

A MUST LOVE DOGS Romantic Comedy

HOLLYWOOD



MY

BILLIONAIRE

FAKE

BOYFRIEND



JENNIFER ST JAMES

*My Billionaire Fake Boyfriend*

A MUST LOVE DOGS NOVEL

JENNIFER ST JAMES

# Contents

## Foreword

1. ~ Maisie ~
2. ~ Brad ~
3. ~ Maisie ~
4. ~ Brad ~
5. ~ Maisie ~
6. ~ Maisie ~
7. ~ Brad ~
8. ~ Maisie ~
9. ~ Maisie ~
10. ~ Brad ~
11. ~ Maisie ~
12. ~ Brad ~
13. ~ Maisie ~
14. ~ Brad ~
15. ~ Maisie ~
16. ~ Brad ~
17. ~ Maisie ~
18. ~ Brad ~
19. ~ Maisie ~
20. ~ Brad ~
21. ~ Maisie ~
22. ~ Brad ~
23. ~ Maisie ~
24. ~ Brad ~
25. ~ Maisie ~
26. ~ Brad ~
27. ~ Maisie ~
28. ~ Brad ~
29. ~ Maisie ~
30. ~ Brad ~
31. ~ Maisie ~
32. ~ Brad ~
33. ~ Maisie ~
34. ~ Brad ~
35. ~ Maisie ~

My Billionaire Fake Ex  
Acknowledgments

[About Jennifer](#)

*She's dog's best friend. He trusts no one. When opportunity knocks, will they allow love to run off the leash?*

**Malibu Beach, California.** Maisie Jones' sparkling smile can't pay the bills. And after inheriting her grandparents' debt, the pet photographer is desperate to keep a roof over the heads of her eight senior shelter dogs in need of forever homes. So when her gorgeous and crazy-rich neighbor inadvertently photobombs her latest charity TikTok promo, she's only too happy to let the world think they're a hot item.

Born into old money, Brad Zander will do anything to make his mark in Hollywood. And with his reputation in the dumps, he gives in to his agent's urging to generate buzz with the charming social media sensation next door. But his viral PR boost takes an unexpected, heart-fluttering leap when their staged parties and dates transform his cynicism into desire.

Despite Maisie's growing attraction, she knows she can't bring Brad the kind of lasting buzz he needs to make his new movie a smash hit. And as Brad hungers to prove himself beyond his wealth, he fears their delightful private cuddles may be coming to a very public end.

Can they stop living for the masses and settle into a cozy network of two?

## CHAPTER 1

~ Maisie ~

I'VE GOT EIGHT HOT, RED-BLOODED LOTHARIOS HANGING ON MY EVERY MOVE, a retina-blasting light display screaming overhead, and a crackling bass beat loud enough to shake all my bones.

Tonight is party time.

Sort of.

Mr. Symmes yowls as another technicolor burst shatters high above us over the Pacific coastline, the bright light dancing across the faces of the eight watchers at the window. Three of them bounce with joy, four stare in disapproval, and one flings himself to the floor, his entire body quivering in abject terror.

"It's okay, Symmie, it's okay." I scoop up the impossibly neurotic chihuahua in time for the next firecracker to explode, big enough to be seen all the way to LA. With this blast, all the dogs start shaking.

"C'mon, guys, we talked about this. Beaches mean fireworks. It's a thing."

Not to be ignored in his moment of need, Mr. Symmes yips as he burrows tight against me. I lean down to brush a soft kiss on his forehead. "It's going to be okay," I whisper again.

I used to think that a dog's fear of fireworks stemmed from some sort of past trauma—maybe combat duty or living near a gun range. But after taking so many different four-legged friends into my care, I've been forced to accept that some dogs simply aren't built for them.

According to the shelter, Mr. Symmes had lived with an elderly woman in Redondo Beach. It sounds fancy, but there's nothing resort-like about that particular Southern California retirement community...only a whole lot of old people and one very high-strung chihuahua who had no place to call



home when his person died.

“You wanna go for a walk?” I ask aloud, which sends the dogs into an entirely different frenzy of whining anticipation. It’s a copout, of course. I should be able to soothe their fears without a bribe. But I’m all in on a really great copout right about now.

Besides, they love the ocean, and they’re *such* good dogs. Point Dume Beach is only a five minute walk from my little ramshackle bungalow, down a private trail. I rub Boxer’s head as I pass him to retrieve his leash. He woofs somberly at me. Tall and muscular despite his old age, Boxer’s fawn-colored coat and white paws and chest gleam in the half-light, his cropped ears making him appear perpetually alert. Though most police dogs are shepherds or retrievers, Boxer the boxer earned his kibble as a K-9 specialist once upon a time. His regal appearance and calm acceptance of the world betrays not one hint of how badly he was treated after his owner passed away. Some people just plain suck.

Though I keep Boxer on a leash to make other people comfortable, the long leads are really for the three pint-sized scruff balls, Blanche, Dorothy, and Rose. They had to be adopted as a set, which meant they weren’t adopted at all. They don’t so much mind their leashes, but they do appear to be caught off guard by them every single time. Once harnessed, they usually flop to the floor as one, astounded by their captivity.

Then there’s Jazz, my permanently forlorn Beagle mix. She’s now leaning against the door, her hangdog expression no match for the way her entire back end vibrates with excitement at the prospect of an escape—*any* escape—even a sanctioned one. She’s an equal opportunity flight addict, but I rarely bother leashing her until we get to the beach. She’ll head straight for the water, then stop dead at the edge of the sand until the others catch up, forever perplexed at this soft, squishy barrier, so different from the hard, bare dirt of her former chain-linked enclosure.

The two newest members of our pack, Jupiter and Buggy, watch with profound concern from beyond the circle as I prepare the other dogs for our midnight adventure. Jupiter is a beautiful but troubled golden retriever whose former owners will get the karma they deserve one day, while Buggy is a wild-eyed pug who carries himself like he’s wearing a top hat and tails. He attached himself to Jupiter during the car ride from their respective shelters, and the two have been inseparable since.

Now they all want out into the cool California night, the prospect of the

big wide Pacific far outweighing the fear of death bombs falling from the sky.

I almost make it to the back door of the bungalow when a thin, whistling screamer warns me that another mortar is incoming.

“Brace yourselves, guys.” I hug Mr. Symmes close, and he whimpers slightly less as the sky lights up with rose gold perfection. “That was a big one.”

Boxer woofs in appreciation, and Jupiter also attempts a soft bark, making Buggy twirl around in circles of delight. Tears prick my eyes as I offer the golden my hand to sniff, then sneak past his white muzzle to rub his ears. He tenses, then shivers, but his big tail thumps against the floor, and my heart expands yet another inch. With charges like these, I’m surprised there’s any room left over for the other organs inside my body at all.

“Come on then,” I manage, pausing only to snag my phone—probably the most expensive thing in the entire house other than my photography equipment. Then I let the dogs out onto the paver porch, its crumbling edges poking into the grass verge. My tiny gnome home is built low to the ground, covered with creeping vegetation that seems to be all that’s keeping it upright most days. A whimsical stepping-stone path extends the length of the lawn before disappearing into a giant hedge, and from there it’s a short and not-too-steep drop down the switchback trail to the beach.

I’m grateful there aren’t more steps, honestly. Steps aren’t easy for old dogs, and I’ve carried a few of these guys up the sandy trail more than once.

“There you go,” I murmur as I unhook the gate in the hedge at the back of my patchy lawn and let the dogs through. The gate won’t keep anybody in or out, of course. It’s more of a guideline. But beyond it lies my very own private walk to the beach, a rare and wonderful entryway to a world of water and sand.

At night, when the sky spreads out above me with its canopy of stars, I know I’m the luckiest girl alive. It’s only during the day when I wonder what on *earth* I was thinking, leaving my thriving photography business in Cleveland to start over at Billionaire Beach. I don’t fit in at Point Dume. Nobody from Cleveland could fit in here. And I especially don’t fit in with the mind-blowing cost of living. Everything is way more spendy than I’m used to.

My bouncing, bopping, and wriggling pack surges ahead as my brain ricochets back to the day’s haul of bills. When I was a kid, my grandparents’

place had always seemed like a fairy-tale oasis at the edge of the sea. But over the past few months that I've owned it, I've come to realize that my new home's most magical property is its ability to make money disappear.

Still, I'm *almost* caught up on the electric bill my grands let lapse when Grandpa Bo entered the nursing home last fall. The water likely *won't* get shut off before I scrape together enough to cover the back charges from three months of a constantly running toilet. And as of this morning, the repair of the broken back windows is officially paid off...just in time for the roof to maybe, possibly, have sprung another leak.

I'm pretty sure I can ignore that for at least a month or two, though. Tonight, I can enjoy the beach, the stars...and all my gloriously rich neighbors being gloriously rich, together.

The gang and I emerge out onto the beach a few minutes later, the steady breeze carrying away their woofs and barks of glee as they bustle down to the water. Up the shoreline, I can see that the reason for tonight's fireworks show is a party situated smack in front of Brad Zander's palatial estate. As in Brad Zander the billionaire bad boy *movie star*, whom I've never so much as seen in person since I moved to Point Dume three months ago, no matter how hard I've looked.

Word on the beach is that Brad rarely ever makes the trek out here from LA, but tonight he's most definitely making his presence known—or at least his entourage is. There must be fifty people milling around on the beach, laughing, drinking, and dancing. Brad has also commandeered a portable party condo right in front of his private beach walk for tonight's event. Because who wants to walk all the way up to the main house to pee? No one, that's who.

With the fireworks finally petering out and the gorgeous murmuring water beyond, even the Jimmy Buffett knock-off singer at Brad's throwdown can't overpower the sound of the sea. The magnificent Pacific laps lazily against the night-white sand, beckoning to adventure.

Mr. Symmes perks up in my arms, wiggling mightily to be let down.

"Oh no, you don't," I inform him, holding on to the whirling dervish for long enough to snap a leash on his collar. The little guy can seriously move when he wants to, and the trailing leash is easier to grab than he is.

As if to prove that point, the chihuahua leaps out of my arms the moment the leash is attached. He takes off like a shot at an oblique angle toward the water by way of the glittering party lights, his little legs churning through the

sand, the leash snaking out behind him.

Boxer woofs once, the sound rich with disapproval, as he watches the dog flee.

“Keep an eye on the others,” I order him. Jazz has already zigzagged her way up the beach, so I throw down the leashes of Jupiter, Boxer, and the girls. Boxer gravely drops a large paw over them as I sprint after Mr. Symmes.

It takes only a few seconds to realize that the chihuahua has a target in mind, a miniature poodle sitting at the edge of the water near the border of the Zander party crowd, her owner busily bent over her phone, tapping away.

I feel I should warn them both of the impending chihuahua explosion, but Mr. Symmes beats me to it with a series of sharp, high-pitched yaps.

The poodle at the shoreline whirls around, then lets out the most unearthly yodel I’ve ever heard out of any dog of any breed, and I’ve heard some things. Not just a poodle, clearly. This girl’s an opera singer mix.

“Hey!” the teenager erupts with surprise as her charge—which doesn’t seem to be her actual dog—breaks free of her lax hold and starts towards Mr. Symmes. “Oh God! Oh my God, your dog’s attacking her—stop it!”

The idea is so ludicrous, ordinarily I would laugh. But I’m still huffing from the short run, and, in all truth, I do understand that it’s dark and that Mr. Symmes...okay, seriously, Mr. Symmes is a six-pound *chihuahua*. The twenty-pound poodle could eat him for breakfast.

Nevertheless, I reach the dogs about the same time they reach each other, leashes tangling as they bounce and wiggle in pure doggy excitement. The poodle’s yodel carries over the sand.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you, sweetheart,” I say, grabbing both the wriggling mass of Mr. Symmes and the warm, chubby body of the poodle. This close, I can see her muzzle is white, her eyes a soft, gentle blue.

“Aren’t you a pretty girl,” I coo, but flinch as she yaps in my face, this bark sounding credibly in pain.

“Oh, my *God!*” the girl protests. “You’re hurting her!”

“A little help here?” I grouse right back. It’s dark, I don’t know this second dog, and hell, I *could* be hurting her. She’s an old girl, and old girls sometimes don’t move so well, though she looks healthy, and her coat is soft and trimmed without being shaved into a topiary.

“Amanda?” The male voice that cracks through the night is strong and authoritative, pissed off, and... vaguely familiar. Vaguely familiar isn’t good.

“Amanda. What’s going on?”

My mouth goes dry, and for a split second, my world careens off its axis. I know that sharp, angry growl—I’ve seen the person issuing it on screens stretching three inches wide all the way up to thirty feet high. I channel my inner Amanda and start chanting *ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmyGOD!* in my brain.

Brad Zander is only thirty years old, but he’s already a legend for his California surfer good looks, surprisingly solid acting skills, bags and bags of money, and ego-shriveling disregard for anyone in the world who isn’t Brad Zander.

I brace myself and turn, but I am in no way prepared for the gorgeous hunk of man meat striding our way. Even with Tiki-lighting, the guy’s a work of art. Dark blond, wavy hair flows carelessly back from a face highlighted by what I know from previous study are intense gray eyes. His body—what I can see of it, given his loose trousers and tight, short-sleeved shirt—looks powerful and fit, and it practically hums with energy. Despite the heavy beach sandals that should look stupid on him but totally don’t, he glides over the sand like an avenging wraith.

“This woman’s dog *attacked* Sweetie,” Amanda announces, which proves she’s an idiot—or that maybe she has it in for me. Meanwhile, billionaire bad-boy actor, celebrity, and the all-around person most likely to trash a movie set, Brad Zander, reaches us, his scowl changing course at her words to zero in on me.

Clearly ready for her close-up, Sweetie yodels one more time—then leaps for him.

Unfortunately, Mr. Symmes leaps with her.

## CHAPTER 2

~ *Brad* ~

“WHAT THE HELL?”

I have a vague sense of corkscrewing dark hair, large eyes, and a mobile mouth before a knot of leather straps and warm dog explodes toward me, the curly-haired menace right behind, her hands entangled in the leashes. Sweetie, who never misses a chance to bolt, takes advantage of the loose collar that I can never bring myself to tighten enough, no matter how many times her owner—my housekeeper—warns me. The poodle is out of the leash in a flash, streaking across the sand. Of course, this is Sweetie, and her streak is no longer as dangerous as it used to be. She also hates people as much as I do, so I know she won't be heading back toward the party.

“Sweetie!” Amanda wails, making a credible attempt at doing the job I'm paying her for tonight, though clearly the task of overseeing a twenty-pound ball of fuzz has proven to be too much.

I toss the small wiggling mass of some sort of dog back at Curly. “Police your animal,” I order, which may be unfair, but I don't give a shit.

The woman's flash of irritation transforms her entire face in the flickering Tiki torchlight, all the curves turning to angles and the buoyant joy flashing to outrage. It might have taken my breath away if the Captain America of dogs wasn't thundering our way down the beach. Sweetie, no fool, immediately changes trajectory and hauls ass back toward us, slow enough that even Amanda can scoop her up as Curly issues a sharp command of “stay” that the big dog instantly heeds.

“Is that one out there yours too?” I ask Curly, mainly because I want to hear her say words with more than one syllable.

She doesn't disappoint. “He is, so why don't you police your dog *and* your babysitter,” she snaps back, the effect ruined somewhat by the wiggling

ball of dog joy in her arms. A second yodel, this one almost melodic, bursts out of the poodle, and I blink at her in surprise. Since when did the old girl start yodeling like that?

“You okay, Sweetie?” I ask, then turn back to Curly—but she’s gone. The shadows of the beach have swallowed her up, and only the delighted barks of what sounds like fifty-seven dogs mark her passage in the darkness.

“Oh my God, that woman came out of nowhere and her dog was a total *menace*. Sweetie got so scared, she jerked away.”

I shoot a withering glare from the girl to the aging Sweetie, who’s peering after Curly and her tiny pet with her weakened, milky eyes.

“I think that dog was a chihuahua of some kind,” I advise Amanda, but she shakes her head, doubling down.

“Chihuahuas can be dangerous. They’re insane. Sweetie knew it.”

“Take her inside if you would, thanks.”

Amanda’s mouth turns down. “But—”

“Just take her inside.”

My phone buzzes. I yank it out of my pants pocket, then glare down at the screen. Thirty different AirTags moving in all directions greet me, the result of me carefully labeling the tumblers of the extremely alcoholic punch being ladled out by the beach deck. After the last party, I lost one particularly enthusiastic drinker for several hours and was finding trash from that damned party for weeks, up and down the shoreline. That’s not going to happen again. I warned everyone about the trackers, so it’s not like I’m invading their privacy, though they sure as hell have no problem invading mine.

I glance up again, squinting toward the water, but Curly and her mutts are long gone. Does she live around here? I didn’t get a great look at her, but her clothing seemed a little downmarket for this stretch of Point Dume. Is she camping on the beach, which I’m pretty sure isn’t allowed? Granted, the fireworks I’d set off from boats drifting off the shore aren’t allowed either, but give me a break. It’s summer.

My phone beeps again, this time indicating a text from my security team.

*It’s considered poor form to escape your own party.*

I grin as the second text comes in. *Also, you’ve got a runner. Fifty yards away. Was moving fast, now not so much. But definitely not moving back towards you. You scare someone off?*

I blink, then peer down the beach again, wondering...

And then I get it. “The leash,” I say aloud, though there’s nobody with



me. I follow it up with a text. Sweetie's leash is also tagged. She's slipped it, and Curly must have picked it up.

*You want me to track it?*

A small twist of interest flickers inside me at my security guy's suggestion, but before I can respond, he types more. *Erratic incoming.*

"Brad!"

I turn to see Carmen staggering toward me through the sand, waving her arms, phone in one hand and a tumbler full of go-juice in another. Wilhelm, the guy I'm pretty sure is about to become my replacement, stumbles along behind her, but looks credibly worried as he meets my gaze.

I refocus on Carmen. "What is it? Are you okay?"

"Oh my God, you're such a *dickhead!*"

That gives me pause. Not that it isn't true, but I haven't done anything to Carmen, so far as I know. We only hooked up a couple of weeks ago, at the close of shooting the promo spots for Jeremy's movie—and the mere fact that I was shooting honest to God *promo* spots was only because it was for Jeremy Greene. Poor as hell kid turned film director phenom, with more talent in his left elbow than I have in my whole body.

I may have stood up for Jeremy when we were both trouble-seeking kids in LA's premier arts high school—him on scholarship and me because my parents had forgotten to keep track of me—but that was a long time ago. This movie is his ticket to the big time, and he chose me to be in it. Never mind that I'd left my last movie set in pieces and was told I'd never get a role in Hollywood again. Never mind that I've been blackballed by every credible producer in the city.

After that last shit storm, I headed to Broadway, fuck everyone. That worked out for a while...but California's home to me, even if I don't really have a *home* anywhere—or a family—what with my parents off in their own little world and the industry turning its back on me. I wanted back, and Jeremy gave me that chance out of the blue, without me even asking him.

Here he is on the verge of making it big, and he's doing whatever he can to help *me* get back into the game. He's been a far better friend to me than I've ever been to anyone, and for once I didn't try to bite off the hand that was trying to feed me.

Still, if I can't help him make good on taking a risk on me, then what the fuck are my millions worth? Hell, screw that—what kind of actor am I? I sure as fuck can keep my temper under control for another few weeks. So this

comeback—and Jeremy’s big break—is going to happen. I’ve made sure of it. I’ve greased every track I can credibly grease, showed up for every take on the schedule, and acted my ass off. I’ve crossed every t, dotted every i, and not once did I throw anything on set. I’ve been a goddamn angel.

Even tonight’s beach party is part of my carefully calculated “don’t be an asshole” plan, a thank you to several cast and crew members complete with airfare to a resort in Hawaii later this weekend. I figured Carmen would last as my girlfriend about as long as the island massages did, and then be on her way with Wilhelm, no blood, no foul. But she looks genuinely pissed as she tosses her waterfall of tawny blonde curls.

“How could you! How could you have broken her heart like that? She’s talking about *you*, right? It’s so obvious!”

She waves the phone at me again, and I grab it, seeing the video capture briefly before words start scrolling down the page. Some of them I recognize—but only some. *Broken hearts and broken dreams*, and then *Hollywood dollars and ice cold lies*. The rest is new...but there’s no doubt who wrote this...or that she’s most definitely talking about me. Again. After all this fucking time.

“She needs to get a new hobby,” I mutter. “That’s ancient history.”

“Oh, my God, she *is* talking about you,” Carmen breathes boozily, her dark eyes wide with angsty outrage. “I knew it! That’s Glenna Dare, Brad. She fell in love with you and you broke her *heart*! She was an *innocent*!”

“I didn’t break her heart.” It’s the same bullshit from eleven years ago—eleven! A lifetime in Hollywood and here it is back at my feet, like trash washed up on the tide. “I didn’t know who she was at the time. I had no idea she had a crush on me.”

“But she *loved* you, and you treated her like *dirt*.”

“That’s not the way it happened,” I protest, but I’m not an idiot. I understand the optics. I don’t usually care about the optics, but that doesn’t mean I don’t understand them.

Glenna Dare was one of the Hollywood up-and-comers when I played the LA party scene the first time around. I was fresh off an indie flick I’d done for kicks and full of unearned pride. She wasn’t an actress, but a singer who came from a royal pedigree of music and was treated with kid gloves. Eleven years ago. I was all of nineteen and didn’t give a shit about much of anything or anyone. I was throwing my family’s money around and getting a few small acting gigs, mostly because I knew people who knew people. And losing

myself in the acting was a way for me to stay sane.

It's blessedly quiet, living in a box of someone else's making, a box you can leave without any drama weeks or months later. It suits me just fine. But back then especially, I partied hard and carelessly, and when I came across the quivering, shivering Glenna Dare one night, I ignored her. I hadn't been a complete dick about it—not on purpose, anyway—but apparently, I'd made an impression. She wrote a song about it, the song went viral, and my PR team all fucking quit.

After a few seriously apeshit weeks, my reputation was set as an asshole villain who broke the hearts of ingenues. That perception got me a few bigger budget films, which solidified my cred—sort of. But it also took me down roads I should never have followed. Even though I went dark on social—and am still off it—that stopped absolutely no one from talking shit about me. After a while, having everyone believe the worst of me sort of rubbed off. I became the asshole I was expected to be until I trashed one set too many. Which is how I ended up in off-off-Broadway, playing alongside people who work way the fuck too hard for way the fuck too little scratch and attention.

In the meantime, Glenna Dare recovered and moved on with her life—ruining other A-listers along the way with her mewling bullshit hate screeds—and I counted myself lucky I was just her warm-up act. But now the PR machine for Jeremy's picture is well and truly cranked, PR about a billion times more valuable in light of the “bad-boy redemption” storyline the film's publicity team dreamed up for me, and so it looks like everything's changed.

Seeing me take over her social media feeds must've brought back to Glenna all the old hurt and degradation of our fifteen-minute conversation eleven years ago, and she's realized all over again how much she's truly suffered.

Funny how that happens.

“I don't give a shit what she's saying now,” I shrug and hand the phone back to Carmen. “It was eleven years ago.”

“But Brad...how *could* you?” She takes the device, gazing at me reproachfully.

Based on the buzzing in my pocket, my own phone shares the sentiment. It's blowing up. Glenna Dare's newest song has clearly been shot out to her forty-million-plus followers. And Carmen isn't the only Hollywood “friend” I have who wants to tell me about it.

Wilhelm passes me a tumbler, and I now realize he was carrying two. “I

think you're going to need this, mate."

## CHAPTER 3

~ Maisie ~

THE NEXT MORNING DAWNS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL. I MEAN, IT'S SOUTHERN California, of course it's bright and beautiful. I still appreciate it, though... every single day.

Once we get down to the beach, the gang is more than happy to let me clip their long leads to an anchoring bag of rocks so they can roam safely along the scrubby bushes while I work. They can move the heavy weight with their combined effort, but they can't get into too much trouble, and my photo shoots never last more than a half hour.

My clients are already down by the water. I pause to give Boxer a friendly pat, because once again he'll be playing babysitter. He nods gravely at me and gives me a patient woof.

"I love you, baby," I murmur. I say it every time I leave him. He hasn't heard it enough in his life. His somber eyes brighten in their dark sockets, and he swings his head toward the ocean as if to tell me to get on with the job I came here to do. I'm happy to do it.

I swing my camera around and begin shooting as I make my way down to the water. "Hey!" I call out.

Cheryl and her beautiful greyhound react with equal delight at my shout, her hand going up in a wave as Olympia dances in the shallow surf, only the slightest wobble apparent in her legs. It's only as I get close that I see the clues more clearly. The gray muzzle, the shuddery steps. Olympia is a sweet old girl, and the love that Cheryl has for her shines bright as she turns to watch the dog play too.

"How's she doing?" I ask, because I always do. Because nobody ever asks enough.

"She's beaten all their expectations so far," Cheryl says in a rush, her

voice a little too high, a little too tight. The voice of a woman who wants to get it all out before the emotion that lays below the surface can block it. “But she gets really tired. This is the best time of day for her. By about ten a.m., she sleeps, bless her heart.”

“Have you thought about the pictures you want?”

Even as I ask the question, I’m capturing Olympia’s play in the water. The camera won’t show the greyhound’s faltering step, her uneasy gait. It will show a dog jumping at each new wave rolling in, skipping in the spray. Playing and happy, the way all dogs should be.

“I couldn’t come up with anything,” Cheryl admits, a little ruefully. “Maybe just take some pictures of her?”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be any fun.” I swing the camera toward Cheryl and snap a few photos as she stares at her beautiful dog, her friend. “Don’t you think she wants to play with you in the water too?”

Cheryl gives a startled little laugh that may also be a sob, but she kicks off her sandals and starts for the water, calling out Olympia’s name. The dog practically pirouettes midair with delight as Cheryl joins her, and Cheryl laughs like a child when Olympia splashes her. Then she opens her arms and gathers her dog close. They hug in the bright sunshine with the spray dancing around them. Some of the photos will catch the tears on Cheryl’s face, but all of them will capture her smile.

I have more than enough within a few minutes. That’s always the way it works with these sessions. And when Cheryl finally staggers out of the water, happy and about as exhausted as Olympia, and starts asking how much the photo shoot costs, I shut her down. Back in Cleveland, I had enough steady work to do these kinds of photos for free, and I want to keep that practice up for as long as I can out here.

“Just let me use the photos of you both for my business, if you don’t mind? You’ll get the opportunity to approve that again in writing. I’m starting over out here, and testimonials are gold.”

She raises a skeptical brow. “It’s not a business if you don’t charge people. And those are a lot of dogs to feed.”

She gestures up along the shoreline, and I grin, though her wave indicates that the guys have moved the burlap sack farther than usual. Fortunately, they get tired pretty quick. “I have a GoFundMe for their food and vet bills—and whatever I don’t need I use to help shelter dogs like them.”

“Text that link to me. I’ll totally contribute. And when you get things

rolling for your photography business, I'll send people your way. I already know I'm going to love these pictures."

"Well, that would be great! If you could follow me on social, that would help too." I hand her a card with all my links, and a QR code to make it even easier. She nods, her gaze straying to the water again, as Olympia barks at a seagull. The soft sadness comes back to her face, so I sling my camera over my shoulder again and open my arms to hug her tight.

"You're a good mom," I assure her, patting her shoulder, and she does the little half-laugh, half-sob again. It's the time of life for that sound. I've heard it so often during these photo shoots that you'd think I'd be steelier about it—but it always gets me right in the gut. "Olympia's lucky to have you as family."

"Family—yes," Cheryl manages, her words only a little wobbly as she pulls away. "It's so important. Do you have family close by, too? Beyond your dogs, I mean?"

"I totally do," I assure her, because I know it's what she wants to hear. In truth, my parents are on the other side of the world—again. This time, it's South America, but they spent most of my childhood and young adult life going somewhere remote and unreachable, leaving me behind. When they announced this latest volunteer mission, I at least was able to say I was heading out, too—relocating to California.

I counted it as a win at the time, but as the weeks turn into months with barely any contact from them, I've come to realize that I'm still the girl you leave behind. I probably always will be.

Up the beach, Mr. Symmes' excited yelps draw my attention, and I notice the dogs focusing a little too hard on a particularly thick clump of bushes. "Ahhh...I better go see what they're getting into."

"Good luck with that." She laughs. "If you need any help, let me know."

"Thank you," I call over my shoulder since I'm already heading up the beach. "Boxer?"

The big dog doesn't respond, and Mr. Symmes stops barking too. The three puffballs are up on their hind feet, shivering with excitement, the sight so cute that I just have to pull out my camera and start taking photos as I approach. They're gathered close together, almost as if they are having a tea party, the lot of them surrounding something in the bushes. I pray it isn't a dead seagull or something. That's always the worst.

Fortunately, nothing stinks, and whatever they're looking at below the



heavy foliage isn't breaking the scene. You can't even see the thin beach road from this angle—just miles of open sand and sea. They all look absolutely perfect in the bright sunshine.

“What're you guys doing?” I ask, though I honestly don't care. I'm capturing their expressions, their bodies, the sand and sky. All the dogs look up at me with so much interest that I laugh and snap another few shots. On impulse I pull out my phone and swing myself around for a selfie video. I don't usually post anything on the weekends, but it's so hard to get all the dogs to stay in one place long enough to take selfies that I'm totally capturing this.

I open up my TikTok app and switch it to live, then do a quick three-second pan, trying not to squint in the sunlight. “I'm out with my favorite folks in the world this morning, and I even met some new friends. I think it's going to be a good day!”

Turning slowly, I tilt the phone to capture the dogs—Boxer tall and regal, Jazz the Beagle now rolling in the sand, Jupiter holding a sandal in his mouth, looking happier than I've ever seen him in our short time together.

I blink, then stare hard at Jupiter. *Sandal?* “Whatcha got there, sweetheart?”

An entirely unexpected response drifts up to me.

“Hello, Curly.”

Turning abruptly, I stab off the live feed. My hand still gripping my phone, I finally understand what's capturing the dogs' attention. A *guy* stretches out in the sand, a few feet away from a brightly colored tumbler I last saw at Brad Zander's party. And it's *Brad Zander lying there*, half-sheltered by an overzealous lemonade berry bush on a battered beach blanket that he balled up as a pillow, the top flap of it pulled down to cover his eyes. Beneath it, his mouth is stretched into a teasing grin, and I stare a few seconds longer, stock still—then fumble my phone into my pocket and shake myself back to reality. *Focus!*

The rest of Brad is dressed the way he was the night before, a tight black shirt dragged up at the waist to show truly grade-A abs, khakis frayed at the hem, sandals kicked off and tumbled haphazardly near his feet. Well, one of them is near his foot. The other is now gripped in Jupiter's mouth. *Oh, boy.*

“C'mon, guys, give him some space,” I suggest, my voice a little hoarse. They pay absolutely no attention to me. If anything, all eight of them press closer to Brad. Even worse, Boxer gives a soft, urgent woof far too near

Brad's head.

The smile falls away from Brad's face. Before he does anything completely stupid or knee-jerk celebrity-throwing-shit asshole, I start talking fast.

"It's okay, Mr. Zander, it's okay. They're old dogs and they're curious. But they do freak out easily, so maybe let me come up to you?" I wince. "Um, that's Rose, licking your ankle. I'm sorry. She's all drool, no teeth."

"Good to know," he says without moving, and the confident smile slides back into place. His eyes also remain covered, which allows me to keep staring at him, so I appreciate that. His voice is like liquid caramel drizzled over ice cream.

I blink, suddenly realizing I must be hungry. I'm *hungry*! That's why my breath has gotten stuck in my chest, why my mouth is watering. I mean, come on. When was the last time I had a sundae? Way too long ago, for sure.

I don't waste any time, though. I move forward, keeping my voice steady and the words flowing. "Rose, you make a better wall than a window. Move it. There you go, Mr. Symmes, stop sniffing his arm, that's not polite. You too, Boxer, back away. You're a good boy. Blanche, please leave his face alone. It's super clean already. No, Jupiter, that's not your shoe."

Jupiter looks at me mournfully, but he doesn't drop Brad's sandal. It might as well be his shoe now. I hope Brad has more than one pair.

By this time, I've reached Brad. I crouch down beside him. He hasn't moved, as I instructed, but I can feel his energy radiating out toward me, coiled and ready.

Biting my lip a little, I reach out and flip up his beach blanket...and find myself staring into clear, intelligent, gorgeous storm grey eyes. *Oh, hi there.*

The smile deepens. "Hi yourself," he says, and I realize I spoke that last part out loud.

Whoops.

## CHAPTER 4

~ *Brad* ~

CURLY IS BACK, AND I CAN'T SAY I'M SURPRISED. SHE'S HAUNTED MY thoughts since she disappeared in a whirl of dogs and energy last night—one of the few bright spots in an evening that turned into complete shit otherwise.

When I finally stumbled down the beach away from the party, things had already gone from bad to worse. I'd just wanted to get away. The tag attached to Sweetie's collar indicated her leash remained remarkably close to my own property line so I'd headed for it, but quickly lost interest. The combination of the night, the unexpected crap publicity about something that happened so fucking long ago it makes my head spin, the solidarity of the cast and crew—really everyone except for Carmen and her new champion Wilhelm—and way too much tropical knockout punch, did their job. I was down for the count.

A few more details from last night poke hard against my skull. I even had to stop some of the crew from posting online against Glenna Dare in my defense, though a few of them did it anyway. They are now ankle deep in Dare-Girl daggers, but they assure me they don't care. I certainly don't give a shit, except for the drama. I came out to the beach house to get away from the spectacle of LA, the irritation of too many people all the way up in my grill. I don't like anyone getting too close.

No one gave that memo to Curly, though. She stares down at me with the same wild-eyed intensity that she showed while trying to pry her crazed chihuahua off my housekeeper's dog the night before. Her hair was apparently tied down at one point, but now the ponytail only corrals one section of her wild curls, with the rest floating free in the stiff ocean breeze. She's wearing a green tee-shirt that looks as old as she is, beat up capris, and sturdy hiking sandals. And around her shoulder is slung...

I freeze. “You’re a fucking *photographer*?”

The ice in my voice catches her up short, and not only her. The boxer behind her tenses, and the retriever with my sandal in his mouth backs up without letting go of the shoe. Even the three scruffy balls of fluff stop twirling. Beyond them, at the fringe of the group, a sorrowful beagle and bug-eyed pug stare at me reproachfully. I don’t know where the chihuahua is...probably on his way up my beach walk to find Sweetie.

To Curly’s credit, she’s clearly used to dealing with wild animals. Her hands come up camera-free, fingers wide, her gaze direct and fixed on my eyes. “Not the way you think. I’m a dog photographer. Well, not solely dogs, but mostly dogs. I’m an animal photographer. I’m not whatever they call it, the paparazzi or whatever. I don’t take pictures of movie stars, I swear. Only dog photos. I put those photos up online to help get donations for their care. I take care of a lot of dogs.”

She speaks low and fast, but the sound of it surprises me the same way it did last night. She doesn’t strike me as a California girl, but her voice doesn’t have the hard angles of the Northeast or the flat planes of the West. And it definitely doesn’t have the soft rolls of the South.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

If anything, the question seems to make her more nervous. “I live down the beach a bit. Here, let me get these dogs away from you. I didn’t mean to scare you, honestly. And I won’t take your picture.”

“I don’t care if you take my fucking picture,” I growl, the headache coming back into focus as she leans forward to scoop up the chihuahua, who I now realize has remained hunkered down beside me the whole time. “Look—I’m sorry. It’s been a shitty night. You might have heard about it.”

“I didn’t,” Curly says, surprising me. “I try to stay off social media on the weekends.” But she bobbles the chihuahua as he strains toward my hand, clearly scenting Sweetie on me. I squint at tiny animal.

“Dude, she’s not here. Have some self-respect.”

The completely unsuppressed giggle draws my attention back to Curly. She clamps her lips together, her cheeks reddening as she hugs the dog to her chest. “I swear he never does this,” she says, sounding thoroughly delighted. “Act out, I mean. It’s the happiest I’ve ever seen him.”

I peer harder at the dog, and finally notice the wild hairs poking from his brow bone, the white halos around his eyes. A quick glance around confirms my suspicion. “So...you’re a dog rescue photographer? That’s actually a

thing? And you're not from here, I know you're not."

"I'm not." Curly squats to let the chihuahua wriggle free, grinning as he shimmies over to the sketchy looking beagle. She stands and moves over to a large burlap bag and unclips a fistful of leashes. "I moved here from Cleveland a few months ago. My grandparents lived here, and they left their beach house to me. And I photograph all sorts of animals, rescued ones included."

"Uh huh. And you think I needed rescuing?"

Again with the giggle, but Curly is backing away now, the sun beating down on her, making it hard to see her face.

"Come on guys, let Mr. Zander finish his nap. You don't like it when I wake you up from your naps, do you? No you don't. And don't think I'm going to be enjoying lugging this bag of rocks back over to the gate. What the heck was wrong with you, pulling it all the way over here?" She snorts, the sound so unlike any noise that most women make around me that my head clears a bit. Curly seems happier than most women I know, too. And definitely more capable. She has all eight of her dogs on collar and leash, which is more than I can say for Sweetie back up at the house.

Aw, shit. *Sweetie*.

Except...wait a minute.

A solution to at least one of my problems bursts into my brain, perfectly formed. Before Curly can say anything else—or, even worse, *leave*—I press on.

"Look, I gotta leave tomorrow for a trip, and as you can probably tell, my current dog babysitter sucks. It's not even my dog—"

She turns and peers back at me, the breeze catching her hair. "I figured that."

"—but she is my housekeeper's, who's out of pocket for a bit. Could I, like, pay you to take care of the dog? As long as she doesn't run away with your chihuahua?"

I heard her snark about me not being Sweetie's owner, but I can't afford to get pissed off about that—not until I lock her down as my dogsitter. Still, why does she think I can't handle a tottering old poodle? Who does she—

But my question has done the trick. Curly's mouth now rounds into a startled O, which instantly sends my thoughts zipping someplace completely different—somewhere where that mouth is soft and pliant and warm beneath mine, tasting of salt and sweat.

Wait, *what?*

My whole body jacks to attention, and I suck in a breath at exactly the same time Curly does—though for vastly different reasons.

“Pay me?” she squeaks, blinking before she recovers herself. “Oh gosh, I don’t actually—”

But it’s too late, way too late. A familiar zing of control rushes through me, overpowering the sexual interest while at the same time adding to it. So, Curly needs money—hell, who doesn’t in Malibu, outside the Richie Riches whose homes line the beach? She needs it, and I have it—which means I have her. Game fucking *on*.

I roll to my feet, not missing the way she watches me. She recognizes me—knows my name. And she isn’t running away, so either my reputation doesn’t scare her, or she really does need the cash.

Or maybe she simply likes dogs.

Either way, I push hard, offering her my most earnest smile. “Seriously, I’m in a bind, and I’m leaving town early tomorrow. I’ll be gone for a week, maybe two, tops. I know it’s an imposition, and I know you don’t know me other than my name—but if you’re local here and you don’t mind, it will really help me out if you can watch Sweetie.”

“I don’t...” She bites her lip, gesturing uncertainly toward her pack. “I mean, you can already see I kind of have my hands full.”

“Bring ‘em. They can stay over too. There’s plenty of food for everyone.”

I can see her waver, and I lean in. “I’ll pay you, of course. Five thousand dollars for the two weeks? Would that cover everything?”

I’m not an idiot. I counted the dogs, and I checked out Curly’s outfit. The camera, while high-end, is at least a few years old, and it’s dangling from her shoulder by a strap so heavy and old fashioned, she almost certainly bought it used. I’m sure as hell not going to let Amanda the Twit take care of Sweetie anymore. I don’t care whose daughter she is. And this windblown sea nymph of a woman clearly knows dogs, even if she doesn’t know how to keep her hair tied up.

“Five thousand dollars?” Curly asks faintly, blinking at me. “To watch your dog for two weeks?”

Boom. She’s mine. I don’t even feel bad about it. She’s too far away for me to know for sure the color of her eyes, but they’re light-colored. Maybe blue? Probably blue. She has a smattering of freckles across her cheeks, and the tip of her nose is burned. She said she just moved here...will she stay? Or

is this a temporary relocation?

It doesn't matter. I only need her for the next two weeks.

"But you don't even know me," she falters, and I feel another jolt to my system. I like the uncertain sound in her voice. I like surprising her. I don't even know the woman, she's right, but I get the feeling that she doesn't get surprised enough, not in any good way. And after the abuse I've taken from Glenna Dare, I think that surprising the shit out of this random chick on the beach with all her old dogs is a giant Fuck You to the universe and the entire Dare Girl posse. A Fuck You I've totally earned.

I give Curly another smile, this one pitched to reassuring. It's one of my best looks—just shy of shit-eating smugness, but well north of it'll be okay. "I have great security. The whole place is camera'd-up—not the bedrooms or bathrooms of course, but the main areas and all the entrances. It's not like you're going to be able to steal anything without me knowing it. And if it helps, you can give me your name. Since you already know mine."

"Oh!" She blushes. "Maisie Jones. I, um—I actually live right next door."

"Okay, Maisie Jones, that's great. So much easier for your chihuahua to sneak over that way." I've gotten attached to Curly, but Maisie works too, and my comment is rewarded by another giggle that does more to cure my headache than anything I've ever tried. "Come by any time after nine a.m. tomorrow. The place will be yours. Deal?"

"I—I guess?" The blush suits her. Color suits her in general—color and wind and sky. I'm feeling better about this all the time. "The gang is always up for an adventure. And Mr. Symmes would love to see his new girlfriend again, I bet."

"Good point." I give the chihuahua a hard stare. "Do we need to talk to them about safe sex?"

"Oh, god—*no*," Maisie bursts out laughing, the sound so bright and carefree that I blink. When was the last time I heard anything that spontaneous? "Mr. Symmes has been neutered, and I'm sure that Sweetie..." She glances down at the wriggling dog grinning up at her. "Mr. *Symmes*," she says reproachfully.

I laugh—the sound far more like a strangled cough than Maisie's yelp of infectious joy. But then, I'm out of practice. "No worries there. Mrs. Powell, Sweetie's owner, would have made sure of that a long time ago. She's nothing if not methodical. Like I said, she's the housekeeper, and that's who usually lives there. But she took a fall—"



Maisie's head comes up, her brows climbing her forehead. I should feel like an asshole, because Mrs. Powell *didn't* fall, she's just going to visit her grandkids, who are afraid of dogs—even seriously old miniature poodles. But fuck it, I need to sell this.

“Is she okay?” Maisie asks, and her concern seems full-on genuine.

“She is. But she'll be out a few weeks, and I told her I'd be happy to find someone while I was in Hawaii.” I flash her a smile. “Now I have. No takebacks, right? I can count on you?”

“No takebacks,” Maisie says automatically. Because of course she wouldn't go back on her word. “I can totally watch her for the next couple of weeks, but five thousand is—”

“A steal,” I assure her. “Thank you.” And I mean it. For the first time since Carmen stumbled down the beach waving her phone the night before, things are taking a turn for the better.

“Shake on it?” I ask, reaching out a hand. Maisie tenses, while the boxer beside her woofs. It's my turn to hold both my hands up. “Maybe next time.”

“Sorry, sorry—he's protective. I'll go now. I'll take care of your dog and thanks and be careful...I mean, have a great trip to Hawaii, and I'll take care of Sweetie, promise, and—um, I'll go now.”

She says all this as she backs away from me, talking all the while until the sun swallows her whole.

I turn to grab the blanket...and realize I only have one sandal.

## CHAPTER 5

~ Maisie ~

“DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT, LUCAS. YOU’LL FIND THE FOLDER ON MY desk by the laptop. Well, no, of course not. I wouldn’t bring...right. See you later—no, not there. The laptop.”

Catherine, Ayla and I are standing outside the LALA Dog Spa, ready for our emergency puppy walk. The spa has been a fantastic side hustle since I first arrived in Los Angeles, with more than enough work for me as a dog walker and part-time coordinator for their pet charity outreach. I wasn’t scheduled today, but they called me less than twenty minutes after I’d gotten home from my *Unscheduled Brad Zander Sighting and Subsequent Freakout*, begging me to come in and cover for some no shows.

To my surprise, Catherine and Ayla were free and able to help out too—even though I’m the only one on the payroll at LALA, while they’re volunteers. Yet another reason why meeting the two women is easily the best thing that’s happened to me since I moved to California. Not even the *Brad Zander Sighting* can compete with that.

Now Catherine rolls her eyes at her boss while juggling the phone, smiling wryly as she hands coffee from a to-go container to me and Ayla. She looks perfectly poised, but I worry about her. Despite her professionally streaked blonde hair, bright red lipstick smile and high-end athleisure wear, Catherine Perezzeo is thin even for LA standards. And while the hair, makeup, and clothing are all paid for by the pair of billionaire financiers for whom she serves as a personal assistant, the two men also seem unable to draw three breaths without using one to call her. She’s currently rocking more frenetic energy than the mini-Aussie pressing against my shins. And it’s *Saturday*.

“I—yes, there you go. Her name is Absinthe. Yes, like the drink. Well, she’s as beautiful and as drama free as I could find—right. You’ll do fine.

See you soon.”

Ayla and I exchange significant, exaggerated eyerolls as Catherine signs off from the phone. She seamlessly transfers the phone from her shoulder into her sling bag before unlooping her dogs and giving the trio of bouncy pups more space. Then she swings around to me and points. “Okay, Maisie, talk. You need to spill *all* the tea. Every last drop.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, genuinely confused. “What tea?”

It’s just before noon, and we’re taking the brief walk from the LALA Dog Spa to the dog park off Fuller, a full-on oasis for dogs of all sizes, even this morning’s puppy explosion. Catherine has three short-haired pups of multiple breeds, Ayla a lushly curled Boykin spaniel and spring-loaded labradoodle, and I have the yappy mini shih tzus in my carrier along with the mini Aussie who’s more than ready to herd us on our way. I’m still beyond thrilled that Gwen and Ayla were free for today’s two-hour romp. They shouldn’t have been free. They’re never free on Saturdays.

Except now, given the way they’re staring at me...

“Um, what’s going on?” I ask, swinging my gaze from Catherine to Ayla. How had I missed the pent-up energy between them, the two of them quivering like a pair of huskies staring at their first sight of snow? “Do you guys know something I—”

Catherine pounces before I can finish. “Brad *Zander*,” she blurts, waving her perfectly manicured fingers at me. My heart stops at the mention of the man who’s been playing on an endless loop of meltdown in my brain. But Catherine doesn’t have access to my brain. She couldn’t know that I saw him this morning—saw him! Spoke to him! Nearly shook his hand! Or that I’m going to be *taking care of his dog in his zillion dollar beach house*! She couldn’t know that any of those things happened. I still can’t believe that any of those things happened but she—

She barrels on, oblivious to my internal butterfly tsunami. “On your feed. On *everyone*’s feed, looking freaking adorable. How did you manage that? A celebrity photobomb is footage *gold*.”

“Wait, *what*?” I splutter again, trying to refocus, then Ayla interrupts.

“That video is *way* more than a photobomb. He was smiling. *Intimately* smiling. He totally knew you were there.”

Now it’s my turn to stare at her. Tall and willowy, with long dark hair and warm, gentle eyes, Ayla looks like she should be starring in a movie herself—or at least a network series, probably in a pencil skirt and stilettos with

killer nails, playing the role of the therapist she really should be. Instead, she wears sensible shoes and keeps her nails short and unpolished, her lean form muscled by hours of hard work every day. Despite her advanced degree work in psychology, Ayla currently cleans houses for the rich and famous. In the few months I've known her, she's never shared one word about the path that's gotten her there, at least not with me. She will someday, I suspect. Like a lot of the rescue dogs I've fostered, Ayla just needs time to feel safe.

Now, however, she's grinning at me with full-on glee. "You guys are dating, right? Tell me you're dating. Or that you're going to date. He's so hot, even if he is an asshole. I saw that video Glenna Dare posted and believe me, it presented him as a Grade A asshole."

I grimace. After Brad's mention of his no good, very bad night, I did a quick search...and learned so much more about Glenna Dare than I ever wanted to. I'd clicked off after just a few minutes, but that *song*...

Then the rest of Ayla's statement catches up with me. *Dating?* Me and *Brad?*

"He *was* a Grade A asshole," Catherine counters, pinging my attention back to her. "Up until this morning. Now he's a redemption story in the making. I mean the best possible thing for Brad's social cred would be him and Glenna falling back in love or something, but the second best thing? Falling in love with someone like Maisie. And door number two is way more fun. I asked Lucas when I saw Maisie's feed blow up—though I don't thank you for that, since now Lucas is convinced that the best way to sweep someone off their feet is to photobomb them."

"Guys!" I finally get a word in. "Brad Zander and I are not dating. We're not even close to dating!"

"Oh, yes you are." Catherine flutters her hands again. "A-is-for-Asshole A-lister Brad Zander—just about to drop his brand-new movie, Hottie Mchottiepants Brad Zander—is now your new boyfriend. You're already trending on TikTok, and you know it's going to be picked up by the news streams. Do you have more followers already? You've got to. Dogs and Brad Zander. How can this go wrong?"

"I..." I suck in a deep breath and try again. "Seriously, stop. I don't know what you're talking about. I mean, I did meet Brad Zander last night—last *night*. But nobody knows about that, I swear. And our meeting wasn't even a meeting so much as Mr. Symmes attacking his dog."

"Brad Zander has a dog?" Ayla goggles.

“Wait, Mr. Symmes? He’s a fourteen-year-old chihuahua who weighs six pounds. How can he attack anything?” Catherine protests.

The pups pick up on their excitement and start scrambling around us. It’s another few minutes before we can untangle them, but the girls don’t let up. Catherine snaps her fingers first, because of course she does. “It’s not about last night. It’s about today. You don’t know what you did, do you?”

“I...”

“Oh, my god, oh my god, oh my god.” Her chant sounds vaguely familiar to me as she thrusts her phone at me. I take it, and Ayla scoops the tipping coffee cup out of my hand.

I squint at the phone in the bright sunshine while Catherine grabs my leashes and points me to the shade. “Go.”

The two of them devolve into gleeful giggles as the TikTok video loops around, and by the time I reach the shade I can see me at the beach—looking like a crazed, windblown beach nut as usual, the dogs zeroed in on the bushes as I prattle on about having a great day with new friends. Then, the phone still zooming—I pan up the long, muscled body of Brad Zander, all the way to his adorably covered eyes and devilishly smug grin.

“I...” I swallow, then look up as they crowd close. “Um, I thought I’d shut the live feed off. How could I *not* have shut that off?”

“Well, thank God for you and your ninja TikTok instincts that you *didn’t* shut the video off. That’s some of the best full body footage I’ve ever seen of Brad Zander, and it’s on your freaking TikTok channel.”

I stare at her, then back at the phone as the video loops again. “Oh my god,” I breathe. “I’m a *stalker*.”

Catherine takes her phone back, scrolls. “So not a stalker. Are you kidding?” She turns it around to me. “This video already has fifty thousand views. Fifty thousand in, like, an hour! It’s totally going to keep gaining steam, and you’ve already built up enough of a following that your links are there, big as life. Go ahead. Hit your GoFundMe.”

I blink at her. “What?”

“Pull your phone out, go to your account, and *check* it,” Ayla instructs. We’ve started walking again, and I pull my phone out of my jeans, tapping the apps until I get to my GoFundMe account. And nearly drop the phone.

“Oh my god,” I whisper. The last-ditch dog food fund I started when I discovered the electric and plumbing bills I need to pay have gotten some love from my social media followers over the past few months, but only

modestly. As of yesterday, it was maybe at \$1200 or so.

Now it's at \$10k—and climbing.

“What *is* this?” I gasp as Ayla and Catherine chortle. Catherine turns her phone toward me again—featuring a close-up of Jupiter with Brad's sandal in his mouth. The dog looks every bit as blissed out as I remember.

“He gave him his *shoe*,” Catherine sighs. “His shoe. That means something, right? That has to mean something.”

It takes me a second to realize she's quoting someone. “Who said that?”

She holds her phone higher, well out of reach of my grab, and grins widely. “Next comment: ‘He probably didn't give it to the dog—but he didn't ask for it back. That *totally* means something. How long have they been together? How didn't we know?’ There are about thirty other comments in the same vein. And that's on Facebook, I'll have you know. I didn't think you had a following on Facebook.”

“Well, I sort of do, but—”

I open that app, and my sight dwindles to a pinprick. The Jupiter pic alone has four thousand likes and over a hundred shares. Everyone likes a dog picture, but a dog picture with Brad Zander's sandal?

“He's going to kill me,” I moan. “I have to stop this.”

“What?” Catherine's head comes up, and Ayla turns to me. “No!”

The puppies around us explode in reaction to their sudden dismay. We herd the pack all over to the small dog enclosure, locking them inside so I can continue my freakout safely.

“Definitely not,” Catherine says, the moment the dogs are all freed of their leashes and set loose to scamper around on wobbly legs. The two shih tzus orbit in ever-widening circles, yipping with undiluted joy, while the mini Aussie takes off for the far end of the enclosure at top speed—simply because he can. But I only notice them in my peripheral vision, while my primary vision is locked solely on the end of my life.

“You're not going to say a *word* to Brad,” Catherine continues, in her most commanding tone. It's effective, but I shake my head fiercely.

“This is ten thousand dollars—”

“Eleven thousand,” Ayla chimes in.

“—that I didn't earn! That I'm getting because of something that's not true! I can't keep this up. I don't really even know the guy. I'm just going to be babysitting his poodle!”

“That's what she said,” Ayla cracks, and my cheeks flame.

“I’m serious! I can’t—I mean, I don’t—I mean I—”

“You can’t tell him because you don’t mean anything by this and you don’t expect it to go on for very long...” Catherine finishes for me, her calm self-assurance breaking through my bleated protests. I look up to see her wagging the phone at me, her other fist planted on her hip. She looks like a Peloton drill instructor without all the sweat. “But in the meantime, it’s for a good cause, it’s taking care of senior foster dogs, and you’ve done nothing wrong.”

“But it’s a lie,” I moan. “It’s a total lie. I’m taking money from these people based on a lie.”

“You’ve said nothing,” Ayla agrees, taking up the side of opposing counsel. “And at this point, they haven’t either. Right now, it looks like most of the sentiment is that you tripped over Brad Zander on the beach and he first fell in love with your dog, not you. Which, that retriever, *super* cute. I can totally see it.”

“Jupiter?” I bite my lip and flip through a couple of comments, but they’re all dog centric—mostly wondering if Brad would adopt Jupiter. Then they quickly devolve into an entire spiel of who else Brad might adopt, with many, *many* volunteers.

“Jupiter,” both Ayla and Catherine confirm with certainty.

“You did nothing but scroll your camera lovingly up every inch of Brad Zander’s incredibly gorgeous body, which any warm-blooded human would do in a similar circumstance,” Ayla continues. “And then you lingered on his mouth-watering, super sexy smile. You are not to blame for that.”

“I didn’t—”

Ayla cuts me off by leaning over and flapping her phone at me, which displays a cut version of the TikTok video that’s currently spooling through that exact pan.

“Oh my god.” I close my eyes, feeling the blood drain from my face. “I thought I’d turned the phone off. I thought I...I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Ayla laughs. “What you were thinking was, ‘Holy Crumpets, the most gorgeous man in the world is on the beach in front of me.’ What your fingers were thinking was, ‘video number six million and seventy-six, ready for take-off.’ I’ve seen you work, girl. It’s automatic.”

“Okay.” I swallow. “Maybe...maybe I could let things just...run? For a day? I don’t normally post on the weekends. I try to stay off my feeds as



much as I can.”

“Of course you do.” Catherine pockets her phone into the side of her three-hundred-dollar leggings. “See? You haven’t checked your feed. You have no idea what’s going on. When are you supposed to, uh...” She waggles her brows. “Babysit his poodle?”

“Stop. You’re making it sound terrible.”

“Doesn’t sound terrible to me,” Ayla puts in. She hasn’t pocketed her phone. “*Twelve* thousand. Let me tell you, this is a way better method of earning money than cleaning houses. Believe me, there are things I could take videos of, but nobody would want to see them.”

I wince as Catherine laughs. “And I assure you, you are wrong, but *when* are you *babysitting* his *poodle*?”

She says this last as she swivels back to me, cutting my newest freakout off at the knees, and drilling me with her steely, blue-eyed gaze. I’m beginning to see why she’s able to manage a couple of financial whiz-bang billionaires.

“Tomorrow,” I finally manage. “Tomorrow morning, after nine a.m.. I... I’m going over to his house. He’ll already be gone, though, and—”

“Perfect,” she pronounces. “If he contacts you once you get to the house, plead ignorance or apologize—done. He’ll have his people issue some sort of cheeseball statement and add money of his own to your GoFundMe, which is a win-win-win.” She holds up a hand to stop my protest. “It’s for the dogs, right?”

I blink. Glance down at my phone. *It’s for the dogs.*

“And if he *doesn’t* contact you, don’t sweat it,” Ayla says. “Remember, I clean these people’s homes for a living. I also talk to them on the rare occasion they stumble home when I’m there. I can assure you, ten to one he has no idea this is even *happening*. And if he doesn’t, then whenever you call him to let him know how much you *love* his *poodle*—”

I wince as she cackles again.

“—you can tell him then. Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.”

“Done,” Catherine agrees, and both of them look at me expectantly.

“Done,” I breathe out. And with a shaking hand...I also pocket my phone. What harm can one more day do?

## CHAPTER 6

~ Maisie ~

I WAKE UP SUNDAY MORNING FEELING ALMOST NORMAL. I ROLL OVER TOWARD my nightstand and reach for the phone—then stop myself. Then reach for it again.

“Normal” has officially left the building. It may never come back.

After we returned to the dog spa, Ayla and Catherine took off and I drove home in a daze, then spent the day playing in the surf with the dogs instead of clearing the worst of the vines off the roof like I planned. I was really, really good about not checking my feeds, too. Partly because I was terrified about what I might see. Okay, mostly because I was terrified.

Still, I *have* made it a rule not to check on the weekends. An inviolate, sacrosanct rule. My videos and social media posts don’t spawn the kind of requests or comments that need immediate response, especially on the weekend. People can find links to local shelters and animal adoption sites on my website, which is prominently listed everywhere. I’m not a doctor. I’m not a celebrity. I...

I grimace. *Am* I a celebrity now?

How will I know if I don’t check?

Gingerly, like Insta might bite the hand that feeds it, I hover over my apps...but I can’t force myself to tap them. Because once I do, I’ll have to figure out how to fix this mess I caused, and I have to fix it, right? I cannot—should not—make money off a lie. That isn’t right—and it isn’t fair to Brad.

Granted, I’m pretty sure Brad can handle it.

*Brad.*

I collapse back on my pillow, remembering his mouth grinning up at me from beneath the beach blanket, clearly aware that he was surrounded by panting, licking dogs. Rose licked his ankle, for heaven’s sake! And really,

who could blame her, but—

*Focus.*

“Okay you guys, come on,” I say, throwing off the sheets and jolting a little as my cell phone rings in my hand. The number is local, and even though it’s coming up as a spam risk, I see it often enough to know what it is. The utility company. On a flipping *Sunday*.

Why can’t it be someone I want to hear from?

To be fair, I *have* gotten a couple of calls from local photographers in response to my inquiries for help needed. But as it turns out, a lot of people move to California with the idea of becoming a photographer. There simply aren’t enough jobs to go around. Maybe...maybe coming out here wasn’t the smartest idea.

The utility company doesn’t call back, and a few minutes later, we’re ready for our big adventure: the trek to Brad’s house. I grab the dogs’ leashes—even Sweetie’s, which I realized I’d inadvertently swiped after her and Mr. Symmes’ tango late Friday night. I think about that night, the next morning—and the bills I have to pay—as I watch the gamboling dogs bounce and bustle down the beach trail, unreasonably happy to be exploring again.

They’re all off leash for the moment—it’s Sunday morning, and no one is usually out here before ten. They deserve their freedom and their joy. They served their former owners faithfully and well, in some cases for over a decade, and then were abandoned, discarded, or sometimes simply left behind without a provision that was proven, safe, and stable. It seemed a no-brainer that I could get enough support from people who want to watch dog videos to keep them in kibble, but there’s more than kibble involved with taking care of a house full of old dogs.

A bevy of barking jerks my attention forward, and I look up to see the dogs streaking off in a flurry of movement, chasing something onto the beach. Something that stops abruptly.

I run after them with practiced skill, stowing my phone and hoofing it as I call out. “Guys—guys! What are you doing?”

Boxer barks with authority as he reaches the unfortunate animal, but he doesn’t kill it as I rush up behind them. He just knocks it senseless.

“Oh my god, what...” I begin, then stop short. It’s a toy, one of those remote-control drone things, and I wince, looking around. I can’t see the controller. I feel heartsick at a kid having his toy whozit damaged, but the little blinking light is feeble and the high-pitched tones it’s emitting—which

is surely what captured the dogs' attention—eventually peter out.

“Ah geez,” I mutter, scooping up the toy. It's heavier than it looks, but I don't want it lying here out in the open. Eventually, its owner will figure out where it is.

“Come on guys,” I say, and I carefully lodge the spaceship at the edge of the bushy verge, in plain sight on a piece of driftwood. If there's a tracker on the thing, hopefully somebody can find it. I did what I could.

There are a few people on the beach after all, so I leash Boxer just to be safe. I turn toward Brad's house as my phone chimes again, but I don't recognize the number. My photography business lists this line, so I take a deep breath, and connect the call. “Hello?”

There's no telltale pause that indicates this is a telemarketer call. Instead, a bright, cheerful man asks, “Maisie Jones?”

“Yes, can I help you?”

“Is it true you're dating Brad Zander?”

“What?” Reflexively, I click off the phone and stare at it like it's sprouted horns. It rings again, and I stuff it into my pocket, only to jerk with surprise at another round of baying from the dogs. Mr. Symmes has raced ahead, and is well on his way to Brad's beach walk, but the other dogs have found something else to occupy their attention—and it's not a toy glider. “Guys, be nice! Stop barking at the nice...”

I blink.

There are three teenage girls coming our way, practically sprinting, waving and shouting, though the wind carries their voices away. And they're already between me and Brad's place—which is absolutely where I need to go, if only to catch Symmie. I want to believe these girls are racing toward me to take their picture, but I know it's because of Brad. It has to be because of Brad.

“Guys!” I shout again, all business. The dogs, God love them, let me pull them back into formation even without their leashes, a moat of dogdom protecting me from lovelorn teenagers.

“Maisie? Maisie Jones?”

Even though I'm expecting it, it still sounds impossible that the girls are calling out my name. One of them is waving her phone and pointing excitedly at the dogs. For a second I think maybe it *is* going to be about the dogs.

“Oh my God! When did you start dating Brad Zander?”

Nope, not about the dogs. I pick up the pace slightly as a new voice calls out, this one louder, somehow sounding much closer. I whirl around to see a knot of people moving toward us from another direction. They don't have phones out—well some of them do, but others have honest to God cameras with long telephoto style lenses, and one guy is carrying a boom mic on a pole. It bobs over the lead figure, who breaks away and jogs ahead of the group.

“Maisie Jones,” he shouts, with an authority that grates. Beside me, Boxer stiffens, breathing out a low growl.

“It's okay, it's okay, baby,” I murmur to him, but I don't know if that's true.

Then we're surrounded.

“Is it true you're dating Brad Zander?” someone asks, and then they all pile on.

“Where is Brad? Why aren't you two together?”

“How does he feel about Glenna Dare's new song?”

“How long have you been seeing each other?”

Suddenly it hits me. That flying whozit up on the beach walk isn't a toy at all, it's a paparazzi drone. And apparently, my video has hit the radar of more than just dog lovers. I decide that acting like a clueless and confused dog lady is my best option, because I can rock that reaction with total authenticity.

“Um, please stay back!” I blurt. “The dogs aren't great with strangers.”

A woman's voice calls out, “Are they dangerous?”

“Are *you* dangerous?” someone else asks.

That question elicits a round of laughter, and I see my opportunity to double down on the dog lady angle.

“They're not, and I'm so lucky to be able to take care of them. There are so many dogs who have nowhere to go after their people can't take care of them anymore, especially senior dogs. If you check out the adoption listings, you can see for yourself. And next Saturday, one of the best dog spas in the city, the LALA Dog Spa, is teaming up with the Los Angeles County Animal Shelter to help get these dogs into the homes they deserve. You should really check it out!”

As I talk, I start moving forward again, giving Boxer just a little more leash to work with. No doubt sensing my nerves, he pulls forward with enough determination that some of the paparazzi fall back. I keep talking as Boxer clears a path and the other dogs bounce along, noisy and full of life.

“But what about Brad?” the first man pushes. He’s older, old enough that he could probably make his living doing pretty much any other type of photography instead of stalking celebrities or their fake non-celebrity girlfriends, but I get it. There’s money to be made here. Besides, I can hardly judge, considering why I’ve caught their attention in the first place.

“Brad’s not here right now,” I assure him brightly. “I mean, he’s obviously not here or you would see him. But I guess you probably already knew that. I don’t know when he’s coming back. We’ve only just started, um, being friends, and I’m afraid there’s not much more that I can tell you.”

“How about telling us what he’s like in *bed*?”

This new question, blurted out so loudly, catches me off guard, and I whirl around. It’s one of the younger girls, and she waves her phone at me.

“Or, like, to kiss, or anything?” she quickly amends her question as her bestie punches her in the arm.

I can feel my cheeks blazing. When did it get so hot out here on the beach? Is it normally this hot? “I don’t, ah...”

“Surely you’ve kissed already,” the man at the front challenges, leaning in. “Or is this all *fake*? Gotta say, that new song of Glenna Dare’s is a pretty damned good reason to fake a new girlfriend.”

A burst of sudden understanding jolts through me as a ripple of excitement pushes through the crowd. Glenna Dare! *Crap!* That’s what’s driving all the interest in me, it has to be! I’ve scanned the feeds—there’s no missing the way Glenna Dare and all her zillion followers are ripping on Brad like it’s their job, making him out to be the biggest asshole in Hollywood, but he’s not that. There’s no way he can be that bad. And if I could help, like, make sure people know that...I mean, if I could just point that out that he’s not the scum of the earth and maybe use this attention to help out dogs as well, then....

“No!” I suddenly blurt, before I can change my mind. “No, there’s absolutely nothing fake about the way we feel. Brad—gosh, I just don’t feel right saying anything. This is all happening so fast, and honestly, he’s so *amazing*.” I put every ounce of sincerity I can muster into my words, but I’m speaking so quickly, I’m surprised anyone can follow. I force myself to slow down, speak more clearly—and pile on the emotion. “He’s so great with the dogs, and he’s so kind. I guess you all probably know that already.”

“Kind. *Right...*” the man drawls, and there’s more laughter. I desperately dial it up another notch.

“He is—and he loves dogs, even old dogs that nobody else cares about. And frankly, if that’s not a great reason to check out his new movie, then I don’t know what is. We all should be kinder to those in our lives who need us, shouldn’t we? Shouldn’t you?”

As I give this impassioned speech, I drop Boxer’s leash. “Get Symmie,” I mutter, and the old dog takes off in the direction of the churning chihuahua, now almost all the way to Brad’s walkway. All the other dogs start running, too.

“Oh!” I throw up my hands in alarm. “Oh, I’ve got to go—guys! Guys, wait up!”

I take off, and we’re clear of the knot of people in just a couple of seconds. The bottom of Brad’s beach walk is only a dozen strides away, and I run through the unlatched gate and slam it shut behind us, then lean down to scoop up Mr. Symmes.

Then I turn up the trail without looking back, and run as fast as my shaking legs will allow.

No one follows us...but what will happen when they do?

It only takes me a few minutes to reach the top of the winding trail, picking up the smaller dogs as I go. I try not to goggle as I see the pool. And the tennis court. And the party patio.

“Guys,” I murmur, and thank God they’re all exhausted enough to stay close as we weave our way through the outdoor wonderland. The pool isn’t enormous, though it is impressive, a stone-scaped rectangle with a waterfall. I check to make sure that it has wide, shallow steps, easy enough for even old dogs to use. It’s surrounded by a swath of stamped concrete and bordered by thick natural grass. “Don’t even think it, Jazz,” I inform the already quivering beagle, but I know that pool is destined to become her new favorite place.

And then I stop stock still, staring at the pool, the tennis court, the house. Brad Zander’s house...the billionaire Hollywood celebrity that I just confirmed to all the world was my *boyfriend*.

What have I *done*?

Was that little charade truly helpful, or did I just throw gasoline on the bonfire of Brad Zander? Should I warn him—call him? Should I post something online? Should I—

“Oh! Hello, dear.” My thoughts are scrambled again by the unexpected voice, and I look up to see a stout, white-haired woman in coveralls, beaming at me from the doorway.



A high yodeling cry bursts out across the back yard. Beside me, Mr. Symmes jumps straight up in the air, seeming to levitate for a full three seconds before bursting forward. The woman opens the door wider, and Sweetie runs out, no leash or collar in sight, yipping and twirling as we approach.

“You must be Maisie,” the woman says.

I laugh, sounding only a little hysterical, I think. “Maisie Jones, yes. Mr. Zander said—”

“Oh my, yes, he gave me the whole story, asked me to pop over to make sure you came by. I’m Carol Meadows. I’m the housekeeper for the Bennets, who live just up the road.”

“Oh! Well, great. I brought Sweetie’s leash, and...ah...” I stare up at the beautiful house, all white stucco and glass. “I can keep the dogs out on the lanai if that’s best?”

Carol waves me off. “No need. You’ll find the house, for all its pretense, is meant as a beach home, with floors intended to be swept with a broom and sponged down to clear off mud and sand. You keep the dogs on the first floor, and they shouldn’t get into too much trouble. Oh, aren’t you a fine-looking fellow,” she says to Jupiter, who looks up at her mournfully, Brad’s sandal still in his mouth. “I have something for you. From Mr. Zander himself.”

Carol lets us into a kitchen the size of my entire first floor all gleaming white cabinetry and rich stone countertops. She plucks up a matching sandal from the chair and presents it to Jupiter. Jupiter gazes at it, completely confused for a moment, then gravely drops Brad’s right shoe and accepts his left. Beside him, Buggy leaps on the discarded shoe, clearly prepared to guard it from any interlopers. Carol keeps talking as the dogs shoot off in different directions to explore.

“There are your keys to the house. Lock everything up tight whenever you leave, if you would? There’s the code there for the backup security system as well. Either works, so if you forget your keys, just don’t forget the code, and vice versa. There’s your payment for the week tucked into that envelope, and general information like the Wi-Fi password and all that. You know your way around a kitchen, I assume?”

I snort. “Maybe not a kitchen quite like this,” I counter, which makes her smile.

“It is pretty isn’t it? But if you need anything, feel free to call me—or, of

course, call Mr. Zander. His number's there as well."

*Right.* Any half-formed thoughts to maybe call the man curl up and retreat deep into my brain. "I don't think there'll be anything that requires me to bother him."

Carol carries on cheerfully, and by the time she leaves, the dogs have migrated back to the pool. I find them there basking in the sunshine, the scene so perfect that I can't help myself. I pull out my phone camera and snap a photo, checking it before I upload. I don't want to invade Brad's privacy any more than I already have today, but there's nothing—*nothing*—in this photo that looks unique. It could be any beach house anywhere... except for mine, of course.

Sure, there's a tiny corner of the inlaid stone patio of the pool visible in the shot, but nobody will be looking at that, not with Boxer's regal head tilted to the right, and Jupiter leaning up beside him, the three balls of fluff for once not moving as they sprawl on the deck next to a quivering Jazz, who's still inching toward the pool. Mr. Symmes, Sweetie, and Bugsy are off to the right, Bugsy up on his back legs investigating a flowerpot, while Sweetie and Mr. Symmes lean together like new lovers...I mean, I can't *not* post this shot.

*California is for lovers, barktalk, sunset happiness, Love your dogs,* I hashtag, with my usual links for the social media sites that allow them.

I hesitate right before posting. Even if no one could possibly figure out where I am right this second, I shouldn't capitalize on Brad's fame just to make sure I can keep taking care of these guys. Seriously. I shouldn't. And I won't.

Starting tomorrow.

Closing my eyes, I hit send.

## CHAPTER 7

~ *Brad* ~

THE DAY STARTED OUT SHITTY AND WENT DOWNHILL FROM THERE, WHICH IS saying something, considering I'm in fucking paradise. There ought to be a law to keep bad things from happening while you are on vacation.

Not that it's been much of a vacation, exactly. The crew is having a good time, and I take some comfort in that. Still, while I have no problem helping out every last grip, stunt double, or PA, the next time I'll send them a couple grand each to go wherever the hell they want. It will be easier than playing cruise director.

But even cruise director is better than publicity bitch.

The premiere is scheduled in two weeks—and I've already signed on for more promo shit than I ever normally do because Jeremy is working his ass off on this picture, and, once again, I'm not going to let him down. But everything has completely blown up over the last seventy-two hours, courtesy of one mock-outraged singer and her string of hangers-on. And not blown up a little. My schedule is now bristling with visits to every human with a live mic within a three-continent area.

Even worse, there's been no outreach from the beach house. I don't know what I expected. It's not like I need to keep tabs on a dog sitter, for fuck's sake, especially since the dog she's watching isn't even mine. But I still can't help wondering what Maisie Jones is up to in my house.

I know who should be in that house, *I* should be. Never mind that I rarely go there. I have a place in the city—a *nice* place. I have houses all over the fucking world at nicer beaches than Point Dume.

Well, beaches that are at least *as nice*.

Either way, it's taking everything in me not to switch on the house cameras to see what's going on with Maisie and her pack, and even feeling

proud of that is pathetic. Real fucking humanitarian of me, not spying on the help.

The phone rings, and the sudden spark of what could only be classified as hope pisses me off even more. Because of course it isn't Maisie. It's my agent again—my agent, who has been trying to reach me for two days running, doubtless to natter on more about this Glenna Dare bullshit. I wasn't in the mood. I'm still not in the mood. But now, I'm finally pissed off enough to take her call.

"Hello, Jillian," I begin, taking a long pull on the resort's signature non-alcoholic drink, which would be improved with a splash of anything but is still pretty damn good.

"Brad! Oh, thank God. You're not dead. I didn't know if the Dare Girls had made it to the island in frog suits."

"Yeah, well. Your nonstop text stream has kept me updated on their campaign. Apparently, I was a very bad man when I was nine-fucking-teen years old. It really would have helped if I could remember Glenna better, so I could say something soothing. But the reality is, if her face wasn't plastered on every feed I zip through, I couldn't have picked her out of a lineup. We really didn't have that meaningful of a connection, no matter what she's claiming in her latest ridiculous song."

"Well, it seems like you're more mesmerizing than you give yourself credit for," Jillian says drily. "It's kind of a problem."

I've been working with the woman for long enough to recognize when she's being serious. I scowl at the phone. Not what I was expecting. "What do you mean?"

"Look, I know you've been deliberately living under a rock since Friday, but Glenna Dare has been busy. That ridiculous song she just wrote about you is number one in the country on Spotify. Would you like to know a few of the lyrics?"

I grimace. "I've already caught a couple."

"Well, the original song is still a classic, but the new one is giving it a run for its money. Trust me, there's a whole lot of you staring through her like she wasn't there, and her knowing she could love you, but she didn't dare. See what she did there? Ooo. Another possible Dare rhyme."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"I would laugh if it were happening to anybody else, I'm not going to lie. But you are my client, and you have a movie coming out and a redemption

tour to complete and the timing here is shitty. The only bright spot is your new loyal following of dog lovers, and by loyal I mean they've stuck around for longer than twenty-four hours. Not even the Dare Girls can argue against dogs. Cats, maybe, but not dogs."

"What are you talking about?" But I think about Maisie and her camera and her dogs... and she's at my house. Surely that doesn't mean...

It does.

"Apparently there's some woman who uploaded a video of you with one of her dogs holding your shoe in its mouth. Then she shot another picture of an entire pack of blissed out dogs by a pool that the sharp-eyed trolls have said is incontrovertibly your Malibu house—and the whole thing is building like a category five hurricane off Point Dume."

I grin. "Yeah?" I ask, taking a long slug of my drink. "The dogs look happy?"

"The dogs look ecstatic, and the photographer is apparently the Mother Theresa of old, broken-down canines and she has a social media following. You haven't heard about any of this? Of course you haven't heard any of this, because you're Brad freaking Zander and you don't pay attention to social media. But word on the feeds is you two are totally dating—even though she got cornered by a photographer yesterday on the beach beneath your palace. The guy asked her straight up if you two were hooking up, and she looked like she might explode from embarrassment. Or excitement. But mostly embarrassment. She didn't seem to know what to say to that."

My brows climb my forehead, and though I feel a twinge of annoyance at being disavowed, I mostly enjoy the idea of starstruck Maisie Jones and her pack of old pooches being mistaken for my newest squeeze. She would have been exasperated, I think. She does exasperated very well. "She denied we're together?"

"Well, she starts out denying it, but she doesn't do a super great job, and then she straight up starts defending you as a champion of old dogs. My PA spooled it up for me, and here's this crazy-haired brunette with eyes as big as her face shouting at her dogs to be nice to the people with cameras until she realizes they're focusing on her. And then they ask about you, and she kind of giggles and blushes, and honestly, it's the cutest thing. If you haven't seen it, you should really check it out. Your girlfriend is adorable."

"She's not my girlfriend," I correct, feeling some vague need to at least tell Jillian the truth. "I barely know the woman."

“Well, maybe you *should* know the woman. Because she’s doing more for your movie career than you are right now.”

That punches a hole in my good mood. “Jillian.”

“All I’m saying is, if this is a charade, would it hurt for you to continue on with said charade for a couple of weeks until the movie launches? No, no it would not. You hooking up with a curly-haired photographer who takes care of old dogs is good for people’s hearts. Hell, it’s good for my heart and my heart is made of stone.”

“Except the story is fake,” I point out. “I don’t have an opinion one way or another about dogs, old or otherwise.”

“Uh-huh. You know that, and I know that, but she most definitely does not know that. I’m sending you her social media feeds.”

“I don’t want to see—”

“You need to see! Her GoFundMe is popping. There’s some trendy dog spa she works at that’s about to name her Most Valuable Player of the century, same for the LA County Animal Shelter. Despite her blushing denial, you think she’s shutting down her exceptionally worthy cause to help old dogs? No. No, she is not. She knows you’re not dating and *she’s* going with it, so why can’t you? Look at what I texted you—and some of it is from today, not yesterday, which means she knew she’d be attacked when she went down to the beach, and she went anyway. Because she is a *baller*. Go ahead and check it out. I’ll wait.”

My phone buzzes, and I groan, switching over to text and clicking through the links. There’s Maisie, with dogs all around her as the photographers zoomed in, including one fuzzy dog I can’t quite see, nestled protectively in her arms as she half turns away.

It’s Sweetie, I realize. Maisie wanted Sweetie to be a part of the group, but didn’t want to reveal the old dog’s identity. She wanted to protect her.

Something breaks a little inside me. “Goddamned paparazzi.”

Jillian snorts. “Yeah, yeah, cry me a river. But the real clincher is the video she took of you Saturday on the beach, which couldn’t have been staged any better if David Fincher was behind the camera. The video is fucking epic. That link I sent you is to TikTok.”

“Great.” I click on it and scowl down at the phone. I see sand and dogs and my feet, but my gaze fixes on the count beneath the image—five million views? “What the hell?”

“Just watch it,” Jillian says as it loops back to the start.

I do, and dial up the sound so I can hear Maisie's voice, clear and joyful. "I think it's going to be a good day!"

The video follows the voice up over the rise, to a group of dogs standing guard over me. "Whatcha got there, sweetheart?" she asks the shoe-stealing retriever, before panning the camera over me—slowly, even seductively. Then her camera jerks away and the video loops again.

"Honestly Brad, I've never seen you look better," Jillian quips.

"I was hung over and half asleep."

"You were accessible and beachy and hot as hell—and now you're trending on TikTok. It's good stuff. More importantly, it's about to take over chatter about that damned new Glenna Dare song, and *that* is pure gold."

"It's insanity."

"Insanity that is gold," she insists. "Get back home to your girlfriend and try not to break her heart before next weekend, okay? Because if you get a bunch of dog lovers angry at you, I *will* drop you as a client."

"Oh for fuck's—"

The line goes dead.



## CHAPTER 8

~ Maisie ~

“HELLO? HELLO! BRAD, COME ON MAN, WE NEED TO TALK! IT’S IMPORTANT! It’s *everything*. You totally nailed it!”

I jerk awake, completely disoriented. I’m sleeping outside on the lanai... except I don’t have a lanai. And there’s a man rattling the door of the screened-in porch that I also don’t have.

The dogs come awake a second later—half of them anyway. Boxer and Jupiter and Buggy spring to attention with various levels of success.

I’m wearing the same clothes I’ve had on since Sunday morning, because I didn’t actually plan to stay overnight in Brad’s unreasonably gorgeous beach home. But every time I venture down the beach walk, the paparazzi mobs me, and I don’t have the guts to run that gauntlet all the way to my own house. Still, none of the photographers have been so bold as to breach Brad’s security gate—especially not in the middle of the night.

Who *is* this guy? And what is he doing breaking in at—I peer at my watch—*two a.m.*?

“Hey!” I shout at the same time the dogs start barking.

I fumble for the security remote and flip all the lights on in the yard, hitting the man with enough wattage that he could be seen from space. With a yelp, he stumbles back and crashes into a deck chair. Tall, athletic, and dressed in a worn blue tee shirt, scuffed jeans, and boots, the man looks vaguely familiar—as if he’s someone I’ve seen fairly recently—like *really* recently. In fact, I’m almost sure I’ve seen him in the stack of publicity photos that are piled on the desk in Brad’s first-floor office...the office I absolutely did *not* snoop through. Much.

“Holy shit!” the guy shouts, scrambling upright again with his arms flung over his face to cut down on the glare. The dogs are barking so loud now I

can hardly hear him. “I’m Jeremy Greene—*Jeremy*. I’m Brad’s director—and his friend. His *friend!*”

“Oh!” Jeremy Greene. He *is* someone from the photos, and I definitely know that name. I read about him online. Jeremy Greene was the one director willing to give Brad another chance despite all his bad behavior. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry—”

I stab various buttons on the remote and finally switch off the lights. By now, Jeremy has collapsed back into the deck chair again, clearly dazed. “Guys, quit it!”

The dogs continue barking like mad, and I barely manage to squeeze out the door without them following me. I head across the deck and hear a splash behind me. Okay, so maybe I wasn’t *completely* successful at trapping them inside.

“Um...is that a beagle in the pool?” Jeremy asks, his voice still a little shaky.

“Hi—yes. I’m so sorry I blinded you. You startled me.”

“Where is everyone? Wasn’t the party tonight? Never in a million years would I have thought one of Brad’s parties would have shut down before freaking dawn.”

“The party was on Friday,” I tell him.

He squints at me, clearly confused. In the normal, non-security lights of the backyard, I can see him more clearly. With his hair buzzed short, warm brown eyes and an easy smile, he’s younger than I would have expected, probably not even thirty. *Brad’s age*, I think, which strikes me as significant. “Friday,” I say again. “Like, three days ago.”

“Oh.” He shakes his head, lifting up a hand to rub his eyes. “I’ve been working round the clock, editing like crazy. We’ve got a new movie coming out—I need to see him. Talk to him.” He jolts a little. “Wait a minute. Three days, you said. Which means it’s, what, Monday? So Brad’s not here.”

“He’s not. He’s in Hawaii. I’m—well, I’m looking after his poodle.”

He blinks at me. “Brad has a poodle?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. My name’s Maisie Jones. Brad and I...” I hesitate. It’s one thing to lie to the paparazzi, but this is Brad’s director. Surely that changes things, right? “Um, you said you two are friends?”

Jeremy gives me a wide smile. “Oh, yeah, we go way back. Without him, I sure as hell wouldn’t be where I am now, and that’s just the honest truth. And I *don’t* mean scaring the shit out of a woman and her dogs in the middle

of the night at his palace of a beach home.”

“I figured.” I laugh, but I want more information—a lot more. “Well, we just started dating. But honestly, I don’t know all that much about him, and I kind of hate to read anything online—”

“Fuck all that. It’s all bullshit,” Jeremy says emphatically. “All you really need to know is that he’s one of the most talented actors in Hollywood, and one of the best guys I’ve ever met.”

“He’s definitely talented,” I agree, not knowing what else to say. But whether Jeremy reads my hesitation as confusion or doubt, he pushes on, his words picking up steam.

“I’m serious. Brad stood up for me when we were in a summer program together—a chi-chi school for the arts that opened up its doors for kids who were too broke to have a chance otherwise. That explains why I was there, anyway. He should never have been there, except he bluffed his way in to learn from the best, and his parents didn’t know where he was or what he was doing. They had a thing for that.”

My pulse jumps at this unexpected nugget of information. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was broke as shit and desperately trying to be someone, he was rich as God and desperately trying to be no one. His folks—well, that’s not my story to tell. But he’s the best thing that ever happened to me. That summer we roomed together, he listened to all my completely bullshit plans, my ridiculous hopes and crazy-assed movie ideas that I’d run for him night after night. And he always had my back when I got into trouble. Which was *often*.”

He breaks off, laughing a little as he rubs his eyes. “Sorry for going on. I guess I’m more exhausted than I thought. But I still really need to see his face when I talk to him about this...”

He suddenly brightens. “You mind if I call him from his house phone? The one in the kitchen. That’s all the face anyone could ever need. I swear, it won’t take but a few minutes, and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Call him?” I hesitate, but I don’t see any reason to deny the request. “Sure—of course. Don’t mind the dogs. If I accept you, they will too.”

“Good to know.” Jeremy smiles, and I find myself smiling back. He’s got a strong, positive vibe, and now that he’s no longer blinded, he oozes a confidence that makes me want to trust him. He’s a good director, I suspect.

Pausing only long enough to locate Jazz lolling on the shallow concrete steps at the side of the pool, I lead Jeremy back through the house until we

reach the kitchen.

“I’ll just leave you to make the—”

“No need, this won’t take long.” Jeremy raises his voice. “Outbound video call to Brad One. Urgent. House under attack.”

“Wait, *what?*” I stare at him, but he merely grins.

“A total freakout is good for the soul. Especially Brad’s soul.”

Less than five seconds later the entire wall between the kitchen and living room erupts into bright white light. Then it shifts, and there’s Brad’s head, ten feet tall by five feet wide, the sight so startling it’s my turn to stumble back.

“Jesus!” I yelp.

“What’s wrong?” Brad demands, and his gaze swivels from me to Jeremy. “What are you doing there? What’s happening?”

“Brad! Good to see you. Just wanted to keep you on your toes. Did we catch you at dinner?”

“That was a *joke?*” Brad snarls, and I am reminded of all the old paparazzi pictures I scrounged up, each of them with a bad-boy actor gone wild vibe. “You’re lucky I didn’t send in my entire security squad.”

“And you’re lucky your best friend is a genius. Just like I told your *new* friend here, who’s definitely let your house go to the dogs.”

“Maisie—”

I jerk my focus back to the screen. It’s surreal to see anyone’s head that big, but compound that anyone to being *Brad Zander saying my name*, and I just might stroke out. “Jeremy is a friend, and a genius. He’s also the king of terrible jokes. Don’t believe anything he tells you.”

“Except the good stuff.” Jeremy grins.

“Especially the good stuff.” Brad still looks a little annoyed, but there’s a smile teasing at the edge of his lips that I don’t miss, and I suspect neither does Jeremy. “What are you doing there, Jeremy?”

“I missed your party.”

“I’m aware of that. You never call, you never write...”

“But I had to let you know, Brad, we nailed it. *You* nailed it. You gotta let me go with the new ending. We reviewed the dailies today, and the team about fainted. I know you don’t think that sort of scene is you—but it *is* you. It’s totally you. And you nailed it.”

“Jeremy...” Brad winces, and his irritation is definitely back. “All that emo...it’s a little much. Maybe too much, given what’s hitting on social

media right now.”

“What do you mean?” Jeremy swivels and looks at me. “What’s he talking about?”

I glance up to see Brad studying me, one sexy eyebrow lifted. “You didn’t tell him?”

“Tell him what?” I offer weakly. “What’s there to tell?”

“Funny, you were a little more talkative on the beach in front of all those cameras.”

“Cameras?” By now Jeremy’s got his phone out, swiping furiously screen to screen. His eyes grow huge in his face. “What the...Glenna *Dare*? Wait. This awful—oh. Hold up now.” He glances up at me, then down at the phone. Then he turns the screen to the wall. “That’s her. She’s the dog lady.”

Brad smirks as Jeremy flips the phone around to scroll some more. “She’s the dog lady, yes.”

“You know, dog person is fine,” I point out.

“Well the dog person is trending like *fire*,” Jeremy puts in, and he and Brad’s gazes connect again. “Dude, we’ve *got* to do the new ending now. It’s your redemption, man. And you *nailed* it. Did I mention that part?”

Brad’s face shutters. “It’s manipulative.”

“Fuck yes, it’s manipulative, and you learned how to be manipulative from a master, so own it. More importantly, it plays. Tell me I can do it. Tell me I can. I won’t do it if you say no, but tell me—”

If anything, Brad’s expression darkens as Jeremy gets more animated. “Look,” Brad finally says. “Fine. I—”

Jeremy holds up both hands. “Great—great! Say no more, that’s fantastic, that’s great, and we’re done here. I’m out. Nice meeting you, Maisie Jones.” He turns to me with a wide grin. “You’re helping Brad out in a major way.”

“I’m babysitting his poodle.”

“You...” Jeremy’s gaze drops to the floor at the edge of the kitchen, where Mr. Symmes and Sweetie stand at attention—with Jupiter easing up behind them. “You are certainly doing that. And an admirable job of it. My work here is done though. You want tickets to the premier? You got ‘em. You want more poodles? I can arrange that. All the poodles everywhere, a whole truck full of poodles. Poodles for everyone...”

I trail after him as he strides toward the front door, but the man never stops talking. He’s outside and the door shut firmly behind him in less than thirty seconds. I gape for another moment, then Brad’s sharp voice has me

swinging back around.

“What are you looking at?”

I hurry back into the living room, to see that Sweetie and Mr. Symmes have been replaced by Jupiter—who’s still gripping Brad’s shoe in his jaws like someone might steal it from him. But his eyes are wide and soulful, and he’s staring at the wall-sized image of Brad’s face as if he’s seeing God.

“Why is he still eating my shoe?” Brad asks irritably, never taking his gaze off the golden retriever. “That’s not your shoe, buddy. Let it go.”

Now it’s my turn to be annoyed. “Since when do you care about a five-dollar rubber sandal?” I protest. “It makes him happy. You make him happy. What’s wrong with that?”

His gaze jerks to me, jerk being the operative term. “Why do you look like you’ve slept in your clothes?”

The unexpected challenge makes me feel impossibly self-conscious. “Because I *have* slept in my clothes. Because every time I leave this house, I am attacked by paparazzi who think we are *dating*.”

“Based on what I’m seeing online, they think that because you told them we were.”

I flinch, embarrassment flooding through me. “I thought I was helping! All those people were surrounding me, and they started throwing out Glenna Dare’s name—and I saw that song she put out about you too. I wanted to help!”

“It’s not your job to help me,” he informs me stonily. “It’s your job to take care of my housekeeper’s poodle. You think you can handle that until I get back home and can deal with whatever fucking fallout this little shitstorm of crazy is going to cause me?”

“You’re acting like this is all my *fault*.” Granted, it sort of *is* my fault, but that’s not improving my mood any. “I didn’t mean to upload that video, and I sure as hell didn’t plan on dragging you into my life.”

“And yet you did, and it’s certainly not hurting your GoFundMe numbers, now, is it?”

“*Hey*. I didn’t mean for *any* of that to—”

“Look. Forget about it. I’ll fix it when I get home.” Brad’s gaze is back on the dog. “Why is he looking at me that way? You’ve already got your shoe, dude. Take it down a notch.”

“Leave him alone,” I snap. Jupiter swings his big brown eyes to me, then back to Brad. He looks confused, and maybe a little sad, and genuine anger

claws through me. “You know, don’t take your assbattery out on him. He doesn’t know that you like to bark at people just for the sake of barking at them. He’ll take it personally.”

“Oh, please. He’s a dog.”

“He’s absolutely a dog. And you don’t seem the type to be a bully, so knock it off.”

“Uh huh. So now you’re my shrink?”

“No, I’m just the woman who’s babysitting your *poodle*.” I practically snarl, and Jupiter scrambles back at the tone of my voice, apparently preferring the safety of the rest of the dogs to the two of us arguing.

“*And you’re my fake girlfriend*,” Brad growls back. “Don’t forget that part. You started it, you need to continue it until I get back. Especially now that Jeremy...shit.” He rubs his hands over his forehead and does a credible job of looking like he’d rather be anywhere but on the phone with me.

I’m more than happy to help him out with that. “Look, I’ve gotta take the dogs for a walk. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No.” He glares at me. “But I get that this wasn’t part of our initial arrangement. I can pay you for your time. All actors should be paid.”

“Laudable of you,” I say drily, but I don’t miss Jupiter edging forward again, his gaze trained mournfully on Brad’s tight, angry face. “But I think the five thousand dollars should cover it until I get my SAG card. Now before you fucking make my dog cry, how do I turn off this wall?”

“I’ve got it. And I won’t bother you again.” He glances down and clearly sees Jupiter again, and the two stare at each other for what seems like another impossibly long three seconds. Then Jupiter drops his sandal and barks, wagging his tail excitedly.

I flinch at the happy sound, and even Brad winces. “I’m not that guy, buddy,” he mutters. And before either Jupiter or I can say anything else—the video feed goes dead.

“Well, okay then!” I say cheerfully, as Jupiter scoops up Brad’s sandal once more and plops down in the center of the hallway, staring at the wall as if it might come back on again and make all his dreams come true. I lean down to give him a hug, but I know he’s not going to be moving anytime soon. I may need to get some of Brad’s publicity shots and tape them up around the house. Or use them to line the floor. That thought appeals, in particular.

“Hey there, he’ll come back soon, sweetheart, okay?” I say, ruffling



Jupiter's fur. "Then you can give him a big, slurpy kiss, right before I kill him and bury his body on the beach. Does that sound good? Yes, that *does* sound good, doesn't it. It sounds really, *really* good."

A disembodied voice floats out above me. "I heard that, Curly."

And only then do I hear the click of the phone being disconnected.

## CHAPTER 9

~ Maisie ~

OMG WHERE ARE YOU LOCATED?

*Do you photograph horses?*

*Do you do weddings?*

*Can you come to my house for a photo shoot?*

*Are you really dating Brad Zander?*

I look up from the phone and peer at the low-flying, spaceship-like drone hovering outside Brad's property line, north of the tree line. It's early enough that I know only drones will be photographing me—which is exactly why I'm heading over to my own home at six freaking a.m. in the morning. I wave at the drone, and it zips away.

In a few short days, I've become skilled at recognizing the machines—and timing my travel to miss most of them. I'm beyond grateful that there aren't more of them and that I'm still a fairly unknown story outside the few celebrity hounds who make their home base in Malibu. This stretch of beach, for all its beauty, isn't that easy to get to, and it's far enough from LA that it takes a really, *really* dedicated photographer to make the trek. And, with Brad very clearly in Hawaii for the foreseeable future, there isn't much of a story until he comes home again.

Yes, a woman is staying at his house. Yes, that woman doesn't deny anything anymore—but she mostly uses any conversation to promote dog adoption. And said woman isn't duping the hapless billionaire next door. So really, said woman is not doing anything wrong.

"I'm not doing anything wrong," I repeat, this time aloud. Beside me on

the sand, Boxer woofs. He isn't completely buying it. I'm not buying it either, but you know what I am buying? Food. The GoFundMe account is topping out at fifteen thousand dollars...and I've managed to score six months' worth of dog food and a sponsorship offer from a dog food startup called Poocheroo. All I have to do is mention them in my posts a few times a week, and all the kibble I need is mine.

Even crazier? I checked the fine print of my GoFundMe description, and it *clearly states* that I can use some of the funds for the general upkeep of the dog's residence. Which is my *house*. Which means my fridge is so about to be fixed.

Plus, my photography business is finally getting some traction. Hits to my website are off the charts, and I'm getting emails and texts daily from people who've actually seen my work and liked it. Do they like it because I happen to be the girlfriend of Brad Zander, or because I'm just that talented? Maybe a little of both. But they never, ever, would have known my name without Brad.

So, even if my newfound fifteen minutes of fame will be brief...it will totally be worth it.

And I expect it will be brief. It's Thursday, and I haven't heard one thing from Brad Zander since I yelled at his wall on Monday. He hasn't called; he hasn't texted. Jupiter, fortunately, stopped staring at the wall after the first day...but he hasn't given up on Brad's shoe.

"Come on guys!"

As we approach the dilapidated path to my gnome home, the dogs flip out, bouncing and wriggling with such joy that it's a TikTok video waiting to happen. I whip out my phone and tell Boxer to lead the way. He's the tallest of them all, and a master at unlatching the gate. But with the press of dogs jiggling around him, he looks like nothing as much as an exasperated mother of toddlers trying to get the door opened with his hands full of groceries. He manages it though, and the dogs spill forward.

I quickly edit the shot, tag it #HomeSweetHome and #BarkTok, and upload it before I can overthink it. A second video follows as the dogs revisit their favorite sunny spot in the backyard. The sandpit was probably once intended for a grill but was now perfect for rolling in. Even Jupiter lies down, Brad's sandal still clenched tight in his jaws. He lets me pet his long, sun-kissed coat, a huge, derpy grin on his face.

The dogs are happy and resting for the moment, so I unlock the door to

my house and walk inside. A quick recon of the place confirms that the toilet isn't running and that there are no new cracks in the windows. Fixing the windows will happen right after the new fridge, I resolve. I head out to the front porch and scoop up the stack of mail there—and a haul of Poocheroo goodies, packaged in such beautiful, bright boxes that my eyes get misty. Dog food lasts a long time, thank God. And, again, I've started getting inquiries on my photography work.

I'll be okay. The dogs will be okay.

I quickly flip through the bills—then stop at one that looks more official than most. It's from the city of Malibu, and for a half second I wonder if I've been cited because of my roof. But surely that would have happened before now, right?

I slit open the envelope with my nail, and see it's some sort of tax assessment. An overdue tax assessment.

Very overdue.

Tens of thousands of dollars overdue.

“Oh, no,” I whisper, sagging against the kitchen counter. I've never seen such a big number on a bill before—any bill. Certainly not any bill addressed to me.

“Thirty-six thousand...oh my god, no.” I close my eyes. Property taxes. Of course there would be property taxes, even on a house that was long ago paid off. Of *course* there would be. How had I not thought to check...and how long has it been since my Grands' just—stopped thinking about it?

And how...I mean, what...I mean...

My sight narrows down to a pinprick, and it takes me a full thirty seconds to realize the sudden cacophony of barks is happening *outside* my brain, not inside. The dogs! The dogs are losing their minds. Did some photographer follow us? Are they being attacked?

I dash out onto the back porch—and stop short.

Brad Zander is kneeling next to Jupiter, roughing his ears as the beautiful old retriever stares up at him as if he's hung the moon. The entire pack of dogs is wiggling and wagging, bursting with joy all around him, until he looks up as I stand frozen on the cracked concrete patio.

“Hello, Curly,” he drawls. “You miss me?”

## CHAPTER 10

~ *Brad* ~

“BRAD?”

Maisie looks even more disordered than I remember, her curly hair escaping her bun, her T-shirt and shorts at least a size too large for her slim body, her bright orange socks and purple beach sandals yet one more discordant note in an orchestra of chaos.

“What’re you doing here? How’d you know where I live?” She starts to move forward, stops again, clearly thinks about retreating, then slides her gaze to the dogs, who are watching her with rapt fascination. They aren’t the only ones.

After three straight days of re-running all three Maisie Jones conversations through my head—over and over—the prospect of talking with her in person again has become a single-minded obsession for me. She isn’t beautiful in the ordinary sense, but she’s absolutely captivating. I can’t stop thinking about her. I disappointed her, pissed her off, exasperated her, and damn near caused her dog to cry...and I only feel bad about the last part. The rest of it, I’m completely jacked to do all over again, and not only because my agent and now my director are demanding we take the Maisie Jones as girlfriend story to the next level.

It’s honestly the most interesting role anyone’s asked me to play in a long, long time. And it’s going to help Jeremy’s movie hit the stratosphere.

“Why are you smiling—and why are you back early? Did Carol tell you where I lived? No, she couldn’t have. I didn’t tell her.” Maisie holds a water bottle up to her forehead, her wide eyes assessing me mistrustfully. “How did you find me?”

“I’m resourceful like that,” I say cheerfully, enjoying this way the hell more than I should be. “And I’m back early—and here—because I owe your

dog an apology.”

I look down into the adoring eyes of the golden retriever. “It’s Jupiter, right?”

“Um...yes?” Maisie offers faintly.

“Well, Jupiter, I appreciate all the work you’ve done for me. You’re the best.” I lean down to rub the dog’s head some more, trying to give the woman a second to recover. I spent the flight back from Hawaii poring through Maisie Jones’s social media posts, which have gone from outright denial to blushing acceptance to a one-woman PR committee about how great a guy I must be if I was dating her, all without uttering a single lie—and never mind the fact that we were full-on screaming at each other a few short days ago.

As much as I hate to admit it, Jillian is right. Maisie is the real deal, a genuinely nice person doing genuinely nice things for me even though we are not-so-genuinely dating. There’s even a group of vocal supporters on TikTok who call themselves BarkTokkers, apparently after some hashtag she’d started, who are all now posting videos of their dogs wearing Brad Pack signs and T-shirts, all of them carrying sandals in their mouth. I don’t understand it, but I don’t really have to. Jillian is happy. Jeremy is happy. Glenna Dare is probably not happy, but I don’t give a fuck about her.

And I will make this worth Maisie’s while. None of it’s real—that’s a non-negotiable, but the cash sure as hell will be.

“We’ve got company, by the way, above us,” I say conversationally, as I glance back to meet her eyes. “Don’t look up.”

“The drones?” Her smile dims a little. “Yeah, that’s been a thing.”

“Those are new for me. I guess I have you to thank for that. Don’t run away—another one just showed up. You should probably look happier to see me.”

She stops mid-turn and dutifully grins at me. “Are you here to yell at me some more?”

“Why? Do you want to yell at me?”

She speaks through clenched teeth. “More than you can possibly imagine.”

“Maybe you should come down here and tell me about that?”

Her smile turns radiant, though her eyes narrow with genuine animosity. “Oh, can I really?”

The large boxer woofs in approval as Maisie fairly skips out from beneath a vine-strewn overhang of a house that can only generously be described as



ramshackle. I didn't pay enough attention to my surroundings as I walked up the path, unsure of how the dogs would react to me. But clearly the golden retriever hauling around my shoe for the last couple of days, not to mention the whole pack of them sleeping in my house, has imprinted my scent on them enough that they consider me part of the club. Maisie's clearly having a harder time getting used to me joining the pack, but she'll have to suck it up.

"Brad," she says again, this time much more warmly. She approaches me as her eyes fill with worry despite her big grin. I hold out my arms to her, and a look of pure, unadulterated panic crosses her face. But the dogs barking with enthusiasm spurs her on, and she steps forward into my arms, hugging me tight.

"You break Jupiter's heart again, and I'll *end* you," she hisses in my ear.

"Noted." My reply is automatic—and issued partly in self-defense—so I'm relieved to feel her relax against me, her body almost going boneless for a second.

My body, on the other hand, tightens right up.

A dozen different data points explode in my mind. Maisie is all energy, pure forward motion until she slams into a wall. She's also smaller than I expected, her outsized personality adding height and bulk that simply aren't there when I hold her in my arms. Her hair is every bit as big as advertised, though. And it isn't a hardship for me to press my cheek against it, to inhale the sun and salt and soft light fragrance that has to be her shampoo. I stand for maybe a second too long, because I can feel her stiffen again. Then I pull back and smile down at her. "Their mics are good," I warn her, "but I don't know how good."

"I don't know either," she agrees, staring up at me soulfully. "I promise I'll stop threatening you."

"Don't stop on my account. I think we're good if we stay close together like this. I can keep saying nice things about Jupiter if that helps. You okay with my arms around you?"

"Yes," she manages, now sounding a little strangled—and a little wary. I'm a fan of both reactions.

"You look nervous," I point out.

"Do I?"

"Kind of a lot." I'm not proud of myself, but I can't help reveling in the warmth of Maisie's body, the electric-popping energy of her. I've held my share of actresses in my time, and more than a few girlfriends as well, and I

can't for the life of me remember anyone feeling exactly like Maisie. Have I become disconnected from real people? Probably. Do I care? Not usually. But now...I do, a little. Now I wonder how much I've been missing out on. "Sort of to the point that we maybe don't look like we're that good of friends."

"Oh. Um, that's bad, isn't it."

"Well, it's not good."

"Right." Maisie finally seems to pick up on the fact that she's holding her arms stiff at her side. She lifts them, cradling my elbows as if we're eighth graders at the school dance. I can't imagine a more awkward embrace, but it seems to make the dogs happy, as the three blonde furballs start twirling. The hideously ugly pug goes up on his back heels, then piles into the side of the golden retriever, who stares at me as if I'm his long-lost soul mate.

"Seriously, though, am I ever going to get back my sandal?" I ask, and Maisie laughs, the sound arrowing through me as she relaxes a little more. She leans back and regards me with a delight I can't tell is feigned or not, and now I'm the one who's maybe feeling a little nervous. This is a game—a show—a two-week engagement. She does know that, right?

"You are so never getting that sandal back. And Carol gave the other one up as well. I hope you said your goodbyes earlier."

"I really liked those sandals."

"Jupiter does too."

"Jupiter," I muse, and the old dog swings his head toward me as he hears his name, his big, brushy tail thumping. Meanwhile, I can see that the rabid chihuahua has placed himself squarely between me and Sweetie, who yelps excitedly and then goes back to grooming herself. She isn't my dog, of course...but she certainly seems to be the chihuahua's.

Maisie gives me a full-wattage sunny smile, drawing my attention back. "I feel like I need to explain—all of this, a little better. What's happening, I mean. With the drones."

"Yeah, you probably do." She doesn't, of course, but this will get us where we need to be. I'm clearly using her, and I'm going to keep using her, but I'm going to pay her well for her time. We'll get to all that. For the moment, I'm good with just standing here a bit longer.

"I swear on my soul, I honestly didn't know this was happening until it was happening," she says in a rush. "I uploaded what feels like a million videos, and I learned that you should just put them up and keep going. Some

of them are worth adding all the captions and stickers and whatever to, but some of them—a lot of them—do better if you don't mess with them at all. And last Saturday on the beach, I was so startled to come upon you, and then Jupiter grabbed your shoe, and Rose—”

“She's the ankle licker?”

“She's the *worst* with ankle licking,” Maisie assures me emphatically, though her eyes are wide and earnest now, and there's no stopping the confession continuing to roll. “After that—well, I suck, I know I suck, but after I figured out what was happening, hours later, I didn't want it to stop. If you knew how many videos and photos I posted, how much I prayed for anyone to notice—and it suddenly was happening.”

“Because we were dating.”

There goes the blush again. “I know! I know. I'm terrible. I'm completely terrible. As soon as donations started coming into my GoFundMe, I should have stopped it—explained—but I didn't. I just couldn't. And now—”

“It's okay,” I say, trying to redirect the tide of words, but it's no use. They're coming right over the seawall with more crashing down behind them.

“At first, I denied, like, dating you or even really knowing you, but that seemed only to make them think I was joking, and next thing they were taking pictures, and people started following me around with cameras. My own social media started getting more followers, and there's this really mean group of girls that started posting—fans of Glenna Dare—and they don't like you very much, but my volunteer moderators blocked them from posting and now they just are sort of bashing me from afar. It's really weird.”

“They're the Dare Girls,” I inform her. “And yes, they're fans of Glenna Dare. I'm aware of them.”

That makes her bite her lip. She has really soft looking lips, I decide, wide and full. Her mouth is caught, for a second, in her own teeth before she launches it into action again.

“Well, they think you kind of suck.”

I laugh. “I know that too,” I tell her, my hands settling on her hips. She jerks somewhat convulsively at the intimate hold, and the blush rises again, this time almost reaching her sky-blue eyes. They are the exact match of the California sky, because of course they are. Maisie Jones isn't breathtakingly attractive in the conventional sense, but she is in all the other ones. Bright, joyful, and full of light, her emotions are plain and open on her face for

anyone to see.

“I understand you’re now the spokesperson for Poocheroo Puppy Packs,” I continue.

Another flare of color scores her cheeks. “I’m not the spokesperson. I’m like an ad—a blip in the stream—and it won’t last long. It never does. But it is happening and I didn’t expect it and I still don’t even understand how all this happened so fast.”

I squeeze her hips a little, not missing the hitch in her breath, but this is my cue. “But it did happen fast, and we probably should take advantage of it. Both of us. For, say, the next two weeks—and then find a way out that suits us both.”

“Suits us both?” she asks, searching my face with that damned sunny smile still fixed in place. “How?”

“Well, as you already pointed out, I have a whole bunch of people out there who think I’m the absolute *worst* because I upset their favorite singer, and maybe the only thing saving my skin right now is the fact that I’m dating the sweetest woman on social media.”

“Well, I’m hardly—”

“And you’ve got a whole lot of dogs crammed into this tiny house that looks like it’s basically still standing only because a bunch of vines got together and decided to make it so. So I’m thinking the GoFundMe for the care of your shelter dogs is going to come in handy for you. Ditto the Poocheroo sponsorship, am I right?”

That last, unfortunately, seems to be the wrong thing to say. Maisie winces, biting her lip as she glances away.

“Oh, geez. I know. I feel like I put you in a terrible situation, and I can’t apologize enough. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, I should have stopped it. I could have stopped it, but I didn’t because I—well, everything is so much more expensive than I expected. I know that’s a terrible excuse, but I have to take care of the dogs and the house is so much more work than I’m ready for. And now, I mean with this new tax bill, I don’t know how I can pay for everything otherwise so it really is a blessing, I know it is. But I truly didn’t intend for any of this to happen, especially to you, and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,”

To her credit, she delivers this speech without taking more than one breath, and managing to smile the whole way through it, no doubt acutely aware of the watchers in the sky.

“I accept your apology,” I say, with impressive sincerity, though in the back of my mind, I think, *tax bill?* “And I think while we figure out how to best take advantage of the next two weeks, we should probably kiss.”

“Oh!” She’s back to barely breathing now, her lips parting in another O of surprise. I remember that O. I’m a big fan. “You think so?”

“Pretty sure it’s our best course of action. Given the audience, especially.”

“The audience,” she agrees, and I’m gratified to see her eyes widening, her mouth softening in unspoken invitation. At least I sure as hell hope it’s an invitation.

In that moment, even if she said no, I’m pretty sure I would’ve acted like I didn’t hear her. And I can be a damned good actor when I want to be.

I lean forward and touch my lips to hers.

## CHAPTER 11

~ Maisie ~

I'VE BEEN KISSED BY A CELEBRITY BEFORE. JIMMY RATLINE WAS THE MOST popular guy in the freshman class at Olmsted Falls High, and I was still in the eighth grade. When our daily walk down the long empty street to the bus turned weirdly flirtatious, then awkward, I didn't understand what was happening until it was far too late.

When he finally kissed me that warm, sticky morning in front of Mrs. Anderson's house, where the trees grew close together and everything was quiet and still, I thought...well, I thought I was going to throw up. Because Jimmy used tongue and while I technically understood that was possible in a kiss, I wasn't emotionally prepared for it.

I was also not prepared to discover that Jimmy typically consumed a combination of Red Bull and Cheetos for breakfast, but I learned that as well that morning.

It was honestly the most disgusting kiss of my entire life, which was unfortunate since it was also the first kiss of my entire life. First and last for longer than I care to think about.

This kiss is nothing like that one.

Brad Zander has probably never eaten a Cheeto. His mouth is soft, warm, and firm. His hands tighten on my hips, anchoring me to the ground as if he suspects I might float away like a birthday balloon unmoored from its pony. I'm aware I may possibly be whimpering, but the heat spreading from my mouth to my chest and then to my belly feels like liquid sunshine pouring through me, setting parts of me on fire that didn't know they had the option. And there is absolutely no tongue. Which is too bad, because I am so emotionally prepared for Brad Zander's tongue right now.

I catch myself in time before tipping over on to him, but it's a near thing.

I pull back, my eyes wide, and realize that there *are* parallels to Jimmy Ratline's long ago fumbling attempt, because I remain unemotionally prepared for the look in Brad Zander's eyes as he watches me retreat, his slow perusal of my face making me flush with embarrassment, excitement, and maybe a little giddiness.

"Well, hi there, Maisie Jones," he murmurs, a cocky grin stretching across his face, making him look like every bad boy rockstar, celebrity, and A is for Asshole-list actor all rolled up in one.

"You think we convinced them?" I ask breathlessly, desperately hanging on to the trailing edge of my sanity. Because when faced with an overwhelming deep dive into emotions I can't control, I do what any red-blooded woman does. I redirect.

He blinks, then realizes what I'm talking about—realizes it and registers that he should be caring, but he truly didn't before I introduced the concept to him. What must that be like, to have cameras follow you around so much that you stop caring what they capture?

Then again, he staged this kiss specifically for the cameras, right?

*Right?*

Brad's smile turns more teasing. "I'm less concerned about the photographers than I am about your dogs," he confides in me, and I jolt, for the first time realizing that we have drawn a crowd, and not the one I was expecting. Our party of nine rings us in a loose, startled orchestra; Boxer fairly bristling with the need to jump; Jupiter staring in confusion, Brad's shoe between his paws; the three puffballs sitting completely still at uncharacteristic attention, their black, shiny eyes fixed on us. Jazz has scooted back to plant herself firmly in the grass, looking suspiciously like she's going to start eating it. Bugsy is sitting back on his haunches, and Mr. Symmes and Sweetie are watching gravely from a spot nearest the path, as if they want to be the first to escape should everything go south.

"Hey guys," I say a little shakily. I grab Brad's hand, leaning down with our linked hands out for Boxer to sniff first, then Jupiter. It's a move I made a hundred times when introducing dogs to a new member of the pack, mingling our scents together and presenting the newcomer as a welcome friend. Boxer looks at me with amusement, and I recall that he was the one to find Brad in the first place, that morning on the beach that seems like it happened roughly three centuries ago.

"Okay, okay. I get it," I complain to the dog, dropping down to one knee



to bump my forehead against his. Boxer offers me a low, amused woof. “Then why are you giving me such a hard time?”

“This is a hard time?” Brad asks, and I glance over to see that Jupiter is now pressing up against his side, looking hopefully up at him as he reaches down with his free hand to jostle the golden’s floppy ears. He continues rumpling them as he holds my gaze.

“So, terms,” he says quietly. “Let’s work this out. What’ll it take for you to remain my fake girlfriend for the next ten days or so?”

His tone is rock solid practical, and so devoid of emotion I’m finally able to pull my head out of the clouds and stuff my brain back inside. “Ten days,” I echo, as if I set up this kind of business transaction all the time. “What exactly do you need?”

“There are a couple of parties I have to do for the movie. I’d like you to be part of them. One’s at my house, tonight—that’s easy. There’s another one Saturday night in the city. Both involve big money sponsors who want to feel like part of the movie they helped finance.”

I bite my lip. “I’ve got a dog adoption event on Saturday afternoon.”

“Yeah?” He scratches his jaw. “Well maybe I can help you out with that.”

I blink. “You’ll do that?”

“Sure I will. We’re in this together. You make me not look like an asshole; I don’t break your dog’s heart.” He grins, and I suspect that Jupiter’s getting the better end of this deal. “Anything else we should cover? Besides kissing in public? Which is a definite yes, by the way.”

All the butterflies swirling around in my stomach stand up and cheer. “What else is there besides that?”

“Like kissing *not* in public?”

And...the butterflies pass out. I’m supposed to be a sophisticated, unattached business partner in this transaction, so I give no indication of the state of my butterflies. Instead, I roll my eyes. Expressively. “I think I’ll manage to resist you.”

He offers me a mouth-watering half smile. “What if I can’t resist you?”

“I’ll take my chances on that.” I tear my gaze away from him before my knees give out. “Tonight, though—the party? How long will it be? I don’t normally leave the guys for a super long time.”

“You can totally bring them,” he says, “though we’ll probably need to keep them away from the guests for their own safety. It’s big-money Malibu types, and they all smell like old people.”

“I’ve never smelled big money Malibu.”

“You’re not missing anything.”

We’re still holding hands, and he glances up at the house. “This place is yours?” he asks, the question so carefully neutral I burst out laughing.

“I know it doesn’t look like much. It was my grandparents’ place, and they lived here for a lot of years when it looked fantastic. It only got run down in the last few when they moved into a nursing home and didn’t realize what was happening here. None of us did.”

He smiles, his gaze trailing over the thatch-covered roof with its mat of trailing vegetation. “I can see that. They never updated it?”

The question seems strangely pointed, and I shrug, feeling a little self-conscious. Brad’s gorgeous beach home was clearly remodeled a dozen times over. “It was still new in my great grands’ lifetime, and my grandparents only had one child—my mom, and she left for college and pretty much never returned. Not because there was any bad blood,” I add quickly, seeing something pass across Brad’s face and slip away again. “Just because—she’s a free spirit.”

“And is she still?”

“Yeah.” I swallow, but there doesn’t seem to be any point in not being honest. “She and my dad are in Ecuador. Studying...turtles I think.”

“Turtles.”

“Turtles are very important.”

“So are you.”

I bite my lip at the unexpected comment, fighting the blush that crawls up my cheeks. I don’t actually know Brad Zander all that well. He’s an asshole, yes...but then he goes and says things like that, and he looks at me like I matter. Jeremy Greene certainly likes him, and Jeremy seems like a good guy. My scouring of social media turned up no red flags other than him breaking a series of set props—and Glenna Dare’s heart. But a social media profile doesn’t exactly capture the real person. And I kissed the real person. Or was that fake too?

I shove all those thoughts straight out of my brain. “Okay, so, party. Tonight. Totally good. I’m totally fine with that. Is there anything I need to do for that, any way I can help?” I ask in a rush.

Brad’s only answer is a wide, reassuring grin. He turns to tug me toward the hedge line and the beach path down to the water. “You need to do anything here? Or can we head back to my place? I can wait if you need to

take care of the guys.”

“What? You want me to go with you—now?”

He stops, furrows a brow. “Unless you’re busy?”

“Oh—well, no. No, I can go with you. The guys can stay here unless...” I look around at the sea of expectant faces. Leaving them will not go well. While they are amazing at home on their own, that was in the Before Times, before Brad Zander. Now they gaze from one of us to the other, practically quivering in anticipation of being invited on a new adventure. Jazz, in particular, is not so very subtly sidestepping her way toward the far hedge, as if her short, arthritic legs could carry her out of reach and into the wide world before we notice. “Um, will it be okay if they come with us?”

Brad’s smile lights up my whole world. “It will be no problem at all. I’m not all stocked up on Poocheroo puppy chow, but remember, I thought you were going to stay for another week. I still have a shit ton of food back at my place, and they’re welcome.” Jupiter thumps his tail as if he can understand him while the three puffballs explode again into twirling delight. “Besides, we still have watchers.”

My eyes flare, and any other question I think to ask dies in my throat, as we head back down the path to the open beach. There are a few drones off in the distance, but nobody I can see standing in the trees—or out on the beach near my walk.

“How creepy is this going to get?” I ask.

“Probably a little creepier,” he allows. “They’ve approached you on the beach?”

I shrug. “Not really, not after the first day or so. With you not here, it isn’t all that exciting. I think people are mostly watching to see if I cheat on you.”

“As if.” He laughs. He has a good laugh. “I’m here now, so it probably will get a little more obnoxious. Less on the beach because I have Beach Patrol queued up, and these assholes know it. But in town, you should stay on your toes.”

My brows lift. “I don’t do much in Malibu. Most of my stuff comes by delivery, and I’m in LA a lot, so I get anything I need on the way there or back.”

“Smart. You have a photography gig, did I understand that correctly? There’s space at my place if you need it. I have incredible light, or so I’m told. Before my folks bought the house, some painter or another owned it.

You could set up shop...”

Brad goes on, but his words wash over me like an endlessly rolling tide—complete with the hurricane alarms. Is he saying this for my benefit? For someone else’s?

“Brad,” I protest, a little more weakly this time.

Whatever he thinks I’m going to say, he’s wrong, because he smiles at me in a way that makes my bones feel weak and my heart seizes up in my chest. Am I having a stroke?

“Maisie,” he counters as he pulls me along the beach, the ocean before us, the cliffs behind us. A large chunk of driftwood stands bleaching under the sun. It’s a gorgeous shot for photos, which I know because I shoot photos there on the regular. He apparently knows it too.

“Stop looking so surprised,” he instructs as he turns back to me, capturing my gaze with his. “We’ve got six drones trained on us and a long-range camera and mic set up on that beach blanket by the water.”

And then he kisses me again.

This time he lifts his hand to my cheek, cradling my face, and I lean into it, as if we are truly falling in love and are delighting in how we touch...talk...kiss. I pull back and gaze soulfully into his eyes, and his grin is bright and infectious.

“You’re a natural,” he informs me. “And if we’re dating, we’re not lying, are we? So as of this moment, just think of us as officially dating. Easy enough to solve that problem.”

“We’re officially dating,” I echo, with as much certainty as I can muster. “Right.”

And then, since we’re officially dating, I step up on my tippy toes and kiss him.

With tongue.

CHAPTER 12

~ *Brad* ~

NEED JACKS THROUGH ME, HOT AND REAL, AS MAISIE DEEPENS OUR Hollywood caliber kiss into something seriously worth posting online. I give as good as I get, pulling her to me more roughly, tasting, nipping, teasing until she's breathless.

By the time I stand her away from me, I realize two things—one, Maisie is far more intoxicating than I originally gave her credit for...two, she isn't wearing a bra. Or if she is, it isn't doing the job. Maisie's nipples push against the soft fabric of her tank top with an urgent insistence that makes keeping my hands off her virtually impossible...but I can't touch her, not like that. Not in public.

Not if I want us to get back to my house with our clothes on.

"Wow," she says, drawing in a deep breath that does nothing to dispel my fascination with her tank top. I watch as she runs her fingers through her wild mane of curls. "Thank you for that. Jimmy Ratline is officially exorcised."

"Should we let his family know?"

Maisie coughs out a delighted laugh, humor lighting up her features and taking away the soft, subtle glow that has been building there. She's back in her comfort zone, and I should be happy about that. But there was a moment there where it felt more like she was going to swoon. That's a moment I want to get back again.

Even as that thought dances across my consciousness, I reject it. I'm not trying to make Maisie Jones fall in love with me. That's not the role I'm playing. I'm trying to get my agent off my ass, and the production company off Jeremy's, and maybe, sure, keep Maisie in the good graces of her social media followers, the humanitarian guy that I am.

I eye the drones above us dubiously. "That should keep them busy for the

moment, but if we want to get to the house before a horde of them descends, we should probably move it.”

She scans the dogs—all on their leashes, including Sweetie. “How trained is Sweetie?” she asks quietly. “Does she know the way home?”

I grin. “We can find out. Mrs. Powell showed up right before I headed over here, and there’s someone she’d love to see. Sweetie?” I raise my voice when the dog doesn’t react at first. “Hey, Sweetie! Mommy’s home.”

The dog seems to jump straight up in the air, her legs churning well before she hits the sand again—then she’s off like a shot, the rest of the pack following her with Maisie’s encouragement.

As predicted, there’s a barrage of photographers and reporters at the base of the private walk up to my house. They scatter at the onslaught of dogs, and we’re past them and on the walk before anyone seems to know what to do. Eventually Maisie picks up Mr. Symmes while I slow enough to make sure no dog is left behind, but we don’t stop moving until we’re safely in the kitchen and then the living room, all of us blowing hard as the dogs drop to the floor, boneless and relaxed.

I know from the heat tracking sensors I had my security team install, that Maisie hasn’t attempted to explore the house beyond the first floor. She’d slept on the lanai, made meals in the kitchen, and continued her photography activities down by the water, except for the occasional dog shot near the pool. I’ve seen the shots, and can understand why she uses them. Swimming dog pictures never get old.

But now she spins around in the spacious living area that looks like something out of an Architectural Digest magazine, because it is. Decoration isn’t something I give a shit about, but Maisie looks good here, I decide. She looks right...even as she turns back to me and presses her palms against her temples.

“Brad—all those people! That was easily six times the number of photographers that were following us earlier today. What’s going on? Is it just going to get worse?”

Her fluster brings a new spark to her eyes and sends her curls quivering. She clasps her arms around her waist, as if fortifying herself against a gale force wind to come. The dogs’ whines and re-energized barks break through her stress and give her something to focus on other than me. She whirls away to the pantry, and in a flurry of movement, grabs bowls and a water jug before ushering them back out the door onto the deck. Bowls are distributed

and filled, and she's back within thirty seconds. It has to be a land speed record.

"They'll stay close," she tells me, whipping her hair back into a new bun that is only slightly less messy. "The pool is honestly their favorite thing. You may never be able to reclaim it. I mean, like, for as long as I'm here, which I know is only another week or so, but—"

"Hey," I interrupt her, and she stops again in the middle of the kitchen, for a second not knowing what to do with her hands, but flapping them at me for good measure. "Take a breath, it'll be okay. I feel like I should be the one reminding you that you are the one who started dating me."

"I know! I know," she says, slumping a little as she collapses onto one of the bar stools at the kitchen island. Now that we're behind closed doors, she no longer seems like she's going to spontaneously combust with energy. I move around to the refrigerator and pull out two bottled waters, conscious of the barrier of the wide swath of stone between us. I do that deliberately, and it trips Maisie's relief valve so viscerally, I'm surprised she doesn't start blowing steam out her ears.

Instead she leans forward, planting her elbows on the thick granite countertop. She scrubs her hands through her hair again and digs her fingers into her scalp, as if her thoughts are as unruly as her curls. "There's just so much I don't know—so much I should know. Are you actually dating anybody for real right now? Like some secret girlfriend that the world doesn't know about, but you're protecting from outside scrutiny because you want your love to find a way?"

She slaps a hand over her mouth and stares, then speaks through her fingers. "I can't believe I said that. Out loud and everything."

I grin back at her. It's easy to smile at Maisie. Maybe it's because we're two actors playing a role, but it's a role that comes naturally to her, and all roles come easily to me. It works. "I'm not dating anyone else. I was dating an actress, it doesn't matter who, but she is now dating someone who didn't break Glenna Dare's heart. Way better optics."

For the first time, Maisie looks troubled as she knots her fingers again on the kitchen bar. "Did you really break Glenna's heart? That's hard, you know, getting your heart broken. And getting a heart broken by someone like you would be even harder, I think."

I can't deny it, I want to know more about why she thinks getting your heart broken by me would make the situation more dire, but I stop the fishing



expedition before it leaves the pier. “I met her at a party years ago. I was brand new to the scene and didn’t know who she was. That’s bad enough, but when she says I looked right through her, she’s probably not wrong. I looked right through everyone. I was rich but not really famous or even acting on the regular then, so she only got devastated by my glittering Hollywood star in retrospect.”

“Hmm...I suspect you’re missing a few salient details of that story, but I’ll take your word for it.” She pulls the hair band out of her hair again and resets it, a gesture I now recognize as nerves. “But do you think the paparazzi will continue to buy this, now that you’re back? I’m not exactly celebrity girlfriend material. I mean, for heaven’s sake.” She gestures down at her slouchy tank top and sun faded shorts. “I hope it’s another luau tonight, or I don’t have the clothes for it.”

Since she’s given me permission to study her, I take it, a dozen different emotions rippling through me. All of them weird, I decide. Pride, amusement, strategy—which shouldn’t be an emotion, but for me, it is—possessiveness.

“You trust me?” I ask with a smile that my agent tells me is devastating.

Maisie rolls her eyes. But there’s no denying the color lifting in her cheeks, so maybe Jillian is onto something. “Of course I trust you,” she says glibly. “We’re dating, you’re a hot celebrity actor, and you like dogs. What else is there to know about a guy?”

I grin. “Exactly. Come here.”

The tension between us increases exponentially as she stands and approaches me cautiously, walking around the enormous island with a slow and nervous step.

“I’m not gonna bite, Maisie,” I assure her, though I don’t know who I’m trying to convince. She blushes again, harder. I hold out my hands to her. She clasps them and lets me draw her close. “Since we’re officially dating and everything for the next ten days, I’d like to kiss you when no one else is watching. If that’s okay.”

“Oh,” she says, and her mouth rounds into that perfect circle again, and without seeming to realize she’s doing it, she sways forward, then jerks back.

Not expecting the evasive action, I miss her mouth entirely, planting a kiss on her cheek. But feeling her body press up against mine, I don’t want to stop. I trail my mouth back to hers, tasting heat and sunshine, brush my lips over hers, sucking on them slightly as she gasps.

I pull back to see her cheeks are now stained bright with color, her eyes

wide and sparkling, her breath a little hitched. “Brad...” she murmurs, and another lightning bolt of need rips through me, setting everything on fire. That’s not part of the script—it can’t be part of the script. So I step back from her and pull out my phone before I demand rewrites.

“Okay, let’s see about getting you some clothes. I’m sure my PA group has stylists in the area.”

Maisie blinks, momentarily confused—then her whole face lights up. “A stylist—of course! A stylist. Would you mind if we used someone I know—or someone a friend of mine knows? She knows everyone, and she’s constantly getting them work when she can, it’s sort of her thing. Would you mind? If she can do it?”

I shrug as she pulls out her own phone, a sudden tsunami of energy gripping her. “Anyone you want, as long as they’re good.”

“They’ll be the best,” she assures me, and her blind faith in her friend makes me smile. Maisie probably won’t care what she ends up wearing, as long as her friend’s friend can get a commission. But if she’s happy, then I’m...

I frown. I’m happy.

Since when is that a thing?

CHAPTER 13

~ Maisie ~

“SO, HOW HOT ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE HERE? WICKED HOT? RESPECTABLE hot? Rich but too polite to show it hot? What are we looking at?”

I look at Catherine with a nervous shrug—yes, Catherine, who rode shotgun with the stylist and her assistant because she couldn’t help herself, and because she’s Catherine. She has more style in her little finger than I will in my entire closet, ever.

“I don’t think the goal is for me to be looking hot at all,” I inform her. “I have to look like I belong.”

“But belong to what?” Catherine pushes. She arrived at Brad’s house in a van with portable racks of clothing tucked away into enormous double high dry-cleaning bags—from where, I have no idea, but once again, that’s Catherine. She hauled everything in with the help of Brad’s gardening staff, who showed up to make his impossibly manicured lawn look more manicured, and commandeered his office as our walk-in closet. I’d secretly wanted us to be on a completely different floor, but there was no way we were going to lug all these clothes and racks up a set of stairs, only to come right back down again.

And the clothes are impressive—dresses of every shape and description, from tennis whites to ballgowns. They’re also mostly my size, though a seamstress is currently toasting her Melbas out on the lanai, ready to whisk in and start letting out these designer creations once we choose one. I’m surprised to learn that, for the most part, the dresses have been designed to allow for easy manipulation in both directions. All except for the sequin numbers, but tonight doesn’t really feel like a sequin kind of night, though Catherine has made me try on a couple of them anyway, for grins.

“Let’s make this useful, so we don’t have to do it again. You’re going to

need a cocktail dress tonight, and you'll need a red-carpet dress, maybe? And an oh-I-just-threw-this-on-to-get-coffee outfit and..." She skewers me with a look. "Do you ever work out?"

"I run around after eight dogs, does that count?" I offer. "That's more workout than any one person should need."

She giggles. "Okay, fair."

She casts her glance out the window, the wraparound views showing the open water through the trees, and a corner of the tiled swimming pool where three identical lengths of puffballs stretch out to their fullest extension to soak in the sun. They are all sopping wet. I pray that Brad has a good filtration system in that pool.

"And I don't think you need to dress me for more than tonight, Catherine. I've got commissions that have started, but it's not like anybody has paid me yet. I can't afford these clothes." Not to mention the monumental tax bill sitting at home. Can I really play the part of Brad's girlfriend for long enough to get the actual government off my back?

I sure as hell need to try.

But Catherine waves off my response. "You don't have to afford these clothes. Believe me, if it gets to the point where you're at an opening with Brad or, saints be praised, an award show, you'll wear these outfits for free. But as to the rest, Brad's picking up the charge, of course."

I grimace, fingering a beautiful cocktail dress in a sunny, silky fabric. "I can't ask him to do that."

"I'll be shocked if he's even given you the option." Catherine glances back to me as the stylist bustles around...styling, or something. "Maisie, these people are not like us. They have different requirements. And Brad is in a phase of life where his requirement is to look like the kind of guy who could move from a world-famous singer to a chick he met on the beach without skipping a beat. He would never let either one of those girls be embarrassed."

She tilts her head, considering her own words. "Although I guess, technically, he let Glenna Dare be embarrassed. And she totally was embarrassed, she says it right there in her song. You know the line, in the third verse—"

"Please don't sing that song to me," I groan. Catherine smirks and waggles her brows.

"Is it hard knowing that he broke another woman's heart? That it

shattered, it mattered, he tore her whole world apart?”

I throw a three-hundred-dollar flip flop at her. “Are you even listening to yourself? Even if Brad did truly hurt her, which is questionable based on what he’s told me—”

“Well, don’t take his word for it, he could be lying. Guys do that when cornered. Rich guys, especially. It’s a survival response.” She looks around and sniffs. “His housekeeper uses Sunshine Clean, I bet. So did Lucas—I had Ayla figure out the brand so I could expressly forbid its use in his penthouse ever again. It’s way too intense.”

“I know he might lie, but why would he lie to some woman he met on the beach?” I barrel on before thinking too much about why Catherine cares about floor wax. “Glenna was already on the music scene ten years ago. She’d had some success, he just hadn’t heard of her. Because, you know, he didn’t listen to the kind of music that fills stadiums with thirteen-year-old girls. So, worst-case scenario, they had an awkward conversation. As far as I know, they didn’t even date.”

Catherine nods emphatically. “They didn’t date. They had a conversation in the moonlight and he could have kissed her and changed her life, but he didn’t. He didn’t kiss her. Instead, he left her hanging for all the world to see, her soul on display in perfect misery.”

“Oh my God, please stop,” I moan.

“Well, it’s so *pure*,” she gushes in her best breathless teenager impersonation. “It’s so raw and amazing and heartbreaking. I mean, you’ve seen Brad up close and personal. How would you feel if he looked right through you and didn’t even know you were there?”

I bite my lip at her words, a chill stealing over me. “There’s probably gonna come a time when that’s gonna happen,” I say, though I can’t deny the twist in my gut at the idea. What am I even doing here? I slant a glance outside as Mr. Symmes’ excited barks pair up with Sweetie’s yodel. Okay, I’m giving the dogs a vacation, and Mr. Symmes a shot at love. And I’m helping out some who need help, including nailing down good press for the dog spa and the county shelter. And I’m keeping my roof over my head. Those are all good enough reasons. But that’s all this is.

“I don’t know that I agree, but let’s make sure he doesn’t stare through you tonight, okay? Give me the guest list again, in general terms? Are these like actors and their people?” At Catherine’s question, the stylist turns too, her sharp eyes scanning my body as I reply.

“No, that’s the weird thing. There are a few ad people, but I think the rest are mostly family friends, it seems like? Old Malibu money. So they’re, um, more conservative, I guess? Not like the group of movie people he had here last week.”

“Okay, okay. That helps a lot.” She glances towards the stylist, who nods and goes to a different rack. She starts tossing dresses down on Brad’s large desk and across one of the overstuffed chairs sitting in front of it. “You focus on the dresses, I’ll get the other stuff together,” Catherine says.

“I’m telling you there doesn’t need to be other stuff—”

“Dress.” Then she’s out the door.

I try hard, but nothing works. The bright blue halter dress looks vaguely ridiculous, the yellow flirty sundress seems like I’m trying too hard, and the little black number would be perfect if somebody had died. And it’s not just me thinking these things. The stylist purses her lips together and hums with every new outfit, and I end up feeling worse, not better. It’s like the anti-makeover scene, an early preview of my failure.

At some point during the process, Jupiter enters the room, Buggy by his side. The stylist shoos them to a corner, but fortunately, she also loves dogs—as long as they don’t lay on her dresses. Eventually both pooches curl up together, Jupiter panting heavily despite the arctic condition of the room. I glance at him worriedly. “You okay, old boy?”

He doesn’t respond, and with my newest outfit, Buggy has retreated behind Jupiter’s body, as if he’s slightly afraid of me.

“Maybe it’s your hair,” the stylist hums. “It’s got so much personality up top that trying to balance it out with your clothes...”

“I look like a circus clown. You can go ahead and say it.” It doesn’t help that I’m wearing a dress with broad red and white stripes.

“Well, you look like a circus clown in that, to be sure,” Catherine agrees as she steps into the room with a crate of hair tools. The stylist plucks something else off the rack.

“Honestly, I know you wanted to avoid playing dress up, and this isn’t anything that noticeable, but...” She pushes the dress toward me, and I take it, marveling at the soft blue hue, the swishy fabric. It has a detachable scarf that flutters in the ceiling fan’s breeze, and I dump that on the desk and slide into the dress.

“Ohhh,” Catherine says, and the stylist steps forward, pulling my hair back where it’s escaped its ponytail, and pinning it into a bun.

Then she picks up the scarf and twines it around my neck, turning me around toward the mirror. Behind me, Buggy yaps excitedly, and even Jupiter raises his head to bark with encouragement.

I stare. The woman in the mirror is fresh, confident—in charge. And she’s even a little beautiful. How did that happen? “Wow. I don’t even look like myself.”

“You look totally like yourself,” Catherine counters. “This is how Ayla and I see you. This is how everyone should see you.”

I lift my fingers to the fussy scarf, pulling it away from my neck. “Do you think he’ll like it?” I ask, not missing Catherine’s knowing smile. She nods to the stylist, who immediately grabs the pile of discarded dresses, heading toward the makeshift racks.

Meanwhile, Catherine turns me back toward the mirror. “I think if I kissed some girl at the beach and she showed up looking like this? That would make my whole evening.”



CHAPTER 14

~ *Brad* ~

I HATE PARTIES. I COME BY IT HONESTLY. MY PARENTS THREW PARTIES FOR two reasons—to impress other people and piss each other off. I was always forced to attend, even if—especially if—I didn't want to. My mother's drama would be out on display, and my father's anger would simmer. The longer the night, the more she laughed, and the more they both drank. The more they drank, the more she'd cry later, and the more my father would lash out. Parties meant shouting and anger—and fights. Fights I couldn't avoid, not if I didn't want to get the shit beaten out of me.

I hate parties.

I promised myself after I turned twenty-one and officially moved the fuck out of my parent's Bel Air mansion, I would avoid them at all costs. And every time I go back on that promise, I regret it.

Right at this moment, I deeply, *deeply* regret agreeing to my agent's suggestion that I circle the wagons of some of our biggest ad people under the guise of giving them impromptu exclusive access to Jeremy, me, and several of my extremely rich neighbors—but when I'd phoned Jeremy about the idea, he'd accepted way too fast. Jeremy, who's been down to the wire working on the new end to the movie that he swears—*swears*—will make me a star.

It won't, of course. We didn't shoot a superhero movie. Jeremy's project is a midlist, inventive film—and yes, it's already been picked up by a major house and gotten a ton of early screening buzz, and the new ending is causing additional ripples of interest, sure. But Jeremy can't control anything beyond what's going to spool out onto the screen in theaters across the world. He can't control anything at all, in fact, outside the editing room. So he prefers to stay in the editing room.

I can't say I blame him.

“Beautiful, simply beautiful. I adore what you've done with the place. That's new, isn't it? I think it's new. It's stunning.”

I smile at the woman fawning over my decorator's latest acquisition, some mid-century painting that ended up in the beach house because it featured an ocean. “It's new to me, yes. I'm glad you like it.” In addition to the ad execs from LA, I assembled the topmost tier of our well-heeled neighbors, a sea of frosted, bright-eyed women swilling champagne and rustling in flowy fabrics and low-heeled shoes as their husbands stand in loose groups and talk stocks. I silently thank my decorator for rotating the artwork and furniture in this house. I never even noticed before, but clearly people do.

Maisie is somewhere close, I can feel it, but I asked her to give me an hour with the people, paying my debt to society before she shows up. I haven't seen her yet, but it's only been fifteen minutes past her designated arrival time. She might still be hiding. I could understand that.

“You think we're good? We're good, right? We're good.”

Jeremy blows out a breath beside me, gripping his bourbon as he glances around the room. He's dressed perfectly for the night, a well-cut blue suit and open-necked striped shirt, but to me, he still looks like the scrawny kid I met at the summer immersion experience filled by kids attending the LA County High School for the Arts—an experience that meant teenagers like Jeremy had somewhere to sleep over the summer between their junior and senior years. Desperate to learn from the best, I paid my way into that program by sponsoring it, and my parents never even noticed the donation spike that summer. Win-win, as far as I was concerned, especially since I got to meet Jeremy. He was hands down the most talented kid at that school, and the most tormented. I had his back, that summer and beyond—and now, though I don't deserve it, he's got mine.

When I don't say anything right away, he takes another slug of his drink. “I don't know how you deal with this shit, man. It feels like we're in a sea of piranhas, and they're looking for blood in the water to start a frenzy.”

I grin. “Still glad you broke into Hollywood?”

“I haven't broken in yet. The numbers came back and—”

“You can't worry about the numbers, my man. Half the time they're bullshit. You have any interest in *Arroyo*?”

Jeremy takes another quick, nervous slug of his drink, clearly suspecting

that even saying the name of his next passion project out loud will jinx it. “Some, yeah. Others are waiting to see how the next month goes.”

“Keep the names handy of the ones who believe in you now. Fuck the rest.”

“Easy for you to say, my man. These are your people, not mine.”

“Well, they were my people. Until, like you say, they smell blood in the water. Which they are always ready to do. You’re the only reason why I’m back...and I promise you, I’m doing everything I can not to fuck this up for you.”

Jeremy curses quietly under his breath and glances away, but he knows what I’m talking about. Glenna Dare released another video a few hours ago to go along with her latest sob track, and Jillian sent me a short clip of it. The multi-platinum singer is now a beautiful, polished woman, but she has a chameleon-like ability to transform herself into a shattered, hysterical teen that’s master class in method acting. And the video of her walking by half a million screens with my face on them appears to be...impactful to her target demographic.

“How could you have blown her up so bad, man? I knew you back then. You were an asshole at nineteen, but you weren’t exactly on anyone’s radar. You weren’t even serious about your acting. You weren’t serious about anything.”

I lift a brow toward him. “And I am now?”

He cracks his first real smile of the night. “You’re serious about the work. And about helping me. You know it as well as I do.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I grin back. “Don’t make me cry if I’m not getting paid to do it.”

A bright, sunny laugh breaks across the room, barely discernible above the hubbub of music and chatter, but I know that laugh. Turning, I see the dark chestnut curls bobbing enthusiastically, the hint of a light blue scarf trailing from Maisie’s neck catching the breeze generated by the lazy fans high above. A surge of interest leaps within me, broken only by the rumble of interest in the crowd as murmured awareness zips through the room. I suspect anyone here who’s seen the Glenna Dare music video has also seen the short, unvarnished clips Maisie posted of me interviewing her dogs at the pool.

The dog clips are beating the videos two to one—but there’s no arguing they’re being handled by a master videographer.

“Looks like she’s got your back too,” Jeremy says quietly. “Funny how

that happens.”

I snort. “More than I deserve.”

“So, about that...” Jeremy blows out a long breath. “If you guys are both on board with this being a role you’re playing, what’re the odds of you amping it up a notch?”

I sharpen my gaze on him. Irritation flares, but something else, too. Something I’m not too proud of. “What do you mean?”

He waves his glass. “I’m just saying—if it’s kind of a hot and heavy romance, and given the new ending to *Fallout Protocol*...”

“That’s a movie.”

He shrugs. “And this isn’t? Look—no worries if she isn’t game, you gotta respect that. But if she’s good with pushing that envelope, well, hell. Life following fiction following life ain’t a bad story.”

If anyone else had asked me to do this—Jillian, one of the money guys, whoever—I know I’d be pissed. But somehow, coming from Jeremy... “I’ll think about it.”

“Just ask her, all right? All she can do is say no.” He holds up his glass, quoting our long-ago mantra from that summer where I learned how to act and he learned he has someone in his corner, and that with just one friend, he can take on anyone.

“All she can do is say no,” I agree. “But you should, you know, circulate. Talk to people. Smile. Everyone here wants your movie to succeed, my friend. They’re on your side.” At Jeremy’s grateful nod, I wink. “But remember: piranhas. With money.”

He laughs. “Here’s to piranhas with money,” he agrees, draining his glass. I turn to head toward Maisie—only to be stopped by a tall, slender sylph of a woman I vaguely remember—someone with Jillian’s agency.

“Beth,” I try at the last minute, and am rewarded with an all-teeth grin.

“Close. Billie. But if that smile you shot me was the same one you leveled at Glenna all those years ago, I can see why her heart was broken into glittering dust/oh stupid girl, don’t make a fuss.”

I lift my hand to pinch the bridge of my nose. “Stop. I beg you.”

Her smile turns a little more arch. “That song quote was brought to you by Jillian—and so is this: Keep doing whatever you’re doing.”

She takes a long sip of her champagne as I lower my hand. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the trendlines are *magnificent*. The added effort you put in today

with the dog lady landed on fertile soil. It got picked up by all the outlets and it's goosing overseas interest in the movie."

I blink. "Germany?"

"You're already big in Germany. This is China, and it's make-or-break-a-career money—for Jeremy, even if you don't give a shit. Which I know you don't." She slides an amused glance to where Maisie is holding court with something in her hands that I can't fully see. "She's cute. Is she good for the whole promo tour? Or does she turn into a pumpkin at midnight?"

I scowl. "She'll be there until the movie hits, minimum."

"Well, make sure of it," Billie says with a decidedly piranha-like flip of her fins. "You've got a full slate for the next two weeks, then a press tour after that. You can maybe drop her by release day, but up 'til then, try not to break her heart either."

I manage not to say anything I'll regret, but it's a close thing. I swing away from Billie and make my way over to where Maisie is entertaining a half-dozen decidedly younger people, junior staffers of the ad execs it looks like. She has her camera, I realize, and I stop, surprised as she directs people together and takes shots like a pro, chatting all the while about social media trends. Because she is a pro. But this isn't a working gig for her, damn it. She's my guest. She's my girlfriend, for fuck's sake. I'm working up a full head of steam when I see her give her camera to the young man beside her, who takes it with nervous hands.

"You'll be fine," she says brightly, tossing back the blue chiffon scarf that she doesn't seem to know quite what to do with. "People like short clips—the shorter the better—stuff they can use. Look for people laughing and in motion, but not too much motion. Catch them being casual and take approximately five thousand more videos than you think you'll need. I'll send you everything you capture tomorrow if you give me your contact info. The memory card can take it, and it's better to have too many options than not enough."

I start moving again, and she looks up when I draw near, smiling with genuine delight.

"I don't expect you to be taking photos," I say, and her startled blink makes me curse the edge in my voice. She recovers quickly. I suspect she's good at recovering.

"They didn't think to bring cameras here."

"Maybe because it's a private party?"

“Only for about a quarter of the people—and you can tell them from their clothes. The rest are ad execs trying to preen.” She sends me an arch smile, but it has a desperate edge to it. “Video doesn’t have to be put up on social media to be useful. A great clip of your boss looking amazing at Brad Zander’s iconic Malibu beach house celebrating his new film....”

I roll my eyes, but I’ve already leapt ahead to see what she’s doing. Never mind that these people have been sent out to triage the Glenna Dare battle, Maisie is framing this as a victory party. Maybe I should too.

“You’re right.” My sudden capitulation draws a startled expression of relief to her face, and her blush makes me feel like a hero. Then again, everything this woman does makes me feel like a hero. It’s an easy illusion to get used to, but fuck it, it’s my party.

“Brad—thanks for the invite.” A well-oiled exec with a shit-eating grin has sidled up to us. “We’ve got another opportunity for coverage. I think you might want to get in on it.”

Beside me, Maisie’s hands twitch. I know immediately that she wishes she still had her camera in her hands, but it’s currently roaming the floor. Now she can’t rely on anyone but me to keep her from getting eaten alive, and I’m more than up to the task. I need to navigate this asshole back to Billie...

It takes another dozen introductions to people I thoroughly hope to never see again for us to make our escape. The night is clear outside, and the doors stand open, never mind that we’re air conditioning the deck as much as the party room.

“Is it very different, where you live full time?” she asks, and I glance down at her, the light playing over her features, her curly hair floating in the wind.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a condo in the city, right? I was reading about it. That’s why you’re never here.”

“I’m never anywhere, not for very long. When I’m in the city I’m working, and when I’m not in the city I’m on location, or at least that’s the way it’s been for the last several months.”

“Well, where do you go to relax?”

The question surprises me.

“I don’t relax. I’m not really wired that way.”

She nods, giving me a little smile. “Which is why you fell into acting

without any formal training before high school, then parlayed it into a full-time career, the more exotic the locale, the better. Do you like it?”

Once again, the question throws me. Is this what people do? They talk? “I like acting, sure. It’s different every time, and I have to work at it.”

She laughs. “Most people don’t latch onto things they have to work at.”

I shrug. “How did you become a photographer?”

“Honestly? I needed to have something between me and the world—hey, there, guys.” The soft pad of feet catches my attention as Jupiter and Buggy nose out onto the patio and join us, settling in somberly to look at the moon. Maisie slips back to the office to make sure the rest of the pack aren’t planning to follow the pair, but apparently the other dogs are all down for the count.

I wait until she comes back, then prompt her. “Something between you and the world, you were saying?”

“Yeah,” she smiles a little sheepishly. “You know that girl the kids all teased because she got way too emo about everything? Somebody would pick apart a daisy and she’d feel bad for the flower. A bird would be hopping along a frozen branch, round as a ball, and she’d feel bad that it was too cold. A baby would start crying and she’d cry along with it—that kid. People hate that kid.”

I chuckle. “You were that kid?”

“Not for long,” she says with a resolve that pokes at me. “I figured out I *was* that kid, and how to not get upset. For me, that was with a camera. I wasn’t reacting to the emotion, I was capturing it, figuring out that everything has its place, the good and the bad. It’s all part of the story. And because *it* was the story, I wasn’t, if that makes sense.”

“It...yeah. It does.” I don’t know what’s happening to me, but standing here, listening to her speak such simple, obvious truths, I can’t breathe, I can’t think. Beside me, Jupiter has settled in close, leaning against my leg as if psychically connected to me by the shoe that he still holds in his mouth. Talking to Maisie Jones feels like I’m watching a shooting star zip across the horizon too fast for me to catch it. But she’s real. She’s here. And for the moment, anyway, she’s mine.

And after all, all she can do is say no, right?

I draw in a deep, uncertain breath. “Maisie, I’d like to ask you a favor....”



CHAPTER 15

~ Maisie ~

I LOOK UP AT BRAD, SO SURE THAT HE'S GOING TO ASK ME TO KISS HIM, TO marry him, to run away with him and be his girl—and then I'm *mortified* that I've put those words together in my brain as a grown-ass woman—that I open my mouth and close it, unable to get the words out. The dogs shuffle and edge away, going somewhere—anywhere but here. Even they're embarrassed for me. *Thanks, guys.*

Apparently, Brad changes his mind about asking anything, because he mutters “Fuck it,” and bends towards me, our lips connecting again in a kiss so perfect, so right that of course he puts his arms around me, of course he pulls me into his embrace.

It's perfect and beautiful and then—oddly—conversation surges around us, the buzz of chatter rising. Brad pulls back and we both figure out at the same time that at least a dozen people have been tracking our movements long enough to whip out their phones and record the moment.

Brad swears, though he keeps his expression perfectly affable, like he's selling organic butter before a YouTube video. “I didn't do that for the photo op, dammit,” he murmurs for my ears alone.

“Well, you kinda did,” I point out with a shaky grin. “Considering everything that we're doing here is for the photo op, in a way, right? It's kind of like we're in our own private movie—or one of those reality TV shows, only we never need to fake like we're not aware that the cameras are on. Because they're always on.”

He grimaces. “You're not wrong about that.”

“Is it hard?” Did I ask him this already? I feel like I did, but I can't help repeating myself. “Being on all the time like you are, knowing that at any given moment you could be recorded and posted on the Internet without even

realizing it?”

“Honestly?” he shrugs. “You really do get used to it. You learn not to care too much about it. I gotta tell you, I didn’t even know that you uploaded something that included my picture to TikTok or whatever until a couple of days after it happened. My agent told me.”

I wince. “She must have thought I was some kind of stalker.”

He smiles, and I can’t help but follow the curve of his lips to where they disappear into a deep dimple at the right of his mouth. Brad Zander is gorgeous on a level that isn’t fully understandable, I decide. It’s not that he’s cute. He is heart-poundingly beautiful, and intense, and passionate, and practically vibrating with energy, even when he’s standing still. Is that why he’s found such success in acting? The camera naturally goes to him, and where the camera goes, all eyes follow?

“She didn’t, actually. Given what was going on, she couldn’t be more thrilled. The third or maybe fourth Glenna Dare bombshell dropped by then, and social media sentiment against me started building up steam. To have a wholesome potential romance brewing with a woman who clearly was beloved by her followers, her dogs, and her followers’ dogs was pretty much perfect timing.”

“Yeah, I can see how it would be,” I say brightly. A little too brightly. A *wholesome potential romance*? The words bounce around in my brain, and not entirely in a good way. I know what I look like. I know that despite the pretty dress I have on tonight that I’m ordinarily in sloppy T-shirts and loose shorts, my phone in one hand, a leash in the other. I’m not the kind of girl that Brad Zander dates. I’m not the kind of girl that he would even look at twice. I’m wholesome, not sexy. Certainly not beautiful.

I know I should embrace that, it’s who I am. And the fact that even a total stranger can pick up on it shouldn’t surprise me. I never tried to be anything else. But still, at this moment, with the taste of Brad Zander still on my lips, I don’t want to be the wholesome dog lady next door. I want to be someone he would find attractive, someone he might desire for more than a well-timed photo op. I’m being ridiculous, and I need to pull it together, especially since Brad’s eyes narrow on me as my cheeks heat, his gaze raking across my face.

“What are you thinking right now?” he asks quietly, and in that moment, his voice low and resonant, he does sound interested. Sort of interested, anyway, or at least interested in being interested, depending on what I say next.

So of course I screw it up.

“I’m thinking I should probably go check on the dogs,” I say breezily. “They’ve been so good cooped up in your office, but I want to make sure that they’re not trying to dig through your carpet.”

I groan internally at my own words. *Seriously? The dogs?* The entire pack is asleep.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Brad reassures me, but the corner of his mouth kicks up. “Is that really what you were thinking, though?”

“I mean...” I try to recover, but I don’t get a chance to ask him to say anything more before a new interruption has us both turning.

A middle-aged man in a loose summer suit steps out from the doorway to the house and waves Brad inside. “I am so sorry to disturb you, Brad, but your house is ringing. Like, an entire wall next to the kitchen, flashing ‘Urgent.’”

Brad barks a short laugh, squeezes my hand, and steps away, the loss of him almost a visceral jolt as he strides off to answer the house. I can hear it now, the soft melodious chimes, and wonder how he answered the phone privately with a whole pack of people inside.

Speaking of packs, I glance around, but Jupiter and Bugsy have melted into the shadows, no doubt back in the office with the other pooches. Well, I told Brad I was worried about them, so I might as well follow through on that buzzkill all the way. It won’t take me long to make sure they’re okay. I glance back to the party, which seems to be going strong, but Brad is nowhere in sight. He has guests, and guests have a way of wanting to talk to you.

Meanwhile, I have plenty of time to do whatever I want. I was ever so slightly nervous about handing off my camera, but it wasn’t my primary shooter. I brought it more as a prop tonight, and it’s served its purpose well.

I move over to where the office opens out to the deck, and nudge open the French doors enough to poke my nose in. Boxer sits up immediately, but the other dogs remain sleeping, snoring loudly after a larger-than-usual dinner. Brad commissioned homemade dog food to be part of the caterer’s offering, and the dogs did their level best to show their appreciation. Now they’re sleeping—snoring, wheezing, or in the case of Mr. Symmes, on his back with his feet up, twitching. But there are only seven dogs here. There should be nine.

“Where’s Jupiter and Bugsy?” I ask Boxer, and he stands, shakes himself,

then glides over to me, soft as a shadow. A vague sense of worry pricks at me. Jupiter was checked out thoroughly by the vet, and she pronounced him remarkably healthy for his age, which she places at around ten years old. A senior dog, but with care and exercise and love, he can see as many as another three years, maybe more. But sometimes dogs' lives catch up to them a little quicker than that.

And sometimes when dogs wander off to be by themselves as opposed to the pack they adopted, or who adopted them, it doesn't mean good things. "Where is he, Boxer? Do you know?" Maybe they're still at the pool.

A sense of urgency grips me as I leave the other dogs in the office and move back to the deck, Boxer padding almost silently at my heels.

"Hold on a minute sweetheart," I say, then with a broad smile but a sense of focused determination, I step back into Brad's buzzing, beautiful house. A few of the ad people smile and nod at me, but with that vaguely alarmed look that tells me they have no idea what to say to me. That works out, because I have even less idea on what to say back.

I retrieve my purse from the coat check crew, a matching little nothing bag that's important only in that it carries my house key, my phone and credit card. I hope I'll only need one of those items. But if I can't find Jupiter...

I meet Boxer at the edge of the lanai, the dog's nostrils flaring, his ears pricked forward. "Go get him," I say and the wind picks up as we move swiftly along the paved walkways of Brad's estate, back toward the manicured beach trail that leads to the ocean.

A particularly bold gust of wind kicks up, blowing the ends of my scarf into my face. The last thing I need is to lose that somewhere between Brad's house and mine. Catherine and her stylist would kill me. I unwind the scarf and tuck it into a chair by the pool, taking the extra second to search those pristine waters before Boxer woofs again, impatiently. Jupiter isn't here.

"I know, I know." I pull out my phone and tap a quick note to Brad, using the telephone number his housekeeper gave me when he first left for Hawaii. I doubt he's even carrying his phone, but if he's looking for me, I don't want him to worry.

Even that thought makes me smile a little as I carefully kick off my borrowed blue satin shoes and tuck them next to the scarf. How long has it been since somebody worried about me, other than my parents, whose worry became more of a diffuse, general sort of *take care of yourself* as they returned to their English teaching gigs the moment I went away to college?

They came back for breaks and even my graduation, but they always were more wrapped up in each other than anything else around them. They love me, I know that, but they taught me to take care of myself. And so I poured my need for more attention into those who need it around me.

Like Jupiter and Buggy.

The trek back to the house is quick, the summer sky bright enough and the sand white enough that it isn't difficult to see. At this hour, nobody is out in the water, and no fires crackle along the waterway. The beach patrol did a much better job of cracking down on that. So nobody tracks Boxer and me as we hustle our way across the thick sand, the athletic dog ranging ahead of me, though not too far. Checking back almost curiously as I lift my short dress even higher, trying to keep up with him. Thank God I didn't decide on a pencil skirt or I would've had to leave the dress behind too.

The gate to my walkway is still latched tight, but the sand is trampled over around the right side. So I follow Jupiter's and Buggy's path rather than take the extra second to unlatch the gate properly. Boxer follows behind, but quickly passes me, jogging up the zigzagging beach walk to my gnome home. It's dark inside, of course. Not even Jupiter can figure out how to turn the lights on, and I didn't get around to installing wrap-around motion detectors to illuminate the outdoors. Still, a single bright lamp flickers on as I enter the backyard.

"Jupiter?" I call. "Buggy?" But there's no answering bark. Boxer woofs again, then dashes into the yard, crossing the crumbling concrete slab and entering through the dog door. I follow right on his heels, sliding the door wide and trying again.

"Jupiter?" I ask, and the sound of a dog's whimper floats back to me—along with Buggy's short, worried yap.

"Hey, there, baby," I murmur as I finally see the golden, stretched out on the peeling linoleum of my grandparents' kitchen floor, panting heavily. I've seen enough old dogs to know that they can pass at any time, and my heart twists at the thought that this might be Jupiter's time. Buggy is sitting beside Jupiter, hunched and worried. I go to them both.

"Oh, honey, it's okay," I coo.

But we all know it may not be.

CHAPTER 16

~ *Brad* ~

I FINALLY MAKE IT BACK OUTSIDE FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, DESPITE BEING stopped nearly half a dozen more times on my way to the door. I scan the crowd the whole while, looking for someone who isn't perfectly packaged, but I can't see Maisie anywhere.

Detouring to go check the study, I poke my nose in, noting the French doors to the pool area that are now firmly closed. But the dogs were all lying around in various stages of post-dinner stupor—the little ones, anyway. The girls are full on snoring, and Mr. Symmes is looking entirely too cozy with Sweetie. I don't see Jupiter or Boxer—or Buggy, for that matter—and a sudden flash of fear snakes through me, though I'm not sure why.

The dogs won't hurt any of the guests, and none of the guests will be wandering around outside. Still...I shut the office door softly behind me, and make my way through the crowd again, heading for the main exit to the deck. There are a couple of ad execs out there smoking. They tense as I step out, like I give a shit about them killing themselves one puff at a time. "You guys haven't seen a collection of old dogs out here, have you?"

"Dogs?" the woman asks. "Oh, that's right, you mean Maisie Jones's dogs. Honestly, that entire campaign is pure gold, Brad. If you didn't have the singer's nonsense to combat, you would be killing it."

"You think?" the man beside her counters, California cool in his bright blue suit and white loafers. "I think having the point and counterpoint is what's driving the popularity. But to your question, we haven't." He takes another puff on his vape, which somehow makes me think of my grandfather smoking Cuban cigars. That sets my mind to Maisie's grandparents, and then Maisie's house. Did she have to go back there for something? Why didn't she...



I pull my phone out, and of course, the text is there. Because of course she's thoughtful like that. But she hasn't texted again after the initial notice that she was heading back to her place to find Jupiter. Jupiter? Why would that old dog wander off and go all the way back down the beach trail to his house? Is he not feeling well? I didn't notice anything different about him, but he's not my dog. He's my shoe's dog.

Something about that bothers me more than I want it to, and I tell the dynamic ad duo to explain my absence if needed, that I'll be right back. Ordinarily I wouldn't bother, but they're handy and I appreciate Maisie's note. Someone might appreciate knowing where the fuck I am, too—especially Jeremy, assuming he isn't still trying to edit the closing credits to *Fallout* on his phone.

I hurry down the path, not missing the balled-up scarf and shoes tucked into the pool chair. Maisie leaving them behind is innocent enough. She needed to make time, and those items weren't designed for beach treks. But I hit the path at a much faster clip after that, practically jogging down the beach walk, then breaking out onto the sand and canting over to where the footing is the firmest, picking up speed. By the time I swing back up toward the considerably narrower, less manicured path to Maisie's house, my heart is pounding from more than simple exertion. The gate to her beachwalk is still latched, but I take the path of least resistance around the post, then speed on.

“Maisie?” I call out, hearing the panic in my voice and not liking it as I clatter onto her back deck, everything looking a little too stark and unfinished in the weak light of the interior lamp. There's a broken set of blinds in the back window, I notice, and another window is fogged over, the glass intact but the seal broken. Probably way down the list of priorities, and that adds to my tension as I pull the screen door wider. She left it open. For me? For the dogs? Out of habit? She really needs to take better care of herself. “Maisie!”

“Back here—kitchen!” she calls out, and then her voice drops into a low, cajoling patter that I can't understand until I reach the kitchen door and see the big golden dog on his side. Something inside me doesn't simply break...

It cracks wide open.

“What happened? Is he okay?” My questions come out a little low and breathless, and several thoughts converge in my head. Maisie takes care of old dogs. Old dogs die. Jupiter is older than most, in temperament if not in age, but as I ask the question, the golden lifts his head and turns toward me. His brushy tail flaps and hits the floor, once, twice, his eyes so big and happy

that I nearly choke on a surge of wild, unnamable emotion. Fear? Joy? Relief? All of it mixed up together and something bigger and smaller, too. Something quiet and needful between me and Jupiter.

Maisie laughs, her soft hands stroking the beautiful dog. There's a bucket and towel next to her, and the floor around Jupiter looks suspiciously clean.

"Careful, it's a little wet," she says as I approach, but the golden's tail wiggles faster, his entire back end shivering as he rolls over onto his paws and looks up at me. I crouch down beside him and glance at Maisie, whose face is a mask of contradictions. Her smile is bright, but her eyes are wet.

"Is he okay?" I ask again, my voice sounding a little strangled to my own ears as Jupiter licks my hand and—smiles at me. Smiles! Can dogs do that?

This one, it seems, can.

"There, there, baby, don't do too much. He's fine," she says this last to me, but it doesn't ease the tension in my chest. "His stomach is distended, and he had an accident on the floor here. I think he was looking for comfort, that's why he came back home. He's used to not making a fuss, aren't you, sweetheart? But you're allowed to make a fuss around us, okay?"

Jupiter doesn't seem to be paying any attention to her. He leans into my hand, issuing a long, heartfelt sigh. Something shifts in my peripheral vision—Bugsy, I think, with Boxer standing watch behind him. But my eyes are only on the golden retriever staring back at me.

"Did he eat something bad for him?" I ask, then immediately understand. "Shit, the caterer. I swear he said the food is good for dogs, that they have an entire side business devoted to gourmet dog food."

"Oh, I'm sure he does," Maisie says, her sincerity obvious as she switches her caretaking focus from the dog to me. Like I need it, but in this moment, I guess I do. She meets my gaze and shakes her head a little.

"Brad, you couldn't have known. Dogs can be as finicky as people sometimes, especially if they get excited. I've had dogs eat the same thing for two years straight and then suddenly it upsets their stomach. I've already called the vet, described the symptoms, and she's officially diagnosed Jupiter with a tummy ache. He's going to be fine. He just needs to take it easy and stop partying so hard."

A deep woof draws my attention to the side of the kitchen, and sure enough, Boxer seems to agree with the prognosis. Bugsy looks a little more dubious.

"How long have you had Boxer?" I ask, because I can't ask anything

more about Jupiter. I don't want to know anything about the beautiful golden other than what Maisie has told me, that he feels like shit and that he'll be okay.

I rub my hand along Jupiter's white muzzle while Maisie glances over to Boxer, her smile brightening the room as well as the cold, dark stone of my heart.

"He was the second dog I adopted after Rose, Blanche, and Dorothy—those actually were their names all along, but adopting out three dogs is tough, and they really needed to stay together. Boxer sort of scared people, I think. He was a police dog whose owner died unexpectedly, and he didn't take it well. His interim owner was...not great. I was worried he wouldn't take to the other dogs, but I think they've helped him too. And he's a good friend to everyone I bring home."

"He followed Jupiter back here?"

"Come here, boy," she says softly. Boxer pads over to her, then settles on his haunches at her side, still alert. She rubs her hand over his ears, down his sleek coat.

"Boxer doesn't keep track of the dogs that way. He lets them do their thing, but he's got a nose for about anything. When I asked him where he thought Jupiter was, he started off for home, and he was right."

Her gaze goes back to the golden retriever. "Jupiter and Bugsy have only been with us for a few weeks. I wouldn't have thought he'd know how to get back here by himself, without the context of the other dogs. But he pays attention, don't you, boy?"

The dog shifts again, and I realize that trapped beneath his chest is my now half-disintegrated sandal. I reach down and tug on it with a teasing grin, and the dog jerks, his paws coming together as if to guard it from me.

"I've got lots more shoes where that one came from, buddy, but you've got to get better, okay?" I look over at Maisie, nestled on the kitchen floor in a Tee-shirt and shorts, her fancy designer dress now carefully folded over a kitchen chair. She wouldn't have wanted to get it wet when she cleaned up after Jupiter. I glance down at my own suit, but I don't give a shit.

"He'll be okay?" I ask again, because I can't help myself. I'm way more gratified than I want to be at Maisie's quick nod.

"He's a good boy, and now he's made a friend," she says in a gentle tone, as Jupiter shifts her way. "Who doesn't enjoy having friends at the beach?"

She glances up at me, and her eyes go wide—something in my face no

doubt giving me away. “Brad, it’s okay, really. He’s going to be fine.”

“I know he’s going to be fine,” I say, a little more gruffly than I intend. But the words wobble in my mouth. “I mean, I don’t know, but if you say he is, then he is. Is there anything he needs? Is there anything I can get him? Should we move him? No. We should keep him here. Fuck, I’ve got all these people at the house.”

“He’ll be fine,” she says again. “I should probably stay with him, but I guess...” Her cheeks flare with a renewed blush. “I guess you should go back. You’re welcome to stay, I’d love you to stay, but all those people...”

“I’ll get the dogs. When everybody’s gone, I’ll bring them back here so you don’t have to worry about them, and they don’t have to worry about you.”

She snorts. “Did you see Mr. Symmes in your office with his feet in the air? I don’t think he’s worried about me.”

I grin. “Is it okay for me to bring them back, then?”

I’m rewarded by her blush. “I’d love that—as long as it’s not any trouble.”

“It won’t be,” I assure her, and then I lean forward and kiss her—hard. Harder than I plan to, but she laughs and kisses me right back. I can taste the salt of her tears then and feel my heart crumble a little more. She’s been worried over Jupiter. She’s been scared and sad and worried, all alone in this broken-down house with a broken-down dog who needs her. I pull back, aware of Boxer’s deceptively calm stare on me.

“It’s a good thing you like me,” I say.

She chuckles, a little shakily. “Boxer knows me. Even when he doesn’t approve, as long as I’m happy, he’s happy.”

“Smart dog.” Then I swing my gaze back to Jupiter. The old golden stares at me as if I hung the moon, the stars, and a little of the sky as well. “You’re smart, too, buddy. You’re the best boy ever.”

Jupiter’s tail thumps the kitchen floor.

I leave before I make a fool out of myself.

By the time I return to the party, it’s clear I was missed, and equally clear I’m not going to get out again until they all fucking leave. That takes longer than it reasonably should, and when the place is finally empty and I’ve switched my suit out for a tee shirt and khakis, a small go-pack of supplies over my shoulder, I nervously approach the dogs to let them out of the office.

I remind myself that these are not my dogs. I really don’t know what I’m

doing here. Then again, people walk dogs all the time and I have both of Maisie's multi-leash contraptions. Besides all that, I'm missing three of the dogs.

Granted, two of them are the bigger dogs who could provide ballast against the nuttier, smaller versions, but nevertheless.

My concerns prove to be invalid. No sooner do I show up with the leashes and the indication of going "home" than the dogs are all over it. Even Sweetie consents to be haltered, which is a good thing since any one of them could run off in the night and I'd never be able to find them again.

Despite it all, I end up carrying Mr. Symmes most of the way, with him perched in my arms and straining forward like a lookout. The other dogs trot along docilely, though apparently everything smells differently at night versus during the day. They must have traveled this route a thousand times already, but they sniff every inch of it as if it's all brand new.

I reach Maisie's house after midnight. I scowl as I think about her taking a similar late night stroll with this crew. Granted, she has dogs with her, but with the possible exception of Jupiter—and Boxer, of course—they aren't scary dogs. They certainly wouldn't stop anyone who has an agenda.

What sort of security options do people have to keep themselves safe when they're like Maisie and living alone? My mood doesn't improve as I draw near her house, and the sensor light doesn't turn on. Did I notice it when I was here earlier? Did she turn it off for some reason? Is one of the dogs out here?

At least she has a dog door, but even that probably isn't safe enough.

I don't even bother rolling my eyes at myself. Obviously, she's survived all this time without me running her life, though frankly, she's not doing that great a job at it. Still, who am I to judge? I'm the rando neighbor who conned her into watching my dog.

Even as I think it, I dismiss that characterization as bullshit. I know I'm more. I'm way the hell more. She may not know it yet, but I do.

I let myself in the door, calling out softly to blunt any surprise, but apparently, arriving with the rest of the pack is bona fides enough for Boxer, who barely looks up from where he lies sprawled next to the couch. Maisie comes awake in a rush of awareness.

"Oh!" she blurts, sitting bolt upright on the floor, still in her T-shirt and shorts. "Hey there. I thought maybe it might be easier for you to try in the morning. I didn't expect you back."

“It’s a harrowing journey, but I persevered.” It seems that the couch has been commandeered by Jupiter, and I eye him nervously as he strains forward to greet me. “How is he?”

“Recovering.” She smiles fondly at him. “He’s keeping down everything I give him and asks for more because he is a high achiever. Aren’t you, boy?”

Jupiter’s big eyes are on me. I unhook the dogs, who scatter to the four corners of the small house, and focus on the golden. He flaps his tail happily as I sink down beside Maisie, then nuzzles my face and sighs. I maybe sigh right back.

She’s made up a double-sized bed on the floor next to the couch and she looks at me ruefully. “I don’t feel right sleeping in my bedroom, but I can’t ask you to be out here. He’s fine, I know he’s going to be fine. But I still want to make sure that he doesn’t have any problems during the night.”

I grin. “Is it safe to fall asleep, or do we need to set the watch?” Once again, I feel like a hero when she relaxes. The rest can wait for tomorrow.

“We can sleep,” she assures me.

“Are you sure?” I glance around the room, but at this point, other than Jupiter, the dogs completely ignore me. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done a sleepover. Will there be a pillow fight?”

She laughs. “No pillow fights. But brace yourself. Buggy snores.”

CHAPTER 17

~ Maisie ~

I AWAKE WITH A START, COMING OUT OF A DEAD SLEEP IN THE EARLY PRE-dawn gloom, instantly worrying that something is wrong. A quick scan of the room verifies that all the dogs are in their own beds except Jupiter, who's left the couch to lay curled up at the bottom of our sleeping mat, Brad's sandal in his paws—a new one, I can tell. It looks like Brad is out another pair. All the dogs are passed out, even Boxer.

“Everybody okay?” Brad murmurs beside me, because of course he's awake.

“Looks like.” I collapse down beside him again, so exhausted I can barely move, and check my watch. It's three a.m. We've played out some version of this every hour on the hour, but none of the other dogs have gotten sick, and Jupiter seems content.

“Hi there,” Brad rumbles, bracing himself on one elbow to look down at me.

I smile. “Hey. I feel like I'm back at my college dorm and I snuck a boy in for the night.” The wind chooses that moment to pick up, whistling through the screen door and ruffling the dogs' fur, while making the edges of the curtains flutter.

Instinctively I draw closer to Brad, then stop myself, suddenly out of sorts. This is Brad Zander—in my house, on my *floor*. What am I *doing*?

“I didn't expect it to be so cool outside,” he murmurs, apparently not noticing my sudden acute embarrassment. “I practically live in the air conditioning when I'm in the city.”

“It's the wind. It's my favorite time to sleep with the windows open, at least if there's not a true storm rolling in. But we're lucky with that. I actually did the research before moving the dogs out here so that I'd know what to



expect, but we don't usually get a ton of storms along this coast."

He chuckles. "Do you make all your decisions so carefully?"

"Clearly not," I say, staring up at the ceiling. Tonight needs to not be the night the roof comes down. That's all I have to say about that.

But I can feel Brad watching me in the comparative gloom. It feels like the two of us are suspended in a private cocoon. We keep our voices hushed, Brad seeming to understand that once the first dog wakes up, it's all over. Still, he waits for me to say more, and eventually, I oblige.

"I think it's pretty obvious that I don't make many choices based on careful consideration, but this one was pretty easy. We only came out here a handful of times when I was growing up. My parents worked as teachers during the school year, my dad teaching school during the day, my mom as the professor at night so they could trade off duties taking care of me. Then they volunteered overseas, teaching English as a second language over the summers. When I was still a baby, they left me with my grandparents during the summer, but then I went along with them for a few summers after that."

"That must have been interesting."

I shrug. "Well, you would think so, but kids are kids. I usually befriended the pets of our host family easier than their children, and yes, I picked up some language and got to see a lot of cool things, but I always knew we wouldn't stay, so it was tough to look at it as more than a distraction. When I got into my teens, I lobbied to stay with my grandparents, helping them out. That meant coming here, and it was awesome."

"So you did live here as a kid," he muses, then shakes his head. "I never saw you, I don't think."

"You wouldn't have noticed," I point out. "No dogs back then. The Grands were allergic."

"Ah."

I gesture around us, at the sagging screens and broken shutters. "It didn't always look like this. I mean, it was always pretty simple, but my grandparents took care of it, and they had enough money to keep it going. When they had to go in for advanced care, money started becoming a problem, and by then I was in college and working during the summers, so I didn't come out as much. And maybe they were proud, or maybe they didn't realize how bad things were getting, but then it didn't matter anymore."

Brad reaches out and touches my hand lightly, the move subtle, gentle, not too much.

“They could have sold it for a lot of money,” he points out.

“They could have. I still could. The place is paid off—except for taxes, of course. And I may get a loan. I just want to get myself established first so I can make sure I can pay off a home equity loan or whatever they call it.”

Brad’s quiet, and I sense danger there, my heart giving a nervous little twinge before I push on. “But it’s been great. Since I went to college, my parents transitioned back to their ESL posts in the favorite countries they visited, and they’re happy. I have the guys and I’m starting to get some photography commissions, so I’ll make it work. And now I have a billionaire boyfriend, at least for a few more weeks. What could be better?”

“About that...” he begins, and my heart gives another nervous, fluttery thump. It’s getting quite a workout for me just laying propped up on a bunch of pillows.

“You don’t need to worry if you want to call things off, seriously. I mean, you’re totally out a few pairs of shoes, but otherwise—”

“Stop,” he says, leaning forward to plant a kiss on my lips, the move so unexpected that it has the intended effect of shutting me up. He leans back, his eyes sparking with laughter and something more intense. “Man, if I knew that would work so well, I would have tried it earlier.”

“Well, you can’t expect me to—”

My words break off as he leans forward again, our lips brushing. This time I actually do forget what I was going to say, all my vague plans and promises dwindling to nothing. I’ve written them all down somewhere, I can find them when I need them. Right now, it’s more important for me to be kissed and to kiss back, our hands tangling beneath the sheets, then exploring further, fingers sliding up arms, threading through hair, our bodies shifting and angling closer.

We do this all in near silence, demonstrating extreme human ingenuity in the face of sleeping canine supervision. Eventually Brad pulls back, huffing a soft chuckle. “What I was going to say, what I tried to say earlier tonight, was I was wondering if you could do me a favor. You don’t have to—at all. If it makes you uncomfortable, it’s not worth it. But if you would...” He gets a faraway look on his face, but I’m losing track of the sentence again as his fingers knead my hip in a rhythmic massage. I put my hand on his forearm to still the motion, but the touch of his skin remains electric and distracting.

Nevertheless, I try to focus. “What favor? What do you mean?”

“The party on Saturday? My publicist signed me up for it months ago,

and it would be in bad form to back out now, but it's a date kind of thing."

"Right—I told you I would be there, though. I have an event during the day, but I can come after?"

"Yeah, well, It'll go pretty late, though, and with traffic..." he blows out a breath. "We can bring the dogs."

"To the party?" I ask weakly, and he laughs.

"Maybe not the party—but to my house for sure, so you can stay the night. They'll be fine there."

"Oh! Well...that'll be great—that's no problem, then."

Honestly, I'm surprised that the idea of bringing the dogs hits me on a level where I'm not too comfortable. Because I know it's not about the dogs—I can kennel the entire lot of them if necessary. Suncoast Veterinary Center has premier boarding services, and they were the nicest people on the planet to me even *before* I could pay them.

But the dogs are security for me, a big furry tail-wagging barrier between me and, well, really everything else. I've swapped out a camera for a camera and a pack of dogs. If I don't watch it, I'll have a whole zoo between me and the world before long.

Brad hasn't said anything else, though, and I look up at him and catch him watching me. "That isn't the favor, is it?" I guess.

"Not...exactly." He smiles a little ruefully, and my heart does a weird skitter-thump in my chest. The movement wakes up my butterflies again, and they blink around woozily. "You know how we're fake dating?"

"Yes..."

"That's going pretty well, right?" he waggles his eyebrows, and I can't help but giggle.

"I mean, I did get you to sleep on my floor..."

"Exactly. So what if...what if we took it up a notch? What if we made it seem like there was real passion between us?"

I stare at him as if he's speaking to me from another dimension. Or maybe just from my dreams. "You mean...like we're fake falling in love? Having fake sex? Or like, fake throwing pots and pans at each other and slashing each other's tires? Passion can go a lot of different ways."

"Definitely more the former than the latter," he laughs. "You totally don't have to do it if you don't want to—and it may not even be something we can fake, in the end. Though I *am* an exceptional actor, and you *are* pretty great in front of the camera. It's just that Jeremy dreamed up this new ending to the

movie, re-cut some of the shots we took to open up the possibility of a love match between me and one of the other characters, and—well...”

He blows out a breath. “You know what? Forget it. It’s stupid and unfair.”

“No, I like it,” I say, surprising us both. “I can do that. I can totally do that. Do you think people will buy it, though? Can you fake chemistry if it’s not there?”

“You can, but it doesn’t work really well.” He reaches out and touches a finger beneath my chin, and tilts my face up until our gazes meet. “Do you think we might be able to figure out how to have chemistry together?”

I swallow. “I don’t know. Is chemistry something you can develop if it’s not...you know...there instantly? You’re the professional at this.”

“I am, that’s true.”

“So how do you determine whether or not you’ll have chemistry with a co-star?”

“Well, a lot of the time it’s how I feel when I look at them across the room—male, female, doesn’t matter. If there’s a connection when our eyes meet, you can feel it. You know what I’m saying?”

I nod, and he leans in. The butterflies erupt into chaos. “So, do you feel anything when you look at me, Maisie?”

“Well...I’m mostly into your poodle.”

He chuckles, low and soft. “She’s a pretty great poodle. But what about the rest of the package?”

“Well...I guess maybe.”

“Maybe, huh? Maybe’s not so good.”

I try to take a breath, and nearly choke. The butterflies are clearly taking too much of my oxygen. “No?”

“Not if you have to convince someone else we’re into each other. It’s hard enough getting past the cynical assholes when you’re legit. But two actors on assignment with only a poodle holding them together...it’s a lot. We’ve got our work cut out for us. We should probably start practicing.”

“We could do that,” I whisper. He’s so close, and he smells of sand and heat and memories. When he leans toward me, I know I may regret a lot of my decisions in my life...but this is not going to be one of them.

I hope.

He drifts his lips over mine, so gently it might as well be a puff of mist—but it completely turns me inside out. “I don’t suppose you have a room

somewhere in the house with a door?”

A particularly stiff wind gust rattles the windows. One of the slats from the awning on the side of the house finally breaks away to clatter to the concrete. We tense, but the dogs remain dead to the world.

“What, and leave all this behind?” I joke, because I can’t focus too closely on anything but his hand sliding along my arm, his warm body snuggling close to mine.

He chuckles as the wind whistles through the chimes, prompting a contented sigh from one of the dogs. Maybe Jazz? She shifts in her sleep, her feet twitching in a nighttime run, once again the escape artist, even in her dreams.

Brad grins as I glance back to him. “I’ll try to make it worth your while,” he promises.

Boldly, I lean forward and kiss him, tasting the heat and salt on his lips. “No takebacks?”

“No takebacks.” He pulls me close, trailing a line of kisses up my jaw until his lips rest just south of my ear. “Let’s go see if we can work on our chemistry.”

CHAPTER 18

~ *Brad* ~

I DON'T CARE WHERE WE ARE, OR HOW MANY OTHER SOULS ARE CROWDED IN with us. I'm going to make love to Maisie Jones tonight. I'll never forgive myself if I miss out on this opportunity to connect with someone so real, so right, and so full of pent-up energy it's like she's captured the sun in a bottle.

That said, a little privacy never hurt anyone.

"Me first." Maisie slips off the mat and stands in one smooth motion, her body lean and lithe. She looks absolutely perfect in nothing more than a sleep shirt and underwear, her hair tousled and her eyes bright. She swings around, squinting in the gloom, and begins her careful trek across the living room.

Watching her weave her way through the furry obstacle course, I grimace. This is going to be more work than I expected.

Then she's through, and it's my turn. I stand uneasily, and the smallest, softest woof greets me. I blink up to see Boxer watching me with his sharp, intelligent eyes. For a second I think he's going to give me a lecture, but he rises up from the floor and nudges my hand, then pulls away, nodding toward the side of the room.

I see it then—the furniture pulled away from the wall, offering a clear path of escape, no gymnastics required.

"Thanks, buddy," I chuckle, and he sinks back down, dropping his head to his paws as he watches me.

It's only a matter of moments before I reach the hallway, stopping in the tidy kitchen long enough to grab my go-bag. Then I move deeper into the house, until I come upon an open doorway into a small, sparsely furnished bedroom. Maisie sits perched on the bed, her head swinging around, and in the pale wash of moonlight I can see the anxiety building in her expression.

"Nope." I haven't made this perilous trek only to fail in my mission now.

I stride the few short steps over to her bed, and climb into it—pulling her down onto the pillows with me.

“Brad,” she squeaks, and I shush her.

“Not a word,” I instruct. “Unless you want the house party to join us. But this is serious acting work, and I don’t think they learned their lines.”

She giggles, but relaxes and lays back. I draw my hand down her arm, relishing the shiver she gives despite the coziness of her bed. When I slide my hand beneath her shirt, she sighs, and when I skim the flare of her hip and the indent of her waist, she arches toward me slightly. My hand creeps up to press into the soft, warm flesh of her breast, my fingers brushing across the tightly peaked nipple, and she gives a groan worthy of any film star—one that ignites my blood and every other inch of me along the way.

“Wait,” she breathes, then surprises me again by pushing me over onto my back, following the movement with her body.

She perches on top of me, looking down, her face serious but her mouth parted, as the vee between her legs connects with clear and present evidence that I am extremely, *intensely* interested in anything she has to say.

“I think we need to have the neutering conversation,” she announces gravely.

Okay, anything but that.

She grins and tilts her head, a tumble of curls splashing around her face as she tries again. “I’m not exactly prepared for a sleepover-sleepover, is what I mean. Unless you really do intend to...just act.”

“I am,” I assure her. “Prepared, that is. Though I’m going to opt for less extreme measures if that’s okay.”

She grins. “I’m good with that.”

“Are you?” I hold onto her hips, giving her one last out. I don’t want to give it to her, but I do. “Good? With all this?”

“Shhh...” she says, dropping a finger to my lips. “If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Fair enough.” I roll off the bed, shucking my sweats, but don’t drop them until I remove the foil packet I’d slipped into my pocket back home—just in case. Because in acting and in life, it always pays to be prepared. I don’t slide on the condom yet—there’s more I want to do first—and a second later I’m back beside her.

I kiss her again, because I can spend hours kissing this woman, exploring her, sliding my lips along her jaw, her neck, her collarbone. The wind picks



up outside, forming another layer of isolation until it's only me and Maisie, breathing and tasting, kissing and feeling. She breathes out a soft, worried moan of protest as I inch my way down her body, kissing the soft curve of her breasts, the smooth skin of her belly, trailing a line of kisses along her thighs.

"Are you..." Whatever she's going to ask, it's muffled in a throaty groan as I drift my lips to the soft, sensitive skin of her thighs. I shift over slightly as her legs fall open, the heat rising from her equal parts need, desire, and—I think—embarrassment over the need and desire. As if she shouldn't be allowed this moment, this pleasure.

My fears are born out a second later, as her hand firms on my shoulder, her breathy words floating over me. "Maybe we—ohhh..."

I don't let her finish. I'll stop if she asks me to, but she'll have to ask me with my tongue buried inside her.

Maisie's words choke off as my lips connect with the soft folds of her sex, heat blossoming up as she sags back, and that's all the permission I need. I press in, tasting, licking, taking everything she offers up. She's warm and damp for me, and as another burst of wind rattles the house, I'm gripped with a sense of urgency that the place might truly come down around us. I'm not about to miss my chance. I shift up, drawing even with her, and as I nudge her legs wider, she surprises me by grabbing either side of my hips and pulling me in. As her body arches up against my bare cock, I let out a hiss of surprise. I've never felt anything that good. We're playing with fire here, but for this moment—with this woman—I'm okay with that. I'm more than okay.

"Oh," she sighs, but there's no more need for talking then, no more need for anything but the rush of the wind, the pounding of my heart, the heat of our bodies moving together.

"Anything I should know about?" I murmur against her ear. "Anything you like or don't like?"

She laughs softly. "I'm ticklish. Insanely ticklish. To the point where I can't get a pedicure without steeling myself as if I'm going off to war."

"Really." I drop a kiss on her shoulder, relishing my own reaction as she sighs with contentment. "Was that ticklish?"

"No, that was okay."

"What about here?" I move to the left, drawing a line of kisses down her collarbone. "Is that okay?"

"Mmmm, yes. That's good."

“Oh, good. So maybe this would be okay too.” I shift, my lips brushing the hardened tip of her nipple, drawing it gently into my mouth. She shudders beneath me, an inarticulate groan wafting up.

“Yeah, that’s good too,” she manages.

“I don’t think you’re very ticklish at all.”

“Shows what you know.” But she hums and gives only the occasional jerk as I once more reach the sensitive skin of her stomach and thighs. She offers up a low throaty laugh as I drift my fingertips along the inside of her knees, but reaches out to stop me as I trail my hands further down.

“Seriously, you hit my feet and it’s all over. I might scream.”

“Maybe not tonight then,” I decide, and feel the tension rise and fall within her. She’s as changeable as the ocean, I realize, calm on the surface, as bright as skipping sunlight, but beneath the currents are constantly shifting. I can’t get enough of her, and I don’t want to try. I want to taste her, touch her, to feel.

The house chooses that moment to rattle with another stiff burst of wind, and we both tense, our gaze meeting in shared need that now has taken on a new layer of urgency. “Brad—”

“I’m on it.” More importantly, I slip the condom on me, and a second later I brace above her body, my breath coming fast, every muscle locked. I hold on to my sanity long enough to savor the long, appreciative sweep of her gaze as she studies my body, but when she lifts up her hands to trace her own line of discovery down my chest, my abs, I give an involuntary shudder. Her hands flare out to palm my hips, and she groans as she pulls me in. Her legs fall open, and her lips part, and the soft moan she exhales is the final invitation I need to press into her, feeling her heat surround me in an explosion of sensation that takes my breath away.

And when I sink into her, it’s like every high school fantasy come true, a girl at the beach, the wind whistling off the ocean, and the wild magic of an endless night sky.

CHAPTER 19

~ Maisie ~

TIME SEEMS TO STOP, THEN RUSH FORWARD, STOP, THEN RUSH, A SWIRL OF heat and need and Brad's long, gorgeous everything pressing into me and retreating, sliding deep and out and then deeper again, as sure as the ocean and every bit as powerful. I've kissed men before—I've had sex before—but nothing like this. I can't even separate the experiences out as individual notes in the crashingly beautiful chaos that sweeps over me. It's all too much—glorious and free and...

Clearly I'm out of practice, though, because I can feel my body ripping into its release in approximately fourteen point four seconds.

*No, no, no, no, no!*

I want to stop it—I need to stop it, but I can't. In the end I surrender in ragged relief to a full-on body-jacking release, a pounding tide of an orgasm that I know, *know*, even as it's happening, I will never, ever experience again. I hold on to it as long as I can, a renewed fierce shot of pleasure ripping through me as I feel Brad shudder in my arms, his own release drawing him rigid before he collapses, boneless over me. But the waves of sensation don't stop, and the energy coursing through me is electric.

I'm riding high on a tide so extreme that it feels like a storm is breaking over me. Then an enormous crack of thunder makes me realize that a storm *is* breaking over me.

Instantly, a huge howl goes up from deeper in the house, a canine chorus of desperate terror.

Brad and I don't speak, don't hesitate. I roll one way, he rolls the other, both of us coming to our feet a moment before the dogs pound into the bedroom, blasting through the slightly cracked door and bouncing maniacally around the bed. Brad dashes into the hall—no doubt heading to the bathroom,

but he's back again in seconds, his arms out as if he's going to need to peel the dogs off the walls and ceiling. He might.

"It's okay, it's okay!" I cry, but Rose, Blanche and Dorothy, by far the most panicked by storms, are insensible, and Jazz lets loose with an enormous wail as another peal of thunder booms. A particularly strong crack of light arcs through the sky, brightening the entire room.

"It's okay, come on guys." I let all the dogs clamber onto the bed, since apparently they need an invitation. A tide of white scruff sweeps over the covers, and I scoop up Mr. Symmes and toss him up as well. Sweetie follows, but at least she has the grace to look faintly disgusted at the turn of events. Boxer, legitimately scared of storms for reasons of his own, stands stiff and trembling in the doorway, but he won't leave the hall to join us. The entire pack isn't here yet.

"Jupiter," I blurt, looking around. He's still in the living room.

Once again, Brad doesn't hesitate. He bolts out the bedroom door and I follow, reaching the living room in time to see him lean down and pick up the old dog in his arms, cradling him close as he turns back to me. Something inside me breaks a little at the sight, but I focus on Boxer as Brad carries Jupiter to the bedroom.

"Are you going to be okay, sweet boy?" I ask, but Boxer's growl stops me in the middle of the hallway. He isn't seeing me, I know. He's seeing something that scared him long ago.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I kneel beside him, mentally kicking myself for allowing this to happen. Pop-up storms are a *thing* off the coast of California. I should've checked the weather again before I let them sleep with all the windows open. Open windows make storms of any sort so much more real and immediate.

Jupiter woofs from the bedroom, and another loud clap of thunder shakes the house as Brad's soft words of reassurance float back to me. Suddenly, the sound of scrabbling nails on floorboards has me turning, and Buggy shoots straight past me and toward the bedroom door, barely breaking stride before running into Boxer. The little pug bounces off him, then goes up on his back legs and twirls, brilliantly excited and yapping like it's his job.

It does the trick. Boxer woofs once, twice, as if to inform the universe that he can't be bothered by a silly storm anymore. And then, when Buggy continues his trek toward the bedroom, he follows. I look up to see Brad watching from the doorway, not moving so as not to spook Boxer with his

presence, though he's already accepted as one of the pack. After Boxer passes him, Brad steps back into the hallway. Somehow he's managed to score his sweats again, and I dart into the room only long enough to snag my own T-shirt and shorts.

I slip back into the hallway, then lean against the wall to wriggle back into my clothes. "Well, you can't say it's not exciting around here."

"Truer words were never spoken."

He pads down the corridor, then stops in the living room to peer through the windows. "It's not even raining. It probably is down the coast, but not here. Wanna check out the ocean once they're okay? We could grab a blanket?"

I grin at him, my butterflies bursting back into life. Walking the beach after a storm has got to be the most romantic offer I've received in my life. "Yes—that would be amazing."

We hang out for a little longer until the dogs settle again, then make a break for it, giggling and whispering like teenagers. Within a few minutes, we're walking down the shoreline as thunder rumbles ominously in the distance. A scatter of rain hits as we near the water, but it's gone as quickly, barely marking the sand. The wind is high, the water choppy. Dangerous water I know—riptides love this kind of weather—but the sky is breathtaking. The next crack of distant lightning illuminates the entire ocean, and it's only Brad and me and no one else to enjoy the show.

"Every time I come out here, I wonder why I don't live here full time," he says, and he pulls me to him, holding me close, my back to his chest as he wraps his arms around me. Then we simply stand together, warm in each other's embrace.

"Well, it *is* out of the way," I offer, but in truth, I can't do much more than revel in the feel of him there beneath the stormy sky. Memory #671 to save forever, I think, and if he wasn't hugging me, I'd be hugging myself at how lucky I am.

It seems obvious and natural that the next thing for us to do is to spread out the blanket and settle in the sand. It's hard and flat here, not as wet as I expected, but I'm grateful for the second blanket that Brad wraps around us both.

"Do you ever think you'll leave?" he asks me.

I laugh. "Well, I've only just gotten here, but ask me after a couple of tourist cycles, and I'll let you know. I don't think so, though. I know how

lucky I am, even with the work needed on my grandparents' house. The idea of being able to get up and walk down to the beach whenever I want? I mean, it's a dream come true, right?"

He shrugs, but I can't see his face, given how he's holding me. Still, I suspect he's staring out at the ocean, his thoughts skipping over the waves. "There are a lot of dreams in the world," he counters. "There may even be better ones waiting for you someplace else."

I consider that. I don't know this man all that well. If I'm honest, I don't know if I *want* to know him that well. Our relationship has an expiration date—even if we're leveling up the heat of the show, every show must end. Once the credits roll on...whatever this is between us, every nugget of information, every revelation, will play over and over in my mind—forever. He'll be away and somewhere else. And, like always, I'll be the girl left behind.

No. Better for him to be a photograph, beautiful and perfect and surface. That'd be smarter, more sensible.

As if any of this is sensible.

"What's your idea of the perfect place?" I ask instead. "What are you looking for?"

He stiffens a little, and I know it's the wrong question, somehow. A barrier between us slides into place, shuttering him away like one of his private estates.

"What, you still haven't read my celebrity bio?" he counters, his tone both derisive and teasing. "What kind of girlfriend are you?"

I lean back, angling around so he can see my smile. Because that's what we're doing here, having fun and not making any of this real. "Well, have you read the online articles on me? Or even better, the videos put up by the Dare Girls that show a woman with a dog attacking an unsuspecting celebrity heartthrob on the beach?"

His self-protective expression clears, surprise wiping it away. "Please tell me you're not serious. I'm surprised Amanda can handle her phone so well."

"That generation? Please." I grin a little more authentically. "And I gotta admit, it's a little funny. Once it hit TikTok, I stitched it together with a hand-made sign on the beach that warns tourists away from me. I took the sign down as quickly though, because I don't want to give anybody ideas."

He scans the beach almost reflexively, but of course, in the wake of the storm, we're the only two people out here.

"I suspect everyone will lose interest pretty quickly," I tell him, sensing

his tension. “There’s always another story.”

“Yeah. And again, we only need to keep this up for another couple of weeks. After that, I don’t care what they say about us.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. He’s right, of course he’s right, but a few short weeks with him suddenly seems like no time at all. He’ll be flowing into and out of my life as quickly as a storm over the Pacific, as temporary as raindrops on the beach. I need to be ready for that. I want to be ready for that.

I’m so not ready for that.

“If you could change anything about your life, what would it be?” I ask impulsively, and once the words are out, I really do want to know. “I’m serious. I know it’s easy for you to say that everything is perfectly great in your life—”

“Everything *is* perfectly great in my life,” he cuts in, raising a mocking brow. “I have problems, Maisie, everybody does. But I don’t think for a moment that my problems hold a candle to any of the shit most people have to go through. Most of the time, I feel lucky that I’m able to do what I do. And even then, I’m an asshole about it sometimes. I get pissed off when people are in my way, keeping me from charging forward to do whatever the hell I want. I know I’m being a dick, but I do it all the same. And the worst part about it is, I don’t even want to change it. It got me where I am.”

“But there has to be something,” I press—but when his expression shuts down, I abort my fact-finding mission and bail in a parachute of random misdirection. “Like, for instance, if I could change anything, I would change my hair.”

He barks a startled laugh. “Your hair? Your hair is amazing.”

“My hair is a nightmare,” I assure him, mostly happy that he’s smiling again. “It never stays put, it’s a complete drama queen no matter what I do to it, and it never looks sleek or controlled.”

His smile softens. “You don’t need to be sleek or controlled. You’re you.”

I blink, and, once again, can’t keep my next words from tumbling out. “Well, maybe you being a dick is who you are, because being a dick got you through some terrible situation that you couldn’t solve any other way. And I think you’re wrong, anyway. You’re helping out Jeremy with this movie, you employ an awful lot of people, you agreed to take care of your housekeeper’s dog, and Jupiter likes you. All of that is really poking holes in your asshole



persona. You may need to consider shifting your brand.”

“Yeah? To what?”

I lean back on my elbows and gaze out at the ocean again. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe the sexiest, most talented, thoughtful, smartest Hollywood actor to ever share a beach towel with me? That sounds like a really good brand to explore.”

Once again he laughs, and the sound is so light and free that I grin too. Our gazes meet, and his glance turns into more of a smolder. Heat rockets between us, and my brain skids to a stop and hops around on one foot, trying to figure out what I’ve said that was either sexy or smolder-inducing. All those questions are chased away by his next salvo.

“How’s that chemistry between us working for you, Miss Jones?”

“I’m not so sure,” I say shakily. “I think we may need to work on it some more.”

“Anything for the craft,” he agrees. And he pulls me into his arms.

## CHAPTER 20

~ *Brad* ~

THE KNOCKING ON THE FRONT DOOR IS INCESSANT, AND I'M OUT OF THE BED and on the floor almost before fully waking up. Maisie lays sprawled in a tangle of sheets, nothing visible but the top of her curly-haired head, and I suddenly, viscerally know that on an ordinary morning, a knock on her door would have sent her halfway across the bedroom before she even fully woke up.

This isn't an ordinary morning, though. By the time we made it back to her house, her pack was standing at the gate, whining, yipping, and woofing. It took another hour to get them all to settle down, and then we collapsed into a deep, boneless sleep. Deeper and more boneless than I was used to, for sure, whereas Maisie...she sank into an exhausted stupor within seconds of hitting the bed, and hasn't stirred since.

I gave her that rest, that sleep. I don't want to break it.

I push out of the bedroom, recovering my trousers and T-shirt along the way for the second time in one night. I even manage to rake my hand through my hair by the time I get to the living room, where I witness the dogs in various states of lounging in the living room—at least those who aren't lined up at the window staring with intense focus, their tails swishing furiously at the newcomer. Strangely enough, they aren't barking, which shows a staggering level of discipline. Maybe they're giving Maisie a break as well?

I reach the front door and yank it open. I'm braced for anything: the police, the paparazzi, or even a dog I haven't met yet.

I'm not prepared for a six-foot-four lumberjack. My first thought is: boyfriend? But the gray running through the guy's beard and the deep lines fanning out from his eyes make that seem unlikely. The man's smile quickly fades to a bemused expression of surprise. He glances around, but he clearly

thinks he's at the right home—he didn't expect me to be here. Apparently, he isn't keeping up with his TikTok feed.

“Ah...I'm looking for Maisie Jones,” he finally says, his voice gruff and open. “I'm early, and I texted her, but she didn't respond. I can come back.”

“She's still asleep. Can I help you?”

He points up. “Roofer. Part of the reason I'm early is because I was going to do the patchwork for free. She's a good egg, what with the dogs and all. Photographed my wife's friend and her old dog, so when she called us—well, it's not a big job. I can at least stop any leaks I find, get her stabilized until she gets the job done right. Assuming I can get up there without falling through it.”

I don't hesitate. “Plan on replacing the whole roof. Whenever you can fit it into your schedule. Send the bill to me next door. I'll cover the costs.”

The roofer is already lifting his hands in a classic fending-off gesture—he maybe sort of recognizes me, but he doesn't know what I am to Maisie. Hell, I don't know what I am to Maisie, but I'm not going to get into that with this guy on Maisie's porch. Instead, I give him a smile I've been practicing for nearly two decades: easy-going and conciliatory.

“Okay, then, how about this.” I shoot a glance at his truck, see the information printed there. “Give me your card, if you've got one, or I'll call you, and then we can talk. You do whatever it takes to get her shored up today, but then, when your schedule allows, we'll have you back to do the whole thing. I can get you the money today, if you need it, but I think we both can agree—she needs a new roof. I'm grateful for you helping to keep the leak from getting worse today, though, especially since you weren't going to charge her. That's a generous act, and I'm sure you're busy.”

The guy gives me a wry smile as he fishes a card out of his back pocket. He hands it to me, and I tuck it away as he squints up at the roofline. “It's not so generous if you're gonna pay me. And we didn't talk about all the vines, either. I think she's worried that if she gets rid of those, the whole roof will slide off. She may be right.”

I grimace. “You've gotta pull them down, though, don't you?”

“Oh, yeah. But if she really wants 'em—which she shouldn't, those vines are a disaster waiting to happen—it won't take long for them all to grow back. That shit's invasive.”

“We'll work that out. But seriously, thanks.” I give him the classic “you're in the Zander club” smile, which has been working for me since I

was six years old. I nod, he nods. I half-imagine the dogs in the house are nodding too. That's how it usually works. "It's good of you to come over, and I know Maisie will appreciate it."

He seems to accept that. He turns away, then glances back, his head tilting slightly. "I know I should know you, but—"

I grin and I hold out my hand. "Brad Zander. I've got the house next door, but I'm not out here a lot. Hell, I may need a roof. We can talk about that later too."

He seems to accept that. He shakes my hand, but I still don't think he fully recognizes me. Or maybe he does and doesn't give a shit. Watching him amble back to his truck, a big man fully aware that he can choose his own destiny, I kind of suspect that's the case. I glance down and realize there is a box on the front step, branded Poocheroo. Maisie is a popular girl. God knows I'm already a fan.

I pick up the box and step back inside, immediately besieged by a chorus of far more cheerful barks. Maisie chooses that moment to stumble into the living room, looking mussed and soft. She blinks around like she isn't quite sure where she is—or, more likely, that she can't place me in the context of her own home.

"Who was that?" she asks, her gaze going to the window. I turn, but the roofer's truck isn't in her sightline.

"Poocheroo delivery," I say, holding up the box to distract her. "Is this stuff any good?"

"Oh." She grins. "I don't know, I've never tried it. The gang seems to like it, though. And yay, food! Always better when you get it for free, especially if it doesn't taste like feet."

"Yeah..." I consider the box as the dogs' yipping increases slightly in intensity. A few of them are already milling around the patio door at the back of the house.

"You want coffee duty or dog duty?" she asks. "Not all of these guys will go out by themselves. They need me to escort them."

I lift a brow. "Seems like both tasks are crucial. What happens when you don't have a sleepover?"

Her laugh is a short, wry snort. "Coffee waits while I suffer for my people. But what's the point of a fake boyfriend if you can't get coffee out of it?"

"I got you." I tuck the box against my side and wave her along. "You go

out with them, then. I'll bring it out to you."

"Deal." Her voice climbs above the dog barks. "You see anyone else out front? I am sort of expecting a contractor, eventually, for some patch work. Roofing guy. His wife said—"

"I'll check before I come out," I say, weirdly unwilling to admit the truth. I want the lumberjack up on the roof before she knows what's going on. I'm pretty sure she won't be able to push him off once he gets up there.

Maisie accepts that, and a few seconds later, she's fled out the back door with a cacophony of dogs. I set about the business of making coffee. I don't cook much, but coffee is something I excel at, and I smile to see that she cares about it too. The coffee beans are from what looks like a local place, her coffee machine is cheap but sturdy, and she has a little teakettle style gadget beside it plugged into the wall for frothing the milk. A poor man's latte, and I wonder, was the way to this woman's heart through her coffee mug?

I don't care—I shouldn't care—but that doesn't stop me from making two killer thermoses of foamy caffeinated goodness and carrying it out into the sunshine a few minutes later like I'm offering a prize. She has already headed down to the beach, which is good since Lumberjack Lou has now begun hammering. I carry the thermoses down to the beach and catch Maisie peering back toward me by the time I make it to the base of the beach walk.

"Do you hear hammering?" she asks as I hand her a thermos, and I realize the time has come for evasive action. I give her a winning smile—not quite "you're in the club" but "everything's good here, everything's on track." Matter of fact, easy, and misdirecting as hell.

"Yeah—that roof guy showed up. Did you need to show him where the leak was? 'Cause I told him to look around and he seems good to go, but..."

Her brows go up. Then her gaze swings to me, her eyes narrowing, proving maybe I need to work on my smile game. "He's only going to fix the leak, right? That's what he said? I know the whole damn thing needs to be replaced, but that job's like four or five down on the list in terms of priority."

"Yup. He said he was patching stuff and getting the lay of the land."

"Good." She sighs in relief, and hugs the coffee thermos to her, popping the top to blow the steam off before turning to keep an eye on the dogs. As she does, I find myself watching her more closely than any actor I've ever been cast against.

Once again, I realize that Maisie Jones isn't playing the role of the sweetheart neighbor down the beach who I met on summer vacation. She's my co-star in a drama that has a purpose, a focus—and a timeline. She's helping me out, and I can help her as well. It'll be an even-up exchange. No emotions, no strings, no problem. I'll learn everything she needs fixed on her house, pose for a few photo ops with her dogs, and field all the dumb questions the press can throw at me for the next two weeks until the movie comes out, and then we can go on with our lives.

I blow out a breath, mentally flipping through the PR shit I have coming up. Maisie will be a natural at any of them—all of them—but the party tomorrow night will be a clutch win, especially if we appear genuinely in love. It's the last big event before the premier next week.

Do I really want to do that to her, though? Like it or not, our supposed love affair will be the most interesting thing going on tomorrow night. When stars and money get together, it quickly becomes a feeding frenzy. Given half a chance, they'll rip the heart right off Maisie's sleeve and stomp on it. But the club has bouncers, and no one will be let into the VIP area who isn't thoroughly vetted. Maisie will be safe, protected.

I frown, slanting her another glance. Does she ever worry about being safe or protected? Probably not nearly enough. She's the most unaffected, natural woman I've ever met. I mean, sure, her parents aren't going to win any awards, but they are in an entirely different league from my own folks. Maisie never had to learn the danger of showing emotions when they weren't carefully scripted...and she isn't going to get that lesson on my watch. I want her to remain as pure and unfiltered as she can—for as long as she can. Which will be forever.

I nod to the dogs as they play in the surf, vaguely aware of Maisie finally taking a long, appreciative sip from her thermos as she turns back to me. We need to get a game plan together, get some cameras lined up. "How good are they at travel?" I ask.

My question is cut off by a long, throaty, and distinctly sexual moan, and I turn to see Maisie pulling the thermos away from her lips, staring from it to me with a slightly glazed expression.

"I'll marry you if you make coffee like this for me every day." she says, sounding so sincere my heart jerks hard in my chest. Then she grins and shakes her head at the drones buzzing about fifty feet above us, well out of mic range given the morning breeze. "That's a joke, Mr. Drone! The coffee

made me do it!”

I grin at her, because that’s what the line calls for, and raise my own thermos to my lips. But I watch her over it, her hair flying in the wind, her chin turned up to the bright early morning sunshine, and for half a second I live in the idea that her words aren’t a joke. Maisie Jones is meant to be on the beach, surrounded by sunshine and ocean. I don’t know where I’m meant to be. She asked me last night, but I didn’t want to give her the answer. I still don’t—but for this second, I can picture myself right here, with her. It’s a feeling I need to bottle up, make more of, and dump liberally all over the press the next time I get a chance.

“Where is this event you’ve got going on tomorrow? Is it near your dog spa?”

“Not really. The adoption event is at the convention center, and LALA is close to Runyon Canyon Park—I’m not sure if you know it?”

“Of course I know it.” And thankfully, I do. “It’s maybe three or four miles from my place, takes maybe ten minutes when traffic is good, no more than a half hour when it’s bad. An easy drive.”

“Well, nothing’s an easy drive when you’re wrangling eight dogs.” She grimaces. “It’s going to be a lot of a lot.”

Jupiter presses up against me, his tail swishing. I take that as a personal challenge. “What’s the point of a fake boyfriend if he can’t arrange some dog transpo?”

“Mmm…” She takes another sip of her coffee and declines to respond, which unaccountably makes me grin.

“I think maybe you have some trust issues to work out,” I tease.

The flash of chagrin across her face sears right through my humor and embeds itself into the growing file of information I’m subconsciously collecting on the woman. All in the name of our performance, of course, but the hard tug of emotion in my chest makes me grip my mug tighter. “Maisie —”

The dogs choose that minute to discover something in the bushes near the beach walk—something undoubtedly foul given how excited their barking is.

“Save the coffee,” Maisie orders me, thrusting her thermos toward me as if it’s the Holy Grail. Then she turns, digs her heels into the sand, and races off.

But is she running toward something—or just away from me?  
I shouldn’t care. I don’t care.



“Jazz!” she shouts, her voice going shrill. “Oh, Jazz, gross!”  
I bolt after her.

CHAPTER 21

~ Maisie ~

“YOU RENTED US A STRETCH SUV LIMO? TO DRIVE THE DOGS INTO THE city?”

Brad glances back at me and then to the car, though ‘car’ is pushing it. Even calling this thing a Suburban is a little disingenuous. It’s a sleek, extended cab monstrosity, large enough to host an entire rock band and all their gear. The driver gets out and opens the doors and I see that it’s been outfitted with rubber flooring as well as heavy duty covers on all the seats.

“How in the world did you even find this? They can’t have this sort of thing sitting around in Malibu.”

“You would be amazed at what they have sitting around in Malibu, given the clientele here,” Brad assures me with a lopsided grin. “But I figured if we had the right ride, you would be more relaxed, and if you are more relaxed, they will be more relaxed. Make sense?”

“Well, yes...”

The driver steps back, and with a deferential wave, gestures us inside.

“Most of our guests find their pets are most comfortable when they get in first, and sit and chat for a minute,” the driver says. “It really does seem to be a case of if you’re having a good time, they’ll have a good time.”

Brad waves to the van. “Ladies first.”

Bemused, I climb into the back of the SUV, which is maybe half the size of my living room. Brad clambers in after me, then pulls out a bag from his pack and waves it at me. I recognize the mixture of dog treats he clearly pilfered from the kitchen.

That’s enough to get Boxer into the SUV, though I think part of his enthusiasm is to set a good example for the others.

“I’ve got doggy sleeping pills if you think that’ll help?” Brad offers.

I watch the guys carefully. “Honestly, they’re usually pretty good on short car rides. We’re either going to the vet or to a dog park, and both of those are good things to them. Once we hit the highway, though, they get nervous. At that point, the best thing for me to do is to keep talking. As long as they can hear the sound of my voice, they seem to be okay. And now that they’re used to you, the sound of your voice will be good as well. As long as we’re not shouting at each other, you know?”

I say all of this with my eyes on the dogs, but when Brad laughs in a low, satisfied chuckle, I glance at him in surprise. He’s watching me with a half-smile. “Well, then if you have to keep talking and I have to keep talking, there are a few questions that I feel I should ask, some details to work out.”

“Sure,” I say brightly, as Boxer starts to whine. I give him a broad smile, directing my words at the dog even though I’m answering Brad.

“Like the driver said, I think they’ll handle the ride better if we’re talking, so I’m super happy to answer any questions you might have.”

I say this last in a sing-songy voice, the kind I use when I’m kidding around with Boxer, and the dog sighs, finally content even as the engine beneath us roars to life.

“Excellent,” Brad says. “We’ll start with something easy, then. What’s your pick? Sex, religion, or politics?”

I shoot a startled glance toward him, but now he’s grinning fully. “Say that again?”

“I don’t so much care about your religion, or your politics as it turns out. So I guess that leaves sex.”

“No! We’re not talking about sex. Not at first, anyway. There should be something else first. Like, maybe you should tell me about this party tonight.”

“Well, it’s sort of like your dog event, only there won’t be any dogs. However, there will be plenty of prickly fish, sharks, and moray eels to go around.”

I laugh. “That good, huh?”

“It’s the advance party for the movie. There will be press, celebrities my personal assistant insists upon inviting, and loads of photographers.”

“Will there also be Glenna Dare?”

His mouth kicks up at one corner, and he gives a little shrug. “Well, if *I* were her, I would be there. Whether she drops a new tune in her endless album of pain, or she’s looking to capitalize on the tracks that she already

laid down, it feels like it would be a major miss if she isn't on hand. Which means, ideally, you'll be on hand. Because it makes me feel manly to use an unsuspecting dog photographer as a shield against a snotty pop singer."

He delivers this line with such derision and self-mockery that I burst out laughing. All the dogs tense and look my way.

"It's okay, guys," I tell them, and then I send the same reassuring glance toward Brad. "It really is okay. Brad, I'm getting a ton of benefit from the illusion of being your girlfriend. And as far as us—last night—I know it's still an illusion, but that was pretty special all on its own."

He scowls and starts to say something, and I lift my hands. "No, no. I don't want to hear it, and you don't want to say it. This thing between us is amazing. It's fun and it's light, and it's been fantastic. So if it turns out to be great for you as well, then how is that a bad thing? It's not."

I tilt my head, regarding him. "But I'm not gonna lie. It'll probably be helpful if I know what to expect from Glenna Dare. Do you think she'll actually try to approach me? Talk to me? I mean, surely she doesn't actually..." I break off, a new and strangely upsetting thought crossing my mind. "Does she, um, care about you? Like, for real?"

Brad rubs a hand over his jaw, but he answers my question seriously. "I can't imagine that she does. She's never approached me in all the time since our supposed harrowing meeting. But in a way, it doesn't matter. She's into this now, and she can't back out of it easily, even if she wants to, which she's given no signs of."

"Okay, well if she does decide she wants to talk with me, I think she'll want to know the answers to: who am I, where did I come from, and why did you decide to hook up with me? That seems like a good place to start."

"Not exactly. If she cares about you at all, she will have already learned everything she needs to know about you." He gives me a sad smile that bothers me in a way I can't quite put my finger on. He looks like he's going to say something else, then shakes his head. "But let's go with your thought. If she asks you those questions, what will you say?"

"I'm still in my role of love-struck girlfriend, right? For the purposes of this question?"

He nods, his eyes intent. "Let's say you are."

"Then that's easy. I didn't know who you were when I first came upon you, but I saw how you were with the dogs, and how kind you were to Jupiter. They liked you from the start. If you can't trust a dog to determine

someone's character, who can you trust?"

He chuckles. "You would seriously say that?"

"Why not?" I ask, newly defensive. "It's the truth."

"The truth."

"Well, it's sort of the truth," I insist. "I mean, we didn't have a committee meeting to decide whether or not you were okay. But you let Jupiter take your shoe, and you didn't protest even though a bunch of dogs were bouncing around your face. You handled the whole thing pretty well, and that's before you even knew who I was or if you would see me again."

"Not true. I already decided to recruit you to take care of Sweetie."

At her name, the old poodle yelps, and Mr. Symmes's head comes up, his small chihuahua ears askew.

"Ahh, so for you, it was an elaborate recruiting mission?" I challenge. "That's why you were lying out there on the beach, covered by an old blanket?"

"Hey, it could work," he counters. "Most of the time, you'll want to ignore any questions a reporter or blogger or whatever puts to you in line, but that one you could answer. They ask you how we hooked up, you could say that I figured out that you love dogs, and I had a dog who needed a nanny. So I staged a trap."

"Okay." I decide to go with it. "Maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea. So, you originally intended me to be a dog sitter, but we fell in love the way only celebrities can while I looked after Sweetie. Then you wanted to show me your new movie. Fast forward to a week from now, after the premiere, and —"

"It may go longer than another week," he interrupts me. I blink at him in surprise, but he rolls his shoulder as if he didn't just speak words to stop my heart.

"It'll probably only be a week. But I've learned it pays to be flexible."

"Uh-huh," I shoot back, to mask my confusion. "Another week, and I want a bonus."

He grins, clearly back in familiar territory. "What kind of bonus?"

It was the right thing to say, I think. Spontaneous and fun and he's taking it as the joke that it is. Sort of is.

I give him an airy wave. "I haven't decided yet. We'll see how this party goes tomorrow and if Glenna decides to pounce on me."

He laughs and nods. "You've got a deal...though I don't think she will

approach you herself. That's not saying that she won't sic her little sycophants on you."

"Seriously? At the party?"

"No, they wouldn't be allowed at the party. But I could see it happening in the lobby or on the street..."

His gaze shifts to the road outside, and I notice that he hasn't stopped stroking Jupiter's head. The dog, for his part, hasn't stopped looking at Brad the whole time, his eyes fixed in rapt fascination on this human who's made all his dreams come true.

I grimace. Once all this wraps up, Jupiter isn't going to understand. I might have to arrange visitation whenever Brad will allow it, maybe the occasional FaceTime. Or maybe I could watch his movies over and over and over again.

Yeah, because that won't destroy me.

Jupiter and I both have our work cut out for us.

Whatever I'm thinking must show on my face, because Brad pipes up again. "Okay." He grins at me, all teeth. "Now we can talk about sex."

"Brad..."

"You did promise. And I feel like this could be important information to, you know, nail down."

I scrunch my face at the joke. Beside me, Boxer lets out a little whine.

"It's okay, boy," I say automatically, then swallow. "We're going to talk about sex now, it's okay. It's all going to be okay."

He seems to believe me. Which is good. Because I don't believe myself.

## CHAPTER 22



~ *Brad* ~

“SO, WE’RE DIALING THINGS UP A NOTCH HERE, IT’S ALL GOOD.” I SAY easily, watching the play of emotions across Maisie’s face. My entire body is electric with interest at this new turn of the conversation, but I’m more than willing to let her run the show, at least for now. “Do you want to go first, or shall I?”

“Me. I’ll go first. That seems like it makes much more sense.” She shoots a quick glance at me. “Why again are we asking these questions, exactly?”

“So if we’re asked anything inappropriate by a reporter, we can keep our stories straight.”

“And you think reporters are going to ask us about our sex lives? After we’ve only known each other for a week?”

He grins. “What else are they going to ask about? It’s not like we’ve had time to meet the parents or anything.”

There it is again, the flash of panic in her eyes. Her parents didn’t completely suck, from what she’s told me—they weren’t going to win any awards, but they’re at least human. But there’s something there in her reaction when I mention them, something important. Something we should probably talk about if we are a normal couple doing normal couple things.

Sex is easier.

And isn’t that why I’m here? Taking the easiest possible path out of the mess Glenna Dare pulled me into? Delving into this stranger’s life enough to use her to my advantage, and then moving on?

I suddenly don’t feel all that great about this—any of this. Then Maisie fixes me with her sky-blue eyes.

“Okay, so, sex. You like it and I like it, and we’re both single and healthy, so—um, have we done it? Or is that one of those questions we don’t

answer, so you can give that crinkly-eyed grin while I blush?”

“That crinkly-eyed grin has gotten me pretty far in life.”

“Okay, blushing it is. And I’ll even throw in an adoring, self-conscious glance or two, since I’m supposed to be the ingenue in this little drama.”

A smile teases at the edge of my mouth, but I shut it down. “You’re not an ingenue?”

“Well, I’m not a billionaire Hollywood actor, so by those standards, I am. But it’s not like I rolled off the apple truck yesterday.” She huffs a little in protest, and my heart twists. “I’m me, and me has gotten me pretty far in life. Not as far as you, maybe, but...”

She doesn’t end the sentence, but she doesn’t have to. In the race of life, she started out in the middle of the pack. I was carted to a point about thirty yards away from the finish line, and dropped off with water and snacks.

“Me is good,” I assure her. “Me is perfect. After they hit you with some surface question about the nature of our physical relationship, they’ll probably ask something stupid and inappropriate, just to screw you up. Like ‘so, he’s not doing that choking thing anymore, is he?’”

Her eyes fly wide. “They wouldn’t.”

“They would if it made for good video.”

“Ok...well, is there anything out of the ordinary that you’ve done in a movie that I should know about? Like, something you didn’t already do with me?”

She flushes furiously as she asks the question, her voice getting higher and tighter at the end as embarrassment clearly floods through her.

“You mean like a little light bondage?” I ask, equally pleasantly. “Drunken orgies? Role play with hula hoops?”

“Oh, God, stop.” She flaps her hands, then stills them quickly as Boxer mutters a low growl. “Please. Forget I asked.”

“It’s okay, Maisie. We’re talking here,” I remind her, and she sends me a baleful glare before smiling brightly at Boxer again.

“We’re talking, buddy, talking,” she echoes, reaching over to pet him. “We don’t have to talk about anything real, though, right? And we definitely don’t have to talk about this.”

“I don’t know, I kind of think we do,” I counter, back to enjoying myself far too much. “And you did ask a question. To answer it, as an actor or in real life, I’ve never been asked to do anything my partner doesn’t like. Though as an actor or in real life, I’m willing to push her boundaries a little, if she’s

open to it.”

“Oh,” she exhales. “Well...um, good, I guess...”

“But as far as something I’ve done in a movie—most of the indie stuff didn’t get into that. And as far as the big budget movies, they were meant for kids. The only time I was tied up was on—”

“Planet Darkken. I remember.” Twin flags of color have appeared on Maisie’s cheeks, and her voice has sped up again. “You are, um, restrained by Princess whatever her name was, and she decides to do something vaguely sexual to or with you when the rest of the team attacks and you break free. That was a pretty racy scene for PG-13, you know. I couldn’t let the dogs watch.”

I snort. “It didn’t seem racy to me when we filmed it. Her original direction was to decide to kill me in order to remove the threat of me. The rest was put together later. That’s the magic of post-production, capturing expressions, the slant of an actor’s eyes. It isn’t real. Sort of like the ending that Jeremy’s spliced together for *Fallout Protocol*.”

“Well, it looked pretty real on Planet Darkken.”

“Why? You getting some ideas with those leashes there?”

“What? No!” Her suddenly revived nervousness throws the dogs into a bouncing, wriggling flurry, and she plasters on a mirror bright smile, her eyes wide and desperate as she tries to rein in her embarrassment. “Oh, God. I’m going to be terrible at this. If they ask me anything inappropriate at all, I’ll be a huge fail.”

“Not a fail. You don’t have a lot of experience with Hollywood celebrity assholes.”

“Well, I don’t have a lot of experience with anyone. No one ever gets too close.”

She stiffens as if she’s said more than she intended, while beside me, Jupiter sighs as if she’s disclosed the secret of the universe.

I speak quickly to fill the space, though I keep my words deliberately casual. “Well, that seems like a shame. Your joy makes everyone around you happy. Who won’t want to be close to that?”

She glances up at me, and for a moment, her eyes are so nakedly vulnerable that it makes my throat clench. In that blink, she stares not with little-girl wonder at a bright sparkly new boyfriend or the bemusement of a full-grown woman trying to assess her newest fling but with the startled surprise of someone who’s been seen, even for a second. The look is gone as

quickly as it came, and she smiles. Boxer sighs and lays his head on his paws—apparently, Maisie has finally unwound a little.

I stroke Jupiter's neck. The dog huffs a low bark around my shoe while Bugsy stands up, eager and curious about the swirling shift of emotions.

“Okay, I have another question,” I say, encouraged by her quick nod. “You said you aren't involved with anyone, but are you seeing anyone even casually? Did you come off a break up? Is there somebody I need to block from my social media accounts?”

She coughs a laugh. “Honestly, there hasn't been anybody for a while. I dated in college, but since I graduated, there's always been travel or the business, then coming out here and taking care of my grandparents' place and then the dogs. We didn't even know they were sick, so it all kind of happened in a rush.”

The comment at the end there surprises me. “Your grandparents? You didn't know they were in a nursing home?”

She grimaces. “These were my mom's parents, and let me tell you, Mom came by her self-sufficiency honestly. Grandma said Grandpa took a fall and that he didn't want anybody to see him 'til he got better, that he was being a total pain in the ass. She didn't say that the fall was because of a stroke and that he passed almost before getting to the hospital. By the time we figured that out, she also declined. I was on the plane heading her way when she died.”

Now I'm staring at her. “That's unbelievably sad.”

She shrugs. “Is it? They both loved one person more than anything else in the world like my mom and dad do. When one went, the other followed. That's what happens when you love someone that much.”

“What about you? They loved you, I'm sure. Your parents love you. And you love everyone.”

She laughs, then lifts her hand to pat Boxer, but Boxer chooses that moment to lean away. On a whim, I reach out and catch her hand instead, squeezing it as I gently guide it back down to her leg.

She stares at our hands clasped together, then gives a little shiver, not unlike Jupiter beside me. “People are built differently, like dogs are built differently, I guess. I'm happy for my parents, but I don't know that I would ever want to be so deeply into another person that I couldn't live if they were gone. I never really had the luxury of thinking that could be a thing.”

I swallow, hearing the low, dull ache in her voice echo inside me. “That's

not how it works for everyone. Some couples get together for much worse reasons, then can't understand why they're not happy."

Her gaze swings back to my face. "Do you mean your parents? But I thought... I mean, I've read about them. There was a piece..."

"That is a piece that rich people made happen," I correct, knowing exactly the one she means. "And other rich people act like it's true. Too many of my parents' friends know that my father would as soon take a contract out on my mom as be seen in public with her, but she's the money and he's the cutthroat businessman. She loves the limelight and drama, he prefers to bully people in back rooms and crush them when they show weakness."

Beside me, Jupiter huffs a low woof. He lays his head on my lap and I glance down, startled at the wash of comfort and even relief I feel as he gazes at me. "You know, I'm not the guy you think I am," I inform him, and he wags his tail.

I look up to see Maisie staring at me. "Were they mean to you?" she asks, in that tone people use when asking about abused dogs—maybe even abused kids.

I hesitate. Easy enough to tell her a lie, the same lie I've been telling people since I was a kid, the lie that made everyone feel secure in their beliefs about the wealthy. Petty, stupid shit, poor little rich boy shit. The perfectly acceptable reason for someone to grow up into an entitled asshole celebrity lucky enough to be a decent actor with a great face and the money to finance his own way in life until his quote-unquote big break.

But I don't need to lie to Maisie. After all, we're playing a role here, we both know that. She's going to be gone in a week, maybe two. She doesn't need me to impress her.

Then again, how well do I really know her? I didn't know Glenna at all, and she ran over me with a dumpster...admittedly, after I did the same to her. Maisie has a following, and the attention of the media, anything I tell her could come back to haunt me.

Even as I think those thoughts, I know they're unfair. Maisie's not Glenna. I should trust her. Any normal person would.

I can't though.

My mouth tightens, as if speaking the truth will somehow get me struck again. I'm as much a sack of shit as my parents are, living behind the lie that's gotten us where we are today.

"They probably aren't any worse than a lot of parents," I finally manage,

my voice perfectly smooth and even. “Dad went a little too heavy on the alcohol and the corporal punishment whenever he thought I was acting out. Mom also hit the wet bar early and often, but she never hit me. She was always the victim in our little household dramas.”

“Maybe that was her way of hitting.”

The words catch me off guard, and I glance up to see her studying me steadily—her and all the dogs. Jazz leans against the door, as if at any moment she will figure out how to pop its latch, but her big, dark Beagle eyes rest softly on me. Mr. Symmes and Sweetie lay curled up in a doggie Mobius strip, their faces turned my way. The cream-colored fuzzballs have migrated over to my feet, and are now pressed up against my shin, while Jupiter, of course, never moved.

“Maybe,” I allow. It’s a miracle I could say anything at all. “I never asked her.”

“You ever want to, say the word. I’ll show up with the gang to strike the fear of God in her. They can be very fierce.”

I laugh. It’s easy to laugh with Maisie, allowing only the gentlest of pokes at the deeper, heavier emotions that are lurking underneath. Laughter lets the air out of that big bag of awful, bit by bit.

Is that how Maisie has managed her own sorrow and vulnerability all these years?

I twist my lips into a smile, glad I’m still holding her hand. “I don’t think either one of us have had very good parental models.”

She matches my grin, looking equally grateful for the segue out of emotions that make freaking *dogs* feel sorry for us. “Well, if we get asked about having kids, we’ll just say we’re focusing on the dogs for right now. Which we probably should anyway. Dogs are way easier...kids will require a whole different skillset.”

A shiver of emotion skitters through me unexpectedly—hopeful, I think. Entirely too hopeful. “You think you’d be up for kids though? Maybe someday—with someone?”

She squeezes my hand and smiles, meeting my gaze for just a second before hers skitters away. “Yeah. Someday...with someone.”

“You’d be good at it.”

“So would you,” she assures me, then, as if she sees the denial building in my expression, she grins far more broadly. “But for right now, we should maybe consider channeling all that drama we’ve got stored up. We can break

up on camera in a super dramatic fashion and it will go viral, and then I can write a really terrible song about you...”

I groan. “No more songs. Please, God, no more songs.” Without thinking much about it, I tug her a little closer, then lean down to close the open space between us—and kiss her.

The touch of her lips feels cool, refreshing, and filled with possibility. She blinks, clearly startled, and gazes up at me with wide eyes.

“Oh, c’mon,” she tries again. “Maybe a little song?”

I kiss her more earnestly then, smothering her giggles with my own rough laughter, then I pull away. “Hang on a second.”

I lean over and hit the comm. The driver’s voice crackles through a second later.

“Mr. Zander?”

“I think it’d be good for the dogs to get some fresh air before we head home. Can you take us to Runyon Canyon Park first—for a walk?”

“Of course, Mr. Zander.”

I swing back to see that Maisie has slapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes bright with brand-new mirth. Meanwhile, the dogs all snap to intense, quivering attention. Bugsy starts to twirl.

“You said the magic W-word. It’s all over for you now,” Maisie explains, as I blink at the dogs’ eager faces. “You better be ready to party the moment those doors pop open.”

## CHAPTER 23



~ Maisie ~

THE LIMO GETS AS CLOSE TO THE PARK AS IT CAN WITHOUT BEING FORCED TO back out again. It hangs a sharp left and stops in the intersection, affording the dogs a clear view of the park.

“Will they be scared?” Brad asks, which isn’t a bad question. Nearly all the dogs were upright, quivering with anticipation, which should scare *him*, anyway. His arms are going to be yanked out of their sockets if he isn’t careful.

I shake my head as I ready their leashes. “They shouldn’t be. For some of these guys, this park represents their first experience with running around and having a good time. They haven’t been at my place for so long that they won’t remember that.”

I’m not wrong. The moment the SUV’s doors swing open, Jazz is out like a shot while Blanche, Dorothy, and Rose scramble out immediately after. I leap out with them, keeping a tight hold on the leash. Mr. Symmes and Sweetie hop down next, Sweetie, in particular, bouncing around in delight. Jupiter hangs back, trapping Brad inside, while Buggy and Boxer stay with him in solidarity.

“What’s happening here?” Brad asks quietly.

I grimace, sitting back down on the edge of the SUV’s floor, never mind the other dogs and their barely contained, joyful freakout.

“He’s okay. Aren’t you boy? You’re okay,” I say consolingly, patting the edge of the flooring as I glance back at Brad. “Sometimes, depending on what the dog’s experience has been, changes in routine catch them off guard. Jupiter isn’t so sure about where we’re going to go and what we’re going to do once we get there, are you, Jupiter? The last time he was at this park, he’d come from a not-so-great situation. There are probably some lingering

memories attached to that.”

Brad scowls. “What’s his story? What did his previous owners do to him?”

I hesitate. A dog’s story is every bit as sacrosanct as a human’s, and if Brad was adopting Jupiter, he’d definitely need to know. But he isn’t adopting Jupiter, and sometimes people can be judgmental. Or focus on the wrong thing. It isn’t Jupiter’s fault that his owners were assholes, after all. Then again...

I keep my voice low and easy. “Jupiter was a breeding dog. To keep him looking his best, he wasn’t allowed much freedom. He didn’t get fed as much as he should’ve, didn’t get as much affection, either. He was mostly kept in a very small enclosure and ignored until he was needed. Then he got too old to breed, and his owners brought him to the shelter. As a result, he doesn’t trust too many people, do you, sweetheart?”

Brad makes a choked sound deep in his throat. When I look up at him, he turns away sharply. But not before I see the telltale shine in his eyes, or the way his hand shakes a little as he strokes Jupiter’s neck. “No fucking way,” he mutters.

“But all that’s in the past now. Forever and ever.” I stand and let the other dogs drag me a few steps closer to the park, but my gaze remains on the old golden. “C’mon boy.”

Once I move away a few feet, Brad hops out of the vehicle and turns back to Jupiter, his voice low and encouraging. “It’s okay, buddy,” he says, echoing my tone. “You don’t really want to be shown up by a chihuahua, do you?”

Bugsy gives an indignant little yip at this, and bounces out of the SUV then right back in, an athletic feat I wouldn’t expect in such an old sir, even as the entire back half of his body wiggles in excitement.

Boxer sits, stoic and proud, never one to leave any of the team behind.

“C’mon, old man.” Brad grins, offering Jupiter his hand to sniff, then performing the same sneaky move I’ve perfected to give his ears a good scratch.

“We don’t have to go if you don’t want to. We can sit here all day if that works for you better. But it looks like that trail will be a great place to go walking, doesn’t it?”

Whether it’s his words, the tone of his voice, or the excited yapping of the other dogs, Jupiter relaxes. He stands up on legs that are only slightly wobbly

and gives a soft experimental woof. Then he slowly angles down, allowing Brad to half-lift him out of the vehicle.

I watch this last move critically.

“I think someone is angling for an academy award for pitiful,” I advise with a wry twist to my lips. “He’s not that old.”

“Don’t you pay any attention to the mean lady,” Brad assures Jupiter, giving him an enthusiastic pat. “She’s got attachment issues.”

I snort, Boxer jumps out of the van, and a few seconds later, all of us are heading up the sidewalk toward Runyon Canyon Park.

When we reach the pass-through, it takes a little jockeying to keep the dogs from going through in one huge snarl, but then we’re off to the races, trotting up the sandy trail. By this time, it’s midday on a weekday, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything in L.A. Most of the folks who can afford to live in the city can also afford to have hired help walk their dogs on whatever schedule pleases them, and some gig workers can set their schedule at will.

Because we have so many dogs on leash, we draw a little attention, but only the best possible kind—until a sudden intake of a surprised gasp is my first warning that our idyll isn’t going to last.

I brace myself for the onslaught of admirers as the young woman turns to her friend and whispers fiercely.

“You get this all the time?” Brad asks out of the side of his mouth as the girl grips her leash tightly on her toy Doberman, then turns back to approach us. Both owner and dog look incredibly nervous.

I chuckle. “Hardly. It must be difficult for you to even—”

“Are you Maisie Jones?”

The question is delivered in the kind of breathless awe that I expect for a Hollywood celebrity admirer. Except the question isn’t directed to Brad.

I blink at her, startled, as the young woman’s face bursts into a smile. “Oh my God, you *are*. I absolutely love your channel! I’m a proud BarkTokker!”

Her gaze drops. “That’s Boxer, right? My Sally here has a crush on Boxer. Every time he comes on the screen, she gets excited. Don’t you, sweetheart?” She grins down at the shivering mini-Doberman, who’s staring at Boxer like she’s seeing an apparition.

“They busted a breeding operation out in the hills,” the woman continues. “Nasty stuff, but Sally here is the best. She was too young to breed yet, so it’s just, you know, garden variety trauma, not trauma and slavery all mixed up together. But I tell her she has to be brave like Boxer was.”

Hearing his name so many times from the same person, Boxer turns his attention from his own pack to this newcomer, and finally seems to notice the gangly pup. He glances up at me and at my nod, trots forward. By unspoken agreement, I hand the other leashes to Brad, totally overwhelming him, but he gamely herds the other dogs forward up the path.

Sally cringes back as Boxer approaches, her eyes like saucers. Boxer sits on his haunches, then eventually lowers his regal head to his paws. That's all it takes. Sally gives a high-pitched yip and bounces straight up and down a couple of times, then rushes forward. Her owner watches her with tears in her eyes.

"Oh my gosh," she whispers as the puppy strains forward to sniff at Boxer without actually stepping up the final few paces. "Oh my gosh, how sweet is that?"

Boxer tilts his head and utters an approving woof, and the two dogs get to know each other.

Sally's owner is quivering almost as much as the puppy. "This would be a moment that would totally go in her diary. I'm serious, you've made her entire month."

By now Brad is several yards up the path, dragged along by the enthusiastic dogs.

As the gang breaks out in a spontaneous chorus of happy barks, the girl glances their way, then jolts. "Wait a minute," she says, apparently noticing Brad for the first time. "That's Brad Zander."

Her gaze swings back to me. "Is he *seriously* your boyfriend? Is it even possible that I live in a world where someone like him could actually fall for a real person?"

I grimace, but only for a second. I'm selling an illusion, but not all of that illusion is completely false. "Nobody is more surprised than I am," I say, giving her an "I know, right?" smile. "He's been really great since I ambushed him on the beach."

She laughs. "That was the *best*. I must have watched that clip a thousand times. I always thought he was kind of an asshole—but is he secretly nice?"

The question is asked so innocently that I blink and glance up to where Brad is wrangling the dogs inexpertly around an eager pair of mid-sized mutts. These dog owners seem to be more clued in as to who he is, judging by their open-mouthed stares as their dogs tangle leashes.

"Honestly, he's the best." I sigh. "I never thought a celebrity could *be* so

nice, but then again, I don't know many celebrities."

"Oh, come on! What do you mean?" she protests, her smile wide and sincere. "You're a celebrity now, too! Speaking of, Sally, we should let these folks enjoy their walk, okay? Yes, I know, you can get Boxer's digits and you might see him here again sometime. But he's a very famous dog. He's busy."

"Hey," I blurt impulsively, watching her kneel to offer her quivering pup comfort. "There's a dog adoption event tomorrow starting at ten a.m. at the convention center, sponsored by the LALA Dog Spa and the LA County Animal Shelter. You should come. I can interview you about your experience rescuing Sally and put it up online. I think people will love it."

"Really?" Her eyes light up. "I can do that. I'm kind of in between gigs right now."

"Well, in that case, you should *also* talk to the people at LALA because they're desperate for hired walkers. It's not a lot of money, but you *can* bring your own dog."

"Then I'll definitely be there tomorrow. Thanks!" And she's off. I turn back up the trail, Boxer at my side—and hesitate.

Brad is now besieged.

Not only are a half-dozen other dogs and their owners gathered around him, but people with real-live cameras as well. When did that happen? Do photographers have some sort of tracking system, a celebrity GPS geolocator that flags unusual movement? I think briefly about taking Boxer and heading in the opposite direction, when Brad looks up and spears me with a glare.

"There she is," he calls out brightly. "I told you she wouldn't be reckless enough to let me handle these guys on my own too long."

With no other choice, I hustle up the trail, glad I have Boxer to keep me protected...though protected from what, I'm not exactly sure. No sooner do I reach Brad and take half the dogs back under my control than the cameras start flashing in earnest, lights coming at us from every angle while I'm peppered with questions. "What're the dogs' names?" "What brings you into the city?" "Where are you going next?"

And out of nowhere. "Is it true love between you and Maisie, Brad? What about you, Maisie?"

No matter how much prep time we logged, this last one catches me slightly off guard. I grin back with abject alarm, my brain scrambling. Why didn't I think of this question? This one is way more challenging than whether Brad has a pair of fuzzy cuffs in his nightstand drawer.

And worse, it starts a clamor among the other watchers, all of them with state-of-the art cellphone cameras trained on us, half of which, I suspect, are shooting video.

“I wouldn’t want to speak for Maisie, she does a great job of speaking for herself,” Brad puts in and I realize, to my utter shock, that he’s answering the question. *This* is the question he decides to answer? How does that make sense?

Except he isn’t answering the question. He’s expecting me to answer the question. He turns and looks at me expectantly, and I flash over approximately forty-seven different ways that I could kill him. Slowly. And with extreme prejudice. But I don’t have any other choice than to unclench my teeth and actually speak again.

“Well, they say Hollywood is made for fairy tales, and I have to say, this was never one I thought I’d be living,” I gush. “But any Prince Charming who loves dogs is the right Prince Charming for me.”

Clearly I know my audience, and anyone in the group actually attached to a dog erupts in cheers as Brad grins at me. Then, in the second most shocking turn of events in the last thirty seconds...he leans down to kiss me.

In public.

With people around.

And this is *not* a PR kiss.

Brad’s lips brush against mine. I expect him to act tentative, almost curious, but that’s nothing like what happens.

The moment he tastes me, he leans in, the touch of his lips matched only by the feel of his hand snaking around my neck to press hard, urging me closer to him. Though he barely moves, he surrounds me with his presence, and a second later he shifts more, gathering me closer so our bodies are flush against each other.

This is unlike any other kiss I’ve ever experienced. My head tilts back, my breath exhales in a sigh that sounds a little more like a groan than I expect it to, and all I want is more. More of him, more of this. More of anything.

“Brad,” I gasp. And something in my voice must reach him, because he breaks away from me, his eyes intense and searching, but once again, there’s no hesitation. No doubt.

“Maisie,” he says as phone cameras whirr and click. Not a question, certainly not a request, more a statement of this thing that is happening between us, and that he’s here for it.

I lift my free hand and press it against his temple, his hair soft as I tangle my fingers in it, his skin warm and earthy as I kiss him again. He tastes like cool water and possibilities, and I want nothing more than to drink him in. His lips leave my mouth and drift in a hot scorching trail across my cheek, to my ear, and he breathes, the touch of his lips sending sparks that shoot through my bloodstream, warming me to my toes.

Then the entire world explodes into hoots, calls, laughter and applause—and the excited yapping of what seems like a million barking dogs.

“Say yes,” Brad murmurs into the cacophony. “All you have to do is say yes, and I’ll get us back to the condo and finish what we started here—what we started last night and what we’re definitely not done with.”

Part of me knows what he’s asking, that an entire afternoon of falling into each other and shoving the world away awaits us, but part of me wonders—hopes—fears? If he’s asking for something more from that yes. Something deeper and longer lasting.

That’s both stupid and ridiculous, but as my heart pounds and my breathing falters, the unsteadiness of my trembling hands becomes obvious, at least to me, if not to him. I don’t want to hesitate and I definitely don’t want to stop.

“Yes,” I say, and I pull him to me to prove it, kissing him hard. “A thousand times, yes.”

The dogs in their tangled leashes woof. Cameras click. And the questions start up again.

I freeze as the sound engulfs me, and stare around, suddenly overwhelmed. “I mean...no.”

He grins down at me and keeps one arm firmly around me, the other hand gripping the dogs’ leashes. “Nope,” he proclaims. “No takebacks.”

## CHAPTER 24



~ *Brad* ~

MY HOUSE IN THE CITY SERVES A SINGULAR PURPOSE: TO GIVE ME A PLACE TO crash that I don't have to think about.

Everything about the space is managed. From the sun-drenched backyard with its saltwater pool, to the cool clean interior decorated in muted tones and only the occasional splash of color. Though it's located in the Bird Streets above Sunset Strip and is a pretty enough property, I don't use this space to rejuvenate. I have a half dozen properties spread out across the world, not the least of which is a mere hour-long drive away. How have I not gone out to Point Dume more often? I've always loved the ocean. Plus, the ocean at Point Dume is more peaceful than most stretches, and my parents rarely visit. The zip code is too bohemian for them, and their friends prefer the city—any city, really. Meanwhile, I prefer to live anywhere away from California for as much of each year as I can manage.

But do I still need to do that?

Irritation zips through me. Of course I do. Maisie isn't real. None of this is real. And there are far more Glenna Dares in the world than Maisie Joneses. When reality finally barges back into my life, I'll be itching to check back out. Malibu won't be far enough to truly get away from the city.

"Oh, Brad," Maisie's slightly awed voice recalls me to the moment. Though it isn't huge and splashy, the villa has also been written up in *Architectural Digest*. I know it's well designed, and I figure she'll appreciate that.

But Maisie isn't staring around inside, she's staring through the glass slider doors at the long rectangle of sparkling blue water. "You have a pool *here*, too? How can you have two pools?"

I slant a glance at her. "Um, you have an entire ocean," I remind her, and

she laughs, the sound suddenly filling the space with color and life.

“You can take the girl out of Cleveland, I guess, but... Jazz! Stop!”

The beagle pays no attention. She jacked forward at her first sight of the pool, and is now hurtling toward the glass doors, her ears flapping wildly. I barely get the door open in time to avoid her face-planting into it.

“The place is fenced behind the hedges. She can’t—”

“Oh, she won’t,” Maisie assures me, and in truth, the beagle wasn’t heading for an escape route. Instead she pounds forward, leaping out over the crystal blue water, all four stubby legs sprawled wide. She lands with a resounding splash. My heart seizes as she goes under, but then she breaks through the plane of the water again, tilts her chin up and issues the most ecstatic cry of pure pleasure I’ve ever heard.

I swing around toward Maisie, wide-eyed. “What the hell?”

“No sand,” she says, as if that explains everything. “You should see her at your beach house. It’s embarrassing.”

The other dogs trot out in quick succession. The white scruff balls express instant fascination over something in the planter. Boxer surprises me by joining the beagle in the water, and Sweetie and Mr. Symmes post up at the edge of the pool. Buggy and Jupiter stick close to each other, the old golden sprawling in the sunshine as the pug circles, circles, and circles some more, before settling down.

“Were they all like this at my place?” I ask, feeling a tug of regret that I missed it.

“They definitely like the pool, but there are tons of other places to explore. Whereas here, in the city...I’m not sure they were expecting it.”

She gives me a wry smile. “I may seem like I understand them, but they surprise me all the time.”

“I know the feeling.”

Something in my voice must give me away, because she looks up at me, her eyes wide beneath her corkscrew hair—and instantly deflects her emotions toward her charges. I’m beginning to notice a pattern here. “Are you sure it’s okay for them to spend the night?” she asks. “I can’t imagine you have the place dog-proof.”

I shrug. “It’s party-proof, which is about the same thing. Tile floors, easy-to-wash rugs, glass sliders, a stone wall to make sure no one gets lost.”

Her gaze drifts out to the hedge row again. I follow it. There is no view back here, not really. I never needed one. “I really only use this to crash when

I'm in the city," I explain. "I wasn't looking for the views."

She rolls her eyes. "You do *not* need to defend your bazillion-dollar villa to me, buddy. This place is flat-out amazing. And I kind of like that it feels a little more enclosed. It's more peaceful—relaxing in a way you don't usually expect in the city."

"I guess it is," I say, surprised to realize that she's right on a couple of counts. Especially since I *was* defending the house. I'd purchased it against my parents' recommendations—they always were about the view first—but I wasn't expecting them to visit me. I've always liked it for the escape it provides, and I find myself absurdly glad that Maisie likes it too. A voice in my head, my father's voice, assures me that of course she likes it. It's something she's never experienced before.

Just like I've never experienced someone quite like her.

"When is your gig tomorrow?" I ask her to draw her attention back to me. I'm not proud of that, but I still appreciate the zing in my pulse when she glances my way.

"Doors open at ten o'clock. It'll go till four. And I..." Her eyes widen, sudden alarm skiffing over her features. "Brad, I don't have anything to wear tomorrow night for your party. I totally didn't think that far ahead. I can call Catherine's stylist, I bet—"

I wave off the concern. "I'm not worried about that. There are dressers for these kinds of events, usually set up right next door. We can find you something you'll like. And you can keep it, this time, if you really like it."

"Oh, wow." Her eyes brighten. "Seriously? I would *love* that. I honestly don't have much in the way of nice cocktail dresses, and I probably should. I've been asked to a couple of parties by some of the ladies that I photographed, and those have all been pretty casual, but now..."

"Now you may be getting some different commissions," I say. Unwarranted annoyance zips through me, but I shove it down. I want to simply write this woman a check and solve—if not all of her problems, then a hell of a lot of them, but I know that isn't the answer—not yet, anyway. It would seem like a payoff for services rendered, and that doesn't sit well with me for some reason. Plus, Maisie is stubborn. She has her photography business, and she wants to make her way in this world with it, be recognized and paid for it. I understand that. It's why I accept getting paid for acting. No matter how I got my skills at becoming something I'm not, showing emotions I don't naturally feel, I'm good at what I do. I want validation too.

Watching Maisie now, seeing the sun in her hair and the delighted smile on her face. I want something else, too.

“So, you think they’ll be okay out here for a few minutes?”

She bites her lip, squinting out at the dogs, but I don’t think the color in her cheeks has anything to do with the sun that now dances across the pool. “Probably not...but in the kitchen, yes. We could leave them for a few.”

“No takebacks?”

That brings the grin out.

“No takebacks.”

I haven’t really given much thought as to what I’ll do the day Maisie does turn me down, but fortunately she takes that concern away with her soft agreement, so quiet, almost tentative, that a raging tide of need nearly swamps me.

In many ways, I barely know this woman, yet more than anyone I’ve ever met, anyone I’ve ever dated—I want her. For this afternoon, for tomorrow, for as long as I can touch her, taste her, feel my hands in her hair and her breath against my skin. I want nothing more than to be with her. She may not be mine forever, but she’s fake dating me, dammit. She can be fake mine today.

“Come on.” I sweep everyone back inside the cool, quiet house, and we bribe the dogs with kibble and water. Because we’re not proud. When they seem content to lounge in the sunshine streaming through the windows, Maisie gives me the thumbs up, and we edge slowly away.

“Why do I feel like we’re the parents of toddlers?” I murmur.

“Because we are?” She giggles. “But only in the best possible way.”

“Shhh...don’t wake the babies.”

Moving slightly faster now, feeling like I’m getting away with something, I lead her deeper into the house until we reach my bedroom, then I pull her inside and shut the door.

“Damn, those shades are good,” she murmurs, peering around as her eyes adjust to the gloom. It’s sunny outside, but this room exists in a constant, drowsy twilight during the day.

“Blackout shades. I don’t entertain here, usually. I sleep.”

“Sleep...is good,” she manages as I pull her into my arms.

“It can be.” I want to go slow, to savor every inch of her wild corkscrew hair, her gleaming eyes, her wide and mobile mouth, but I can’t wait. There in the relative darkness of the room, I kiss her again, deep, searchingly, and

feel her melt beneath my arms, another body-wracking groan rippling through her, driving me to a higher need as well.

Her fingers move to my shirt, plucking ineffectually at the buttons there, but I bat them away. Instead I reach for her shift, easily whisking the long slender strip of material off her body with one tug. I vaguely realize that the material of her bra and underwear is shiny black and new. And that both pieces match.

I know in a heartbeat that she bought these items with her precious few funds, thinking, clearly hoping I would see them. Something dark shifts within me then, and the low growl I breathe out next makes her pull back, some belated sense of self-protection finally stirring within her. But it's too late for that. It's way the fuck too late.

“Maisie,” I say again, and I lean forward to plunder her mouth.

She moans something to the affirmative, and I'm lost. There's only the taste of her, salt and warmth and need. I drag my lips from her mouth to kiss along the edge of her jaw, down into the hollow of her neck, across the ridge of her collarbone and the curve of her shoulder. I tuck a finger beneath the shiny black material of her department store bra then slide it down her shoulder, the scrap of cheap silk nothing compared to the warm and vibrant touch of her skin.

My own breathing grows heavy as I dip further still, nuzzling against the soft curve of a breast, round and firm and perfectly sized, the weight against my cheek driving me nearly mad until I shift enough left to take the soft beaded nub of her nipple into my mouth, and lean into her, tasting, sucking. My entire body reacts to that—everything tight with a need I can no longer ignore.

Maisie gasps, and I pull back to look at her, but her eyes are on my shirt, her dexterous fingers finally unfastening the buttons. Her audible hiss of pleasure as she yanks the shirt free of my trousers almost sends me diving down on her again.

Instead, I force myself to absorb her touch as she splays her fingers over my stomach, then drifts her hands up the ridges of my chest, as if she's some sort of faith healer drawing poison from my blood. But the poison doesn't want to be free from me; it stirs and pools, simmering with heat as her hand slips lower again, her thumbs dipping into my waistband.

I can't wait anymore. I pull my own belt free, loosening my trousers as Maisie eagerly helps, her bright teeth flashing as she bites her lower lip with

concentration, fixed on the effort of getting me naked. It doesn't take long.

"Now you've got me at a disadvantage," I say, and her half-choked laugh does more to convince me that she does want what's happening here, maybe needs it as much as I do. This is a woman who's a force of nature everywhere she goes. But not here. Here she can simply lie back and be.

She's also still wearing her bra and underwear, but I don't mind that. I stretch her out on the bed, drinking in the sight of her. She's perfect. Crisscrossing suntan lines showing too many hours on the beach without applying sunscreen often enough, scrapes and bruises on her legs betraying however many times she had to dive into the trees or up the trail to help a senior dog along. I suspect there's sand in her hair and salt beneath her nails, those nails that were so carefully painted for the party last night and are already chipped. I don't think she notices, but I do. I lift her beautiful, long-fingered hand, and slip that finger into my mouth as she watches me, her sky blue eyes going wide and slightly hazed as I draw the finger out of my mouth, then dip it in again. Even in the shadows, I can see a sheen of perspiration now glistening on her brow as her lips part, her breath growing uneasy.

I press a kiss to her palm and realize her hand is shaking. I drift my kiss further down to her wrist, allowing the staccato pulse to beat against my lips, then drag her hand over my shoulder and lean in again, my left hand skimming down the length of her gentle curve, feeling the angle of bone at her hip, and wanting to taste it too. But first, I lower my head and nuzzle the hollow between her breasts, my tongue snaking out to learn this new territory that I want to conquer and keep for myself.

The certainty of that knowledge ripples through me, and I slide my hands beneath her body, arching her up so I can feast more deeply. I ease her breast into my mouth, unhooking the bra and letting it slide haphazardly away as I take my fill and go for more. She murmurs something indistinct but needful enough that I take it as encouragement, and I drop further still, sliding my lips to that compass point I've already located with my thumbs, the soft outcrop of her hipbone that I kiss and make mine before drifting further south to the vee between her thighs.

The strip of silk there is already damp, and I pull it down further, baring her flesh to my mouth as she hisses and arcs beneath me, her thighs falling open, her heat rising between us. She hooks the string of her panties with a thumb and pulls it further, but that is all I will allow her before I brush her

hands away and bend into her body. I savor every inch of her, the soft twitch of her skin on the inside of her knees, the way her ankles flex and her fingers clench into fists as I draw my tongue along her skin.

She tastes of sun and heat, but in that moment I know that I won't rest until I taste her in all seasons and for all reasons. I want more, I want everything, and so intense is the blood pounding in my ears that I almost miss the catch of her breath, the arch of her hips, as she responds to my kisses with a small cry. She hits her release even as I lift her more firmly to my mouth, her body shuddering as she gives herself over to the crest and fall of her reaction, the rolling tremors sweeping me along with her. She gasps my name, and it's all I can do not to explode—but that isn't going to happen. I'm too greedy—and I want this to last.

After a quick sheath of the condom, I roll back to her, her breath a startled gasp as I slide home. She closes around me like a fist, tight and sure, throttling me and tilting her hips to take me in deeper. Her body shudders again, whether in reaction to my intrusion or in the delayed finale of her climax, I don't know and can't care. I'm swept into motion, plunging and withdrawing, rising and falling, vaguely aware of the toss of her head, of her hands curling around my shoulders, of her fingers digging into my skin as she moans, sighs, and urges me on, her legs lifting to cross behind my back, carried along with my momentum.

The ocean is forty miles away now, but the crashing of a thousand waves thunders through me, driving me higher and higher until finally I'm set free.

## CHAPTER 25



~ Maisie ~

BEFORE THIS WEEK, I'D NEVER ACTUALLY IMAGINED WHAT IT MIGHT BE LIKE to wake up with a gorgeous billionaire celebrity actor staring at me, but the reality is several times more nerve wracking—even though I'd gone to sleep next to the guy the night before.

“What?” I ask before I even become fully conscious. Brad's stormy gray eyes are crinkled at the edges, giving me a sudden glimpse of the man he will become in thirty or forty years—definitely hotter than he is now, which hardly seems possible. My brain jerks to the right, and I flush as his grin only broadens.

“The dogs?” I ask to cover my rabbiting thoughts.

“They've been outside already, though they have clearly indicated that a formal walk is both necessary and the only humane thing for us to do. Meanwhile, I've got a surprise for you. I think you're going to like it.”

“You built a dog door overnight? An entire wing for them to walk themselves?”

He laughs. “Even better. Get up and I'll tell you all about it. Coffee is already brewing.”

My passionate affair with coffee once more trumps my sanity. “I love you, I love you, I—ahhhh...thanks.” I flail, lurching out of the bed and barely keeping upright as I remain twisted up in the sheets. “Sorry.”

“It's okay.” He gives me a lopsided grin. “Anything said under the duress of pre-caffeination will not be held against you, I promise.”

He's out the door before I untangle myself, and by the time I make it to the kitchen he has prepared a to-go mug and the leashes. The dogs are over-the-top excited to head out the door, and we step into the hazy LA sunshine a few minutes later, a long pull of the coffee enough to cover my latent

embarrassment.

“So, so, do you want to know my surprise? Huh, do you?” he teases, and I peer at him over my cup, surprised at his excitement. He totally thinks I’ll be delighted by whatever the surprise is. I can’t remember the last time anyone cared so much. Like it matters. Like I matter.

My voice only wobbles a little as I laugh. “Is it a pony?”

“It’s even *better* than a pony. So you’ve got this dog adoption event, and it’s a great gig and probably will attract a lot of people because of your newfound fame and our connection. But, this is LA, see? Which means you can always go bigger. So I think, how many friends do I have with dogs?”

“You have friends? I mean, with dogs?”

“Yes, I do. Both, as it happens.” He chuckles. The sound is light and easy, and contains a different note in it that I haven’t heard before, but I know I want to hear it more.

“Anyway, with full star-power on hand, you’ll probably need to be there all the way up to four, and maybe for some promo shots after. That puts us kinda close to the event tonight, but that’s no problem. I’ve set it up so that you can get dressed at the clothier’s next door to the party—they have anything you’re going to want, trust me—and you can meet me at the club. We’ve got the garden lounge area reserved, so at least there will be fresh air.”

“Wait a minute,” I protest, suddenly alarmed, though I have no reason to be. “You’re not going to come with me after inviting your friends?”

That stops him, and he glances back at me, genuinely surprised. “Why would I? You’re the star.”

“Are you *insane*? I have a few thousand followers on TikTok. That doesn’t exactly equal the clout of Brad Zander.” Even as I say this, I realize the absolute, abject truth of it. Brad has literally changed my life by being my fake boyfriend. How much help have I really given him? Some good PR, sure, but...in the grand scheme of things, this exchange is seriously out of balance.

“Oh, please.” Brad simultaneously manages to roll his eyes and keep Jazz from peeing on the neighbor’s lawn. Skills, he has them. “I’m not that big of a star.”

“I guarantee you’re the biggest star that has likely graced any event of the LA County Animal Shelter *or* the LALA Dog Spa. Plus, we’ve got to fill a ridiculous amount of space in the convention center. *Please* come. They will love it, I will love it, and Jupiter won’t have to steal another shoe.”

He looks down, and sure enough, Jupiter stands at attention beside him, looking up at Brad adoringly.

“You guys want me to come with?” Brad asks, and Jupiter drops a suspiciously new looking sandal long enough to bark, then scoops it up again.

“See? You’re already outvoted.”

“Well, I could at least help with these guys,” he offers, spearing Jazz with a hard stare as the beagle strains at her leash. “You run, buddy, I will look for you. I will find you. And I will revoke your pool privileges.”

If I wasn’t already half in love with Brad Zander, I would fall to pieces for him right this second. I don’t have much game on the best of days, but throw in being nice to dogs and it’s all over.

Brad Zander is a dream come true. I know I’ll have to wake up eventually...but not quite yet. I laugh and we walk on then, letting the dogs set the pace, and I try to imagine how amazing it will be to show up at the shelter event with a bona fide celebrity on my arm.

Despite my best attempts, though, I am not at all prepared.

In fact, as we drive to the convention center a few hours later and I stare at my feed in total shock, I realize I have *dramatically* underestimated the celebrity effect of one of the hottest actors in Hollywood showing up at a dog adoption event.

Granted, I should have known something was up with how quickly the TikTok video we’d filmed of us with the dogs this morning got picked up, no doubt because it showed Brad talking excitedly to Boxer, Bugsy, and Jupiter, telling them about the birthday party they were going to all attend, since it’s going to be the birthday of all the other shelter dogs meeting their forever families.

The dogs picked up his excitement, and responded in kind, with Bugsy’s entire body wriggling, Boxer weighing in with deep throaty barks, and Jupiter looking at Brad adoringly, which is his best skill.

Dog owners from around TikTok stitched their own dogs’ reactions to the idea of a birthday of their adoption, and it took off.

By the time we reach the convention center, there are two dozen cars in the parking lot, and by the time we get the dogs inside, there are four dozen more.

And that’s just the outside. As I step into the enormous ballroom covered in wall-to-wall AstroTurf and rubber flooring, dutifully being manned by intrepid volunteers armed with pooper scoopers, I see people pouring in

through every entrance.

“This is LA,” Brad says. “There are a lot of dog lovers out here. They’re happy to fund events like this if it gets dogs adopted.”

The doors open on the far end of the room, and a flood of volunteers come out with dogs on leashes, or cuddled up in their arms. There are even a few older dogs, and my guys make a beeline for them.

“Be strong,” he advises, and I laugh, though I can’t help choking up a little as I take in the white muzzles, the soft eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I say, though inside I pray that all the dogs will find a home today, even the ones that aren’t such an easy choice for people.

“Oh my gosh, you came!” I don’t look up until Brad nudges me, and I realize that I know the owner of the voice. It’s an influencer I follow on TikTok, but have never met in person. I know she lives in LA, but to me that’s like saying that she lives in an Island Kingdom. I’d never expected to run into her in real life.

“I saw online that you were promoting the event, but I didn’t expect you to actually be here, and...” Her eyes widen as her gaze swings to Brad, and instantly her phone comes up. “Oh my God, it’s really real? Like really-really?” she asks with such wide-eyed stupefaction that I laugh. We all made our living with illusions. She can be excused.

“Ms. Jones? Maisie? I don’t suppose...”

I look over to see a harried looking woman holding a puppy in one hand and a camera in the other. Her name tag introduces her as Barbara, but she doesn’t seem like a volunteer.

“You’re a photographer, right? Of course you are. Our photographer’s late, and people want photos and I’m not a photographer—but I’m happy to help out. But I was wondering, um, if you don’t mind...”

“Of course,” I say. Waving off her camera and reaching for my own. “I’m happy to help in whatever way I can.”

She looks at me, startled. “Oh! No, no, you don’t have to *take* the photos, but I was wondering if you would be in them? I’ve had requests already, and I don’t want to intrude, but...”

I stare at her in amazement as Brad laughs and pushes me forward.

“Superstar.” He chuckles. “But hey, let’s take this one first.”

He takes two of the puppies from Barbara and hands one to me, then brings Jupiter and Boxer forward, the six of us posing for a photo. Other

photos are being snapped all around us, but I can only watch Brad as he ruffles Jupiter's head, balancing the wriggling puppy and laughing as the old golden woofs experimentally at the puppy power duo. Then Barbara whisks me along for more photos, and I go one way, Brad another.

The next few hours pass in a blur, as it seems like more and more people flood into the Convention Center. Even attendees from other events poke their heads in to see what the commotion is all about, only to end up staying to greet the dogs. When the older animals get attention, too, I choke back a sob, only to turn to see Brad standing right next to me again, a strangely intent expression on his face.

"They're going to be okay, Maisie," he says. "You gotta believe that."

"I know," I whisper. "They're all so deserving."

Then his phone rings, saving me the need to burst into tears. He looks down and scowls. "I gotta get this."

"You're good, it's fine." I smile gamely as he turns away, but I can't help the twinge of dismay at his loss. Brad is a busy man. He has friends, he has obligations. I am...a shelter dog star. I need to—

"Maisie!"

I'm spared from the opportunity to spiral any further by a familiar voice—even though it's completely out of context. I look up to see Ayla striding over to me, an adorable toy goldendoodle wriggling in her arms.

"Ayla—what do you have there? What a beautiful puppy!"

"She's not a puppy. Well, not a baby anyway. But she was left behind. Left *behind*, Maisie. On purpose!"

I haven't known Ayla for all that long, but I've never seen her so distraught. Her beautiful big brown eyes are shimmering with tears, and I don't miss the way the doodle clings to her, despite her full body shivers. Like the dogs from which they were originally bred—golden retrievers and poodles or Labradors and poodles or pretty much anything and poodles—these dogs make excellent therapy pets. But Ayla looks like she's going to need more than one session.

"What happened?" I manage as she thrusts the dog toward me, then rakes her hands through her long brown hair, which is now coming free from its loose ponytail.

"I was over at the Bonaventure's house, you know, the one in north Beverly Hills—whatever, it doesn't matter. They recently sold the place, needed me to come in for a final cleanup, and this little girl was there. With a

note and her papers or whatever dogs have, asking me to get rid of it as part of the cleanup duties! *Get rid of it!* Literally, that's what it said in the letter, I can show you. What does that even mean? They don't mean for me to kill the dog, right? They can't. They were absolute assholes, but nobody expects their cleaning lady to kill a dog. Like, that doesn't happen."

"There's a good girl," I coo to the puppy, who's already turning around to stare mournfully at Ayla. "What's her name?"

"She doesn't have a name," she says, her voice hushed. "That was in the letter too. Apparently they'd gotten the dog for some niece or nephew, and they hadn't named her yet because they wanted the kid to do so, but then the kid got a dog from somebody else and they were moving and it's all too much for them to deal with, so they're making *me* deal with it. Not making me, of course, I would take care of things, regardless. I mean, look at her, Maisie. She's beautiful."

The mini doodle jerks in my hands and strains toward Ayla again, and I hand the dog back to her. She takes her automatically and cuddles her close. "I figured that maybe I could find her a new owner here, like adopt her out or something. I have a list of stuff from the house that I'm supposed to get rid of as well, but no vet information, no previous owner listing, nothing like that. I honestly think they were embarrassed. Like, they didn't want me trying to find out where they got her from or who took care of her because then it would get back that they dumped her. And they *should* be embarrassed. Who does that?"

"Well, you're the one always telling me that celebrities are terrible..."

"They're disgusting. Still, everyone's disgusting. That's why they hire housekeepers. But this, this..."

She looks down at the mini doodle, who gazes up at her with impossibly big brown eyes, and I bite back a smile. "If you take her over to the front table, they can get her processed. They've got vets on hand. Then she'll go into a pen with other dogs her age and she'll be taken care of. She's a pretty girl. I'm sure somebody will want her."

I keep my words gentle, but Ayla's eyes fill again. "I've dealt with a thousand different types of human trauma. Why is this bothering me so much?"

"You'll be fine, sweetheart." I pat her shoulder, then point out the table. But I don't offer any more advice. Ayla makes her living cleaning houses, but her calling is helping people clean up their emotional messes. She has an

overdeveloped sense of responsibility for everyone and everything around her. She doesn't need me to explain why she's so devastated that someone would discard another creature because he or she has become inconvenient.

I have a feeling that her new doodle friend will make an excellent therapy dog.

"There you go, sweetheart," I say, giving her a little push toward the adoption event organization table. She starts walking, hugging the nameless little dog close, and...I know she's done for.

As I turn back into the crowd and catch sight of Brad with his arms full of dogs, I have the oddly sinking feeling that I am too.

## CHAPTER 26



~ *Brad* ~

I COUNT MYSELF LUCKY WHEN THE DAY'S FIRST CALL IS INTERRUPTED BY A throng of giggling teenagers and their dogs, all of them wanting photos. Hey, anything for the fans, and again, it got me off the phone with Jeremy, who's flat out freaking out about tonight's party. I love the guy, and he's brilliant at what he does...but there's the making of the movie and then the blind-assed panic of putting the movie out. Two totally different skill-sets. This is part of the reason why I never like to be around LA in advance of a film coming out.

I don't mind doing the publicity tour in other cities, especially New York or Chicago or Seattle, where I can hit a bunch of different outlets in the shortest amount of time, but something about a movie coming out in LA is far more stressful for the producers and director. And if they are stressed, it's almost a foregone conclusion that they need me to be stressed too.

Now I hand off the last of the squirming pups, all of them brand new adoptees of this gaggle of kids—more likely their parents—who are all standing together off to the side as well, too polite to come up to me. I raise a hand and am about to call out to them when my phone rings again.

“Damn it.” I send it to voicemail, but the moment is lost. The kids are back with their parents, and a few send appreciative waves my way, but they are all happily together with the newest members of their families. They don't need me to make the moment any more special. It's special enough on its own.

I scan the crowd, subconsciously looking for Maisie as my phone vibrates yet again. She's nowhere to be found, doubtless posing for a photo or taking one or matching up prospective parents with the dogs that will change their lives. It's taken a few tries for me to shake Jupiter, but as clingy as the golden was, now I miss him. Which is ridiculous.

This isn't real, none of this is real. I've gotten attached to animals on sets before, and at the end of the shoot they are taken off by their handlers, perfectly happy to continue their lives. Jupiter will be the same. Maybe he will miss me a little, maybe I'll miss him. But he isn't my dog. Like Maisie isn't my girlfriend.

I scowl, not missing the fact that a few eager adults that were heading my way abruptly swerve and stride off in another direction, doubtless having caught my expression. This time, when the phone rings, I yank it out of my pants and jam it up against my ear.

"What?" I demand. "What the fuck is so necessary that you can't leave a goddamn voicemail and leave it at that?"

Jillian's cool voice comes over the phone.

"Well, it's good to see that you're having a grand time there, Brad," she says drolly. "Funny, the pictures make it seem like you are enjoying yourself tremendously."

"I *was* enjoying myself tremendously until my phone started blowing up. What's going on? Did somebody die?"

"I figured that you are at a dog event that is not for the purpose of promoting your movie, so it's reasonable for me to pull you aside for a few minutes and tell you what the rest of the week's schedule is."

"You know what the rest of this week should be? Nothing. I should be in another city, in another country preferably, talking to people who work on my schedules for me. You need to book me into a bunch of publicity shifts? Do it. Send a notice to my PA, get the flights scheduled and arranged, keep me in the air as much as possible so that everybody thinks I'm doing my job, but the bullshit time is limited. And get me some new scripts to read. I'm antsy. I need to line something else up."

There's a long silence on the other end of the phone, and I sigh. "Look, Jillian, I'm sorry. I know you're only responsible for one of those things. I'll get with my PA on the scripts, and once I dive into something new, I promise I'll be less of an asshole for at least a little while. But the rest of it, the schedule, text it to me. And text it to my PA and we'll get that set—"

"Brad." Jillian's tone is not quite harsh, but definitely forceful enough to cut me off. "You sound like you are in the middle of chaos. Find a quieter space. I'll wait."

I grimace, but I do as she asks. Jillian is a solid agent and has graciously stepped up as the primary handler for all of my media shit after I drove off

half a dozen other specialists. She doesn't deserve me treating her like crap, even if she's partly responsible. She's doing what I pay her to do.

"All right, all right," I mutter as I navigate through the crowd. "I don't know if you can still hear me, but there's gotta be a way to get me the fuck out of here for the next several days. Jeremy is losing his ever-loving mind."

"Why?" Jillian asks quickly. "Is anything wrong? I thought the film was pretty well buttoned up at this point."

"It is buttoned up, but you know he's going to be fucking with it until the release itself. That part is no problem. But he's wired for sound with all this publicity shit, especially since he changed up the ending at the last minute. Now he's overthinking everything. I think the Glenna Dare bullshit has thrown him for a loop too. Okay, I'm almost free now."

This last I share as I clear the edge of the crowd and step into a hallway that is markedly less noisy, then duck into another room. I breathe out a long sigh at the sudden silence that greets me. I'd forgotten how much unrelenting noise keys me up. My mind skips back to the wide open beach at Point Dume. Why, again, do I not spend more time out there? And where else could I go that has that similar level of quiet?

"You're alone?" Jillian prompts, and when I grunt an assent, she launches in.

"That's excellent, Brad, because you're going to need to listen very carefully to what I'm about to tell you. There are two key points that you need to understand regarding this coming week. Point number one, you cannot leave the city."

I instantly bristle. "What are you talking about? There's nothing that I need to do in the city that I can't do somewhere else, on some other sound stage and some other talk show. You know that as well as I do."

"I do know that, but you're not worrying about yourself for the next week. You are the gorgeous, doting boyfriend of a woman who helps make sure that dogs are taken care of. Your numbers have been going off the fucking charts ever since Maisie tripped over you."

"I know that. But you know that isn't real, Jillian."

"Let's put a pin in that comment for a second, because I'll circle back to it. As of right this hot second, however, your relationship with Maisie is real enough to the hundreds of thousands of fans around the world who have been chattering about you, about Maisie, about your upcoming movie, and about how amazing you are to be helping her with this fucking dog show you've

got going on today. That kiss you guys shared yesterday in the park? It's everywhere. It amped everything up by another million percent. You disappear after this, and it's going to leave a hole where right now there's a big ball of happy. You want to keep Jeremy from swan diving into hysteria? You stick it out for another week. You finish the job you signed up for when you first decided to fake date Maisie Jones. What you do after the movie is your business, but what you do up until the point the movie drops is the business of a whole hell of a lot of people that you told me you don't want to disappoint."

"Fuck," I mutter. She's right, I know she's right, but it's not helping my mood. It should help my mood—being with Maisie always seems to—but something is niggling deep inside me, and I don't like being niggled.

"Now, back to that pin about stuff not being real," Jillian says. Her voice is, if possible, even grimmer, and I wince, feeling a headache coming on. "Because...a situation may be developing. In a big way. So you need to pay attention."

I scowl. "What situation?"

"We've started to get some additional intel about what's going to go down this evening with Glenna Dare showing up at your party. I want you to be as prepared as possible, but you're likely going to have to pull an audible, because I can't verify that any of this information is true."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Tell me. What does she have planned?"

"She's dropping another song that she just wrote last night. You know, last night. After the Kiss to Make a Million Dog Lovers Swoon. That kiss was huge, Brad...but what we're hearing about this song might be even huger."

I rub my hand over my brow. "Great. And?"

"And, apparently it's going to go live immediately before she departs for your party, and while she's in her limo or whatever, the track will drop for purchase on all the streaming services."

"Well then, she drops it. I don't know what else you fucking want me to do at this point, Jillian. I'm fresh out of ideas for dealing with the Glenna Dare problem. What else can she bitch about? It was eleven years ago."

"I know," she says, sounding pained. "And, apparently she has figured that out too."

That stops me. "What are you talking about?"

"This new song, Brad? It's—well, supposedly, she's going to be singing

about how much she's been in love with you from afar for the last decade and...she's going to apologize."

I freeze. "Apologize."

"Yup. She wants to make nice. Very nice. As in she wants to make nice and throw her billion-dollar brand behind your movie nice. This...I mean, this could be everything Brad. This could be magic. She's offering herself to you."

Every drop of blood in my body turns to stone. "She's not going to do that."

"Yeah, well, she just might. In front of God, the world, and her millions of adoring fans. She might serve herself up to you on a platter, and beg for you to take a bite."

## CHAPTER 27

~ Maisie ~

BRAD HAS GONE COMPLETELY MIA FOR THE REST OF THE DAY, BUT I DON'T mind that so much, especially after his celebrity friends cause a minor stampede among the crowd. Volunteers, prospective dog parents, and actual dogs all got caught up in the excitement of the Hollywood dog Walk of Fame, and then the enclosure with all the puppies in it partially fell down, leading to an explosion of slippery dogs everywhere.

From all indications, the day could not have been more successful even with—especially with—the dog escape. Video from The Great Puppy Escape has already gone viral, and according to the shelter personnel, will probably be picked up on all the major news feeds. That might have led to some awkwardness, except that all the guests and volunteers came together like magic to corral the dogs safely in record time. Honestly, it's the perfect Hollywood script. The shelter started the adoption process for nearly five times the number of dogs they were hoping to place into good homes, donations came pouring in for the animal shelter and the spa's charity work, and I am flat out exhausted.

More to the point, I know that I'm only the tiniest reason for all of this success. It's mostly because of Brad. Brad and his stardom, Brad and his friends, Brad and his legions of fans.

Why is it he needs me again...to do anything? I actually am beginning to wonder.

The next few hours only make me more uneasy. Brad's SUV driver, David, shows up promptly to help me get the dogs to the house and me down to the clothier where I'm supposed to get my dress for the night. It's right down the street from the club, easy enough, but then David surprises me by handing over his card.

“You need anything—anything at all—you call. I’ll be right around the corner and can get you at any time.”

I take the card from him but regard him curiously. “That...sounds ominous.”

“It’s not,” he says cheerfully. “But I’m on call all night, and at your service. Hollywood parties can get old in a hurry. So I’m here if you need me.”

I salute him, then slip out of the car and peer up at the brightly lit boutique of James Will Clothiers. *Here we go.*

I square my shoulders and step inside.

“May I help you?” a tiny, exquisitely boned young woman with dark eyes and club makeup greets me at the front door, her severe black sheath dress and stilettos making me feel like the grubby kid on the playground.

“Maisie Jones—I—well, I’m a friend of Brad Zander, and he knew I’d need help getting dressed for the party next door.”

The young woman smiles. “Yes, of course. Right this way.”

My momentary burst of relief at her recognizing me—or at least my name—is tempered by the look I catch her sharing with another of the staff members, an older, equally slim blonde who turns to watch me walk by as the first woman leads me deeper into the cluster of people. There appears to be a cocktail party going on in the store, champagne flutes all around, and beautiful people in beautiful clothes, all looking vaguely similar. Their clothes anyway. The people too, I realize, all of them striking similar poses on similarly painful looking shoes.

“Are all these guests getting dressed tonight for the movie party?” I ask as I’m ushered into a room with three large racks and easily a dozen women milling around.

“Getting dressed, yes, but not only for that party,” my guide assures me with a smile that hasn’t grown warmer—but isn’t offensive either. I’m simply another in a long line of poorly dressed women in her day, and there will be more to come after me. Though hopefully not too many more, judging by the picked-over racks. “We offer design samples for a number of our customers and their guests. What size are you?”

“Probably bigger than anything you typically stock.”

For a moment, her smile flashes into something more authentic. “Not everyone in LA walks a runway, I promise.” She surveys me critically. “Shoe size?”



“Six.”

“Right.” Her gaze sweeps up again. “You’re the shelter dog princess, right? That’s what they’re calling you? So nothing too fussy. I’ll find something.”

“I...” I don’t have time to fully process everything she’s saying before she turns away, so my reactions fortunately play out over my face while she can’t see them. Shelter dog princess? Is that what they’re calling me? I haven’t seen that anywhere but I haven’t looked anywhere but at my feeds for a couple of days—not since Brad came back from the island and everything has started moving so fast. What did she mean about nothing too fussy? Am I supposed to look like some sort of frumpy sidekick to Brad, playing up his generosity in dating me? I mean yes, our relationship is all a lie for our mutual benefit, but suddenly showing up to a party with borrowed clothes in a borrowed life beside a borrowed boyfriend is making me feel not so great.

“Oh my *God*, this is a disaster.” The woman beside me moans in genuine distress, and I turn to her. This being LA, I still expect every other person I meet to be a celebrity, though that is ridiculous. And in fact, I don’t know who this woman is, other than she’s tall, angular, and striking in a way that surely means she’s a model. Her eyes, nose and mouth are perfectly symmetrical, but the angle of her chin and the sharpness of her cheekbones are slightly outsized, creating an arresting appearance that I know must photograph incredibly well.

She glances my way, noting my attention.

“Do you work here? Of course not, not in those clothes—I’m sorry. Nothing here works for me. I look like I’m going to my own funeral.”

I bite my lip. She’s wrong, of course. She’s beautiful, but she’s staring at herself in the mirror, fussing with seams and hemlines and trying to get the slightly ruched material of her dress to lie flat on her smooth body when it isn’t intended to do so.

“You look great—trust me. I’m a freelance photographer and I shoot a lot of fashion. What you’re seeing isn’t what the camera sees.”

I’ve guessed right, and her eyes brighten. “Really?”

She’s young, I realize, young enough that she probably hasn’t gotten her footing quite yet in this pool of moray eels. Modeling isn’t a profession for the weak of heart.

“Really,” I promise her. “You have a phone? I can take a few shots to show you.”

“Miss Jones?” My dresser’s bored voice floats toward me, and I turn to see her pointing at a dress and shoes on a rack, flagged by a garish pink flag. “You’re good?”

“I’m good,” I say, half wondering if she picked out a pair of overalls and a designer pooper scooper for me. But I don’t mind so much since the young model is fumbling her phone into my hands with eager thanks.

A few shots turn into a dozen, and then she has her friends ask for photos too—and the camera does the trick that cameras do. As harsh of a judge as it can be, it’s never as harsh as we are to ourselves. Along the way, I’m asked for my contact details, and I find myself texting them to all the women in the room. Might I start photographing two-legged beauties along with four? I’m open to that. I’m open to anything, I realize, and my heart nearly bursts with joy at their reactions to their shots. Even in a selfie world, getting the right shot taken by someone with a passion for photography makes a difference, it seems.

By the time I finish with the impromptu photo shoot, the crowd in the room has thinned, and my pink-tagged clothes haven’t been swiped. With trembling hands, I pull the tag aside and see the dress—simple, black, sized a little big but probably the right call, the little clutch purse—and the shoes.

The shoes are a disaster.

I lift the delicate pair of heels out of the box and hiss in dismay at the knife blade heels, the brutally pointed toes. Given the short, frothy skirt of the black dress—which would probably make me look like one of my grandmother’s hydrangea bushes—the shoes will absolutely show off my well-toned legs...right before breaking them.

But there’s no time. I glance at my own phone and see that it’s nearly 8 p.m.—the party will be starting. I know it’s not like there’s going to be a cake or a speech, but Brad will only get more besieged as it goes on, and there is also the likelihood of me being permanently crippled by the shoes. I need to try and catch him early and then find somewhere to perch.

I pour myself into the dress—which looks as ridiculous as I fear, though I guess sweet, in its own way. I drift my hands down, surprised to feel one of the frothy fabric flowers at the base give way.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, quickly unclipping an entire hedge of bulky blooms, leaving only one flirty row behind. I tuck the other flowers into my tote, and shove my original clothes inside it as well, then text Brad’s driver with shaking hands.

*Can you swing around to grab my ordinary clothes?*

Then I look at myself in the mirror. Wildly curling hair springs out around my head like it's trying to escape my skull. My skin is flushed and bright enough—but I've long since chewed off my lipstick. My gaze lands on the makeup samples tucked by the mirror as my phone pings—it's David the driver.

*Be there in ten minutes.*

I blow out a long breath. I fed, watered and doggy-pit-stopped all eight dogs in less than ten minutes. I can make myself look like I'm worthy of a Hollywood love story in the same amount of time, right?

I pick up the lipstick and smile. Of course I can.

Everything is going to be perfect.

## CHAPTER 28

~ Brad ~

I CASE THE SIDE GARDEN LOUNGE FOR POSSIBLE AVENUES OF ESCAPE AS Jillian peers over my shoulder. From her vantage point she has a clear view to the main entryway of Bounce, the neo-hot venue for tonight's publicity party.

"Does it mean anything that Glenna Dare's supporters have shown up *en masse*, but that Maisie's haven't?" she asks nervously.

"Yeah, it says that Maisie's supporters are wiped out after saving a thousand dogs today, and don't feel like dressing up to act like idiots on a sidewalk."

"I don't know, I think Glenna's supporters are sweet. They want to believe that true love will prevail between two of the prettiest people in Hollywood. And if that song shows up the way I think that song will show up, it could be a goddamned fairy tale." Jillian lifts her glass to me and grins. She looks ever so slightly intoxicated, but I suppose she can be forgiven. Once I knuckled under and started scanning the feeds that sent me, I understood a bit more all the various data she's been tracking for the past week. By every possible metric, my gambit with Maisie Jones has been a success.

Meanwhile, Glenna Dare's initial hate song topped the charts, followed by a second track that was more tempered and sad, which merely drove the first one to greater heights. Then, when she announced a new track dropping tonight, the music world exploded yet again. I don't intend to help the woman out in any of this, but she should probably be paying me some back royalties.

"Yeah, except that I'm already supposed to be living a fairy tale with the wild-haired beach girl and all her sweet old dogs. You do understand that both of these stories can't exist simultaneously?"

Jillian laughs. “They don’t have to exist simultaneously forever, only for the next week or so. Think of it as a really long movie happening in real time. A summer blockbuster for the ages.”

“But we’re dealing with real people here, with real feelings and emotions and dogs. That changes things.”

“Does it, though?” Jillian presses. “You woke up one morning on the beach with a dog stealing your shoe. Everything else that’s happened these past several days stems from that one moment. A moment that could have as easily not happened. So how much do you really have to change to get things back on track? Not so much in the end.”

I eye her drink pointedly. “Since when did you get so philosophical?”

“Pretty much since you and Glenna Dare broke the internet. Do you actually dislike her?”

The question irritates me. “I don’t like or dislike her. I don’t think about her at all.”

“Oh, Brad—”

“Brad!”

Jillian’s chiding spin on my name is overtaken easily by Jeremy’s excited shout. He strides toward me through the club, a smile breaking across his face. His brown eyes are lit up with a joy I would have drawn blood to create when we were back in school together. But it’s even more fulfilling now, to see all his hard work coming together—*our* hard work.

I’ll do anything to keep that expression on his face.

“Brad, you won’t believe who’s out in the main club—actors, producers—and they all know my name. Know that we’re friends, know that the movie is charting up-up-up. Early reviews are good—especially regarding the new ending. The premiere is going to rock next week, and it’s you, my man, it’s all you.” He holds his arms wide.

“It’s not me,” I laugh, but I take his hug, and maybe hold on for a half-second longer than I need to. Jeremy is shaking. For all his flash and cheery optimism, he’s well aware of how fleeting this moment can be, and how infrequently such moments might come along. He pounds my back, and when we step apart, his eyes are a shade brighter than they’d been a moment before.

“You finally done with post-production dicking around?” I ask him. “It’s done?”

“Oh, God, no. It’s never going to be done. Five years from now, I’ll still

look at something and want to change it, but it's good. And the ending is flat out amazing. You never know who's gonna show up or how they're going to react, but the streaming services are paying attention, and we've got more overseas interest every day. The social media mentions alone are off the chain."

"As I've been trying to tell him." Jillian laughs, but her gaze never leaves the front of the house. "She is coming, isn't she? Maisie? She didn't get caught up in some dog accident?"

"I—" Instinctively, my hand goes for the phone in my pocket. Maisie would have texted if anything had come up. I know she would have texted, and my gaze sweeps the room another time as I pull out the device.

Then I see her.

Security staffers that look like they were trained by the marines man the entryway. But they now stand to the side, eagerly showing their phones to Maisie as she laughs and nods. Dogs, I think. Maybe cats and turtles too. They're showing her their pets. A second later, she steps away to scan the room with a quick, nervous sweep, her smile faltering.

In that moment, I see the space as I can only suspect she's seeing it, packed full of people in designer clothes with designer hair, drinking designer drinks, the epitome of seeing and being seen. Meanwhile, the clothier next door has done its job.

Maisie looks absolutely stunning in a simple black dress with a fringe of something fluffy at the bottom that hits her tanned legs above the knee, her hair tamed by a dark band with another fluffy something on the side—flowers, I think, to match the bottom of her dress. She takes a step forward, bobbles a bit, then with a set to her jaw I can see all the way across the room, she squares her shoulders and steps into the room, looking like a woman about to leap into battle.

The warrior in question clearly senses my focus on her because her gaze shifts to me, and I'm greeted with the wide, delighted smile that I will never tire of.

"There she is!" Jeremy says as Maisie makes her way across the room to us, Jillian huffing in frustration.

"Damn it, I really wanted to see her deal with those Dare Girls—especially given the new song. Do you think they even noticed her?"

Something about her question cuts through me, but I push away those thoughts as Maisie reaches us. I open my arms and she steps into my

embrace, accepting my squeeze and giving me a hug back before stepping away again. I don't miss how she grips my arm to ensure that she stays upright, and I glance down to her feet. Her shoes look steady enough, but I've never tried to navigate a room in heels.

"How are the dogs?" I ask before Jeremy can get a word in edgewise, and she relaxes another six or seven degrees.

"The dogs are great, and the driver that you arranged for us, Brad, he's the best. His name is David, and if he's not on your permanent staff, he should be. He helped get everybody in the house, got me here in one piece, and he was super nice the whole time."

"Well, you're easy to be nice to. You remember Jeremy?"

"Maisie Jones, I think I may need to name my first child after you," Jeremy says, pumping her hand. "I cannot thank you enough for stepping in and making my boy here show the world what a sweetheart he really is under that asshole exterior."

"I'll have you know I work very hard on that asshole exterior. I'm not giving it up anytime soon," I protest, and Maisie laughs.

"I assure you, the pleasure has been all mine. Well, mine and a certain troupe of dogs who have also gotten quite used to the limelight. Is everything going okay? With the picture and I guess the publicity and all that?"

"It's going more than okay," Jillian puts in, her focus still on the entryway to Bounce, though she briefly shifts her gaze to meet Maisie's, and her smile seems genuine enough. Then again, she's an agent, which makes her almost as good an actor as I am. "And your ratings are also trending well, right? You've gotten a lot of good publicity from all...this?"

Maisie blinks. The look of startled dismay on her face lasts only a second, but staring at her the way I am, I don't miss it. Then she smooths over her features, her smile easy and reassuring, as if Jillian is a crotchety Pomeranian who needs stroking. "It's been a fantastic experience," she agrees with impressive sincerity. "And Brad's efforts with today's adoption event literally sent it into the stratosphere. I couldn't have done that without him."

"Excellent, excellent," Jillian says, but her attention is snared again by what's going on outside. I can tell by the change in her demeanor that she's finally seeing what she's been waiting for.

"Brace yourself, everyone," she says, though the tremor in her voice belies her excitement. Jillian isn't the type to be starstruck, but she knows ratings gold when she sees it. "She's here."



CHAPTER 29

~ Maisie ~

“WHO...”

I bite off the words almost as soon as I start them, recognizing how idiotic they will sound if I let them get past my lips. *Who* is clearly Glenna Dare. I’ve seen her followers holding signs at the doorway to Bounce, and for a moment, I thought about turning around on my killer heels and wobbling off to where Brad’s driver still watched me warily through the windshield of the SUV. I think he half expects me to turn around as well. He has a lot of experience with LA celebrities, and it’s clear that I don’t.

I mean, he did try to warn me.

Still, I use that lack of experience to my advantage. The videos that these girls saw of me have my hair wild and flying in the breeze, my arms full of dogs. They don’t match up with the sleek silhouette I present tonight. Even my hair is clamped down tight, courtesy of a migraine-inducing headband that I’d pinned with black fluffy flowers behind my ears.

I’d slipped inside Bounce and then, on impulse, videoed a selfie of myself for my BarkTokkers—with the Dare Girls in the background, holding up all their glitter-decorated signs. It might give away my location, but only if someone is monitoring the feed. I have a feeling the Dare Girls have their eyes—and phones—trained on a bigger prize.

And now that prize is here.

I meet Brad’s gaze, a sudden upswelling of panic immobilizing me. “Should I go?”

“No.” The response is sharp and authoritative, but it isn’t Brad speaking. Instead, it’s Jeremy Greene, the director of Brad’s newest movie. His gaze shoots around the room as he speaks.

“She’s going to walk in, she’s going to see Brad. She may react right

away, she may not. If she thought about this at all, she'll give a little wave, maybe summon up a tremulous blush—tonight's the apology track, right?"

I blink. Apology track? I scramble to process that as Jillian nods enthusiastically. She has her phone out, scrolling through...something.

"Apology and maybe something more," Jillian says. "Supposedly she... Yep, she did stream it live from her limo on her way over here. I haven't seen it yet, have you?"

She glances at Brad as she asks the question, and my brain skitters off the tracks again. Apology track? And Brad knows about it?

"Of course I haven't seen it," he snaps, and I jolt. I've heard that tone of anger in his voice before, but not around me anytime recently. Still, the man is capable of getting seriously pissed off, an effusive volcano itching for a reason to blow, and he's heading in that direction now. I don't want to do anything to make him any angrier, and I suspect any more questions won't help.

"Okay, so she comes in. She waves, smiles, and..." I offer up instead, and Jeremy takes the ball and runs with it.

"She'll want to come over here, but she'll see you and Brad talking. She'll stop, hesitate, and then—"

"Maisie, oh my gosh, it's about time you showed up!"

I turn again, somehow managing the move on my spiky heels, my elation at the familiar voice overriding Jeremy's terse direction. "Catherine!" I exclaim, as she links her arm in mine and expertly holds me upright while steering me back into our small group. "Catherine—Brad Zander, Jeremy Greene, and—"

"Jillian MacAfee," Brad's agent offers, holding out her right hand, though her left still clutches her phone. "You work with Lucas Morrow, don't you?"

"Guilty as charged." Catherine smiles. She's the exact opposite of me—cool, blonde, controlled, and dressed in a killer soft pink dress that looks like something Jackie Onassis might have tossed on for an evening on the town. "I'm sorry that we're crashing your party, but Lucas heard the guest list and couldn't help himself. He's a huge fan."

Brad plasters on a movie-star-worthy smile. "Anything for a fan," he says, and they both smirk as if it's a private joke. It probably *is* a private joke—not between Catherine and Brad, but among all the people who live in their world on the regular.

People who aren't like me.

People who *are* like Glenna Dare. Glenna Dare, who apparently penned an apology song in her free time—an apology song and maybe something more—and who now lands on Brad’s doorstep, a billion-dollar Mary Poppins who’s practically perfect in every way.

“Can I pull Maisie away for a sec?” Catherine asks smoothly, and for the first time, I can sense the tension in her. Brad’s brows go up—more out of curiosity than concern, I think—but she’s already moving before Jeremy gives her the assent, the director’s gaze snapping back and forth as if he’s cutting the room into clipped-off scenes.

“Catherine,” I bite out as she swings us around, then casually grabs a glass of something sparkly from a passing server. She sips the concoction, then hands it over to me.

“Vodka tonic,” she says. “Take a big slug.”

I obligingly take the glass, but keep staring at her. “What are you actually doing here?”

“Exactly what I say I am.” Her serene smile never slips as she scans the room. “Lucas caught word that Brad was looking to entertain whoever wanted in on the show tonight, and some of his people are people that Lucas would like to know better—bitcoin billionaires with more money than sense. Of course Lucas can’t be bothered to come anywhere on his own, and all his usual partners were suspiciously busy on such short notice.”

I frown. “Usual partners?”

“Don’t get me started,” she says airily, her bright and easy laugh completely at odds with the tension in her body. “Lucas has gone through every respectable starlet, trust fund darling, and aspiring actress in the city. Even the gold diggers can’t put up with him, so getting that man a date has become my number one job. And tonight there was too little notice. At least you’re here, and once I realized the shitshow that is about to go down, I came over as fast as I could.”

She glances over at me, sizing up my expression. “You don’t know, do you? Of course you don’t know. You’ve been doing God’s work with those dogs all day long, and then you had to get cleaned up. You look freaking amazing, by the way. I have never seen your hair like that.”

“Forget about my hair,” I say tightly. “What shitshow?”

“The Glenna Dare apology song—no, don’t listen to it.” She waves off my instinctive grab for my phone. “It’s every bit as awful as you can imagine, but sweet too, I guess, in its way. Oh fantastic, there she is. Don’t

look over. She's—"

"Let me guess," I say drily. "She steps into the room, she waves, she smiles. She scans around the room and sees Brad."

"How are you getting all this?" Catherine asks me quietly.

"She lifts her hand, but the smile falters as..."

"You smile, too," Catherine orders. "She's looking straight at you."

I bite my lip. "I think I'm supposed to be standing next to Brad right now. But maybe—maybe that's okay?"

"There are too many people between us, anyway. She probably doesn't know that you aren't. And she *is* lifting her hand to her face."

"She's beautiful, isn't she? Like as beautiful in person as she is on the screen?"

"Well, yes—" Catherine narrows her eyes. "But so are you. Beautiful and amazing and—"

"And not Glenna Dare. I mean...if she's going to make a big scene with Brad, something sweet to go along with her apology track, I shouldn't be here, should I?"

Catherine stares at me. "Of course you should be here! Brad's here."

"Brad is here. And so are all the Hollywood people. And so is Glenna Dare—come to apologize and make things up to him. And she's the whole reason why I'm here, Catherine. When you come right down to it, she's the only reason why he's doing this."

"Well, maybe she was to start, but now—"

"Nothing's really changed." I pull away from Catherine, and turn to see Brad staring at me. He reaches out a hand, and I start forward, but the advance team for Glenna Dare jostles in front of me—a man and two women whose sole job appears to be clearing the way for their high priestess of song. I stop and Catherine freezes beside me. Brad gives me a rueful grin then turns back to confront Glenna, and my heart nearly leaps into my throat.

"He doesn't want this," Catherine says abruptly. "He doesn't want this, but he's doing what he needs to do. Because of course he is. He has to. That guy beside him, Jeremy? Do you know their story? I tracked it down."

"I know some of it," I say defensively as I watch Brad and Glenna meet. They are both so impossibly attractive, it's everything I can do not to pull out my phone and discreetly take pictures of them like more than half the room is doing. "They went to school together, right?"

"A summer program, yes. How Brad ended up in that subsidized acting

school has never been fully explained, but Brad met Jeremy and a whole bunch of other kids there. He's sort of served as their patron saint ever since, whenever he can. Despite that, not all of them made it, but Jeremy did. Or he's about to."

"With his new movie," I say faintly, as Brad and Glenna's conversation continues. Is he smiling at her now? He looks like he's smiling at her, with the warm, crinkly-eyed smile that makes you feel like you're his whole world. A smile he's given me, but not my smile alone. He's an actor, after all, and we're both playing roles. So that smile that's not my smile is just one of the many weapons he can draw on whenever he needs it.

It's a great smile.

"Yup," Catherine agrees.

I sigh. "And Jeremy reached out to make sure Brad is in that movie too, both for the star factor and...and to give Brad the same kind of open door Brad once gave him. So now everything's coming together."

I turn to her again. "I should go. That's kind of the ending this is heading toward, right? The two Hollywood stars make up, the girl with the dogs gets the consolation prize of a lot of attention and money for her cause, and everybody's happy."

"But you're not happy," Catherine says, and I realize I'm gripping her hand and she's holding on to mine with both of hers.

"I'm not happy." I shrug, my smile slipping a little. "But I'm still really lucky. And I wouldn't change anything. Not one single thing."

The sound system crackles abruptly, and I glance up. Catherine does too. The whole room follows suit, conversations dropping off, then starting up again like a hum of bees.

"Oh, God," she groans. "Tell me they're not going to play that here."

A soft, raspy melody comes over the speakers, and everyone falls silent. "Is anyone watching me?" I whisper.

Catherine shakes her head. *Of course they aren't.*

Not even Brad, I can see now. Instead, with Jillian on one side of him and Jeremy on the other, he's somehow captured a spotlight glow that links him up with the blonde, wide-eyed, lush-mouthed Glenna Dare as if they were two parts of the same whole. Brad's lean, loose carriage and surfer-boy good looks blend perfectly with Glenna's Hollywood royalty mystique and soft lips that seem constantly on the verge of breaking into song. An entire movie montage of how they met, how they split, how they stared, how they kissed,

seems to be compressed into the few short stanzas of music that completely silence the room, and everyone's holding their breath—including me.

But not, thank God, Catherine.

“No one's watching. All eyes are up front,” she murmurs, her lips twisting into a grimace as she squeezes my hands again. Because really, that's the way it should be. That's the way it has to be, right? In the end. The end where all this has always been heading. Actually, an even better ending, because Glenna can do so much more for Brad, for Jeremy, for their movie together than I can. It's a new love story resurrecting an old love story, the twist no one saw coming.

Brad and I stumbled over each other at the beach and made something bright and perfect and as fleeting as the fireworks he set off over the sand. But now those rockets are coming back to earth.

Glenna's over-produced voice warbles out over the sound system.

*Love never works out how you want it to.*

*Love never wins in the end.*

*But I'm standing here like I promised you...*

I make a face and shoot a glance at Catherine. “Really?”

She smirks, and her expression makes me want to giggle instead of cry. The bubble of my inertia pops, and I suck in a deep, cleansing breath.

“Trust me,” Catherine mutters. “It doesn't get any better.”

She's right. After a few more melodramatic lines, I give Catherine a final squeeze. I'm not the girl who's going to be left behind this time, dammit. I'm going to be the one who leaves.

I take a deep breath, then step back into the crowd, a salmon swimming upstream. The moment I lose Catherine's grounding reassurance, though, another wave of embarrassment nearly bowls me over with a sneak attack. I'm the dog shelter queen being thrown over by Hollywood glam. Not even thrown over, simply moved aside to allow the natural progression of the world. Brad has a redemption tour to keep rolling. Jeremy has a big break to nail down. And I have everything I did a week ago...and so much more.

A roof over my head that will now stop leaking. Food and care for my beautiful dogs. Money and attention to help lots of other dogs in need. Unreasonably fabulous buzz for my photography business. Notoriety. A platform. Fame.

What's a broken heart against all that—especially a broken heart I don't deserve, since I'm a grown-assed woman who knew what I was getting into

as I was getting into it? What right do I have to whine now because...just because...

My head is pounding by now, and I reach up and wrench my headband free, tossing it to the side. Still moving quickly, I yank my phone out of my clutch purse and type out a quick text to Brad's driver. The garden lounge of Bounce has its own exit, thank God, and I slip out onto the sidewalk half a block down from the Dare Girls. Nobody so much as notices me.

As Glenna Dare's newest #1 hit floats out across the LA night, I kick off the torture stilettos—then scoop them up, because they're not mine. None of this is mine—none of it was ever really mine...and still, knowing all of that, I wouldn't have given up a *second* of it. Never mind the gaping hole that's cracked open in my heart, never mind the tears that sting at the back of my eyes. Never mind that I'd begun to think maybe—just maybe—this wasn't all a crazy fairy tale, a brilliantly fake romance for the cameras. Maybe it was something more. And heck, maybe, for a few days in there...it had been.

But it's over now.

I turn up the sidewalk and start walking.



CHAPTER 30

~ *Brad* ~

I WILL PROBABLY NEVER SEE AN ACADEMY AWARD IN MY LIFETIME, BUT tonight I totally deserve that particular hunk of tin as I stand in the middle of a crowded LA nightclub, staring into the eyes of a beautiful woman as the world's most God-awful love song blasts over what feels like every speaker in the city.

If my agent and director weren't flanking me, cutting off my escape, I would already be out of here.

Instead, I'm trapped with the Hollywood It Girl who's made my life miserable at two entirely separate times with a decade break in between. And I'm not allowed to do anything about it. I mean, technically I could kill her on the spot, but there would be repercussions for that, not to mention Jeremy's movie going down in flames, what with his headlining star being arrested for murder. I could slap or insult her, but honestly, she isn't the real problem here.

I am.

"Glenna," I begin, but her eyes have gone a little glassy with the sound of her own voice pumping out around her. Her chin tilts up, and her lips part. If you weren't looking too closely, you would think she's expecting a kiss.

I know better. Glenna is mouthing the words to her own inane creation, reliving the moment when she finally understood that the love we shared was an illusion—and not an illusion that I created and then abandoned, but one that she spun out of sugar and fairy dreams, too sweet and fragile to last. I don't want to follow the song too closely. I don't want it to destroy any more brain cells than it needs to.

Still, eventually it ends, and as the final, overburdened strains die away, Glenna's eyes drift open and her soft, vulnerable smile reappears, a ray of

hopeful sunshine after a sobbing storm. Maybe she's the one who deserves the Oscar.

"Glenna..." I try again, but she shocks me by lifting up a slender hand and laying it against my cheek. I freeze like a rabbit, wondering if she's going to rake her claws against me or go straight for the jugular.

The jugular, as it turns out.

"I've loved you for the last ten years, Brad Zander," she says, her voice surprisingly loud. Then again, she's a professional singer, with an absolutely captive audience. Inside I die a little, imagining Maisie hearing all this. She has to know I didn't plan it...right?

I realize somewhat belatedly that Glenna has fallen silent, and I scramble to catch up. "I didn't intend to lead you on ten years ago. Until your song came out, I didn't even know that I'd broken your heart."

"You didn't break my heart," she says, her chin coming up sharply. "I broke my own heart over you." I see a bright gleam spark in her eyes as she says this last, and I know that I am witness to a future Glenna Dare top ten hit being born. Hopefully, one not starring me.

As if following my thoughts, she pushes on.

"I've spent the last ten years wondering how I'd ever get over you, and knowing that you didn't care. Knowing that you would rather turn away from a love that could be, rather than stay long enough to explore it. And that's on you, Brad Zander, not me. I forgive you."

I stare at her in a stunned silence that's shared by at least half the crowd, but those further away, or perhaps plants of Glenna's team, immediately whoop and break out into ecstatic applause.

For the first time in my life since I was a little boy, staring gape-jawed at my mother's flamboyant antics, I'm at a loss for words. Should I accept her forgiveness? Thank her for giving it to me? Tell her to shut up and leave? So many possibilities, but then Glenna steals the show again. She laughs joyously, flings out her arms, and hugs me. My own arms go around her automatically, and I squeeze her long enough for propriety and photos, before stepping away again.

She isn't quite done, though. She reaches out and captures my hands with hers, holding them tight.

"Good *luck*, Brad," she says, as if she's making some great declaration of reestablishing her own freedom. Then she lifts my hands to her lips, kisses them, and lets me go. Stepping back gracefully as her obliging entourage

clears the space, she looks beautiful, still-fragile, and free. I glance at Jillian and Jeremy, and am gratified to see that both of them have also been shocked into silence.

Then Glenna is surrounded by well-wishers, and I can finally turn away. I search the crowd for Maisie, but don't see her. I can't say I'm truly surprised. She's probably in the bathroom throwing up.

"Well, I think that about covers it," Jillian says, her eyes once more glued to her phone. "Somebody streamed the whole thing to TikTok, and now there's a petition shipping you both back together."

"We were never together to begin with," I point out, but she waves me off.

"I've got to keep tracking this. You go find Maisie. If she's crying, try to get it on camera."

"For God's sake, Jillian—"

"I'm joking, I'm joking," she says with such a bona fide giggle that I actually believe her. Well, I want to believe her, anyway.

I glance at Jeremy. "Did you see where she went?"

"I did not. She went off with the ice queen blonde and then there was just the blonde..." He glances around. "Now I don't know where either one of them is."

The space around us has cleared somewhat, the drama apparently driving its participants to requiring more booze, and I spy a familiar strap of material on the floor. I stride over, then lean down and scoop up Maisie's hair band. Turning it over, I realize the flowers had been hastily pinned in place, the band itself tightly knotted. She'd improvised the headpiece to control her wild curls, and a sense of foreboding slides through me.

Has she left? Did she see me standing up there next to Glenna and decided this farce was over, and that she had better things to do with her time? Did Glenna's stupid song send her over the edge—or, worse, my deer-in-the-headlights reaction to it?

I should have stopped Glenna mid-song. I should have confronted her. I shouldn't have ducked the punch...but I didn't.

And now it's decked me cold.

I glance up to see the ice queen blonde staring daggers at me. Catherine, I recall. Her name is Catherine. Her boss is nowhere to be found, but that's okay. Lucas Morrow is a bit of an asshole, and I'm the guy playing that role tonight. We don't need more than one.

“Did she leave?” I ask as soon as I draw close enough to her for some semblance of a private conversation.

“She did,” Catherine says simply, her smile brittle and false, though no one else probably would pick up on it. I’m a master of that smile, though. A master of all the fake emotions. “She hadn’t heard that Glenna had dropped a new song, but she’s not an idiot, Brad. She read the room. There are very few people here that would think that you and Maisie Jones make sense together as a couple, especially when you’ve got the serially broken-hearted Glenna Dare dancing on a string.”

“I don’t have anyone dancing on a—”

“*Brad!*”

I jolt as Glenna’s melodic voice rings out again, and a second later, she rushes into the small space that Catherine and I occupy. She looks at Catherine with confusion. “Oh! You’re not her, you’re not...” Her voice fades away uncertainly as if she has somehow forgotten the woman’s name who has become an internet sensation over the past two weeks.

“I’m not Maisie Jones, no,” Catherine supplies. “She left to give you time to speak to Brad, ah...privately.”

It’s an epic save, but it’s lost on Glenna.

“You let her go?” she asks with a gasp, swinging toward me. “You turned away her love as well? Your heart has grown so cold for so long that you can’t let anyone in, can you? Even after I forgave you. Despite all my pain, I can’t save you from yourself?”

Catherine’s expression doesn’t change, but I hear her issue a faint choking sound, and I know evasive action is necessary. I need to get rid of this woman for good with a final and public goodbye.

I hold up a hand to Glenna’s face, consciously mimicking her dramatic gesture from a few minutes ago.

“I never deserved you, Glenna, and I certainly don’t deserve Maisie Jones. Wherever she is, I hope she’s happy. And that’s all we can ever ask for in this world. So thank you and—”

“Oh, *Brad!*” Glenna Dare cries out so loudly that all of Bounce stops bouncing, and whirls around toward us. “I don’t deserve *you!*” Glenna declares. Then she flings her arms around me and bursts into tears.

I could push her away with an angry snarl. I want to push her away. She’s ridiculous and this farce is ridiculous, and in this moment—more than anything—I want to burn it all down. Everything balances on the knife’s edge

between being the asshole I want to be and being the man who stands there and accepts that sometimes, you can't get everything you want. Sometimes, actions have consequences you never expected. And sometimes, you have to take the punch that you set yourself up for.

It's fully another hour before I reach my house up in the Bird Streets, but there really is no rush. David's text came across my phone almost before I'd finished disentangling myself from the sodden mess of Glenna Dare—who has, by necessity, perfected the art of looking beautiful while dissolving into sobs. His message was brief, his question briefer.

I texted back the okay for him to take Maisie back to Malibu—because she and her entire found family were ready to go home.

While I'm back to having no home, and no real family, anywhere.



~ Maisie ~

“MAISIE! INCOMING!”

A whirling furball races by me onto the hard packed sand, the puppy’s leash zigzagging crazily behind. A second later, Ayla dashes down to the water at an angle, heading off the caramel-colored, curly-haired mini goldendoodle before her headlong flight sends her too far into the Pacific. The dog hits the cool water and yips in surprise, jumping straight up and down until Ayla scoops her up and cuddles her close, then eases her down again to explore the water.

Jupiter and Boxer sit a short distance away from the puppy, the two old sirs having bonded more in the last week as Jupe was getting to life without Brad. I’d stolen a few of Brad’s shirts on the way out of his villa to make the break a little easier for the old dog, and with Boxer’s patient companionship, he’s doing okay.

I’m not doing okay, but I’m doing my best to fake it. My best isn’t enough to convince Ayla and Catherine, of course, which is why they’re spending the day on the beach at Point Dume vs. doing work that needs doing and taking care of people who need caring for.

Instead, they’re caring for me.

I press my lips together tight, forcing myself not to cry. It’s taken me all morning to get them to relax and decide that I’m officially over Hurricane Brad, and that there’s only a little storm damage left to repair. I need to keep that up until they leave...and then I can go back and re-read the seventeen texts Brad has left me, each one I’ve carefully saved. Then I can figure out how to—finally—respond.

But what is there to say? Do I seriously want to put myself through an encore performance, when it will just put off the curtain coming down for



good?

*Don't think about that.*

By the time Ayla returns to us, Jupiter on her heels, I'm smiling brightly again—and believably enough that she grins back. She collapses onto her blanket and turns to squint at Catherine on the next blanket over as Jupiter flops down beside me. “How is it you even get reception out here? My phone died the moment I hit the sand.”

“These are the perks of working for a pair of extremely needy billionaires,” Catherine says, looking up from her laptop with a grin. “I was lucky to get the day off from them, so I've got no problem keeping up while I'm out here.”

“But how is it a day off if you are actually working?” Ayla insists. “That kind of defeats the purpose of a day off.”

“Trust me, if working means I can spend my days at the beach, making sure there are no fires to put out but otherwise soaking in sunshine and drinking California-approved beverages that are in no way a violation of any local statutes, ahem, I consider that a more than even trade.” She holds up her completely obscured beverage inside its soft rubber koozie and shakes it. “Add in the Uber that's going to take us home, and it's a win all around.”

“OK, I will agree on the Uber,” Ayla acknowledges. “And I was happy to take advantage of it. Even if I did bore the hell out of you the entire drive out being neurotic over Cheryl here.” She scrunches up her face. “Cheryl? That seems sort of not doggie enough.”

“Definitely not Cheryl,” I agree. “Though it's better than Curly, so I appreciate you branching out.” Ayla has been having a heck of a time trying to come up with a name for her new puppy. The mini goldendoodle answers with equal enthusiasm to any name that Ayla throws out to her, seeming to imprint more on her owner's voice than anything in particular she's saying. The dog is maybe a year old, already potty trained by whoever sold her to the Bonaventures, and Suncoast Veterinary Center has confirmed that she's hale and hearty and not possessing a chip yet.

They were far more suspicious about the dog being left behind than even Ayla was, openly speculating that the sweet pup had been stolen. But without anything to prove who previously owned her, there was very little that Ayla could do. The Bonaventures were out of the country, and their answering service assured Ayla they would get back to her when they returned, but there was no clear indication as to when that might be. She even contacted the

authorities to see if anyone reported a missing dog—but no dice. Still, the whole thing feels a little shady.

“How about Shady?” I suggest, my mind settling on the word.

“Hey, Shady!” Ayla calls out. The small dog yaps but pays us no further attention, and Catherine wrinkles her nose.

“Not Shady. That implies that there’s something not on the up and up with the dog, and she’s honestly the sweetest thing. You can’t call her Sweetie because that name’s already taken, in more ways than one.”

We all look down the beach to where a white-haired woman sits swaddled on a stout beach chair, two dogs lolling at her feet. Mrs. Powell is now fully back in command of Brad’s housekeeping now, looking remarkably spry despite her recent illness. When she saw how Mr. Symmes and Sweetie bonded, she asked if they could remain friends. It was all I could do not to burst into tears. Jupiter isn’t the only one missing Brad—especially since I’ve been watching him on late night talk shows ever since. At least he hasn’t tried to call me. Talking to him in person would have made all this so much harder.

No, really.

I shake myself to refocus. “Do you have a list of names that you’re working down?” I ask Ayla, resolutely pushing all thoughts of Brad to the back of my mind.

Catherine interrupts Ayla’s response with a laugh. “Only about three hundred of them, fully one hundred of which we managed to get through on the drive out here. By the end of it, the Uber driver was weighing in as well.”

“Nicest guy in the world,” Ayla confirms. “Seriously, Catherine, the offer of a car was a class move by your boss. It makes everything so much easier.”

“To clarify, it’s a kissing-ass move by my boss, and I totally deserve it. He left me hanging at Bounce last week for the entire evening, never once showing his face. I found out later that he hooked up with a woman at some bar he decided to stop at before he headed to Bounce. Clearly, he got sidetracked.”

“Oh!” I say, turning toward her. “You didn’t tell me that. Did she stick? Does he officially have a girlfriend now?”

“She did not stick.” Catherine sighs. “I wanted her to stick, I needed her to stick. I was even willing to overlook her misdemeanor rap sheet of shoplifting and petty theft if she would have stuck. But she did not.”

“You’re kidding me.” Ayla giggles.

“So not kidding. Unfortunately, in addition to being a low level and not very good thief, she’s a vegetarian.”

“And that matters...how?” I ask.

“That matters because she wanted Lucas to be one as well, and told him that she could taste the meat on him when they kissed.”

I slap my hand over my mouth, and Ayla gasps. “No,” she whispers. “Oh my God, that’s the best.”

“I wouldn’t make this up. I couldn’t even if I wanted to.” She points at Ayla. “You know what I’m talking about. You clean the homes of these people. I’m sure you ran into every bit of crazy there is to see behind the scenes in a billionaire’s mansion.”

“Oh honey.” Ayla laughs. “Between what I find cleaning, and what I hear from the staff who are there when I’m doing my job, it would make your toes curl. These people have so much money and so much time on their hands, they create drama to get through the day. Not all of them, but a lot of them. And this is the tail end of wedding season, summer’s last gasp of crazy.”

“Yeah?” I ask, letting my gaze drift down the beach to where Brad’s walkway juts out into the sand. I wonder idly how long it will take me to stop looking for him. I never saw him on the beach before I crashed his party a few weeks ago. It isn’t reasonable that I’ll see him again. But still.

“Oh, yeah. First there was the story of the bride who ditched her groom at the altar and declared her love for his widowed father. That was a hit.”

“No,” Catherine whispers. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I’m just getting started. There was the house bachelor party that ended up getting busted by the cops, only to find out that the cops knew the off-duty officers who were serving as the evening’s entertainment. Then there’s the story of the superty-duperty rich Greek parents desperate for their son to marry some woman they’ve picked out, only he keeps bringing home party girls and announcing their engagement.”

“What did they do? Those poor parents.”

“Yeah, well, they are the actual opposite of poor, because the story I heard is that they paid the last few girls to take a hike.”

“Like, paid them a lot?” Catherine asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“I think so—more than fifty grand, anyway. And wouldn’t *that* be something.”

We all sigh appreciatively. While I’m out of financial danger with the windfall that is Brad Zander-sized popularity, I don’t think I’ll rest

completely easy until my photography business settles in...though that's getting better and better every day. Catherine isn't hurting for money, but Ayla...well, she isn't cleaning houses because it's her passion.

Catherine's phone pings, and she glances at her text app, then stretches back into her low-slung chair with a fully contented smile. "How are you doing, Maisie?" she asks casually. "Did Brad reach out at all?"

"He has, a few times—no big deal," I say, leaving off the exact number of texts I've received, or the fact that they started out apologetic and then just became...resigned. Not sad, I tell myself. Resolved. Stoic.

Was that because Brad learned a long time ago to hide his emotions? Or because he was secretly glad I wasn't causing a fuss?

I didn't know...and I couldn't take knowing, if it was the latter.

I wave airily, resetting my smile. "He left town, you know. He took off almost immediately after Bounce, heading to New York to promote the movie and then I think overseas somewhere. All the Glenna stuff sort of blew up and blew over."

"You think they're dating now?" Ayla asks, as matter-of-fact as always, but Catherine snorts.

"They are definitely not dating, I can guarantee that," she says. She skewers me with a glance while I swallow down the surge of butterflies clawing up my throat. "As I told you numerous times. Glenna cried all over him that night, then cooped herself up in her recording studio. She's not dating anyone but her own voice."

"It's honestly no big deal," I say again, with enough cheer that I almost believe myself. "Seriously, this whole thing has been a miracle. My entire roof was replaced in the twenty-four hours and change that I was in the city, and he sent his housekeeper over with more money than I totally did not earn for taking care of her dog."

"Oh trust me," Ayla counters. "You earned it."

I wave that off with a hand that doesn't even shake anymore. Progress. "You know what I mean. I basically got paid to have the time of my life for two straight weeks, and to have all my dreams come true. It's not fair that I want more than he can give, and once I had a second to back away from it, I saw that."

"Well, that sounds very well adjusted of you," Ayla says in her best therapist voice. "But how do you really feel?"

"I mean..." I let out a long, gusty sigh. "He's a great actor. And we both

played our parts very well, I guess. If I let myself believe in the fantasy maybe a little too much, I can be excused, can't I?"

"You can totally be excused," Ayla says, reaching out to hold my hand tight. "You'll be okay, Maisie. There may be tough moments to come, but every day it'll get a little better, I promise."

"Thanks." I squeeze her hand back. "Now shut up before I cry."

"Excellent." Ayla grins and glances back to Catherine. "I feel complete here, don't you, Catherine?"

"Not quite," Catherine says, holding up her phone triumphantly. "Because Lucas *just* texted me—Brad is looking for you, Maisie. Something about a movie premiere tonight? He wants you to come."

"No," I say while I can still get the word out, before all my butterflies leap back into my throat and threaten to choke me dead. "No, I don't think that's a good idea. I can't go through—I can't."

"...and he says he wants you to bring the dogs. All of them."

"Oh." I blink. "Why? Is he in trouble? Did Glenna drop another song? Did he go off on someone or trash a set or..."

Catherine's grin remains firmly in place as she waves the phone at me. "He told Lucas, and I quote, 'do whatever you can to get her here, whatever it takes. And tell her I miss Jupiter—because it's true.'"

"Oh!" I manage as Jupiter looks up, his paws still wrapped around Brad's sandal. "He said that?"

"Game set and match to Mr. Zander," Ayla chortles as I stare. "And I think that means that Bella is invited, too." She lifts her chin and shouts louder. "What do you think about that, Bella?"

Down at the edge of the water, the tiny doodle yaps excitedly, dancing in the sun.

CHAPTER 32

~ *Brad* ~

THE RED CARPET IS ROLLED OUT IN FRONT OF TCL CHINESE THEATER, AND the movie's key actors and invited guests have been arriving for a good hour and change already. There's a respectable collection of fans in the fenced-off fan zone—due in no small part from the additional star power Jillian arranged from her arsenal to round out the event. Chris Hemsworth, Channing Tatum, and Jason Momoa have no business being at a premiere they aren't actually in, but they were in the city anyway, and they're good guys. Plus, they know I'll do the same for them someday if they ever need it, so it's a win-win.

But Maisie isn't here yet.

"She's not here yet," I point out to Catherine, who, of course, *is* here, complete with her sleek custom clipboard, her hair and makeup looking professional and cool in the warm LA night. She's wearing a red-carpet worthy cocktail dress—elegant but not over the top. She showed up a few minutes ago after I asked my own PA to text her, but she came alone.

Now she gives me a look that pricks my conscience, except my conscience is in no need of pricking. I need to be completely in control of my emotions, tonight as every night.

"Mmmhmm. Maybe you should have thought of that when you ghosted her all last week?"

I stare at her. "Ghosted her—my God, I must've texted sixteen times—no. Seventeen. But who's counting. I—"

I break off as Catherine suddenly beams at me, her ordinarily cool and competent expression morphing into a delighted grin. "I knew it! I knew it," she says. "Good man—and she'll be here in another twenty minutes. The movie doesn't start for another hour, Brad. There's even still room in the fan zone."

I decide not to pursue what exactly she knows. That's not the way to stay controlled for sure. Instead, I squint past the lobby doors of the theater toward the fan zone. "Really?"

"Is that bad?" Jeremy asks beside us, the words exhaled on a quick whoosh of air. He's had movie premieres before, but this is his first at the iconic theater on Hollywood Boulevard. "Should there be more people in that zone? It looks pretty crowded to me."

"It's absolutely crowded enough," Catherine assures him, consulting her clipboard where her phone rests immobile no matter how much she waves the board around. The thing must have a magnetized connection. "It always fills up to the brink at the very end, and—well, it'll fill up for sure tonight."

"Excellent, good."

"Why do you have a clipboard, anyway?" I frown, trying to peer at the notes Catherine has written down.

She angles the board away. "Because I don't have a date," she says succinctly, "and you want me here. I want me here, too, but solo arrivals can be awkward. If you show up with a clipboard, however, you don't need a date."

"*Really.*" I haven't ever thought about that as a party-busting strategy, but even Jeremy looks interested.

At that moment, the crowd gives up another smattering of applause and cheers as a new limo shows up, but isn't the limo I want to see—David's long, gray SUV with a rubber floor perfect for dogs. Instead, a tall, dark, and striking-looking man in a well-cut tux steps out of the vehicle, then puts out a hand for an impossibly proportioned woman almost wearing a blue sequined dress. The paparazzi go wild, but I don't recognize the man. "Actor?"

Catherine's gaze flicks up, taking in the duo with a shrewd eye. "She is, not him. And she's C-list, but...memorable."

"She's definitely that," Jeremy mutters, awestruck at the starlet's over-the-top outfit and squealing antics beside Mr. Tall, Dark, and vaguely Greek-looking. "*He's* probably crazy rich and bored enough to let himself get talked into an event where all the world can notice his completely unexpected girlfriend. You know the type."

I grin at the intentional jab, then pick up the far less flashy vehicle coming in next. Still not Maisie, but I smile a little more easily as this limo issues another actor from *Fallout Protocol*—a debut star who's sure to make it big if she keeps her head above water. I like her, and she stayed out of my



way on set.

That thought pokes at me as I glance around the room. The thirty odd actors and key set personnel, stylists, promotions people and hangers-on who are in the building so far all pretty did a fantastic job staying out of my way. And that contributed to their invitation here tonight, because I have a good memory of them—specifically because they left me alone. But that—that doesn't feel right anymore. I don't mind being an asshole when being an asshole makes sense, but have I maybe overdone that role a bit?

Either way, I can start being less of one.

"I'll be back in a minute," I say, and without looking up from her clipboard, Catherine responds with a supportive murmur that I suspect means nothing at all, it's just one of a million responses she has in her repertoire.

For the next few minutes—and for the first time I can remember—I work the room with intentional interest. I pose for pictures with anyone who wants them, chat with my peers and some of the older guard, and...genuinely enjoy their surprise and double takes when I laugh. It's almost natural laughter, too. I feel it...even if I'm not used to showing it. Something else I picked up from Maisie, I realize, and something I miss more than I thought I would in this past week. Her easy laughter, ready smiles, her constant, albeit unconscious scan of her pack to make sure everyone is okay. Her intense ability to stay in the moment.

A round of cheers goes up outside, but again the limo isn't the stretch SUV I'm waiting for, so I turn back to pressing hands and smiling, my mind straying back to Maisie.

It didn't take me long to weaken enough to scan her feeds—image after image from the LA County Animal Shelter event, more from the beach—and even more celebrating the pet pictures her fans have sent her, featuring not just dogs but cats, lizards, hamsters, rats, birds...even a few barnyard animals. She responded to each one with such infectious joy that I became trapped in an endless feel-good scroll, binging on her feed.

But those weren't the only pictures she's posted. More and more as the days went on, in response to the requests from her fans and after assuring everyone that she had permission, she shared photos of owners with their old or sick pets, mostly at the beach, but some from a lush-looking area that I picked up as the metro parks district in Cleveland. She wasn't in any of those photos, yet her presence was everywhere, in the smiles of the pet parents, the unabashed joy of the animals, and in the clear and undeniable connection that

existed between the pets—mostly dogs—and their owners. Each picture could bring tears to the eye, and the combination, night after night, has nearly undone me.

I don't deserve Maisie Jones, but I want her—desperately. I want to be near her while she shines bright enough to light up the whole world.

“Brad.” Jeremy comes hustling up, his face all smiles. “You’re not going to believe this. She’s here.”

“Maisie?”

For a moment, Jeremy looks stricken, then he recovers. “No—no, man, not Maisie. Glenna Dare. I didn’t know you put her on the guest list, but the fans are going absolutely nuts.”

“I didn’t put her on the guest list,” I say gruffly, and I glance up to see that Jillian is now conspicuously absent from the lobby. I sigh. “But it’s a free country, man, and she’s done arguably done more promo work for this movie than anybody we’ve actually paid.”

“You know, you’re probably right.” Jeremy laughs. “And for what it’s worth, she doesn’t look like she’s unhinged, so maybe there won’t be the waterworks again tonight?”

“One can only dream.” I grimace. “You think I should meet her out front? Keep everyone from guessing what’ll happen inside?”

Jeremy’s eyes light up. “I think that would be some class-A direction for this little drama. Tonight’s the last night before the movie lives or dies on its own—might as well milk this plotline for all it’s got, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I grin at him, and for a second, it’s as if we’re back in school, two teenagers who knew their own worlds inside and out, but who had not one clue about the business of acting and the magic of filmmaking. We stared at each other like we were seeing aliens from another planet—then realized that’s exactly what we were, and nothing could be better. It was the first time none of my own shit mattered to someone close to me, and I didn’t have one problem with any of his baggage either. “All right, I’m ready to go on your —”

At that moment, the crowd outside seems to spontaneously combust, with a second roar that almost outstrips their full-throated hysteria over Glenna Dare’s arrival. I turn along with everyone else in the forecourt to see the long, sleek SUV pull up, a cacophony of barking dogs sounding from the rolled down windows. My heart surges half out of my chest, and I suddenly can’t breathe.

“Maisie,” I gasp, as Jeremy pounds me on the back.

“Maisie,” he agrees.

The driver parks and bolts out of the driver’s seat to come around to the side doors. Then they spring open, letting out an absolute pack of dogs and not one but two beautiful women. The first is a tall, willowy brunette with long dark hair, olive-toned skin and a gorgeous deep crimson dress that accentuates her height—but her real attraction lies in the exhausted puppy cradled in her arms. The starlet closest to them—the one with all the sequins—makes as if to pet the small pooch, but the woman takes one look at her and her billionaire escort and swings quickly around, back toward the limo. I snort. Clearly, the woman has excellent survival instincts.

By then, Maisie has exited the vehicle, however—and as I take in the sight of her, my heart feels like it expands to three times its normal size.

She’s here...and I’m home again.

CHAPTER 33

~ Maisie ~

“Do I LOOK OKAY? I LOOK OKAY. YOU WOULD TELL ME IF I DIDN’T LOOK okay?”

We’re driving through the city toward the TCL Chinese Theatre, and I smile brittlely at Ayla, clenching my teeth together so hard that I think they might crack as she gives me a reassuring thumbs up with the hand that isn’t securing Betty Boop to her lap. “Maisie, you look absolutely beautiful. And I know I look better than I ever have in my *life*.”

Her derisive tone makes me laugh. “Well, you’re right there. You’re stunning.”

She snorts. “We’re both remarkable. But how Catherine managed to get these freaking dresses into her apartment before we showed up—and the stylists, and the shoe person...” she trails off, shaking her head as she glances out the door. I notice that her dexterous fingers never once stopped stroking her new dog, and the sight does more to settle me than the layers of blush, lipstick, and mascara on my face—or the beautiful, sea-green formal gown Catherine’s miracle stylist has dressed me in. The fabric is definitely not something I’d typically get anywhere near the dogs, but they were keeping a safe distance from it, though they each now sported matching green collars—and Bugsy a *very* swanky bowtie.

“Do you think...?” I also let my words die before I can finish them, but at least Ayla’s there to back me up. Though what she has to say isn’t what I expect.

“You know what? I actually don’t know what to think. And believe me, I fully intend to one day make it my business to tell people what things mean in their life, the messages they’re supposed to get from what people do and what people say so that they can make the best decisions, regardless of

what's going on around them. But in this case, I don't know. Catherine said all that Brad told Lucas was that he wants you to be there, whatever it takes. For love, for money, for Poocheroo dog food, if it got you to the TCL Chinese theater tonight, he was ready to shell it out. I assume you noticed the first word in that set."

I laugh, the sound coming across as only slightly hysterical to my own ears. "Yeah, I picked up on that. Was he joking? He has to be joking, right? Everything I've read..."

"Everything you've read has been carefully curated social media content. So, I don't know, queen of carefully curated social media content, you tell me. Do you believe everything that you read on social media? Can you even believe comments that are directly attributed to him?"

I sigh. We already went over this half a dozen times, snatches of conversation in between Catherine's furious flurry of activity that lasted almost the entire car ride from Malibu to the city. David, the SUV driver, showed up at my house by the time we shepherded the dogs up the hill. Brad had apparently counted on Catherine carrying the day. The Uber driver that her boss Lucas commissioned for her and Ayla's trip out to the beach was redirected to gather supplies and follow us, and she called in what seemed like approximately 467 favors to get suitable clothing assembled at her condo for a gala event.

This is nothing compared to the parties I've already been dressed for, and I start to feel almost sorry for the models I met the week before. So many people pushing and poking, tightening and powdering, clucking and whispering around us—an entire machine dedicated to a few short minutes in front of the cameras. It's glorious fun...but isn't something I could do every day. Brad knows that—knows that I don't fit in his world, with his people.

Glenna Dare is one of those people, though. After a week of determinedly avoiding any mention of the woman on social media, trying my hardest to put her out of my mind, I spent the drive into the city poring over social media feeds, desperately trying to understand what, if anything, actually existed between her and Brad. The accounts are all wildly divergent, with pro Maisie bloggers insisting that he will come back to me, Glenna Dare advocates squealing about trips to bridal salons, and quite legitimately everything in between. It's impossible to know what's true and what is farce without seeing Brad in person. But I've steeled myself against that ever happening again. Until tonight, when it's so about to happen.

I look over at Jupiter, who sits up, his tail wagging, a goofy doggy grin on his face. While he no longer holds Brad's shoe between his teeth, the sandal is carefully tucked between his two paws. It's as if he knows he's going to see the owner of that shoe, and that makes everything in the world better.

I press my lips together.

"Oh no you don't," Ayla commands. "Absolutely no tears. That makeup is colorfast but not leakproof because otherwise you'll be wearing it for the next week. But the tradeoff for that is that you *cannot* start crying or you will look like a raccoon for all your adoring fans. So suck it up, buttercup."

"Noted." I hiccup a half-sob, half-laugh, but manage to stave off the tears. "Is this your version of tough love? Because it still feels pretty great. You're going to make an amazing therapist someday."

We share a smile as David's voice comes over the speaker. "We're coming up on the theater now. There's quite a crowd, but they expect that and there's a queue line for limos. Maisie, I should tell you, I've seen the limo two cars up before. I think we've got Glenna Dare here."

My eyes fly wide, and I turn to the window, but I can't see anything but throngs of ordinary people—well, as ordinary as people get in LA—on the sidewalk. A woman with a snake wrapped around her body undulates on the pavement, a guy with spiked hair and long green fingernails waves his hands in the air, and a large, impossibly beautiful man stands watching from the corner, his eyes glowing a soft purple. We pass all these in what feels like slow motion, as Ayla reaches out and squeezes my hand.

"She's a person, Maisie," she reminds me.

"She's a megawatt superstar."

"Who's still a person. She's got a lot of talent doing what she does, but so do you. And you can bet she's got issues that she works hard to make sure nobody knows. Everybody does."

"But what is she *doing* here?" I moan. "Do you think Brad invited her?"

Even as I ask the question, I reject it. I didn't misread Brad and his reaction to the Glenna Dare antics at his party. Whether or not he decides to trade one farce for another, he isn't in love with Glenna. He's so careful not to fall in love with anyone, and he isn't going to change those rules for her.

"Here we go," David announces, and the car slows down. "Let me come around and open the doors, Miss Ayla. You should step out first with your sweet—Betty, is it?"

"Buttercup, I think," Ayla corrects, hugging the pup close. "For now."

“Buttercup,” David agrees. “Then, Miss Maisie, let the two big dogs out first. I’ll hand out the little ones, and then you make your exit. I hope you have better shoes this time?”

I grin down at my sturdy Mary Jane heels. “That I do.”

“Then here we go.”

David slows the limo to a complete stop, and a cheer goes up that seems far louder than the number of people should warrant. Then the doors pop open, Ayla gracefully exits the vehicle, and the dogs burst forth. I step out a moment later to see a wide-eyed Ayla swinging back toward me, looking as if she’s seen a ghost. But there’s no time. David presses leashes into my hands, and the dogs start forward—for once, Jupiter straining at the fore. That can only mean one thing...

I look up to see Brad at the far end of the red carpet, his smile broad, his expression lit up as he starts for me. Then another person turns in my peripheral vision, halfway between me and Brad. It only takes a second for me to register who she is: the petite blonde dynamo, Glenna Dare.

Despite my long years of wrangling dogs, there’s no slowing down my crew. They drag me forward, and in order to not look like I’m being hauled along, I lengthen my stride, appearing to all the world like I’m eagerly approaching my doom. The fans call out my name, Brad’s, and Glenna’s, and the three of us arrive in the middle of the red carpet in front of the Chinese theater at the same time.

“You left before I could meet you the other night,” Glenna announces loudly, but I’m beginning to understand that projecting her voice is simply something she does. “I want to show you—Frank?”

I blink and shoot a startled look at Brad as Glenna turns and flaps her hands at one of her entourage. Brad stares back, seeming equally surprised. By now Ayla has sidled up behind us, and expertly takes one set of leashes from me, so when Glenna turns around with a tiny hairless Chinese crested dog in her arms, I have a hand free to raise to my mouth in legitimate surprise.

“This is *Buttercup!*” Glenna announces, and I barely hold back a giggle as Ayla groans beside me. “She’s a huge fan.”

“I—she’s beautiful,” I manage, as Glenna beams, but I don’t miss the way she angles perhaps unconsciously toward Brad, the two of them looking like the classic Hollywood couple.

Brad apparently notices it too, because he smiles down at the little dog



and then drops his hand to Jupiter, who's extended his leash long enough to press firmly up against Brad's tuxedoed leg.

"It looks like the gang's all here," he announces, turning around so we all three are in full view of the paparazzi. "Which is good, because there's something I really need to say."

He turns and smiles at me, and I've never seen anything like the look in his eyes.

"I love you, Maisie Jones."

CHAPTER 34

~ *Brad* ~

I ONLY VAGUELY NOTICE THE BORED ENTERTAINMENT REPORTERS SNAP TO attention, the photographers pressing in. All I care about is Maisie staring at me, her beautiful curly hair tugging in the wind, already threatening to burst free of its bonds, and the gorgeous blue-green gown that makes her eyes sparkle. But everything sparkles about Maisie, it always does. It's time she knows that.

“I know you never planned on running into me a couple of weeks ago. You only wanted to take care of your dogs, the way I quickly learned you take care of everything—your clients, your friends, anyone who needs you. You barreled into my life like a force of nature, and then you were gone again, just that fast. And then, when you somehow found me the next morning in the sunshine...It's like I got a second chance that I still almost managed to fuck up.”

There's a rumble of nervous laughter, but I hear it only distantly.

“After that day, I've been grateful for every moment I've gotten to talk to you, walk with you, share your space—and see the world through your eyes. You bring your sunshine to everyone you meet. You see the best in them and find ways for everyone else to see it too. Even me. Especially me. This past week—without you—made me realize how much I would be missing out in a life without you. I don't want to miss out anymore, Maisie. I don't want to miss out on another day of loving you.”

Maisie's eyes have grown huge, and they shine mirror bright with tears that she somehow manages not to cry. I don't know if I'll be so lucky. After so many years of not shedding a tear in the face of my mother's guilt trips and my father's rage, crying has never come easy to me. It's one of the few emotional reactions I can't summon up on demand no matter how hard I try.

But now I feel the tears scraping at the back of my eyes, clogging my throat. It's overwhelming, overpowering, and as I stare at Maisie, I feel myself start to shake a little, my heart once again feeling too big for my chest, my hands starting to tremble.

"Oh, Brad..." Maisie whispers, and that nearly pushes me over the edge.

I want to lose myself in her gaze, in the soft, trembling uncertainty of her lips, the blush in her cheeks, the slight tremor of her arms as she clutches the dogs' leashes in two hands. The dogs, for their part, are standing still and at attention—not barking, not even wriggling, their heads swinging back and forth between Maisie and me as if they can see the emotion passing between us and don't want to interrupt.

Glenna, of course, has no such barriers to communication.

"Wait, you mean you two really did meet for the very first time, like, two weeks ago?" she demands, her strident voice carrying over the renewed hush in the crowd. "When her dog stole your shoe? So it truly *was* love at first sight?"

"Well, Jupiter loved me, I'm pretty sure." I laugh a little, but it comes out sounding more like a strangled sob. I glance down to see Jupiter staring up at me once again, his big brown eyes accepting every dumb thing I ever did, everything I'll ever do, and loving me all the same. I reach down and run my hand over his broad forehead, taking in the bony ridge of his brow, his muzzle that has only seemed to grow whiter in the few days I've known him. "I don't know what you see in me, buddy. I'm not a great guy."

Another murmur of laughter ripples through those fans closest to us, and Glenna swings back to Maisie.

"And you?" she asks shrilly, while her fluffy-headed, hairless-bodied dog stares out at Maisie with equal accusation. "Did you love him at first sight? You did, right? You had to know who he was."

"I..." Maisie blinks, clearly at a loss, and a new emotion chases across her face, one I don't like. Worry, concern, doubt. Her smile falters as she stares back at Glenna, her hands still gripping the dogs' leashes. She's been handed a script that's missing a few pages, and she isn't sure how to react.

I understand what that feels like, but for once, I can't step in to cover her part. I'm hanging on her response every bit as much as Glenna is.

"Brad—" she manages, swinging back to me, and I jolt a little as Jupiter nudges my hand, giving me the comfort and support I didn't realize I needed—support I sure as hell don't deserve.

“It’s okay, Maisie. You can say it.” Because she’s earned the out. She’s earned whatever she wants to happen at this point, whether it’s being with me or not, to share her story or not. I know that story from my own perspective, but this isn’t my world anymore. It’s a world that she shares, and that makes it a rare and different place, with rules I don’t know but am willing to learn. If only she will give me the chance.

“It wasn’t love at first sight,” she finally says, and I feel the collective gasp of the crowd all the way through my heart, vaguely aware of Jupiter shifting beside me to press more firmly against my legs. At that moment, he’s pretty much all that’s keeping me upright. “The first time I ever saw you, Brad, you were thirty feet high on a movie screen. You weren’t even a real person, just someone I could sigh over and wonder about, and read about online. And then you were that guy down the beach who gave amazing parties with all these people who I’d never seen before and knew I’d never see again. I don’t think I ever saw you in person, though, not once—and I looked.” She smiles then, her mouth wobbling a little. “I always looked.”

I stare at her, not knowing where this story is going, and both desperate for it to finish but not wanting it to end.

“And then I crashed your party one night and your nap the next morning, and you weren’t that guy up on the screen anymore. You were funny and real, full of sharp edges and harsh words, sometimes, but with a smile that made everything around you brighter. And you let Rose lick your ankle and Jupiter steal your shoe and then...you came back. Even when there were no cameras following you around—especially then. You came back. You didn’t have to—I knew you didn’t. But you tried to take care of me when you didn’t think I’d remember to take care of myself. You watched how I responded to everything and you cared about my day and what I was feeling and my life, and—you came back.” She breaks off, laughing a little shakily, and I see a few tears have now slipped down her cheeks, sparkling on her lashes. “That’s when I fell in love with you. And I don’t know if I’ll ever fall out.”

“Then don’t!” Glenna insists, her words practically a gasp. I shoot a startled look at her to see her staring at Maisie with wide eyes that are also full of tears, her dog now clutched to her chest for what looks like genuine comfort. “Don’t ever fall out!”

“I won’t,” Maisie blurts, her natural desire to please, to give comfort, to make everything okay, seeming to take over before she can stop herself. Then she turns to me, her nervous energy carrying her along. “I won’t.”

“No takebacks?” I ask, stepping forward as someone pulls the leashes out of her hands and she stands there, untethered, with no one needing her in that hot second and all the choices before her only hers to make. She reaches for me and I step into her arms, the two of us pulling each other tight as the world erupts around us in flashing lights, cheers, an impromptu Glenna Dare original, and howling, barking dogs.

“No takebacks,” she whispers beneath it all. “I love you, Brad. I didn’t mean to, I didn’t plan to—I know that wasn’t the point of this. But I love you. I’m afraid I’m always going to love you.”

“Good.” I lean back to stare into her beautiful, tear-stained face. A moment later, Jillian is at my side, handing me a tissue for Maisie to wipe her mascara clear and staring at her phone.

“Brad, you’re not—”

“Not now, Jillian,” I laugh as I turn and usher Maisie toward the front doors. The theater isn’t a dog friendly environment, but they agreed to allow the guys inside for long enough to get them off the street, and then we arranged for them to be picked up and whisked back to my place, safe and sound.

“I’m just saying...”

“Oh, Brad.” Maisie stops and waves madly at the fan zone, looking dazed as everyone claps and cheers. “I totally didn’t expect, well...any of this. It’s okay, right? You’re okay?”

“I’m okay.” I shake my head and drift a kiss over her hair. Then I gently turn her back forward and get her through the doors. Only a wild-haired beach sprite with a job of caring for a found family of hard-luck shelter dogs would be worrying about me at a time like this, but that’s who Maisie is. That’s who she always will be. “I’ll never be more okay.”

“Well, I’m very glad to hear it,” Jillian says, her voice cracking out in the sudden quiet of the TCL Chinese Theater front lobby. She swivels her phone toward us. “Because you two—and Glenna Dare—have once again broken the internet.”

CHAPTER 35

~ Maisie ~

I FLOP DOWN ON THE ENORMOUS BEACH BLANKET, STAKED TO THE MOONLIT sand to make sure it doesn't fly away in the stiff Pacific breeze. Four supremely happy dogs relax around me, grateful that the worst of the fireworks have died away, but keeping a wary eye on the sky. Dorothy, Blanche and Rose have twirled themselves into fluffy knots at the corner of the blanket. Boxer sits upright, his watchful gaze on Jazz, who stands at the shoreline, howling her opinion at the ocean. Buggy lies beside Boxer, still wearing his favorite bow tie. Mr. Symmes and Sweetie are conspicuously absent, but only because Mrs. Powell has already headed up to the house, and they didn't want to let her go without them—or let each other out of their sight. Despite the fact that both dogs are full-on senior citizens, I never saw a stronger case for puppy love.

“Mind if I crash your party?”

Boxer woofs in welcome as Brad and Jupiter stroll up, Jupiter's tongue lolling out of his mouth as he pants with exertion after their brief jog down the beach. He got an enthusiastic thumbs up from the vet earlier today, and when we caught word of the secret fireworks plans for the party a few doors down from Brad, we decided tonight calls for a beach party of our own. Dogs most definitely allowed.

“We've been faithfully waiting for you,” I inform Brad as he sinks down on the blanket. “Well, everyone but Jazz. She waits for no man. Or dog.”

“She's gonna be surprised when mermaids show on the beach one night and start howling back at her.”

I laugh as he settles back on his elbows, and he shakes his head as he notices the phone still gleaming beside me. “You know, you're allowed to turn that off on occasion. The world will go on tokking without you for one



night.”

“It totally will, but why would I want it to? It’s been nearly a month since your movie came out, and we’re still getting new followers, my photography work is going great, and I was contacted by, like, four other brands to mention their products online. Every single one of them is donating to a pet charity of their choice, and it’s only growing. It’s the miracle that Brad built.”

“Not me.” He rolls to one side and rests his head in his hand. Though he’s talked about picking up a new manuscript, starting a new project, he hasn’t yet. He came back to Point Dume and helped oversee the renovations of my grandmother’s bungalow. He says it’s to make it more livable for me, but these last couple of days, I started thinking that maybe we could do something else with it. “So you know, I’ve been thinking,” he begins, and I shoot him a wide grin.

“About the house,” I finish for him. “The Grands’ house. As much as I love it, it really is too small for eight dogs, and it’s such a great location. I really and truly want it for a studio, a photography studio, but the light isn’t that good with it tucked away in the vegetation the way it is, and I hate to dismantle it for that reason.”

“I’ve got lots of room at my place,” he puts in. I choke a little on my laugh. He’s already made this offer, a dozen times over, and I bite my lip, looking over at him as I quickly nod.

“Your house has amazing light,” I sigh. “Perched up on the cliff the way it is, all those windows, and the view of the ocean from the outside decks off the top floors...”

“And what will you do with your Grands’ place?”

His voice is teasing, and I blush, though he can’t tell in the moonlight. Still, I love this idea so much... “Well...I was thinking it might make an amazing place to rent out to dog lovers or to even use as a prize to benefit top contributors to the charity—or maybe to give to people who want to book, like, an extended photography session, or to reward—oh, my gosh, Brad, we could use it to reward people who work at the dog shelters in LA!”

I bring my hands together in sheer excitement, and he grins up at me, then pats the blanket for Jupiter to come over and join him. The golden does, and I smile to see Brad move easily to his knees to give Jupiter a robust scratch beneath his collar. The collar is almost a non-event anymore when Brad is around. The dog would probably follow him through a squirrel sanctuary without ever breaking stride.

“That sounds like—”

“It won’t even take that much work,” I assure him, coming up to my knees as well and staring out at the ocean, letting the plans take shape in my head. “The roof is already amazing, and we’ll replace the flooring, fix the windows.”

“Update the appliances, make sure the electricity is up to code, which I am almost certain it is not,” Brad puts in. “Repour the back concrete patio or maybe put in something a little easier to keep clean, tidy up the landscape, and fix the rickety railing on the beach path.”

I frown and keep my gaze fixed on the ocean, but he’s probably right. “You know, I never really noticed any of that. It’s been like that for so long, it’s part of the charm of the place. But I guess if we’re going to invite strangers and their dogs in, we need to make sure they’re okay.”

He laughs. “Don’t sound so forlorn. I’m not sure if you noticed, but you’re a bona fide businesswoman now—with one heck of an investor, if I do say so myself. You’ve got resources and the dreams to put those resources to work, and I can’t imagine being any place other than right here with you.”

“Oh, Brad...” I turn toward him, then my brows go up. “What do you have there? Did you sneak some of their treats out here? You’re gonna start a riot.”

He’s still on his knees by Jupiter, but Dorothy, Blanche and Rose are now cuddled up on one side of him, Bugsy sits at attention, and Boxer has corralled Jazz. The two of them are now trotting up from the water, apparently alert to the sudden urgency of the pack. Jupiter looks up at Brad, his gaze rapt with adoration, and Brad holds out his hands to me, folded over something small and bulky. “You better take this then.”

I reach for it, but my hands falter when he presses a small, square, velvet-covered box into my hands. My gaze shoots to his, but his image slides and blurs a bit as he keeps talking.

“Since the first night you raced into my world with your dogs and your love and your sunshine, Maisie, you completely changed my life. You gave me family, you gave me home. You made my whole world a better place to be—and I can’t wait to see what’s next for us. Will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

“Brad,” I gasp, fumbling the box open. “Oh...um...wow.”

There, nestled in a bed of white silk, rests a large square-cut diamond flanked by two sapphires the color of the sea, banded in soft pale gold. It’s

the most beautiful ring I've ever seen, and I stare down at it for a long moment, then up at him, utterly frozen. "Really?" I finally manage. "I mean...for real?"

"For real, Maisie..." he whispers, and I choke a little sob as his eyes shimmer, a few tears making their way down his face. "For me, it's always been real. You were always real. And if you don't say—"

"Yes," I burst out, half-laughing, half-crying. "Oh, God, Brad. Yes. Always and ever, yes."


He pulls me into his arms and we both kneel there, crying for no good reason and every good reason. Beside us in the moonlight, Jupiter barks in encouragement, Boxer woofs his approval, and Buggy twirls. Jazz, still at the corner of the blanket and ready to make another break for it, stays long enough to offer a cooing howl.

"No takebacks?" Brad insists, and I hug him even tighter.

"No takebacks," I agree.

And somewhere high above on the cliff, tucked in with his own lady love, I can almost hear Mr. Symmes join Sweetie in a yodel of pure, unbridled doggy joy.

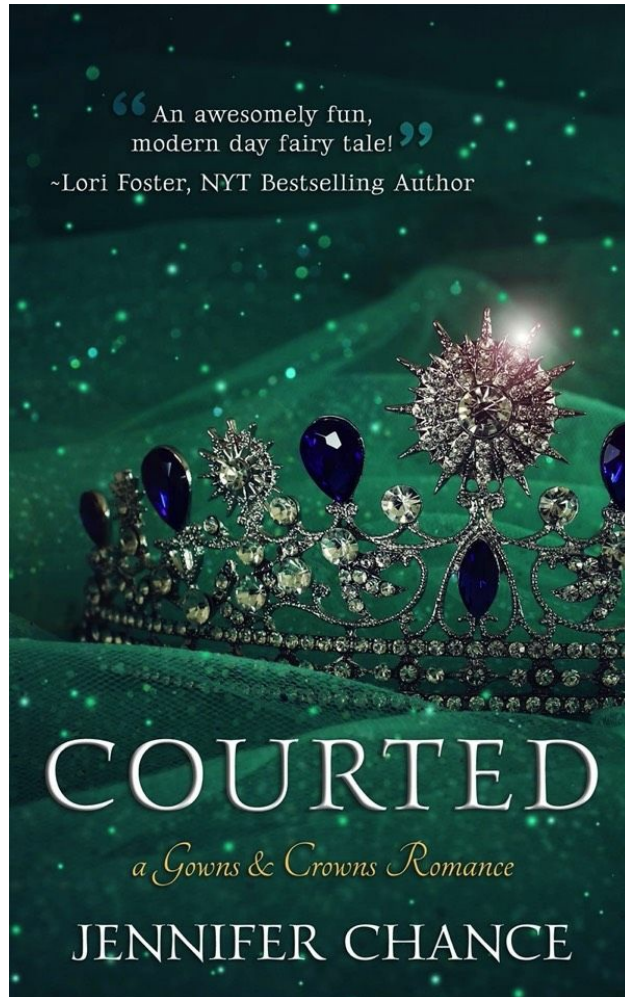
*~End~*

THANK YOU for reading MY BILLIONAIRE FAKE BOYFRIEND. Without readers like you, this story would never have been told. Turn the page for a brief excerpt of the next Must Love Dogs adventure!  If reviews are a thing you do, I would be very grateful for your review on Amazon, BookBub, and Goodreads—or anywhere on social media would like to share it! And if you haven't already, and would like to sign up for my newsletter to keep up to date on the release of my next book, you can [here!](#) You can also find me online at [www.authorjenniferstjames.com](http://www.authorjenniferstjames.com) and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/authorjenniferstjames!](http://www.facebook.com/authorjenniferstjames!)

\* \* \*

Interested in another swoony contemporary romance? [COURTED](#), written under my pen name Jennifer Chance, launches a modern royals romance

filled with heat, humor, and royal adventure—and a fairy tale love affair you won't want to miss. Now in [Kindle Unlimited!](#)



Download [COURTED](#) now!

\* \* \*

Then, turn the page for a sneak peek of [MY BILLIONAIRE FAKE EX](#), coming soon!

*My Billionaire Fake Ex*

~DIMITRI~

The persistent chime of my security alert is the only thing that could possibly cut through the jackhammer pounding against my skull. I pry one eye open and scan the room over Shar's soft, well-toned shoulder, barely visible among the mound of pillows. Galadriel lays tumbled on the other side of her, the expansive bed of the Ritz more than enough to handle both of LA's finest debutante philanthropists. They don't move. They won't for a while.

I smirk as I uncoil from my own pile of pillows and swipe my phone off the nightstand, punching keys as I stagger into the bathroom. It's barely six fucking a.m., the sun only now rising, and there is really only one set of chimes that could yank me out of bed this goddamned early in the morning.

The one that indicates my parents are breaching my house.

"*Gamóto*," I mutter as I pull a robe free of a hook and lash it around me, snagging a water bottle as I head out to my suite's private balcony. I want my full computer set up, all screens live, but my state-of-the-art security system does its job even on my phone screen. The foyer cameras catch my mother in full hysterical outcry as she enters the house with my father, Magdala's hands already flapping, my father staring around balefully at the wreckage.

I survey it as well, with much more satisfaction. Last night's party was epic—making the most of my Bel Air mansion and its pools, its party rooms, its endless supply of booze and food. The guests hadn't constrained their consumption to the dining areas, and why should they? Life is meant to be lived.

My parents are arguing now, and I sit back in my lounge chair, taking a long swig of my water. Good, they should be angry. That will teach them not to interfere with my...

I freeze as a new creature enters the frame. A small, furry, caramel

colored...dog? The dog skids to a stop in front of my parents, clearly frightened, then tears back off to wherever it came from. Who the *hell* has left a dog in my house?

My parents look at each other, their eyes radiating dismay as they then shoot their gazes upward. I know what they're thinking. I've only lived with them my entire childhood. I *hate* dogs—all pets, really, but especially dogs. I refuse ever to have one. And now there is a dog in my house.

To my parents, that can mean only one thing.

They take off for my private rooms.

“*Gamóto!*” I curse again and scroll through the camera feeds, some of them capturing my parents racing through the house, some of them catching the tiny ball of fuzz on legs. I reach my bedroom suite first, only to see that not only is it as appropriately wrecked as it should be after a party...it's also occupied.

A woman in a tight black tank top and black yoga pants kneels on my bed, wrestling my enormous decorative pillows into position. I can't see her face, but her long, tawny brown hair is swept back into a messy ponytail, earbuds sprout from her ears, and her ass...

Well, her ass is exceptional.

My parents burst into the room a second later. With a grin, I click on the sound.

“What are you doing here!” My mother shrieks, and the woman whirls so quickly, she lands square on that exceptionally fine ass in the middle of my creamy satin sheets. She isn't wearing socks or shoes—which only makes sense, since she's in my bed. But why is she there? She looks vaguely familiar, but she wasn't at the party the night before. I would have remembered that. Hell, if she'd been at the party, I might have stayed.

Then I see the hamper at the side of the room, and it clicks. This woman is my housekeeper. I vaguely remember a photo with the bio that approximates the gorgeous creature kneeling upright amid not nearly enough pillows on my sheets. But...she brought her dog? To my house?

Don't dogs shed? Especially a dog like the one currently hiding under the bed, its springy caramel-colored hair probably spontaneously molting in the middle of all the chaos. I suspect the poor dog has never experienced histrionics like Magdala Galanis in full, hand-waving outcry.

I hold up the water bottle to my forehead as my mother's accusatory wails fill the air.

“You! Who are you? You are this—this Galadriel Sensa? No. No, she is blonde. Someone *else*?”

I gape as the woman’s eyes flare wide. Galadriel Sensa is currently tangled up with her best friend Shar twenty feet away from me—the two of them deeply in love and needing me last night only as a handy colleague with a suite at the Ritz, not a lover. How do my parents know anything about Galadriel?

The housekeeper seems equally confused. “What? No. I’m Ayla. Ayla Duran. I’m the—”

“I cannot hear it. I will not hear it!” My mother bursts into tears as my father glowers from the doorway. Ayla stares in slack-jawed confusion, clearly searching for the right thing to say. Then my mother reaches her hands up in exhortation of the heavens and my father bolts forward. I’ve seen my mother do that before. It’s time for evasive action.

“Magdala—Magdala! Enough,” my father commands. “We are here, you are here, and this young woman should not be here.”

He turns his steely eyes on her, but Ayla is shaking her head, still clutching a pillow. The dog wisely remains beneath the bed. “What? No! No, I’m supposed to be here. It’s my—”

“She has a doggggg.” My mother keens, and if anything, Ayla looks more panicked.

“I’m so sorry!” she blurts, dropping the pillow and doing a credible job of slipping and sliding out of the sea of satin to reach the plush carpet. She looks around wildly for the puppy, but the dog isn’t an idiot. It’s nowhere to be seen. “I just adopted her, and she’s still quite young—I couldn’t leave her. She’s very well-behaved. She won’t hurt anything.”

“Dimitri *hates* dogs,” my mother wails, as if that explains everything, and clearly the housekeeper knows who signs her checks because now her hands come up as well.

“I’ll never bring her again! I’ll kennel her, I promise. But she’s really sweet and her name is...Daphne. Well, I think it’s Daphne, It’s kind of—”

“Gregor—stop her. Stop all of this. Dimitri cannot marry this woman!”

I freeze. The woman freezes. My father, looking like nothing so much as a man who wants the chaos to disappear into thin air, pulls out a slim leather folio from his jacket.

My eyes narrow.

*Son of a...*



“Ayla Duran,” my father says officiously in his thick Greek accent. “You will leave our son to his life, yes? You will not marry him. You will not date him. You understand?”

“But I...” Ayla inhales in a deep breath. “I’m *not* dating him. I wouldn’t. I’m certainly not going to marry him. I would *never*—”

I scowl as my father cuts her off. “We are in agreement, then. Good,” he decides, but my eyes stay pinned on the housekeeper.

What does she mean, she’d never date me? I’m Dimitri fucking Galanis, billionaire financier and LA’s fucking philanthropist of the year. I have women falling all over themselves to be seen within five *feet* of me. And this woman, this housekeeper, won’t date me? Wouldn’t even consider it?

My father gives her what is obviously a check, and the woman nearly blanches with shock. But she doesn’t give it back. So, what, she will accept money from my *parents* in return for not dating me, but she won’t give me a chance?

“I don’t—Seriously, I’m not...” she sucks in another deep breath, finally lifting up the check with shaking fingers, but my father turns on his heel. Meanwhile, my mother flaps her hands at the housekeeper with such vigor Ayla steps back, and the little furball chooses this moment to burst out from beneath the bed, yapping and making a run for my mother.

I quirk a smile as my mother turns and flees. Then Ayla drops the check to race after the puppy.

The room is empty, but I keep the camera focused on the check. With a few clicks, I zoom in closer. Closer still. Until I finally see what I need to see.

Ayla Duran has accepted \$100,000 not to date me. Certainly not to marry me. Because these are things she would *never* do. It doesn’t matter if she cashes the check, rips it up, or frames it on her wall. She has accepted it, taken it from my parents. She has rejected me without seeing me, without ever speaking one word to me. She has turned aside my attention as if it is party trash. As if nothing I could do could seduce her, entrance her, or convince her to be mine.

I take a deep drink of water, then smile out over the LA sunrise, feeling better than I have in a long, long time. Ayla Duran is about to learn how convincing I can be.

\* \* \*

[Pre-order MY BILLIONAIRE FAKE EX today!](#)



Can't wait for your next rom-dog-com fix? Sign up for my [newsletter](#) today for sneak peeks, freebies, and updates from the furry stars of the Most Love Dogs series!

\* \* \*

## *Acknowledgments*

This book would not have been possible without the extraordinary effort of people I'm privileged to both work with and call my friends. My endless thanks go to Lindsey Faber for her exceptional developmental editing and insights, Judi Soderberg for her copyediting, and Shawnn Welde for her additional proofreading assistance. Liz Bemis created one of my absolute favorite covers ever for this series, and continues to amaze me with her creative talent on my websites and in every aspect of her life. In addition, Sabra Harp is the world's best PA, and I'm so lucky that she puts up with me. I'm also eternally grateful to the Scorchingly HOT Sexy Six, who shall remain nameless to protect their secret identities, and my romantic-comedy-partner-in-crime, Belle Adams. Hooray for all the laughter!

## *About Jennifer*

Jennifer St. James is the romantic comedy pen name of an award-winning author of romance. She lives and writes in Ohio. . . and she definitely loves to write. In addition to her Must Love Dogs series, she is also Jenn Stark, whose urban fantasy and paranormal romance series are available wherever ebooks are sold; D.D. Chance, whose fantasy romance novels are available exclusively at Amazon; Jennifer McGowan, whose Maids of Honor series of Young Adult Elizabethan spy romances are published by Simon & Schuster; and author Jennifer Chance, whose Rule Breakers series of New Adult contemporary romances are published by Random House/LoveSwept and whose modern royals series, Gowns & Crowns, is available exclusively at Amazon.

You can find her [online](#) and visit her on [Facebook](#), or sign up for her [newsletter](#) to keep up with all the news and dogventures!



Copyright © 2023 by Jennifer St. James

All rights reserved.

Ebook ISBN-13: 978-1-958512-23-4

Print ISBN: 978-1-958512-24-1

Cover design by Elizabeth Bemis

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locations are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in encouraging piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase/Download only authorized editions.