

The

RISING

Summer

A Curvy Girls Club Novel

Twyla Turner

The **RISING** *Sun*

By Twyla Turner

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To:
Those who've lost their dreams, but created new ones.

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Part I

First Love

Chapter One

Twelve years ago...

“Holy shit! Who is that with your new boy toy?” Kennedy Callaghan asked Royal.

The redhead sat in the college cafeteria with her three besties. Royal, her edgy friend who had to hide her true rockstar nature behind conservative clothing and hair to appease her straightlaced parents. Mia, the sexy, no-nonsense friend who drew the male gaze like a magnet. And Payton, the shy, introverted nerdy friend. The one who brought them all together during their freshman year, after they saved her from being attacked by some douchebag football player.

“Oh, that’s Corey’s bestie and roommate, Koji.” Royal answered, her pretty brown eyes sparkled as she looked at her current booty call.

“He’s gorgeous!” Kennedy hissed under her breath.

Corey nudged his friend and jerked his chin over to the girls’ table. Koji glanced over to look at Royal, but in the process his eyes landed on Kennedy instead. They locked eyes for a fraction of a second before Kennedy chickened out and looked away bashfully. But in that second, the obvious attraction was there.

Kennedy peeked back over. Koji’s lips spread into a huge, megawatt smile that nearly knocked her out of her chair. His hair was jet-black and chin length. He ran a very masculine hand through the silky locks, pushing the hair out of his face. The move emphasized his incredible jawline. Square and strong. His lips were pink and full. His dark amber eyes under the epicanthal folds of his eyelids gave him a sexy, sleepy appearance behind his black-framed glasses. His frame was slender but fit, and he looked to be around six feet. She wasn’t entirely sure if he was Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. But by his name, she assumed Japanese.

She figured that to most girls with his glasses and anime T-shirt, they’d

assume he was a geek. But Kennedy saw beyond that. He was an Asian Clark Kent. Remove the glasses and put him in different clothing, he could be a model.

Royal's giggle as Corey winked at her, pulled Kennedy away from the spell his roommate had her under.

Corey had fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. He had the air of a guy who used to be a dork in high school, but found his stride in college. And he used it to his advantage.

"I don't think I have ever seen you so red before, Ken." Payton remarked as she cocked her head to the side.

"Her face is straight up as red as her hair." Mia laughed.

"Hush!" Kennedy said, her face heating even more. The curse of having her Irish father's fair skin.

Their group was like a melanin rainbow. Kennedy fell at the lightest end of the spectrum with her pale, freckled skin. Her friends teased that her brown freckles were the Black trying to break free. Mia's skin was toasted caramel. Royal's a pretty mahogany. And Payton's the smoothest obsidian.

Aside from Kennedy's fair skin, red hair, and cat-green eyes, that's where her similarities to her father stopped. Her 4a curls, full lips, and broad nose were all her Black mother. So, even with her hair, skin, and eyes there was no "passing" for her. And she loved it. She looked like a lighter, redheaded version of her mother, whom she adored. Kennedy loved both her parents. They had a love story for the ages. And she dreamt she'd eventually have the same.

"I could always introduce you." Royal nudged Kennedy with her shoulder.

"No!" Kennedy blurted out and then continued in a softer tone. "I'd just get all tongue-tied and end up embarrassing myself."

"Well, it might not be up to you, because it looks like they're coming this way." Royal hissed under her breath.

Kennedy sucked in a nervous gasp of air as Payton and Mia looked behind them to see the two guys headed towards them.

"Shit!" Kennedy whispered.

What do I do? What do I say? She thought to herself.

She loved love, but at the same time, she found it hard to talk to guys. She got so bashful, worried that she'd say the wrong thing. She wanted everything to be perfect. Her love story to be perfect. Just like her parents.

Koji and Corey finally reached their table. All four ladies looked up at them. Royal's smile was so big and bright, Kennedy was surprised Corey wasn't blinded. As for herself, Kennedy glanced up at Koji and then looked down quickly. He was even more beautiful up close. But as she looked away, she missed the way his eyes widened as he got a closer look at her cat-green eyes and sprinkle of adorable freckles across her nose and cheeks.

"Hey, ladies." Corey greeted them. "Mind if we sit with you?"

"Of course, not." Royal grinned.

Corey sat on Royal's right side.

"May I?" Koji said softly to Kennedy.

Kennedy looked up quickly. Her face flushed a deep red. She felt it and nearly died inside. She quickly scooted closer to Royal's left side to make room for him on her right. She needed to keep Royal next to her for moral support.

"Uh...sure." She mumbled.

Koji smiled brightly and took a seat next to her. Then he held out his hand. Kennedy looked down at it for a little too long before finally taking it awkwardly.

"I'm Koji. Koji Ito." He introduced himself as he shook her hand lightly. Chills ran up her spine.

"K-Kennedy. Kennedy Callaghan."

"Callaghan? Irish?"

"Yeah. Half."

"I guess if the name didn't give it away, those insane eyes, cute freckles, and red hair definitely do. And I'm assuming from those amazing lips, your other half is Black." He said before looking away to bite into his hamburger.

That gave Kennedy enough time to internally scream with delight and calm her breathing.

"Uh...yeah. So...you're Japanese?"

"Yep. How could you tell? People never guess right." He smiled at her past all the food in his mouth.

"I don't know. Your name mainly. I don't know a lot about the different Asian cultures, but I know Japanese names are very different from Chinese and Korean." Kennedy finished and proceeded to flush from his big smile.

"You're observant. I like it." Koji smirked and nudged her shoulder with his.

"I guess." Kennedy shrugged. "Probably because of what I want to do

for a living.”

“And what’s that?” Koji asked with genuine interest on his face.

“A writer. If I want to write good characters, it stands to reason that I should pay attention to detail and the people around me.”

“That’s awesome! You got any stories I can read?”

“No!” Kennedy blurted out a bit too loudly.

Koji held up his hands. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Kennedy cringed. “I’m just not ready for anyone to read the stuff I’ve written yet. It’s...personal. It would be like sitting here naked.”

Koji raised an eyebrow and then glanced down Kennedy’s soft, curvy body before looking in her eyes again.

Why did I say that? Now, he’s thinking about me naked.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing that.” Koji grinned mischievously.

“Absolutely not!”

Kennedy saw the slightest hint of hurt behind his eyes before he covered it up with a big smile.

Damnit! Now, why did you say that?!? He thinks you’re not interested.

“T-The only person to see me naked in years is my doctor.” Kennedy tried to explain.

That sounded even worse. And now, he knows you’re a virgin.

Kennedy wanted to drop her face in her hands and end the whole exchange. Just the few minutes of conversation had her exhausted.

Koji snorted. He pressed a fist to his mouth to keep from spitting out his food. When he looked at her again, the attraction was back in full force. Now that he knew she hadn’t rejected him.

“Noted.” He said after he swallowed his food.

“So...what’s your major?” Kennedy asked.

“Pre-med.” He said with about as much enthusiasm as someone who was about to shovel shit.

“You almost sound depressed when you say it.” Kennedy looked at him curiously.

Koji shrugged. “It’s not really what I want. But—”

“Hey, Ken.” Payton said as she and Mia started to rise. “You have class in about 15 minutes, right?”

Kennedy looked down at her watch.

“Shit! You’re right. Thanks, Payton.”

Payton was a stickler for time and knew all of their schedules. She kept

them in line and on time.

Kennedy jumped up and grabbed her bookbag. She paused and looked down at Koji.

“Um...to be continued?” Kennedy asked hopefully.

“Oh. We’ll definitely continue this conversation later. I’ll have my people contact your people.” Koji joked and smiled brightly.

His megawatt smile punched a hole right through Kennedy’s gut.

He really is beautiful.

“Okay.” Kennedy giggled softly. “See ya.”

“See ya.”

“I better go too.” Royal said as she stood. “You’re not gonna make me miss class again.”

“Damn!” Corey grinned. “I was hoping to get in a quickie.”

Royal looked conflicted for a minute. “Nope. No. I’ll see you when our classes are over for the day.”

She leaned down and gave him a quick smack on the lips. Corey glanced around nervously. Kennedy didn’t like the self-conscious look on his face. Like he was embarrassed. In her opinion, he was lucky that Royal even gave him a shot.

He caught Kennedy’s watchful eye and quickly smiled. She didn’t smile back. Instead, she gave him a look that let him know she was watching and he swallowed nervously.

That’s what I thought. Prick.

“Come on, Royal.” Kennedy jerked her head towards the doors of the cafeteria.

“Bye,” Koji said.

Kennedy flushed slightly.

“Bye.”

All the girls headed for the door.

“So...” Mia smirked deviously. “Have we officially found the right candidate to pop that cherry?”

“Yes!” Royal wrapped an arm around Kennedy’s waist and squeezed her. “Is Koji Prince Charming enough for you?”

“Does Koji fit all the criteria?” Payton even chimed in when she normally tuned out their sex talks.

“Sheesh! You guys act like I have a clipboard with a checklist on me at all times.” Kennedy frowned.

“Don’t you?” Royal teased.

“Whatever.” Kennedy rolled her eyes. “I just want it to be—”

“Perfect.” Her friends finished her sentence in unison.

“God. Am I that anal?” Kennedy cringed.

“Not yet. But you will be.” Mia joked crudely.

“Ew! Mia!” Kennedy scrunched up her nose.

“Don’t knock it, till you try it, chica.” Mia grinned.

“You and Alejandro have done everything, haven’t you?” Royal asked.

“Pretty much. We’ve been together forever. You gotta spice things up.”

Mia shrugged, unashamed.

“Anyway, back to the subject.” Royal said. “Yes, you are a little anal. I understand you wanting everything to go perfectly. But your first time having sex is usually anything but perfect. Mainly, because it involves two people. And you have no control over what the other person is gonna say or do. I just don’t want you to be disappointed if it isn’t this magical thing like in your romance novels.”

“I know. I know.” Kennedy sighed heavily. “I can’t help it, though.”

“Well, either way. You seemed to have hit it off with Koji.” Royal said.

“Yeah.” Kennedy smiled shyly. “I like him. And he’s gorgeous. A smidge cocky, but in a charming way.”

“He’s a cool dude. I definitely think he’d be good for you. You need someone a little bit cocky. Anyone too shy and you both wouldn’t get anywhere. And someone overly cocky would turn you off. He’s a happy medium.” Royal said.

“Plus, you two are *really* adorable together.” Mia added.

“Really?!” Kennedy smiled brightly.

“Absolutely.” Payton agreed.

“Even *you* noticed, Payton?” Kennedy blinked in shock.

“I notice things other than computers and sci-fi movies.” Payton rolled her eyes.

They all squinted and pursed their lips in doubt.

“Oh, shut up.” Payton shoved them and laughed.

“See you guys later.” Kennedy said as she turned to head down the sidewalk that led to her class.

“Later!” They all said and waved.

Chapter Two

“So...you guys up for a little fun?” Royal asked.

They were in Kennedy and Royal’s dorm room. They flipped aimlessly through channels in an attempt to find something interesting to watch. Royal hadn’t heard from Corey in a few days and Kennedy hadn’t gotten her second chance to see Koji. She wondered if the flirtation in the cafeteria had all been made up in her mind.

“What did you have in mind?” Mia lifted a curious brow.

Royal looked over at the life-size cardboard cutout of Fabian, the world-famous romance novel cover model and *I Can’t Believe It’s Margaine* spokesperson that Kennedy had brought with her to college. He was in some 17th century breeches and boots. His billowy white shirt was untied and pulled back enough to show off his amazing pectoral muscles and rock-hard abs. His blond hair blew back slightly from an imaginary breeze. Royal grinned deviously and looked back at her friends.

“Okay, here me out...”

Kennedy ran across the lawn with Fabian tucked under her arm towards the residence hall where the guys lived. Their dorm room was on the bottom floor, which made their prank doable. She followed closely behind Royal, who carried a to-go container filled with butter she’d taken from the cafeteria. Payton and Mia followed behind to be the lookouts.

They all stifled giggles as Royal scooped out the butter and wrote in big letters on the guys’ window, *I Can’t Believe It’s Margarine!*

After she was done, Kennedy crept forward and leaned Fabian against the window next to the letters. Now, all they needed to do was wait.

They knelt behind the bushes in front of the window. A little while later, they heard the door open and close, and the guys’ voices reached them. They started to giggle. Royal pressed her finger to her lips. They all squeezed their

lips together to stifle their laughter.

The light inside their dorm room came on.

“What the fuck?!?” Corey said.

The girls couldn’t contain it any longer. They screamed with laughter. They jumped up and Corey and Koji’s faces were pressed to the window to see who was there. Which made the girls laugh even harder.

“Royal?!” Corey shouted.

“Run!” Royal shouted.

Kennedy grabbed Fabian and took off. She was not about to leave her most prized possession with two immature boys.

They howled with laughter all the way back to their building. Payton tripped over her own feet and did a tuck and roll in the grass. They snorted and choked on their laughter before Mia ran back to help her up. They made it inside before the guys could catch them. They ran into the elevator and collapsed against the walls as they tried to catch their breath between their laughter.

“Did you see their faces?!?” Royal shouted.

All the other three could do was nod their heads as they clutched their stomachs.

“Best...ever!” Kennedy gasped.

The girls got off on the third floor and headed to Royal and Kennedy’s room. They sprawled out on beds, the floor, and their little couch until they could finally breathe again and their mirth had finally calmed down.

They were in the middle of watching their favorite show, *Scandal*, when there was a knock at the door. Royal jumped up to answer it. She swung the door open and on the other side was Corey. Her mouth popped open moments before his hand shot out and rubbed shaving cream on top of her head. As he started to laugh, Kennedy jumped up and ran to her roomie to help. Just as she got to the door, Koji jumped out and grabbed Kennedy around her thick waist. He lifted her off her feet and spun her further out into the hallway. One of his hands shot up and smeared shaving cream across the side of her face.

All hell broke loose. Laughter, flailing limbs, and shaving cream.

The two guys were no match for all four girls.

Somehow, Kennedy got Koji on his back and she straddled his waist. She clutched his wrists above his head to keep his shaving cream-filled hands away from her. They both panted and smiled as they looked at each other.

Kennedy felt Koji's breath flutter against her lips. She suddenly realized the quite intimate position they were in. Their faces so close that all one had to do was move a few more inches and their lips would touch. Her face flushed a deep crimson.

Koji lifted his head towards her and Kennedy pulled back quickly.

Damnit, Ken! He was about to kiss you, you idiot!

With the spell broken, Kennedy quickly scrambled off his torso. She stood and held out a hand to him. Koji took it and she pulled to help him up. He pushed his glasses back up his nose. They smiled shyly at each other. Both of them had white foam all over their bodies. As they took in each other's bedraggled state, they giggled slightly.

Kennedy glanced over at her friends and Corey. Royal and Corey didn't pass up the opportunity to makeout like she just had. They were on the floor in a similar position, except Corey was on top of Royal. They were in the middle of kissing passionately. Kennedy had a feeling she'd have to sleep with headphones on later.

"Welp. I have never watched porn. I'm not about to watch it live now. I'm going to take a shower." Payton said before she turned and headed to her and Mia's room next door.

They all snorted with laughter. Payton rarely intended to be funny. But the things she said just came out hilarious. Her comment finally broke apart the passionate couple.

"Yeah, I'm gonna head to the shower too. Now, I have to do my wash day routine late at night on a weekday." Mia frowned as she grabbed a curly lock covered in shaving cream. "Thanks, guys."

"Huh?" Koji looked at Kennedy for clarification.

"It's a curly hair thing." Kennedy said.

"Ah. Sorry." Koji cringed.

"It's okay. We had fun." Mia smirked and then headed into her room to grab her things.

Payton walked out in her robe with her PJs and toiletries clutched in her arms. She nodded towards them and continued on to the community bathroom.

"I guess I better do the same." Kennedy said.

Koji reached out and brushed a thumb across her cheek. Kennedy tried not to shiver. He pulled back his hand and the single digit that had touched her face was covered in white foam.

“Yeah, you’re a bit of a mess.” He grinned.

“And whose fault is that?” She grinned back.

“Yours! You guys started it.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t bodily attack you. Just your window.”

Koji snorted.

“You do know this means war, right?” Kennedy raised an eyebrow.

“Bring it.”

“You hear that, Royal?” Kennedy asked her friend who had finally untangled herself from Corey.

“I did.”

“Tomorrow. The courtyard. 9 p.m.” Kennedy challenged.

“We’ll be there.” Koji squinted in a fake mean face.

He held out his right hand. Kennedy took it and they shook hard once like they’d just accepted a duel at dawn. Except they held onto each other a little longer than the situation required. The air sizzled and crackled between them.

Corey cleared his throat, breaking the spell. They dropped hands and Kennedy looked at anything but Koji.

“You staying?” Royal asked Corey.

“Yeah, sure.” He tried to say nonchalantly.

“I’ll get my headphones ready.” Kennedy rolled her eyes.

Koji scoffed and then coughed in an attempt to cover his laughter.

“Better you than me.” Koji teased.

“Thanks.” Kennedy rolled her eyes and laughed.

She started to walk towards her dorm room.

“Tomorrow?”

She turned and looked back at him. His eyes blasted her with so much attraction, it nearly took her breath away.

“Tomorrow.”

Kennedy felt her face flush again. She quickly turned and escaped into the privacy of their room.

Koji watched Kennedy disappear into her room. Her red hair was parted down the middle and French braided on either side, down to her shoulders. She looked like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*.

When she was on top of him a few minutes ago, her cheeks were flushed

with the prettiest pink. Which made her freckles across her cheeks and nose stand out even more. Her lips had looked so plump and kissable. Her cat eyes glittered with attraction. She dazzled him.

Koji knew he was a little cocky, but it was more of a front than anything. As an Asian kid, he had only a few choices in a world that always wanted to stereotype. The smart one or the martial artist. He normally would've fallen under the smart stereotype. But he worked hard to be outwardly cool. A so-called ladies' man. When he was actually still a virgin.

When Kennedy had mentioned that no one had seen her naked other than her doctor, his soul rejoiced.

She won't know if I'm horrible in bed if she's inexperienced too. He'd thought to himself.

And he had the distinct feeling he was going to be horrible. If not horrible, then super quick. Just to look at her plump, hourglass frame made him want to cum in his pants. He'd been so hard when she was on top of him. If they had kissed or if she'd moved an inch against his erection, Koji was sure he'd have embarrassed himself completely.

If he ever did get up the courage to ask her out, he was sure he'd need to masturbate like five times before meeting up with her. Anything to stop from having his very own *American Pie* moment.

"See ya tomorrow." Koji said to Corey. "Bye, Royal."

Corey jerked his chin in acknowledgment.

"Bye." Royal said before she started to giggle when Corey kissed her neck.

Koji shook his head and started down the hall towards the elevators.

Corey is an idiot.

Royal was pretty and a lot of fun. Corey always tried to hide that they were together. If Koji found out he had a chance with Kennedy, he'd lock it down immediately. And he wouldn't be embarrassed about it either.

Corey always said, "She's a cool chick. But I wanna keep my options open."

The guy didn't even have any options. He was punching way above his weight with Royal as it was.

It wasn't that Corey was a bad looking guy. He just kinda had that desperate vibe that girls shied away from. He tried too hard to be the cool guy.

All Koji knew was that he hoped Corey didn't screw things up so badly

with Royal that Kennedy would decide not to give him a chance. Their friend group seemed extremely loyal. And they'd probably think that if one friend was an asshole, the other one was too.

Koji rode the elevator down and walked back to his building with thoughts of pretty freckles and plump curves the whole way. He couldn't wait for their epic battle the next day.

Chapter Three

The next day, they recruited a few more girls from their dorm. During lunch, they filled as many to-go containers with as many condiments as they could. Mustard, mayo, ketchup, ranch dressing, etc. Especially, after they saw the boys with a few more of their friends as they conspired at another table, and grabbed a ton of condiments before they snuck out.

After class, they all piled into Royal's luxury SUV that her father had bought for her. She hated it. She wasn't that flashy, and would've preferred a rugged SUV that she could pop the top off and go off-roading somewhere. Mia, on the other hand, would've taken it gladly. Every time she got in it, she caressed the lux interior. She practically melted into the seat. Kennedy smiled and shook her head.

The girls headed to the superstore in town to load up on supplies. They grabbed water balloon grenades and super soaker guns that were almost as big as they were. They were not about to go out like punks.

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"Okay, water grenades are all full!" Royal called out.

"Super soakers are loaded." Payton called back.

Each girl lined down the row of sinks in the community bathroom as they filled their assigned weapon.

"I need to change." Kennedy said.

"Same." Mia agreed.

"Let's meet by the elevators in ten minutes." Royal instructed.

All the girls nodded.

They grabbed their things and headed back to their rooms to change. Kennedy pulled on some blue camo pants and an old camp counselor t-shirt

with cutoff sleeves. She grabbed a blue bandana and tied it around her head, slipped the strap of her super soaker over her shoulder, and turned to her roommate like she was *Rambo*.

“Fuck, yeah!” Royal nodded.

She lifted her hand and they high-fived.

After Kennedy stuffed her pockets with as many water balloons as she could, she walked over to the window and looked out. She saw one of the guys’ friends standing on the lawn below. The light post illuminated him in the darkness. He held a small, neon green water pistol. Kennedy scoffed. She unlatched the window and swung it open.

“Ha! You call that a gun? Well... ‘*Say hello, to my lil friend.*’” She said imitating the accent and famous line of Tony Montana in *Scarface*.

Kennedy raised her giant automatic water weapon for him to see. The guy just smirked up at her.

“We’re waiting,” he said.

Kennedy turned to the girls. “Let’s go.”

The four girls and their three other friends rode the elevator down to the first floor. They strode out the building like they owned the place.

Koji, Corey, and two other guys stood in a line across the lawn. They were all armed with tiny water guns. Koji smiled brightly the moment he saw Kennedy. Corey grunted and Koji looked over at him. His friend frowned at him and shook his head slightly. Koji squeezed his lips together and faced forward again. An attempt to be serious.

Royal let out a loud battle cry and the girls shouted with her as they ran straight for the guys. Kennedy cocked her gun multiple times. Once she reached Koji, she pulled the trigger. The gun blasted him with pressurized water. His little water pistol was no match.

As Corey was being shot by Royal, he got close enough to Kennedy to shoot her with his small gun right in the face. Immediately, Kennedy winced as her eyes stung from the liquid. As the water ran down her face, she could smell the scent of soap.

“You fuckers are using soapy water?!?” Kennedy shouted.

She was blind.

“I’m not!” Koji’s voice reached her ears. “It was their crazy idea. I told them not to. Here...”

Kennedy flinched back when she felt water from his gun spray her face. He was right. His gun had only water in it and it washed away the soap.

When she could see again, he smiled at her.

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now, I won’t feel so bad about this.”

“Huh…”

Koji placed his foot behind Kennedy’s and pushed her backwards. They both tumbled to the ground with him on top. He smirked down at her before smearing something on her face.

“The hell?”

Kennedy touched her face and her hand coated with something thick and slick. She pulled her hand back and look at what substance he’d smeared on her face.

“Butter? Butter!”

Koji laughed and jumped up. Kennedy rolled onto her knees and stood. She went to cock her gun and her hand slipped. She tried again and nothing. Her hand was so coated with butter she couldn’t even use her gun.

“Smooth move, fucker.” Kennedy squinted at her adorable adversary.

She reached into her pockets and grabbed her water grenades. She aimed straight for his head and upper torso. Each balloon exploded against him. Koji tried to turn and twist away from her, but she continued to light him up until all her balloons were gone.

The screams, shouts, and laughter from the others finally reached Kennedy’s ears. She looked over. Payton and Mia were on top of one of Koji’s friends. His face was in the grass as they smeared mustard and ketchup in his hair. Royal and Corey wrestled on the ground. Two of the other girls they’d recruited held up the last guy, while the other girl blasted him with balloons.

Once their guns were empty and their balloons were gone, they all looked at each other.

“Time to reload!” Royal shouted to them.

“This isn’t over. We’ll be back.” Kennedy squinted at Koji.

“We’ll be ready.”

The girls ran back to their building full speed. As they ran towards the elevators, they heard a throat clear behind them. They all turned. It was their head resident advisor, Sam. A very serious and responsible senior. He looked bedraggled in his t-shirt and shorts and tousled brown hair.

“Ladies. My room. *Now.*”

They all cringed.

“Uh oh.” Kennedy whispered.

They dragged their feet into his room. Sam sat down at his desk and looked at them with a stern face.

How he didn't laugh, Kennedy had no clue. They had to be the biggest hot mess of a group ever seen.

They looked like drowned rats. Their clothing, faces, and hair were smeared and matted with the nastiest stuff. Kennedy swore she saw pieces of soggy pineapple fall off Mia's head onto his floor.

“I'm sure you guys are having a blast.” He began. “And that would be fine if it was the weekend. But it's in the middle of the week. You can find a better day to play Cowboys and Indians.”

“Actually, sir. It's natives. Or First Nation.” Payton corrected him.

He gave her a withering glare. Payton cringed and put her head down.

“If I hear you out there causing a ruckus again, I'll write you all up.”

Mia looked over at Kennedy and mouthed the word ‘ruckus.’ Kennedy squeezed her lips shut to keep from laughing. Although she still snorted and he glared at her.

“Do you understand?” He asked.

“Yes, sir.” They all said with lowered heads.

“Good. Now, go study or something.”

They quickly turned and left his room. Once they got on the elevator, they exploded with laughter before the doors could even close. Kennedy was sure that he heard them.

“Ruckus???” Mia gasped. “How old is he? 80?”

“Right?!” Royal agreed.

“We look a hot mess. How did he not laugh?” Kennedy cackled.

“That's just how tight he's wound. He seriously needs to get laid. I'd take one for the team if I wasn't in a relationship.” Mia pondered.

“Ew! No, Mia. No!” Royal cried. “He's so...so...*bland!*”

“Hey, I'd take bland over sadistic.” Kennedy said.

“What are you talking about?” Royal frowned at her.

“Your boy toy literally put soapy water in his gun and shot me in the eyes with it! That dude is a douchebag.”

“Yes!” One of their friends chimed in.

“I got shot in the eyes too by one of the other ones and I was wondering why I was blinded for a while. What assholes!” One of the other girls agreed.

“Luckily, Koji was the only one that used regular water. He used his gun to wash my eyes out. That would’ve been an immediate deal-breaker.” Kennedy looked at Royal. “I don’t know, Ro. You might want to consider another guy.”

“He was just playing.” Royal tried to defend him.

“Don’t try to defend the indefensible.” Mia said. “He’s turning out to be a real pendejo.”

“We’re in a good mood, guys. Don’t ruin it.” Royal said in a warning tone.

“Fine.” Mia said. “We’re just looking out for you.”

“Thank you. But I’ll ask you when I need it.”

“Touché.”

The elevator opened on their floor. They stepped off and Kennedy paused.

“Hey, wait, guys. Should we tell the boys we’re not coming back?” She asked.

“Nah.” Mia grinned. “Let’s let them sit there and wait for us. It’s what they get for trying to blind us.”

They all smiled deviously before heading to their rooms to get their shower gear.

An hour had passed, and the girls were all cleaned up and in their pajamas. They sprawled across the couches and chairs in the common area on their floor. They each told their side of what had happened during the battle of the dorms. They laughed so hard they could barely breathe nor noticed the guys standing in the doorway.

It was the four boys. Koji and Corey front and center.

“So, were you gonna tell us that you weren’t coming back or were you gonna make us sit out there all night?” Corey asked.

“Sit and wait.” Mia said.

“It’s the least we could do after you tried to blind us. You were wrong for that.” Kennedy said. She looked pointedly at Corey.

The asshole in question held up his hands in surrender.

“It was just a joke. We weren’t trying to hurt you or anything.”

“Ha!” Mia scoffed.

“We weren’t!”

“Then what was the purpose of the soap?” Payton cocked her head to the side.

“Uh...well...um...”

“Like we thought.” Mia rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, we were just messing around.” Corey said as he slithered over to Royal like the snake he was.

He tried to kiss her sweetly on the forehead. Kennedy rolled her eyes.

*As if that’s fooling any of us.*

She looked at Royal’s face, who smiled up at him brightly.

*Well, the rest of us who aren’t fucking him. That girl is seriously dickmatized.*

Kennedy looked at Koji as he walked towards her. He plopped down next to her on the couch.

*Please don’t let me become dickmatized and do something stupid.*

“I just wanted to apologize again for my asshole friends. Are your eyes okay?” Koji asked with genuine concern.

“Yeah, they’re alright. Thank you for asking.” Kennedy flushed.

“I liked your battle gear. You looked like a little *Rambo*.” Koji blasted her with his megawatt smile that stopped her heart.

Kennedy giggled and she felt the red of her face deepen. Koji smiled even harder.

They all chatted for a little while longer before the guys left. The girls attempted to study.

Kennedy had no luck. All she could do was think about Koji. She wondered if he was ever going to ask her out.

Eventually, they called it a night and headed to their rooms.

Kennedy opened the door to their dorm room. They hadn’t locked it since they were just down the hall. Kennedy flipped the switch and immediately noticed something was different.

“Fabian!!!” She shouted.

“What?” Royal asked.

“They took Fabian! Bastards!”

Kennedy’s cardboard cutout of the cover model that had started their whole battle was nowhere in sight. She knew it was the guys.

A devious sparkle glittered in Royal’s eyes.

“Oh, no. What?” Kennedy asked apprehensively.

“Koji has a pen-up poster of Kyra Banks from Sports Inc. Magazine:

Swimsuit Edition. So, we sneak in and get it.”

Kennedy smirked.

“Let’s do it.”

## Chapter Four

“They’re leaving!” Payton said. “They’re heading to dinner.”

She was perched on her bed as she peeked out the window to spy on the guys. It was evening, but the sun was staying up longer now that it was spring. So, it was easy to spot the boys.

“Let’s go!” Royal said.

They all smiled deviously at each other.

“Are you sure their door is gonna be open?” Kennedy asked.

“Dude, they never lock their doors.” Royal rolled her eyes. “Mainly, because they’re irresponsible boys and are always losing their keys.”

“Perfect.” Kennedy grinned slyly.

Once on the first floor, the girls swiftly made their way outside and across the courtyard to the boys building. Someone was coming out and they caught the door before it closed and locked. They tried to act nonchalant, as if they were meant to be there, whenever someone passed them.

Royal turned the doorknob and swung the guys’ door open with ease. She turned to her friends with a quirked eyebrow.

“See?”

Kennedy nodded and then stepped inside. On the wall by, what she assumed was Koji’s bed, was a poster of the beautiful Black model.

*Not sure I can compare to that. But at least his taste in women has some color.*

Most of the posters of models on the walls of male dorm rooms were of blonde, blue-eyed women. She gave him bonus points for going against the crowd.

Surprisingly, his bed was made and his side of the room was pretty spotless. The same could not be said of Corey’s side. Royal’s man really was the typical college dude-bro.

After her brief internal assessment of their room, Kennedy quickly crawled onto Koji’s bed and pulled the poster off the wall. She scrambled off

the bed and rolled up the poster. She shoved it under her hoodie and turned to her friends. Payton and Mia stood in the doorway to watch for the boys.

“Let’s go, before they come back,” she said.

This time, the four girls ran full speed back to their building. Once inside Kennedy and Royal’s dorm, they grabbed some tape and put the poster in their window. It faced outward to the courtyard. They spotted the boys coming and they squatted down out of sight. Only the tops of their heads and eyes peering out.

Koji, Corey, and a few of their friends from their dorm joked and laughed as they walked towards their building. Suddenly, Koji glanced up at the girls’ window.

“Shit! Kyra!” He shouted.

The girls jumped up and started laughing hysterically. Koji tried to glare, but instead he huffed with a reluctant laugh and shook his head. He knew he had been bested. Kennedy grinned proudly.

It wasn’t long after the guys disappeared into their building that Royal’s cell started to ring. It was Corey.

“They’re ready to negotiate a hostage exchange.” Royal said.

“Tomorrow. 4 p.m. In the courtyard. Just Koji. Just me.” Kennedy said as if it were a real hostage situation.

Royal nodded and repeated what she said into the phone.

“Done,” she said.

Kennedy nodded.

“Now, am I gonna see you tonight or what?” Royal said to Corey.

The three other girls rolled their eyes heavenward.

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Kennedy tried to contain her smile as she walked across the courtyard towards Koji. But she had a feeling his face mirrored her own. He tried to hold a serious face, but he couldn’t quite hide the sparkle in his eyes.

He held the massive cardboard cutout of Fabian. Kyra was rolled up in her hand. They stopped a couple of feet from each other. Kennedy started to lift her hand to hold out the poster.

“I have one request before exchanging the hostages.” Koji said.

“Ooookay. And what would that be?” Kennedy frowned at him.

“Go out with me this weekend?” Koji asked.

He flushed red and looked down at his feet before he could finish his question. Finally, he revealed that he wasn’t as cocky and self-assured as he always seemed. Kennedy decided to put him out of his misery quickly.

“I’d love to.” She said softly.

Koji’s eyes shot up to hers. He pushed his glasses up his nose. She smiled brightly at him. His beautiful smile spread wide across his face. Kennedy’s heart flip-flopped in her chest.

“Sweet!” Koji nearly shouted. He caught himself, cleared his throat, and tried to be more serious when he spoke again. “Um...what I meant to say was, ‘Where would you like to go?’”

“Uh...at the moment I can’t really think of anything other than dinner and a movie. So, if you can come up with something better, surprise me.” Kennedy shrugged.

“Alright. Bet.” Koji beamed.

It seemed he could no more hide his true feelings than she could. Most boys she’d ever interacted with put on a ‘tough guy’ act. None of them wanted to show their true feelings for fear of being made fun of by their peers. Kennedy knew that Koji was no different. He played the cocky guy in front of his friends. But alone, he let those walls down just a bit. It’s one of the reasons Kennedy wanted it to be only the two of them when they exchanged their hostages. She knew there would be a better chance of him asking her out if they were alone. And she’d been right.

They passed each other their prized possessions. Koji brushed his thumb over the skin of her hand as he grabbed Kyra. Kennedy shivered. Her eyes connected with his pretty warm brown eyes. The attraction there was so intense that she had to look away.

Never in my life...

“I’ll call you and let you know what time to be ready, when I figure out what we’ll do.” Koji informed her.

“Okay.”

“See you Saturday?”

“Yeah, see you Saturday.”

They turned and walked towards their buildings. Kennedy turned back and caught him staring at her as she walked away. She flushed. He winked. Her skin burned even brighter as she darted inside her building.

Kennedy stepped inside the empty elevator. She collapsed against the wall as the doors shut.

“How am I going to get through a date with him, without turning fifty shades of red every time he so much as looks at me?”

Chapter Five

“Damn, Ken!” Royal said from behind her.

Kennedy stood in front of their full-length mirror attached to the back of their door.

Koji had told her to dress up, but not too much. And to dress warmly. But he refused to tell her where they were going. He insisted it was a surprise.

So, Kennedy had chosen a long-sleeved, black knit dress that stopped a few inches above the knee. Mia had helped her pick it out at the mall, earlier in the week. It hugged her plump, hourglass figure in all the right places. She paired it with black, knee-high boots.

She flat-ironed her red curls until her hair was sleek and straight down her back. Her only makeup was a little mascara and a bold red lip. She opted out of foundation because she knew that Koji liked her freckles. And quite frankly, she did too. She was one of the rare freckle owners who loved her freckles, so she rarely wore foundation anyway.

“You look fucking hot!” Royal smiled brightly.

“You really do.” Payton agreed.

“Seriously, Koji is gonna bust a nut just looking at you. I’m so proud.” Mia pressed a hand to her heart.

Kennedy snorted. “I highly doubt that. But thank you, ladies.”

“Shit.” Royal huffed with a frown. “Now that I think about it, Corey has never taken me out on a date.”

The other three gave her incredulous looks.

“What? He hasn’t.” Royal said.

“Yeah. We know.” Mia began. “Because you two are nothing more than a booty call.”

“I mean...yeah. But no.”

“But nothing. That’s definitely all you two are.” Mia said truthfully.

“Fine. We’re just booty calls.” Royal rolled her eyes.

“Good. Now, the sooner you let that seep into your pretty little head, the sooner you’ll start seeing other people. Don’t put all your eggs in that shitty basket.” Mia wrapped an arm around Royal’s shoulder and squeezed her tight. “Because otherwise you’re gonna get hurt. Which means, I’m gonna have to kill him. I’ve gone this long without a record. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Kennedy smiled at her friends. She felt so blessed to have found them. Her sisters from other misters.

“Okay.” Kennedy sighed after she looked at herself in the mirror one last time. “I think that does it. I’m ready...for my first real date ever.”

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Koji’s hands shook as he stood in front of Kennedy’s door. He’d gotten into the building as someone came out. He held a gift he’d gotten for her in one arm as he raised the other to knock on her door. He quickly moved the gift behind his back as he waited for the door to open.

A second later, the door opened and his dream girl stood there with a surprised look on her face. Her eyes widened as she took in his clothing.

“Wow, Koji! You look amazing.” She breathed.

He’d chosen black slacks, a thin charcoal gray sweater, with his black, leather bomber jacket and a black pair of combat boots. He’d put a little product in his hair to keep the strands out of his eyes. And he finished off his look with a little spray of cologne.

“Thanks. But nothing compares to how you look.” Koji said as he pushed up his glasses to see her better. His eyes swept up and down her body.

She was stunning. He preferred her curls, but her hair straightened gave her a sleek, sophisticated look.

Kennedy flushed a pretty pink.

“Oh!” Koji said when he remembered his gift. “I have something for you.”

From behind his back, he pulled a white flower pot that burst with green leaves. White petals in the form of cups with long pistils within them stood out from the green.

“It’s a peace lily. I thought I’d offer you a truce.” He grinned.

“Oh my goodness! That’s so sweet, Koji.” Kennedy took them.

She turned to put them in her room. Koji finally noticed the three other girls. They all beamed up at him with approval.

“Hey, ladies.”

“Hey, Koji!” They all said in unison.

Behind Kennedy’s back they all gave him a thumbs up. He sighed with relief that he’d made the right decision in getting her a gift. When she turned back to him, he quickly looked away from her friends and smiled at her.

“Ready?”

“Absolutely.”

They walked silently for a while as they headed towards the parking lot. Kennedy finally broke the ice.

“So... Where we headed?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Aww...come on! You can’t give me one hint?”

“Well, we are going to dinner first.”

“Okay... And then what?”

“Sorry, still can’t tell ya.”

“Fine.” Kennedy fake pouted as they reached his car.

“Holy shit! *This is yours?!*” Kennedy exclaimed.

His car was a sleek, black two-door *Porsche*. He could’ve gotten something even more expensive if he’d wanted it. But he rarely led with the fact that he came from money. He tried to get to know people before he let them in on that bit of information.

“Yeah.” He said as he opened the passenger door for her. “Does it impress you?”

Kennedy quirked her head and gave him a serious look.

“No. Cars don’t really impress me. I’m impressed that you don’t flaunt your apparent wealth. So many guys with money use it to gain status and friends...and girls. You never said a word.” She finished with a look of respect in her eyes.

Koji internally sighed with relief that she didn’t care about his money. She seemed to like him for him.

“I’d rather know someone likes me for me and not my money. And honestly, it’s not my money. It’s my parents’ money.” Koji gestured inside the car.

Kennedy ducked inside and he gently closed the door. Koji quickly

walked around to the driver's side and got in.

"So, what is it that your parents do?" Kennedy asked curiously.

"My dad is a surgeon and my mom is an engineer." Koji said as he started the car.

It car purred to life. It barely made a sound as he backed out and took off out of the parking lot.

"Wow!" Kennedy said under her breath. "I suppose that's why you're pre-med?"

"Pretty much. I had to choose from the big four."

"What's the 'big four'?"

"Doctor, lawyer, engineer, tech god."

"Ah...I see. The big money makers."

"Exactly. Anything else won't do."

"Is that what you want? I remember you were about to tell me something the day we met in the cafeteria about not really wanting to be a doctor."

Koji smiled softly. *She really did pay attention to detail.*

"Out of the big four, being a doctor is the option that most interests me. But honestly..." Koji sighed heavily before he continued, "I like the arts."

"Really?!" Kennedy perked up.

"Yeah. But that's like a dirty word in our house. It's okay for a hobby. But it's not a serious profession."

"I'm assuming that's something they said to you when you told them what you really wanted to do?" She asked curiously.

"Actually, no. They have no idea I want to be an artist. But they have said it a million times about my cousin who disappointed her parents when she went into the arts. She wants to be a full-time violinist. She's really good too. I've gone to a lot of her concerts.

"So, I've heard the disdain in my parents' voices enough to know that if I even thought about telling them what I really want, they'd lose it. At least a violinist has the potential to make good money if they're really good." Koji drifted off.

"What kind of art do you want to do?"

"Photography."

"Really?" Kennedy turned to look at him as he drove. "Royal is studying photography."

"Yeah, we've talked about it a little in between her sucking face with Corey." Koji chuckled.

Kennedy rolled her eyes. The look gave Koji the distinct feeling she didn't like his roommate and best friend very much. *I hope that doesn't become a problem.*

"But I don't just wanna do any photography. I want to be a nomad. Traveling the world taking photographs of the land and cityscapes. And the interesting people and cultures who live there." He said passionately.

"That sounds wonderful." Kennedy sighed and melted back into his leather seat. "The romantic in me wants to write in places like France or England or any cool place with centuries old architecture. Places where I can immerse myself in the culture. Eat good food. Ride an old-timey bike with a brown paper bag in the basket with a baguette sticking out the top."

Koji glanced over and she had a dreamy little expression on her face. The setting sun cast a soft, pinkish orange glow against her fair skin. Her freckles stood out and her hair looked as if it was on fire. She was the most stunning girl he'd ever laid eyes on. And from what he already knew of her, she was just as beautiful from within.

She's like sunshine.

He found it hard not to continue to glance over at her. He was drawn to her like a sunflower to the sun.

"You know..." Koji started and Kennedy looked over at him expectantly. His heart stuttered for a few beats before he remembered what he wanted to say. "You're really easy to talk to. I don't think I've told anyone about how I feel, with the exception of my cousin. But that's only because she gets it."

"A lot of people say that to me. That I'm easy to talk to. I don't know why." She shrugged.

"Hmm... I think it might be because you don't seem to have a judgmental bone in your body. So, people feel comfortable sharing." Koji said.

"You might be right. I don't get the point in judging. Everyone is going through their own battles that we don't know about. And we don't know how we'd handle it if we did. So, I have no right to judge. Except for Corey. I'll judge that dude." She finished with a laugh.

Even though she laughed, Koji knew she was serious.

"You don't like him very much, do you?" Koji asked.

"I sure don't." She didn't even hesitate.

"Wow. That didn't take long."

“No point in lying.”

“I know he seems like a dick. But he’s not that bad.”

“To you. But when my friend’s heart is at stake, he is one-hundred percent a dick.”

“But aren’t they both adults who know what they’re doing? She knows it’s just a booty call.”

“And he knows that she’s catching feelings.” Kennedy gave him a stern look.

Koji lifted one hand off the steering wheel in a gesture of surrender.

“You’re right. You’re right,” he said.

“He knows that she wants more with him than a late-night hookup. And the moment he realized that, was the moment he should’ve broken it off. But no, he’s being selfish because he wants to continue getting laid. So, he’s using her just in case he fails getting new tail on a night out. The nights he calls her at two or three are the nights he failed. The nights he doesn’t are the ones he’s probably found someone else to hook up with.

“And the sad part is, the nights he doesn’t call I can see the disappointment on her face. She knows he’s probably with someone else. But at the same time, the nights that he does call and her face lights up, a little bit of the light in her eyes dies. Because she wants more and she knows he’s just using her, but she’ll take whatever crumbs she can get because her heart is starving. And that breaks my heart for her.” Kennedy finished sadly.

“Man...you really are a writer. The way you observe people. Get to the heart of them. And then the way you explain it. Very deep.”

“Thanks.” Kennedy said shyly.

Koji sighed heavily before getting back to the subject.

“I’m sorry about my friend. And you’re absolutely right about him. But I swear I’m not like that!” Koji urged.

“I know that.” Kennedy smiled softly. “I wouldn’t be in this car otherwise.”

Koji beamed happily. He hesitated, but then reached across the center console. He gripped her hand briefly and then pulled back.

Kennedy smiled, but then scrunched her eyebrows slightly when he removed his hand and put it back on the steering wheel.

There was a lot to unpack there, but Koji wasn’t ready to talk about that just yet.

A few minutes later, Koji pulled up to the valet of a popular restaurant.

One of those fancy steakhouses you had to make reservations for in order to get a table.

Two valets came around to either side of the car and opened their doors. Koji handed his valet a twenty along with his keys. The guy looked to be about his age. And Koji briefly wondered if the guy was working to pay his way through college or if it was just his full-time job while he figured out life.

Koji knew he was blessed a million times over to be able to go to school without worrying about money. Or that he had his future practically mapped out for him. But in that moment, he envied the valet guy. Koji knew the valet probably was thinking how lucky he was. But Koji would've given anything to have the freedom the valet had. The freedom to make his own choices. To decide where he wanted his life to go. Of course, that kind of freedom came with tons of obstacles and setbacks along the way. But the valet would earn every victory. Koji was handed his. His wins were no better than a participation trophy.

If he didn't pass his classes, his father would just make a huge donation to the pre-med department to get his grade changed. Luckily, he did pass all of his classes because he was smart and deep down wanted to make his father proud. The classic Asian overachiever. But when his anxiety flared over an exam, his father would pat him on the back and say that it was covered if need be.

If he did pass, his spot in medical school was already available because his father knew people on the board. And if he passed medical school, his residency was set up in the very hospital where his father worked.

Not to mention the daughters of prominent Asian families that his parents had lined up for him to choose from to marry.

Koji's life was planned up until he was fifty. He felt like he was a tiger trapped in a cage. His date with Kennedy was his first real act of defiance against his parents. The first swipe at the lock on his cage. It rattled loudly.

He walked around to the passenger side of the car to where Kennedy stood. She smiled up at him brightly. Koji lifted his arm to Kennedy. She slid her hand under and around his forearm. Even though he wore a sweater and leather jacket, the touch of her hand made his skin prickle with awareness.

Once inside and they'd reached the hostess podium, Koji dropped his arm and her hand. He ignored the frown Kennedy gave him.

"Reservation for Ito." Koji said to the hostess.

The pretty blonde smiled brightly at him with attraction in her eyes.

“Right this way, Mr. Ito.” She said huskily as if he wasn’t even there with someone.

The restaurant had that perfect low lighting. Bright enough that people could see their plates and dinner companions. But dim enough to give it that romantic ambiance.

The tablecloths were pristine white. A single candle was lit on every table. The patrons were dressed in their finest. No one dared to speak too loudly. A woman dressed in a black, lace dress sat at a sleek black baby grand piano and played soft romantic music. The restaurant screamed money.

“Wow!” Kennedy whispered under her breath. “This place is fancy, fancy.”

Koji’s chest puffed out at her words. It was less about wanting to impress his date. It was more about the fact that he felt Kennedy was the type of girl who deserved to be treated to finer things. She didn’t seem like a chain restaurant and cheesy movie type of girl. She’d gladly enjoy that because she was down to earth. But she made him want to do better than that. She made him want to spoil her.

Once they reached their table, Koji pulled out a chair for Kennedy. He knew his chivalry paid off when she smiled so hard her cheeks turned into rosy, freckled balls and her cat eyes glittered with joy. Her reaction was worth the added effort.

He pushed in her chair as she lowered herself. He walked around to the opposite side and sat. He watched as she looked around some more.

“This place makes me feel so...*grown up*.” Kennedy leaned forward and whispered.

“Yeah, it kinda does.” Koji agreed.

Although he was used to restaurants like the one they were in, it was his first time without his parents. And she was right. It did feel very adult.

The waiter arrived at their table. He was a tall, well-built guy with light brown hair and big, brown eyes. Even Koji knew that he was an attractive dude. And he only had eyes for Kennedy. The moment he looked at her his eyes widened and the attraction was evident on his face. She only looked up at him expectantly.

“Uh...here are your menus.” The waiter finally remembered his job.

He handed Kennedy her menu first and then Koji’s.

“I’ll give you some time to go over the menu. But in the meantime,

would you like anything to drink? A glass of wine, perhaps?”

Kennedy frowned in thought.

“Would you like for me to choose for you?” Koji asked.

“Yes, please!” She sounded relieved.

“I think the lady would like to start with a nice rosé.” Koji said to the waiter. “And I’ll have a shiraz.”

“Very well.” The waiter nodded and walked away.

“You really sound like you know what you’re talking about. I hope I like it though. I haven’t had much wine on a beer budget.” Kennedy laughed nervously.

“Well, the one I chose for you is light, crisp, and flavorful. Something for newbies to start with.” Koji grinned.

“Sounds good!”

They sat quietly for a few minutes as they went over the menu. They surreptitiously gave each other shy glances over the tops. Kennedy pulled down the menu and leaned forward to whisper.

“This menu doesn’t have any prices on it.”

“I know. Please, don’t worry about the prices. Get whatever you want. And please, don’t let it be a salad.” Koji joked.

Kennedy giggled and went back to study her menu.

When the waiter returned, Koji ordered a massive porterhouse steak, double-baked potato, and asparagus. Kennedy chose the beef wellington, fondant potatoes, and the house salad. She tried her rosé and moaned with delight. Koji adjusted uncomfortably in his seat at the sound and blissful look on her face.

As they waited for their food, they drank and talked. Well, mostly Kennedy talked. But Koji didn’t mind. It seemed like a nervous tick of hers. That she started to ramble when she felt awkward. And she mostly talked fondly of her three best friends. Her face was lit up.

“You really love them, don’t you?” Koji cocked his head to the side.

“I do.” She nodded. “They’re more than my best friends. They’re my sisters. The Curvy Girls Club.”

“That’s what you call yourselves?” Koji smiled.

“Yep. We’ve all got meat on our bones. And we celebrate it, when the world often doesn’t.”

“As you should.” Koji looked her up and down as far as the table allowed.

Kennedy's face turned a bright shade of red.

The waiter walked up with their food before the conversation could go deeper. Kennedy looked relieved.

You're saved for now. Koji continued to gaze at her as she looked at everything but him.

Kennedy tucked into her food in an attempt to avoid conversation or eye contact. But as the pastry-wrapped steak melted on her tongue, her eyes rolled back and she hummed deep in her throat. When she opened her eyes again, their eyes locked.

Koji was certain he wasn't able to hide the hunger of a different kind from his eyes. Kennedy bit her bottom lip and looked down at her plate. He knew she thought the lip bite was harmless. Innocent. But it was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. He'd give anything to grab her face and nibble on that luscious red lip.

Patience.

Chapter Six

They were back in the car after their lovely dinner. Kennedy was full and just slightly tipsy. So far, their date was a huge success. He was a complete gentleman, thoughtful, and sweet. And his intense gazes made her body tingle with awareness. Especially, her nether regions. Never had a boy turned her on like Koji did.

The only issue she had was his lack of physical affection. One moment, he seemed like he wanted to touch her. And would, briefly. And then, the next moment, he pulled away. It was definitely odd and left her utterly confused.

He looks at me as if he wants to strip me naked, but then doesn't even try to touch me. Maybe he's just trying to be respectful. Yeah, that must be it. Her mind whirled.

Kennedy was so deep in thought she didn't even realize that Koji had parked the car along a tree-lined street.

"We're here." Koji said as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

Kennedy looked around. She couldn't make out exactly where they were in the darkness.

"Where's here?" Kennedy asked.

"Come on. I'll show you." Koji opened his door and stepped out.

Kennedy waited like her father always told her to. And like the gentleman he had already proven himself to be, Koji walked around and opened the door for her. Internally, she screamed and did a little dance. So far, he'd passed every test.

He offered his arm like he had at the restaurant. She took it and he guided her onto the sidewalk. As they walked, she spotted a sign that said "Rose Garden." Just before they reached the sign, he turned right to guide her down a path towards the gardens. Kennedy's mouth popped open and a little gasp escaped.

Down below, the garden was lit up with thousands of candles. The

garden was made up of rows of bushes in a type of pavilion. The roses still hadn't bloomed yet, but it was still beautiful. At the bottom was an orchestra. The tiered rows had chairs setup for those who came to listen.

Kennedy's eyes stung. She blinked rapidly in an attempt to stop the flow of tears that wanted to come forward.

"Koji...this is...this is *amazing*." She said with wonder.

Through her tears, she saw the smile that spread across his face. The pride was written all over his face.

"I can't take all the credit. This is my cousin's orchestra." Koji confessed. "They do little candlelit concerts around the San Francisco area on the weekends. I asked her where I could take a date I wanted to really impress. She told me they were playing here tonight."

He gave her a sheepish smile.

"It doesn't matter. I don't think most guys your age would even think outside of a chain restaurant, movie, and a bar." Kennedy said.

He huffed with a small laugh.

"What?"

"I was literally thinking that earlier. You'd be okay with a date like that because you're down to earth. But that you deserved something with more thought put into it." Koji said as they reached the garden from the path.

Kennedy couldn't even speak. Her throat was clogged with tears. It was her junior year of college. She'd declined every offer she'd received from the guys at school. None of them had put in any real effort to pursue her like she felt she deserved.

Not the way her father had pursued her mother. Not the way the heroes in the books she read courted the heroines. Nothing.

The boys around her had always led with one thing. Sex. Always sex. And while she definitely wanted to have it, it was not the thing Kennedy wanted to lead with. She desperately wanted romance. So, the fact that it appeared as if she was finally getting what she'd always dreamt of, Kennedy was overcome with emotions.

When she could finally speak again, the words came out soft and wobbly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Kennedy. It's my pleasure."

Koji removed her hand from his arm and clutched it in his hand to guide her down the stone steps of the tiers. They reached the second row from the bottom where there were two empty seats left. They took their seats and Koji

scanned the members of the orchestra. When he spotted who he was looking for, he waved.

“That’s my cousin.” He pointed as she raised her bow in the air at him and smiled.

Kennedy waved back and the girl smiled brighter. Kennedy took that as a sign of approval.

Once everyone was seated, the orchestra lifted their instruments and began. The theme of the evening was a celebration of famous composers for movie musical scores. Kennedy recognized most of them and sat enthralled as they played surrounded by candlelight.

The only thing that would’ve made the moment even more perfect was if Koji would’ve held her hand. Or placed a hand on her exposed thigh.

She’d never craved someone’s touch the way she craved Koji’s. Half the time, if a guy put his arm around her in a flirtatious way, she’d pull away in disgust. Something about their grabby hands turned her all the way off. Now, all she wanted was to be grabbed and ravished.

It didn’t help that she felt Koji’s eyes on her more than on the orchestra. The heat from his gaze penetrated her skin to warm her from within. Her clit tingled. She could feel the slickness of her arousal coat her labia. She restlessly shifted on her chair.

How can a simple stare I can only feel turn my hormones into a rage monster?

She shyly glanced over at him. The flames of the candles that surrounded them echoed the flames of desire in his eyes. The candles danced in their reflection. In daylight, his irises were a warm dark amber. At night, they were black glass. Dark and penetrating.

Kennedy’s body shuddered as a wave of awareness ran down her spine.

Holy Cannoli!

She quickly looked away and back at the orchestra where it was safer.

Kennedy had no intention of losing her virginity on their very first date. But she couldn’t see waiting for months like she’d always imagined. As it was, she was ready to throw caution to the wind, lift up her dress, pull her panties to the side, and sit on his lap right there in front of everyone.

Mia would be so proud.

She was finally grateful that he held back from touching her. Kennedy wasn’t so sure she wouldn’t completely embarrass herself if he did.

The concert came to a close and the audience stood and clapped

appreciatively. Kennedy wiped her eyes between claps. The orchestra had ended with the musical score from the movie *Somewhere In Time*. A movie her mother had introduced her to when she was a little girl. A movie that choked her up every time she watched it. Just to hear the musical score brought tears to her eyes. This time was no different. And combined with the best first date she could ever imagine, she was overcome with emotions.

“That was wonderful.” Kennedy sighed.

“I’m so glad you liked it. I didn’t know if you’d think it was boring. But I kinda had a feeling you’d be the type to like orchestral music.” Koji said.

“How so?”

“It’s romantic. And you’re a romantic girl—I mean, woman.” Koji corrected.

Kennedy flushed.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yeah. But...it’s a good thing.” Koji quickly reassured her.

“A good thing with the right person.” She said without making eye contact.

Kennedy chanced a glance at him and she saw the shy smile on his face.

“Come on.” Koji took her hand. “Let me introduce you to my cousin.”

“Oh!” Kennedy’s eyes widened. “Uh, okay.”

She nervously gulped. She’d had no intention of meeting any of his family for quite some time. But if he was willing to introduce her to his cousin, who he seemed close to, Kennedy figured that was a really good sign that he was into her.

They walked down the last step to the center of the garden. His cousin was bent over as she placed her violin in its case.

“Hey, Kari.” Koji said.

She straightened and turned to them. A huge smile spread across her pretty face.

“Hey, Koji!” She wrapped him in a warm hug. “I’m so glad you came.”

“Of course. You guys were awesome!”

“Thanks.” She grinned up at him and then glanced over curiously at Kennedy.

Kennedy smiled back shyly.

“Oh, sorry!” Koji cringed. “Kennedy, this is my cousin, Hikari. But I call her Kari. Kari, this is Kennedy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Kennedy.” Kari held her hand out to Kennedy.

“Koji hasn’t stopped gushing about you.”

As the girls shook hands, Koji flushed in embarrassment.

“Seriously, Kari? Why you gotta embarrass me like that?”

“I’m just teasing you.” She smirked and pushed his arm.

Kari turned back to Kennedy.

“But seriously. You must be special. He’s never come to me for advice on where to take a girl.” She winked at Kennedy.

Kennedy smiled brightly and looked at Koji. He shrugged sheepishly.

“I did tell you that I asked her.”

“You did.”

They talked with his cousin for a little longer. She needed to help put out and clear all the candles. So, they left and headed back to campus.

Once in the parking lot, Kennedy waited as he walked around to the passenger side to open her door. Koji held out his hand to help her out of the car. He guided her to the side and he closed the door. He stepped closer to her and Kennedy backed up. She felt the cool metal of the car against her back and she shivered.

“You cold?” He asked.

His lips only a few inches from hers.

Kennedy could only nod. His proximity had stolen her voice.

She watched as Koji shrugged out of his leather jacket. He swung it around her back and draped it over her shoulders. Kennedy could feel his warmth and smell his sexy cologne. She snuggled deeper into the jacket and breathed in deeply.

“Better?” He asked as he stared at her lips.

“Y-Yeah.”

“I never noticed before. But your bottom lip has one single freckle right in the middle.” Koji said huskily.

Kennedy realized her lipstick must have been wiped away throughout the night.

His thumb lightly caressed said lip. He pulled down slightly and her lip moved with it and popped back when his thumb slipped to her chin.

“I-I know.” Kennedy’s breath trembled across his hand.

“X marks the spot.” He said as he lowered his head towards hers.

Oh my God! Oh my God! This is it!

Koji’s plump, pink lips finally reached hers. He just slightly moved his head from side to side. The move made his lips lightly brush over hers.

Kennedy shuddered again, but much deeper. Her mouth popped open on a sigh. Her eyes fluttered shut. She felt his hands cup her face.

Suddenly, something must have snapped in him. Koji's fingers slipped back into her hair and gripped her tightly. His tongue dove hungrily into her mouth. His body moved closer. So close he pressed her head back onto the car. Kennedy could feel *all* of him. She gasped at the feel of his erection against her abdomen. The gasp only opened herself further for his seeking tongue.

Kennedy knew she was too much in her head. She let go and finally joined the kiss.

Her curious hands lifted to his chest. Her fingers splayed over the taut skin. She felt his muscles flinch. He kissed her harder. Her hands slid up his neck. Her fingers finally felt the silky strands of his hair that she'd wanted to touch ever since they met.

Kennedy's tongue stroked against his rhythmically. Koji groaned in her mouth. His hands slipped down to her hips and gripped her tightly. His own hips began to roll forward. His hard length rubbed against her to the rhythm of their tongues. He felt huge through the fabric of their clothing.

She pulled away from his lips with a gasp of breath. The internal walls of her pussy flexed with need. Her clit pulsed. Now, engorged with the blood her heart had pumped there.

"No. I can't." Kennedy panted.

Koji immediately stopped. His body went completely still as he tried to catch his breath and cool down his raging blood. But he remained pressed against her.

He lowered his forehead to hers. Their harsh breaths mingled between them. His hair a dark curtain that covered their faces.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to get so carried away."

"It's okay. I did too."

"But you feel that?" Koji asked and pressed his erection slightly against her.

"Y-Yeah."

"Never in my life have I been this hard. You make me this way," he said. His voice raspy with desire.

"Same." Kennedy said and realized how it sounded. "I mean...I've never been so turned on before."

"Good."

Kennedy looked at him. A grin spread across both of their faces.

Koji placed his hands on his car and pushed away from her. Kennedy immediately felt the loss of his warmth.

“Let me walk you to your door.” Koji said.

Kennedy pushed off the car and stepped forward. It was the perfect moment for him to hold her hand, but he didn’t. Instead, they walked side by side. Their arms brushed every few steps.

Once at the main door into her building, Koji finally grabbed her hand and turned her towards him. He pulled her in, pushed his glasses up his nose, and briefly gazed into her eyes. He was so beautiful, Kennedy’s breath caught in her throat.

“Thank you for an amazing night, Kennedy.” Koji said softly.

“No, thank *you*. It was perfect.”

Koji placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face as he leaned down for a final goodnight kiss. He gave her three soft pecks. Then he pulled back before they could get carried away again.

Kennedy shrugged out of his jacket and handed it back to him. She fumbled for the keycard in her purse. Her hands shook. She finally pulled it out and held it up against the black box on the door. The little light changed from red to green and the latch clicked. Kennedy turned her head to look back at Koji as she opened the door.

“Goodnight, Koji.”

“Goodnight, Kennedy.”

She started to walk through the doors and then she felt his hand on her arm.

“Wait!” He almost shouted and then brought his voice back to a normal level. “Can I see you tomorrow?”

Kennedy couldn’t hide her joy even if she tried. A huge smile spread across her face.

“I kinda have to study for an exam on Monday.” Kennedy cringed.

“We can study together. I have one too. We could quiz each other.” Koji said hopefully.

“Okay. I can do that.” Kennedy nodded.

“Sweet. How about at ten? After breakfast. At Morrison library?” He suggested.

“Sure. Sounds good. We can study without my friends or yours trying to spy on us.” She grinned.

“Perfect. See you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

They smiled shyly at each other one more time before Kennedy finally turned and walked into her building. She got on the elevator and rode to her floor and walked down the hall on a cloud.

Kennedy opened her door and her three besties were there. They all turned to her with expectant faces. It was a Saturday night and they hadn't gone out just so that they could be home when she returned. They also wanted to be home in case she called with an emergency. They may not have noticed a call on their cells if they were at a loud club or party.

“So...” Royal said.

Kennedy walked over to her bed and collapsed on it with a sigh. She stared up at the ceiling with a little smile on her face.

“It was...*perfect*.”

They all jumped on her bed with squeals of delight.

“Tell us!” Royal shouted.

“Yes, please!” Payton agreed.

“Give us every juicy detail.” Mia grinned deviously.

“Well...”

Chapter Seven

“Dude.” Koji said to Corey as he walked into his dorm room. “We gotta talk.”

“What’s up.” Corey grinned slyly. “How was your date? Did you get any?”

“Man, seriously?!” Koji rolled his eyes to the ceiling, shook his head, and sighed. “You gotta grow up. Everything ain’t about pussy.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. And that’s what we gotta talk about. I really like this girl. So, I don’t want you messing up my chances with Kennedy because you keep dicking around her best friend.” Koji pleaded.

Corey jerked his head back and scowled. “It’s not that serious.”

“Yes, the fuck it is. They hate you, dude. Royal’s friends, I mean.”

“So what? As long as Royal likes me, it doesn’t matter.”

“If you give a fuck about me and my happiness, it does fucking matter.” Koji tried to keep his temper under wraps, but Corey’s nonchalance was pissing him off.

“Kennedy isn’t going to stop dating you because of what I’m doing with her friend.” Corey continued to not get the hint.

“If she or her friends think I’m like you, she might.”

“‘Like me?’ Shit, you should want to be like me. And she’d be lucky to have a guy like me.” Corey puffed out his chest with fake cockiness.

Koji could see his insecurities written all over his face.

“Corey, I’m gonna give you a little tough love real quick. You’re a dick. Everyone thinks you’re a dick. And the only person you have fooled is Royal. And eventually she’s going to realize you’re a dick.

“You don’t care about anyone but yourself. You use people. And a lot of people are sick of your shit. Get it together, dude. Or you’re gonna be spending a fuck ton of time by yourself.” Koji finished.

He grabbed his backpack and walked back out the door. He slammed it

behind him to punctuate his last sentence.

He pulled out his cellphone and called his cousin.

“Hey, Kari. You mind if I crash at your place tonight? My roommate pissed me off.”

“Sure. Come on by.”

“Thanks, Cuz.”

“No problem.”

Koji hung up and headed back to the parking lot.

From a perfect date to sleeping on my cousin's couch. What a crazy night.

Chapter Eight

Kennedy walked into the library at exactly 10 a.m. For their study date, she'd chosen a Berkeley sweatshirt, white tennis skirt, and white sneakers. The skirt was because of Mia. She told them to always wear skirts or dresses on dates. Mainly, for easy access.

Kennedy wasn't exactly ready to lose her virginity in the stacks at the library. But she wasn't opposed to a feel up under a table.

She smiled shyly as her eyes immediately found Koji's. It wasn't hard to spot him. He sat on an over-stuffed, burgundy with satin striped loveseat that faced the door. He wore a sweatshirt that almost matched hers, loose-fit jeans, and the most popular and recognizable sneakers on the planet in the Berkeley colors.

We almost look like one of those matching couples.

Koji stood as she came closer. His eyes devoured her as if she wore the sexiest dress he'd ever seen.

"You look so hot." Koji breathed.

Her hair was still straight. But she'd decided to pile it on her head in a messy bun, with strategically placed tendrils that hung to frame her face and neck. She'd applied just a hint of mascara so her red lashes didn't look so invisible. And a touch of lip gloss to enhance her already plump lips.

"Really?! It's just a casual outfit." Kennedy looked down at herself.

"You could wear a baggy sack and I'd still think you're super hot." Koji smirked at her.

Kennedy giggled softly.

"Come on." Koji jerked his head towards the interior of the library. "I found a quiet spot for us, if it hasn't been taken yet."

Kennedy nodded and followed Koji further into her favorite library on campus. It had an old world feel. Heavy, dark wood tables with matching dark wood walls and shelves. Vintage furniture back-to-back or placed here and there, which gave it a living room feel. And antique lamps that gave off a

golden glow lit up each table throughout. It was romantic and charming. And perfect for their second date.

They walked upstairs to the second level that overlooked the lower. Koji found a large four-chair table between two library stacks. The chairs were dark brown leather and cozy.

Koji pulled out a chair for her. Kennedy sat and he pushed her in. Then he took the seat to her left, instead of across from her like she thought he would. She shifted nervously. His chair was closest to the dark-stained wooden railing that overlooked the lower level. Kennedy realized it was the perfect position to play footsie under the table without anyone noticing a thing. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Kennedy looked at Koji. His eyes gazed down at her lap. She glanced down and saw that in a seated position, a lot more of her thighs were exposed than she'd intended. She needed to say something to distract herself or she was going to combust.

"So...ah. Studying!" Kennedy burst out nervously.

Koji chuckled softly and quickly raised his finger to his lips to remind her to keep it down.

"Oops." Kennedy cringed. "So, what exam are you studying for?"

"Oh, nothing big. Just my pre-MCATs. I take them this year in preparation for the real thing next year."

Kennedy's eyes widened.

"You mean the test that makes or breaks you getting into medical school?"

"Yep. That would be the one."

"And here I was worried about my test on the novel *The World According to Garp*."

Koji snorted softly. Kennedy covered her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"Yeah, I wish I had your problems." Koji sighed. "Imagine taking one of the hardest tests and not even wanting to be in that profession."

"Maybe you should talk to your parents. It's not too late." Kennedy said and placed a comforting hand on his.

Koji looked at her with a sad smile. He shook his head and then pulled his hand away.

"Nah. I couldn't. They'd flip their lids. In my culture, it's not about what the individual wants. It's about the family. That's why in our home country we introduce ourselves by our last names first, and then our first names. You

are a representative of the family. And you don't bring shame to the family name." Koji said.

"And being a photographer would bring shame to your family?" Kennedy said incredulously.

"Precisely."

"That's just wild!" She exclaimed softly.

"I think it would be easier if we lived in Japan. Where every kid is experiencing the same thing. But living here in the U.S, our culture is a microcosm within a much bigger American culture. A culture where it's the individual first. Sure, there are kids who have parents that push them towards careers they're not actually interested in. But a lot of them rebel and do what they want to do anyway and a lot of parents are disappointed but accept it.

"In an Asian American family," Koji frowned and shook his head, "that shit don't fly. Some may disown. Most will just make you regret it for the rest of your life. Every visit. Every holiday. Every phone call. They will bring it up over and over. Tell you how you embarrassed them in front of the rest of the family or their friends. If they get sick, it's because your decision weakened their immune system."

Kennedy scoffed.

"No, seriously. Every ailment. Every bad thing that happens is because you brought shame to the family. You might as well be miserable in your profession and find peace in your personal life. Because they *will* find a way to ruin the joy in your preferred profession. It's happening to Hikari as we speak. Her parents are always making her feel like shit for choosing what should've only been a hobby. The only thing that will stop them is when she becomes a world-famous violinist. Only then will they be overjoyed and brag about her." He finished.

"Sheesh. That has to be so hard." Kennedy said.

"It is. But I guess it could be worse. I'm just being a baby."

"No, you're not." Kennedy reached out and gripped his hand again, but then jerked it back before she continued. "Just because you were born into a wealthy family and others have it harder than you, doesn't mean that your feelings aren't still valid."

Koji smiled and pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Thanks, Kennedy."

They stared into each other's eyes for several moments. The heat was there. That same heat from the night before when they'd kissed. But there was something else. Something soft. Something deeper.

“So... Enough about me. What are your parents like?” Koji changed the subject.

Kennedy cringed.

“We don’t have to talk about my family.” She avoided.

“You can talk about them. I won’t be bothered.” Koji nudged her shoulder with his.

“Well...they’re amazing.” She confessed. “They adore each other and have this amazing love story. My mom is affectionate and giving to a fault. My dad pretends to be stern, but is a big softy. And they encourage me to do and be whoever I want.”

“So, pretty much the exact opposite of my parents.” Koji chuckled.

“See! That’s why I didn’t want to say anything.”

“It’s okay. I think it’s awesome.” He reached across the space between them and tucked a tendril of her hair behind her ear. “The beautiful spirit that you have would die out in a family like mine. I’m glad you have the parents you do. They nurtured the part of you that radiates rainbows and sunshine, so that you can shine your light on the rest of us poor souls.”

Kennedy’s mouth popped open and she could only stare at him. Koji’s hand came up to cup the side of her face. His thumb brushed across her cheek.

“Maybe you should be the one with the creative writing major. That was pretty p-poetic.” Kennedy stumbled over the last word as his thumb stroked her bottom lip.

“Maybe you should stop looking so tempting.” Koji said as he leaned towards her.

Kennedy could no more stop herself from moving towards him than she could stop the sun from setting.

Their lips brushed briefly. Reacquainting themselves from the night before. Koji’s tongue flicked lightly against Kennedy’s lips. Her mouth popped open on a tiny gasp. He gripped the back of her head and his tongue took the opening to dive into her awaiting mouth. The kiss went from small spark to raging inferno.

Koji pulled back. Kennedy cried out softly at the loss.

“Come.”

Koji grabbed her hand and pulled her out of her chair. She stumbled out of her seat and followed him deeper into the stacks.

Kennedy found herself shoved up against the shelves. Koji’s mouth

found hers again and resumed the deep kiss from moments ago. Her fingers slipped into the dark, cool strands at the back of his neck. They clutched tightly and Koji groaned into her mouth.

Of their own accord, Kennedy's hips began to pump against his jean-covered erection. Koji bit her bottom lip in response. She hissed at the sting.

"Sorry." Koji panted.

"It's okay. I liked it." She said breathlessly.

Koji growled deep in the back of his throat. His hands slipped down to her ass and he squeezed tightly. Kennedy rolled her hips even more. She was so wet and throbbing she felt like she would go mad. She needed release.

It was as if Koji could read her thoughts. A moment later, his right hand slipped under her skirt. She felt his fingers move the drenched fabric of her panties to the side. His middle finger slid through her folds and they both moaned.

"Fuck, Kennedy!" Koji stopped kissing her and pressed his forehead to hers. "You're so wet."

"I know. I've never been this turned on in my life." Kennedy confessed.

"Same."

He lightly stroked over her clit with his sopping wet finger. Kennedy gasped and pumped forward against his hand. Koji caught her gasp with a kiss. He started to simultaneously stroke her tongue and her clit. Kennedy whimpered in his mouth as her body began to tremble with the stirrings of her first orgasm by someone other than herself.

The shelves shook slightly as she bucked against his exploring finger. A tingle stronger than she'd ever felt built at the friction against her hardened bud. Kennedy's entire body seized for a second before she shattered. Koji caught her scream in his mouth. Her body was wracked by convulsions. Her fingers grasped his hair in a punishing grip. Her hips rocked against his hand. And then she melted.

Thank you, Mia!

The skirt was a brilliant idea.

Kennedy started to slide down the stacks. Koji couldn't catch her before she crumbled to the floor on trembling legs. He quickly crouched down in front of her.

"Are you okay?" He whispered.

"Yeah. I just can't feel my legs." Kennedy panted.

"I take that as a good thing?" He asked.

“Yeah. Very good.” Kennedy giggled.

“Let’s get you back over to the table.”

Koji held out his hands and she took them. He stood and pulled her up with him. He turned away from her slightly. Then he pulled off his sweatshirt to reveal his white t-shirt underneath. He tied the sweatshirt around his waist.

“Um...do you need...to...well...you know? Do you need relief?”

Kennedy finished with a blush.

“No,” he said quickly. Too quickly. “I’m fine.”

“Koji—”

“I swear I’m fine.”

Jesus! How embarrassing. She made me cum in my jeans. And now, we have to sit and try to study when my underwear and jeans are wet.

“Excuse me. I have to go to the bathroom really quick.” He said once she was back in her chair.

“Uh...okay.” She said and glanced at the crotch area he had covered with his sweatshirt.

Great. Now she either thinks I’m gonna rub one out in the bathroom. Or she knows I messed my jeans.

Koji quickly made his way to the men’s room. He grabbed half the paper towels in the dispenser and rushed into one of the stalls. He quickly cleaned himself off and tried his best to dry his boxer briefs and jeans.

Way to go, virgin! I can’t even imagine what will happen when I can actually be inside her. UGH!

Once he was finished, he tied his sweatshirt around his waist once more. He washed his hands and exited the restroom.

Back at the table, Kennedy had gotten out her materials to study. She looked up at him with a sweet, bashful smile. All his fears about his performance melted away.

She was beautiful. She looked at him with adoring eyes. And for the time being, she was all his. He truly couldn’t be any happier.

“So, uh...I actually have to go to the bathroom too.” Kennedy flushed deeply and wouldn’t make eye contact. “I’m a bit of a mess...down there.”

“Really?!” Koji asked, surprised.

“Yeah. All that slickness doesn’t go away. And now it’s just uncomfortable.”

“Oh.”

Maybe I shouldn't be embarrassed.

Koji remained quiet as she got up and headed to the ladies' room. Once she was back, Koji decided to tell her.

“So...um...earlier when I went to the bathroom and why I have my sweatshirt tied around my waist is because your orgasm was so hot, I kinda came in my pants.” Koji fiddled with his pencil instead of looking at her.

“Oh my God! I did that to you?!” Kennedy exclaimed softly.

Koji glanced up at her. The only emotions that registered on her face were shock, awe, and pure giddiness. No judgment or humor in sight.

“Yeah, you did. You're much sexier than you give yourself credit for.” Koji smiled.

“Thank you.” Kennedy flushed.

Koji began to realize that Kennedy Red just might be his favorite color.

“Well...I guess we should study, huh?” Koji asked.

Kennedy snorted and then dissolved into silent giggles. She nodded when she could contain herself again.

“Alright, let's do it.”

Chapter Nine

Over the next week, Kennedy met up with Koji for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the cafeteria if their schedules matched up. The girls would be there as well. Koji joked and talked with them easily. Her friends adored him.

Once they were finished eating, they would walk out the building together. Kennedy wished it would be hand in hand, but he never reached for hers. And she refused to initiate it.

They would reach the point where they had to part ways. Koji would look at her lips longingly, but never kissed her before he bid her farewell and walked away.

But after dinner, they'd either go back to his or her dorm room and do homework or study. And in between conversation or during breaks they'd kiss and giggle with each other.

Kennedy didn't know what to make of his hot and cold behavior. Even when he was being distant, she still saw the affection on his face. But there was definitely something off. She needed to know if their relationship was going to go any further.

"Today, I'm gonna ask him why he's not affectionate with me." Kennedy said to her friends.

"As you should." Mia stated.

She stood in front of the mirror and fluffed out her red afro. Her tight coils framed her face. The curly bangs reached her eyebrows and brought the focus to her cat-green eyes. She was fresh-faced with the exception of a little mascara and lip gloss.

It was going to be a warm afternoon, and they planned to spend it outside. So, Kennedy had chosen a light olive-green sundress that stopped just above the knee. It was cotton and lightweight with a subtle floral pattern on it. She accessorized with big silver hoops and cute flat sandals. She grabbed a white cardigan, just in case.

"Okay, ladies. Wish me luck." Kennedy turned to them.

“Good luck. Although I don’t think you need it.” Payton smiled at her.

“You look adorable. Koji is gonna flip.” Royal grinned at her. “Oh, and ask him what’s up with Corey. I haven’t seen him in a week.”

Kennedy gave her friend a sympathetic look. But had to give her friend some tough love.

“Royal. Babe. The last thing in the world I want to do is put Koji on the spot like that.”

“You’re right. You’re right.” Royal held her hands up. “Don’t ask. Just have fun!”

“Make him wear a condom!” Mia called to Kennedy as she opened the door.

Kennedy whipped around with wide eyes.

“Shh! We are not having sex!” Kennedy whispered loudly.

“If you say so. Just seeing you two together I can see the heat radiating off you.” Mia smirked.

“I know!” Kennedy groaned as she closed the door.

She could hear their giggles as she walked away.

Koji stood outside and smiled brightly when she walked out of her building.

“You look incredible!” He looked her up and down.

“Thank you.” Kennedy flushed. “So, do you.”

He wore black, fitted jeans with a light blue V-neck t-shirt that fit him to perfection. It wasn’t douchebag gym bro tight. But it was tight enough to show off his very nicely defined biceps and chest. He also had a very professional looking camera slung across his body.

“Thanks!” Koji smiled and pushed up his glasses. “You ready?”

“Yep. So, what’s with the camera?” Kennedy asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Koji grinned.

He turned and started towards the parking lot. Once again, he missed the perfect opportunity to hold her hand as they walked. But he always walked as close to her as he could without stepping on her.

So weird!

They drove to Golden Gate Park. First, they had lunch at a little café near the park. After they were finished, they walked to Stow Lake and rented a pedal boat. Koji snapped shots of a little bit of everything along the way. Including Kennedy.

Koji stepped inside the boat. Once he found his balance, he reached out a

hand to Kennedy to help her in. They laughed as they lowered themselves into the seats on wobbly legs.

They started pedaling and eventually got in sync with each other. They pedaled and talked for a little while, and then stopped to rest and let the sun warm their faces.

Kennedy took a deep breath. She was ready to broach the subject.

“Koji?”

“Hmm...” He hummed.

His head was thrown back and eyes closed. He was gorgeous.

Kennedy’s voice got stuck in her throat. She had to look away in order to speak again.

“I have to ask you something. I hope it doesn’t offend you.”

“What is it?” Koji sat up straight and turned to her. “You can ask me anything?”

“Why don’t you ever hold my hand? Or hug me? Or kiss me in greeting or when we part ways? You only seem to show affection when it’s in private and related to something a little more...sexual.” Kennedy said all of it while fiddling with the hem of her dress.

“I...I don’t know.” Koji said, his brow furrowed in thought. “I never really thought about it. I mean, this is my first relationship.”

Kennedy smiled softly. *We’re in a relationship!*

“So, I have nothing to compare it to. But I guess, maybe it has to do with my parents. They never really show affection towards each other. It’s not really a part of our culture. I’ve never heard them say ‘I love you.’ They definitely never said it to me. You show love by taking care of your family. Not with affection. When I was a kid, I used to envy my friends when their moms would hug them and tell them they loved them. My friends would always get embarrassed and say stuff like, ‘Moooooom, stop! You’re embarrassing me in front of my friends.’ I wished my mom would embarrass me like that.

“So, yeah. I never see my parents holding hands or hugging or kissing. I guess their lack of affection rubbed off on me. From what you said about yours, I’m assuming your parents are the exact opposite?” Koji smiled softly.

Kennedy’s head reeled with the information he’d just given her. She couldn’t imagine a life with no affection. Her heart broke for little Koji and the young man that sat next to her now.

“Yeah. Sometimes it’s so much I want to tell them to get a room.”

Kennedy huffed with a soft laugh.

Koji's hand tentatively reached out and clutched hers. Kennedy's heart fluttered.

"I'm so sorry that you never got the affection that you deserved."

Kennedy looked at him with watery eyes.

"It's okay, Kennedy. Don't be sad for me. I'm okay. But..." He paused, looked down at their joined hands, and gently stroked her skin with his thumb. "...I might need help sometimes. Can you teach me?"

A breath hitched in Kennedy's throat. She tried to hold back, but a tear slipped down her cheek anyway. She couldn't speak. All she could do was nod.

Koji gripped her hand tighter. He lifted their hands to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

"Thank you." His lips brushed her fingers as he said it.

"You're w-welcome." Kennedy said around her clogged throat.

Koji leaned towards her and Kennedy met him halfway. They kissed softly. When they pulled back, they grinned at each other like besotted lovestruck fools. Koji snapped a photo of her to capture the moment.

They turned their focus back on pedaling the boat.

They returned the boat and decided to stroll through the rest of the park. Koji couldn't stop from staring at Kennedy whenever he got the chance. She was stunning.

Her afro glistened in the sun. The different shades of red like a coiling, circle of fire as the breeze blew through it. Her freckles stood out against her fair skin. Especially, the one in the center of her lush bottom lip. Every time she looked at him with those feline eyes, he was punched in the gut. And that was just her head.

Her plump body. The thick hourglass shape. He wanted to strip her down and touch her everywhere. She looked so soft and inviting.

Now, that they had had the conversation about his lack of affection, she touched him often. Her fingers brushed his and he immediately entwined his fingers with hers as they walked. He guided her into an underpass that had a brightly colored mural painted on it that said 'Tunnel of Love' across the top.

Koji grinned slyly and pulled her deeper inside. He pressed her against the wall. Kennedy's eyes widened as he placed a hand on either side of her

head. He caged her in and that innocence in her eyes burned away as the flames of desire flared in her eyes.

As Koji leaned in and captured her lips, his heart pumped thickly. It wasn't completely with desire. It almost hurt. And he knew, she had already crumbled down whatever walls he may have had built around his emotions. He was falling in love. *Hard.*

He pulled back before he could get carried away in broad daylight.

They spent the rest of the day walking, eating ice cream, and going for a drive through the city and their favorite neighborhoods. They pointed out houses that they loved and dreamed of living in.

As it neared dusk, Koji drove to the park next to Lands End Lookout. The Lookout had views of the Golden Gate Bridge. But he wanted something a little more private.

He parked, grabbed a big blanket from the backseat, walked around to Kennedy's door, and opened it for her.

"Come on." He said as he took her hand and guided her down a path into the park.

The park was thankfully empty. Koji found a flat spot in the grass. He flung out the blanket and it fluttered to the ground. He helped Kennedy to sit and took a spot next to her. She stretched out her legs and placed her hands behind her. A soft sigh slipped from her lips as she stared up at the evening sky. He took the opportunity to snap a few shots of her.

He gazed at her as the setting sun set her hair on fire. The orange and pink sky reflected against her skin and hair made her look like something out of a dream. She was simply unreal.

Koji felt a punch to his gut for the hundredth time that day. His heart raced. He felt perspiration prickle his upper lip. He wiped his damp palms on his jeans.

I love her. The thought came unbidden to his mind.

Although his heart and his head knew it. His throat couldn't speak the words. He opened his mouth. Nothing. He swallowed and tried again. Silence.

Those three words were stuck. There was no getting them out. But there was something he could say.

"Kennedy?"

"Yeah." She turned to look at him.

Fuck! She is beautiful!

Snap. Snap. He took a few more photos of her before he put the camera down.

“I...uh...I wanted to ask. Umm...do you want to make this serious? You know? You wanna be my girl and I’m your guy? Officially.” He finally got out.

The biggest, most stunning smile spread across Kennedy’s face. Koji let out a huge breath before she could even answer.

“Of course! Yes!” Kennedy said as she flung her arms around his neck.

He fell back and she on top of him. They laughed for a few seconds before the heat and tension between them took over.

Koji rolled her over onto her back. He gazed down at her. His thumb brushed across her adorable freckles. He leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose.

“I want to make love to you so bad, right here. But it’s too risky. Anybody could walk up on us. And no one gets to see this body but me.” He said possessively.

“The dorms?” She asked, but the look on her face said she wasn’t really feeling that idea.

“No, that’s not good enough for you.” Koji said and kissed her lips. “I have an idea. But I’m not telling you. I’ll make it a surprise. We’ll just have to wait a little longer.”

“Okay. I trust you.” She said with loving eyes.

“Will your,” he pointed to her region down below, “situation be okay for next weekend?”

“You mean, will I be on my period next weekend?”

Koji laughed at himself. “Yeah.”

“No, I won’t. I don’t have it anymore. My mom made me get an IUD before I started college. She didn’t want me to risk my future and she knows how the college lifestyle can be.” Kennedy cringed.

“I’m so surprised you haven’t had sex yet.” Koji stated.

“How do you know I haven’t?” Kennedy said sassily.

“It’s kinda obvious. But truth?”

“Always.”

“I haven’t either.” Koji confessed.

Kennedy shot up and they almost knocked foreheads.

“Seriously?!?”

“Seriously.”

“Oh wow!” She exclaimed softly. “That actually makes me feel a lot better. Less stress, ya know?”

“Same.” Koji breathed heavily.

Please don't let me suck the first time.

Kennedy laid back down. Koji moved over her. She parted her legs slightly and he settled between them. His hands cupped the sides of her face as he lowered his lips to hers. She opened up for him like a flower to the rain. His tongue dove into her mouth just as his hips thrust against her. His hardness pressed against her warmth through their clothes. Kennedy gasped into his mouth. He rolled again and flicked his tongue against hers. She released his mouth on a desperate gasp. It didn't take long before she cried out and began to tremble in his arms.

After days of touching and dry humping, Koji was able to control his body. But it was close. Her orgasms always made him want to cum. He guessed he'd just rub one out in the shower later.

Koji fell on his back. He looked up at the stars that began to appear now that the sun had set. He tried to focus on that to cool his raging hormones.

Once Kennedy finally caught her breath, she looked at him with concern. She propped herself up on her elbow. Her hand splayed across his chest. Slowly, she began to inch downwards. Her fingers reached the button of his jeans. He placed his hand over hers, stopping her.

“Kennedy, you don't have to.”

He *really* wanted her to. But he didn't want to be one of those guys to pressure girls into giving him blowjobs.

“But I want to. I doubt I'll be any good. But Mia has been tutoring us.” Kennedy giggled.

“Jesus. I don't think it would matter. Just you saying you want to made me hard as a rock all over again.” Koji confessed.

A devious little smile spread across her face. She wasn't all 'sugar and spice and everything nice.'

Koji placed his hands behind his head. He knew the pose looked cocky. But it was more an attempt to keep his hands from pushing her and to control himself in general.

Kennedy's fingers trembled as she undid his jeans and pulled the zipper down. Koji lifted his hips to help her pull his pants and boxer briefs down enough to release him. He could feel the cool night air against his dick. But he was so hard, the cool air had no effect on him.

A little gasp burst from Kennedy's mouth. Koji looked at her face as she stared at his junk with wide eyes.

"Wow!" She breathed.

Koji knew the stereotype. He heard enough non-Asian girls say they didn't want to date him because they heard that Asian guys were small. He saw the jokes on social media. It was half the reason he was still a virgin.

He was not the stereotype.

Kennedy took a tentative finger and glided it over his length. From root to tip. Once she reached the tip, her finger slid through the little pearl of precum that had seeped out. She swirled the slick liquid around his head.

"Fuck, Kennedy!" He growled. "Don't tease me."

"Oops. Sorry."

She bent her head down and swirled her tongue around the tip. Koji flinched up onto his elbows.

"Sorry! Did I hurt you?" She asked as she jerked back.

"No. No. It felt really good. *Really* good. I wasn't expecting it."

She grinned. "Oh."

She leaned back down, but this time Koji stayed on his elbows to watch.

Kennedy's plump lips wrapped around the tip once more. Her tongue flicked against the head. Koji's lips popped open. He panted softly as she tested out her abilities. Her head dipped further down his length. She got about midway before she reached the back of her throat and gagged. She pulled back quickly and a little saliva trailed between her mouth and his dick.

Koji was pretty sure he'd never been more turned on in his entire life. Just to watch her try to choke down his length was enough to make him come.

"You're doing so good, Red." He moaned.

Kennedy smiled at him. She must have liked the nickname.

She dipped back down. This time she tried to go further. She reached the base. Her nose nestled in the trimmed thatch of black hair. She pulled back on a huge gulp of air. Then like an expert, she wrapped a hand around his dick and began to rhythmically rotate it up and down with her mouth.

"Ah! Jesus! Fuck!" Koji couldn't stop the shouts that burst from his lips. "I'm gonna come!"

And with a growl deep in his throat, his dick rippled with jets of cum. He warned her, but Kennedy held on tight with her lips round him. He came deeply in her mouth. Once he was finished, she turned to the side and spit out

his semen.

“Here.” He handed her a bottle of water he’d brought with.

She took it and rinsed her mouth before she spit again. Once her mouth was clean, she took a few gulps of water.

“That was *amazing*.” Koji said.

“It was?” Kennedy asked hopefully.

“Yes!”

“Thank goodness! It was a lot to take. You’re big!”

“Thanks.” Koji grinned proudly.

“Sorry I couldn’t swallow.”

“I really can’t blame you. I know it can’t taste great.” Koji cringed.

“Not exactly.” Kennedy giggled. “But I still really enjoyed that. I didn’t think I would. Maybe it has to be with the right person. It felt good making you feel good.”

Again, Koji felt those three words choke him. She was the sweetest, most thoughtful and loving person he’d ever met. She was so open and vulnerable. She made him want to open up. Well, as much as he could.

There was so much she could teach him about love and affection. And he wanted to learn it all. If only he were brave enough.

They laid on the blanket and stared at the stars for a while. Kennedy’s head rested in the crook of his arm. Her warm body snuggled up against his.

After the sun had disappeared, it took with it the unseasonably warm temperature. When she started to shiver, Koji called it.

“Okay, let me get you back before you freeze to death.” He said as he sat up.

“But I was so cozy.” Kennedy said.

“We can be just as cozy in the warmth of one of our dorm rooms. Under some blankets where my hands can explore.” Koji grinned slyly.

“Ooh! I like that idea. Let’s go!”

“Let’s stop and get some pizza on the way.”

“Perfect!”

Koji jumped up and held out his hand to her. He pulled her to her feet, grabbed the blanket, and reached out his free hand to her. Kennedy beamed up at him as she took his hand. They intertwined fingers and headed towards the parking lot.

Chapter Ten

“Thank you, Mia!” Kennedy said as she grabbed her friend’s face and kissed either cheek.

“Um...for what?” Mia asked skeptically.

“For teaching us the way of the blowjob.” Kennedy said reverently.

“Gah!” Mia wiped roughly at her cheeks that Kennedy had just kissed. “Cochina, did you just kiss my cheeks with lips that just sucked dick?!?”

“It was quite a few hours ago. I’ve had pizza and beer since.” Kennedy giggled.

“Ew! It doesn’t matter!” Mia faked disgust, but then a sly smile spread across her face. “So, you sucked out his soul, huh?”

“I did!” Kennedy jumped up and down before flopping on Mia’s bed.

“I’m proud of you.”

“I couldn’t swallow though.” Kennedy pulled a face.

“That takes time, my child. One must walk before they can run.” Mia said sagely.

“You both are ridiculous.” Payton said from behind a book she was reading.

“You should be listening to every detail, ma’am.”

“Pssh. I don’t want to talk to guys, let alone wrap my mouth around *that*.” Payton cringed.

“You say that now. But one day, you’ll be sucking dick like you’re sucking the chrome off an exhaust pipe.” Mia said.

“You think you’ll rub off on me. Ha! I’m never going to the Darkside.”

Mia looked at Kennedy. “She will.”

Kennedy nodded. “Yeah, she will.”

Payton threw the book she’d been reading at them. They swiftly dodged it and burst out laughing.

“Now. Continue. Tell me everything.” Mia placed her chin on her hands in anticipation.

Chapter Eleven

“You have her overnight bag?” Koji asked Royal as he glanced covertly around the parking lot.

“Yep.” Royal handed him a medium sized weekender bag.

It was filled with Kennedy’s pajamas, a change of clothes, and some toiletries that she would need for a weekend away from campus. Koji didn’t want her to know that they were staying in a hotel for the weekend. He didn’t want her to feel anxious about tonight. And he wanted it to be a surprise.

“So…” Royal started. “What’s up with your friend? I haven’t seen him in weeks.”

“Royal, take it from me. You deserve better. I haven’t spoken to him much lately either. He’s pissed because I told him he’s a dick for using people.”

“Oh. Yeah, Kojack. You’re probably right.” Royal gave him a light shove like she was a guy.

“Kojack?”

Royal laughed. “It seemed like a perfect nickname.”

Koji just smiled and shook his head.

Kennedy’s friend really was a cool chick. Kinda like one of the guys with her tomboyish ways. If Corey wouldn’t have been such a prick, they could’ve all double dated. Two roommates dating two roommates.

“Thanks again, Ro-Ro.” Koji smirked and tousled her hair.

“Touché, fucker. Touché.” Royal pulled her head away.

Koji shouted with laughter as she walked towards the dorms. He then popped the trunk of his car and placed the bag inside. He’d drop it off at the hotel before he picked Kennedy up later. He also had little touches he wanted to add to the hotel room before he brought her up.

He wanted to focus on making her first time magical. It also helped him to keep his mind on other things than his performance. He was a nervous wreck. But he found that planning for his girl kept him calmer. And if he

couldn't be the perfect lover, Koji at least wanted everything else to be.

Chapter Twelve

Koji had told Kennedy to dress up for a nice dinner. She knew that meant at a fancy restaurant. So, Kennedy had once again gone shopping for the occasion. Most of the clothes in her closet were a mix of casual clothes for class, bohemian style dresses for the weekend, or club clothes. Nothing for an elegant restaurant.

She was lucky her parents had extra to slip her. Her mom was thrilled to hand over some extra cash now that her daughter had a real boyfriend. Every time they talked on the phone, her mother badgered her about meeting Koji. Kennedy knew she couldn't hold her off for long. She just wanted to be a little more secure in her relationship before bringing him around her parents.

Kennedy smoothed down her new black sequined mini-dress. It stopped just a few inches above the knee. It was strapless and sleeveless with a sweetheart neckline. It cinched in her waist and accentuated her generous breasts and hips. Because the dress was a little on the short side, she opted for black, sheer stockings with those sexy lines that ran up the back of the leg. They attached to the black lace garter belt underneath. And to finish the ensemble she wore black, glittering stiletto heels. All suggested by Mia. Her sexy friend hadn't steered her wrong yet, so she conceded.

The dress called for sleek, straightened hair. She'd almost put it in a slicked back high ponytail. But if it just so happened to be the night she lost her virginity, Kennedy wanted it down and touchable. Not with that awful dent that comes from a hair tie.

It has to be perfect.

In the end, she'd straightened it and then used a barrel curling iron to give her huge soft waves. Jessica Rabbit style.

Again, she didn't put on any foundation since Koji adored her freckles. She gave herself a winged eyeliner and added mascara. The end results made her moss green eyes stand out. And her already insanely full lips looked even more lush with the deep red lipstick she'd applied.

She turned to her friends that once again had gathered in their room to give her their stamp of approval and signature sendoff.

“So?” Kennedy looked at them.

They all had watery expressions on their faces. Even Payton.

“You look like a dream.” Payton said.

“No, she looks fucking hot!” Mia exclaimed.

“He’s one lucky dude. You’re gorgeous, Ken.” Royal added.

“Thanks, ladies.” Kennedy flushed. “Alright, I better get going. He said we have 8 o’clock reservations in the city.”

“Have fun!” The three girls shouted as she opened the door.

“See you later tonight.” Kennedy said.

“Uh huh. Yeah, tonight.” Royal said with a sly smile.

Kennedy frowned.

What was that about?

She shrugged and walked down the hall to the elevators.

Once she reached the entrance to her building, she saw Koji on the other side. His arms behind his back. He fidgeted a little. Like he was nervous. He glanced up and their eyes collided.

Kennedy smiled shyly and stepped outside. Koji’s eyes ate her up from head to toe.

“My God!” Koji exclaimed. Though it came out in a winded whisper. As if he’d just finished a race. “I don’t even have words for how fucking amazing you look.”

“Thank you, Koji.” Kennedy said as she felt her face turn beet red. “You look really good too.”

He had on a dark blue suit. A crisp white shirt underneath with a couple of the top buttons undone. On his feet, he wore brown leather dress sneakers with the white soles. He looked like a corporate mogul who’d just gotten off work and ready to play. His hair was semi-slicked back. Not the douchebag slick hair that looked like a helmet. But the kind where it kept the hair sort of in place, but a few hairs have escaped in a sexy disheveled way. The whole look was sexy as hell. He looked like a male model.

“Oh! These are for you.” Koji said as he whipped a bouquet of roses from behind his back.

They were yellow with orangey coral tips. They were stunning. Kennedy took them from his hand that trembled slightly.

“They kinda reminded me of you and the way you looked in the setting

sun last weekend.” Koji said while he looked down at the ground bashfully.

“Oh, my goodness! Koji, you’re gonna make me cry.” Kennedy blinked rapidly. “I can’t mess up my makeup already.”

Koji expelled a laugh of relief. He pushed his glasses up on his nose. His nervous tick.

“They’re perfect. You’re perfect.”

Kennedy leaned forward and Koji leaned down to meet her. They exchanged a soft kiss.

“Come on. We don’t wanna be late.”

Koji held out his hand and Kennedy gladly took it. She cradled the flowers in her other hand.

The past week, Koji had done so much better with showing his affection. He held her hand everywhere they went. And when they parted ways to head to class, he would give her a soft kiss. Kennedy had been delighted.

She’d walked on a cloud all week.

I have a real boyfriend. And he’s perfect.

They reached downtown and Koji pulled in front of The Grand Marquis hotel.

“A hotel?” Kennedy asked.

“There’s an amazing rooftop lounge where we’ll be having dinner. It has stunning views of the city.” Koji explained.

“Oh. Awesome!”

Valet came to open their doors. After he handed the keys and a tip to the one who came to his side, Koji quickly walked around to Kennedy and offered her his arm. He guided her inside the beautiful hotel. The lobby was made of marble and trimmed in gold. Definitely a place for the wealthy. Kennedy’s parents made good money. But not money like the people who frequented places like this.

Koji headed straight for the elevators. Inside, he pressed the button for the lounge at the top. The elevator dinged their arrival and the doors slid open. Kennedy’s mouth popped open.

“Holy shit!” She hissed under her breath. “I feel like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, sans the prostitute part.”

Koji choked on a laugh.

“Well, you do have the long red hair and black sexy dress like she wore to that first fancy dinner they went to.” Koji said.

Kennedy’s mouth widened even more.

“You know the movie well enough to remember *that* detail?!”

“Yeah. Shhh...” He pressed his index finger to his lips. “Don’t tell anyone. It’ll mess up my street cred.”

Kennedy snorted. And then slapped a hand over her nose and mouth in embarrassment.

“I don’t know why, but I really loved that movie and watched it every time it was on. I wouldn’t dare buy it though.” Koji confessed.

“That makes me like you even more. I think there’s a hopeless romantic hiding in there somewhere.” Kennedy smiled at him.

She saw a blush creep up his neck. Her smile spread even further. It was nice not being the only one to blush all the time.

Kennedy turned her attention back to the rooftop lounge. It had a very 1920’s art deco feel to it. An arched window from floor to ceiling was the biggest wow factor. It provided stunning views of the city. Gray couches filled the center. Dark emerald chairs that wrapped around patrons like a hug with black, round tables lined the windows. The bar was hopping. The lighting gave the bottles of liquor a pretty glow. People filled the stools with golden legs and gray seats at tall golden tabletops that surrounded the bar area.

The patrons were all dressed sharply. There were a few young people around their age. But it was mostly people from their mid to late twenties to early forties. They all appeared to be part of the elite crowd.

Is this his life normally?

Kennedy wasn’t so sure she was down for the snooty crowd. She was a middle-class girl. She preferred salt of the earth kind of people. She certainly enjoyed the special treatment Koji was providing her. But it wasn’t something she wanted nor needed on the regular. For tonight, though, she was going to enjoy every bit of it.

A hostess took them to their table in front of the magnificent windows. Koji pulled out Kennedy’s chair and pushed it in as she sat. Then he took his seat across from her.

They stared at each other for a few minutes too long. The heat and attraction must have radiated off them. Kennedy couldn’t hold it for long. She was the first to look away. She busied herself with looking out at the beautiful view of the city that sparkled against the night sky.

“This view is breathtaking.” Kennedy breathed.

“It is.” Koji said huskily.

She glanced at him and he hadn't taken his eyes off of her. She flushed at the compliment.

As the night continued, through drinks and dinner, their looks became more and more heated. Kennedy couldn't explain it, but their gazes were pointedly sexual. They held the promise of pleasure.

And she was absolutely ready to lose her virginity. She'd never been more certain of anything in her life.

She had begun to wish that they were staying at the hotel. It would be the perfect place to have sex for the first time. Way better than in one of their dorm rooms with the possibility of someone barging in.

After dinner, they drank and talked a little more. But Koji seemed slightly preoccupied. As if something weighed heavily on his mind.

"You ready?" He asked after he paid the bill.

"Yeah."

He rose and came around to help Kennedy up. They held hands as they walked to the elevators. His hand felt clammy, but she didn't say anything.

"Do you trust me?" He turned to her to say before he punched the elevator call button.

"Uh...yes?" She said it as more of a question than anything.

"Good."

Kennedy frowned as Koji pulled out one of those sleep masks. It was black satin. He lifted it up to place over her head. He gave her a reassuring look and she nodded slightly in consent. He placed it over her head and adjusted it on her face until she could see nothing.

"Can you see anything?" He asked.

"Not a thing."

"Perfect."

She heard him press the call button. The elevator dinged a few moments later. With a hand to her back, he guided her forward. She was sure if anyone watched, they had to wonder what was going on. But then she felt his breath on her ear as he stood just behind her. Kennedy forgot about anything else but him.

Her other senses were heightened now that her vision had been taken from her. She heard the doors close. She felt Koji's heat as he stood close. His cologne filled her nostrils and she breathed in deeply. It was woodsy and masculine and sexy as hell. His nose caressed the shell of her ear as he softly kissed her neck. Kennedy shivered.

The elevator dinged. The doors slid open and Koji applied pressure to her back to walk out. The ride down didn't seem as long as when they rode up. And it sounded much quieter than when they were in the lobby when they first arrived.

The click of her heels was muted against the carpet as they walked. His hand held one hip and the other lightly clutched her opposite arm as he guided her. He gripped her a little tighter as they stopped. Kennedy heard a soft beep and then the whirl and a click of a lock being unlocked. She felt Koji lean forward and the sound of a door opening reached her ears.

Koji pressed against her back and she walked forward. He stopped her after only a few steps and a moment later, he pulled the mask from her eyes. Kennedy gasped once her eyes came into focus.

They stood in a hotel room. No. A hotel suite.

It had floor to ceiling tinted windows. More views of the city beyond. The giant king-size bed had rose petals in the shape of a heart on it. Soft candles of various sizes were lit on the nightstands. To anyone else, it would've been cliché and cheesy. To Kennedy, it was a dream come true.

"You did all this...for *me*?!" Kennedy whispered for fear it would all disappear.

"Of course, I did it for you. I... You deserve it." Koji stammered slightly.

Kennedy had the distinct feeling that he had been about to say something else entirely. She let it go for now.

"How did you do all of this?" She asked instead.

"After class, I came to decorate the bed and place the candles around the room. Halfway through dinner, when I excused myself, I called the front desk and they sent someone to light the candles. It wasn't all that much." Koji smiled humbly.

"Well, it's a lot to me."

Kennedy looked away from his penetrating stare and placed her hand over his heart. It pounded quickly.

"Siri, play 'Kennedy's Playlist'." Koji called out.

Suddenly the room filled with music. Sexy music.

'Kennedy's Playlist.' Swoon!

He hadn't missed a single thing. Everything was...*perfect.*

Koji's hand trembled as he placed it over hers against his chest. The dinner and room had gone off without a hitch. She loved all of it. Kennedy's eyes glistened with unshed tears in the candlelight.

Everything up until that moment was a success. *And now, for the main event.*

Koji had stressed over this moment all day. He tried to make everything else perfect for her, in case he wasn't perfect during the actual sex part.

He took a deep breath and looked down at Kennedy. Her eyes were cast down. And her breathing seemed a little too fast. Koji realized she was just as nervous as him. And as he focused on her, he started to feel a bit calmer.

Don't focus on your performance. Just focus on her.

One curling sideswept bang fell over her eye in the sexiest, most innocent way. With the back of his index finger, Koji pushed it back and tucked it behind her ear. Then he took that same finger and placed it under her chin. He gently pressed up to raise her face.

"Look at me." Koji said softly.

Kennedy's eyes fluttered open.

Koji's heart squeezed and then pounded as her green irises stared back at him. Without thought, his hands urgently grasped either side of her face. His fingers in her thick, silky hair. His palms against her jawline. His thumbs against her cheeks. His lips captured hers desperately.

Koji realized that he had let the fire slip from its containment. His tongue plundered her mouth ferociously. The blaze began to catch. He backed Kennedy up against a wall. He gathered her dress in his hands and pushed it up to expose her garter belt and panties. He hiked her leg up around his hips and he thrust against her. The inferno was almost a complete wildfire.

Koji released her lips and trailed his down her jawline to her neck. It gave Kennedy the opening she needed.

"Koji!" She gasped. "Slow down. Please."

Her voice shook with a combination of need and fear.

Koji pushed off her immediately and stumbled back to the opposite wall. They both panted as they looked at each.

"I'm so sorry, Kennedy. I didn't mean to get carried away."

"It's okay. I liked it. But it was just going a little too fast for me."

When Koji felt like he had his desire under control, he stepped towards her again.

He took her hand and turned her to face away from him. He gently swept

her hair over her shoulder. It exposed her back and the zipper that trailed down the center of her dress. He leaned down and softly planted kisses from one shoulder to the other. Kennedy hummed deep in her throat.

Koji grasped the zipper tab and began to slowly pull it down. With every inch of her back he exposed, he kissed. His tongue darted out here and there to taste her as he went. He kept going until he was on his knees behind her.

The dress dropped to the floor. He held her hand as she stepped out of it. He grabbed the shimmery fabric and tossed it onto a chair.

He turned back to Kennedy. Her in nothing but a strapless bra, black lace cheeky panties that exposed the bottoms of her generous globes, the garter belt and stockings, and finally her black stiletto heels. The latter almost made him cum in his pants.

Koji kissed and lightly bit each of her ass cheeks. She gasped. He slowly stood and turned her in his arms.

This time, he kissed her slowly. Deeply. His tongue delved in and she flicked hers against his. He groaned into her mouth.

Koji pulled away again before he got carried away. He took a few steps back to look her up and down. Kennedy flushed. And for the first time he could see that her blush spread across her entire body.

She tried to cover herself.

“Don’t.” He pulled her arms away. “You take my breath away. Every inch.”

Her body was shaped like an hourglass. A thick one. Her stomach was soft and rounded. She had small love-handles on either side. Her breasts were heavy. Her hips flared wide. Her thighs were thick and smoothed down to shapely calves.

She was voluptuous. The type of body artists would have begged to paint in centuries past. The type of body that begged to be nibbled, gripped, fucked, and cuddled. Everything Koji had plans to do over the weekend.

He grasped her hand and walked her over to the bed. He guided her to sit and lie back. She was in the center of the rose petal heart. Her hair splayed around her. She was a vision.

He walked over to the table and grabbed his camera. He turned towards her.

“May I? For our eyes only.” He reassured her.

Kennedy gave him one nod.

Koji walked back to the bed. He lifted one of her legs. Placed her still

heeled foot on the edge of the mattress with her knee bent. He told her to stay as he dragged a chair to the foot of the bed. He got on the chair and stood high over her. She looked sexy as hell. He snapped a photo.

He wanted to take more. But opted against it. The night wasn't about a photoshoot. It was about them. About making love. Losing their virginities to each other. But the break from touching her had cooled him back down. Something he was very grateful for.

Koji placed the camera back on the table. He turned and stayed a few feet from the bed. Kennedy's eyes were on him. He smirked slightly.

Koji shrugged out of his suit jacket. He pulled his white shirt from his pants. Kennedy's eyes widened when she realized she was about to get a private striptease. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall to the floor. He picked it up and tossed it onto the other chair at the table with his jacket. His muscles flexed as he moved. He turned back to her and he unbuckled his belt, undid the button of his pants, and pulled down the zipper. Koji toed out of his shoes. He pushed his slacks down and stepped out of them and quickly ripped off his socks.

When he stood back up and faced her, he was in nothing but his black boxer briefs. His erection pressed against the cotton fabric. The material was too soft to confine him and jutted out like a tent. Kennedy's eyes devoured him.

Koji strode back to the foot of the bed. He held out his hand. She raised hers and he took it. He pulled her up into a seated position. His hands slid behind her back. He fumbled for a moment with the hooks of her bra, but finally got the hang of it. Once unclasped, he pulled it off and tossed it onto the chair with his clothes. He kissed her shoulder before he pulled back to see her naked breasts.

Koji could tell she wanted to cover herself, but instead Kennedy lifted her chin proudly. Her breasts were insanely luscious and tipped with light brown nipples and large areolas. They shriveled and hardened at his gaze and cool air.

He guided her back down to the bed. He crawled onto it and over her. His hands bracketed either side of her head. She looked up at him with such trust and love in her eyes, he almost said, *I love you*. But once again, the words stuck in his throat.

Instead, Koji lowered himself to her lips. He kissed Kennedy deeply and her body responded in kind. Her hips moved restlessly. He knew she was

ready for more.

His kisses trailed down her jaw, to her neck. She squirmed and gasped. He filed away for future reference that her neck was a sensitive spot. Then he moved down to the pretty mountains that her breasts made. His lips wrapped around one dusky brown peak. He sucked it in deeply. His tongue swirled around the bud and then flicked it.

“Ah! Koji!” Kennedy gasped.

He smiled internally and moved to the other breast to give it the same attention. Kennedy’s hips undulated responsively.

Koji’s dick ached and throbbed. He was so ready to bury himself deep within her. But he knew he wouldn’t last long. He *had* to focus on her pleasure. To make sure she got hers first.

A few years back, when he was still a teenager, he’d watched tons of porn. But his cousin told him, *‘You better not be watching a bunch of porn like every other boy I know. It’s not a real representation of sex.’* So, being curious, he’d searched how to make a woman orgasm. He’d watched several videos on it and learned where the clit and G-spot were, and that every woman was different. Now, was the time to put into practice what he’d learned.

He was an overachiever. So, he planned to make Kennedy see stars.

Koji kissed a path down her soft tummy. He listened closely to her breath. Watched as her hands clutched at the flower petals and comforter. His hands smoothed down her hips to her thighs. Koji sat back on the chair he’d used to take her picture.

One by one, he lifted each leg and rested her feet on his knees. He reached under her leg to unclasp the garter’s straps. Then he moved to the front of each leg and removed the stocking from the straps there. He bent his fingers into claws and let his short nails scrap lightly down her legs as he removed the stockings. Kennedy squirmed. Little gasps passed her parted lips.

Once he removed the last stocking, he placed her foot against his chest. He leaned forward and kissed up the side of her calf. Her leg trembled. He reached her knee and then kept going up her thigh. Kennedy’s breath quickened.

Koji reached her lace-covered sex. He could feel the heat that radiated from her. The slightly musky scent of her arousal. He quickly grasped the fabric of her garter and panties. He inched them down her hips slowly.

Kennedy lifted her butt to help. Once he'd pulled them down her legs and whipped them away, she pressed her hands against her face bashfully.

"Don't hide from me." He said softly. "I want to see your expressions. I want to know if I'm doing it right."

Kennedy slowly pulled her hands away from her face.

"Don't be afraid to tell me if you don't like something. And definitely direct me. Slower, faster, softer, harder. Whatever feels right. Whatever feels good. Okay?"

"Okay," she said so softly he could barely hear her.

Koji gripped her hips and pulled her closer to the edge of the bed. He placed her feet on the arms of the chair, which spread her legs wide. He gazed down at her pussy. His dick hardened even more.

"Fuck! You have a pretty pussy." Koji said.

Kennedy's entire body flushed red in the candlelight.

Her mound had a little triangle of hair. She'd shaved or waxed her labia. The lips were a light brown like her nipples. The top of the hood of her clit matched, but underneath and trailing down to her entrance was a soft, pale pink. And she glistened with the slickness of her arousal. She was so wet, he watched as some of it slid down to her little puckered rosette.

She looked delicious.

Koji removed his glasses and tossed them onto the bed. Then he leaned forward and kissed her mound. He kissed and flicked his tongue down the crease between her thigh and labia. And did the same to the other side. Kennedy moaned and flinched back. Her tummy trembled as she tried to contain herself.

He lifted up slightly. Koji pursed his lips together and blew cool air ever so slightly against her warm, wet flesh.

"Ah!" Kennedy gasped.

Koji lowered himself once more. He started at her entrance. His tongue lapped at her slick desire. She was a little salty with a hint of sweet. It was his first time tasting a woman and he liked it. He gathered her natural lube on his tongue and stroked it up to her clit. He bathed it with her nectar. Circled around her swollen nub.

"Oh my God!" Kennedy screamed out breathlessly.

"Does that feel good?" He asked, making sure his breath fanned over her.

"Yes!"

Koji continued where he'd left off. His tongue swirled around her clit. Kennedy rocked her hips. The move made her clit glide over his tongue. Her hips jerked and trembled.

Fuck! She's so responsive.

Koji wrapped his lips around her nubbin and suckled gently. Kennedy shot up to her elbows.

"Ah! Too much! Too much." She exclaimed.

"Okay, no sucking." Koji grinned.

He placed a hand on her chest and pressed her back to the mattress. He went back to what had made her squirm before.

His tongue circled her clit. Then with a feather light touch, he flicked it over her clit. The latter made her hips buck against his mouth.

That's the spot.

He alternated between swirls around her clit and the light flicks. Once her breath became erratic. And she bucked against his face with wild abandon, he focused solely on the soft flicks.

Kennedy's hips shuddered to a stop. Her back arched off the bed. Nothing but silence came from her opened mouth. For only a second before she completely came apart.

Her hips suddenly started again as she fucked his mouth. Her back fell back to the mattress. And a cry ripped from her throat.

"Aaaaaaaah!!! Aaaaah! Unh!"

Koji's mouth latched onto her and held on for dear life. His tongue continued to flick lightly and rapidly against her. He could feel her pussy flexing. He slid two digits inside her and crooked them. He found that soft, spongy spot behind her clit internally. He pressed it rhythmically in time with his tongue.

Kennedy shot up again and tried to scoot away from him. Unfortunately for her, Koji had a good grip on her. He continued and fluid splattered against his hand, tongue, and face as she threw her head back and screamed.

At the realization that he'd made her squirt on the first try made his dick weep with precum. His balls ached for release. His dick was so sensitive that he was sure the first stroke in and he'd come.

Kennedy fell back to the bed when he finally released her with a gasp. Her body twitched with aftershocks. She covered her face with her hands once more. Koji jumped up and ran to the bathroom for a towel.

"Oh my God! I'm so embarrassed. I squirted all over you and the bed."

Her muffled voice said from behind her hands.

“Embarrassed?!?” Koji said disbelievingly as he walked back into the room. “Are you kidding me? That was the hottest shit that I’ve ever experienced in...my...*life!*”

Kennedy peeked at him from behind her hands.

“Really?”

“Yes!” He exclaimed and then pointed down at his junk that protruded out of his briefs. “Do you see how hard I am.”

Koji wiped his face with the towel before he gently cleaned up her thighs. After, he helped her move higher up on the bed. Away from the wet spot. Kennedy reached out and traced a finger down his cotton-covered length. Koji flinched back away from her curious fingers.

“Don’t. I don’t wanna set him off. As it is, I don’t think I’m gonna last long.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “But I promise I’ll be ready to go again not long after.”

“It’s okay. I won’t judge you.” Kennedy said sweetly.

She held out a hand to him. Koji quickly shucked off his briefs. His erection was so hard it bounced as he slid into bed next to her.

“You ready?” He asked.

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“Do you want me to put on a condom? I brought some.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Like I told you before, I have an IUD. So, no pregnancy scares there. And we’ve both never had sex before, so no STI worries either. I just want to feel you.”

He felt his dick jerk at her words. *Stay calm, little dude.*

“I want to feel you too.”

Koji settled himself between her legs. His hair fell forward and made a curtain around their faces. He lowered his lips to hers. Kennedy opened her lips and parted her legs further, welcoming him.

He lowered his arms on either side of her torso. His left hand slid under her arm and wrapped around the top of her shoulder. He kissed Kennedy a few more times before he lifted up to look down at her. His right hand moved down to position the head of his shaft at her entrance. He rubbed the tip of his dick against her entrance and clit. His precum and her arousal mixed together to create the perfect friction. They both moaned.

Koji looked deep into Kennedy’s eyes. She nodded as if to answer his unspoken question. He thrust forward. He felt a slight barrier before breaking

past it. Kennedy gasped and arched up against him.

“Are you okay?” Koji asked with genuine concern.

“Mmhmm.” She hummed.

The cringe on her face told a different story.

“I can stop.”

“No! Keeping going.” Kennedy urged.

It took all he had not to move. She was so warm. So wet. And she squeezed him so tight. He closed his eyes. But that didn’t help.

Think of something else. Anything! My parents. Ew, gross! My grandma. Even worse! Biochemistry. Yes! Think of biochemistry.

On shaky arms, Koji pulled out to the tip and then stroked back in. They both gasped.

“Better?” He asked. His voice trembled with restraint.

“Yeah, a bit. That felt kinda good.”

Koji nodded rapidly. He refocused his efforts.

He pulled back out. The squeeze of her made him grit his teeth. He thrust forward. He could feel his balls tingle. He pulled back out once more. All he could do was one last thrust in and he exploded.

“Fuck!” He growled.

His forehead pressed against Kennedy’s. He panted against her lips. His body twitched and trembled as his dick pumped his seed inside her.

Well, that was embarrassing. Four, Koji. FOUR! All I could do was four pumps. I guess that’s two strokes better than a two-pump chump.

“Well, that was humiliating.” Koji said as he rolled off her and onto his back.

“Don’t!” Kennedy rose up on her elbow to look down at him. “Don’t say that. I’m pretty sure it’ll get better. You were just overexcited.”

Kennedy looked down and flushed.

“What?” Koji asked.

“To be honest, it’s kinda hot. Knowing that I got you that turned on. So badly that you couldn’t control yourself.” She smiled bashfully.

“Well, it’s true. You do turn me on that much. See?” He said as he pointed down.

They both looked down. Kennedy’s eyes widened at the sight that greeted her. He was just as hard as if they hadn’t even had sex yet.

“Oh wow.”

“Round two?”

Koji growled, rolled towards Kennedy, and grabbed her waist to pull her close. Kennedy burst out with laughter.

Chapter Thirteen

Kennedy's eyes cracked open. The sky beyond the hotel window was beginning to lighten. She couldn't help the wide smile that spread across her face. Koji's arm was thrown over her side and banded around her waist. His face buried in her hair. His warm breath snuffled and fanned the back of her neck. His body molded to hers from back to feet. She felt safer than she'd ever experienced in her life.

The night before had been magical. She couldn't have asked for a better first time.

Koji had been so worried about his rather short performance. But with each time they made love, and that had been several times, he got better and better. And lasted much, much longer. So much so that she had barely gotten any sleep. Not that she was complaining.

She snuggled deeper into his arms. Koji hummed groggily. His man bits began to stiffen between her cheeks and he nestled himself a little closer.

"Mmm..." He nuzzled her neck.

"Again?" Kennedy asked in shock.

Although, she really couldn't say anything. She was already slick with arousal from daydreams of the night before.

"It's like I don't have control of my body. All I want is you." Koji whispered against her neck.

Kennedy couldn't help herself as she rolled her ass against his dick. Koji groaned and pumped forward. His lips kissed. His teeth grazed her shoulder and neck. Her clit throbbed with need.

"Please!" She begged.

Koji's hand moved from the nipple he'd been rolling, to back behind her. She felt him grasp his erection and slide it between her cheeks and thighs. She hissed from the sting of her tender insides. He immediately froze.

"Are you okay? We don't have to."

"No! Keep going. Just be gentle."

“Alright.”

Koji eased himself deep within her. Her pussy fluttered in welcome. His hand slid back around. This time, he made his way down to the apex of her legs. His fingers caressed over the thatch of red hair to her clit. His index finger lightly played her clit as he stroked in slow and deep. His lips and tongue kissed and flicked the shell of her ear. He moved down to her earlobe and then her neck. Kennedy moaned and pressed back against him.

She raised her leg and placed it back over his. The move opened her up further. It gave him better access as he strummed her clit. Kennedy felt that tingle stir within her.

“Ah! Koji! I’m gonna come.” She moaned.

His hips quickened. The slick sounds of her devouring his dick filled the room. Kennedy’s face scrunched up as she soared over the top.

“Aaaaaaauuuunnnnnhhhh!” She cried out.

Her pussy seized and then exploded with tight flexes around his considerable girth. He growled into her ear and she felt his shaft ripple with jets of cum.

She reached for the towel on the nightstand before he could slip out and make a mess. She pressed the towel between her legs to catch the flow. Koji pulled out slowly. Kennedy hissed again from the tenderness.

“I think we better stop for a while. You need to recover.” Koji suggested.

“Maybe a hot bath will help. What time do we need to check-out?” Kennedy asked.

“Not until tomorrow at 11.”

Kennedy whipped around to look at him. He answered the question in her eyes.

“I wanted you all to myself for the whole weekend. I knew we’d want time to... You know? Get acquainted.” Koji wiggled his eyebrows.

“Ha!” Kennedy shouted. “You mean, you wanted the whole weekend to fuck each other’s brains out uninterrupted.”

Koji pulled the blanket up to his chin and clutched it with both hands. He gave her a fake innocent look.

He gasped, “Well, I never! I just wanted to spend alone time with my girlfriend.”

Kennedy whacked him with her pillow. They wrestled and giggled for a bit. Koji pinned her to the bed. His hands clutched her wrists above her head. They panted as they gazed at each other. The humor in his eyes turned

gradually to love and adoration. And she knew her eyes mirrored his.

“I love you,” she said.

Her eyes widened slightly. The words had come unbidden. She hadn't meant to say them. She'd wanted him to say it first. But it was too late now. They were already dropped like a bomb between them.

Koji's throat worked. His mouth opened and closed. Nothing came out. He cleared his throat and attempted once more.

“I feel the same.” He said hoarsely.

Kennedy blinked up at him. Koji looked away and then sat up.

“I'll call the front desk and ask for some bath salts and then run you a bath.” He said before quickly rolling to his side of the bed where the phone was.

‘I feel the same.’ That's it? That's all the courage he could muster up to say?

Kennedy frowned. She tried to make herself feel better by rationalizing the fact that he did, in fact, feel the same way. He did love her. He just couldn't say it.

It has more to do with his parents and upbringing than it has to do with me. She tried to tell herself.

But even knowing that he didn't come from an affectionate family like she did. It was still a blow to her self-esteem. She couldn't help it. Logic didn't mean much when emotions got in the way. And Kennedy was all heart.

It only took about ten minutes for someone to bring up the bath salt. Koji ran her a hot soothing bath, which she eased herself into gratefully. Kennedy sat forward and he slid in behind her. Once he was settled in, she leaned back against him. She sighed as she melted into him.

“Better?” Koji asked and kissed her temple.

“Much.”

They sat quietly for a while. The silence wasn't uncomfortable. Kennedy was deep in thought and Koji seemed to be as well. But she decided to take that moment to broach a certain subject.

“So... No pressure. But my mom is dying to meet you at some point.” Kennedy rushed on at his silence. “I told her I wanted to get more comfortable in my relationship before making you meet my parents.”

“I'd actually like to meet your parents.” Koji said.

Kennedy leaned to the side and looked back at him.

“Really?!”

“Yeah. They sound great. I’ve always loved to spend time at friends’ houses. To be around parents that are super easy-going and fun. I’m not saying all Asian parents aren’t, but mine certainly aren’t. It’s all, ‘good grades,’ ‘you represent the family,’ ‘be perfect.’” Koji said the last part in a stern voice that must have mimicked his father.

It was no wonder he’d made the night so magical. How he’d fretted so much about his performance. Kennedy cringed inside. She always pushed the idea ‘perfect.’ At least in her head. He was human and with that came flaws. She had to remind herself that he wasn’t always going to be the perfect boyfriend. And that she shouldn’t be disappointed if he wasn’t.

Like not being able to say ‘I love you.’

“I’m so sorry, Koji. That sounds exhausting.” Kennedy said and clutched his arms that were wrapped around her tightly.

“It can be. But I’m used to it.” He sighed heavily.

“Don’t do that. Don’t dismiss your feelings. Don’t bury them. That’s not healthy.” Kennedy said.

“What am I supposed to do, Kennedy?” Koji said. Frustration colored his voice. “Cry? Scream? Break shit?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Kennedy said softly.

It was the first time he’d spoken to her in an angry voice.

“Well, I can’t do any of that.” His arms loosened from around her.

“You could cry. Let out your frustrations.”

Koji lifted his chin defiantly.

“Crying shows weakness. Ito men do not show weakness.” Koji said as if he recited something his father had said word for word.

“No, it doesn’t.” Kennedy said firmly. “It’s necessary. Otherwise, it turns to anger and bitterness.

“Men never consider anger, frustration, rage, et cetera to be emotions. Those are just as emotional as sadness, hurt, or any other emotion that would make you cry. And it takes strength to be vulnerable enough to cry. Besides, it makes you feel better afterward.” Kennedy raised her chin proudly.

Koji sighed again and wrapped his arms around her once more.

“I’m sorry, Red.” He kissed her neck. “I just don’t really like this subject. Mainly, because there’s nothing I can do about it. My parents aren’t going to change. And they are my family.”

“I understand. Or at least I empathize.” Kennedy rubbed his arms soothingly. “Just know that you can cry and scream in front of me. I won’t

judge you or think any less of you.”

Koji’s arms gripped around her so tightly that she thought he would suffocate her. And then he squeezed her even tighter. His cheek pressed against her back. Kennedy clutched his arms. Her thumbs stroked the skin there.

He held her like that for a few minutes. She knew he needed the affection. And she wasn’t positive because the bath was hot and they had been a little sweaty as their skin clung to each other. But Kennedy thought she felt silent tears run down her back.

Although there were no other signs that he was crying. No shaking. No sobs. No sniffles.

“Thank you, Kennedy.” He said and then kissed her back.

“You’re welcome, Koji.”

He finally released her from his death grip.

The bath had been enlightening. Kennedy had always wanted the perfect relationship. But she had to remind herself that perfect didn’t mean without roadblocks or disagreements. She was glad to have had their first almost fight. What mattered more than the fight was in which way they both fought, and how they communicated through the fight.

So far so good.

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The rest of the weekend they slept, ordered room service, talked, and made love. The hotel room was their own little insulated bubble from the outside world. They felt no need to leave. All they needed was right there.

Kennedy tried to store away every moment to reexamine for years to come. The best weekend of her life with the love of her life.

*Perfection.*

She damn near cried as they pulled into the residence hall parking lot Sunday afternoon.

“I don’t want it to be over.” Kennedy said sadly.

She rolled her head on the headrest to look over at Koji as he put the car in park. His face looked just as melancholy as hers.

“Me too.” He agreed.

He walked her to her building door. Koji pulled her in for a soft, intimate kiss. When he pulled back, Kennedy looked deeply into his eyes. The love was there again. Written all over his face.

“I love you,” she said.

“Same.” He said after a slight pause.

Kennedy sighed inwardly and nodded.

“See you at dinner in the cafeteria?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, cool.” He grinned and kissed her on the forehead before he turned and headed towards his dorm.

Kennedy rode the elevator to her floor with a small, wistful smile on her face.

When she opened the door to her room, three faces looked up at her with barely concealed anticipation.

“Well...?” Mia said.

Kennedy hesitated for a few beats just to make them squirm.

“My virginity is no more!”

Delighted screeches filled the room. Royal jumped up and down on her bed with Mia. Payton watched with a smile on her face and shook her head wryly.

Mia jumped down off the bed and rushed over to Kennedy. She pulled her into a hug. Then she pulled back, grasped Kennedy’s shoulders, and gave her a onceover.

“You look thoroughly satisfied. Tell us everything,” Mia said.

Kennedy gave them the watered-down version of the weekend’s activities. She wanted to keep some things to herself. And she wanted to keep some privacy for Koji. When she finished, Royal and Mia gave her dreamy little sighs for different reasons, of course. Mia sighed over the good sex. Royal sighed over the romance. And Payton. Well, Payton looked like she was half paying attention. She usually did drown out their sex talks.

“Koji. My man!” Mia said proudly. “I’m so glad I don’t have to send you back to him with critiques.”

Kennedy snorted.

“He was so thoughtful.” Royal said dreamily. “Corey has never made me orgasm.”

That statement dropped like a bomb in the small space. They all fell silent. Kennedy and Mia stared with gaped mouths at Royal.

“What?” She asked self-consciously.

“You mean to tell me you’ve been putting up with that asshole all this time for terrible dick, and I’m assuming no oral?!?” Mia exclaimed.

“But I like him!” Royal tried to justify.

“But what’s to like?” Kennedy asked. “He’s a dick!”

“I–” Royal opened her mouth and then stopped.

“Exactly. That dude is indefensible.” Mia said.

“Your picker might be broken, my friend.” Kennedy said.

“I don’t know. We laugh a lot.”

“Girl, a good laugh is not an even exchange for awful dick. You can laugh with him and give the pussy to someone else. I’d ha-ha-ha my ass right on over to some good dick.” Mia finished.

Kennedy shook with laughter.

“Real funny.” Royal pouted.

“How about this? Next weekend will be ‘Project: Find Royal New Dick.’” Kennedy suggested. “We can go clubbing Friday, and Saturday if you don’t find anyone the first night.”

“What about Koji?” Royal asked.

“As much as I want to spend every waking moment with him, I’m pretty sure a girls’ only weekend would be good for both of us. Forces us to give each other space, which in turn, will make us want each other more.

“Mind you, I’ll probably regret saying all this next weekend. And will annoy you all when I talk about him all night.” Kennedy finished with a laugh.

“I have a feeling you’re right.” Mia grinned at her.

“But there’s always after the club. Or even before the club when we could see each other. So, don’t you worry about me. Next weekend is all about you,” Kennedy said.

“Alright. Next weekend it is.” Royal conceded.

The conversation went back to Kennedy’s romantic weekend with Koji.

## Chapter Fourteen

Koji's cell started to ring. It was Monday evening. He'd been attempting to study, but his mind kept drifting to thoughts of Kennedy naked and writhing beneath him. He looked at his phone and saw it was his dad. He rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. He picked up his phone and tapped the green accept button.

"Hey, Dad." Koji answered.

"Koji." His father's voice said stiffly. "Your mother wants you to come for dinner next Sunday."

"Dad, I need to study for my pre-MCATs."

"I'm sure you can take an hour or two away from your studies for dinner with family." His father said.

Koji could tell his father wouldn't back down.

"Alright. I'll be there. What time?"

"Seven. As always."

"Okay. I'll see you next Sunday."

"Goodbye." His father said shortly.

"Bye."

*Great.*

His parents rarely bothered him during the school year. They'd call to check in, of course. But they usually didn't want to interrupt his studies.

*There must be something they want to talk about. Something unpleasant.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Kennedy wobbled over to Koji's building Saturday night. She fumbled around in her little purse for her phone. When she finally found it, she pulled up her texts. She went to her and Koji's text thread.

**Kennedy:**  
*I'm outside. Let me in.*

**Koji:**  
*K.*

Kennedy smiled goofily. Then she crossed her legs when she suddenly felt the urge to pee.

Koji opened the door moments later and she rushed in.

"I gotta pee!" Kennedy whisper shouted.

She awkwardly ran into the community bathroom. Some guys startled at the sight of her. She ignored them and headed straight for a stall. She sighed with relief when she got her panties down and sat in the nick of time.

Once she was done and opened the door, she found Koji leaned against the stall as he waited for her. She had a feeling he stood guard to keep any unwanted advances from the other guys in the bathroom.

She washed her hands and they walked down to his room. He kept a hand on her back to steady her. A little smile on his face the whole time.

"Had a good night, I'm guessing?" Koji grinned down at her as she flopped on his bed drunkenly.

"Meh." She squinted as she held up her thumb and forefinger to measure how little fun she had.

"You look like you had fun." He said as he sat next to her on the bed.

"I mean, we did. But the whole point of the weekend was to find Royal new dick. Last night, she was so moody that no guy would even approach

her. And if they did, she scared them away with her attitude.

“And then tonight, we’re at a different club and who walks in?” She didn’t wait for Koji to answer. “Corey. He slinks over and begs her for forgiveness for being such a dick. And only after a little coaxing and a round of drinks for all of us to butter us up, she forgives him.

“They’re currently in my room making the beast with two backs. And that’s why I’m here. Well, I would’ve come over anyway. But I definitely *had* to come over too.”

“You’re adorable,” Koji said.

“I am?”

“You are. And you know it.” Koji stood. “Let me get you some water.”

“Okay. Ooooo...let’s order a pizza!” Kennedy said.

“Sure. You need something to absorb some of that alcohol.” He chuckled as he reached into his mini fridge.

Kennedy chugged the water within seconds. Koji handed her another and she sipped that one as they waited for the pizza. Kennedy gave him more details about the night. But even in her tipsy state, she could tell that something bothered him.

“What’s up? You seem preoccupied.”

“I have to have dinner with my parents tomorrow. I’m just dreading it.”

“Oh.” Kennedy cringed. “I’m sure it won’t be that bad.”

“I’m not so sure about that. They usually just check in by phone call or text. Dinner means something bad.” Koji fiddled with the bottle of juice he’d gotten for himself.

Koji got the text that the pizza delivery guy was out front. He left to get it. Kennedy thought about her family dinners and how warm and happy they usually were. She couldn’t imagine dreading going home. It’s home. It’s supposed to be the safest place in the world.

*I’ll be his safe place.*

Koji returned and the smell of the cheese, garlicky marinara sauce immediately wafted to her nose. Kennedy’s stomach growled loudly. He laughed, while she flushed.

“I guess the pizza is just in time,” he said.

He sat it on his desk. Grabbed two paper plates and put two slices each on them. He brought the plates over and handed Kennedy hers and plopped down next to her.

They ate in silence for a while. After they were done, Koji took their

plates and threw them away.

Kennedy looked around at his side of the room. Every time she was there it was pretty much spotless. And Corey's side was always a wreck.

"You're a neat freak, aren't you?" Kennedy asked.

"Maybe a little." He laughed.

"A parent thing or a Koji thing?"

He thought for a second.

"I think a little bit of both. They instilled cleanliness. But I also like things organized. I get anxious when things are out of place."

Kennedy fell back on his bed. He leaned over her and smiled. He lowered himself and kissed her softly. When he pulled back, they stared at each other for a while. Then Kennedy reached up and removed his glasses.

"You're beautiful. Did you know that?" Kennedy asked.

"Beautiful?" He asked skeptically. "I've been called handsome, but never beautiful. Isn't that more of a compliment you give to a woman?"

"Normally. But you are. It's hard to describe. Your features are so striking. Like you could be a model in one of those high fashion magazines. And then your insides are just as beautiful." Kennedy raised her hand to cup the side of his face.

"You're one to talk. You're the sweetest person I know." Koji smiled down at her in adoration.

Kennedy sighed. "I love you."

Koji looked away from her eyes.

"Same."

Kennedy didn't say anything for a moment. Then she took a deep breath.

"Why can't you say it?"

"Say what?" Koji feigned ignorance.

Kennedy gave him a pointed look.

"You know what. But let me spell it out. Why can't you say, 'I love you?'"

"I-I don't know." He shrugged. "I've never said it to anyone before. I've never heard my parents say it to each other. They've never said it to me. And I've never said it to them. It's not that easy for me."

Kennedy pulled him down for a kiss. When he pulled back, she cupped his face again.

"I had that feeling."

She quickly sat up and he moved back to give her space. Kennedy

thought for a moment and an idea came to her.

“Oh! What about this? What if you could say it without saying it?” She asked excitedly.

Koji frowned. “And how would I do that?”

Kennedy grabbed his hand.

“What if you said it like this?”

She opened his fingers and with her index finger she drew ‘I ♥ U.’ When she finished, she looked up at him with bright eyes. His eyes lit up at the idea.

“Or maybe even just the heart.” He suggested. “The whole thing might take too long.”

“Whatever works for you. Either way, it gives you the ability to say it without saying it. And I’ll know what it means. Our little secret thing.”

Kennedy said with a soft smile.

“Our secret.” Koji agreed.

That moment, he took her hand, opened it up, and traced ‘♥ U.’

*Love you.*

Kennedy’s heart melted.

“Love you, too.”

Koji lowered her back to the bed. He made love to her slow and gently. The only way that seemed appropriate after he’d finally exchanged declarations of love with her.

Afterwards, Kennedy held him close as they drifted off face to face. Half asleep, Koji placed his finger on her chest. Just over her heart. And sleepily traced a heart.

A tear slid from the corner of Kennedy’s eyelid.

*I love you, too.*

## Chapter Sixteen

Koji parked his car in the five-car garage of his parents' palatial home. He walked through the door into the mudroom just off the kitchen. He quickly toed out of his shoes and padded quietly into the kitchen on socked feet. His mother was at the stove.

They had gardeners. A cleaning lady came twice a week. But his mother refused to hire a cook, unless it was for a big party. She loved to cook. And she currently cooked his favorite. Quail egg soup.

"Hi, ma." Koji greet.

Her hair was jet black with a few streaks of silver shot through it. She wore charcoal gray slacks and a lightweight powder blue sweater. Her usual string of pearls graced her slender neck. Her feet bare. And a navy-blue apron protected her ensemble. Even at home she was the epitome of elegance and grace.

He walked over to her and took a deep breath over the fragrant steam. She swatted him back.

"Don't hover over the food." She tried to suppress a laugh.

Koji grinned. He was about the only person who could at least bring out a little playfulness from his mother.

"Smells great as usual." He complimented.

She nodded once.

The shuffle of slippers feet reached Koji's ears.

*How is it that even his footsteps sound stern?*

Koji turned to see his father in the entrance to the kitchen.

For the evening he wore dark-washed pressed jeans, a white button-up shirt, and a navy sweater over it.

"Son." His father nodded.

"Pa."

Koji could tell his father wasn't happy about something. He was even more short than normal and he had that little crease between his eyebrows

that he got when he was mad.

*Great.*

Koji didn't deal well with anxiety. He was not about to wait until dinner to find out what was going on. It was his favorite food and he couldn't very well enjoy it with knots in his stomach. And if he knew his father, he'd torture him to the bitter end.

"So...what's up?" Koji asked.

"What's up?" His father played dumb.

"Come on, Pa. You don't usually call me to come for dinner in the middle of the semester. So, what's up? What's wrong?" Koji said, refusing to back down.

"Well...your mother and I noticed some interesting charges on your charge card lately. We want to know what's going on?"

"Going on?" It was Koji's turn to play dumb.

His father gave him a stern look.

"Dinners at fancy restaurants. A weekend stay at The Grand Marquis with all kinds of room service charges." His father gave him a pointed look.

"And? It's not like you can't afford it." Koji grumbled.

He hated them in his business.

"That's not the point. It's my money and I say what I spend it on." His father's voice started to raise. "Now, what's going on?"

Koji knew by his tone that the anger boiled just under the surface. If he didn't start to explain himself, the rage would boil over. He hadn't wanted to tell them about Kennedy yet. He knew they'd have questions. Questions he wouldn't want to answer. The less they knew the better. But there was nothing he could make up to justify his purchases.

"I...I have a girlfriend now. I just wanted to take her out. To be romantic." Koji mumbled.

His mother's eyes lit up. He'd never had a girlfriend before. He was sure his parents had started to worry. He just hadn't been into the girls they wanted him to date. And the girls he'd been drawn to, never took an interest in him.

"Oh. What is her name?" His mother asked.

*Shit! Just from her name they'll know she's not Japanese or Asian at all.*

"K-Kennedy." Koji stuttered.

"Kennedy?" She frowned. "Kennedy what?"

"Kennedy Callaghan."

Her frown deepened, but she said nothing.

“I want to meet her.” His father said abruptly.

“We are reaching the end of the semester. We all have finals. Maybe when summer starts?” Koji rushed to explain.

“Alright, then. When your exams are done. We will have dinner here. Bring her.” His father commanded.

Koji nodded his assent.

By his tone, Koji knew his father brooked no argument. And he would not forget.

*I only have a few more weeks with her.* Koji thought morosely.

He'd hoped to keep her a secret from his parents for as long as he could. Maybe even until graduation the following year. He knew as soon as they met her. Saw her. That they'd flip out.

*But maybe they'll see what I see. She's so charming and sweet. Maybe they'll fall in love with her like I did.*

Koji wasn't one for praying. But he prayed in that moment.

*Please...*

## Chapter Seventeen

“So...uh...” Kennedy began. “My parents want to meet you. This Saturday.”

They were in the middle of studying in her room. He was sprawled across her bed. She sat at her desk. The separation was the only thing that would guarantee they’d keep their hands to themselves to focus on their studies.

Koji looked up at her with wide eyes.

“Oh.” He blinked.

“I swear they’re easygoing. And I’m pretty sure they’re gonna love you.” Kennedy reassured him.

“Okay. I’m down.” Koji smiled at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Kennedy asked worriedly.

“It’s nothing.” Koji sighed and then sat up. “My parents want to meet you too.”

“Oh.” It was her turn to look stunned.

Truth be told, the thought of his parents scared the shit out of her.

“Yeah. But I told them that we’re busy with finals and stuff. So, they said when summer starts, they want to have you over for dinner,” Koji said.

“Okay, so a few more weeks then?”

“Yeah.”

The thought hung heavy in the air between them. Kennedy instinctively knew that meeting his parents would be a pivotal moment in their relationship. Just from the things he’d mentioned about his life, she had a very strong feeling that they wouldn’t approve of her. She was normally really good with parents. But the Itos were going to be tough nuts to crack.

A small cloud of darkness formed over their heads. It filled them both with impending dread.

*Everything has been so perfect.*



## Chapter Eighteen

“Oh, my goodness!” Kennedy’s mom exclaimed immediately after she opened the door. “You two make the cutest dang couple!”

Koji couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. Her mother’s warmth was cheerful and instantaneous. Like the sun when he stepped outside on a bright afternoon. It was where Kennedy got hers from.

It wasn’t the only thing Kennedy got from her mom. She looked exactly like her mother. The shape of her eyes, the breadth of her nose, the fullness of her lips, and the heart-shaped face.

Their only differences were that her mother had dark mahogany skin, dark brown hair and eyes. Just as beautiful. Just slightly different. And she was aging so well, they could be sisters instead of mother and daughter.

Her mother wore ripped skinny jeans, white sneakers, and a cozy pink sweatshirt.

“Come on in here.” She stepped to the side and ushered them in.

“Mom, this is Koji. Koji, this is my mom, Sandra.” Kennedy introduced them.

Koji could barely get out, “Hello, it’s nice to meet you,” before he was wrapped up in the best hug he’d ever received.

“Boy, quit playing with that proper stuff. We hug in this house.” She rubbed his back soothingly as she said it.

*I’m never gonna leave.*

“He is so cute!” Sandra said to Kennedy as if he wasn’t there.

The smell of fried chicken wafted up his nose. Koji had to stop himself from rolling his eyes in the back of his head.

“Are they here?” A male voice tinged with an Irish accent called out.

“Yes! Get your butt in here.” Sandra called back to him.

A rather large, husky red-headed man with the same color eyes as Kennedy tromped down the hallway towards them. He wore khaki cargo shorts, a Berkeley t-shirt, and white sneakers.

“So, you’ll be the boyfriend. Koji, is it?” The man asked.

“Uh...” Koji stood up straighter. “Yes, sir. Koji Ito.”

Koji held out his hand.

“Sean. Sean Callaghan.”

Kennedy’s dad took Koji’s in a firm handshake. His hand was massive and wholly intimidating.

“Ha! Get in here, kid.” Sean said as he pulled him in for a side hug and a firm pat on the back.

The strong pat almost sent Koji to the floor.

“I already know, if my Kennedy chose you, you’re a good man.” Sean said proudly.

Kennedy beamed at her dad as he pulled her into a big bear hug. He lifted her off her feet. Then he kissed her on the cheek. She looked down at her father with so much love, Koji felt a tinge of jealousy at their obvious affectionate relationship.

*What would it be like to have a father like that?*

Once Sean put her feet back on the floor, Sandra pulled her in for a warm hug. Then her mom pulled back, held her at arm’s length, and smiled at her with watery eyes.

“My baby is a woman now.” She said soft enough where Sean couldn’t hear.

“Mom!” Kennedy hissed as she looked to make sure her dad didn’t hear. “How could you even know that?”

“I know. A mother always knows.”

“This is so embarrassing.” Kennedy flushed.

“Oh, hush. You’re grown. And it’s natural.”

Koji felt his own face heat with embarrassment.

Sandra led them into the kitchen.

Their house was modest in comparison to his parents’ mansion. Still pretty big by most people’s standards. But what it lacked in square footage, it absolutely made up for in warmth.

It wasn’t messy or cluttered. But it had pictures everywhere. Knick-knacks that showcased their travels. And everything Kennedy did throughout her life. From framed childish drawings to awards for academic achievements. Next to her parents’ house, his seemed downright sterile.

His parents lived in a house. Her parents lived in a home.

“I hope you’re ready to eat. We’ve got fried chicken, mashed potatoes,

green bean casserole, and peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream.” She listed off.

“Can I stay forever?” Koji asked and then pressed his lips together for being so forward.

“Baby, as long as you want.” Sandra winked at him.

Koji helped Kennedy set the table. Sandra and Sean brought in the food. They sat down and Sean said a quick prayer. Koji was used to his family sitting and saying ‘Itadakimasu,’ which meant ‘Let’s eat,’ in Japanese, before they tucked into their food. He wasn’t religious, but the prayer seemed nice. Personalized. Especially, when her father added him to the prayer.

They lifted their heads when Kennedy’s dad was finished and started to pass around the platters of food. Once their plates were full, Koji tucked into his food and nearly passed out from the amazing flavors. Kennedy’s parents asked how they met and they regaled them of the story of the war between the boys and the girls. Her parents chuckled happily.

“Kennedy said that you two have an amazing story. But she hasn’t told me the details yet.” Koji looked to both her parents.

“That’s because they tell it so much better than I can.” Kennedy said.

“Well, it was my last year of college.” Her mom began. “My school had a semester abroad opportunity. I hadn’t been much further than my neighborhood, and liked the idea of challenging myself. So, I packed up and moved to Dublin for a semester.

“It was literally my last night in Dublin. My friends and I decided to go out with a bang. We headed to this popular pub, where I locked eyes with this big, red-headed beast of a man across the room.” She laid a loving hand on Sean’s arm.

“I had just finished my carpentry apprenticeship and was celebrating with some friends.” Sean interjected. “I locked eyes with Sandra and that was it for me.”

“He bought me a drink and one thing led to another, and we ended up talking until the bar closed.” Sandra continued. “Then he offered to walk me to my place. We walked slow and talked fast. Trying to fit a lifetime into a few hours.”

“At her door, I tried to give her the best kiss of her life. A kiss she’d never forget.” Sean chuckled. “Turns out, it was a kiss I could never forget.

“A few weeks had passed, and I knew that I’d never get her out of my system. I knew she was it for me. No other woman would do. So, after

Christmas and New Year's, when I knew the spring semester had started, I packed up my bags and headed to America.

"All I knew was she went to school in San Francisco and the name of the school. I had no plan. No idea what I'd do for work. I just knew I needed to find her and that there would always be work for building things."

"I hadn't forgotten about him either. In fact, I had kinda fallen into a depression. I knew I'd never find someone like him again. But I knew nothing about him, save his name and that he lived in Dublin as a soon to be carpenter. I still had a semester to finish. And it wasn't like my parents had the money to send me back to Ireland. They'd only had enough to send me the one semester. So, my heart was so heavy with the realization that I'd never see him again.

"Then one morning, I was headed to the library on campus and there he was sleeping on a bench out front." Sandra grinned up at her husband.

Koji could feel the love that radiated between them. It was as if they saw each other again for the first time. As if the passage of time and the ups and downs of marriage hadn't affected their love in the slightest.

"I figured every student had to go to the library at some point. So, I camped out there." Sean shrugged. "It paid off. I felt someone touch my arm. I opened my eyes and there she was. My angel."

"We've been together ever since." Sandra finished.

Kennedy sighed wistfully. "I love that story."

"That is probably the most romantic true life love story I've ever heard." Koji said.

"We were pretty lucky." Sean said and then leaned over and kissed Sandra's temple.

As they continued to eat and chat, Koji's mind kept wandering to his own relationship.

*I hope Kennedy and I will be just as lucky.*

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"So... What'd you think?" Kennedy asked Koji when they were back in his car.

"I love your parents so much. They're cool as shit." Koji smiled brightly.

“They are pretty amazing.” She grinned back.

“Other than coloring, you look exactly like your mom and have the same personality. Sunshine and rainbows.” Koji said.

He took her hand and brought her knuckles up to his lips. He kissed the skin there softly. Kennedy flushed.

“And like your dad with your mom, I can’t seem to take my eyes off you. It’s like you’re the sun and I’m a sunflower. Following you wherever you go.” Koji said.

He then traced a heart on the backside of her hand. Something he did all the time after she’d suggested it. Her hand. The small of her back. Her shoulder. Anywhere.

Kennedy sighed dreamily. Her first relationship was a dream come true.

Koji’s next words doused her happy moment slightly.

“I just worry it won’t go quite so well when you meet my parents. So, don’t expect much. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.” Koji said.

“I know.” Kennedy frowned.

Koji squeezed her hand a little tighter.

Kennedy hated the feeling of impending doom that hung over them.

Please let them like me.

Chapter Nineteen

As the end of the school year approached, they spent as much time together as their finals would allow. It was if they knew their days were numbered.

Koji knew it more than Kennedy. She could only assume based off what he told her. But he knew for a fact that his parents were going to flip the fuck out when they met her. He knew them too well. He knew they had bigoted views. They were the poster children for the ‘Model Minority.’

His grandparents had been in the Japanese internment camps during World War II. After that, while his family tried to only interact amongst their own community out of distrust; they also did all they could to fit into White spaces when needed. To be perfect. Not to make any waves. To be White adjacent. Which was more often than not.

And to blend with someone Black, was not part of that plan. His parents would grudgingly accept a White girlfriend. They’d even slightly turn their noses up to a Korean, Chinese, or any other Asian American outside of a Japanese girlfriend. But a Black girlfriend? Even one that was fair in color? Nope. No way.

But Koji still prayed that they would see the love between him and Kennedy. That they would see how special she was. That they really wouldn’t be completely blind to love and happiness.

Koji passed his pre-MCAT test. Kennedy passed her finals. They packed up and moved out of their dorms for the summer. And they spent two amazing weeks off before his dad caught him on the way out to see Kennedy one afternoon.

“We want to have your girlfriend over for dinner next weekend.” His father stated.

“But—” Koji stopped.

His father gave him a stern look. It meant there would be no arguments.

“Yes, sir.” Koji said before he walked to the garage.

Koji headed to Kennedy's house with a heavy heart.

Kennedy flung the door open and hugged him tightly, as if they hadn't seen each other the previous day.

"Come on! We're about to play a game." She exclaimed.

Kennedy grabbed his hand and pulled him into the kitchen where her parents sat at the table. Colorful cards in red, blue, green, and yellow sat in the middle.

"Oh, this is trouble right here." Koji said, putting his worries to the side for the moment. "This has been known to break up families. And I'm good."

"Ha! Bring it, kid." Sean scoffed.

"Don't let him fool you, Koji. Mama is the one who always wins." Sandra winked at him.

"What are the stakes?" Koji asked.

Sandra thought for a moment.

"Losers have to cook."

"Alright, bet." Koji said.

As they began to play and trash talk each other, Koji looked around the table. He felt a bittersweet feeling come over him. He adored spending time at Kennedy's house. He loved her family. Her parents had welcomed him with open arms and treated him like a son.

He spent time with Sean in the garage as he made his custom furniture. He was a general contractor by day and an amazing carpenter on the side. And he also spent time with Sandra in the kitchen. She owned a small bakery chain and he liked to help a little with her creations. Mainly, he liked to sample her creations.

They were never short on hugs or encouraging words. The more time he spent with them, the more he began to resent his own parents. Logically, he knew that they were brought up the same way they had raised him. They did the best with what they knew. But it was still hard to understand how they couldn't even express a little bit of love or affection for their son. He learned every day to open up further to Kennedy.

But that's because she's showing you. You're learning by example. Who's showing your parents?

After Sandra annihilated them, Koji and Sean decided to grill. Because, as Sean put it, "*That's what men do.*"

Kennedy and Sandra still ended up making sides to go with the meat they grilled.

The house was filled with laughter and happy chatter. Sandra put on music. Sean swept her up in his arms and they danced around the kitchen. And Koji's heart squeezed.

Even on the best of days, the kitchen was quiet in his house. And the meals were generally cold and silent with a little stunted conversation here and there.

He'd been to other Asian friends' houses that were lively with grandmothers, cousins, and siblings around good food. The elders were gruff, but would still snatch a hug or a kiss from the children when they thought no one was paying attention. But the Ito household was serious and colder than a morgue in January.

Once dinner was over, Kennedy and Koji slipped downstairs to the family room. They put on a movie, but it watched them as they made out on the couch.

"Nope. Let's keep it PG-13." Kennedy pulled back when the kiss got a little too hot. "My parents are pretty cool, but they aren't *that* cool. My mom has always said no sexual relations under her roof unless I'm married. And honestly, I don't know about even then."

Kennedy cringed at the thought and then laughed.

"I understand. And I don't wanna disrespect them. I freaking love your parents!"

Koji pulled her close and satisfied himself with just being close to her. He absentmindedly drew a heart on her forearm.

"So..." He began. "My parents want to have you over for dinner next weekend."

"Oh." Was all she said.

"I'm sure it'll be fine." He knew he didn't sound very convincing.

"Yeah." Her tone said she didn't believe him.

They didn't say more. Instead, they snuggled deeper into the couch and under the blanket that covered them. Their arms wrapped tighter around each other. As if they held on for dear life.

Chapter Twenty

Kennedy got dressed for dinner with hands that trembled. She chose a modest, white eyelet sundress. And paired it with flat, white sandals. She pulled her natural coils up into a pineapple on top of her head. The red curls spilled down to blend in with her bangs that framed her face. Gold hoops adorned her ears. She left her face nearly makeup free. A little mascara for her nearly invisible red lashes and a dab of clear, shimmery lip gloss. A fresh-faced look that made her appear sixteen again.

“Whatever happens, Ken, we’ll be here.” Royal said to her as she wrapped her in a hug from behind.

They had all come over for moral support as she got ready for the big dinner.

“You’re damn straight.” Mia agreed and joined in the hug.

“If they don’t see how amazing you are, they’re blind and dumb.” Payton said and hugged her too.

“Thanks, guys. I love you so much.” Kennedy said. Her voice wobbly with unshed tears.

Hold it together, ya big baby. You haven’t even met them yet.

Kennedy took a deep breath and swallowed down her tears.

They all walked downstairs to find Koji scarfing down some cookies her mom had baked. He quickly wiped the crumbs from his mouth and navy blue polo shirt.

“Hey, girls.” He greeted her friends.

“Hey!”

“Hi, Koji.”

“Sup, Kojack.”

They all said at the same time.

Koji stood as Kennedy approached him for a kiss.

“You look amazing, Kennedy.” Koji breathed.

He took her in for longer than was necessary. She held his gaze. It was as

if they spoke to each other telepathically.

“This is it.”

“Possibly the beginning of the end.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Always will.”

“Well,” Mia broke the spell, “we’ll leave you two to it.”

“Good luck.” Royal said.

“Thanks.” Kennedy and Koji said at the same time.

“Bye.” Payton said softly as she followed the other girls out.

Once the girls were gone, Kennedy’s mom walked into the kitchen.

“You two look like you’re going to a funeral, not dinner with your parents.” Her mom frowned.

“Might as well be.” Koji whispered under his voice.

“What was that?” Her mom asked.

Kennedy elbowed Koji.

“Nothing, mom.”

She hadn’t told her parents about how Koji’s parents might not accept her. Only that they weren’t as warm and welcoming as they were.

“Well, you two have a nice time. Tell your parents ‘Hello’ for me and that I’d like us all to have dinner at some point. Maybe we can go someplace nice.” Her mom finished.

“Uh...sure. I’ll let them know,” Koji said.

Her mom couldn’t tell, but Kennedy heard the skepticism in his voice.

“Alright, we should go.” Koji placed a hand on the small of her back.

“My parents hate tardiness.”

“Yes, don’t let me keep you. You two get outta here.” Her mom said with a smile.

“Bye, mom.”

“Bye, sweetie. See ya later, Koji.”

“Bye, Sandra.” Koji said almost sadly.

Kennedy gasped when they pulled up to the mansion Koji lived in.

“This is where you live?!” She exclaimed.

“Yep. Welcome to my fancy prison.” Koji grumbled as he pulled into the garage and parked. “I’d rather live in your parents’ house. Modest and filled with love. Instead of a monstrosity filled with icy, strained tolerance.”

Kennedy reached across the center console and gripped his hand. She tried to infuse as much comfort as she could.

He gripped her hand just as tightly. With his other hand he slowly drew 'I ♥ U,' on the back of it. Then he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it softly. He looked into her eyes with so much love that she almost sobbed.

"Always," he said.

"Always." She repeated.

Kennedy waited until he walked around to open her car door. He helped her out and she stood on wobbly legs. They walked into what looked like a mudroom.

"Take your shoes off." He instructed her.

They both toed out of their shoes. He grasped her hand and guided her into the kitchen.

His mother stood at the island. She was finishing up a huge spread of sushi and sashimi. The colors were vibrant and inviting. Unlike the rest of the kitchen and the person who prepared the food.

The kitchen was all white. The only color were the splashes of gold in a decorative bowl or the pulls on the cabinets and drawers.

His mother was dressed in black slacks, a white blouse, with white pearls around her neck and at her ears. A black apron protected her clothes.

From the open concept kitchen, Kennedy could see parts of the rest of the house. They looked just as cold. One family portrait hung on the living room wall above a fireplace. In it they wore no color and their faces were unsmiling. The furniture was white and looked as if no one had ever sat on it. The whole place screamed 'Look but don't touch.'

How did a kid grow up here?

Kennedy took a deep breath as the older woman turned. As soon as their eyes connected, Kennedy could feel the chill in the woman's eyes. It ran down her spine. His mother's face pinched slightly. Then she quickly covered her distaste with a small, cold smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Ma, I'd like to introduce you to Kennedy." Koji started. "Kennedy, this is my mother, Jun."

"Hello, Mrs. Ito." Kennedy said with a bright smile.

She stepped forward to hug the woman. His mother raised her hands that had just been on the raw fish. Kennedy stopped mid-step.

"Sorry, sticky hands." Jun said by way of apology. "It's nice to meet you, Kennedy."

Kennedy had the distinct feeling that she wouldn't have hugged her even if her hands weren't sticky.

His mother's eyes stared at Kennedy's hair for a moment before they slowly made their way down her body. The stare down felt almost insulting.

"You must eat well." Jun said.

Did she just call me fat? Koji's reaction confirmed it.

"Ma!" He shouted.

"I'm sorry. I only meant—"

She was cut off by the entrance of his father.

He wore khakis and a navy button up shirt. He was about average height, but his serious presence made him feel much taller. Intimidating.

His eyes landed on her and he frowned. He didn't even try to hide his displeasure like Jun had.

"Pa, this is Kennedy. Kennedy, this is my father, Ichiro Ito." Koji said.

"Mr. Ito." Kennedy said and bowed.

She hadn't bowed to his mother. But for some reason it felt like the thing to do with his father. He bowed slightly in response. The frown never wavered.

"So, you're Black." Ichiro said.

"Pa!"

"Yes. And Irish." Kennedy said with a lift of her chin.

So, it's gonna be like that, huh?

"Hmm... That's where the name comes from." He turned to his son to address him. "I thought you were bringing home a White girlfriend. That would've been preferable to this."

Kennedy drew in a sharp breath.

"Are you fucking serious, Pa?" Koji lost his cool.

"You do not speak to me like that. I am your father!"

"I don't care. Not when you speak to my girlfriend with such disrespect. She's ten times the person you are. You haven't even given her a chance!" Koji's arms gestured wildly in his anger.

Kennedy had thought that they would disapprove only because she wasn't Asian. She didn't realize it was because they were full blown racists.

Oh! And don't forget fatphobic.

"I don't care what kind of person she is. I will not allow this." His voice boomed. "You will find a respectable Japanese girl and that's final."

"I think we should all calm down and have dinner." Jun said like she was

some *Stepford Wife* robot.

“As if I’d stay to eat where I’m obviously not welcome.” Kennedy finally found her voice again.

“By all means, see yourself out.” Koji’s father gestured towards the mudroom.

Kennedy glared at him. She then turned on her heel and marched towards the door. But she stopped in the doorway that separated the mudroom and kitchen. She turned and looked first at Jun and then Ichiro.

“I have no idea how, but you have a wonderful son. He is loving and warm. He deserves so much better than you two for parents.”

And with that she turned, grabbed her shoes, and walked out into the garage.

Her heart pounded in her chest. Her heart squeezed. The backs of her eyes stung with tears. Until her eyes swam with them. A sob broke from deep within her chest. She vaguely heard shouting past the roaring in her ears.

She suddenly felt arms wrap around her. Her face buried in soft cotton. The smell of his cologne that usually comforted her, just made her cry harder.

“I’m sorry, Kennedy.” Koji’s voice was muffled against her hair. “I’m so sorry.”

He held her for a little while longer. He rocked her from side to side until she calmed.

“Let me take you home.”

“No!” She shouted and then softened her voice. “Not yet. I don’t want my parents to see me like this. Can we go for a drive or something? Maybe even stay the night somewhere?”

“Yeah, we can do that.”

~~~

Koji was absolutely humiliated.

“How could you treat her like that?!” Koji shouted at his parents after Kennedy walked out the house.

“She’s trash. You can do better.” His mother said.

“Trash? You don’t even know her like that. What because she’s half Black?” Koji railed. “Her father is a general contractor and furniture builder

who makes good money and her mom owns a chain of bakeries she started. Since when is that trash? *You're trash.*

“Money is not an indicator of trash. How you treat other human beings is what makes a person trash or not. Her parents welcomed me from the moment they met me. They have treated me like a son. And have been nothing but loving and kind to me. They are the furthest from trash anyone could be. But you just proved that you both are a heaping fucking dumpster fire worth of trash. You talk of shame. Well, you’ve just shamed me in front of the only person I’ve ever loved.”

Koji was positive he saw a look of pain cross his mother’s face at his last sentence. But she quickly hid it behind a look of contempt.

“You will respect us or you can get out.” His father grunted.

“Since I have no respect for either of you, I’ll gladly get out.” Koji said.

He stormed out of the house and found Kennedy standing dejected in the garage.

Koji quickly made his way to her. When he came around to her front, his heart broke for the tears that streaked down her face. She looked like the saddest person he’d ever seen. Her usual sunshiny personality was gone.

He wrapped her up in his arms. She shook within them.

Koji wanted to go back in time and just face the consequences of never letting them meet. It would’ve been better than this. It would have saved the most important person in his life from all this sorrow.

After they decided to stay the night somewhere, he guided her to the car and helped her in.

He threw the car in reverse and squealed his tires out of the garage. He left black tire marks from the garage into the driveway.

*Good. I hope they can’t get them out.*

It would be a stain on their pristine, phony façade. Kinda like him.

“I can’t believe they’d act like that.” Koji slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “They didn’t even give you a chance. What the fuck?!”

Kennedy remained quiet in her seat. She only bit her lip and stared out the window.

Koji wanted to say more. Wanted to reassure her. Instead, he kept his mouth closed. He knew nothing was a guarantee now.

He found a hotel for them to stay at. It wasn’t as fancy as The Grand Marquis. But it was still pretty high end.

“I’m sorry, Sir. Your card was declined.” The front desk rep said.

“What?!” Koji’s stomach dropped. “Try my debit card.”

“Unfortunately, that was declined too.” The woman said a few minutes later.

“Give me just a second.” Koji said and walked away as he pulled out his phone.

He knew before he even called. But sure enough, after calling the credit card company and his bank, both of which his father had his name on, a temporary hold had been placed on both.

Koji walked back over to Kennedy at the front desk.

“My dad put a hold on my cards. I have zero money, other than a little bit of cash in my wallet.” Koji sighed. “What a dick!”

“I have some money.” Kennedy looked around the hotel. “But it’ll have to be something cheaper than this.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Koji guided her out and back to the car.

They found a decent chain hotel that was clean and modest.

Koji tried not to think of how quickly his parents had cut him off. It was a silent move, but it’s meaning was loud and clear.

*Disobey and you get nothing.*

He pushed his impending decision to the back of his mind.

“Now what?” Kennedy said.

She lowered herself to the bed like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. She looked down at her clutched hands on her lap. Her depression was palpable.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, it’s clear that they’re cutting you off.”

“Kennedy, let’s not even think about it.” Koji sat next to her and took her hand. “Tonight, with the cash I have left; we are going to order food, get snacks from the vending machine, and watch whatever we can find on the TV. We’ll worry about what we’re gonna do tomorrow.” Koji finished.

His obvious choices came back unbidden. He knew he would have to choose between Kennedy and being cutoff or letting her go and keeping his cushy lifestyle.

He’d always lived a life of luxury. He didn’t know any other way. Then he remembered the valet. Remembered how he envied his freedom.

*I could always get a job. And this could be my chance to do what I really want to do. But what job am I gonna get that will afford to pay for me to*

*travel the world taking photographs?*

Would the cost of freedom be too high?

Kennedy laid back across the bed. Koji shook his head from the deep thoughts he was obviously having.

“Okay.” He lifted one leg onto the mattress and turned to her. “What do you have the taste for?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Kennedy shrugged.

*Not like I’ll actually taste it anyway.*

“Let’s order some wings and fries!” He faked excitement.

“Sounds good.”

Kennedy texted her parents to let them know she wouldn’t be home and she’d tell them how dinner went when she got home. They flipped through the channels as they waited for their food. As luck would have it, *Pretty Woman* had just started on one of the movie channels.

“Perfect!” Koji grinned.

He tried so hard to turn the night around. Kennedy finally sucked it up and attempted to play along. Especially, when she knew their days were numbered.

*If this is going to be one of my last nights with him, I better stop pouting and make the most of it.*

Kennedy rolled onto her stomach. She faced the TV and rested her chin on her hands. Koji smiled and did the same. He leaned over for a kiss. She smiled and obliged him. The kiss was soft and loving. They smiled at each other. Neither quite reached their eyes. Then they turned back to the movie.

Once the food arrived, Kennedy could only choke down a couple wings and a handful of fries. Koji ate all of his and the rest of hers, plus some candy bars from the vending machine. Apparently, the stress of the situation had taken her appetite and given him extra.

After *Pretty Woman* ended, *The Notebook* started next. The plot of the movie was a little too on the nose for Kennedy’s taste. She normally loved it, being a hopeless romantic and all. But the way Ali’s stuck-up parents shunned Noah and purposely ripped them apart, made Kennedy’s chest ache.

She rolled onto her back, unable to watch any more. Koji looked down at her. A single tear slid from her eye down to her temple. He quickly slid closer to her. His hand cupped the side of her face. His thumb wiped away the wet

track.

Koji leaned down and kissed her softly. Kennedy quickly responded. Almost desperate. She ripped away his glasses and gripped his face. She slid her hands into his silky tresses and pulled him closer. His mouth opened and she took advantage of the access. Her tongue stroked into his mouth. Their tongues flicked and danced hungrily.

Kennedy raised up and pushed Koji back onto the mattress. She straddled his hips. She grabbed the edges of her dress and pulled it up over her head. Koji's hands immediately wrapped around back to find the clasp to her bra. He pulled it away from her body and tossed it to the floor. He quickly pulled his polo over his head and it followed the way of her bra.

She knew he was desperate. He'd never toss their clothes to the floor on a normal day.

She lifted up and they both struggled to get his pants and boxer briefs off. They only got them to his ankles before they gave up. Kennedy leaned forward and pushed her white lace panties down her hips. Raised each knee and got them off quickly before she lowered herself on his rock hard dick. She was already drenched with arousal. She slid down his thick shaft easily.

She threw her head back as she cried out.

"Koji!"

His hands found her breasts. His thumbs and forefingers caressed and pinched her tightened nipples. Little shockwaves shot down from the sensitive buds straight to her clit. She pulsed around him.

Kennedy rose up and then slammed back down to the base. Her hips rolled. Koji filled up every available inch she had. Her clit ground against his pelvic bone.

Koji rose up until she sat in his lap. His mouth latched onto her nipple. Kennedy's arms wrapped around his head, unable to get close enough. His arms wrapped around her waist. He helped guide her up and down his length. She bounced on his dick. Her clit rubbed against him. The tingle began deep within her core.

Koji pulled back and they looked at each other. His lashes were wet and his eyes shimmered with more tears. His beautiful, heartbroken face made Kennedy choke on a sob. The floodgates broke just as her orgasm crested. Tears streamed down her face as she cried out her release.

Her lotus fluttered and gripped his dick. Her orgasm milked the climax from him. His eyes shut and he groaned. Silent tears slipped down his cheeks.

They fell to their sides on the bed. Her legs circled around him even tighter. And their arms pulled in the other as closely as they could as they cried.

As they began to fall into a fitful sleep, Kennedy felt Koji draw a heart on her back over and over again.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Kennedy slowly blinked into consciousness. Once her eyes adjusted, warm brown eyes stared back at her.

“I want to talk to my cousin. I texted her and she said to come over. Will you come with me?” Koji asked.

“Yeah.”

They got up and washed up. They brushed their teeth with the little mini toothbrushes and toothpaste the hotel provided. They put back on the clothes they’d worn the day before and headed out.

“Hey! Come in.” Hikari said when they arrived at her place. “It’s so good to see you again.”

She wrapped Kennedy in a warm hug. Hikari was the one family member of Koji’s that she really liked.

“It’s good to see you too.”

“So, what’s going on?” Hikari asked as she gestured for them to sit on her couch.

She had a cute little one-bedroom apartment.

Koji told her all about the evening before. Hikari sighed heavily.

“Damn! I’m sorry, guys. That sucks so bad. And it’s giving me flashbacks of when I told my parents that I wanted to be a violinist instead of a lawyer.” Hikari said.

“That shit was so embarrassing.” Koji said and dropped his head in his hands.

“What are you gonna do? I mean, you can stay here on the couch if you need to. But are you gonna take a break from school and get a job? Get into photography like you’ve always wanted to?”

“I don’t really know yet.” Koji said.

To Kennedy he seemed so confused. In less than twenty-four hours his life had been flipped upside-down. And guilt steadily crept up on her. It was all because of her.

Koji's phone took that moment to break the silence. They all jumped slightly.

"Shit. It's my dad."

He reluctantly answered it. He put it on speaker.

"Yeah."

"Koji. You have until this evening to bring the car back or I will report it stolen. And your phone service will be cut off tomorrow. And you can figure out your own way to pay for your last year of school. You want to live your own life; you will fund it."

Then the line went dead.

They all sat in stunned silence for several minutes.

"My dad is the biggest fucking asshole!" Koji jumped up and began to pace back and forth.

"I'm so sorry, Koji. But like I said, you can crash here." Hikari tried to soothe the blow.

"I know. But now I have to find a job, figure out a way to get there every day, and wait to get enough money to get a phone again. Which will be tough to get a job without one." Koji ran a hand through his hair roughly.

"We'll figure it out, Koj." Hikari said, using a nickname Kennedy had never heard before.

Kennedy sat quietly. She didn't know what to say. Of course, she wanted him to be with her. But at what cost? She didn't want him to be miserable. And possibly later take it out on her. She didn't want him to give up his lifestyle. And maybe resent her for it.

Is it possible that sometimes love just isn't enough?

Koji pulled into Kennedy's driveway. The car ride had been silent. Neither knew what to say. Dread squeezed at his heart as he put the car in park and turned to her. She wouldn't even turn to look at him.

"Kennedy, look." Koji took her hand. "We'll get through this. I—I'll get a job. I'll stay with Kari. I can catch the bus or Kari can give me a ride. Whatever. It'll work."

"You've never even had a job before. You've never even paid your cell phone bill." Kennedy said, but continued to stare ahead.

"I'll learn."

"Yeah, and then you'll eventually blame me." She finally turned to look

at him and he wished she would've kept looking out the windshield.

Her face was filled with a sorrow so deep Koji was pretty sure the image would be burned into his brain forever.

"I won't." He gripped her hand tighter.

"Yes...you will. You'll eventually resent me for giving up your lifestyle. And the life you'll have if you continue to disobey your parents, probably won't look like the dream you've always wanted.

"The daily grind will more than likely crush your soul. And the struggle to make ends meet will push your dreams to the side, until one day you'll wake up and you're forty. You'll wonder where the time went and why you never followed your dream.

"Go home, Koji." A tear slipped down her cheek. "Finish school. Become a doctor. And when you've saved up enough and you're on your own say, 'Fuck it. I'm traveling the world and taking pictures and there's nothing either of you can say about it.' And then live your life for you."

"Ken—"

"No." She shook her head as a few more tears slipped down her cheeks. "I've made up my mind. I'd rather us walk away now. With love still in our hearts. Than to walk away a few months or years from now with resentment and hate in our hearts."

Koji's ears roared. He felt a fissure run down the center of his heart. And then it split in two. He didn't know if he'd ever recover.

Koji's hands shot out and clasped the sides of Kennedy's face. Their mouths crashed together. The kiss was desperate and filled with despair. Their tongues tangled wildly. Their teeth gnashed together painfully, but they didn't care. They gasped and sobbed into each other's mouths as tears streaked their faces.

If it was going to be their last kiss, they made sure they left every ounce of their souls in it.

Kennedy broke away first with a deep sob. She grasped blindly for the handle to the door. She found it and flung it open. She scrambled out, slammed the door, and ran to the front door of her house. A moment later she disappeared.

Koji watched it all through eyes that swam with tears. No matter how many times he blinked, they filled again. Like a windshield during a heavy rain with the wipers on high.

His hands grasped the steering wheel and his head fell forward onto

them. He let the sobs come freely. He was taught never to cry. Never show emotion. But this was too heavy to bear. Too heavy to carry. Besides, he'd rather get it out now, before he went back to his parents' house.

Koji finally sat up straight. He wiped away the tears and took a deep breath. When he looked up, he saw that the garage door had opened and Sean stood at the opening. Koji hadn't even heard the door go up over his sobs.

Sean looked at him sadly for a moment. Then he raised his hand in a silent goodbye.

Koji felt more tears choke him. This time for the family he would leave behind. The family he'd grown to love. He wasn't just breaking up with the love of his life, he was also breaking up with her parents. And her father had just given him the saddest goodbye.

Koji lifted his hand too. Her father let his hand drop back to his side. He nodded solemnly, and then turned and walked back into the garage.

Koji threw his car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. He took one last look at the house that had brought him more comfort and joy than his own. Then he pulled away.

*Goodbye.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Kennedy's summer had been filled with plans to spend time with Koji. Small road trips. Amusement parks. Lazy days in the sun. At a pool. Frolicking on a beach. Ice cream cones dripping down their chins and hands. And making love anywhere they could find.

Summer love.

Instead, she spent the summer in tears. Her parents and her best friends did all they could to keep her busy. To take her mind off of her heartbreak. But that was an impossible feat. The heartbreak had seeped into every part of her. As if a parasite had latched onto her and sucked the life right out of her body.

Her love story was not supposed to end this way. It had been perfect. Until it wasn't.

She started her final year with a heaviness in her heart, instead of the excitement of almost being done.

They moved back into the dorms. She wondered if Koji was in the same building from the previous year. She wondered if she'd see him in the cafeteria. Or on campus somewhere.

She wanted to see him. But she also dreaded it. She feared it would crack open her already sloppily mended heart.

That day came right before the start of Winter Break.

She walked along with the girls before they split off to their respective classes. The morning air was cold and their breath turned into white mist as they talked and laughed.

The girls noticed him first. For they all fell silent. The sudden quiet made Kennedy look up at them. She followed their gazes.

Her heart stopped.

When it started again, it beat as if she had just finished the fifty-yard dash.

Koji stood completely still. He stared at her wide-eyed. And there it was

in his eyes.

Love.

Kennedy was sure he saw it in her eyes as well.

“We’ll catch ya later, Ken.” Royal said.

“Yeah, see ya later.” Payton agreed.

“You got this, hermana.” Mia patted her back.

They all nodded to Koji sadly. He nodded back quickly, but his eyes quickly came back to her.

He walked forward, since Kennedy’s feet seemed to be glued to the spot.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

“H–How was your summer?” He stammered.

“It was okay. Ha” Kennedy huffed wryly and shook her head. “It was awful.”

“Yeah, mine too.” Koji said as he looked down at the ground.

“Are you staying on campus?”

“No. My parents thought I’d have less distractions if I lived off campus in my own place.”

“More like, less opportunities to see me.”

“Pretty much.” He looked up at her again. “You look beautiful, Kennedy.”

“Don’t,” she said thickly.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He looked down, contrite.

“Well, I better get going.”

“Yeah, me too. Bye, Kennedy. G–Good luck...with everything.” Koji said and Kennedy could hear the emotions that choked him.

She cleared her own throat.

“Y–You too, Koji.”

They both turned and headed in opposite directions.

*How apropos.*

Part II  
Second Chances

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*Present...*

“I am so sorry, Kennedy.” Her doctor said after she walked into the exam room.

Kennedy’s smile faded as she took in her doctor’s serious expression.

Dr. Kamila Johnson was a pretty, dark-skinned woman. She was petite with a no-nonsense demeanor. Kennedy was sure she had to be. As tiny as she was, she had to give off a certain attitude for protection and to be taken seriously. Kennedy absolutely took her seriously now.

“Your ultrasound shows that you were right, the fibroids are back. They have grown back quicker than I anticipated and larger than before the myomectomy. And some have even grown on the outer uterine wall. And they’re just too large for the uterine artery embolization we talked about.

“At this point, our only recourse is a hysterectomy. It will, of course, stop the excessive bleeding and debilitating pain you’ve been suffering from. But you will also be unable to have children.” Her doctor sighed heavily.

“Oh. Okay.” Kennedy said.

It was all she could think to say. What else could she say, when her dreams of a family were shattered in the space of a few seconds?

Kennedy’s mind wandered to a conversation she’d had over a decade ago...

*“After I’m done with medical school, maybe we could get married.” Koji said with a shy smile as he looked down at her.*

*They laid in bed in between love-making sessions. He was propped up on an elbow, his head rested on his palm. Kennedy laid on her back and she looked up at him with love in her eyes and an equally bashful smile.*

*“That sounds good.” She said softly.*

*“How many kids do you want?” Koji asked.*

*“Because I’m an only child and was so bored as a kid, I want a ton! Well, okay, not a ton. But like three or four.” Kennedy answered honestly. A wide grin spread across his face.*

*“Yeah, being an only child too, I’d definitely like a few.” Koji agreed.*

*“Really?!” Kennedy raised up on her elbow. “But how would you live out your dream of traveling the world and taking photographs?”*

*“You can write anywhere. So, we’ll just throw the babies in a papoose and roll out.”*

*Kennedy snorted with laughter.*

*“Hmm...what about when they hit the terrible twos? How would we travel then? I can’t imagine trying to chase around a toddler in the bustling streets in a town in India or the African bush, or rice paddies in Indonesia.” Kennedy rationalized.*

*“Then we’d either pick more toddler friendly destinations during those years. Or take a break during those years and stay in one place.” Koji shot back.*

*“Fair points. You sound like you have this all planned out.” Kennedy smiled.*

*“Maybe a little.” Koji held up his thumb and forefinger and held them close together.*

*Kennedy smiled brightly as he leaned in for a kiss...*

*“Kennedy?” Dr. Johnson said.*

*Kennedy shook off the memory. She was brought back to her bleak reality.*

*“Do you need time to decide?” The doctor asked.*

*“N–No.” Kennedy shook her head. “I can’t imagine living with this pain for another fifteen years or so when I finally reach menopause, in the hopes that the fibroids will shrink. And it’s not like I’ll even be able to have children anyway, with the tumors in the way of everything. Might as well do it.”*

*Her voice wobbled slightly at the end, but she was able to choke down the emotions.*

*“Okay, we’ll schedule it.” Dr. Johnson handed her some papers stapled together. “This is a packet of all the information on the procedure and how you’ll need to prepare. You’ll have to have someone drop you off. You’ll probably only have to stay over one night in the hospital. You’ll need*

someone to pick you up because you won't be able to drive for approximately six weeks.

"You won't be able to do much for six weeks while you heal. Please take all the things you can't do seriously. A lot of women have found themselves back in the hospital afterwards. They feel so good after the surgery that they think they can do everything. Some even go out for jogs. You can't even go up and down stairs. Or vacuum. There are internal stitches and you can easily rip them. And even after they dissolve, the incision area is still delicate.

"I always reiterate that multiple times, because I see it happen too much. So, no strenuous activities. Remember that." Dr. Johnson gave her a playful stern look to add levity to the situation.

Kennedy raised her hands in surrender. "Duly noted, Doc. Lay on the couch. Eat snacks. Be waited on hand and foot. Got it."

"Exactly!" The doctors smiled and then got serious once more. She laid a comforting hand on Kennedy's arm. "You'll get through this. And I'll leave your ovaries intact for hormone control. You could always have some of your eggs frozen and use a surrogate when you're ready."

"Thank you, Dr. Johnson. I'll definitely consider that."

"Alright. You try to have a good day, Kennedy. They'll get you scheduled for the surgery up front. See you soon." The doctor said before she left the room.

Kennedy got up and walked to the front desk to schedule the death of a dream.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Kennedy walked into their new favorite brunch spot. Their Saturday lunches that often turned into partying into the evening, had now turned into sporadic Sunday brunches.

The girls usually had some plan or another with their spouses on Saturdays.

Kennedy was almost positive that the only reason they still got together every few Sundays was for her benefit. To appease their last lonely friend.

*I can't believe I'm the last holdout. Me? The hopeless romantic. No spouse. Not even a boyfriend. Even Mia remarried before I could get married once. And she said she'd never remarry.*

Mia, Payton, and Royal were already seated at their favorite table when the weather was nice. Out on the patio with views of the city. Kennedy was usually the second most punctual, next to Payton. But she'd dragged ass ever since she'd learned of her fate.

She needed to tell the girls. One of them would probably have to drop her off and pick her up from the hospital.

It had been nearly a week since she'd scheduled her surgery. Yet she still hadn't told anyone. Not the girls. Nor her parents.

*Maybe if I don't say anything, it won't be real.*

Royal spotted her and waved happily. Payton and Mia turned and waved as well. Kennedy smiled and waved back. The smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Hey, girls." Kennedy said and plopped down next to Royal.

"Hey!"

"Sup."

"Hey, Ken."

"How are you all doing? It feels like I haven't seen you in forever." Kennedy said to the table.

"It's been approximately two weeks." Payton said. "And everything's good. Better than good."

“All good this way. I’ve got tons of freelance work and about to start a new photo series. Oh, and I have Mia and Dante’s photos for you to pick from for the cover of your next book.” Royal said.

“Oh, perfect!” Kennedy feigned excitement.

She was usually super excited to look at Royal’s images for her book covers. But right now, she couldn’t seem to dredge up much enthusiasm for anything.

“I’m really good. I actually have some news.” Mia said with a big smile.

“Oh! Me too!” Payton said. “But you go first.”

“Okay.” Mia pulled out a manila envelope from her bag. She pulled out some official looking paperwork. “I’m officially adopting CeCe!”

Gasps of joy traveled around the table.

CeCe was Mia’s stepdaughter. She had started out as the girl’s mentor, before Mia started to date and fall in love with her father. Her and the teen had bonded. And although Mia had never really wanted children, she took to motherhood like a pro. She loved that girl as if she’d given birth to her.

“That’s fantastic, Mia!” Kennedy reached a hand across the table and clutched Mia’s.

She may not have felt much excitement for her own life, but she was truly happy for Mia.

“I adore your little readymade family.” Royal grinned at Mia.

“Mia, that’s wonderful. And perfect. You two are so close, it only makes sense.” Payton said with uncharacteristic tears in her eyes.

“*You’re* getting teary-eyed?!” Mia looked at Payton in shock. “You never get emotional about this kind of stuff.”

“Well, that’s probably because I’m 12-weeks pregnant.” Payton said sheepishly.

The news dropped like a bomb at their table. Wide-eyed silence fell over the table. Then they exploded with squeals of delight.

“Oh my God! Payton!” Royal screeched, which drew eyes from around the restaurant.

“Are you serious?!” Mia cried out.

“Bradyn must be beside himself.” Kennedy choked out.

Payton’s announcement sent razor blades through Kennedy’s heart. It was shredded to pieces. But she had to hold it together. She had to celebrate her friend. But every word spoken was as if she walked across a bed of nails.

“He is!” Payton smiled brightly. “And now he’s treating me like some

delicate flower. Fluffing pillows before I sit or lie down. Asking me if I'm hungry every half hour. I'm pretty sure when I start showing, he'll just carry me around everywhere so I don't strain myself."

She shook her head at the thought. A dreamy smile on her face.

Kennedy had never felt two opposing emotions so strongly in her life. On the one hand, the joy she felt for her friend was beyond measure. Payton deserved every ounce of happiness she found. But on the other hand, the deep sorrow she felt for her own childless life snatched her breath away.

She hadn't cried yet. For the last several days, she'd walked around as if in a fog. She was glad that she was self-employed. It gave her the opportunity to just stare at the wall. But the tears came now. And they threatened to choke the life out of her.

Kennedy grabbed the glass of water in front of her. Her hand shook as she raised it to her mouth to take a massive gulp. An attempt to stave off the knot of emotions stuck in her throat.

Yet she still felt a hot tear streak down her face.

"Aww...Ken." Royal said.

"I'm just so happy for you. Both of you." Kennedy looked at both Mia and Payton through tears.

It was true. But it was also the perfect excuse to cover up why the tears really began to stream down her face.

"I-I'll be right back. I'm a blubbering mess." Kennedy laughed at herself as she quickly stood.

She bumped the table and the dishes rattled loudly. She ignored it and swiftly made her way to the bathroom to regroup.

The girls smiled after her. They all assumed that the hopeless romantic in her was overcome with emotions for them.

They assumed very wrong.

Kennedy grabbed several paper towels. She drenched them in cold water at the sink and then disappeared into the farthest stall from the door. She pressed the cold, wet towels to her flushed face. A few sobs slipped from her lips. She pressed the towels to her lips and managed to choke the rest down.

She took slow, deep breaths. The concentration on each breath gradually calmed her. A few more hiccups escaped. When she felt she'd steadied herself enough, she finally left the stall.

In the mirror, her reflection was a mess. Her face was blotchy. The curse of her fair skin. Her cheeks were rosy, eyes bloodshot, and eyelids swollen.

Kennedy bent over the sink and splashed cold water on her face. She continued to breathe. In, through the nose. Out, through the mouth. She looked at her reflection again.

*There's no help for it. It'll be at least an hour before the redness goes away and a couple more before the swelling goes down. I'll just blame it on being overly emotional. I'm the emotional one in the group anyway.*

With that, Kennedy took one last deep breath before she headed back to their table.

Her friends took one look at her and assumed exactly what she knew they would.

"You okay, Ken?" Royal asked. "You're such a sap."

"I know." Kennedy smiled sheepishly. "I'm just so overcome with happiness for you two."

"We know. And we love you for it." Mia reached across the table and clutched her hand.

"Yeah, I'm feeling as emotional as you now. I don't know how you do it." Payton laughed.

"It's rough. Lemme tell ya." Kennedy chuckled.

"Oh. We ordered for you." Mia said. "Our usual mimosas. Except for Payton, of course. She's getting a virgin mimosa. And you're still good with your usual steak, eggs, and hashbrowns, right?"

"Yep. Thanks." Kennedy smiled at her friend.

They all knew each other so well. They always looked for and took care of each other. Kennedy knew that if she told them about her impending surgery that they'd rally around her. They'd give her words of encouragement and soothe the ache inside her. And she knew without a doubt, they'd tell their husbands they needed to be there for their friend, and they'd pack a bag and camp out in her living room while she healed.

Even with that knowledge, Kennedy just couldn't bring herself to tell them. She didn't want to be the Debbie Downer. She didn't want to ruin their moment. And she absolutely did not want Payton to tone down her joy over being pregnant. And Kennedy knew without a shadow of a doubt that Payton would tone it down. She'd feel horrible, which in turn, would cause her to hold back. To not share every amazing moment of her pregnancy.

*No. I can't rob her of that. I refuse. This will be my cross to bear.*

"So, I'm going to have an adoption party next weekend. And, of course, I want you all and your men to come." Mia announced to the table.

“We’re there!” Royal spoke for the rest of them.

Kennedy and Payton nodded their agreement.

“Kennedy,” Mia looked at her. “Have you any new prospects? Any new boy toys we need to know about that you might want to bring with?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Have you been on the dating apps?” Royal asked.

Kennedy drew back and scoffed. “As if!”

She knew it was the way most people met these days. She just couldn’t bring herself to do it. She was old school in the way she wanted to find ‘The One.’

*Besides...I already found ‘The One’ years ago. Anyone now, will be Mr. Good Enough.*

Even all these years later, Kennedy couldn’t imagine she’d find a man that she’d connect with the way she had with Koji.

“Kennedy, it’s highly unlikely that you’ll find a man the old school way.” Mia said.

“Um...all of you did.” Kennedy looked at her like she was crazy.

“You’ve got a point.” Mia cringed.

“Well, I wouldn’t call the way I met McKinnon ‘old school.’ More like horrifying.” Royal frowned.

Kennedy’s friend had fortunately, or unfortunately, met her husband after a horrific motorcycle accident, where she had saved his life. He’d lost his leg, but gained the love of his life.

“Well then, you already know Mr. Right isn’t gonna show up on your doorstep. You gotta get out there and be seen if you don’t wanna get on a dating app.” Mia returned to the subject at hand.

“I know. Maybe at some point.” Kennedy shrugged.

Their food showed up and she got a short break from their dating advice. Unfortunately, they weren’t quite done.

“When was the last time you got laid?” Mia asked after the waiter left.

Kennedy frowned. She really couldn’t remember.

“I don’t know.” Suddenly, she remembered the last guy she’d dated.

“Oh, God! It was Josh!”

“Ew!” Royal’s nose scrunched up. “The dude that love-bombed you until you were hooked. And then gave you the slip and started breadcrumbing you to keep you close but not too close?”

“One and the same.” Kennedy said as she cut violently into her steak.

“What a dick.” Payton said and they looked up at her in surprise. “What? He was.”

“Textbook narcissist.” Mia shook her head.

“So, how many years ago was that then?” Royal asked.

“Five.” Payton said nonchalantly before she took a sip of her orange juice and lemon lime soda mixed drink.

“She’s right. It was five.” Kennedy nodded.

“Dang, girl!” Mia exclaimed. “You ain’t got none in *five years!*”

“We really gotta do something about that.” Royal said.

“We don’t have to do anything. It’s *me* that does. And I really couldn’t care less. Once you reach year two, it’s a breeze. And you all know that I don’t do one-night stands, friends with benefits, or booty calls. I’m a demisexual and that’s not going to change. And with the way men behave these days, I highly doubt I’ll be experiencing an emotional bond with any of them.

“So please, back off.” Kennedy finished in a voice that was harsher than she’d intended.

It was obvious her frustration and exhaustion from holding back her emotions was about to bubble over.

They all raised their hands and cringed back in surrender.

“Sorry, Ken.” Royal said.

Kennedy’s shoulders sagged a bit.

“I didn’t mean to snap. I know you all mean well. I know you all feel bad that you’ve found your other halves and I haven’t. But applying pressure on me to find someone to absolve you of guilt, isn’t going to make it better. I’ll be okay.” Kennedy finished and tried to hide the wobble in her voice.

They all nodded with contrition.

“I think I’m gonna get a to-go container. I have a deadline and I’ve been procrastinating.” Kennedy raised a hand to get the waiter’s attention. “You ladies don’t mind if I bounce early, do you?”

“Uh...no.”

“Go ahead. Get your writing done.”

“Yeah. Get your book done. We’ll be here to celebrate when you type ‘The End.’”

“Thanks, girls.” Kennedy said guiltily.

She felt bad for wanting to leave early. But she couldn’t stand it another moment. She was going to break. And she’d much rather do it in the privacy

of her own home and all alone, than in a crowded restaurant. Plus, she didn't want to explain why she was so upset.

*They can't know. At least not until Payton has her baby.*

As she left the restaurant, Kennedy felt three pairs of concerned eyes watch her as she walked out.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Instead of driving home, Kennedy found herself in her parent's driveway. On autopilot, she walked up the steps, unlocked the front door, and walked in.

"Mom?" She called out.

"Kennedy?" Her mom walked around the corner.

The moment she saw her mom, Kennedy let go. Sobs wracked her entire body. Tears ran down her face. She took in ragged breaths and her shoulders jerked with them.

Those familiar arms wrapped around her. She melted into her mother. Her mom stumbled back a little. Her mom wasn't as strong as she used to be and Kennedy was a little bit bigger than she used to be.

Suddenly, bigger arms wrapped around her. And she smelled her father's comforting scent. He quickly guided her to the couch. They sandwiched her on either side and held her close. Kennedy sobbed and snot all over her dad's shirt, while her mother rubbed her back in soothing circles.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Her mother asked.

"You haven't cried this hard since—" Sean started and then stopped at the look on his wife's face.

They never tried to bring up Koji.

When Kennedy could finally get a handle on her emotions, she sat back with a heavy sigh. Her mom handed her some tissues. She blew her nose with one, and wiped her eyes with another. When she could finally speak, she looked at her parents sadly.

"Well...it's doubtful you'll ever have grandkids. The fibroids are just too bad. Too big. They have to do a hysterectomy."

"Aww...baby." Her mom clutched her hand. "I am so sorry."

"My dreams of a big family are over." Kennedy said around a hiccup.

"No, they're not." Her father said.

She frowned up at him.

“Maybe it won’t be in the way you thought it would look like. But you can still have a big family, Kenny. Families can look anyway you want them to these days.” Sean said.

“I know, Dad. I just had a vision. A vision of this perfect life.”

“Life isn’t always perfect, Sweets. It’s what you make outta the life God gives ya.” Sean bopped her nose with his finger.

Her parents always had a way of making her feel better. As well as feel like a little girl again. In their arms, she wasn’t thirty-three. She was thirteen.

“The worst part is, I can’t tell the girls.” Kennedy sighed.

“Why not?” Her mom asked. “You tell them everything.”

“Today, not only did Mia announce that she’s adopting CeCe. But Payton also told us she’s pregnant.” A few tears slipped down Kennedy’s face.

“Aww, Kennedy. I know that had to be so hard after finding out you have to get a hysterectomy.” Her mom hugged her close.

“But I still don’t understand why you can’t tell them.” Her father said.

“Dad...because then Payton will feel guilty. And she won’t want to share all the special moments because she’ll think it’ll hurt me. I don’t want to ruin her moment. This is too special to mess up. It’s just horrible timing.”

Kennedy looked down dejectedly at her lap.

“That makes sense. You’re such a sweet soul. Do you know that?” Sean said.

“Huh?” Kennedy looked up at him.

“You’re always thinking of your loved ones before yourself. You’re a wonderful human being and I couldn’t be prouder of ya. And you’re too wonderful for what’s happening to ya.” Sean said. His accent became thicker as he became emotional.

His face turned red like hers and he wiped a few tears from his eyes. He was a big ol’ sap. Kennedy was pretty sure that was where she got her emotional personality from, not her mother.

“Oh, Dad!” Kennedy hugged him tightly.

“I just want my baby girl to be happy.”

“I’ll be okay, Dad. I promise.” Kennedy wiped her eyes and sat up a little straighter. “It’s just gonna take some adjustment.”

“Well, we’re here for you if you need us. Always.” Sandra said.

“Yeah, I’m gonna need you to take me to the hospital, bring me home, and maybe take care of me for a while. The doctor stressed that I can’t do

anything strenuous for six weeks.” Kennedy informed them.

“When is the surgery?” Her mom asked.

“Next month. July 19<sup>th</sup>.” Kennedy said.

“It might be easier if you move in here for those six weeks. Easier to keep an eye on you. You can stay in the family room. If you’ve got to spend six weeks resting, it’ll be way more spacious. You won’t feel like you’re in a prison down there. And you’ll have the big screen TV and cozy couch.” Her mother rattled off.

“Sounds good.” Kennedy agreed.

“Alright. I’ll get things ready for you.” Her mom jumped up and started writing things down on the calendar. “It’s gonna be so good to have you home for a while.”

“Like the good ol’ days.” Her dad grinned.

Unbidden, Kennedy’s thoughts went back to Koji and his parents all those years ago. She couldn’t imagine needing her parents for such a big surgery and them being cold and not nurturing like his were. To have to move back into that cold museum of a house that looked like no one was allowed to touch anything. Not a place for one to recuperate.

She wondered where he was in the world.

Just as quickly she shook off the thought.

*Where he is, is none of my business.*

She was pretty sure whatever he was doing, it was what his parents wanted.

Kennedy had never wanted to admit it out loud. But a small, hopeful part of her had dreamt that when he was finished with medical school that he’d come find her and they’d run off together. At that point, he’d be a doctor and could potentially do his residency anywhere.

She’d heard nothing.

And she was easy to find. He knew where her parents lived. All he needed to do was come there and her parents would absolutely tell him where she lived. Or at the very least, give him her number. But he never came. And with that her secret dream died.

The last time she’d thought about him was eight years ago. But something about her dreams of having a family being ruined had triggered her. And now, thoughts of him continued to rush into her consciousness.

Kennedy would gladly like to shove him back into the vault where he belonged.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

Kennedy was the first to arrive at Mia and Dante's home. She smiled as she took in the remodel Mia had done to the house. It was modern, but cozy and inviting.

Mia had decided to keep her condo and rent it out for more income. She'd moved into Dante and CeCe's house. But being the interior designer she was, Mia had decided to remodel the house. Dante had given her carte blanche, because he wanted the house to feel like hers as well. And per usual, she'd done an amazing job.

"Hey, Kennedy!" Mia greeted her.

Kennedy gave her a hug and then handed her a bottle of wine.

Everyone had been willing to bring a dish to the party. But Dante was a world class chef and he wouldn't hear of it. The house smelled amazing. The aromas of several dishes mingled together to make Kennedy's mouth water.

"The house looks great, Mia." Kennedy said.

"Thanks, chica! The space was easy to work with." Mia smiled as she looked around her home.

Dante walked over to them from the stove. He was dressed in relaxed fit dark denim jeans and a white T-shirt that hugged his tan biceps. His dark hair was windswept, the temples a sexy gray. His face had a light scruffy beard and framed his bright, white smile.

"Buonasera, Kennedy." Dante said and air kissed Kennedy's cheeks.

His whole appearance and Italian accent still made Kennedy giggle bashfully.

"Hey, Dante."

"Would you like something to drink? Rosé, perhaps?" He asked.

"That sounds good." Kennedy accepted.

As he poured her a glass, she looked at Mia. Mia stared at her husband with love and hunger.

"You seriously lucked out." Kennedy nudged her. "I still can't fully look

that man in the eyes. He's too gorgeous for words."

"Girl, I know!" Mia hissed. "But don't tell him that. He already knows he's fine as hell. We don't want it to go to his head anymore than it already is."

Kennedy chuckled.

She hadn't been feeling herself lately. And she hadn't really laughed in days. It felt nice to feel somewhat normal.

"Hey, mom? You need help with anything?" Celeste said as she bounced into the kitchen.

Mia's newly adopted daughter smiled happily at her mom. Her curly hair was tamed to perfection with products Mia had helped her choose. Her biological mother had been Black, and mixed with her Italian father, CeCe had a head full of 3c curls she'd struggled with. So, she'd always worn straight. Now, they framed her pretty face in a tamed mane, much like her new mother's curly hair.

Kennedy marveled at how much Mia and CeCe looked alike. As if Mia had given birth to the teen herself. The perfect blended family.

*Maybe that'll be my fate. To have a blended family. Not the dream I'd envisioned, though.*

She knew that many people had wonderful blended families these days. It could be possible to find peace in that. But she'd only just lost the dream of having her own blood family two weeks ago. It would take time to adjust to her new reality. And she was still deep in mourning.

"Sure. Could you set the table for me?" Mia asked her.

"On it." CeCe said before she turned and headed to the cabinets where the dishes were.

The door burst open and Royal, her husband McKinnon, Payton, and her husband Bradyn all flooded into the house. Suddenly the house was filled with voices and laughter.

The party had officially started.

Kennedy watched as Bradyn did exactly what Payton had described the week before. He watched her like a hawk. He was there at a moment's notice if she even looked like she needed anything. The giant, redheaded Scotsman was the perfect doting husband. Payton looked at him patiently and told him for the seventh time since they'd arrived that she didn't need anything.

They were beautiful to watch. And it twisted Kennedy's heart until it was wrung dry.

*This has to be the worst timing ever.*

A few of CeCe's friends came over, as well as her boyfriend Ty.

Once Dante was finished in the kitchen, he and Mia brought over the dishes weighted with food to the large table. Everyone took their places. Kennedy sat between Royal and CeCe.

"I have something I want to give you, CeCe." Mia said as she stood up across the table from her daughter.

She handed CeCe a jewelry box. When she opened it, she gasped.

"That represents the three of us. Three peas in a pod. I have a matching one too." Mia held up her wrist.

Nestled inside the black velvet was a gold bracelet. The gold was in the shape of a pea pod. And within the pod were three birthstones. Aquamarine for Dante, pink Tourmaline for Mia, and nestled between the two was a pretty pearl for CeCe.

The teen looked up at Mia with eyes that shimmered with tears.

"Thank you, Mama Mia." Her voice wobbled as she said the nickname she'd given Mia.

"You're welcome, sweetie."

Mia came around the table and give her new daughter a big hug. She helped her put on the bracelet and all the women oohed and aahed over it.

The dinner continued with animated conversations. Drinks flowed. Laughter filled the air. Warmth and love floated around the table. And Kennedy felt outside of it all.

She couldn't seem to shake her morose attitude. She smiled and talked when spoken to. But other than that, she couldn't find it in her to be an active participant in the festivities.

"Hey," Royal came up behind Kennedy as they all began to clear the table. "You alright?"

"Uh?" Kennedy looked up. "Oh, I'm fine. Just deep in a story. You know how my mind gets when I'm in the zone. Half here and half in LaLa Land."

It was a lie, of course. But it was a believable one, since it was true when she was in the middle of writing and had to stop for whatever reason.

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure." Royal gave her a look like she didn't quite believe her.

That was the problem with having friends that knew her far too well.

"You haven't fully seemed yourself lately." Royal continued as she

rubbed Kennedy's back.

Kennedy shrugged off Royal's hand.

"Like I said, I'm fine. Just deep in thought." Kennedy said. Her voice tinged with annoyance.

"Alright." Royal raised her hands. "I wasn't trying to pry. You know I'm here for you. For whatever."

Kennedy sighed and gave Royal a small smile. "Yeah, I know."

Royal gave her a quick side hug and then walked over to her husband. He looked down at her with love shining in his eyes. He pulled her in and kissed her softly.

She looked over at Mia and Dante as they stood at the sink. They washed dishes and playfully splashed each other. Dante lifted his hand and placed fluffy white suds on Mia's nose. She quickly lifted her hands and wiped suds on his face, giving him a soapy beard. They giggled as they wiped each other's faces.

Bradyn had Payton's feet in his lap on the couch. He rubbed them as if she was already eight months pregnant with sore, swollen feet. She smiled at him as if he'd hung the moon.

*No. You don't want my mess to ruin your perfect lives.*

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Kennedy?” An unfamiliar voice reached her ears. “Kennedy, it’s time to wake up.”

She blinked slowly. The bright fluorescent lights made it hard for her to focus at first. Finally, she remembered. She was in the recovery area in the hospital after her surgery. The last thing she remembered was when she said goodbye to her parents, before she was wheeled into surgery.

“Are you thirsty?” The nurse asked.

Kennedy slowly licked her lips. Her mouth was dry. She nodded.

“Apple juice or water?”

“Water.” She rasped out.

“Okay, give me just a second.”

The nurse got her some water and she drank it down in one long gulp.

Once her room was ready, they wheeled her to the elevators and took her up to her single-bed hospital room. By then, the gravity of her loss began to hit her.

“Hey, sweetie.” Her mom said as her and her dad poked their heads into the hospital room.

“Mom.” Kennedy’s voice wobbled.

Then she broke. Again.

Her parents rushed to her side. Her mom kissed her forehead. Her dad grasped her hand.

Sandra pulled a chair up to the bed. Sean sat on the bed, next to her leg and continued to hold her hand and rub soothing circles on her skin.

“It’ll be okay, Kenny.” Her dad said.

“It’s just gonna take time to adjust.” Her mother added.

All she could do was nod as tears continued to stream down her face.

Kennedy thought she’d been heartbroken before at just knowing her fate. But it was totally different now that the surgery was over. Because now her dream was officially over as well.

She let self-pity wash over her.

*Why did this have to happen to me? Why is it so hard for me to find love? Why do I have to be the one to give up having a normal family?*

Kennedy wiped roughly at her face.

“I’m just so...angry.” She said to her parents.

“I know.” Sandra said sadly.

“You don’t deserve this.” Sean gripped her hand tighter.

“Thank you both for being here. But I just need some time alone. I’ll see you tomorrow when you come to pick me up.” Kennedy said.

She didn’t make eye contact. She stared down at her blanket.

“Okay.” Her mom rubbed her arm as she stood. “We understand. Besides, we’ll be seeing plenty of each other for the next six weeks.”

“Very true. I’m sure we’ll get on your nerves before too long.” Sean tried to make light of it.

They all gave half-hearted chuckles.

Her parents gave her kisses on the forehead and then left her alone.

With only slight difficulty, Kennedy turned onto her side and cried herself to sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kennedy had thought it would be harder to keep the girls from knowing she'd had surgery, staying at her parents' house, and couldn't do much. But with them busy with their own lives, it was easy to blame writing deadlines.

In reality, she hadn't been inspired to write anything. She'd lost her mojo. It was as if her creativity had disappeared altogether.

All she did was lie on the couch, mindlessly watch movies and TV shows on streaming services, and ate her feelings.

Kennedy had to admit that physically she felt better than she had in years. She understood why Dr. Johnson had stressed so hard about not overdoing it. She felt like she could get up and run a marathon. All the pains and complications her fibroids had caused her were gone.

It was her mental and emotional state that not only had her parents concerned, but also herself. Kennedy knew that she should find a therapist. But she wasn't ready to speak to anyone just yet. She'd already cried enough as it was.

As she scrolled through movies on a streaming service, she stopped on a movie she knew well. *Eat, Pray, Love*. She'd read the book years before. She'd watched the movie a few times.

*Maybe that's what I need. My very own Eat, Pray, Love journey.*

Hers would be less about eating, praying, or loving. At least not love for someone else. But more about finding love for herself again. Finding joy in her own life again. Possibly redefining what happiness looked like for her.

A journey to self-discovery.

No family. No friends. And absolutely no men.

Kennedy felt like she had to do it all on her own. To focus on herself. Because if she didn't learn to love herself and her life again, she wouldn't be good for anybody.

She'd always wanted to visit more of Europe. She'd only been to Ireland to visit her dad's people. But Europe didn't feel appropriate for what she

needed. She needed places that screamed Zen. Peace. Rest and rejuvenation.

Kennedy grabbed her laptop and opened it for the first time in weeks. She began to research trips to Asia.

*First up...Bali.*

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Royal, Mia, and Payton all sat at their favorite restaurant. Their eyes continued to glance at the door as they waited for Kennedy. She was unusually late.

Suddenly, all of their phones chimed at the same time.

They grabbed their phones and opened them. They glanced up at each other when they saw it was a long text from Kennedy.

**Kennedy:**

*Girls, I am so sorry to be sharing this via text. But it was the only way I felt comfortable and I know you're all together to talk through it. 8 weeks ago, I had a hysterectomy. My fibroids had come back with a vengeance and it was my only option. I couldn't tell you because I didn't want to ruin Payton's pregnancy. I know you would've tried to dial down your happiness and wouldn't have wanted to share the joyful moments of your pregnancy, Payton. You deserve to be happy without worrying about my feelings. And don't worry, my parents took good care of me.*

*During the downtime, I've had to reevaluate my life. I've been severely depressed at the loss of having a family of my own. My writing has stagnated and I can't find an ounce of creativity or inspiration in me. So, I need to go on my own and find peace and happiness again. To find love for myself and my life. Otherwise, I won't be able to be there for those who matter most to me. All of you.*

*So, don't be sad or mad at me. I just need some time alone. I'm heading to Asia for a while to try and find that peace and love. Don't worry about me. I'll check in when I can. And don't fret. I'll be back in time for the birth of your baby, Payton. Take care of my niece or nephew in the meantime.*

*I love you, girls.*

The girls looked up at each other with watery eyes.

“I can’t believe she didn’t tell us.” Mia said.

“I can.” Royal said with a sigh. “I knew something was wrong. I asked her the night of your adoption party. But she refused to tell me. It makes sense why she didn’t, though.”

“Yeah, she’s always been a really selfless person.” Payton said. “God! My pregnancy was horrible timing.”

“Shit!” Mia hissed under her breath. “You do have a point.”

“And she’s right.” Payton continued. “I would’ve kept parts of my pregnancy to myself if she’d have told us. So, I totally understand why she didn’t say anything. I just feel terrible.”

“Don’t beat yourself up.” Royal touched her arm. “You couldn’t have known. It was just an unfortunate twist of fate that you got pregnant around the same time she needed a hysterectomy.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Payton’s shoulders sagged.

“I can’t believe she left for Asia on a solo trip!” Mia said with pride in her voice.

“Right?!” Royal agreed.

“It is pretty epic.” Payton said with a smile.

“I pray she finds what she needs there. She deserves to find some happiness.” Mia said thoughtfully.

“Let’s all send up a prayer that she finds peace and happiness. No matter what form it takes.” Royal said.

“To Kennedy.” Payton held up her virgin mimosa.

Royal and Mia held up their champagne flutes as well.

“To Kennedy.”

## Chapter Thirty

Excitement coursed through Kennedy's veins for the first time in a while when the plane touched down in Bali. It had been a long flight with one layover in Taipei, Taiwan. The whole trip was nearly twenty-four hours long. And she felt like she should be exhausted. But the anticipation of adventure made her blood pulse with electricity.

Kennedy walked towards the entrance to the airport with one giant suitcase and a large tote. A little man with dark reddish skin and a sign that read 'Miss Callaghan' on it, stood near the exit.

Kennedy didn't want to figure out all the ins and outs of traveling to a foreign country by herself as soon as she stepped off the plane. She needed this trip to go smoothly. She was already on the verge of a breakdown. She needed peace. Not chaos. So, she'd booked a villa that pulled out all the stops. And one featured amenity was a driver that brought her to the villa. As well as a driver the next day to take her on a tour of Ubud, the city she'd be staying in for the month. And to all the interesting and beautiful places that weren't super touristy.

She wanted to avoid people, particularly tourists, at all costs. She absolutely wanted to meet locals and learn the culture. But that was where her interest in other humans stopped.

*Myself. I only want to focus on myself.*

"Hello," she said as she approached the man.

"Miss Callaghan," he said.

"Yes. You can call me Kennedy." She smiled.

He smiled back. His teeth white and a little crowded.

"Okay, Kennedy. And you can call me Guss." His accent was thick, but his English was perfect.

He took her luggage and guided her to the car.

The little car sped past scooters and other vehicles. Greenery and traditional buildings flew by. The damp air whipped past Kennedy's face.

Luckily, she'd tamed her curls into two French braids down either side of her head. She had a feeling with the humidity, she wouldn't be straightening or having her natural curls down in any way. Afro puffs, pineapples, and braids would be the standard looks. Which was fine with her. She was not there to impress.

A little while later, Guss pulled into a driveway. Kennedy inhaled sharply.

The villa was beautiful. Nestled in between green foliage that was landscaped to perfection. Guss unlocked the door for her and swung it open. Then he handed her the key. She handed him a tip in exchange. Then she turned to look at her new home.

Kennedy gasped again.

The living space was open and bright. The furniture was made up of dark wood and white cushions. It all looked cozy and inviting. The ceiling was dark-stained wood. The wall along the back was wide open and led out to a terrace that overlooked the jungle. A small, private infinity pool stood off to the side. The middle of the deck jutted out a little further and Kennedy walked to the railing. She flung out her arms and lifted her face to the sun.

"This is perfect!" She called out to no one in particular.

"We're so glad you like it." A feminine voice said from behind her.

Kennedy spun around to see a petite brown-skinned woman with long, straight jet-black hair. She looked to be around the same age as Kennedy. She bowed slightly.

"Hello, Miss Callaghan. I am Annisa. And I'll be taking care of any needs you may have."

"Hi, Annisa. You can call me Kennedy," she said.

Kennedy bowed back and they smiled at each other.

"Kennedy, I have ran you a bath to relax you after your long journey." Annisa informed her.

"Oh. Thank you. I would like to wash away the grime.

"Good. I'll show you to your bath."

Kennedy followed the woman through to the bedroom. Her mouth gaped open. The bed was king size with white gauzy mosquito netting on each of the four posts. The view from the bed was the same as the deck. With floor to ceiling windows to leave it unobstructed.

The bathroom had white walls and the majority of the ceiling was glass to let the sunlight stream in. Under a large window sat a free-standing tub

with a golden light underneath it like a beacon. Inside the tub, the water had already been filled and flower petals in an intricate design floated on top.

“Oh my goodness! This is lovely, Annisa. Did you do this?” Kennedy asked.

“I did.” Annisa smiled happily. “Before I go to let you enjoy your bath, I wanted to show you the app to download on your phone to contact me in case you need anything.”

Kennedy pulled out her phone and the little woman showed her the app and how to use it.

“If you need anything, please do not hesitate. Your lunch will be ready in one hour.”

“Thank you, Annisa.” Kennedy grabbed money from her purse and handed it to the woman.

Annisa smiled and bowed. She turned and padded out on quiet, bare feet.

Once alone, Kennedy quickly stripped out of her comfy travel clothes and slipped into the hot bath. The petals surrounded her and she breathed in deeply. They smelled heavenly.

Kennedy knew she could've opted for the much cheaper backpacker trip. But as she melted into the bath, she knew that the more expensive option she'd chosen was exactly what she needed. She had to tap into a little bit of her savings to do it. But the luxury of not needing to think about anything. To just focus on herself. It was worth its weight in gold.

After her bath, Kennedy pulled on denim shorts and a loose-fitting white tank top. Lunch was set up on a table right at the entrance to the deck. The food was aromatic and made her stomach growl loudly. Annisa stood next to the table.

“I hope the bath was to your liking?” She asked.

“Oh, it was amazing. Thank you.”

“Good. For lunch, we have one of our traditional meals here in Indonesia. Nasi Uduk. It's popular for lunch. The rice is cooked in coconut milk. With fried chicken and tempe, which is soybean cake. Along with other sides to mix with the rice.” Annisa explained.

The dish was in a charming wooden shallow bowl/plate combo. In the middle, was rice in the shape of a dome. It was surrounded by two fried chicken legs, some kind of salsa looking item, crispy looking chips, cucumbers, two hard-boiled eggs, and rectangle-shaped savory cakes.

The whole thing looked amazing and filling. And Kennedy was ready to

dig in.

Annisa bowed and left the villa.

Kennedy savored her meal as she looked out at the beautiful view. She breathed in deeply.

After lunch, Kennedy explored the villa a little more. There was a fully equipped kitchen. Though she doubted she'd use it, considering she could get food from Annisa with the tap of a screen on the app. But there was an option to have a cooking lesson from Annisa if she wanted it. And since she'd be there a full month, Kennedy definitely considered it.

During her exploration, Kennedy found a yoga mat. While convalescing, she'd taken up meditation to try and calm her mind. With each session she had gotten better. But it was still hard to clear her mind. If there was ever a place where she could practice that. It was in Bali.

Kennedy grabbed the mat and took it out onto the deck. She rolled it out and sat cross-legged on top of it. She placed her forearms on her knees. Straightened her back. And listened to the sounds of birds, insects, and other creatures in the jungle that surrounded her. She focused on her breathing to quiet her mind. And closed her eyes.

*I could get used to this.*

## Chapter Thirty-One

The next month, Kennedy spent time exploring Bali. She walked the beaches. Drove a scooter throughout town and the surrounding villages. She popped into shops and spoke to the locals. Ate at street carts and quaint little restaurants.

She took boat trips to other islands. And when other tourists left on the 5 p.m. boat, Kennedy stayed overnight just so she could watch the sunset, and woke up early to watch it rise the next day. The pink and orange hues soothed her spirit.

She ate the freshest fruits and veggies. The meals that Annisa brought her were flavorful, light, and healthy. Kennedy was sure her clothes had gotten looser. Which she was grateful for, after she'd put on at least ten pounds since the surgery. She'd practically eaten her weight in chips, cookies, and ice cream. Her way of coping.

Her favorite spots to eat were in the infinity pool and Annisa would bring her a circle-shaped basket laden with plates of food. The basket floated on the water. Kennedy would pick a piece of food and rest her arms over the edge of the pool and eat while she took in the view. Or at night, the table would be set up on the part of the deck that extended out further. It would be lit with candles as she ate. She tried not to think about how romantic it would be with someone. But she eased her mind as she realized that it was still romantic alone.

A woman who enjoyed her solace. Who basked in the inner peace she sought. Who drew comfort from her own soul.

She'd begun to meditate every morning and night. Her mind never really got as quiet as she would've liked. But she was able to focus a little more on positive thoughts and what she wanted from her life. And she had begun to feel much more at peace.

Her heart still stung that love seemed to elude her. And that even if she did find love, children of her own would probably be out of the question. She

would've loved to freeze her eggs, but it was an expensive procedure. She was doing well. Not *that* well, though.

It was Kennedy's last night in Bali, before she headed to Lampang, Thailand. A smaller city about an hour and a half from Chiang Mai by car. Close enough to the big city to go enjoy it if she wanted. But far enough away from the hustle and bustle to keep her quest for Zen going.

Annisa had set up her dinner on the deck as usual. But the spread of food was even nicer than usual. The dishes burst with colors. Shades of orange, red, yellow, green, and purple. The food always looked so appetizing.

"Thank you so much, Annisa. I'm really going to miss your cooking. The food is always so delicious." Kennedy smiled up at the woman.

"You are very welcome, Kennedy. I have been so happy to host you." She nodded sincerely. "And may I say something before you leave?"

"Oh. Uh...sure."

Kennedy gave Annisa her full attention. While Annisa had taught her a traditional meal a few weeks ago, they'd spoken about their lives. It had been nice to pour out all her thoughts to a stranger that she may never see again.

"I know you are trying to find peace and love for yourself. But remember to leave room for love for another. You have built a wall of protection around you. It is okay to let someone in. Experiencing a life without love is no life at all.

"During your meditation, try to focus on opening your heart space." Annisa finished and laid a hand over Kennedy's heart.

"I'll try. But I'm so scared. The last time nearly destroyed me." Kennedy admitted.

"I know. But now that you've found more love for self, if things don't work out, you know that you have yourself to fall back on. Because this time around you won't find validation through their love and you know you can walk on your own two feet without them. You know how to love without forgetting to love yourself at the same time." Annisa said sagely.

Kennedy smiled brightly. Tears stung the backs of her eyes. And she nodded.

"You are so right. I'll do my best, Annisa. Thank you so much. You've been amazing in more ways than one." Kennedy grabbed her hand and they clutched hands for a few moments.

"Enjoy your dinner." Annisa bowed and walked away.

Kennedy took a deep breath, smiled happily, and dug into her food.

*Stay open to love.*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The city streets of Chiang Mai slowly gave way to the lush green landscape of the mountainous countryside, as Koji sped towards the town Lampang in the little open top utility vehicle he'd bought.

The drive was an hour and a half one way. But he didn't mind. He had a giant thermos full of black coffee on the way in. And the cool damp air on his face gave him time to wake up and mentally prepare for his day at the hospital.

Many days, if he was really tired or had a particularly challenging day, he slept at the hospital. Even though Lampang was an adorable town he'd been assigned to, he preferred being in the city. The sights and sounds. The places to eat, drink, and socialize if the need presented itself. It's why he'd taken the job with Doctors Beyond Boundaries.

He did socialize. With women. But nothing ever stuck. And he knew why.

*Kennedy.*

It was a name that crossed his mind every single day for the past twelve years. He never went a day without thinking about her. He tried to find her in every feminine face he met. He looked for curly, red hair in the crowd. He dreamt of freckles and curvy bodies. Loving green eyes haunted his waking life.

The last couple of years, he'd thought about finding her. He knew all he had to do was go to her parents' house. But so many years had passed.

Would she still be single?

*Doubtful. She was too amazing of a woman to remain single for long.*

If not, though, did she hate him?

*Probably. I should've found her and whisked her away when I was finished with medical school.*

He had so many regrets. But the biggest one was how chicken he was to reach out. And now, it was possible that too much time had passed for him to

make things right.

Koji parked at the hospital and took a deep breath.

*No matter what. No matter how much time has passed. When I'm finished with this assignment, I'm gonna try to find her. Because maybe...*

*Maybe.*

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Kennedy spent a few days in Chiang Mai. Even though the bustling city wasn't the vibe she wanted for her spiritual trip, she couldn't miss the beautiful sights and temples the expat-filled city provided.

She visited Wat Rong Khun, which was aptly nicknamed The White Temple. The entire structure was white with mirrors blended in that made it shimmer. To reach the temple she walked across a bridge and on either side were sculptures of hands reaching up in supplication. Inside was a golden mural of Buddha. The colorful detail stood out amongst all the white. Her mouth hung open the entire time.

The Golden Temple also took her breath away. She visited in the evening, as someone had suggested. Hidden lighting made the temple come to life. The golden glow was too beautiful for words and made her eyes tear up.

She even saw the Buddhist monks with their shorn heads and bright orange robes. They held a monk chat almost daily. They sat outside at tables where anyone could come and chat with them. But Kennedy had been too shy. She had no idea what to say or ask a monk.

After her few days were up in the big city, Kennedy boarded a bus to Lampang. She'd gotten an extended visa and would stay there for a full three months. She'd wanted to visit Japan as well. But she figured in Japan, she'd rather visit the big cities. She wanted to experience the crowds and hustle and bustle. And this trip's vibe didn't really mesh with that one. Plus, she needed to get back home to be there for Payton's little arrival.

Kennedy already felt ten times better after one month away while she focused on herself. She had a feeling that by the time her three months were up in Thailand, she'd be herself again. Possibly a better version of herself. And then she'd be ready to be there for her friends again. She'd be able to handle Payton's joy.

The bus pulled into the station. The surrounding city was a little bigger

than Kennedy expected. As well as a little more rundown.

She hired a taxi to take her to her lodging. As she watched the landscape pass by, the town became much more charming.

The taxi pulled up to a beautiful dark wood building. It very much looked like a tropical lodge. The entrance was wide open with no doors or walls on three sides. Only wooden pillars. It was evening and lights ran down either side of the wooden path and on the ceiling of the entrance. It looked like summer camp for adults.

The front desk agent guided Kennedy to where she'd be staying. They walked along more wooden pathways that turned into bridges at certain points. All lit by string lights overhead. It was like something out of a story book.

Her new place of residence was a little wooden bungalow. It had a large king size bed. The interior walls and ceiling were some tan tightly woven material like bamboo. She had her own private terrace. There was a separate living room and a little kitchenette for cooking small meals. But the river lodge also offered two restaurants if she didn't want to cook or go into town.

Everything about the place charmed Kennedy down to her toes. It was exactly what she'd hoped for and needed.

Kennedy said to herself as she plopped down on the couch in her living room.

*Three more months of this and I'll definitely be in a better place to go home.*

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Kennedy woke up, got showered, and headed to one of restaurants that offered a breakfast buffet. She loaded up her plate. She'd been so exhausted the night before, all she did was strip out of her clothes and fell into bed without dinner.

She was ravenous.

She found a small table that overlooked the river. Kennedy raised a fork to her mouth just as someone came to stand beside her.

"Hello," a feminine voice with a slight accent said over her.

Kennedy looked up to see a very pregnant young woman. She held a plate of food.

"My name is Emi. Do you mind if I eat with you?" She asked.

"Uh...sure." Kennedy said.

Emi was the typical petite Asian woman. Kennedy was surprised she didn't fall over with the size of her stomach. Her dark, straight hair was cut into a cute little bob that stopped at her chin. She was pretty and her clothing indicated that she didn't hurt for money.

"I saw you leave your bungalow earlier. I wanted to introduce myself, but couldn't catch up. We're next door neighbors. I live in the bungalow next to yours." Emi smiled as she sat across from Kennedy.

*What the hell! Is it my curse to be surrounded by pregnant women? Is this some kind of test or lesson I need to learn? Who did I piss off in a past life?*

"Well, it's nice to meet you Emi. I'm Kennedy." She said as she put down her fork to shake hands with the girl.

"Nice to meet you too, Kennedy," she said. "Where are you from?"

"I'm from San Francisco."

"Oh, nice! I've never been, but I hear it's lovely. I'm from Osaka, Japan."

"Oh, wow! I wanted to visit Japan. But I just don't have enough time.

Plus, this trip is for finding some peace and quiet. Everywhere in Japan I want to visit is not that.” Kennedy chuckled softly.

“You should definitely visit Osaka when you can.” Emi encouraged.

“Your English is perfect.” Kennedy commented.

“Yeah, I’ve always been interested in Western culture. Especially, American. So, I studied harder than most of the kids in my schools. Then I went to school to become an English teacher. I spent some time in the U.S, for a semester to sharpen my English skills. And now, I teach English at a middle school in Osaka.” Emi finished.

“That’s pretty impressive.” Kennedy nodded.

“Thanks.” Emi smiled brightly.

“So, what brings you to Lampang? Are you here alone? Or are you waiting on your partner?” Kennedy looked pointedly at Emi’s large round stomach as she said it.

“Oh...well, I don’t exactly have a partner. It’s a little complicated and a long story.” Emi looked down at her plate.

Now, Kennedy was really intrigued. What would bring a pregnant teacher from Japan to a small town in the middle of nowhere Thailand all alone?

“Well, I really don’t have any plans if you want to share. I’m here for the next three months. So, I’m not rushing off to anywhere.” Kennedy offered kindly.

“Uh...okay.” Emi started off hesitantly. “We get English teachers from Western countries that come to help us teach. They’re contracted to stay a year, unless they decide to stay longer.

“The last teacher we had was this gorgeous guy from the UK. We got really close. Then we started dating. But I kept it a secret from my parents because I knew they wouldn’t like it. You see, he was Black.”

Memories washed over Kennedy like a tsunami. They took her ability to breathe as she thought about Koji’s parents.

*So, I’ve come full circle.*

“Anyway, I realized I was pregnant in February. Around the time he needed to decide if he would extend his contract. But when we told my parents, they lost it.

“They’re wealthy and have some influence over things in Osaka. Osaka is a huge city. The third largest in Japan. So, they aren’t people to cross. They made it where his company that assigns the Western English teachers told

him he could finish out the school year that ends in March, but that he couldn't renew his contract.

"He tried to find other companies that outsourced English teachers, but they'd all been contacted too. He had to go back home." Emi's eyes shimmered with tears.

Kennedy reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

"I'm so sorry, Emi."

"Thank you." She sniffled, but continued. "So, my parents told the school that I needed an extended vacation because we had business abroad. It was a lie, of course. They sent me here to have the baby in secret. They didn't want anyone to see my pregnant belly and ask questions. They were even too paranoid to let me stay in Chiang Mai. After I have the baby, I'm to put it up for adoption and go home."

"And they're making you do all this by yourself?" Kennedy asked incredulously.

Emi nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a napkin.

"Oh, Emi." Kennedy grabbed her hand again and shook it until Emi looked up at her. "Well, I'm here for you if you need me. I won't let you have this baby alone. And by the look of things, you're about ready to pop any moment."

"Yeah," she gave a watery laugh. "A week or two at the latest."

"Well then, I'll try to stay close by until you have the baby. Or you can come with me to places that aren't too much of a strain on you." Kennedy said.

"That would be lovely. Thank you."

They ate the rest of their food and Emi told Kennedy about the town and the things she could do there. Afterward, they walked back to their neighboring bungalows. Emi wanted to nap. So, Kennedy decided to meditate since she'd been too hungry earlier to concentrate.

As she meditated, Kennedy couldn't stop her mind from wandering to how strange life could be. Here she was, a woman who'd fallen for a Japanese man and how his parents had disapproved of her Black heritage. Only to meet a Japanese woman years later, whose parents disapproved of her relationship with a Black man. And for her to be pregnant after Kennedy had lost her chance at having children.

*Wild!*

Kennedy also didn't know why she'd volunteered to be this woman's

champion. Not when she wasn't even sure she was strong enough to handle it. But there was just something about Emi that Kennedy felt a connection with. Kindred spirits. And she couldn't just leave Emi to have a baby on her own. Especially her first. It had to be scary enough with a partner.

For whatever reason, Emi had come into her life. Kennedy knew she needed to be there for her.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

A few days later, Kennedy and Emi walked around one of the many temples in the town. Emi had wanted to walk in the hopes it would get the baby moving. She waddled alongside Kennedy. She often held out her hand to steady Emi.

After a while, Emi plopped down on a bench. Kennedy sat next to her and let her rest. Then she brought up the subject Kennedy had been avoiding.

“So, what made you decide to travel around Asia? You mentioned that you were in search of peace and quiet. People tend to do that for a reason.” Emi said astutely.

Kennedy sighed heavily.

“Life hadn’t been working out the way I wanted it to. I had to get a hysterectomy a couple of months ago. Giving up my opportunity to have children the way I’d always dreamed. And one of my best friends announced she was pregnant right around when I had to get my surgery. It was all too much. So, I needed to get away for a while. Try to find peace and happiness again.” Kennedy finished.

“Oh my God!” Emi cried out. “I’m so sorry, Kennedy. And here I am pushing myself and my problems on you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m fine. I promise.” Kennedy smiled down at her. “It’s actually kinda crazy. When I was in college, I fell in love with a Japanese guy. But we broke up because his family didn’t approve of me. So, it kind of feels like you and I are kindred spirits.”

“Wow! I think we might be.”

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The two women spent every day together. Kennedy told Emi about her

career as a writer. About her best friends. And about Koji.

She hadn't really wanted to talk about him at first. But Emi had asked for more details. And somehow it felt almost cathartic to talk about him again.

It had been two weeks since they'd met and Kennedy had grown fond of Emi. And she felt that Emi felt the same.

They were out for another stroll along a street filled with vendors. Clothes, jewelry, food, and everything in between lined the street.

Emi's attempt to get the baby moving. Today, she needed to stop more often than normal. She held her stomach with one hand and her back with the other. Her face a mask of pain and discomfort.

"So, I think you should try to find Koji." Emi said between grimaces.

"I don't think so. And I wouldn't even know where to start if I wanted to." Kennedy shook her head. "No, if anyone needs to find anyone it's him who needs to find me. He knows exactly where my parents live. It would be super easy to find me if he truly wanted to."

"You have a point." Emi sighed. "It would be nice if you two could reconnect."

"Maybe. But I'm not looking for anything right now. For once, I'm actually enjoying my life and singlehood." Kennedy smiled.

Suddenly, Emi's eyes widened and she jerked upright.

"Uh...Kennedy?"

"Yeah." Kennedy said absentmindedly as she looked at handmade leather purses a vendor was selling.

"I think my water just broke." Emi said with a voice filled with fear.

Kennedy's head whipped back to Emi. She reached out an arm to help steady her new friend.

"Shit!" Kennedy hissed. "We need to get a taxi to the hospital. Do you think you can walk? We need to get to a through street."

"I-I think so."

"Okay, let's try. Just hold onto me."

They gradually made their way to the next street over. Emi stopped once to breathe through a contraction. Kennedy flagged down a taxi. The driver didn't look too happy to have to pick up a woman in the middle of labor. He was probably worried about getting delivery goo all over his backseat if he didn't get them to the hospital in time. But he also wanted the fare, so he grudgingly let them in.

Once they arrived at the hospital, Kennedy rushed inside and gestured

with her hands that there was a pregnant woman who needed help. She used broken Thai, but she was sure that her miming a pregnant belly was what they understood the most.

They brought out a wheelchair for Emi and helped her on it. Kennedy walked alongside her as they wheeled her into a private room. They asked a few questions, but Emi's Thai was just as bad as Kennedy's.

A few moments passed, while they waited. Kennedy helped Emi breathe through another contraction. Kennedy's back was to the door when a voice she'd recognize anywhere spoke behind her.

"So, what do we have here?"

Kennedy turned with wide eyes.

It can't be.

His head was down as he looked at a chart. But it was him.

Koji.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Even her mind said his name breathlessly.

“It looks like somebody’s about to have a—” He stopped mid-sentence when he looked up and their eyes collided.

Holy shit! He’s gorgeous! The years have treated him well.

He only looked a little older. In the good way. His face looked less like a boy and more like a man. More chiseled. His golden-brown eyes were still just as intense. His lips were just as full and tempting. His sculpted jawline ticked. He didn’t wear any glasses like he once had. She couldn’t tell for sure, but his body had filled out with more muscle over the years. If his defined biceps, sinewy forearms, and the man cleavage of his pectorals through his scrubs were any indication. And his hair.

Dear God, his hair!

He’d let it grow. Long. And it was all piled on top of his head in a messy bun.

“Kennedy.” He whispered breathlessly.

“Koji.”

She thought the word would come out just as breathlessly as his did as he said her name. Or as hers had when she’d thought his name a moment before. But to her surprise, it came out almost cold and flat.

“What are you doing here?”

“Pregnant lady, here.” Emi gasped. “Having a baby.”

“I’m so sorry.” Koji shook off his stupor. “Emi, right?”

“Yes.” She panted.

“Hello, Emi. I’m Dr. Ito. You have nothing to worry about. We’ll take good care of you,” he said.

Kennedy watched his hand shake as he placed his clipboard down. He put gloves on and gave Emi a quick exam to see how far along she was.

“You’re only about 4 centimeters dilated. So, you have some time before you reach 10. We’ll continue to monitor you. Just make sure you breathe

through your contractions. You'll do fine." Koji said as he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

His bedside manner was confident and warm. Much like he was when they were younger. Kennedy wondered what brought him to a hospital so far away from home and in the middle of nowhere.

He turned to Kennedy. His confidence of a moment ago wavered a bit. "Can I speak to you for a minute?" He asked.

Yes!

"No. I want to stay with Emi." Kennedy looked down at her new friend who curiously looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Please, Kennedy. Just for a moment. She'll be fine. I swear." Koji pleaded.

"Yes, I'm good. Go talk." Emi agreed.

"Okay, fine."

What is wrong with you? You know you're excited as hell to see him.

She followed Koji out into the hall of the tiny hospital.

"It's been so long." He began. "You look..."

His voice trailed off. His eyes devoured her from head to toe.

Kennedy had her hair in a giant puff on top of her head. A few tendrils left out to frame her face. She wore a bohemian style dress in bright colors that stopped at her ankles.

If he'd have eyed her up and down a month ago, before she left for her trip, she would've felt bashful and self-conscious. As it was, she was about forty pounds heavier than she was the last time she'd seen him. Back when they'd dated, she was around a size 12. Now, she was solidly in a 16. But she still loved her curves and had learned to embrace them. And after she spent a month loving herself, she felt more confident than ever.

"You look incredible." He breathed. "What are you doing here?"

"Thank you. I'm just on a trip abroad. I ended up making friends with Emi and told her I'd be here for her when she went into labor, since she's here alone." Kennedy informed him as if he were a stranger.

"The same Kennedy I once knew. So sweet and always thinking of others." Koji smiled at her.

"I'd like to think I'm not quite the same." She lifted her chin.

He looked at her for a moment. She felt naked under his evaluating gaze.

"Yeah, there are walls there that weren't before." He looked at her sadly as he read her perfectly.

Kennedy shifted uncomfortably.

“Well, I have my reasons for building them.” She looked at him pointedly.

“Ouch. Touché.” He nodded.

“So...what are you doing here? Seems like an odd place to choose to be a doctor.” Kennedy asked. She tried to sound uninterested, even though she was dying to hear what he’d been up to over the years.

“I’m working with Doctors Without Boundaries. I travel to 2nd and 3rd world countries to work in their hospitals for months or a year. Whatever they need. This time I was assigned to Lampang.” He finished.

“So, traveling while being a doctor. A little of what your parents wanted and what you wanted.” Kennedy nodded.

“Exactly.” He smiled. “And I take photos everywhere I go.”

“Sounds like you made a nice life for yourself. Good.” Kennedy turned towards the door to Emi’s room. “I better get back to Emi before another contraction hits.”

Koji’s hand shot out and he gripped her wrist firmly.

“Wait!” He shouted and then dropped his voice when he continued. “How long are you here?”

Kennedy really didn’t want to tell him, but she was a horrible liar.

“Another two and a half months.”

“I’m here for another four. Have dinner with me sometime.” He said almost desperately.

“I can’t, Koji.”

“Why not?”

“Because...I just can’t.”

“You really don’t have an excuse, do you?”

“Not wanting to is excuse enough.”

The hurt in his eyes squeezed her heart. And she shut it down immediately.

“I don’t understand, but I’ll respect it.” Koji said. “I’ll be back in a little bit to check on the patients.”

“Patients?” Kennedy frowned.

“There’s more than one person in there.”

“Oh. Duh. The baby. Okay. I’ll let her know.”

Why didn’t you accept the dinner date, you idiot?!? This is a dream come true.

But Kennedy feared that if she opened her heart again, it would be crushed. The issues of the past hadn't changed. She was still Black. And he hadn't mentioned his parents passing. So, why open herself up to that kind of heartbreak again?

Because he's a grown ass man, thousands of miles away from his horrible parents. He's making his own money and probably no longer beholden to them.

"This is gonna be a long day." Kennedy grumbled low as she walked into the room.

She was just in time. A new contraction hit Emi. Kennedy rushed over and grabbed her hand. She helped her focus on her breathing. All the yoga and breathing techniques Kennedy had worked on the last few months paid off.

As soon as the contraction wore off, Emi got right down to business.

"Woo! That was rough. But what the hell? Is that really *the* Koji from college?!" She hissed.

"I'm afraid so." Kennedy sighed.

"'Afraid so'?" She said disbelievingly. "The love of your life just so happens to be in the same small town as you a million miles away from home and you said 'afraid so'?! You're crazy! This is literally a miracle happening in real time."

A nurse took that moment to come in, take Emi's vitals, as well as the baby's, and left a container of ice for Emi to suck on. Emi gratefully grabbed the ice and started to suck maniacally.

"It's not like our issues from the past have magically disappeared. I don't want to open myself up to getting hurt again. *Especially*, after finding some peace and happiness again." Kennedy said logically.

"Umm...first of all, he's a grown up now. He's making his own money. Screw his parents." Emi's words mirrored Kennedy's thoughts a few minutes ago. "And did it ever occur to you that the reason he has miraculously reentered your life at this very moment is *because* you've healed and learned to love yourself without another person? That having love doesn't somehow validate you? That you're officially ready to fall in love again?"

Everything she said hit its mark. She made too much sense and Kennedy wasn't sure she was ready to hear it.

"I know you're right. But still. I literally *just* got comfortable. I was *not* ready to get into something right now." Kennedy sighed and sat in the chair

next to Emi's bed.

"That's usually when it happens."

"Ugh!" Kennedy slumped in her seat. "Fine. I'll at least think about it. I'm here for another two and a half months anyway. I have time."

"Well, don't take too long." Emi smirked.

"Yeah. Yeah."

"No, seriously." Emi's face turned serious. "You and Koji have a chance that Will and I probably never will. Don't waste it."

Emi's eyes filled with tears. A few slipped down her cheeks.

Kennedy had kind of forgotten about the part where Emi had lost the love of her life. It had been all about the pregnancy and how her parents left her to have it alone in a foreign country. But she also nursed a broken heart. And Kennedy knew what that felt like. To have to be separated from your person because of outside circumstances.

That was extra hard to handle. Usually, in a break up, one or the other did something wrong. Or not even wrong, they just fell out of love with the other. But it's still the fault of either party. One can justify hatred for the other and eventually fall out of love with them.

When it's neither's fault. When it's because someone else forced the separation. *How do you stop loving them, when they did nothing wrong?*

Kennedy felt that she needed that hatred to move on. But it never came. So, moving on took years. And she knew it would be the same for Emi.

Maybe I should take one for the team.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Nope. Definitely not. I can't.

Hours later, Kennedy was headed back to her bungalow in a taxi. She was exhausted from the events of the day and the emotional rollercoaster she'd been on.

Emi's labor lasted ten hours. Koji came in to check on her and the baby's progress every hour. He asked if Kennedy was hungry. And when she gave him a noncommittal response, he ordered her lunch from a local spot and brought it to her. She ate in the waiting room, not to tempt Emi. The whole time she ate, she felt guilty for being so cold with Koji. She'd been starving, and it was as if he knew it. He'd always been attentive to her needs.

And this is why I can't. I'd probably fall harder now than when we were in college. God, he's sexy as hell. NO! Focus.

Once Emi reached ten centimeters, Koji came in with the little disposable doctor caps that they wore. He'd taken his hair out of the top knot and tied it up at the back of his head. He had on a mask, which emphasized his pretty eyes.

He looked at Kennedy with those piercing eyes. A mix of emotions passed over them. Sadness. Awe. Hope. Love. All of them hit their mark. A punch to the gut and chest.

"Open your heart space." Annisa's voice came to her unbidden.

Kennedy realized that his emotional gaze probably hit her so hard in the chest because it was still locked up so tight around her heart. But it was as if she was split in two. Her heart side wanted so badly to be open and accept the love he was so obviously ready to give her. Her head side remembered the heartbreak so well that it had built a protective barrier around her heart. A mental prison. And her heart beat on the bars wildly. Yet her head seemed to have thrown away the key.

"Alright." Koji pulled down his mask to speak to Emi. "I think it's time to deliver this little human. You ready?"

“As I’ll ever be.” Emi said with exhaustion.

Her brow dripped with sweat. Her black hair was plastered to it and her face. Kennedy wiped her face with a cool, wet towel.

Emi had never checked to see what sex the baby was. She hadn’t wanted to know. She didn’t want to risk getting attached to a baby she couldn’t keep. Kennedy couldn’t even imagine.

“When the next contraction hits, I want you to push.” Koji said.

Emi could only nod.

The next contraction took over a moment later, and Koji placed the mask back over his full lips and nose. He leaned down between Emi’s legs.

“Push, Emi.” He instructed.

Kennedy held her hand and even though her hand was tiny, it felt as if Emi would break Kennedy’s. When the contraction passed, Kennedy removed her hand and shook it.

“Jesus, Emi!” Kennedy exclaimed with a chuckle.

“Sorry!” Emi collapsed back.

“Next time, just hold onto the railing. I don’t wanna leave here in a cast.” Kennedy joked.

She swore she heard Koji snort behind his mask.

Several more contractions passed before the baby started to crown. After that, everything happened in a blur. Koji guided the baby out, a strong cry ripped through the air, he cut the umbilical cord, and he handed Emi the baby.

“It’s a girl.” Koji pulled down the mask and smiled.

As Emi held her baby girl, sobs wracked her body. Kennedy couldn’t help the tears that slipped down her own face. The birth had been beautiful to witness. Yet the devastating reality of the moment broke her heart for Emi. She couldn’t keep her. The baby made from love.

Kennedy swallowed down her own sobs. They wouldn’t help Emi.

Her eyes caught Koji’s and he smiled at her gently. It was enough to make her break. But she gritted her teeth, dug her fingernails into her palms, and sucked down the ball of emotion that threatened to choke her.

Emi handed her baby to the nurse for clean up and to weigh and measure. Once the nurse was done, she went to hand Emi the swaddled baby once more. But Emi shook her head.

“No. I can’t. I’m giving her up for adoption. It hurts too much to hold her.” Emi choked out.

The woman nodded and took the baby away.

Koji helped Emi pass the afterbirth and sewed her up.

“I’ll come to check on you before my shift is over for the night. Get some rest.” Koji said.

He looked at Kennedy for longer than what was appropriate. Kennedy broke eye contact first. Then he finally left and she was able to breathe again.

“How are you feeling?” Kennedy asked Emi.

“I don’t know. Exhausted physically. Destroyed emotionally.” Emi said as more tears streamed down her face.

“I’m so sorry, Emi.” Kennedy reached out and gripped her hand.

“She was so beautiful.” Emi wiped at her face.

“I didn’t really get a chance to see her before they took her away. But I have no doubt that she is perfect. You did a great job.”

“Thanks.” Emi sighed. “You don’t have to stay with me. I know you’re probably exhausted from being here all day. And I don’t want you sleeping in a chair. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I need alone time to process everything, anyway.” Emi said.

“I definitely understand that. I’ll give you some space.”

Kennedy laid a comforting hand on Emi’s shoulder. Then she slipped out of her room and the hospital without any further run-ins with her ex, and headed back to her temporary home.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The next day, Kennedy arrived with food. Emi smiled happily.

“Thank you!” She said gratefully. “The hospital food is awful.”

“I figured as much.” Kennedy grinned. “So...how are you feeling today?”

“I’m good. Well, as good as can be expected under the circumstances.” Emi busied herself with opening the containers of food.

“Have you seen the baby today?” Kennedy asked cautiously.

“No. Like I said. I just don’t think it’s a good idea.” Emi said around a mouthful of food.

Kennedy nodded. “Yeah.”

“How about this? If you want to go hold her, I can see her through the window. I wouldn’t mind seeing her one last time. I just can’t hold her again. It’s too hard.” Emi suggested.

“Okay, we can do that.” Kennedy agreed.

After Emi scarfed down her food, Kennedy helped her into a wheelchair, and guided her down to the newborn observation window. With some difficulty due to the language barrier, they explained to the nurse on duty what they wanted to do. She eventually understood and allowed Kennedy inside.

Kennedy washed her hands thoroughly. Then she put on a disposable gown before she walked into the nursery on wobbly legs. She had no idea why she was nervous.

The nurse guided her over to the right baby. And Kennedy looked at her for the first time.

Her breath hitched at the sight of the little baby girl. She was gorgeous. Her hair was thick and jet black. It wasn’t quite curly yet. It was straight and laid flat against her head like a little wrap. The ends curled up slightly. Kennedy was sure those curls would spring out later.

Her skin was warm and tan. The darkest baby in the nursery. Her little

face was scrunched up in sleep.

The nurse picked the baby up and handed her to Kennedy. Kennedy's heart pounded in her chest. She immediately started to rock the baby. The little bundle began to stir. Her little mittened hands tried to rub her face, but she was still too uncoordinated to find it. Her little eyes blinked open. And her warm brown eyes stared back at Kennedy.

As soon as their eyes connected, something happened inside of Kennedy's chest. Her heart began to beat with an unconditional love that she'd never experienced before. She'd been close when she'd fallen for Koji all those years ago. But it was nothing like this.

It was pure love at first sight.

Kennedy's eyes stung. She tried all she could to blink them back. But a few slipped out anyway. Then she remembered she had an audience and was supposed to be showing Emi the baby one last time.

She quickly wiped her face and looked up. Emi also had tears running down her face. A face that had a peculiar look on it. Kennedy walked over to the window. Emi stood up on shaky legs and looked down at the baby. She pressed her hands to the window as more tears slipped down. She gave the baby a watery smile and mouthed something. It looked very much like she said, 'I love you.'

Kennedy had to wipe away more tears.

Emi looked up at her. She nodded and sat back down.

By the time Kennedy had walked back over to the bassinet and turned back towards the window, Emi had gone. In her place stood Koji.

Kennedy's heart stuttered. Stopped. And started to race again.

Koji's heart stopped when he saw Kennedy in the nursery. The baby held gently in her arms. The vision was like every dream he'd had over the past twelve years come true. To see the woman he'd never gotten over, holding a baby in her arms. A baby mixed with Black and Japanese. As if made of the two of them.

But then her eyes shuttered. And Koji remembered that there was still a high, thick wall to climb or bust through. He didn't want to push her into anything she didn't want. But he also had no intentions of walking away from everything he ever wanted, when it was obvious they were supposed to meet again.

Why else would we reconnect in the oddest of places, a million miles away from home?

No. He had to try. Especially, after he'd caught the look of love on her face for the milliseconds before she thought to shut it down.

My biggest mistake was not fighting for this connection when my parents forbade me. Or coming for you after medical school. I won't make that mistake again.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Kennedy's heart was at war with her head. The moment she'd held Emi's baby, she knew there was a connection to the little girl. She knew Emi wanted to give the baby up for adoption. Kennedy knew that Emi probably would gladly have her take the baby instead of a complete stranger.

But am I ready for a baby?

Kennedy hadn't even decided yet if adoption was what she wanted. She'd just barely started to feel okay with the fact that she wouldn't have any biological children of her own. And then to suddenly and unexpectedly go from party of one, to party of two in the space of a few days. And in the middle of Asia. She'd need so many things, that she'd might as well cut her trip short and head home. It was all too much to process.

But can I really leave the baby to be adopted by some unknown people?

All these thoughts swirled through her mind as she made her way to the hospital to visit Emi and the baby.

Kennedy walked into Emi's room and the bed was empty and made up for the next patient. She stumbled back confused. Kennedy turned and strode quickly to the nursery. Her eyes scanned the little bassinets and landed on Emi's baby. She was still there and Kennedy breathed a sigh of relief.

The nurse spotted her through the window. The woman grabbed what looked like folded paper and came out into the hallway. She handed her a note.

"For you," she said.

Kennedy looked down and saw her name written on top of it. She unfolded it. Very neat and beautiful handwriting stared up at her.

Kennedy,

I am so sorry to be doing this, this way. I could not stay. To be near her was torture. But I saw the way you looked at her. I saw the instant bond you had. I would be honored if you chose to take her. I know she would be

loved. You are a beautiful human being. You helped me even when you didn't need to. Even though you were hurting because you can't have children of your own. I believe it was fated for us to meet. My baby has always been your baby. Although I know taking a baby you weren't expecting at the last minute in a country so far away is a big responsibility, I hope you do consider taking her. And if you do, my only request is that you give her the middle name Himari. In Japanese, one of its meanings is 'sunflower.' My favorite flower. Take care, Kennedy.

*With Love,
Emi*

The words blurred on the page. Kennedy blinked and a few tears dropped on the paper. She sniffled and quickly wiped them away. She folded the paper again, took a deep breath, and looked up.

Her eyes locked with Koji as he walked towards her. She tried to adjust her composure as he stopped in front of her. Every time she saw him, he took her breath away.

"So, I take it you've heard that Emi left in the middle of the night." Koji said.

"Yeah. She...uh...left me a note. She wants me to adopt the baby. But I—" Kennedy stopped.

"You weren't planning on bringing home a baby from a trip abroad?" Koji said perceptively.

"No, I wasn't." Kennedy looked down at the floor.

What do you do when you're given everything you've ever wanted in the span of a few days?

Kennedy was scared shitless to grasp at her dream. It wasn't happening at all how she'd imagined it.

"So, what are you gonna do?" Koji asked.

"I don't know. I need to think." Kennedy shook her head. "This is a lot to process."

"Well, just to let you know, in the next few days, she'll be transferred to an orphanage in Chiang Mai, so she can be adopted. Most people want newborns. So, she's a perfect candidate." Koji touched her arm. "You don't want to wait too long to decide."

Kennedy's stomach dropped at his words. She only nodded. She couldn't speak around the knot in her throat.

“Would you like to have dinner with me? Maybe use me to work through your decision?” Koji asked hopefully.

“No. I need to decide this on my own.” Kennedy said.

Koji tried to hide his disappointment, but it was still there in his eyes. Although, Kennedy didn’t really have time to sit and analyze it. She had to make one of the biggest decisions of her life. And she needed time to think.

Koji left to do his rounds. The nurse let Kennedy in the nursery to visit with the baby. This time she got to sit in a rocking chair and bottle feed her.

Kennedy cooed at the baby as she fed her. Her pretty brown eyes focused on Kennedy’s face. Or as focused as her underdeveloped eyes could. Kennedy wasn’t sure if she could see her face clearly or not. But the look on the baby’s face was completely rapt. As if Kennedy was the most important thing in the world to her.

Her heart squeezed.

“Don’t.” Kennedy said as she looked down at the baby. “Don’t give me that face. Don’t get attached.”

Kennedy said this more to herself than to the baby.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet. This is a lot to take on at the last minute.” She continued. “Two weeks ago, I was just minding my own business. Traveling the world and finding peace and happiness alone. Now, I’m suddenly to become a mom. Most people have nine months or months of an adoption process to get used to the idea. I had a day.”

Kennedy pulled the empty bottle from the now sleeping baby’s mouth. She raised her head to her lips. Kennedy gently kissed the top of her thick hair. She breathed in deeply. Her eyes closed at the sweet scent of the baby.

She smelled like heaven.

Chapter Forty

That night, Kennedy tossed and turned. Her mind wouldn't shut off. And neither could her heart.

She got up and meditated. She prayed. She paced the floor, weighed the pros and cons, and everything in between. It was a huge decision. One she didn't take lightly. There was more than just her involved. The life of a precious little girl and what was best for her was Kennedy's main concern.

By the time the sun came up, Kennedy felt that she was no closer to a decision than she was when she first thought about adopting the baby. Self-doubt was her main issue.

Will I even be a good mother?

She knew that if there was any time to call her mother or her friends, it would be now. But she didn't want them swaying her answer. This was something she had to decide on her own.

Kennedy showered and dressed for the day. She had breakfast at the restaurant in the resort. It was nice to have her alone time back, but she had to admit that she did miss Emi's company. She was also sad that Emi hadn't left her any contact information. But Kennedy guessed the reason behind it. If she did take the baby, Emi may not want to be tempted to come looking for her years later. Her not leaving any way to contact her, was her way of giving up full rights to the baby.

After breakfast, Kennedy headed straight for the hospital. She couldn't help herself. It was hard for her to stay away.

She headed straight for the nursery. But when she got there, she immediately saw that the baby's bassinet was empty. Kennedy's eyes wildly searched the other bassinets and the rest of the room. Emi's baby was nowhere to be found.

Kennedy felt herself begin to panic. She turned to look for someone who could give her answers. She found Koji coming towards her in a quick stride.

"Kennedy," he said breathless. "The baby has been transferred."

“Already?!” Kennedy’s stomach somersaulted.

“Yes. I thought they’d hold off another few days. But they’ve already taken her to Chiang Mai.”

It was in that moment that Kennedy made her decision.

“But she’s mine!” Her eyes began to fill with tears.

“Come on.” Koji grasped her arm and began to guide her towards the entrance. “I’ll take you to where you’re staying. You can pack a bag and come stay with me in my place in Chiang Mai. Then we can get everything sorted out.”

“But aren’t you supposed to be working right now?” Kennedy asked.

She was too frazzled to even think about saying no to staying with him.

“No, actually. I’ve been sleeping at the hospital the last few nights. Today is my day off.”

Kennedy finally took a moment to actually look at him. He was dressed casually. He wore loose-fitting, lightweight army green cargo pants. His cream-colored shirt hung loose as well with cropped sleeves that showed off his muscular arms. Around his neck was a leather cord with a pendant at the center. Some kind of metal coin with a hole in its middle. His left wrist had leather bracelets in black and brown. His hair hung loose around his face. The strands reached his shoulder blades.

Jesus Christ on bikes, he’s beautiful!

“Wait here and I’ll bring the car around.” Koji said before he ran off.

A few minutes later, he pulled around in some rugged utility vehicle with no doors. It matched his style perfectly. He really had become that sexy nomadic guy. A free spirit. Being away from his parents had done him well. He seemed so much more comfortable in his skin.

She’d been so wrapped up in Emi, the baby, and her decision, she really hadn’t gotten a chance to truly see him. And now that she did, it was like he’d jumped out of a romance novel. Or from out of the movie *Romancing the Stone*. Sexy and rugged.

As Kennedy slid into the jeep, Koji pulled his hair up into a messy top knot. His muscles flexed as he did. Kennedy’s fingers itched to run her fingers through the silky tresses.

“Where are you staying?” He asked, bringing her out of her stupor.

“At the River Lodge.”

“Okay. I know where that is.”

He threw the jeep in drive and took off. Kennedy packed her things and

checked out of the hotel early. She had no idea if she'd even come back. If she was able to get the baby, she was pretty sure she'd immediately head back home to the States. Trying to figure her way around solo in a foreign country was already challenging enough. Trying to figure her way around a foreign country with a newborn baby was asking a little too much.

Koji sped down the country roads to Chiang Mai. They didn't talk much as they went. The silence wasn't exactly comfortable. It was filled with tension. Filled with unspoken words. Koji put on some music in an attempt to cut the silence and tension. Unfortunately, all the songs had to do with love, lost love, and love being found again. A little too on the nose for Kennedy's taste.

She knew she would have no choice but to spend time with him. In close quarters in his place. A chance for him to break down her walls.

How long will I be able to fight him...my feelings?

Koji unlocked the door to his apartment in the city. He was able to find a relatively big place for a reasonable price. The city had several places dedicated to the massive expat community. It was sleek and modern.

He watched as Kennedy walked around and took in his space. The way she stopped at the photographs he'd hung on the walls. The pictures he'd taken on his travels. Of cities. Of mountains. Of the people he'd met along the way. Some in black and white. Some in vibrant colors. It all depended on the mood that struck him and what the image needed to stand out.

"These are gorgeous, Koji. Magazine worthy." Kennedy said in awe.

"Thank you. Maybe one day I'll submit them."

"You should."

"Here," Koji stretched out an arm to take her things. "I'll put these in the bedroom. It's only a one bedroom. You can have my bedroom and I'll sleep on the couch out here."

"O-Okay. Thanks, Koji."

"You're welcome."

He quickly put her luggage and bag in the bedroom and then came back out.

"Alright. Let's get to the orphanage."

Chapter Forty-One

“Unfortunately, they’re going to require you to be married to adopt a baby.” The woman at the agency said.

She had a sweet demeanor and kind eyes.

“But the birth mother told me I can have the baby.” Kennedy stressed.

She handed the woman the letter.

“And I was the doctor who delivered the baby. I can attest to the fact that she left instructions for Kennedy to have the baby.” Koji added.

“But the problem is, she gave up the right to that decision when she left.” She said with a grim face.

Kennedy wanted to scream. But it wasn’t the woman’s fault. She was just giving them the facts.

“How long do I have? Is there anyone already interested?”

“Not yet, as the baby just got here. But newborns don’t last too long. But...and I hate to say this, her mixed heritage might slow things down a bit. That could be a good thing for you. It’ll give you more time.” The woman said.

Kennedy clenched her teeth at that last statement. As if the baby’s Black bloodline was less than desirable. Kennedy took personal offense to that. Even if the woman didn’t mean it in a cruel way, but more of a statement of fact.

“We’ll be back.” Koji said and then stood. “Come on, Kennedy.”

They walked out into the warm sun and steamy air. They walked for a few blocks before Koji stopped and gripped her arms.

“Let’s get married!” He said passionately.

Kennedy’s eyes widened.

“For the baby.” He rushed on. “We get married. We adopt her. And we part ways when you go back to the U.S. with her.”

It wasn’t the worst plan ever.

But then I marry the one person I could never fully let go of, only to let

him go again. And what of our marriage? Do we get a divorce? Get it annulled? And how does that all work with a marriage certificate from Thailand? Hell...will it even work to get the baby?

Kennedy shook her head. She knew she was overthinking it. It didn't matter how they dealt with it later. She needed to get the baby as soon as possible, before someone else did. And it was at least worth a shot.

“Okay.”

Chapter Forty-Two

Koji found an agency that helped them get all of the necessary paperwork to be legally married in Thailand. They boasted that they could get it done quickly, and they came through in four days.

Four long days, that Koji stayed away in Lampang. He'd used the excuse of work and that he usually stayed there overnight during his work week. But in reality, he knew proximity to Kennedy everyday in his one bedroom apartment would be torture. To pretend to be just friends. Not to touch her. To kiss her. To make love to her. It would've killed him. So, he figured it would be best to stay away.

And as Kennedy bent over to sign her name to the marriage certificate, he knew he'd made the right choice. Her curly, red afro was out in all it's glory. She wore a lacy white sundress that stopped just above her knees. She was fresh-faced. Freckles, cat eyes, and full lips the stars of the show. She was even more beautiful than when they were college kids.

He'd asked her if she wanted a small ceremony.

"Are you sure you don't want a small ceremony?"

"No. Signing the certificate is enough. Besides, I can't really get married without my parents and the girls. It just wouldn't feel right." Kennedy said.

But her white dress spoke volumes. She still wanted a little tradition during the certificate signing.

Koji honestly had suggested marriage to help her get the baby. His intentions were altruistic. But he would've been lying if he said that a small part of him wanted to tie her to him. Give him a chance to make her fall in love with him again.

He'd promised himself that if she ever came into his life again, he'd never let her go. He'd fight for her this time. She just needed to give him that chance.

And all of this has to mean something. For her to choose to live where I work. Her befriending a Japanese woman who happened to be pregnant with

a mixed baby. This can't be coincidence. This was meant to be.

The life we'd been promised 12 years ago, falls into our laps overnight. I can't just let that slip away.

When Kennedy was finished signing, Koji stepped forward. He, too, had dressed somewhat for the occasion. Tan linen pants with a loose, white cropped-sleeved shirt. His hair laid loose on his shoulders. He tucked the strands behind his ears as he bent over the certificate to sign.

Once he was done, he shook hands with two of the nurses he'd become close with that came to be their witnesses.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it." He said to them.

"You're welcome." They said before leaving.

Koji turned to Kennedy. It only took a second for her face to turn his favorite shade of red. Kennedy Red.

"So..." Koji huffed out a breath. "I guess we're married now."

"Looks like it." Kennedy looked at everything but him. "Do you think we have time to get to the orphanage to petition for adoption?"

"You're wasting no time." Koji grinned at her.

Inside, he'd hoped that she was just a little excited to be married to him out of the necessity of adopting the baby.

"Nope. I don't want someone to take her. She was meant to be mine." Kennedy said with so much conviction it made the back of Koji's eyes sting.

And you were both meant to be mine.

When the baby was still in the hospital in Lampang, Koji had taken his breaks in the nursery to hold the baby. He'd grown just as fond of her. She was a sweet baby and had seemed content in his arms. He wanted Kennedy to have her just as much as Kennedy wanted it.

"I think you're right." Koji said.

Kennedy's eyes shot up to his. Koji felt the gut punch he usually got when she looked at him.

"You don't think I'm crazy?" Kennedy asked.

"Not at all. It was fated." Koji assured her.

Kennedy smiled brightly. It was the first genuine full smile she'd given him since they reunited. Her cheeks were rosy and the freckles stood out. Her eyes sparkled like emeralds.

It hit Koji square in the chest. It winded him and he had to cough to cover it up.

"Let's go, before they close for the day." Koji said when he found his

voice again.

Kennedy grabbed the certificate. They shook hands with the consulate official who'd signed off on the marriage certificate and headed out the consulate building.

Holy shit! I'm married! And to Koji!

Kennedy felt as if she was in some alternate universe. She was married to Koji and her dream baby was just within reach. But it was all backwards. They didn't get married for love. And she wasn't giving birth to the baby herself. The baby wasn't their blood. Yet she was mixed with Black and Japanese.

None of it made sense. But yet, it felt like it was meant to be.

How strange my life has become.

All these thoughts filled her mind as they filled out the adoption paperwork. They made sure they added the letter from Emi. And they told the story of how they fell in love in college and reunited through Emi and the baby. They knew their love story couldn't hurt.

"It may take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks to see if the adoption goes through." The woman at the orphanage stated.

"We're not going anywhere." Koji said. "We'll wait."

"Can I...I mean, can we see her now?" Kennedy asked.

"Sure." The woman stood. "She's actually been really fussy since she arrived."

Kennedy frowned. She didn't like the idea that the baby was unhappy or potentially being mistreated in any way.

They made their way down the hall, up two floors on the elevator, and then down another hall. They reached the nursery for newborns up to one-year-olds. There were a few newborns. But most of the children were months older. Many were very close to the undesirable age for adoptive parents. Kennedy's heart went out to them.

They reached the bassinet that Emi's baby was in.

Kennedy wanted to say 'her baby,' but didn't want to jinx it. She also wanted to name her. But knew she needed to wait until the baby was officially hers. She couldn't risk growing too attached to her.

The baby was red-faced and squirmed. Little cries escaped her toothless opened mouth. Kennedy immediately reached in and grabbed her. She lifted

her up and placed her tummy down against her shoulder and breast. Then she rocked her gently while she cooed to her.

The baby instantly stopped crying. As if she'd missed Kennedy.

"Oh wow." The woman said in shock. "She calmed right down. She hasn't done that with anyone."

"That's because I've already bonded with her."

The woman smiled. "Then she was crying out for her mama."

Kennedy's heart flip-flopped in her chest at the word 'mama.'

She glanced up at Koji. She couldn't be sure, but the look on his face and his glassy eyes spoke of love without saying a word. And not just for her. For the baby too.

"Here," Kennedy held her out to him. "Take her."

Koji blinked to clear his eyes, and then reached for her. He cradled her gently in his strong arms. She looked so small within his muscular arms. The baby looked up at him intently. He spoke to her softly, and it seemed as if she listened. She was just as content in his arms as she was in Kennedy's.

They looked beautiful together.

She wondered if Koji had spent some time with the baby as well, before she left the hospital. Or if she just immediately knew she was safe with him.

Either way, seeing them together filled Kennedy with a longing she wasn't ready to feel.

It had been a whirlwind few months. To learn she would never have children of her own. To have her body...her womanhood, altered permanently. To suffer from soul-crushing depression. To picking herself back up and moving abroad to heal. To finally find some peace and accept her singlehood and child-free existence. To reuniting with the love of her life and meeting her dream baby in the span of a day.

It was a little much. Her mind, heart, and soul had whiplash.

A woman with a bottle walked over to them.

"Would you like to feed her?" The agency lady asked.

"Absolutely." Kennedy said.

Koji passed the baby back to her and Kennedy moved over to one of the rocking chairs in the room. She sat and placed the nipple in the baby's mouth. She drank greedily. Her pretty brown eyes stared up at Kennedy as she drank.

I love you.

It was the first time she'd even thought it. Tears instantly stung her eyes.

Kennedy felt eyes on her and she glanced up. Again, the look of love

written all over Koji's face, blasted her with its force.

What am I supposed to do with all that? If I let myself go. If I let myself fall again, and he leaves me because his parents disagree again and he doesn't want to lose his inheritance or something, I'll be devastated again. And it's not just me who would be affected this time around. There's a little person involved now. I won't let her be crushed as well.

Kennedy quickly looked away. She refocused her energy on the baby in her arms. A baby who'd fallen asleep, but still suckled at the bottle.

When she was done, Kennedy passed her to Koji to hold for a little longer. After a while, they put her back in her bassinet and left the building.

Now, all they could do was wait.

It was in fate's hands now. They'd either get her or not.

If it was the latter, Kennedy had no idea what she'd do. Without realizing it, she'd allowed herself to fall in love with a baby that wasn't hers yet. And if the adoption agency said no, she'd be crushed beyond words. Which was another reason that falling for Koji again was out of the question. She absolutely could not handle two heartbreaks back-to-back. Not after the peace and happiness she'd so carefully curated, were still so fresh and built on a shaky foundation.

The loss of them both would likely send her into a depression that would be far worse than the one she'd fallen into after her surgery.

I have to wait and see if the adoption goes through. Then I can decide how I want to move forward with Koji.

Chapter Forty-Three

Kennedy sat across from Koji at a traditional Thai restaurant. He'd wanted to take her out to dinner. A celebration of being able to at least start the adoption process.

Kennedy tried to eat her noodles and dumplings, but her appetite just wasn't there. Her thoughts were with the baby. She hoped that she wasn't still fussy.

"So..." Koji started. "How's the writing career going?"

Kennedy knew it was his attempt to get her mind off of things.

"Pretty good. I've written a series about the love lives of the girls. They've all had such epic love stories. I had to write books based off of them." She smiled thinking about the girls.

"I...uh...actually have been following your career a little bit." Koji quickly rushed on to explain. "I'm not a stalker or anything. But I have kind of cyber stalked your career."

Kennedy felt her face flush with color. She made a confession of her own.

"I did try to look you up a few times. But I never found anything." She busied herself with stirring her noodles.

"I've kept a low profile." Koji admitted.

"You should create a social media page and share your photographs. They're pretty amazing."

"I know. Maybe soon."

"So, you don't wear glasses anymore. Have you gone contacts only?" Kennedy asked curiously.

"No, I got laser surgery. I didn't want to travel around the world worrying about my glasses or getting a contact prescription filled." Koji explained.

"That makes sense."

Kennedy ate a few bites of food. She tried not to, but she stared at his

hair that he'd pulled up into a messy top knot. The heat and humidity had been awful all day. She was sure he'd gotten too hot. It didn't matter how he wore it; it was distracting to say the least.

"You grew out your hair." Kennedy said.

"Oh. Uh, yeah." He touched it absentmindedly. "I've always preferred my hair longer. It's so stick straight that if I cut it short, it sticks up in every direction like a porcupine."

They both laughed lightly.

It was true. She'd never seen him with short hair.

"Well, um...it looks good on you." Kennedy mumbled.

"Thanks."

"You've aged well yourself. You look really good, Kennedy." Koji said sincerely.

She looked up at him and his eyes danced with attraction.

"Even though I'm two sizes bigger than I was the last time you saw me?" She asked.

"Maybe because of it." Koji shrugged. "It doesn't matter either way. You're a beautiful woman, Kennedy. I've always thought that since the very first time I saw you in the cafeteria."

Kennedy's heart and stomach performed a synchronized somersault.

"How are Sandra and Sean? I miss them." Koji smiled.

"They're great. My mom's bakery business has expanded. My dad's furniture business is booming so much that he stopped working in construction and devotes his time building his furniture.

"They actually surprised me a few years after graduation. My dad had been saving his money from the furniture business and they'd solely been living off his construction and my mom's business. They'd been saving up to give me a down payment on my first house." Kennedy finished.

"Oh my God! That's amazing, Kennedy!" Koji beamed.

"Yeah, they're pretty freakin' great."

"You've been blessed a hundred times over to have such great parents." Koji said almost wistfully.

"How are your parents?" Kennedy asked somberly.

"The same." Koji shrugged. "As soon as I was done with my residency at my father's hospital, I signed up for Doctors Without Boundaries. My first assignment was in Guatemala. I fell in love with it. My parents got kinda what they wanted. And I got the hell away from them and got what I

wanted.”

“I’m glad. It looks like it’s been good for you. You look happy. At peace. Like you’ve settled into the person you’ve always wanted to be. A free spirit. Not some son of a wealthy family, trust fund douche canoe.” Kennedy said.

“Douche canoe?” Koji snorted.

“I said what I said.” Kennedy grinned at him.

“Yeah, you’re right. I am happy. I do feel more comfortable in my skin.” Koji took a deep breath. “My only regret is that I didn’t come for you when I finished my residency. To take you with me on these adventures.”

Kennedy nodded.

“Once I realized you weren’t coming, I had to let you go.” Kennedy looked away from his intense stare. “I accepted that we wouldn’t be together.”

“But we are now.” Koji reached across the table and clasped her hand. “Even married.”

“I don’t know, Koji. I’ve wanted this my whole life. And now that it’s here in my face, I just don’t know if I’m ready.” Kennedy pulled her hand away from his.

She felt the loss of his warmth instantly.

Koji nodded sadly. “I waited too long. It’s my own fault.”

Kennedy didn’t know what to say to that. Instead, she tried to eat her food that had turned cold.

They finished their meal in silence.

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Kennedy may not have known what to do about Koji. It still didn’t mean that she wasn’t insanely attracted to him. Insanely sexually attracted to him. It had been years since she’d had sex. And she remembered sex with him had been phenomenal. So much so, that she’d measured every sexual encounter she’d had against sex with him.

After Kennedy had washed the sweat of the day off her, she’d dressed in a loose spaghetti strapped camisole and matching little shorts.

Once she had finished, Koji had jumped in the shower after her. While

he was in the shower, she padded to the kitchen to find some water. She needed some ice water to cool her down.

When she turned to find Koji walking into the living room, she realized she needed to cool down for more reasons than the temperature.

A white towel hung low on his hips. It allowed those sexy muscles that led to the groin to shine. Droplets of water dripped from his wet hair that clung to his shoulders and chest, dripped down his tan skin and brown nipples.

*Why do his lips look even pinker and plumper than they did a few minutes ago? Sweet baby Jesus.*

Koji stared right back at her. Kennedy felt her nipples harden through the cotton fabric. Her eyes were drawn down to what was hidden under the terrycloth towel. Suddenly, the hard print of what was hidden pressed against the fabric.

Kennedy jumped and spun away from him. She'd forgotten about the glass of water. Her hand hit it and it went flying.

"Shit!" She shouted before she crouched down to clean up the mess.

Koji quickly came over to help. Their hands touched and she jumped back.

"No! I got it." Kennedy said forcefully. "Just...just go get dressed.

She did *not* want him anywhere near her. She was so wet she was surprised her arousal didn't drip onto the floor to mix with the water. She was damn near ready to hump his leg.

She continued to work on sopping up the mess and refused to look at him. Eventually, he did as she asked and left to get dressed.

Once the water was cleaned up. She grabbed a new glass, quickly filled it with ice and water, and hightailed it back to his room he'd let her occupy.

"Goodnight!" Kennedy shouted without looking at him.

"Goodnight, Kennedy."

She flopped onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling.

*This is going to be the death of me.*

## Chapter Forty-Four

Koji left for work again. He told her he'd be back in a couple of days. Kennedy was grateful for the separation. Her vagina was especially grateful.

She wanted him to fuck her until her eyes went crossed. But she knew it wouldn't just be sex. It never was with him. It would always be more. And she needed her mind clear before she made any rash decisions.

"I've already made one huge, life-altering decision. Am I really supposed to make another right after?" Kennedy said out loud to herself as she manically cleaned his apartment.

She didn't consider marrying him a huge decision. That was done out of necessity for the sake of the baby. Something they could annul. The decision would be to *stay* married.

"Most people take time to decide to get married and then have a baby. Or have a baby and then get married. They rarely get married and get a baby in the same dang week. That's just too much." She said as she scrubbed the shower.

She had nothing else to do while she waited for the answer that would change her life or break her heart. So, it was clean his already clean apartment and wrack her brain over Koji, instead of thinking about the baby.

When she wasn't cleaning, she went for long walks in the thick, humid air. Then she'd come back, take a shower, and lie under the air-con wall unit to cool off. Rinse and repeat.

When Koji arrived home, he found her deep in his fridge scrubbing the insides. All his food on the counter.

"Uh...Kennedy? What are you doing?" He asked.

"Keeping busy." She said loudly.

She pulled herself out of the fridge and turned.

Every time she saw him, she got a kick in the gut.

*Damnit! Does he ever have an off day? Bad hair day? Random pimple? Something?*

He looked around his apartment with a small smile on his face. Once cleaning hadn't been enough, she'd decided to rearrange his furniture.

"A little anxious, are we?"

"Wouldn't you be, if you were waiting for someone else to decide your future?" Kennedy said. Frustration tinged her voice.

"Actually, yes." He looked at her pointedly.

Kennedy couldn't hold the eye contact. She turned away and busied herself with putting the food and condiments back into the fridge.

"I have something that I think might help." Koji said. "Go get dressed in something nice, but casual."

Kennedy looked at him curiously. She remembered how good he was at taking her to experience unique things.

"Oookay." She said hesitantly.

"You'll love it. I promise."

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It was evening. The sun had set, but the city of Chiang Mai was anything but dark. The streets were lined with colorfully lit lanterns. And filled with people from all over the world. It was much busier than normal. Hundreds of happy faces illuminated by the soft glow of the lanterns.

"What's going on? Why is it so busy?"

"It's the Yi Peng Lantern Festival. Come. You'll see."

Koji took her hand and led her in the direction most of the crowd was headed. At the entrance to a temple, Koji pulled two tickets out of his pants pocket and handed it to the person there. In exchange, they gave him two large unlit, white rice paper lanterns.

He took her hand again and led her deeper into the crowd surrounding the temple. They found a spot in the center of everything.

Kennedy looked around as people gradually began to light their lanterns. She spotted the bald monks in their orange robes. They lit their lanterns and it made their robes glow and stand out even more. The entire area filled with a soft glow that took her breath away. And then she looked at Koji.

He'd lit his and the firelight danced across his face. His eyes sparkled as they reflected back the light. He smiled that big, megawatt smile he used to

blast her with twelve years ago. Her breath caught.

“Let me light yours,” he said.

Kennedy could only nod. She lifted hers up so he could light the ring on the bottom.

“It is believed that releasing the lanterns will bring you good luck. And that it allows you to release negativity and all your worries. So, even though I wanted you to see the festival because I’ve heard it’s beautiful. I also wanted you to experience it because maybe it’ll bring a little luck and give you some peace of mind. Let it go. And what is meant for you, won’t pass you by.”

Koji said wisely.

Kennedy’s eyes glittered with unshed tears. She gave him a watery smile.

“Thank you.” She said thickly.

“Of course. I’d do anything for you, Kennedy. You know that.”

Bells rang. The boom of fireworks sounded and silvery sparkles lit the sky and rained down. As if the stars in the sky came to life. And one by one, the crowd released their lanterns into the sky.

And in the middle of it all was Kennedy.

She was lit up from the inside out. She lifted her hands and let go of her lantern. Her chin raised to the sky. Her eyes in awe of it all. She’d pulled her hair up into a curly puff on top of her head. Her bangs laid on her forehead, framing her face and bringing focus to her eyes. Her green cat eyes sparkled and had never looked more radiant to him.

Kennedy was the most stunning woman he’d ever laid eyes on. His heart galloped in his chest every time he looked at her. And as he gazed at her now, it raced. Twelve years hadn’t changed one single thing. He loved her just as much as he did then. Maybe even more, if that were possible.

Once his hands were free, Koji lifted the camera that had been slung on his hip. He took photos of her uplifted face filled with child-like wonder. She must have sensed what he was up to.

Kennedy lowered her face from the sky. She glanced at Koji to see if he was witnessing the beauty that surrounded them. But he only had eyes for her. Their eyes locked. He watched the muscles in her throat work as she swallowed thickly. The look in her eyes had gone from awestruck to desire. He snapped one last shot.

Koji dropped the camera back to his side and stepped towards her. He took it as a good sign when she didn't step back. He looked down at her and she raised her chin slightly. Her eyes gave him permission before they fluttered shut. Her lips parted slightly in anticipation. The bright bursts of the fireworks danced across her fair skin. Her freckles stood out more than ever.

His large hands reached up and held the sides of her face as if she was fragile blown glass. His thumbs stroked over her soft cheeks. Instead of immediately kissing her lips, his lips found the tip of her nose. They brushed over the bridge and it's dusting of freckles. They grazed over her cheeks.

His lips felt moisture. He tasted salt. Koji opened his eyes. Kennedy's lashes were spiked with wetness. Tracks from tears ran down her cheeks. For once since they'd reunited, she let him see behind the wall. There was naked love and longing reflected there in her eyes. Her lips trembled.

Koji gripped her face urgently and their mouths collided desperately. He devoured her lips. His tongue drove into her mouth rhythmically. She kissed him back just as passionately. Little mewls and gasps escaped her lips. The sounds further ignited his desire for her.

They broke apart on a gasp. Koji pressed his forehead against hers as they panted. He closed his eyes as he tried to calm his blood that raged through his body and pulsed in one area.

"Let's finish watching the fireworks. Then we can get some food to go and head back to the apartment." Koji said against her lips.

He felt Kennedy's nod of agreement on his forehead. She finally pulled away and looked at him with innocent eyes.

"Okay." She said softly.

Between the lines of their words what was really said was '*Give me a moment to calm down because I don't wanna rush this. Then let's get back to my place as soon as possible so I can make love to you.*' And she said, '*I'm ready.*'

Koji walked around her. Then he pulled her back to his chest. His arms wrapped around her middle. Kennedy tensed for just a moment. Then she melted back into him. Her head rested on his shoulder. He leaned his chin against her temple and they looked up at the sky. The anticipation of what was to come radiated between them.

The twinkling sky mirrored the tingles that spread from his heart through his body.

Twelve years was too long to miss out on this.

Chapter Forty-Five

They silently walked into his apartment. Kennedy walked over to the counter, took a deep breath, and turned to him.

“Koji. Thank y—”

He dropped the bag of to-go food, grasped her face roughly... passionately, and captured her lips in a searing kiss. Kennedy gasped. Her open mouth was the perfect opportunity for him to kiss her deeper. His tongue stroked into her recesses. Her body trembled.

Koji’s arms wrapped around her. He pulled her in so close, she damn near believed they’d meld into one. She felt his arousal against her stomach. Kennedy rocked her hips into him and he shuddered in response. His teeth nipped at her bottom lip.

Kennedy’s head fell back. His possessive mouth explored her jaw and neck. Lips, teeth, and tongue worked together to drive her mad. His soft lips tickled. His teeth stung. His tongue soothed. And she felt all of it in her clit. She throbbed with need.

Her heart had settled between her legs. Her panties were ruined. They were drenched with her need.

“Fuck! I can smell you.” Koji groaned.

He was right. Kennedy could smell her faint musky scent. The scent of sex.

Koji pushed the food to the side. He knelt slightly, wrapped his arms around her hips, and lifted her up onto the counter. He hurriedly gathered the skirt of her sundress and hiked the material up her hips. His fingers blindly found her lacy panties. He gripped the fabric and jerked them down. Kennedy lifted her ass to help him.

Once her panties were free from her legs, Koji lifted them to his nose. He took a deep breath.

“You smell so good. Like I remember.” He said with his eyes closed.

Kennedy felt another rush of arousal drip from her lotus at his words.

Koji tossed her panties to the side when he'd gotten his fill.

"Lie back." He instructed her.

She did as she was told. His hands smoothed over her thighs. They moved to her inner knees and applied pressure. She opened for him. Koji lifted her legs and draped them over his shoulders. He alternated kisses down each thigh towards her sex. By the time he reached the apex of her legs, she was ready to beg.

Koji lightly bit and licked her labia. He softly kissed her mound. He took his time. He made a meal out of her. Then he flattened his tongue, gathered her slick arousal at her entrance, and slowly licked up to her hardened clit.

At first contact, Kennedy's back arched off the counter. Her mouth popped open. Her breath hitched. Her hands finally found their way into his cool, silky strands. She gripped tightly and Koji groaned onto her clit. She gasped and pumped her hips up onto his tongue. His tongue rolled languidly over her sensitive bud.

"F-Fuuuuuck!" Kennedy groaned.

Koji's lips latched around her in earnest. His tongue flicked feather-light licks over her clit. Kennedy couldn't control her hips. She bucked against his face. He held on. He never broke contact.

That familiar tingle started deep in her core. Once it reached her clit, Kennedy froze. A scream ripped from her throat. And then she lost all control. She went wild. She fucked his tongue as her inner walls flexed and fluttered.

"YESSSSSS!!!" She cried out.

Koji released her on a gasp. Kennedy raised herself off the counter. Their mouths collided. She tasted herself on his lips and tongue. She purposely licked his lips clean. Koji groaned.

"That's sexy as fuck." He growled.

He lifted her off the counter. Kennedy wrapped her legs around his waist. Their lips met again. Their kisses desperate. Her hands made their way into his hair. She found his hair tie and she pulled it out. His strands cascaded over her hands.

Koji blindly walked them into the bedroom. Once he reached the foot of the platform bed, he released her. Kennedy's feet reached the floor. He turned her until her back was to him. He kissed her neck and shoulder as he slowly untied the strings of her sundress. The material fell away. He made quick work of her strapless bra. Her heavy naked breasts free. Her nipples hardened

from arousal and the cool air of the air-con.

Large hands slid around her love-handles to her soft tummy. They caressed up until they cupped her heavy breasts. His thumbs and forefingers lightly pinched and rolled her nipples. Kennedy's ass unconsciously thrust back and ground into his erection in response.

Koji gave her a break as his hands moved to push her dress off her ample hips. He took her hand and stepped back. She stepped out of her dress. Koji knelt down and tossed it onto the chair in the corner.

Kennedy smiled slightly. Koji would always be Koji. He didn't like messes or leaving clothes to wrinkle on the floor.

Still in a crouched position behind her. Koji kissed up her thigh and then took a bite of her round ass. Kennedy couldn't help the giggle that passed her lips. Once he stood, Koji grinned at her.

Kennedy turned to face him. Her fingers found the buttons on shirt. They shook slightly as she undid them. She pushed the white fabric back and off his shoulders. It fell down his arms. He caught it and tossed it on the chair with her dress. Her eyes roamed over the mountains and plains of his body. It was beautifully made. And her fingers couldn't resist the need to touch him.

Koji's body trembled at her touch as her fingers smoothed and danced over his hot skin. She traced the muscles and goosebumps raised along his tanned flesh. Her fingers found a tattoo on the side of his upper right arm. It was the Japanese flag with the red circle and red raises extending out from it.

"What's the meaning of this version of the Japanese flag?" Kennedy asked as she traced the circle.

"It means 'The rising sun.' Japan is the Land of the Rising Sun." Koji said softly.

Kennedy looked up at him. His eyes burned and scorched her soul.

"That's beautiful." She said shakily.

"As are you."

He kissed her lightly. And she remembered she had a job to finish.

Kennedy's fingers found the button to his relaxed fit jeans. She undid them and slowly pulled down the zip. Her hands slid down his skin and under the material of his jeans and boxer briefs. She pushed down his hips and past his tight round ass. She knelt as she shimmied his pants and underwear down his legs. His dick sprung free and she swallowed. He stepped out of his clothes and they joined the rest of the clothes on the chair.

When nothing was left, Kennedy had nothing to focus on but the erection

that stared her in the face. It had been so long, but it was as glorious as ever. Long. Heavy. Thick as hell. The skin dark. Darker than the rest of his skin. As if he was dipped in milk chocolate.

Kennedy licked her lips. She leaned forward and licked him from tip to base. Koji's knees buckled slightly. She smiled up at him. She loved that she could still get to him. Their eyes met and her smile quickly faded. The look on his face said that if she kept teasing him, he'd beat up the pussy so good she'd be speaking in tongues.

She wrapped her fingers around him in a firm grip. Her tongue circled the head. Then she sucked him deeply into her mouth. Koji threw his head back on a gasp. Kennedy slowly slid her mouth down to the base and she worked the back of her mouth around him. The squeeze of her throat made his legs tremble. She drew back and placed her hand around him again. She began to work him in earnest. Her head bobbed up and down his length. Her hand twisted with her movements. Her mouth sucked a little harder and a shout ripped from his throat.

"I'm gonna come! Fuck!" Koji cried out.

Kennedy refused to let go, even though she'd been warned. She wanted all of him.

Seconds later, she felt his dick ripple and a stream of cum hit the back of her throat. He growled and pumped lightly into her mouth. Jets of cum slid down her throat. Most of it hit so far back she barely tasted him. But the few droplets that landed on her tongue tasted slightly sweet. He no longer had the diet of a college boy. The healthy food reflected in the way he tasted.

Koji pulled away from her mouth. His hard length never wavered. He was still hard as a rock.

He bent over and gripped her shoulders to help her up. He crawled to the middle of his bed and sat cross-legged. He reached out a hand and Kennedy took it. He pulled her over and guided her onto his lap.

"I'm too heavy for this." Kennedy protested.

"No, you're not. Now, sit." He commanded.

Kennedy obeyed. She crawled onto his lap. Her knees on either side of his hips on the soft mattress. Koji grasped the base of his dick and positioned it at her slick entrance. Kennedy slowly slid down his length. She threw her head back and her eyes rolled back as well.

It had been years since she'd had sex. Years since she'd had good sex. Years since she had anyone who could stretch her and hit every inch of her

inner walls.

“Oh my God!” She moaned.

Koji grunted his agreement.

“Shhhhhhit! You’re so tight.”

“It’s Mia.” Kennedy panted. “She makes us do our daily Kegels.”

“Thank you, Mia!” Koji groaned.

Kennedy slowly raised back up and squeezed her muscles around him. Koji growled deep in his throat. Then she slid back down to the base. He filled every inch of her. She ground down against his pelvic bone and her clit throbbed.

Koji banded his arms around her back and pulled her close as she rode him. He pressed the side of his face against her chest. Kennedy’s arms wrapped around his head and shoulders. Her fingers stroked through his hair as he stroked into her depths.

The intimate position was as if they’d fused into one being. One soul.

As Kennedy continued to slide down his dick and roll her clit against his pubic bone, she felt herself get closer to another orgasm. Her breath quickened. Koji must have felt her getting close. He pulled back.

“Look at me.” He directed.

Kennedy opened her eyes. Her cat-green and his warm amber connected. His eyes held so much love, trust, and devotion that it sent her over the edge.

“Stay with me. Don’t look away.” He instructed when her eyes fluttered.

She held his gaze. His fingers on her back traced ‘I ♥ U.’ His eyes became glassy. They mirrored hers. And as she hit the top of her climax, he met her there. Their mouths popped open. Tears spilt down their cheeks. And their bodies shuddered. Her pussy milked him and his shaft rippled.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” They cried out together.

Their eyes never looked away. It was the most intimate moment of her life. They bared their souls to each other. And she saw stars. As if their lovemaking was an encore of the fireworks earlier. Her entire body buzzed with it.

Their gazes finally broke as they pulled each other into the circle of their arms. They held onto each other for dear life for several minutes.

Koji finally laid her back onto the bed. Kennedy closed her eyes and stretched languidly as he disappeared into the bathroom to get a towel. He came back and cleaned her off. Then he slid back into bed. She turned onto her side and he spooned her.

They made love several more times throughout the night. It wasn't until Koji rolled over in exhaustion that Kennedy saw a tattoo that she'd never seen before. It covered his whole back. It was the first time she'd gotten a chance to see his back.

It was of the sun and a sunflower with its face raised to it. It immediately brought her back to their college days. And how he said that she reminded him of the sun and that he was attracted to her like a sunflower.

Her heart swelled and beat thickly in her chest. She blinked rapidly to hold back the tears that threatened.

Did he really get a whole mural dedicated to their young love tattooed on his back? And when did he do it? Her mind whirled.

And then another thought popped into her head...

"...my only request is that you give her the middle name Himari. In Japanese, one of its meanings is 'sunflower.' My favorite flower."

As Kennedy fell into her own exhausted sleep, she thought to herself. *Is everything really connected? Was all of this meant to be?*

Chapter Forty-Six

Kennedy's cellphone rang. It jerked them both out of their deep sleep. She reached blindly for her phone and saw it was 10 a.m. She never slept in that late, unless she was in the middle of writing and had a late night. But Koji had worn her out. She looked back at his bedraggled state and realized she must have worn him out just as much.

She blinked the sleep out of her eyes and tried to focus on the phone. It had already stopped ringing. Her eyes finally focused and she saw it was the adoption agency. She shot up in bed.

"Koji! It was the agency!" She said as she shook his shoulder.

"Call them back." He also sat up quickly.

Her fingers shook as she opened her phone and tapped the callback icon. She put it on speaker phone so that they could hear it together.

"Hello, this is Kennedy Calla-Ito." She cleared her throat and started again. "Kennedy Ito. I just missed a call from you."

"Yes, Mrs. Ito. This is Dao Zhang. I called to tell you that you and your husband have been approved to adopt the baby. We just need for you to come in, sign some paperwork, and pay your adoption fees. And the baby is yours." She finished.

Kennedy and Koji stared at each other for a few beats. Kennedy placed a hand over her mouth. Her eyes wide and glassy.

"Hello?" Dao said through the phone.

"Uh...yes!" Kennedy said quickly. "Just in a bit of shock."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure you're both excited."

"We are. Thank you so much, Mrs. Zhang. We'll be right over." Kennedy said.

"Good. See you soon."

The phone went silent. The silence stretched for a moment as they stared at each other. Then the room exploded.

"YES!!!" Koji shouted and punched a fist in the air.

They jumped up and stood on the mattress. He gripped her shoulders and they bounced up and down on the bed like children.

“She’s mine!” Kennedy screeched.

Koji stopped bouncing and gave her a slightly crushed look. As if he wanted to say, *‘What about me? Isn’t she ours?’*

They had been too busy making love the night before to discuss the future. It was obvious that Koji assumed that since they’d made love that meant she was ready to rekindle their relationship. She hadn’t stopped to officially make that decision yet.

“Let’s get cleaned up.” Koji said.

His eyes had shuttered to hide his pain. Kennedy wanted to reach out and say, *‘Yes, she is our baby.’* But there was something very important that needed to be discussed before Kennedy finally gave in. Because she had to think about more than just her now.

I’m a mother now.

Chapter Forty-Seven

They made a stop before they reached the agency. Kennedy wanted to get one of the little wraps mothers use to put their babies in, to hold them to their chests and allowed them to be hands free. She also grabbed some formula, a few bottles, a pacifier, some diapers, a few other essentials, and a bag to hold it all. She'd worry about a stroller when she got home. For now, she wanted the baby close to her heart.

Once at the agency, they quickly filled out the paperwork. Then they moved on to payment.

"It will be 595 Baht, which is \$21,000." Dao said.

Kennedy was about to use up another huge chunk of her savings. She didn't care. She'd never spend it on anything better. And she'd just write a few extra books if she needed to.

Koji took out his phone.

"I can transfer the funds to the agency," he said.

"What?! Koji, no." Kennedy hissed.

Dao looked at them strangely. Kennedy knew she couldn't protest too much. They were supposed to be a happily married couple, after all.

"Let me do this."

Koji looked at her with such love it immediately shut her down. She nodded and he paid the agency the money.

A woman walked in with the swaddled baby. She walked up to Kennedy and passed the baby to her. Kennedy's legs shook and she quickly sat down. She looked down at her little angelic face.

Kennedy clutched the baby to her. Her sweet, soft scent reached her nose. And the dam broke.

Kennedy sobbed.

Koji gently rubbed her back. She eventually calmed. Dao handed tissues to Koji and he handed them to Kennedy. She took the tissues gratefully and wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“Have you thought of a name for her?” Dao asked.

“Yes.” Kennedy cleared her voice to say the name that had swirled around her head for days. “Shae Himari Ito.”

It had been Callaghan in her head. But it had started to shift since last night. And, of course, she couldn’t exactly say Callaghan without raising questions from Dao.

“That’s beautiful, Kennedy.” Koji said sincerely.

“Shae is for my dad’s mom. My grandma. And you know Himari is the middle name Emi wanted her to have.” Kennedy said.

“Yeah, for sunflower.” Koji said.

The way he said it let Kennedy know the meaning was not lost on him. A sign.

Chapter Forty-Eight

When they made it back to Koji's apartment, Kennedy began to pack her bags. As she did, she made arrangements to change her flight home to the next day and that there'd be a baby on board.

Koji watched the whirlwind with his heart in his throat. He shoved his shaky hands into his pants pockets.

"Why are you leaving so soon?" He asked when she was finally free to listen.

"Because I have so much to get done when I get home. I have to remodel my spare room to a nursery. I want to be where everything is familiar. I'm suddenly a new mom and I need to know where to shop. For everything to be in English. I don't want an adventure of learning a new culture and learning to raise a child. Not yet, at least.

"And I need my village." She finished.

She never looked up from folding clothes and placing them in her suitcase. As if she didn't want to look in his eyes.

"Kennedy, look at me." Koji said firmly.

She sighed and looked at him.

"I thought we... After last night... You can't just leave now." Koji finally got out.

"I know. And thank you for last night. All of it. It was wonderful. That's never been a problem for you, Koji. You're the king of the grand romantic gesture. You always planned the sweetest and most thoughtful dates. But I need you to choose me when it *really* counts.

"And this time, it's not just me. It's not just me that could get hurt. Shae could as well."

Kennedy stood up and walked over to him. The baby laid asleep in the wrap against her chest. She gently cupped the side of his face. Koji couldn't help but lean into the touch. Her fingers stroked back and tucked his hair behind his ear.

“I want you to do something for me.” Kennedy said.

“What? Anything.” Koji blurted out.

He hated how desperate he sounded. But the love of his life, who had just reentered his life by chance was about to leave again. And with the baby he had grown to believe was his as well. This was a waking nightmare that he wanted to stop.

“I want you to think this through.”

“I already ha—”

Kennedy pressed a finger to his lips to stop him.

“Think this through.” She started again. “Then call your parents. Tell them everything. Tell them that we found each other again after twelve years. Tell them we’re married. Tell them about the baby. Let the chips fall where they may. Find out their reaction. See what they want to withhold from you as punishment. Trust fund? Inheritance? Whatever. And decide what you want more. What they have to offer? Or a life with me and Shae?”

“If you choose the latter, come back to San Francisco when your assignment here is over. We can raise her there until she’s old enough to travel easily. If you choose the former. Well, then...that’s that. We’ll get our marriage annulled. And we go our separate ways. But I can’t stay here and continue to get close to you again. To fall hard for you again. Only for you to do to me what you did when we were younger. I was devastated. I know you had to do what you had to do. Your life wouldn’t have ended up like this had you made a different choice. We had to go our separate ways for a while to grow as individuals. I understand that now. But I still won’t put myself through that again. And I won’t do that to Shae either.”

Kennedy raised up on her tiptoes and kissed him softly. When she pulled back, Koji saw wet tracks down her cheeks.

“It’s hard enough to leave now as it is. It would only be worse later.” She turned and wiped away at her cheeks.

“I’ll do as you ask. The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you or the baby. I made that mistake once. I won’t do it again.” Koji said firmly.

He didn’t know the wrath that his parents would bring down on his head. He had no intention of letting them affect his life again. But he also didn’t know if his dad had some unknown clout that could ruin his career. Where he would make it impossible for him to find work in San Francisco. He doubted it. But he had to be sure. There was no way he could provide for a family without work.

No, he would find out first before he made any decisions. But his mind had been made up from the moment he walked into that hospital room and had seen Kennedy. He promised himself that he'd never let her go again.

I will find a way.

“Can I hold her for a while?” Koji asked.

“Of course.” Kennedy said with a soft smile.

She gently pulled the wrap from around her. She stretched out her arms to him and Koji took the swaddled bundle into his arms.

She was so warm and tiny. Her little face was adorable. She was perfect. As if she were made of him and Kennedy. A miracle. The miracle that brought them back together.

And hopefully, the miracle that will keep us together.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Kennedy:

Everyone, I'm sending this mass text so I can inform you all at once. I'm coming home early. My flight gets in at 6:05pm tomorrow. Don't come get me. I need everyone to go to my parents' house. Mom & Dad, I hope that's alright. But I have a huge surprise and I need you all to be there to see at the same time. Bring your husbands too if you'd like.

Love, Ken

Mom:

Of course it's alright. Everyone is welcome. Can't wait to see you, baby!

Mia:

What?! Girl, I'm so excited! We've missed you!

Royal:

Sweet! Should we bring anything? Champagne to celebrate, perhaps?

Payton:

Bradyn and I will be there. So happy you're coming back early. It hasn't been the same without you.

Kennedy:

Champagne may not be the worst idea.

Royal:

Hell yeah! Done!

Kennedy closed her phone and smiled. She leaned her head back on the headrest with a sigh. Her hand lightly stroked Shae's soft curls. She squirmed a bit and then settled again. She was formula drunk. Happy with a full tummy and already burped.

Mom couldn't help herself. She bent her head down and breathed in Shae's sweet scent. Then she nuzzled her curls and kissed her little forehead. The baby had been the only thing to keep her from losing it over Koji. But now that she was settled on the long flight home and the baby was asleep, her mind had time to wander back to him.

Their goodbye had been hard. They'd laid in bed, facing each other with the baby in between them. Their hands on top of the baby's bottom, their fingers entwined.

"I'm going to miss having you here." Koji whispered.

"I'm going to miss you too." Kennedy said softly back.

They were silent for a while.

"I saw your back tattoo." Kennedy broached. "It's beautiful. When did you get it?"

"During my first assignment in Guatemala."

"Wait." Kennedy drew back in shock. "That wasn't that long ago. I thought you'd gotten it not long after we broke up."

"Nope." Koji shook his head. "I've never gotten you out of my system."

They stared at each other for a long time. So many words hung between them.

"Neither have I." Kennedy confessed.

Koji used his thumb to draw a heart on top of her hand.

Tears slipped unbidden from her eyes and slid down her temple.

They'd slept a little. Kennedy was restless. So worried she'd roll over and crush the baby. Or because the baby woke up hungry. Or she was worried she'd miss her flight in the morning.

But eventually the moment came when she had to go.

Koji pulled her as close as the baby between them permitted. He gripped her face and captured her mouth in a desperate kiss. His tongue dove in hungrily. And Kennedy kissed him back just as fiercely. Their tongues intertwined wildly. As if they wanted to memorize the other's taste.

Kennedy was the first to pull away. Mainly due to the sob that bubbled up. She turned so he couldn't see her distraught face.

"Goodbye." She garbled.

“Bye.” Koji said softly.

Kennedy quickly jumped into her rideshare. And the driver sped away from Koji’s apartment. She didn’t dare look back. If she saw his morose figure, she’d change her mind. Or at the very least sob and embarrass herself.

Now, she was safely in her window seat. She pulled her hoodie over her head, leaned against the window, and let the tears come. Her shoulders shook with them. Luckily, her row was empty and she didn’t have to worry about prying eyes or ears.

She knew she’d made the right decision. But it still didn’t stop the doubts from creeping in. It was highly likely that she’d never see him again.

Shae stirred a bit and Kennedy refocused her energy on her.

If he doesn’t come back, I have this little baby girl I can love with all my heart.

Chapter Fifty

Kennedy stepped out of the taxi in front of her parents' house. The driver took her luggage out the back. She lifted the diaper bag onto her shoulder and lightly patted the baby's bottom as she fussed a little in her papoose.

"Thank you." Kennedy said to the driver as she passed him a tip.

He drove off and she stood looking up at her childhood home. Her safe space. And what will be a safe space for her daughter.

In the driveway was Bradyn's huge SUV. Kennedy smiled. She assumed they'd all come together in his car, since she saw no other car in the drive.

With a little difficulty, she hoisted her luggage up the front steps. She searched for her keys that held her copy to her parents' house. She unlocked the door and opened it quietly. She heard several voices from the kitchen.

"Do you think she met someone?"

"Maybe she got married and is bringing him home to meet everyone?"

She heard them speculating. She grinned. They weren't that far off. She had gotten married.

She kicked off her shoes and slowly padded into the kitchen.

Before she could say a word, Shae decided to announce their arrival with a little frustrated cry of hunger.

All eyes shot up or whipped around towards them.

"Surprise!" Kennedy said.

The room exploded with shocked voices and cries of joy.

"WHAT?!?"

"Are you for real?"

"A baby!!!"

"How the hell?"

"How?!?"

"Kennedy!!!"

Everyone spoke at once. The baby startled at the sudden burst of noises. She immediately let out a wail.

“Aww... It’s okay.” Kennedy said to her as everyone instantly lowered their voices.

She rocked Shae until she calmed.

“How Kennedy?” Her mom asked.

Sandra came around the island towards her. She looked down lovingly at the baby before she hugged Kennedy gently.

“I’ll explain everything after I make her bottle. She’s hungry and I was too excited to stop to fill her bottle at the airport.” Kennedy said.

She walked to the sink and everyone moved out of her way, but at the same time oohed and aahed and tried to sneak a peek at the baby. Kennedy pulled Shae from her wrap.

“Here, Mom. You get first dibs.” Kennedy held the baby out to Sandra.

Her mom pulled the baby close and she immediately settled down and stared up at her new grandma. Kennedy’s heart expanding a few more inches.

She looked away and focused on filling the bottle with formula. The tears were on the brink just looking at grandma and granddaughter meeting for the first time.

When she was finished getting the bottle ready, her father came up to her and pulled her into a massive hug. Kennedy buried her face in his sweater. He smelled like comfort and security. A few tears slipped down her cheeks.

“I’m so happy for you, Kenny. I was so worried when you left here. But it’s obvious that no matter how it happened, it was meant to be.” He said against her head.

Kennedy nodded against him.

He finally released her and she quickly wiped her face. She gave him a watery, self-conscious laugh. Then she held the bottle up to him.

“Would you like to feed her?” She asked.

His green eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

“Absolutely.” He practically whispered.

Her mother walked over to him and passed him the baby.

“What’s her name?” Mia asked.

Kennedy turned to face her friends. They all had looks for joy and wonder on their faces.

“Shae Himari...Ito.”

The last name dropped like a bomb in the kitchen.

“Wait.” Royal held her hands up and shook her head as if to reset it.

“You named her after my ma?” Sean asked first.

Kennedy turned to him and smiled. "I did."

His mother had passed away a few years ago. He'd mourned her deeply. He quickly used one sleeve of his sweater to wipe away the tears that fell.

"What's up with the last name?" Mia asked.

"Yes. Wasn't that Koji's last name?" Payton added.

"It's a long story." Kennedy sighed.

"We've got time." Royal said as she leaned a hip on the cabinet.

Kennedy rested her backside against the opposite counter and they all stared at her intently. She explained how she met Emi. How they became close. How they rushed to the hospital and how Koji ended up being the doctor to deliver the baby. That Emi had left with a note for Kennedy with her blessing to adopt the baby. And how Koji helped her do that by marrying her.

They all stared at her with varying expressions throughout the story. When she finished, they all looked at her with sympathy.

"Wow!" Royal said breathlessly.

"That is an incredible story, Ken." Mia said with wonder.

"It sounds very predestined. Like fate made it all happen." Payton said, surprising everyone.

They blinked at the normally very logical and analytical minded woman.

"What?" She said self-consciously. "Some things can be explained through logic. But this is not one of those times. This was quite obviously fate."

"I think you're right, Payton." Kennedy agreed.

"So...do you think he'll come back?" Royal asked hesitantly.

"I don't know." Kennedy sighed. "But I can't focus on that. I need to focus on making room for this little girl in my life.

"I have so much to do. Turn the spare room into a nursery. Get a crib. All of it."

"Ye know we'll help." Bradyn spoke up.

Kennedy smiled at the big redheaded Scotsman.

"I'm pretty damn good at putting things together. Royal knows I can put that Scandinavian furniture together in record time." McKinnon added.

"Thanks, guys." Kennedy said gratefully.

"Ahem." Kennedy's dad cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I appreciate your offer to help my daughter. But if there's anyone who's going to be

putting together anything, it's going to be me. The grandfather and master builder."

"Dad, would you really build a crib for her?" Kennedy looked at him with watery eyes.

"Absolutely. Anything for my wee granddaughter." He said as he cooed down at the baby.

"Well, we can help you redecorate the spare room." Mia said. "You know I'll design an amazing room for her."

"I can help paint!" Payton said.

"Ye'll be doing no such thing." Bradyn said to her.

"Agreed." They all said in unison.

"You can sit off to the side and delegate." Kennedy winked at her very pregnant friend.

Kennedy smiled happily as they began to pass the baby around. They all wanted one-on-one time with her.

It takes a village. And I have mine.

Chapter Fifty-One

The next couple of months went by in a busy whirlwind. As promised, Kennedy's dad created the most beautiful crib that would eventually turn into a big girl bed. He even carved Shae Himari into the wood in a pretty cursive font. The crib was white with sunny yellow details.

Mia designed an adorable little girl's room that would grow with Shae until she was old enough to want to change it. Three walls were painted the same warm yellow. And one accent wall was painted a pretty sky blue. Mia found an artist who painted puffy white clouds on top. And on the bottom, she painted pretty sunflowers with fat bumblebees and beautiful butterflies flying around them happily. Kennedy found a giant sunflower rug to place in the middle of the room. And matching throw pillows. They filled the rest of the space with white storage units, a rocking chair, and toys and stuffed animals.

They had all pitched in to help in some way. The men helped with the manual labor. The girls helped Kennedy shop. And Dante made sure everyone was fed.

When it was all finished Kennedy had stood back and smiled brightly. It was perfect. And the theme honored Emi and her sacrifice.

Kennedy also busied herself with the release of Mia's love story. She'd put it on the backburner when she'd thought her life had been destroyed by needing a hysterectomy. So, she finally chose a photo from the shoot Royal had done of Mia and Dante for the cover. It was the hottest cover she had so far. Mia and Dante had not been camera shy. Royal had joked that she needed to take many water breaks. Not to drink, but to splash on her face. And that afterward, she was so horny she'd jumped McKinnon's bones.

Once the book had been released, she'd moved on to the next story she wanted to write. But she'd only get a few paragraphs in before her own story pushed its way to the forefront of her mind. She'd opened a new document

and had begun to write her story. Each day, she'd go in with the best of intentions to write the other story. But inevitably, she'd end up pouring out her heart about her story. It was what wanted to come out and she eventually stopped fighting it.

The problem was, her love story wasn't over. She didn't know the ending. Of course, she could end it with finding love for herself, for the life she'd created, and the unconditional love she felt for her daughter. It would be a beautiful ending. But it still didn't feel right. It didn't feel complete.

So, she left the story where it was and went back to the book she'd tried to work on first.

And she focused on her baby girl.

As Shae grew, her personality began to emerge. And Kennedy fell more and more in love with her each day.

She had the sweetest and sunniest disposition. It matched her middle name perfectly. Kennedy also had a feeling Shae would be a deep thinker. She'd focus on things with such determined concentration. Her sweet brown eyes held such intelligence when she looked at anyone. Like she was already thinking deep thoughts.

And her smile. Her little toothless smile. It brightened Kennedy's most dark days. Her rosy, chubby cheeks shined and her eyes sparkled. She smiled with her whole face. Pure joy.

The type of baby that everyone wanted to hold. When they were at her parent's house, Kennedy never got to hold Shae. Her mom and dad would playfully fight over who'd hold her next. Or when she'd meet the girls for brunch. The baby was passed around the table like a little hot potato.

And then, after two months of being home, was the arrival of Payton and Bradyn's little bundle. Well, maybe not so little. She'd given birth to a 10lb baby boy. With toasted caramel skin and a shock of dark auburn curls. Everyone had been surprised. It meant that somewhere down the line, Payton's family had the redhead gene. But he was beautiful and healthy.

Kennedy grinned at the memory of how Bradyn's chest had been puffed out with pride.

It had been a very busy few months. Kennedy was grateful for every moment. It was what she needed to keep her mind off Koji. To keep from counting down the days until his assignment was over in Lampang.

Their Sunday brunches also helped to take her mind off things.

They sat around Kennedy's dining room table. Since the babies had

come along, they decided to take the now biweekly brunches to their homes. They rotated houses. It was Kennedy's turn to host.

Her home was cute and modest. It was an eclectic mix of vintage furniture and décor from different eras and bohemian touches. It was cluttered, but less in a messy way and more in a charming way. As if one had stumbled into an old book store that had no real rhyme or reason that also sold spiritual crystals, essential oils, and had a tarot card reader in the back. Books stacked in this corner. A forgotten tea cup in that corner on top of another stack of books. The aesthetic was warm and cozy.

"So, do you think they'll date when they get older? Or just be besties?" Royal said as she rocked little Lachlan.

"Are we really already marrying the babies off?" Mia laughed as she held up Shae.

"But I mean...come on! How adorable would that be if they grow up together and fall in love?" Royal defended.

"It really would." Kennedy smiled. "But I'm not forcing anything on her. I'll let her decide for herself. Hell, she might not even like boys. Whatever she's into, I'll support her."

"Same here." Payton agreed. "Whatever baby boy wants. But we're going to make sure, no matter what, that he respects women. He's going to be a big boy. I will not have him intimidating women with his size and strength."

Kennedy looked at her friend with sympathy. She'd overcome her fear of big men. But she would forever be changed by what had happened to her.

"You have nothing to worry about. He's gonna be a big ol' softy like his dad." Royal said and then kissed his springy red curls.

"One hundred." Mia agreed.

"So, what about you, Ro?" Kennedy looked at Royal.

"What about me?" Her eyes widened.

"Are you gonna have one of your own?"

"Eventually. McKinnon definitely wants them. And Shae and Lachlan aren't helping things." Royal smiled.

Kennedy looked over at Mia. She immediately shook her head.

"Nope. Don't even look at me. I have a teen and that's enough for me. I don't do babies and toddlers and PTA meetings. Y'all already know that's not my schtick." Mia said emphatically.

"Yeah, you're right. I can't even see it." Kennedy laughed.

“But I’ll watch your babies bond and grow together. So, you better hurry up, Ro. These two will be way older than yours if you don’t pop one out in the next year.” Mia said.

“Duly noted. I’ll get right on that.”

Kennedy smiled contentedly as she looked around the table at her friends. All their lives had settled into something beautiful, and all theirs. A small, close-knit family they’d created all those years ago.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Kennedy blinked groggily. Her eyes slowly opened. It took her a moment to realize what had woken her. It was music. Specifically, a song from the 80s. Peter Gabriel's song *In Your Eyes*.

She sat up and frowned. She realized it was coming from outside. She scrubbed her eyes as she got out of bed. She walked over to the window. She pulled back the curtains and looked down to her driveway. She gasped.

Koji stood in the middle of her driveway. He held up a boombox that blasted the classic song. He even wore a trench coat. He'd recreated the scene from *Say Anything*. One of the most iconic romantic gestures ever filmed.

He smiled that megawatt smile when he saw her. And just as he sat the radio down in front of him and pulled off his trench coat to reveal a tuxedo underneath, Kennedy heard her front door burst open.

She turned to her doorway as the girls and her mom came barreling in. "What the hell?!" Kennedy exclaimed.

Two grabbed her hands and another two pushed at her back and guided her towards the bathroom.

"Get in the shower." Royal commanded as they shoved her in.

"Make sure you shave!" Mia called from the other side of the door.

In a state of confusion, Kennedy did as they asked. She quickly showered and shaved. Once she had applied lotion and stepped out of the shower, they were on her again. But this time they'd changed into their best ensembles while she'd been in the shower. Kennedy's frown deepened.

What are they up to?

They gave her time to put on underwear that Mia had chosen from her panty draw and her robe, before they sat her down and started working on her hair and makeup. They shoved a breakfast sandwich in her hand and instructed her to eat.

"Now, don't fight this. Just go with it." Mia said once they were done.

Her mom approached her with a sleep mask. She looked at her mom

questioningly, before she slipped the mask over her face and she was blinded. It reminded her of their date at The Grand Marquis, when they'd lost their virginity to each other.

They stood her up. She felt her robe being removed. Then a strapless bra or bustier replaced it. They held her hands and instructed her to lift each leg to step into something. They shimmied the fabric up her body. It took a moment for them to secure it. They then helped her step into heels.

After they were finished, they walked her down the steps and out her house. They helped her into a car and they sped off.

"Thank God, I don't get motion sickness. I'd have puked by now." Kennedy protested.

"You're fine." Royal's voice reached her ears.

"All I know is, somebody better have my baby." Kennedy pouted.

She smelled her before she felt her. Someone held the baby up to her. Kennedy immediately relaxed.

They drove for a while before she felt the car stop. Car doors opened and she was guided out of the car.

They walked over concrete and down an incline. She was led a little further before they stopped. Suddenly the strains of *At Last* by Etta James began to play by an orchestra, just as her blindfold was whipped away.

Kennedy squinted until her eyes could adjust. Her eyes immediately filled with tears when she was finally able to take in the scene in front of her.

They were at the top of the rose garden where she and Koji had had their first date. He stood at the bottom in his tux in front of an orchestra. Kennedy spotted his cousin Hikari. She smiled brightly at Kennedy as she played.

Kennedy looked around at her family. Like the girls, the men were dressed in suits. All the husbands and her father. She took that moment to look down at herself. She was in a white, sheer lace wedding dress. From what she could see, it was very romantic and vintage. Just like she liked. Fitted in the bust and torso, skimmed down her hips to flare just slightly until it touched the ground. The long sleeves were mostly sheer with lace detail on the shoulders and around the wrists. Her friends knew her so well.

She looked up at them and her mom who surrounded her. They all smiled happily. Their eyes sparkled with tears. Then one by one, they began to walk down the steps towards the groom.

After the last one, her dad stepped forward. He extended his arm to her. She took it gladly.

“Are you happy, Kenny?” He asked.

She knew he wanted to make sure she was sure before he led her down to her destiny. Kennedy gave an emotional nod. Her throat was too clogged to speak.

The music changed and the song the orchestra began to play was *Golden Hour* by JVKE. Koji had planned this out to perfection. She couldn’t have planned it better herself.

Her dad guided her down the steps. Once they reached Koji, the music faded away softly. He was gorgeous. His hair was pulled half up into a neat top knot and the rest cascaded down his shoulders and back. His eyes sparkled that warm, dark amber. His full, pink lips spread into that pretty smile that sent a battalion of butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

“Who gives this woman away?” The pastor said.

“I do.” Sean said proudly.

He handed her off to Koji. Her hands trembled as he took them.

“I chose you.” Koji said softly.

Kennedy choked on a sob. Koji quickly pulled out his pocket square and handed it to her. She dabbed at her eyes. Koji turned to the pastor.

“I’d like to say my own vows first.”

“Go right ahead.”

He turned back to Kennedy and took a deep breath.

“Kennedy. Kennedy’s family and friends. I made the mistake of walking away from you twelve years ago. I will *never* walk away from you or our baby. I will fight for this every day of my life. You are my sun. And like a sunflower, I will follow you in whatever direction you take me.” Koji finished.

His thumb traced ‘I ♥ U’ on the back of her hand. Kennedy closed her eyes and let the unspoken words wash over her.

“Would you like to say something?” The pastor asked her.

Kennedy nodded and took a deep breath.

“I don’t have anything prepared, so I’ll do my best.” Kennedy looked up at Koji. “It’s as if I created you from my deepest hopes and dreams. As if you stepped off the pages of one of my books. And I always thought that I wanted this perfect story. Where there was no struggle. Where we’d meet, fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after with a bunch of babies. What the last twelve years have taught me, is that nothing is perfect. And that it’s okay if it’s not. Everything happened exactly as it was supposed to. And as it

turns out, I found my own version of perfect. It can't get better than this."

They both grinned at each other like lovesick teenagers.

The pastor recited the rest of the vows and they repeated them. Although, Kennedy couldn't really remember it if asked. All she would remember in the future was the look of love shining in Koji's eyes.

And the ring.

The ring he'd picked out for her was spectacular. A radiant cut, lab created diamond, since she'd always said she didn't want any stone that caused harm to others in getting it. The band the sparkling stone was nestled in had a romantic and very vintage style, with its swirling details. The girls or her mother had to have helped him pick it out.

After the ceremony, they went to the same lounge on the top floor of the Grand Marquis hotel where they lost their virginity to each other. Koji had paid a hefty price to rent it out for their reception. But he'd lived off of barely nothing for the last few years as he'd worked. The places he'd been assigned didn't have a very high cost of living.

Kennedy looked around the lounge at her family and friends. Her dad held Shae as he talked to Bradyn, who held Lachlan. She felt so full. More than she could've ever imagined. Months ago, she'd been in the deepest depression of her life. But she'd pulled herself up and out of it. Only to find everything she could've ever wanted. She was so grateful, because she knew that was not everyone's ending.

A few of Koji's friends from medical school and his residency, as well as his cousin were in attendance on his side. He'd introduced her to them. They were all nice.

Kennedy turned and her heart stopped for a second at who she saw. Someone she hadn't expected. She touched Koji's arm to get his attention. She nodded towards the elevators. Koji turned and froze.

Koji's eyes widened in shock at the sight of his mother standing awkwardly in front of the elevators. It was the first time he'd ever seen her unsure. He looked down at Kennedy. She nodded.

"It's okay," she said.

"Give me just a minute." Koji patted her hand and stepped away.

He walked towards his mother. She was dressed in nice navy slacks and a cream white blouse with a strand of Tahitian pearls. He stopped a few feet

in front of her. In normal families, he'd hug her. But they weren't normal. At least not by American standards.

"Mother." Koji said coolly.

"Koji."

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

"Well, you did inform us of your wedding."

"But after dad told me that he'd disown me, disinherit me, and would never see me again if I married Kennedy, and claimed someone else's illegitimate child, I figured you wouldn't be coming." Koji ground out.

"That was what your father wanted. I didn't want to lose you again."

"Again?"

"After your residency was finished, you left without barely a word. And I haven't heard from you until a week ago. I don't want to miss out on your life and the life of your...your...baby." She said gruffly.

"And how does dad feel about this?" Koji asked skeptically.

"He knows. He doesn't like it. But I don't care." She paused and her throat worked before she continued. "I—I want to learn how to be more supportive. To be more...nurturing and loving. Maybe you could teach me? You and your wife."

Koji was staggered. He almost stumbled back at her confession. Never in a million years did he think one of his parents would bend their rigid ways.

He stepped forward. His mother looked up at him almost fearfully. He slid his arms around her back and pulled her in close. He felt her hands hesitate. Then she slowly wrapped them around his torso. It was their first genuine hug possibly ever.

Koji pulled her in tighter. She did the same. After a few moments, he pulled back and looked down at her.

"How was that?" He smiled at her.

"Really nice." She smiled shyly at him.

Koji felt a hand on his back. He looked to his side and found Kennedy next to him. She had Shae in her arms.

"Ma, you remember Kennedy?"

"Yes. It's nice to see you again, Kennedy. And under much better circumstances." His mother said to his wife.

"It's nice to see you again as well, Mrs. Ito."

"Please, call me Jun." His mother said.

Koji was shocked again.

“Jun.” Kennedy nodded.

“May I?” Jun nodded to the baby.

“Sure.” Kennedy lifted Shae up.

His mother took the baby in her arms. Shae smiled at her and kicked her little feet happily. They were covered in white frilly socks to match her little white dress.

“She’s beautiful. What is her name?” His mom looked up at them.

“Shae Himari.” Koji said.

Jun smiled down at the baby.

“Himari for sunflower?”

“Yes.”

“Hello, Himari.” She glanced up at them. “Is it okay if I call her Himari?”

“Absolutely.” Kennedy said. “I’d love it if someone did. It was the name her biological mother gave to her.”

“Thanks. I can’t help myself. Proud Japanese grandma.” Jun laughed at herself.

“Nothing wrong with that.” Kennedy said and then laid a hand on his mom’s arm. “I’d really love it if you could teach her about her Japanese culture. The language, the food, everything.”

His mother’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. The first time he ever saw her show any real emotion. He knew she had them, but she always hid it from him. Koji blinked back his own tears. At how wonderful and thoughtful his wife was and at witnessing his mother’s opening up.

“I would be honored.” His mom said to Kennedy.

He saw how his mother immediately softened to Kennedy. She had that affect on just about anyone she met.

He couldn’t believe how lucky he’d been to find her a second time.

Chapter Fifty-Three

They'd partied into the evening. First, they had a light brunch with mimosas overflowing. Then they had an early dinner. And afterwards, drinks and dancing commenced.

Koji didn't drink much. He spent most of his time getting acquainted with the other husbands, whom he liked immediately. He rekindled his relationship with Kennedy's parents. He couldn't have better in-laws. But mostly, he spent time with his daughter and wife. Once he got her away from his mom, he held onto Shae for the rest of the night.

He'd been away from her for four months. He felt like he'd missed so many of those firsts that babies have as they learn how to be little humans. He didn't want to miss another moment. And he wanted to bond with her more. For her to understand that he was her daddy.

Eventually, as the night wound down, he had to give her up. Shae was staying with Sandra and Sean, so that he and Kennedy could have their wedding night alone.

He looked down at his little bundle and she gave a little toothless yawn. His heart melted. Then he reluctantly passed her to Kennedy's mom.

"Don't worry, Dad. We'll take good care of her." Sandra winked at him. She saw right through him.

"I know. I just missed so much time away from her." Koji rubbed the back of his neck bashfully.

"It's just one night, son. You'll have the rest of your life with her." Sean said and clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed firmly.

The word son from the man he'd considered a father during the months he'd dated Kennedy, made his heart squeeze. If he couldn't have his own father in his life, Sean was a damn good substitute.

"Have a good night." Sandra said and kissed Kennedy's cheek.

She pulled Koji in to kiss his cheek too. He smiled down at her. They watched them walk to the elevators and disappear inside.

“You ready?” Kennedy asked.

“Yeah.”

They said their goodbyes to the rest of their guests. Then they got on the elevator. He tapped the button for only a few floors down. Kennedy gave him a curious look.

The elevator dinged and he stepped off. He took Kennedy’s hand and pulled her to him.

“What are you up to? I thought we were going back to my place. Or should I say our place?”

“Yes, you should. But no, we’re not going back there.”

He smiled slyly as he bent over her hand and kissed her knuckles.

Koji guided her down the hallway and stopped at a hotel door. He glanced down at Kennedy and her eyes widened.

“Is this the same...” Her voice trailed off.

“The same room we stayed in when we lost our virginity? Yep.”

Koji unlocked the door. Then he turned to her and swept her up into his arms. She gasped and then giggled happily.

“This is too perfect. If I’m dreaming, I pray I never wake up.” Kennedy said as she laid her head against his shoulder.

“Same.” Koji said and kissed her forehead.

He carried her over the threshold and into the room. He let her feet down in front of the bed. The room had been redecorated in the past twelve years. But the views were still the same.

Koji wasted no time. He turned her around and began to undo her dress. From the moment he’d seen her standing at the top of the rose garden in her wedding dress, he’d imagined stripping her down later. She had been stunning. Her hair swept up in a romantic updo that exposed her neck. Her curly bangs framed her pretty face. Light makeup emphasized her pretty emerald eyes. A nude shiny lip gloss had drawn his eyes to her lips. Her freckles begged for feather light kisses.

The white lace fell around her feet. He helped her step away from it. He picked it up and gently laid it on the couch. When he turned back to her, she was smiling at him softly.

“You’re so meticulous. You’re gonna hate my house.” She giggled.

“We’ll figure it out.” Koji walked towards her.

She stood in front of him in lacy white panties and a white strapless bra. She looked like an angel.

“I can’t believe you’re mine.” Koji whispered.

“It’s been a long time coming.” Kennedy nodded.

Her eyes ate him up hungrily. Once he stood in front of her, she immediately shoved his tuxedo jacket off his shoulders. He stood completely still as he let her undress him. She laid each item on the bed until he was just in his boxer briefs. He placed his clothing with hers on the couch.

Kennedy turned her back to him and gave him a coy look over her shoulder.

“Undo me.” She said in a sultry voice.

Her words made Koji’s dick jump in his briefs.

He reached her and did as she asked. He undid the clasps of her bra. She slid her hands into the sides of her panties. Then she bent over slowly as she pulled them down. Her ample ass pressed into his erection.

“Fuck!” Koji groaned.

Kennedy smirked at him when she stood back up. He growled, grasped her waist, and tossed her onto the bed. He quickly pulled his briefs off. Her eyes ate him up. He quickly positioned himself between her legs. But he rested on his side with his arm up to support him.

Koji placed two fingers in his mouth and sucked on them until they got wet. He took them out of his mouth and placed them between the apex of her legs. He slid them through her labia. Kennedy’s eyes widened as she gasped. He leaned forward and captured her lips.

As his tongue swept her mouth, his fingers dipped into her slick nectar. Then he flicked her tongue at the same time he lightly strummed her clit. She cried into his mouth. He kept teasing her with flicks against her tongue and circles around her clit. The combination made her come apart within minutes.

Kennedy released his lips and her head fell back as she cried out her orgasm and bucked against his hand. Before she could fully come down from her high, Koji thrust inside of her.

“Aaaaaaaaah!!!!” She screamed.

His rolling pumps extended her climax. Her body convulsed and trembled in his arms. Koji captured her lips again. His tongue once again followed the rhythm of his strokes. They could only kiss for so long before they both broke apart to moan their pleasure. His arms wrapped around her back. His forehead fell to the crook of her neck. His breath fanned the already heated skin there. He bit lightly at her neck and then licked the sting. Her hips shuddered. He continued to kiss that sensitive spot and she came apart once

more.

Koji felt himself getting close. He raised up, grasped her thighs and lifted them up to her chest, spreading her wide open. He placed his hands on the backs of her knees and stroked into her. The wet sound of her welcoming every thrust filled the room. Mixed with the smack of their flesh.

Kennedy's eyes widened. Suddenly, an unexpected scream ripped from her throat and her pussy splashed him with her feminine cum. The gush was so fucking sexy to him, Koji immediately came with a guttural growl from deep in his throat. It reminded him of their first time together.

He collapsed on top of her. They panted in a tangle of limbs. Koji fell to the side when he'd finally caught his breath. He pulled Kennedy with him and she rested her cheek against his chest.

"Holy shit!" She said breathlessly. "You made me come three damn times. That's gotta be some kind of record."

Koji couldn't help the shout of laughter that burst from his chest.

"I think so. It was so hot, though. I think it's almost every man's dream to make a woman squirt."

"I'm glad I could make that dream come true." Kennedy giggled against his skin.

"Speaking of." Koji sat up reluctantly. "Let me go get a towel. We've made a bit of a mess. And I also have a gift for you."

"A gift? What more could you possibly give me? You gave me the wedding of my dreams."

"You'll see."

He slid out of the bed and walked naked into the bathroom. When he walked back out, Kennedy watched him. Her eyes took him in appreciatively. Along the way, he grabbed the gift.

"You are one beautiful man. Never ever cut your hair. You can trim it, but that's it." She demanded.

"Happy wife, happy life." He conceded easily.

He cleaned her off with one towel and then laid another over the wet spot, before he crawled back into bed with the white box tied with a silver bow.

They faced each other and just took the other in. It was the first time they were alone since she'd found out he'd chosen her and Shae. It had been so whirlwind that they hadn't had any time to really absorb the gravity of finally getting everything they'd ever wanted.

“I just can’t believe you’re here. That we’re married, married. Like in front of our friends and family. That we have a dream baby. It’s been so long.” Kennedy’s eyes shined with tears.

“I know. Those were the hardest years of my life.” Koji admitted.

Kennedy nodded her agreement.

“Now, go ahead. Open your gift.” Koji nodded to the box between them.

Kennedy pulled the bow until it unraveled. She lifted the top and looked up at him curiously. She reached in and pulled out the photo album. She opened the first page and it was a photograph of her at twenty-one. As she turned, each photo was of her. Some she knew he’d taken, because she looked straight into the camera. Others were taken in secret. Candid moments where he thought she looked so beautiful. And there were photos of her in Thailand. Her stunning face that reflected the lantern light. How the fireworks had glittered against her skin and in her eyes. And a few moments of her sound asleep.

Kennedy’s eyes glistened with more tears as she went through the book. The last photo was of her when they’d sat and watched the sunset past San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge. His favorite photo.

When she was finished, she looked up at him in awe.

“These are amazing, Koji. Is this the way you see me?”

“Yes.” Koji said gruffly.

Koji’s throat worked. He blinked rapidly. He took a deep, shaky breath, and opened his mouth.

“I—I love you.” The words he’d been unable to say fell from his mouth in a rough rasp.

Kennedy broke. Tears streamed down her face.

“I do. I have loved you since I watched the sun set against your skin on our second date. Probably even before that.” Koji said as he laid a hand over the picture from that date.

Kennedy grasped the side of his face and kissed him softly, but passionately.

“I love you, Koji.” She whispered against his lips.

“If the end wasn’t with you, then I’d decided to live the rest of my life alone.” Koji said and meant every word.

There wasn’t another woman who would’ve compared. He knew that deep down in his soul. Kennedy was it for him.

“Lucky for us, that won’t happen. We have decades of happily ever after

to look forward to.” Kennedy smiled at him.

“And when this life ends, I’ll find you in the next.” Koji grinned back at her.

“Us.”

“Forever.”

Epilogue

1 Year Later...

“I think we should do this every year.” Mia said as she raised her face to the sun.

“Yes! A new Curvy Girls Club tradition.” Royal agreed.

She sat up in her lounge chair to look at Kennedy and Payton.

“I’m in!” Kennedy raised her hand.

“Same.” Payton said.

They languished poolside in the sun at a resort in Puerto Rico. The soothing sounds of the surf breaking on the sand was their white noise. The turquoise water and pale beach were their view.

They’d decided to take a girls’ only trip. And the men had conceded thoughtfully. Actually, they knew they had no choice. Once the girls wanted to do something, it was either concede or face the wrath of the other three. The four women were a force to be reckoned with when they banded together. Luckily, their husbands were good sports and doted on them anyway.

And the trip had mostly been for Royal.

“How you holding up, Ro?” Kennedy asked. “You missing baby Diesel?”

“Yeah, I do. But...” Royal looked down shamefully. “But is it bad to say that I don’t at the same time? I just really needed the break.”

“Absolutely, not!” Kennedy said.

“Girl, you’ve been run ragged. You needed the break.” Mia agreed.

“You can only handle so much before it gets to be too much, Ro.” Payton said gently.

“I know.” Royal sighed.

Not long after Kennedy and Koji reunited, Royal had announced she was pregnant. Nine months later she’d had a little boy she and McKinnon had

named Diesel. Royal, of course, wanted her son to be all Punk and Rock & Roll.

Unfortunately, he was a colicky baby and Royal struggled with breastfeeding. The last three months had been a nightmare for her. McKinnon almost begged her to go on the trip. He was worried about her and looked to her friends to help her relax and have some fun.

“This is just a phase. It will get better.” Kennedy said to her friend.

Payton and Mia both nodded their agreement.

“Thanks, girls.” Royal smiled at them. “I’ve been needing to say that to someone.”

“You know we got you.” Mia winked at her.

Royal blew her a kiss and then spotted something in the distance.

“Oh, look! Here comes our cabana boy. Anybody need a refill? I know I do.” Royal looked at them.

Payton, Mia, and Kennedy all raised their hands.

Their cabana boy was drop dead gorgeous. He had a mop of beautiful, dark curly hair. His skin was tanned and dark. Golden hazel eyes, insanely full lips, and a chiseled jaw made up his handsome face. His muscles bulged through his tight uniform. And the white shorts he wore did nothing to hide his third leg.

All the ladies removed their sunglasses just to get a better look. Their eyes followed him as he came closer.

“Hola, beautiful ladies. Are you ready for another drink?” He said in a deep voice and sexy accent.

“Yes, please, Marco.” Royal said sweetly. “I’ll take another beer.”

“I’d like to try a Mai Tai.” Mia said in a sultry voice.

“Piña colada over here.” Kennedy smiled brightly.

“Um...and I’ll take a daiquiri.” Payton said bashfully.

“Very good. I’ll be back with your drinks in just a moment.”

“Thank you, Marco!” They all said in unison.

They stared at his tight ass as he walked away. They all turned to look at each other when he was finally out of earshot.

“Oooooowweeee!” Mia said. “Before Dante, I would’ve fucked the shit outta that young man in a storage closet.”

Kennedy snorted. Royal spit out the last sip of beer in her bottle. Payton just rolled her eyes.

“It makes no sense for a man to be that damn gorgeous.” Royal shook

her head.

Kennedy sighed. "It really doesn't."

"But it's not wrong to admire him from a distance, is it?" Payton asked.

"Girl, no!" Mia said. "You know where your bread is buttered. We all do. That doesn't mean you stop thinking other people are attractive. It just means you don't act on it."

"Mind you, if Dante was here, he'd probably let me get a taste of Marco and happily watch." Mia rubbed her chin in thought. "Hmm... I think Dante and I will have to make another trip here as a couple, and see if Marco would like to play."

"You two have the most interesting relationship." Royal stared at Mia in wonder.

"We're not jealous people. Well, at least not when we play together. You see, if either of us had a dalliance with someone else in private, we'd be jealous. But if we have relations with another person or persons together as a couple, we don't care. It's hot. To us at least. It makes us want each other more somehow." Mia shrugged.

"Fascinating!" Kennedy exclaimed.

"Enough about me. Hey, Ken. How's the house hunting going?" Mia asked.

Kennedy gave her a long-suffering look. She and Koji had been searching to buy a new house that they could both be happy with. Her house didn't feel like it was his as well. It felt like he was living in her house, instead of *their* house. So, they decided to look for a house that could be theirs.

"You already know. He's all modern and clean lines. And I'm all vintage and character. Those two aesthetics do not mesh well." Kennedy grumbled.

"How about you two just find a house with some outside character and modern touches on the inside? And I'll design for you a nice lady lair with your signature vintage charm. How does that sound?" Mia suggested.

"I *love* that idea!" Kennedy clapped her hands together. "That could save us from killing each other."

"I got you." Mia smirked.

"I know you do." Kennedy grinned back.

"So, how's things going with you and Bradyn?" Royal asked Payton. "You two never seem to have any issues. The perfect little family."

"Honestly?" Payton asked.

“Is there any other way with us?” Kennedy asked.

“You’ve got a point.” Payton nodded.

They all turned their full attention on Payton. She squirmed a bit under their intense stares. She really did hate being the center of attention.

“Go on.” Mia coaxed.

“Well, everything is wonderful. We’re still crazy about each other, of course. But I think I wanna try for another baby. And hopefully have a girl.

“Cause I swear Bradyn and Lachlan are thick as thieves. Two peas in a pod. He’s definitely a daddy’s boy. Don’t get me wrong. I *love* to see them together. But it feels like Lachlan just tolerates me until daddy gets home. And then I’m invisible.

“I’m like, ‘Hey, I gave birth to your big butt, buddy. Show some appreciation.’” Payton finished.

The girls laughed at her joke.

“He’s only one, Payton. I’m sure it’s not that bad.” Kennedy said.

“Oh, it is. As soon as dad walks in the door it’s all smiles and happy giggles. They are going to be super close as he grows. And I truly love that. But I need a baby for *me*. A mama’s girl. It feels selfish, but it’s true.” Payton fell back against her lounge chair.

“You’ll get her.” Mia said.

“I hope so. And Bradyn better not use that big, cuddly Scottish charm to bring her to the Darkside. She’ll end up a daddy’s girl. He’ll be the favorite parent to all our kids. I’m too straight and boring. He’s laid back and fun.” Payton finally said what really bothered her.

“Is that what you’re worried about?” Kennedy asked. “Being the least favorite parent?”

“Yeah.” Payton said sadly.

“Aww...Payton!” Royal reached out and grasped her hand. “Don’t think that!”

“Your children will love you just as much as they love their dad.” Mia added.

“Most families have one parent that’s good for one thing and another that’s good for something else. They might go to Bradyn for his cheery disposition. But they’ll go to you when they need advice or help with homework. The science fairs are going to be your wheelhouse when they get older.” Kennedy told her.

“And nothing beats a mother’s love.” Royal added. “They will come to

you when they scrape a knee or bump their heads. Don't underestimate Lachlan and any future baby's love for you."

"I love you, guys. Do you know that?" Payton wiped at her eyes.

"Yep."

"Absolutely."

"We know."

They all reached over and placed their hands on top of each other. They gave each other goofy, watery smiles of unconditional, sisterly love.

"Ooh! He's coming back." Royal said as she spotted Marco.

They all laid back in the chairs and watched their cabana boy with happy smiles.

Strangers who became friends. Friends who became family.

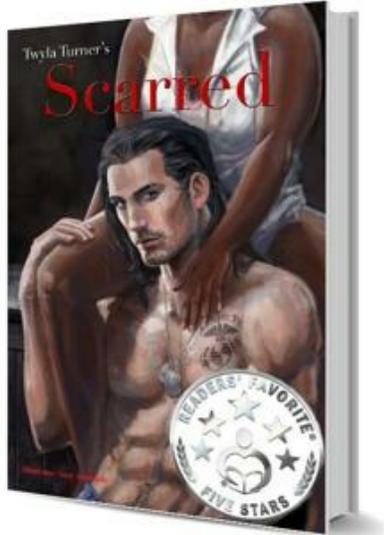
The Curvy Girls Club.

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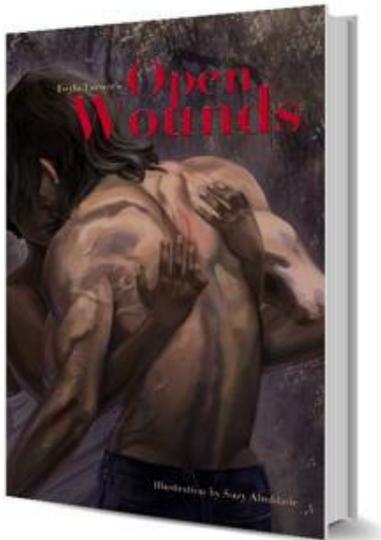
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[Acknowledgments](#)

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About the Author

Twyla Turner currently resides in Arizona. She was born and raised in Joliet, Illinois, a Midwest girl at heart, though constantly moving from place to place, and always thinking of where she wants to go next. Having been an avid romance novel reader since junior high and minoring in Creative Writing. She felt that it was finally time to start combining her love of travel and writing, as well as her life experiences and putting them down on “paper”. Which experiences, she’ll never tell...well maybe, if you ask nicely.

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