

COFFIN UP LOVE



ZORA BLACK

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By Zora Black

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CLARISSA

I hear the click of the safety and guess it's Hudson with the pistol over my head. It's hard to tell when I'm broken and bruised, though, rolled up in a carpet that smells more like a burning dumpster than a proper casket. My left eye is swollen, and I know my hand is busted. Still, I hold my breath and will myself to stay calm.

Calm and dead. They think you're dead.

"But I pride myself on following directions," he finishes as the sound of two sets of footsteps shuffle closer.

"Are we done yet?"

I can tell by the full mouth it's Reginald. Despite my predicament and probable concussion, I imagine the towering redhead with a beard dusted with powdered sugar and bread crumbs.

My powdered sugar and bread crumbs, I think bitterly as Hudson scoffs and lowers the gun.

It slaps against what I assume is his thigh. Or maybe Reginald's bulbous belly, no doubt filled with more of tomorrow's inventory.

What were the Holy Rollers thinking, doing me dirty like this? I'm a baker, for heaven's sake. A donut artist, some would say. Not a snitch.

"Don't talk to me with your mouth full. It's rude," comes Hudson's shrill voice.

“I told him, Huds,” Greta whispers, and through gritted teeth, by the sound of it. “He’s always eating something. It’s distracting. But does he care about the job more than his addiction? No. Those things are going to kill him one day.”

“Youf didn’t say thaf,” Reginald mumbles, and it takes everything in me not to wince as I hear a loud *thwack* and assume it’s Greta throwing something else in my house.

“There you go doing it again. You–”

Click. Click. I blink in celebration at the sound. Another *click*, and Hudson’s practically whisper-yelling.

“Who forgot the bullets?”

Hudson asks this like he wants to know who just tried punching him in the face and out of a dead sleep. He kicks the carpet I’m rolled in a few times, but I can’t feel it over the pounding sensation crippling my swollen face and body.

“Damn it, Reg! You made me forget!” Greta mumbled. “I had them in my key bowl ready to go and everything.”

“Why put them there in the first place?” Reginald sounds defensive.

“That’s where I keep all my important stuff!”

I know it’s Hudson snapping his fingers.

“Each of you, grab an end. I’ll get the middle.”

I feel like throwing up as they lift me and thank my last lucky star that it passes once we get to the van.

“Don’t blame me for your problems,” I hear Reginald say as they slam the van doors and walk around the side. “It’s rude, and the reason why nobody wants to work on these things with you.”

I don’t hear Greta’s reply over the sound of the engine starting. It roars to life, and I jump, suddenly upright and leaning against a tinted window cruising down the highway.

“Good morning, sunshine,” comes an entirely different voice.

I rub my head with my good hand and grin sleepily at Agent Todd. I'm in my handler's car and blinking awake...

I must have been having another nightmare. How much of my near-death experience did the U.S. Marshal hear this time?

"What's good about it?" I ask, sitting upright like I was just closing my eyes and nothing more.

"I don't know. You're alive, and the Holy Rollers don't know that."

"Yeah, and neither does anybody else," I say under my breath, but Todd hears.

"What's a few lost friends?" Todd shrugs and looks at me through the rearview mirror, his hazel eyes full of excitement. I get the sense this might be the agent's first solo case. "Let's go over your story one more time now that you're awake."

"Do we have to?"

"You're Clarissa now. Not Shauna. You've moved to Aura Creek to start over. You're hoping to make this place your new home."

That's not vague at all, I think as Marshal Todd merges through traffic, humming off-key to some tune I've never heard.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," Todd continues.

I watch him turn the stereo dial down, and I wince. We've only been driving a couple of hours, but it's enough time to realize that the captain of this jalopy I'm stuck in likes to turn around while giving speeches.

He stares back at me with his right arm resting against the empty front seat.

"I'm stuck like this forever," he continues. "Doomed to be someone else until I die of old age. But that's not true." Marshal Todd taps his temple, and I grit my teeth in a smile as he continues. "Don't think with this." He taps his chest, then his temple again. "Think with this. It's only until the trial."

“Outstanding,” I reply, knowing my old life as a baker for a mob-ran donut shop is over.

Why did the Holy Rollers have to use BakeTastries to launder their money, then blame me when the delicious products I craft enchanted the authorities? Once the men and women in blue started showing up, my days were numbered.

“There ya go,” Marshal Todd replies, then finally turns his clicking turn signal off. “Just look at this like the adventure you never wanted, the experience you hoped would never come. But it has. Now. Does that make sense?”

I don’t want Marshal Todd to think I’m ungrateful for all his help. The agent took it upon himself to help me pack what little effects I planned on taking with me to Aura Creek. Only well-meaning people do that. I just wish Marshal Todd was as perceptive as he is earnest.

It might not be a modern thing to say, but a woman in danger likes the man assisting her to have a certain degree of... competence. Proficiency, maybe, or masculinity. Though Marshal Todd is certainly all man, and his frequent mansplaining proves it, he doesn’t exactly inspire confidence.

And not without cause, though I generally try to hold my tongue. I don’t want to tell him he broke my suitcase when he sat on it trying to get the thing closed. It’s not like I’m in love with my luggage, but I was in love with my job.

Now, I’m going to have to start over and on a foundation of lies. My best bet is to lay low and meet no one, talk to no one. Though I am pretty sure the Holy Rollers are not wise to the fact that I survived their ridiculous hit, it’s better to be safe than sorry.

I close my eyes and lean my back against the headrest as Marshal Todd veers across three lanes to the exit.

“Aura Creek, here we come,” he says for the third time.

I hear the crumpling of candy wrappers and know he’s digging back into his road snacks. I’d turned them down earlier, though now I wish I’d taken him up on a handful of

gummy worms. I could use something to chew rather than my lips.

“The people here are friendly,” Marshal Todd offers, gesturing to the quaint little beach town I’ll be calling home. “Just remember that as you wave to them from afar and not much else. Have you been practicing your waves?”

I wave with my broken fingers and wrist. Marshal Todd slaps his thigh and smirks as we turn down a narrow but well-maintained road. It’s the type of single-lane strip that forces neighbors to wait for one another as they pass in each direction.

“Just act natural, Clarissa, and you’ll be alright,” Marshal Todd says as a large black car comes at us head-on.

Todd pulls to the side and waves big with one hand while pushing my head down with the other.

“That’s playing it non-existent,” I reply as his sticky hands touch the top of my trimmed brown hair. I miss my long locks but not as much as I miss being treated like an adult.

We both wave out the window despite the backseat’s tinted glass. The elderly couple in the car wave back, and Marshal Todd grins wide at them.

“Top of the morning!” he calls as they crawl by, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

The couple says something I don’t even think Marshal Todd catches, and I wonder if the agent might be more nervous than I am. What if I don’t like Aura Creek? What if Aura Creek doesn’t like me?

“Damn, damn, damn.” Marshal Todd shakes his head as we continue down the road, apparently kicking himself for something, though I don’t know what.

“What is it?”

I look behind me in a panic, half expecting to see Hudson, Reginald, and Greta on our tail. Instead, I see nothing but the rural outskirts of town, the scenery occasionally flecked with a cozy house or two.

“It’s 4:30 in the afternoon. They must think I’m an idiot.” Todd slaps his forehead as he pulls up to a small cottage that has definitely seen better days. Despite its rustic charm, and that’s being generous, I think the place might have had potential before my grandparents were born.

Had potential, just like me, I think as we climb out of the car, Marshal Todd in a hurry to get me inside and out of sight.

Even before the car door is closed, he’s got his jacket over my head. I let him usher me up the porch steps because I know it’ll be faster this way.

The front door creaks open, and I’m shuffled inside. Todd pulls the jacket off me, and I wince, not at the feeling, but at the sight of my surroundings. Nothing looks familiar. Nothing looks like mine.

Because it’s not, I think. Not even your name is yours now.

EMILE

“It’s not like I’m trying to hurt you or nothing,” Marcel says, casually sipping his ginger-infused bloody lemonade – and the bloody part is literal.

We’ve been vampires, friends, and business partners for years, making what he’s about to say easy for me to guess.

He wants to get you to reconsider sailing solo, I think.

It’s not going to work, however. This time off from our architectural design company, plus our side business of flipping houses, isn’t the only thing I’m trying to get away from. People in general, and how to navigate getting to know them, is the furthest thing from my mind.

Liar.

I’m trying not to focus on the thought plus what needs doing tomorrow, which is everything, so I pick a fight with well-meaning Marcel instead. Honestly, it’s what he gets for sounding like a broken record.

“You can’t drink and listen at the same time,” I suggest, taking his half-empty second supper out of his light grip. “It’s why I need space from you for a little bit. I’d say it’s nothing personal, but it is.”

He knows he’s struck a nerve, so instead of backing away altogether, he doubles down with a knowing smirk.

“Ditto,” Marcel replies as I finish the drink, then places it on the side table overlooking my generous vegetable garden.

It's mostly zucchini, but I don't mind. I'm a fan of making it into bread, so it doesn't go to waste.

I have the perfect recipe for zucchini bread, infused with the perfect ratio of crimson clots-to-zucchini flavor. Most humans think vampires can't eat food-food, but that's just not true. Well, not for all of us anyway. Everyone has their allergies slash personal preferences, but the trick to the perfect...

"Are you thinking about zucchini bread again?"

Marcel furrows his perfectly groomed eyebrows. His honey-colored locks hang from his long face as he smirks.

"You should be thinking about what you're going to say to the mermaid you might find when you're done with that boat of yours."

"Hello, my name is Emile, and I need directions," I say. "I'll be on my way after I back my boat out of these rocks."

"You crashed your boat onto some rocks?" he asks, playing along with me. "Why would you do that in front of someone hot?"

"Obviously, it would be an accident, so I guess I'd say sorry first." I shrug.

He'd love to get a postcard from me bragging about a mermaid.

"For crashing into her rock. Okay, go on," he begins, then gets a thought of some kind. I can tell because his green eyes widen as he points a manicured finger my way.

"Or do you prefer a merman? Maybe that's why you're leaving me to handle everything. Lauren drained the last of your attraction to women."

"Shut up, idiot."

I shoot him what I hope is a half-decent side eye, one that says *I'm not ready to talk about it*. It isn't for the reason he's suggesting, not by a longshot. Lauren wasn't for me because she just wasn't. It didn't have anything to do with how

physically attracted I was to her. In fact, physical attraction was one of the only problems we didn't have.

Yeah, she was hot enough. But I just couldn't make myself care. To the point where I still feel a little guilty about it sometimes. Maybe I'm just never going to be able to care about another person that way. The way you have to if you're going to have a real connection, a real partnership.

It's like you're just going through the motions with me at this point, she'd said a few months back, right where we're sitting now.

She wasn't wrong. I've never met anyone who made me want to do anything greater than go through the motions. And those are fine, for a while, but it isn't enough to keep anyone with any sense around.

The worst part isn't starting to think something's wrong with me. The worst part is starting to wonder if I even care if there is.

I get up and fix Marcel and me both a drink, hoping another sip or two might cure what ails me.

I don't know what I want.

That's the truth.

"I'll take mine stronger than however you're making it now. Your drinks suck when you're depressed." Marcel crosses his legs as he checks his phone. "Sorry if that's rude."

"No, you're not," I zing him back, glad to be on a lighter train of thought.

"What do you think about the old Phillips' place out there?" Marcel asks.

I watch him lean back further in his chair and gaze across my sprawling property to the cottage beyond. It's not much to look at now, but the place was no doubt the picture of charm when it was first built.

My own home is the newest one around, though I tried to keep up with my neighbors by making the place look rustic. My favorite part about my and Marcel's design are the

towering windows on the second story. Though the two of us are on the porch, I can still see the red roof of the cottage from this lower level. I bring our drinks over and snap my fingers in front of him.

“We’re already swamped as it is,” I remind him.

We’ve hired a new architect to co-design with Marcel while I’m on hiatus. The guy’s work is incredible, which he humbly attributes to muses rather than his own genius. I can’t say I feel sorry for Marcel for having to work with him. Phil Damini is second to none, not even to the two of us.

“Are you thinking about how Phil is going to outshine you while you’re gone?” Marcel takes a sip of his dessert while checking his watch. I wonder if he has a date tonight and with whom.

“You scare me sometimes.”

“No, I don’t,” he replies. “But answer my question.”

“I just did. Which married woman of Aura Creek has the misfortune of garnering your vampiric affections?” I’m only half joking.

Marcel is a hopeless romantic, with a heavy emphasis on hopeless. It once cost him a piece of his otherwise sterling reputation when the vampire seduced a rival’s wife. Though my business partner plays it cool and rarely talks about his dalliances, how he plans and prepares for his dates speaks volumes.

“I already told you, I currently only have eyes for that house over there,” he finally says.

“You say that whenever you see something worth fixing up, but then you forget about all the other projects you already took on to do that same thing.” I don’t know why I just explained this to him like he doesn’t know this already.

He’s about to reply when a black car drives up the dirt road off in the distance. At first, I assume that whoever is in the sedan is surely lost, no doubt having taken a wrong turn on their way into downtown Aura Creek. It happens a lot.

People will take the road all the way to its end, which sits inconveniently right in front of Marcel's not-so-new potential dream flip, then look around nervously until I come and help. I try to gauge how serious my business partner is by gesturing to the house with my drink hand.

“Are you going to break my heart and buy that while I'm gone?”

I don't know how serious I am, but as Marcel's vibrant eyes glisten, I realize I should get a verbal confirmation while my boat's still being built. I'd hate to get back from my open-ocean pleasure cruise – party of one and only one – to yet another house to fix.

“How dare you ask a question I don't know the answer to,” he jokes.

“They're about to come ask us for directions. Watch.”

I point to the couple climbing out of the vehicle just outside the old cottage. I can't count how many travelers I've had to point back to the main road.

“They better not be stealing our baby out from under us. I'm serious.”

I can't tell if Marcel means this or not. I chew my lower lip and make a decision, one I wonder if I'll regret in the end.

“I'll tell you what,” I begin, watching the burly man in the distance clap a heavy arm around a lithe, slender woman with chestnut-colored hair.

My unbeating heart thuds twice, then once more. My breath catches in my throat as the sensation jolts my drink hand to the side. A few droplets of my drink spill onto my pale hand, and I wipe them away with my other as Marcel continues to study the newcomers.

“Oh, dang,” I continue. “Maybe they are moving in.”

I watch as the man carries a few pieces of luggage up the rickety steps. His leg falls through the final board, and the contents of one of the bags spills out.

“Did that man pack his kitchen into a duffel bag?” Marcel sounds equal parts curious and impressed.

“I think so.”

I watch as the burly man pulls himself up while his attractive girlfriend chases after a collection of whisks that have unraveled from the sweater they were wrapped in. Something about the sight makes me almost immediately start second-guessing my assumption that they are a couple.

Maybe they’re brother and sister? They certainly don’t look related, though. If they’re family, she got all the looks.

A smile tugs on my lips as Marcel laughs, no doubt just as intrigued as I am at the scene before us.

“Just get the door, the door!” I hear the man say, thankful my hearing is superior to even most vampires.

Careful not to fall into his own hole again, the man collects the remaining pieces of kitchenware before looking over his shoulders and darting after the girl.

“I’ll tell you what,” I try again.

“You already said that.”

I raise my glass to make a toast. “Did I say this? If that place isn’t occupied by the time I get back, we’ll grab it and flip it.”

He clinks his drink with mine, though his eyes are dull.

“You only say that because it looks like you have a new neighbor. So much for my dream reno.”

I try to look sad as Marcel drinks away his mock sorrow. But on the inside, I can’t stop thinking about the pretty girl next door and just who the man with her might be.

I wonder if she’ll be staying around for a while.

CLARISSA

“**Y**ou think you’ll be able to handle the rest without me?”

I know Marshal Todd is just being nice. His legs must burn from where the broken porch ripped his cargo shorts, but I can’t think about that and this dump at the same time. I look around the dusty cottage and cough, then grab hold of the nearest sheet in sight.

“I think I can manage to pull off a few sheets from a few pieces of furniture.” I force a shaky smile just as a rickety lamp tips in my direction.

Before I know it, Marshal Todd’s meaty hands are on my shoulders. I step back and let the federal agent take the hit. Surprisingly, he snatches the hand-carved stand with one hand, while flicking on the lampshade with another. I stare at him nonplussed, still clinging to the sheet I’d tried pulling off with my non-dominant hand.

“Sorry about that,” I offer, trying to come up with something both truthful and kind. “This place is...”

“Perfect? I know. It’s a friend of the agency’s,” Marshal Todd informs me, plopping down into an oversized chair still draped in a powder-blue sheet. “Checked the place out already, and the beds are comfortable. The wallpaper in the second bedroom won’t bother you if you don’t bother it.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I begin, then follow his gaze over my shoulder and down the hall.

The wood floor creaks as I make my way to the room in question. Instantly, I understand his cryptic message.

“Why do the flowers all have faces?” I ask, not sure if I should look away from the cacophony of daisies, oleanders, and what I think are begonias with too many eyelashes.

“It was a special commission,” he replies as if that answers my question.

“That just means I have more questions now,” I tell him, pulling the door shut without breaking my gaze.

Let’s just say I found where I won’t be sleeping tonight or any other night while I’m laying low.

“When is the trial again?” I ask though I know the Marshal has no answer.

“That’s another person’s job,” he tells me again, before hopping up and heading to the door. “I’ll get your last bag from the car, miss. Then we can go over door-locking procedures.”

He opens the door, sticks his head out, then looks around.

No, that’s not obvious at all... I think, though a certain part of me wants to ask if he sees anything suspicious.

“Is the coast clear?” I can’t help myself.

I have a new name, a new address, and no friends or family who know where I am. With the grandmother who raised me dead and gone, it’s my own life, the old me, that I miss.

My parents don’t even know where I am, though it’s not like we ever kept in touch before my attack. They didn’t want kids, and I was a kid for most of the time they knew me. Part of me thinks it’s logical that they would treat me no differently than any other obligation they despised. Which was basically all of them.

“Okay,” Marshal Todd says, plopping my last bag onto the dusty rug. A plume of debris wafts up around his ankles, and he stares down at it thoughtfully. “You didn’t pack a broom, did you?”

I shake my head, explaining I can find my way to a store with no problem.

“I like to walk,” I add before the agent can interject. “I’ll need to get out of here for a little bit at least. The town’s not far off anyway –”

He looks dubious about letting a woman wander around town unsupervised. “Just don’t talk to anyone who looks suspicious.”

“I won’t. I –”

“But also don’t *not* talk, either. That’s just as suspicious. Unfriendly women draw attention.”

I can’t be sure, but I think the bead of sweat he’s wiping from his brow is on my account.

“You can’t go disappearing on me now. You’re my responsibility.”

“But not your prisoner, right?” It needs to be said, so I say it.

The bear of an agent deflates, looking up at me sheepishly from the doorway. “I’m coming on too strong, huh?”

“Little bit,” I confess.

It feels like one less brick on my back. *Just about a dozen more to go, I’d say...*

“Great. Good. Give me that feedback.” Marshal Todd rubs his hands together and then motions for me to continue. “I can handle it. I don’t need another situation like Pensacola.”

“What happened in Pensacola?”

I’m not sure if I want to know or not. Wait, yes I do. Maybe I can avoid whatever happened.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m a totally different Todd than I was back then. Older and wiser.”

He grips the door handle too tightly for my liking, and I instinctively narrow my eyes in his direction. “What happens in Pensacola...”

“Stays in Pensacola?” I ask, worried he’d say that.

“Goes on your performance report,” he corrects.

“Oh...” I watch him shut the door, then lock it in front of him so he can see me do it.

“And don’t look out these curtains unless you have to.” Agent Todd’s voice rings out on the other side of a window. I shuffle over to it and peek out, watching Marshal Todd glower in my direction. “Unless you have to!” he reminds me with two meaty fingers tapping against the glass.

It’s too close to looking like a threat for my comfort. I instinctively take a step back and he notices, blushing as his eyes widen.

“Not what I meant to say!”

The hours after Agent Todd leaves drag by. I don’t realize I’ve fallen asleep until I wake up the next morning, dry-mouthed and with a dusty sheet balled up on the couch next to me. I’d used it as a pillow and now wonder if my neck will have anything to say about it later.

So far, the only thing that hurts is my pride. Well, that and my broken wrist and fingers. I look down at my cast and read the only note on it.

Get well soon, dear! XOXO, Grandma.

It was Agent Todd’s idea to use an alias when signing my arm. The smiley face he wrote next to the name barely resembles a face. It’s sort of a metaphor for my life right now, barely what it’s supposed to be but somehow still in my face.

I take one more look around the ancient furniture and bolt for the door. I fell asleep with my shoes on, so leaping over the busted front porch steps is no problem. I keep a steady pace as I hustle down the dirt road, not particularly heading for anything or anywhere but invigorated just the same.

The slight morning breeze carries hints of the salt water along the coast. I feel a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth and let it turn into a grin. Running makes me feel free

and alive — the opposite of being rolled up in a carpet and thrown into a sinkhole.

I blink away the images of me climbing out from my itchy tomb almost one-handed while using my legs to kick my way to freedom. I grit my teeth at the memory of climbing out of the unofficial dump, soaked in sweat and defeat.

The crunch of rocks and dirt beneath my feet is a satisfying sound, one that fills me with adrenaline and a sense of familiarity. The sweat drips into my eyes now, and I wipe the beads away with the back of my palm while picking up speed.

I've always been a runner and make a mental note not to inform Marshal Todd about every single outing I might take. Though the over-the-top agent strikes me as someone who's well-meaning, I don't look forward to his next check-in. I get the sense the agent is trying to prove something, maybe to himself or his superiors.

Or maybe he just is one of those old-fashioned types who think a woman can't handle herself. The kind that doesn't understand why any adult woman isn't someone's wife, because who else is going to tell her what to do all day? I don't really know.

Jogging every couple of days to get my thoughts straight won't be an issue here, at least in terms of scenery. The way I see it, so long as I keep my activities vague from Marshal Todd, there won't be any reason for the excitable agent to worry.

A few birds sing out a greeting as they sail over my head and dip down into the neighbor's garden. The palatial but rustic house I noticed on my way in looks just as good in the morning light.

I catch myself gawking at the large bay windows on the second story, then flinch as I notice my pale but dashing neighbor working in his garden. We're just a few yards away from each other, which gives me the perfect opportunity to take note of his chiseled form. Wearing nothing but a pair of loose shorts and an oversized hat, his eyes meet mine and I almost trip.

He notices, too, given his sudden jolt as I correct myself. Our eyes stay locked on each other, and I think I might still be smiling. His perfect grin stares back at me as I lift my hand in a slight wave. I don't know if my hot new neighbor sees it or not, since he continues to watch as I pass but not much else.

And don't look out these curtains unless you have to! Agent Todd's words echo in my mind. I push them away and pick up speed.

The handsome stranger and I might have only been locking eyes for a few seconds, but I can still picture the vampire's stunning blue eyes as I jog in the direction of town. I'm glad I slept in my clothes, though I probably didn't make the best first impression on my neighbor. *Which is good. You're here to lay low, not pick up a man.*

In any case, I hope the stores in little old Aura Creek take cash. Purchasing a trinket or two for the cottage while I'm out might put me in a good mood. Then again, I'm already a little giddy, and for no reason at all.

EMILE

The satisfying whir of metal piercing wood rings through the air as I drill holes to install cleats to the motorsailer's deck. It's almost melodic. It's an exciting point in the ship's build, and it means soon I'll be able to set up the rigging. Until now, the boat has been all hull and bare deck, and I smile to myself as I imagine how the vessel will look when she's done.

There are still a handful of cleats left to do before then though, not to mention the winches and blocks, plus the engine, meaning I have my work cut out for me today. However, it also means I have plenty of time to think.

While my hands take care of the marine hardware, my mind slowly wanders back to yesterday's interaction with the new neighbor, and with it comes a strange flutter in my stomach. I know it was barely anything, really. Just a glance lasting a second or two, no more. I shake the feeling away, knowing that it's foolish to dwell on something so insignificant.

Instead, I grab a couple of bolts, hold the cleat down by its bridge, and push the bolts through.

The woman's face flashes in my mind the whole time though. It wasn't just a friendly look or a wayward glance. I already know how silly it sounds, but I felt like we really *saw* each other.

"Stop it," I mutter to myself, trying to push away the absurdity of this feeling.

As the morning wears on though, I find I can't stop thinking about her. So much so that I end up putting two of the cleats on backward and have to start again.

By the time lunchtime rolls around, I'm way behind on my work. At the same time though, I've somehow managed to memorize every feature of the new neighbor's face. Not as if that was my intention.

In fact, I don't even know her name. She could be married. Maybe the guy with her yesterday really is her husband. What do I know?

I'm still fiddling with one of the backward-facing cleats when Marcel shows up.

"How's it going?" he asks as he saunters up to take a look at my handiwork.

In my absent-minded thoughts about the woman, I'd completely forgotten I planned to have lunch with Marcel today.

"Uh... good," I lie, trying to cover. "Nearly done with this."

"This isn't going to be one of those times where you say you're nearly done and then make me wait around for another hour, is it?" Marcel retorts. "I'm hungry."

I have to laugh at this. I'm still messing around with the cleat, and he's called me out completely. He has a way of doing that, for better or worse, and I decide to abandon the work for the time being. I'm not doing a particularly good job of it today anyway, given my obvious and ill-advised distraction.

"No, not today," I tell Marcel with a smile, setting my tools down on my workbench. "Give me a second to pack up."

"Oh, thank the dark lord," Marcel replies. "I've been hankering for a feed all day."

I smile as I pack away my tools and close up the garage. The act of doing something so banal and routine allows the thoughts of the new girl and my attraction to her to wash away.

“So, are you going to be ready for the big trip?” Marcel asks as he watches me.

I try not to stress out as I think about all the work I have left to do and how slow today’s progress has been going.

“I’m going to have to be,” I reply, trying not to show him my concern. “It would suck to get to my vacation and then not be able to go anywhere.”

“Buddy,” Marcel tells me. “I’m trying to pay attention, but you’re not helping my appetite with language like that.”

Luckily, I’m nearly done and the Suck’n’Chew diner isn’t far. When he sees I’m done packing up, Marcel practically runs toward the car. I follow along behind him, but as I step onto the sidewalk, I see a familiar figure out of the corner of my eye.

The neighbor is jogging again and against my better judgment, I stare right at her. She’s coming up the path in front of the house, and I allow myself to take it all in. Her thin, tall frame moving with determination, her toned arms and shoulders sticking out from beneath her tank top, her short brown hair shining almost chestnut in the sunlight, and the glow of a light flush on her olive skin.

At the last moment, she catches sight of me. I falter ever so slightly as she meets my eye, worried that I look like a total creep. I’m not trying to scare the poor girl away, and I understand why a scenario like this one is never really fun for a woman. For a second I’m frozen, not sure if I want to stop and talk to introduce myself, trying to make this better, or if I should just let her go.

Thankfully, I don’t have to make a decision. Rather than running right past me, she crosses the street, taking the longer way back to her own house. It basically answers my question – she doesn’t want to be approached. C’est la vie.

Unfortunately for me, that’s not the end of it.

When I turn back to the car, I see that Marcel hasn’t rushed inside as I thought. Instead, he must have turned to wait for me

at the driver's door, meaning he probably witnessed that entire interaction.

“So...” he says with a sly grin as I walk up and open the passenger's side door. “Were you just checking someone out back there or do my eyes deceive me?”

I don't answer him. I climb in the car instead, but he greets me with an expectant look and even an elbow in the ribs. I try my best not to look uncomfortable.

“It was nothing,” I say, probably unconvincingly. “Let's go.”

Marcel gives me a look that says I won't get away with that, but he doesn't push it for now. Instead, he turns the key in the ignition and maneuvers away from the rural parts of Aura Creek and toward the diner on the outskirts of town.

I can't help but glance in the side mirror as we pull away, trying to catch a glimpse of the girl. Try as I might, she's already disappeared, either along the trail that leads into the scrubland across the street, or into her own house next door.

Marcel, thankfully, doesn't notice. He's probably forgotten all about it now that we're on our way to lunch, and I'm glad I don't have to explain myself to him. I can hardly explain myself to myself, it turns out.

Okay, I might have been checking out the neighbor, so what? I think. It's not like I'm looking for a relationship or anything, and besides, I know nothing about this woman. No, it's just a harmless attraction. What man doesn't check out a hot woman in exercise clothes?

By the time we reach the Suck 'n' Chew, I've practically pushed it out of my mind.

“Hi, Martha,” I say to the woman behind the counter as we walk in. “I'll take a sheep's blood shake with cilantro and lime, please.”

“And I'll have rabbit today and surprise me with something spicy,” says Marcel beside me. “I'm feeling fancy.”

“You want that as a shake or in a cage?” Martha asks, hand poised over her order book.

“Oh, as a shake,” Marcel replies. “I don’t want to make a mess.”

“Sure thing, boys, take a seat,” she replies, pointing us toward the booths lining the shaded wall of the place.

I start to relax a little as we make our way to the booth. Thinking of the shake that’s coming my way helps. But Marcel’s words cut right through my thoughts.

“So are you really going to pretend you weren’t checking out that chick outside your house?” he asks, flashing me a knowing grin.

I thought he’d dropped it, but actually, it barely took two seconds after we sat down for him to press me about the neighbor again. I guess his mind is cleared of making any lunch-related decisions now, so he has more energy to pry into my love life. Or lack thereof.

I sigh, wondering how much of a hard time he’s going to give me if I tell him that’s exactly what I was doing. But I don’t really feel like finding out right now.

“I think you see what you want to see,” I tell him, not meeting his gaze. “I was looking because that’s the neighbor we saw the other night.”

“You mean the *hot* neighbor we saw the other night,” Marcel retorts without missing a beat. “Come on, you can tell me.”

Thankfully, Martha comes with our blood shakes at just that moment, and Marcel drops the topic, suddenly distracted by his meal. He spends the rest of lunch going on about how rabbit blood is good for the skin. Apparently, it helps keep it translucent.

Usually, I’d struggle to show an interest in a conversation like this, but today I’m just thankful I’m no longer in the spotlight. I nod and ask questions in all the right places, making sure Marcel can’t shift his focus back onto the hot neighbor.

Just neighbor, I correct myself.

All the while though, I can't stop thinking about this second interaction we just had and if maybe I was right about the connection I felt between us the first time we saw each other. This latest interaction was definitely something. Something I've never had in any of my previous relationships.

I've never had that instant spark calling out to me at first sight, and maybe that's why I always get bored or can't open up. Or maybe I'm just not the type who's ever going to have that with someone, and I don't need a total stranger to rub my face in it.

CLARISSA

I can't tell what's pounding faster – my feet against the pavement or my heartbeat in my ears. I don't know what it is about the neighbor but both times I've seen him, I've gotten immediately self-conscious. Not in an entirely bad way, either.

I glance back over my shoulder to see if he's still there, but he and his friend are both gone and their car along with them. It gives me a moment to stop and catch my breath, trying to figure out what just happened.

“What the hell...” I mutter to myself, staring back at the spot where the neighbor's eyes had bored into me.

It was like he was seeing through my layer of fear, seeing past the façade. For a second, I wonder if he could be involved with the Holy Rollers somehow.

The thought grips my heart, but once the initial panic has subsided, I realize how ridiculous that is. First of all, the gang is nowhere near intelligent enough to have tracked me down this fast. Especially when they think I'm dead. Secondly, the look the neighbor gave me wasn't one of suspicion. It was something else entirely. He isn't the first man to look at me like that, of course.

But he might be the hottest.

My heart suddenly starts pounding again, and I decide my run isn't over yet after all. Instead of heading back into the house, I take the scrubland path toward the edge of town. It's long enough that it'll get rid of all this excess nervous energy,

and there'll be the reward of a snack and a drink once I get there.

I set off along the path, trying to shake the feeling that something remarkable just happened. It's a silly thought though, and not one I have the liberty of entertaining. My mission in Aura Creek is to lay low, not to flirt with the whole neighborhood. I'm living a damned secret life, after all.

The path soon comes out onto a paved road, and by the time I see the diner in the distance, I'm exhausted. A nice cool drink and something light to eat is just what I need.

The diner is mostly full when I walk in, but it's a little cooler inside than it is on the street, due mostly to the shade that the far side of the restaurant affords.

I haven't been here before, and the crowd makes me a little nervous. Not only am I in a room full of strangers, but I'm in a room full of strangers I have to lie to if it comes to it. Any seemingly innocuous conversation could jeopardize my safety if I don't play my cards right, and that's a lot of pressure.

It's not just fear that's making this difficult. Being in this diner also brings up an undeniable wave of sadness. As I approach the counter, I'm reminded of the donut shop, of greeting customers and serving their orders, of the life I used to have before everything else happened.

I still miss that so much, and it feels strange to suddenly be on the other side of the counter. Especially when all I want is to have a normal life again. As much as I'd like to stay here, though, I know I should be keeping away from people as much as possible. I've cut my hair and changed my name, but at any time someone could recognize me.

"How can I help you?" asks the elderly woman behind the counter.

Her words jolt me out of my panicked thoughts, and I realize I just have to get through this interaction and make it out of the diner in one piece.

"Uh, hi," I begin, trying not to sound as nervous as I feel. "Can I get an orange juice and a tuna salad to go?"

“Oh, sorry, sweetie. We don’t do takeaway,” the woman tells me with an apologetic smile.

“Oh,” I say stupidly, trying to figure out if I should stay or leave now that my one mission has been foiled.

“You want to take a seat?” the woman asks politely, noticing that I’m clearly having trouble deciding.

I look around the diner as if grasping for something to hold onto, something to help me make up my mind. And I see *him*. In one of the shaded booths, I see the neighbor and his friend sitting opposite him.

I hardly know if this is a sign to stay, or a sign to run home immediately and not look back, but I don’t really get the chance to figure that out.

The neighbor’s friend catches sight of me, and a huge grin spreads over his face as he waves me over. It’s not the kind of wave that I can pretend not to have seen, either. There’s nothing subtle in the over-enthusiastic gesture, and my chest tightens knowing I’m going to have to go over there.

If ordering orange juice and tuna salad was nerve-racking, I can only imagine how this is going to go. As nervous as I am to stay here in this crowded diner, I know the only thing more suspicious than staying here now is leaving.

“Uh, sorry,” I say to the woman at the counter. “Just a second.”

I approach the booth with as much confidence as I can muster, smiling with what I hope is the ease of a perfectly friendly, normal woman. Not someone who’s running from the people who tried to kill her.

“Uh, hi,” I say, greeting the friend who’s still grinning up at me.

The neighbor is finishing the last of what looks like a strawberry milkshake, and he looks up. Clearly, he hadn’t even noticed his friend gesturing.

When our eyes meet, I can feel my cheeks grow red, and I desperately hope he doesn’t notice. Since he’s presumably a

vampire though, I can't imagine he'd have trouble recognizing a rush of blood in a human's face.

I suddenly realize that's probably not a strawberry milkshake.

"Sit down, sit down," comes the admonition from the friend, and before I know it, I'm being bundled into the booth beside him and staring straight across the table at the neighbor who, despite being a vampire, is drop-dead gorgeous. Literally, I suppose.

He immediately smiles uncomfortably and drops his gaze. But his friend more than makes up for the obvious awkwardness descending upon the table.

"I'm Marcel," the friend says, still grinning. "I'm a friend of Emile's."

He gestures to the hot vampire, who looks up from the napkin at the sound of his name.

"Nice to meet you, miss," he says, holding out his hand.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was cringing at his own greeting, but I'm too worried about my own role in this conversation to really pay much attention.

"Clarissa," I reply, grasping his hand. I'm trying to say it as if I've said that name every day for the duration of my life. "I'm Clarissa."

This time it's my turn to cringe and hope the others don't notice.

"So you moved into the house next door to Emile," Marcel says, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the woman beside him isn't sure of her own name.

I breathe a sigh of relief and try to remember the well-practiced backstory Marshall Todd has run me through over and over again.

"Yeah, I just moved over from, well, everywhere, really," I say with a self-conscious grin that I've also practiced. "I've been traveling around pretty much my whole life and figured

I'd try to settle down for a while. Put down some roots, you know."

Marcel chuckles, but it's Emile's laugh that makes me smile. I hate to lie to either of them, but I have to admit there's a huge wave of relief that washes over me when I see they're buying my story.

"You still want lunch, honey?" comes a matronly voice from above me, and I look up to see the woman from the counter hovering over our table. She's holding a glass of orange juice and a plate of tuna salad.

"Oh, sorry," I tell her. "Yes, please."

"Good," she says with a smile of mock chastisement before setting my food down in front of me.

I feel a little rude for eating after Marcel and Emile have already finished, but I'm also relieved at the interruption. If I'm eating, I can't be talking, which means I can't be accidentally giving myself away.

"How about you two?" I ask, hoping to shift the conversation away from me. "Are you both from here?"

"Well, I am," says Marcel. "Born and raised. But Emile's a little more exotic."

I try not to choke on my orange juice at this, but thankfully neither of them seem to notice.

"I'd hardly call the next town over 'exotic,'" Emile responds with an eye roll. "But here in little ol' Aura Creek, not much happens."

"Good," I say without thinking. I manage to catch myself just in time and hurry to continue before they think the statement is weird. "I'm ready for some peace and quiet after so much traveling."

The two of them nod as if I've said something very profound, but I shove a forkful of tuna salad in my mouth before I can say anything else.

I don't know what it is, but Emile's presence makes me want to open up, even though I know that's the last thing on

Earth I can afford to do. But even as I try to avoid his gaze, I feel a pull to him, like there's something happening between us I don't dare acknowledge.

“Well, I bet you've got plenty of *real* exotic stories to tell then,” says Marcel, breaking my concentration.

Again, I try not to choke, only this time, I'm not so successful. I end up having a coughing fit, and it takes a few minutes to regain composure. Thankfully in the hubbub, the question has been forgotten.

Somehow though, I can't help but hope I haven't made a fool of myself in front of Emile, even though that's the last thing I should be worried about right now.

EMILE

I'm trying so hard not to cringe at every single aspect of this conversation, but it's taking all my willpower to do so, and the longer it goes on, the worse I feel.

I thought this morning's gawking at the poor woman was bad enough, but now she's sitting right across from me, eating her tuna salad, drinking her orange juice, and somehow managing to look incredibly sexy doing it. Even that coughing fit was somehow endearing.

Here, up close, I see she's even more beautiful than I realized when I saw her jogging by. I was aware of her fantastic body – her clothes didn't exactly do much to hide it. But now I can really appreciate the features of her face. Her eyes are slightly almond-shaped, sloping down softly in a way that makes her look thoughtful all the time.

Her hair is cut straight across in what might be considered a long bob, ending bluntly a few inches above the shoulders. When I look closely, though, I can see there's a natural curl to it that the haircut is trying to hide. If it was a little longer, I think it would be in waves. Her olive skin is still a little dewy from her run and involuntarily, I imagine myself reaching out to touch her face and feel her skin. It looks so smooth and tempting.

If I were a different man, I would be relishing this right now. Marcel is the kind of man who lives for scenarios like this. He's in love with the idea of love, which is why he's always getting himself into trouble.

For me, the idea of feeling this drawn to another person is just... uncomfortable. I don't know how to have that kind of all-encompassing relationship. My dating history proves it. In fact, I'm content to just be left alone.

But that, it seems, just isn't in the cards, thanks to my propensity for having well-meaning but meddling friends.

Of course, Marcel decided to call over the hot girl. Uh, the neighbor. Of course, he immediately launched into advertising me as someone far more interesting and 'exotic' than I actually am. And of course, the poor woman is now mortified to be here.

This has happened way too many times before, and although I love Marcel, he's also one of the least subtle people I know. This usually means that he's trying to be 'helpful' in situations like this but it only ever leads to disaster. Every time I'm single, he can't wait to push me to the next woman, even when it's impractical and sometimes even annoying. Luckily, I don't really believe there could be a future with this stranger, or maybe his meddling would upset me more.

I do feel a little bad for this Clarissa girl because I'm sure he's scaring her off. But maybe that's not a bad thing, big picture. I don't have time for a relationship anyway.

"So why did you choose Aura Creek?" Marcel is asking, hardly letting the poor girl finish her lunch.

Clarissa looks up again, her deep brown eyes flickering to me for a moment before she looks back at Marcel. Every time she looks at me, even just briefly like she did now, I can feel my heart skip a beat. I fucking hate it.

I look away, not trusting myself to hold Clarissa's gaze without accidentally showing all my cards. I barely got away with it this morning when I watched Clarissa jog past with all the subtlety of a steamroller.

Still, Marcel should know me well enough to see that I'm clearly not comfortable here, but he clearly has only one thing on his mind – playing matchmaker with me and the neighbor, whether I like it or not.

“To be honest, I kind of just pointed blindly at a map and chose the nearest small town,” Clarissa answers, shrugging. “My parents are still traveling, and I don’t really have any other family, so I figured it didn’t really matter where I moved as long as it was somewhere peaceful.”

“Well, Aura Creek is definitely that,” I find myself saying. *So does that mean she’s single? What are you saying? It doesn’t matter. You’re getting on a boat soon. You gonna send her a postcard or what?*

I don’t know if it’s eagerness to get to know Clarissa more that makes me speak up, or if it’s desperation to stop Marcel from completely embarrassing me, but once Clarissa turns her attention back to me, I feel my heart start racing again.

And then in the back of my head, I remember Lauren accusing me of not knowing how to let anyone in. I remember all the times she told me that all she wanted to do was love me, but I made it so damn hard, and I never loved her back. And the worst part was, as good as she was to me, I couldn’t tell her she was wrong.

The memory of her acts as a warning, and I remind myself not to get too involved here. Clarissa is my neighbor, that’s all.

“So how did you travel for so long then?” I ask monotonously, trying to keep up a nice neighborly conversation but not get too interested in the answers. It’s a fine line and one I hope I’m walking.

Clarissa looks a little embarrassed. “My parents were involved in aid work in different countries,” she tells me a little shyly. “So growing up, it was really normal to move every year or so. Eventually, I picked up some baking skills, and everywhere we traveled, I’d end up finding a job in a local bakery to help fund the trip.”

She gives me a quick smile, and I can’t help but be curious to learn more about this woman. She’s not just beautiful – she’s *interesting*.

But I can already feel myself getting too invested in this. Instead of asking a bunch of follow-up questions like I secretly

want to, I just nod politely before looking away. I've done my neighborly duty of making small talk. Any more than that would be inappropriate.

I can see Marcel staring at me out of the corner of my eye, a big grin plastered on his face, and I do my best to ignore him. Unfortunately, Marcel is a person who refuses to ever be ignored.

“Well, that’s interesting,” he says, tearing his eyes away from me and instead gazing pointedly at Clarissa. “Actually, you and Emile must be cut from the same cloth because he has quite the adventurous spirit, too.”

“Oh, cool,” Clarissa says, clearly as uncomfortable as I am at this point. She obviously doesn’t know what to say, and I’m just about ready to grab Marcel by the collar and chastise him for making this conversation so weird.

But Marcel beats me to it. “Tell her about the boat,” he says, like a mother encouraging her child to play nice.

“Um, I’m building a sailboat,” I say weakly, feeling all kinds of self-conscious now.

But at this, Clarissa’s eyes light up. “Wow, really?” she asks. “By yourself?”

I feel a chill in my cheeks — probably the vampire equivalent of blushing if I could remember what that felt like.

“Yeah, but it’s not a big deal,” I say, desperately uncomfortable. It feels like she and I might be clicking, and I don’t think I want that.

Despite what it probably looks like, I don’t actually like being seen as a playboy. I don’t like hitting it off with women and breaking their hearts. I don’t like the fact that I can never give them the side of me that they deserve.

I don’t like knowing that it’s a side of me that probably doesn’t exist.

I realize only after I’ve spoken that I effectively just killed the conversation. It was sort of what I intended, but maybe not quite so efficiently. The three of us sit there silently for a

second. I'm not sure if I feel relieved to have stopped myself from accidentally flirting with Clarissa, or if I feel bad for being such an unwilling conversationalist.

It's not that I don't want to talk about my boat. In fact, nothing would give me more joy than sharing my passion project with a willing audience, but I know myself. I know if I get too into it, and Clarissa is into it, too, I'll start spiraling into flirting, which will lead to one of us asking the other out, which will lead to dating, and that, inevitably, leads to heartache.

These are the thoughts whirring around in my brain by the time Clarissa speaks again.

"Well, thank you for inviting me over," she says. "It was nice to meet you both, but I should get going."

"Well, do you want a ride home?" Marcel asks immediately.

The thought of sharing a car ride with Clarissa inexplicably makes the hairs on my arms stand on end – a sure sign that I'm into her and therefore that I should keep my distance.

But Clarissa seems a little uncertain. "Oh, thank you," she says, looking between us with something akin to panic. "But it's okay, I want to finish my jog, anyway."

"Of course," I jump in before Marcel can insist. "Enjoy your jog, it was nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Clarissa replies with an awkward smile. She then turns and heads out of the diner, leaving Marcel and I to ourselves. I have to force myself not to stare at her ass as she leaves.

Once again, though, I don't do a very good job of it.

"You are so into her," Marcel says the moment Clarissa is out of earshot.

I sigh, burying my head in my hands for a second. When I look up again, Marcel is grinning at me like he's finally caught

me. Marcel would love nothing more than to finally find me rushing head over heels into love the way he always is.

Of course, he's always rushing in the other direction a week later, sometimes with an angry husband chasing behind.

"I'm not," I insist, hoping I sound convincing enough for Marcel to leave it alone. "But after that little song and dance routine, it wouldn't even matter if I was. You totally scared the poor girl away. She thinks we're creeps now."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," Marcel responds, calling Martha over with one hand. "It was a perfectly lovely conversation between two neighbors, one of whom clearly wants to bone the other, even if he is a little rude about it. Women are used to drooling guys, you're fine."

"You're a poet, you know that?" I quip back. But deep down, I'm starting to feel guilty for how that whole conversation went.

Was I really drooling? Or rude? It wasn't what I was going for at all, and I try to brush off Marcel's insinuation. Or rather, the several insinuations.

On his side, Marcel just grins at me with mock innocence until Martha comes over.

"Can I get another rabbit shake, please?" he asks before turning to me. "You want something else?"

I shake my head. I seem to have lost my appetite.

"Saving yourself for a different kind of snack?" Marcel teases as Martha heads back to the kitchen.

All I can do is groan, too annoyed to even retort this time. Knowing Marcel, it'll only encourage him anyway. Instead, I try to change the subject, shifting the conversation to the boat, or another house-flipping project, or the weather, or pretty much anything except Clarissa.

Marcel's not having it, though, and he continues to tease me about Clarissa all through his next shake and even back to my house. I don't think I've ever been so excited about having to redo some botched work because it's only when I start

talking about cleats that Marcel finally heads back to his own home.

CLARISSA

Leaving the diner, I feel a mixture of high emotions. Emile is an interesting man. Handsome and mysterious. Plus, he works with his hands! I can respect any man who isn't afraid to get calloused hands in his job.

I think about our short conversation while walking down the sidewalk. The trees here are beautiful and give me some much-needed shade against the beating hot sun. I can't imagine how much sunscreen a vampire needs in order to live out here. I wonder if he has any skincare tips he could share. His face was certainly smooth and soft-looking.

Oh, I think. I may be really into my new neighbor.

"That's a little unfortunate," I mutter to myself. Not least of all because I have to lie to him any time we have a conversation! I cringe, remembering how awkwardly I flubbed my introduction back there. And I'd practiced so much!

Not that they seemed to notice at all. But *I* noticed. And maybe next time, I'll say it to the wrong person, and they will, too. I need to get it down until even I believe the lie. My life is on the line, after all!

"Nice to meet you. My name is Clarissa," I say under my breath. "Nice to meet you! I'm Clarissa. Hello! I'm Clarissa. What's your name?"

I can't stop thinking about Emile. How badly I wanted to tell him my real name, my whole story, and ask if he had any plans for dinner tonight. I can't let myself slip up like that. Even thinking it is dangerous. But still, lying to him made me

feel horrible. I sigh, staring at the uneven sidewalk as I walk the final block to my house.

“Howdy, y’all, the name’s Clarissa. Hey there, I’m Clarissa. Pleased to meet you.”

“Who are you talking to? Ants?”

I look up quickly, startled by the sudden intrusion into my thoughts. Standing next to my door is the Marshal. His dark aviator sunglasses reflect my embarrassed face back at me.

“Oh. Hey, Todd. I didn’t think you’d start visiting this soon.”

Todd points at my door and grimaces. “I’ve been here for forty-five minutes. Do you know what could happen in forty-five minutes?”

“Whoa, okay, sorry! Here, I’ll let you in, and you can use my bathroom.” I fumble my keys out of my pocket, dropping them on the ground before picking them back up and opening the door.

“Unbelievable.” Todd sighs. “Get a lighter keyring. And grease the lock so you don’t have to waste an extra half second getting inside.”

“Seriously?” I ask while closing the door behind him. “An entire half a second?”

“It’s the difference between a bullet in the door and one in your skull,” Todd replies harshly. He takes off his glasses and stares me down. Somehow, I feel like a child again. Like my dad just found out I stuffed his slippers down the toilet. “It’s my job to keep you safe, but by God, lady, you have to at least try to help me out here.”

I put my hands up in surprise. “Okay, first of all, I’m 29. Not a kid. Secondly, I’m not sure what I even did wrong to get you worked up like this.”

“You were gone! For who knows how long! I thought we went over this.”

“I went on a jog and got lunch. It’s not like I hitchhiked out of town to catch the waves or something,” I reply

defensively. “If you would just give me a schedule of when you plan to visit, I can make sure I’m home.”

“That’s not the problem, Clarissa. The problem is you being out of the house for that long. Period. Whether I’m going to stop in or not.” Todd puts his hands in his pockets and shakes his head.

“You know, we were following this one woman. Nice gal. Saw stuff she never should have. We had an entire crime family ready to go behind bars so long as we could keep her alive long enough to testify. Everything was going great until she just had to go to the movie theater. Some superhero flick she’d been dying to see. She was told no. She didn’t listen. Not even halfway through the trailers and blam!”

I jump backward as Todd makes a finger gun pointed directly at my forehead. I swallow down the sudden adrenaline spike and exhale hard.

“Okay, fine, I won’t go to the movies!”

But Todd shakes his head. “You’re still not getting it. Had an old guy who spent his entire life running drugs for some kingpin. Grew a conscience just in time for retirement and flipped for us. We had everything we needed to bust the joint. Billions of dollars in drugs we could have kept off the streets, you get it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I get it!”

“But this guy. Oh, he just had to go take a vacation. Needed to live it up in Daiquiri Town. Do you know what happened to him? Guess what happened.”

I blink. “Oh, you’re serious. Um, another bullet to the skull?”

Todd shakes his head.

“More creative this time? Interesting. Poison in the pina colada?”

“Heart attack on a jet ski. Sunk into the ocean like a boulder and drowned.”

My mouth drops open. “What? What does that have to do with witness protection?”

Todd gets closer to me and pokes me on the shoulder, hard. “If he’d been in his home, we could’ve gotten him to a secure medical facility. Or hell, maybe without the alcohol and excitement of the beach, he wouldn’t have even had one. My point, Clarissa, is that you cannot live a normal life right now.”

I shrug my shoulders and sigh. “Todd, I’m not. I’m literally not living a normal life right now. I’m sorry you lost all those... clients?”

“Oh, no. They weren’t mine. Those are case studies they give us in orientation. But the guys who were assigned to those cases are real stand-up agents. I have a lot of respect for them.”

“Well, whatever the case is. All I want is to get some exercise and have a nice meal now and then.” Now it’s my turn to poke Todd. “And I don’t think that’s too much to ask!”

Todd shakes his head and crosses his arms. “I’ll get you a treadmill. And learn to cook for yourself. You know, you can learn anything on the internet these days? Dozens of videos, and a girl should know how to cook anyway. Look into it.”

“I know how to... look, do you really think I’m in that much danger? Even after everything? I moved here. I changed my name. They don’t know where I went, right? Is it really that dangerous for me to just jog down the street?”

“Did you talk to anyone while you were out?” Todd asks.

I gulp. My eyes shift to the floor.

“Ah, cheese and rice, kid!” Todd puts his hands on his hips and walks away from me.

“It was my neighbor! It was just my neighbor... and my neighbor’s friend... and the waitress at the diner.”

“Did you make friends with all the cooks, too? How about the local football team? Any low-lives or gangsters hanging around we can meet?”

I throw my hands up again, this time in surrender. “Okay, I get it.”

“Do you? Because for someone who obviously cares about her health, you sure have no problem playing the hitman lottery out there! You think it would be tough for someone, anyone, to snatch a pretty girl like you?”

“Yes! I get it!” I collapse into my dining room chair, exhausted physically and mentally. “I’m sorry. I’ll take that treadmill, I guess.” I idly wonder why they moved me to such a beautiful town if they expected me to be stuck inside for who knows how long.

“Alright. Good. I’m gonna be dropping by now and then, *unannounced*, to make sure you’re doing your due diligence. I can’t keep someone alive if they’re running around town with a target on their back.” Todd takes his aviators back out of his pocket and puts them on. I can’t help but feel sometimes like he’s just cosplaying as some big important government agent.

I nod, feeling relief when I follow him out of the door and onto the porch. But then he stops and turns to get one more lecture in. Finger wagging and all.

“Oh, and kid? Cut back on the tuna. You know that stuff is just loaded with mercury.”

My eyes go wide at the insinuation that he could smell the tuna on my breath. *Could Emile? It doesn’t matter. Forget it.*

Todd leaves, and I go back inside and lock the door behind him. I rest my head against the heavy wood and sigh.

He’s gotten into my head. Now I’m noticing all the different ways that someone could kill me, even tucked away in this house. The peephole in the door has become a liability. The windows are a portal to assassination town. Even the bookcase, I realize, is top-heavy enough to fall over and crush me if I’m not careful.

Great. I head to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Then, I make a list of ways to safety-proof this place like I’m bringing home a fresh baby.

I'll do what Todd says and treat this less like a weird vacation and more like I'm in real danger. But man, I'm gonna miss jogging outside. And sunlight. And fresh air.

As I go to close the curtains on my window, I spy Emile and his friend pulling up to the house. I can probably trust him, right? At least enough not to take my picture and shove it around mafia circles.

He just seems so... nice. I close the curtains and smile, a warm blush on my cheeks. Maybe I can still go jogging now and then, at least up and down the street. What harm could that do, really?

EMILE

I finish fixing the backward cleat, but like this morning, I can't stop thinking about Clarissa and the awkward lunch I just had.

My mind is ragged, playing the conversation out over and over again. Every time Marcel's teasing comes to mind, I wince as if being hit with a fresh wave of guilt peppered with annoyance.

I know Marcel sees right through my attempts to play it cool when it comes to Clarissa, but the thing is, I do want to keep it cool. Casual. If I keep telling myself that long enough, whatever this weird attraction is will fade. And that's way better than just breaking the poor girl's heart in a month or two, isn't it?

But along with Marcel's incessant teasing come flashes of Clarissa sitting right across from me, her eyes catching mine every now and then, her shy smile speaking volumes. Could it be that she was awkward, not because of Marcel's over-enthusiasm, but because she was as struck by our eye contact this morning as I was?

It's only when I find myself wondering if she's attracted to me, too, that I realize what I'm doing.

"Stop," I groan to myself, trying to put an end to the daydreaming that I know will only lead me down a dangerous path.

The fact is, it doesn't matter if I'm into her or if she's into me. I'm not getting involved with yet another fun fling just to

hurt her again.

Isn't that the whole reason I'm going on this trip? To be alone? I think to myself as I pick up my drill and make another hole in the hull.

I want to get away from everything, not just as an opportunity to enjoy the work of my hands, but to make sure there is no way I can meet anyone for a good long while. I need some time to focus on myself and not the next pretty face that comes along.

I drill another hole, ready for the cleat to be bolted on, but the passion just isn't there. I'm too distracted, and forcing myself to work on the boat isn't giving me the relief I hoped for. Marcel and Clarissa have gotten way too far into my head.

In fact, I'm working almost as slowly as I did this morning, and with the unexpected lunch and the earlier mistakes, I'm way behind on the boat building for today. As much as I'd like to redeem myself, I can't help but feel exhausted by Marcel's childish needling.

With a sigh, I reach into the hull, winding another nut onto a cleat bolt before tightening it and sealing the whole backplate with marine silicone. At least I'm putting the cleats on the right way this time, even if they're going on slowly.

But as I work, I feel my mind and body dragging.

"Fuck it," I mutter to myself, putting the caulking down on the workbench and wiping the silicone off my hands.

I've had enough for today, and rather than stress myself out over finishing what I'd planned, I decide to give myself the rest of the afternoon off.

I glance out the garage door to the darkening sky and realize it's not the creeping evening that's blocking out the sun but a blanket of thick clouds. Judging from the smell of the air, it won't be long until those clouds turn into a full-blown storm, and the thought propels me out of the garage and towards my leaky mailbox.

I glance up at the sky again as I pull a couple of letters out, reminding myself to fix the box before I leave for my trip.

Coming back to a mailbox full of soggy mail will not be ideal.

I'm about to head back into the house with my mail when something next door catches my eye. A tall man in a dark suit is striding out of Clarissa's house with a serious look on his face. I recognize him as the man who fell through the cracked wood of the porch earlier. He's a bear of a man, and I'm still not entirely certain just who he is to Clarissa. He heads across the porch toward his car, a sleek, black BMW this time. But before he can open the door, he turns back to the house with a warning stare.

I follow his gaze and see Clarissa standing on the porch, looking totally terrified, her almond eyes wide and lips pursed tightly together. There's something in her eyes that sparks compassion in me, and for a moment, I'm frozen there at the mailbox, wondering what I could possibly be witnessing.

As the man in the suit drives away, I consider going over there and checking if Clarissa is okay. It's an impulse that goes beyond attraction and into care. But the thought passes quickly, and I tell myself the guy didn't exactly look dangerous. Somehow, I don't really think he's a jilted ex coming around to make threats.

So I give up the idea. Instead, I hurry back inside, clutching my letters tightly and vowing to stay out of it just in case I creep her out again.

The moment I step back into the garage, though, I feel like a complete ass. Marcel's words come back to haunt me — not the teasing this time, but the chastisement. I realize he was right, I *was* aloof at the diner. And in comparison to Marcel being his usual overly friendly self, I must have come off as completely disinterested.

What must Clarissa have thought of me? I wonder, shaking my head.

I sigh, closing the garage door and cleaning up the workshop before heading back into the house. I move slowly, as though the shame I feel for my conduct at lunch and even outside just now is physically weighing me down. I figure maybe a shower will help me relax, and I strip off my work

clothes. But as the warm water washes away the day's grime, it doesn't wash away the stress.

I know I can't get involved with another woman right now, but I also know that I don't want to turn into a dick because of it. I was standoffish at lunch, there's no way around that. When I think back over Clarissa's story, I realize she must have lived a pretty lonely life.

I imagine traveling the world, never putting down roots. I picture deciding to settle down somewhere for the first time, and when you get there, it turns out your neighbor wants nothing to do with you.

I shake my head again, appalled at my conduct, before shutting off the water and grabbing a towel. As I walk from the bathroom to my bedroom, I can't help but glance out the window toward Clarissa's house. It's quiet out there, but the storm is on its way, and I head down the hall to my room to change into sweatpants and a tank top for the evening.

But it's starting to grow chilly as the air pressure drops. I can hear the wind starting to howl outside, and I throw on a hoodie as I ponder what to do about Clarissa.

"I don't have to seduce her," I say to myself as I make my way to the kitchen. "But I don't have to be an ass either." I can tell that the right answer lies somewhere between those two things. I can stop being the playboy who can't commit and breaks girl's hearts. And maybe learning to care about someone as a friend will do me some good.

As I'm pulling out some ingredients for dinner, I have an idea. I know it's a bit hokey, but if I'm entirely honest, I'm nothing if not a little hokey at times. I guess that's what growing up in a small town does to you.

Still, the more I ponder this idea, the more I like it. Soon, I'm smiling to myself. Clarissa said she just picked a place on a map, which means she probably doesn't know anything about Aura Creek or maybe even North Carolina in general. But if there's one thing this town does well, it's farm produce. I start building an imaginary welcome basket in my mind.

I cast an eye around the kitchen, checking things off in my mind. The fruit bowl already has a couple of ripe peaches and a nice-looking pawpaw. Not to mention the fresh raspberries and blackberries I have in my fridge.

None of this stuff is for me anyway, of course – at least not without some blood mixed into it. Mostly it's for the human friends and colleagues who come by to visit regularly, or the craftspeople who come to help with the boat build from time to time.

I just hope Clarissa is one of those humans that likes fruit.

I pull open the pantry to find a jar of local honey, a bottle of North Carolina vinaigrette, and the locally made barbecue sauce that Aura Creekans swear by. I only hope it'll help make up for the lunch

“It's a start,” I mutter, reaching past the barbecue sauce to grab a packet of instant blood and bone for tonight's dinner.

As I stir some boiling water into the packet mix, I wonder what else I might be able to do to make Clarissa welcome. I realize I don't know that much more about her though. Apart from traveling and baking — I make a mental note to add some local pastries to the basket — I have no idea what her hobbies are.

Then it hits me. Obviously, she likes jogging, and I know for a fact that Aura Creek has some beautiful jogging trails, even if I don't use them much myself.

By the time I sit down to drink my dinner for one, I'm feeling much better about Clarissa and absolved of my lunchtime rudeness. Well, almost absolved. I need to actually put my 'welcome to the neighborhood, take two' plan into action.

I imagine knocking on Clarissa's door and greeting her with a friendly smile, apologizing for the lunchtime conversation, and then offering her the basket. Or maybe I shouldn't mention lunch at all. Judging from how awkward she was, it might be better if we both just pretend it didn't happen.

After all, if my attraction to her made her uncomfortable, bringing it up again is probably not going to solve anything. It's probably going to confirm it and make it worse. This'll prove I see her as a complete person, not just a skirt to chase, and I think that's the best thing for both of us.

"Yes, that's it," I say to myself as I live out the plan in my mind's eye. "Just be chill about it."

I just have to make sure I keep it all above board. Neighborly gestures should fit into that category. Right?

CLARISSA

The blows are coming hard and fast, each one sending a crack of deafening noise through my skull and rattling my brain. One after the other after the other, raining down on me. And even when the fists pull back for a moment, there's no reprieve. Along with the punches, a near-constant pelting of pebbles is falling on me and stinging my skin.

I open my mouth, desperate to scream for help, but every time I do, another blow comes, and another, and another. I can't see my attackers, but I don't need to. I know those fists intimately, like every knuckle is imprinted onto my skin, onto my internal organs, even onto my bones.

The Holy Rollers scream at me as they beat me, insults that come out as howls. Their meaning is elusive but no less painful, no less terrorizing.

“Traitor!”

I feel the word more than hear it, like it's being seared into my brain.

I know there's no hope of escape. But I fight, anyway. I am writhing, twisting, and turning, trying to break free from the endless pain, the endless fear, the endless noise. The more I struggle, the more entangled I become, the bedsheet wrapping around my limbs and tying me in knots as the booming in my head grows louder and louder and —

I wake up, head still ringing with the sound of the punches, hands still tangled in the sheets. The Holy Rollers aren't here now, but I can still feel their presence, like they're hiding in

the shadows just waiting to strike, still spitting their venomous words at me.

Traitor. Snitch. Coward.

The sound of my breath mingles with the howls of the mobsters, but as my brain and body adjust to the shift in reality, I suddenly realize the howling is coming from outside, from the wind that whips through the trees and whistles in the windows.

Another boom rings out. Thunder this time, I realize. The rattle of rain against my roof slowly draws me out of my panicked dream and into my bedroom, away from the ravine, away from the gang, away from the life I was forced to leave behind.

The pounding in my chest won't quit, nor will the feeling of intense fear that courses through me. A hand suddenly slaps against my window.

“Oh, Jesus!”

Every frayed nerve in my body immediately comes alive with terror and the need to escape comes surging back. I somehow manage to scramble out of the covers, only half tripping as I jump out of bed and press myself against the bedroom wall. My eyes are wide, staring at the window where I'm sure Hudson Judge or one of his goons is lurking.

Smack! The hand slaps the window pane again, but this time, it lingers before splintering into a dozen or so bulbous shapes. It takes me a second to realize it's not a hand at all but a branch, its slick leaves clinging to the glass as the wind blows it against my window.

I let out a deep breath, one I hadn't even realized I'd been holding till now.

“You're safe,” I tell myself, hoping desperately that the words will soothe me. “This is just the PTSD.”

Sometimes that's enough to calm me down, enough to quiet the voice in my head that tells me I'm back there in the ravine, battered and broken and fighting for my life.

But tonight it's not quite enough. The dream was too real, and Marshall Todd's words are still echoing in my ears. *Watch yourself, kid. I've seen things. I know what I'm talking about.*

Horror stories of witness protection gone wrong come flooding into my mind, and my heart races all over again, terrified that I'm about to join Marshall Todd's list.

The thought shakes me, pushing me into another panic. This time, though, it's not a paralyzing force, but one that propels me into sudden manic action. With the lights still out, I reach in the dark for my robe. Both hands shaking, I wrap it tightly around me as if it will keep me safe from the gangsters I'm practically convinced are lurking outside.

Slowly, silently, I make my way around the house, desperate to check every single window and door to make sure they're all locked tight against the outside. The pounding in my chest has yet to subside, and as I approach each opening, my heart only beats faster. Three more times I jump back in fright as three more would-be intruders beat against the house.

"Oh my God!" I cry as an elbow comes banging sharply against the back door.

It turns out, of course, to be another tree branch, as do the other two.

Eventually, my panic ebbs a little, but only after I've checked and double-checked every entrance in the house. As I'm confirming the latch is closed on the last window, I look out to see the warmth of the living room light on in the house next door. It casts a hazy aura of comfort into the night, catching the still-heavy rain in its tungsten glow.

It's strangely calming. I feel my heartbeat finally slow and my breathing even out as I gaze out at the single beacon of light in what is otherwise a very dark night.

"Emile," I whisper softly to myself. It's as much a call into the dark as it is me testing out how his name feels in my mouth.

The act immediately makes me feel silly, and the panic I felt earlier is suddenly broken with a wave of something

perhaps even stronger – sheer embarrassment.

Flashes of our impromptu lunch come back to mind. I cringe, realizing for what feels like the hundredth time that I made a total fool of myself in front of him today. I think again of how horrible I must have looked choking on my damned tuna salad. I turn away from the window in humiliation as if I think Emile is there looking at me right now.

I can feel my cheeks grow warm even at the thought of facing him again. Our first encounter was intense, if a little unexpected. Our second was enough to fluster me. But the third was an absolute disaster, and in some ways, I wish I'd left the diner after all rather than accepted Marcel's invitation.

First impressions don't get a do-over, unfortunately.

And it's not as if it was a one-time blunder that will be forgotten. The man is my neighbor. I'm going to have to see him basically every day of my life, assuming I stay here in Aura Creek. Especially if I want to keep up my jogging routine which, if I'm brutally honest, is the only thing keeping me sane right now.

For a moment I consider jogging only in the opposite direction from now on. But our street is a dead end, and besides, it would be even worse if I started intentionally avoiding him. That would be admitting how embarrassed I am and would only draw more attention to me.

Still, I can't imagine how I'm going to face him without embarrassing myself again. It's like I don't know how to be normal around him. And I'd blame that on the fact I'm still learning my cover story, but really, I know it's more than that.

There's an attraction there that scares me because I don't know how to be attracted to someone I can't let in. I just can't help but feel exposed when I look into Emile's eyes. I'm no expert on staying undercover or anything, but I'm pretty sure that's the exact opposite of what I'm supposed to be doing.

When I think of him though, I just feel... safe. I feel exposed, open, and vulnerable, but almost in a good way. Despite all that, I feel like I just want to be myself around him.

Although, preferably a version of myself that isn't inhaling tuna salad.

I feel like he would keep me secure, but I'm not allowed to admit what I'm scared of in the first place. I'm not allowed to be myself in front of the one person I really wish could see the real Shauna. I mean, Clarissa. And I don't know what to do about it, other than just run in the other direction whenever I see him.

I grip the robe tighter around my chest, finally feeling calm enough to go back to bed. Right now my thoughts are no longer inhabited by Hudson Judge and his gang. Instead, it's Emile who lingers in my mind.

The moment I walk into my bedroom, though, a mighty crash echoes through the house, causing my heart to practically leap out of my chest all over again. I know I should probably be hiding, but instinct makes me seek out the noise. This time, I turn on a light.

The hallway is empty, the living room, too, and I go back to each of the windows to check the locks for a third time. I go around to every room in the house — the kitchen, the guest room, the pantry — but they're all in order, each of them locked tightly against intruders.

It's only when I get to the bathroom that I find the problem.

“Oh, fuck,” I manage to mutter, open-mouthed.

There, where a corner of the ceiling used to be, is now a partial piece of the mangled canopy of an ash tree. A spray of branches juts directly into the shower while the tiled floor is now carpeted with leaves and shorn-off bark, insulation, and dust. And now, of course, a steady trickle of water drips from the branches.

I step forward, desperate to do something, even though it's clear there's nothing to be done. The moment I do, a shard of tile comes falling through the branches, narrowly missing my head.

“Fuck!” I scream at the tree. It doesn't respond.

I can't imagine how this night could get any worse.

EMILE

I wake up with a jolt. I'm certain I just had a strange dream, but for the life of me, I can't remember what happened. As I begin to move, I feel every muscle in my body tense up and scream in protest. How did I manage to fall asleep in a chair? Slowly, I stand up and stretch out every aching inch of my body.

Satisfied, I begin to start my morning routine. I remember while applying sunscreen that a nasty storm was forecasted to roll through the night before. If I slept through it, it certainly couldn't have been that bad. But still, I need to assess any possible damage.

From the upstairs window, I can survey most of my property. There are a few tree branches in the yard that'll require a little sawing to dispose of. I sigh a little at the thought of the labor involved, and how the wood isn't even good enough to use in anything. The tree they came from is in my neighbor's yard, after all.

Speaking of, I pivot my view to get a good look at Clarissa's house and... oh. Oh, *shit*.

It's wrecked, to say the least. That tree in question appears to have fallen right onto the poor woman's roof. I curse, thinking about how much rainwater must have gotten inside the house. I don't consider myself a sexist guy or anything, and I'm sure some women know how to fix a roof, but nothing about our conversation at lunch made me think Clarissa was any sort of handyman.

She's going to need some help. Obviously, I have to go over there. It's only the neighborly thing to do. What man leaves his single female neighbor to fend for herself in this kind of situation?

I mentally free up my entire day and grab the half-finished welcome basket as an excuse to get my foot in the door. I don't want to come on too strong, after all. I'll make small talk, casually bring up the disaster, and offer my professional services on the house. Or maybe I'll just say free of charge.

It's the right thing to do. I add the peaches and a book on local wildlife I never really used, just to make the basket look less insultingly empty. Then, I do my best to ensure I look equal parts down-home neighborly and uptown suave.

It's difficult when you have a somewhat translucent reflection, but I make do. Adding a pair of sunglasses for equal parts fashion and safety, I'm ready to charm the pants off of my poor unfortunate neighbor. I have to remind myself I'm not *doing that* anymore and calm down.

I take a breath to focus, rehearse my re-introduction a few more times, then knock on the door. And wait. And wait. And *wait*. Just as I'm about to leave, I hear footsteps and then a silent pause, followed by some frantic muttering. Finally, the sound of two different locks click and the door creaks open.

I smile wide. "Hey, neighbor! I just wanted... to..." I look Clarissa up and down with breathless amazement. She looks *awful*. I mean, she's gorgeous like she always is, but this woman has been through the wringer.

She's still in her pajamas, which in itself isn't that important, but they are soaking wet. Her hair is dripping and rests flat against her forehead, and her eyes look bloodshot. Everything about Clarissa is shouting her absolute exhaustion and despair.

Good thing I'm here, then.

"Looks like you had a rough night," I finally say.

"You didn't?" Clarissa asks, despondent.

“Heavy rain helps me sleep. So, I brought this over for you,” I say, offering the basket.

Clarissa takes it and only seems to half notice the contents. “Thanks. Thank you! I love... sauce,” she says while attempting to read the barbeque sauce label.

I consider going through my rehearsed speech of welcoming her to the neighborhood, telling her about the town, all the niceties. But the current situation seems much more dire than I expected, so I decide to cut to the chase.

“I saw you had some roof damage. Mind if I take a look at it?” I ask.

Clarissa looks back at me with wide eyes. Maybe it’s the sleep deprivation, but she looks genuinely scared of me. Not just annoyed in the way that tells me she caught me checking out her ass, but *fearful*. Is she secretly a vampire bigot? Or did I really blow it that badly at lunch?

Finally, Clarissa shakes her head a bit like she’s just woken up and forces a smile. “Right, yeah, you do carpentry stuff. You’d probably know how screwed I am. Sure, please, come in!”

Clarissa awkwardly stumbles back inside the house and sets the basket down on the kitchen counter. “I’m sorry about... this,” she says, pulling at her wet sweatpants. “I wasn’t really expecting company.”

“That’s alright, not much different from what I’ve seen you in before. And you pull it off really well, anyway,” I comment. Clarissa’s face goes beet red at the compliment, and I remember I probably wasn’t supposed to talk about her jogging pants, even though for once I wasn’t thinking about the great view of her ass.

I hold back the urge to say she also pulls off ‘sad wet dog’ well, too. I’m not sure the comment would actually make anything any better.

I follow her into the bathroom, and oh, it’s bad. Somehow, it’s even worse than I thought. While the hole isn’t the biggest one I’ve seen, the room is covered in debris, and any surface

that isn't already coated by chunks of plaster and dust holds some sort of receptacle for gathering water.

"I was working on emptying those," Clarissa says. She gestures towards the sea of buckets, cooking pots, and storage bins. "So, what's the damage?"

I look at Clarissa over my sunglasses, impressed by her can-do attitude. She doesn't cling to me and beg me for help. She doesn't wring her hands in panic. Despite everything she's up against right now, she very calmly has been emptying buckets of rainwater. It's... well, it's impressive.

I pause to think over the answer to her question and raise my eyebrows. "My honest assessment? Bad."

I look down at her busted hand, and the man I saw outside her house yesterday flashes back into my mind. Maybe I will ask who he is, just to make sure there's nothing hinky going on here. I file the thought away and focus on the problem at hand. "It's very bad."

Clarissa puts her good hand on her hip and sighs. "Wow, thanks. I had no idea."

Shit, I did it again. She thinks I'm some asshole guy who assumes she has half a brain because of her chromosomes.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sound condescending. I'm just shocked at how bad it is, that's all. You are looking at some major construction to get this fixed. And then we'll have to clean up everything that got wet and see how much can be saved. Luckily, I can get a tarp set up to protect you from the rain, but you'll still want to get some bug spray. The mosquitos here are very determined, and they do not abide by the same codes as us."

Clarissa shoots his head up and looks at me with an expression of shock. "You...? Oh. Oh, I don't think I could afford you," she says with an awkward laugh. "You're way out of my league. Price, I mean. Price league."

"I didn't even quote you yet. And by the way, the quote is zero. My business partner wants to flip this place if you don't scoop it up. You're renting, right?"

She nods. “Seriously? You would just... fix my roof for free? Get out.” Clarissa crosses his arms, her eyebrows raised in disbelief. “I mean, not *leave*, but get out like you can’t be serious.” Then she takes a step back like she knows what I’m thinking I’ll get in payment, and a look of distrust flashes across her face.

I cough, trying to quickly deny the accusation she hasn’t even made yet. “No look. I *am* serious. See, if this doesn’t get fixed right, your property value affects mine. This may as well be like fixing up my own home. I’ve got all the materials and expertise. It’s nothing, really. Just let me handle it.”

Clarissa goes through an entire routine of palpable anxiety. She threads her fingers together, chews on her lips, darts her eyes around the room, and sighs. “This just seems like a lot to ask of someone,” she finally says.

I can understand her hesitation, but considering the state of the house, it seems a little excessive. What man hurt her in the past to make her this distrustful? But it doesn’t seem like a neighborly thing to ask, so I just shake my head.

“Marcel and I are going to end up doing it anyway. I know you’re new here, so let me introduce you to the concept of southern hospitality. We take care of our neighbors. Alright? Maybe one day I’ll need a hand, and you’ll be there right on time. But for now, you’re the one in need. Unless you think you can fix this up yourself?”

Clarissa’s face goes as pale as a vampire herself. “No. No, I don’t think I can. It’s just, see, I have this, uh, uncle...” She sounds unsure about her own family makeup for a moment there. “I think I should call him. Maybe?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Is this uncle a licensed handyman? A woodworker or even a plumber? Any sort of contractor?”

Clarissa bites her lip. I almost can’t handle how cute she looks like that. For a girl who comes across so confident some of the time, there are little signs that she’s not quite as put together as she wants me to think.

I take a deep breath in an effort to collect myself as she shakes her head. “No. No, not at all. Actually, I’m not sure if he even knows how a screwdriver works.”

I smile and shake my head. “You look like you’ve been through hell, and you’re obviously way in over your head. So how about you at least let me get that tarp installed, and you can let me know how you feel about a near stranger spending all day in your house for at least a few days.”

“Wow, I thought you were going to say longer.”

“Don’t worry, I’m roping Marcel into this, too.” I play it off as a joke, but the comedy doesn’t seem to stick well. I don’t want to brag that I’m just fast and good. The majority of this is going to be the clean-up.

Clarissa’s face gets that pale, placid expression of fear again. She looks like a cornered bunny rabbit out of options.

But then she looks up at me, rubs her hands over her tanned and well-toned arms, and cracks a small smile. “You’d be in my house every day?”

I nod, expecting her to refuse. Instead, I swear I feel something a little bit brighter radiating from her expression.

“Okay. Thank you, yes, thank you very much. Please fix my house.” Clarissa finally lets out an exhausted but boisterous laugh. “I don’t know why I’m being like this. Guess I’ve just had a bad night. Or two. Or a dozen.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her. “I needed a break from the boat, anyway. I tend to get tunnel vision if I focus on one project for too long. This’ll be a great in-between for me.”

“Oh, well, that’s nice. Oh! And I refuse to let you do all this for free. Or at least out of your own pocket. That’s unacceptable. I’ll pay for the materials. Just tell me what you need, and I’ll get it.”

I remember the last time a client insisted on getting his own materials and made a complete mess of things by not realizing how many different types of screws there are. I’ll just let her come along with me to the hardware store instead. Still, I smile and reach out my hand.

“It’s a deal,” I say. Clarissa hesitates, seems to really inspect my hand for a moment, then finally takes it and shakes.

“Deal!”

CLARISSA

I give in and shake Emile's hand. It's embarrassing being in this situation. I should be so lucky to have a carpenter as a neighbor, and a generous one to boot! I've seen with my own eyes what he can do. That boat, even half-finished, is really impressive. But the agony of even needing the help in the first place is devastating.

I am a baker. Baking is what I do. Those skills very much *do not* transfer over to fixing a hole in a roof. I can accept this limitation theoretically because, until now, it was never an issue.

But I hate depending on my brand-new neighbor, especially because I have a feeling Todd won't like it. He yelled at me just for speaking to Emile in the restaurant. I can't imagine what he's going to say when he hears I let him into my house for several days.

In any case, though, I think he's harmless. I'm lucky to have Emile so close, who not only offers to help but does so insistently. I think he recognizes what a helpless case he lives next door to and has taken pity on me.

"So, where do we get started?" I ask, ready to prove myself. I'm not going to let him do everything.

Emile looks me over with such brutal intensity it almost makes me gulp. I wonder what he's thinking about behind those sharp eyes.

"First, you need a shower. And dry clothes, if you still have them."

My eyes fly wide open as I suddenly remember my current state. My sweatpants and shirt are soaking wet, sticking to my skin and leaving nothing to the imagination. If I wasn't already thoroughly embarrassed and mortified, I sure would be now!

“Of course, if that piping is what I think it is, you won't be getting a shower in here. Why don't you grab your stuff and come over to my place? A hot shower and intact roof might help you clear your head a little, too.”

I feel my face flush completely. “Wow, I mean, no. You've already offered so much, I can't impose on you even more!”

If Emile is exhausted with me, he's very good at showing it. He simply shakes his head.

“I already told you. Southern hospitality. And imposing? On what, my shower? Please. You looking like a sad wet dog does more psychic damage to me than just using my bathroom for half an hour. Come on, before the mosquitos wake up and make this place unbearable.”

I give in, if only because I'm too exhausted to argue with someone who seems to have his shit together much more than I could hope for. I grab a caddy from under the sink and fill it with my hair products, body wash, loofah, razor, and my own towels. I also rummage out a dry change of clothes and meet Emile at the door.

“Is that it?” he asks. “You might want a pillow or two as well.”

I blink. Why would I need pillows in the shower? Then it hits me. He wasn't just offering a shower, he was offering to *let me stay*. I gasp at the realization. That's way too much, even for Southern hospitality. And even if it weren't, I don't think Todd would be too pleased with me playing sleepover with a near stranger right now.

“Oh, I thought you just... I mean I'm grateful for the shower. I definitely need it, but I really can't stay. Not because you're a vampire, that's not! I uh, I snore. Loud. So, I'll just sleep in my own bed. It's fine.”

Tell your hot neighbor you snore. That's a great plan. Really want to make sure he finds you irresistible, huh?

Emile studies me again, that face unmoving as he seems to be calculating a proper response.

“Okay,” he finally says.

“Okay?”

“Yes, okay, let's go.”

Emile guides me to his home and shows me inside. It's gorgeous. The layout isn't that different from my home, but the decorating is top-notch in comparison. I guess if you've lived in one place like this most of your life, you're bound to amass a style much nicer than 'fake hideout house.'

“Here's the bathroom. The hot water takes a minute to really get up there, but once it does, it's really hot. So don't pull the lever too much unless you like having your skin scalding. And please help yourself to anything in here, I don't mind.” Emile smiles at me and closes the door.

I sigh, feeling completely hopeless. What would I have done if Emile wasn't my neighbor? Probably call Todd. But knowing him, he'd probably tell me some long story about a master handyman and then make me move houses again. That's the last thing I want to do.

Not just because another move would be a pain in the ass. I like it here. I haven't been in Aura Creek that long at all, but it's got such a nice charm to it. And nice neighbors. Really nice, and nice looking, neighbors.

I shake my head and take Emile's advice to clear my mind with a shower. He's right, the hot water gets really hot, but it feels so good on my sore muscles. I lather up my loofah with rose-scented body wash and get to work scrubbing rain and debris out of my skin. I idly take in Emile's products lined up neatly on a small shelf. He uses a moisturizing body wash, and shampoo with tea tree oil and mint. I bet that smells amazing.

Still, something about this room feels off. I can't put my finger on it, but it feels like there's something vital missing. It's not until I'm toweled off and drying my hair that it hits

me. There's no mirror in here. And I guess that would make sense. What use does a vampire have for a mirror if he can't even see in it?

I shrug my shoulders, accepting that my hair may look a little rough, and get dressed. It's probably for the best. I'm sure I look like a sleep deprived zombie right now. I walk out to the smell of coffee and eggs. It hits me like a truck, and my stomach loudly proclaims how welcome it is.

"Hungry?" Emile asks. "I hope so because I can't eat this."

"Yes, please. Thank you." I take a seat at his table and bite my lip, feeling awkward as Emile continues to be the most polite and welcoming person I've ever known. He slides a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of me before sitting down with a large cup of something red for himself.

"Protein shake," he says before taking a swig. I try not to think about what the protein actually is.

"This is so much," I whisper before taking a bite.

"It's nothing, actually. I love cooking, but I rarely get the chance to, so you're doing me the favor." Emile winks at me. That slightly helps the awkwardness go down easier. "So, once we're done eating, we should head down to Harlan's Hardware. We'll need a tarp. I have enough rope. Do you have any heavy-duty work gloves?"

I pause halfway through taking a bite of my eggs and slowly shake my head.

"Well, you will now. Roofing nails, shingles..." Emile takes out his phone and starts typing down a list. "We can use my hammer. I think I have enough tar paper..."

"I insist on buying everything," I say quickly after swallowing. "I don't want you to waste your supplies on this. And any tools, too. I should probably have some of my own anyway. Independent women need to plan ahead, right?"

Emile looks up at me. I can tell he's considering whether or not to argue with me. But then he shrugs and goes back to his list.

“Agreed.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, you should have a hammer and stash of nails for yourself. However, I’m going to insist on letting me use my own circular saw. There’s no need for you to buy one yourself unless you plan on making roof repair a new hobby.”

Emile’s lips quirk up into a sly smile, revealing the slightest hint of one of his fangs. It’s an amazing sight, and I have to look away and hope he doesn’t see the blush on my cheeks.

“Alright. If you’re done, we can head out.” Emile reaches for my plate, but I pick it up myself and walk it to the sink.

“I insist on at least washing the dishes,” I state firmly.

“Letting my guest wash the dishes, what would my mother think?” Emile says with a chuckle. I kind of appreciate that he at least brushes my offer off instead of acting like it’s obvious I, the woman, should do the dishes. I do them anyway, of course, but I like the gesture.

“Alright!” I announce when I’m done. “Now we can go.”

It’s a short drive to the hardware store that’s only just opened. The owner, Harlan, greets Emile like a very old friend, and Emile is quick to introduce me.

“My new neighbor here got the short end of the stick last night. Well, tree.”

Harlan whistles. “The trees out here are pretty old, you gotta watch out when them storms roll through. It ain’t even hurricane season yet.”

“Hurricane season?” I ask quietly.

“Oh, you’re in for a treat when you get invited to your first hurricane party,” Emile says. My head starts swimming with thoughts of how, exactly, that will work. “But don’t worry, we’ll have that hole patched before the first category two starts forming in the Atlantic.”

I grab a shopping cart and follow Emile through the store as he grabs seemingly random items off the shelf and tosses them in. We stop now and then when old men in overalls come over to say hello and offer unsolicited advice on how to fix the roof.

It's all very overwhelming. There's an entire aisle dedicated to just nails. No screws or bolts, not even hammers, just nails!

"I had no idea there were so many kinds of nails," I say. Emile grabs a pack labeled roofing nails and tosses them in.

"Most people don't. You're very lucky to have me," Emile says.

"Yeah. I really am."

EMILE

I'm all too aware of my proximity to Clarissa as we walk out of the hardware store, trolley laden with supplies for the roof. She walks close to me — not so close that I can feel the warmth of her body, but close enough that I catch the faint scent of shampoo.

It's strangely intimate, but the moment that thought comes to mind, I have to shake it away.

"That's enough," I mutter under my breath.

"Huh?" Clarissa asks.

"Uh, that's enough shopping for one day," I say, trying to put on a convincing grin. "How about we get some lunch?"

Clarissa hesitates for a second, and I wonder if I've somehow given away the thought that crossed my mind just moments ago.

But Clarissa smiles shyly. "Yeah, sure."

I surreptitiously breathe a sigh of relief as we pack the supplies into my car.

"There's a great little burger place not far from here if you're up for that?" I ask, trying to be casual.

"Sounds good," Clarissa replies, smiling more broadly now.

It causes me to smile back. A warmth passes between us as we look into each other's eyes, and for a moment, I'm brought

back to those first two looks we shared as Clarissa jogged past my house.

I catch myself getting too drawn in again, though, and hurriedly climb into the car, determined not to make this awkward. Unfortunately, it's too late for that. There's a slight tension in the air that only grows as we drive to Wagon Wheel in strained silence.

I can't help wondering what exactly I'm doing here. More to the point, I can't help wondering why I thought offering Clarissa my spare room was a good idea. Of course, offering my bathroom was the neighborly thing to do, but I just had to take it one step further. It's not like Clarissa's bedroom has a hole in the ceiling, but you'd think it'd been ripped clean off the house the way I was offering beds left and right.

I risk a glance over at Clarissa as I drive, hoping she doesn't notice. Thankfully her head is turned away from me, looking out the window to the streets of Aura Creek. I try not to let my gaze linger, but it's tricky. And it makes me want to reach out to her — if not literally then at least figuratively.

“What do you think of the town so far?” I ask, trying to cut through the tension that still permeates the air.

Clarissa suddenly turns back to me and I catch her eye again. She smiles gently, apparently grateful for the question, and I only wish that's how she'd looked at me when I offered my room.

Instead, she'd looked immediately uncomfortable. *Of course, you idiot. What woman is going to stay in a strange man's spare bedroom?*

“It's cute,” she tells me, still smiling.

I try my best to concentrate on the road rather than Clarissa's gorgeous smile. It genuinely takes all of my willpower not to quip back something along the lines of, “So are you.” As stupid as it was to offer, part of me wishes she'd agreed to take the room in my place. I like Clarissa's company, even if she seems a little nervous around me. I don't blame her for being a little shy at my advances.

Advances? I suddenly think. I shouldn't be making any advances on anyone. I thought that lesson had been drummed into my skull already.

My thoughts suddenly turn to Marcel, and I just know he'll never let me live it down if he finds out I offered Clarissa a room. I can already hear him now.

You should have just invited her to stay in your bed and saved yourself a couple of steps.

I can see his I-told-you-so grin stretched across his face as he laughs at his own joke, and therefore, at me. He's joked about other women like that, and it never really bothered me, but something about talking about Clarissa like that rubs me the wrong way.

No, I decide. I won't be telling Marcel anything.

Instead, I turn back to Clarissa, determined to make this a normal conversation between two friendly neighbors and not, as Marcel would put it, between me and the girl I want to bed.

Because I don't. I don't. I can control myself and not ruin my relationship with my new neighbor. A neighbor I don't even have time to get romantic with, considering the trip I have planned. A neighbor I should know better than to get romantic with, considering I know how this story always ends.

"It's definitely got that small-town charm you said you were looking for," I say, hoping I haven't let the conversation lapse for so long that my response sounds forced. "And luckily, the burger place delivers the requisite amount of North Carolinian hospitality."

Clarissa grins at this. "Well, of all my travels, North Carolina never made it onto the list until now, so I look forward to finding out what that is."

"I'm still curious to hear about where else you've been," I tell her as we pull up to the restaurant and climb out of the car.

At this though, Clarissa clams up a little. "Oh you know, pretty much everywhere. It's probably easier to tell you where I haven't been than where I have been."

Am I pushing this conversation into territory that's too intimate for Clarissa? I wonder. But that seems silly.

“Well, where haven't you been then?” I ask, still wanting to learn more about this woman. In a neighborly way, of course.

“North Carolina,” she says with a playful grin.

Before I can answer, she steps into the burger place and I follow her, laughing.

I'm not sure if she's got a strange sense of humor, or if she's just very private, but either way, the glint of playfulness in her eyes makes me happy.

“Oh wow, you weren't kidding about the hospitality,” Clarissa says as I join her inside.

The place is truly one of Aura Creek's gems, with long oak countertops, an open flat-top grill, and red wagon wheels adorning the walls. Along the inner wall are a series of oak tables with booth seats made of old horse carts.

“And you ain't seen nothing yet,” I say, gesturing to one of the shaded booths.

The moment we sit down, a server comes to greet us. She's wearing a red-and-white checkered farm dress, in keeping with the decor, but something tells me she'd be wearing this anyway.

“Hey, y'all! Welcome to Wagon Wheel! How y'all doin' today?”

“Fine, thanks,” replies Clarissa, clearly bewildered.

“Well, good!” replies the server with genuine enthusiasm. “We're mighty glad to have you here. My name's April and I'll be takin' care of you. If y'all have any questions about the menu or need any recommendations, just holler. I'll be right back to take your order. And o' course, let me know if there's anythin' I can do to make your visit special.”

With one last toothy grin, she turns on her heel, leaving Clarissa and I to recover.

“I told you,” I say to a wide-eyed Clarissa.

“Well, if I knew North Carolina was going to be like this, I would have visited much sooner,” she says with a chuckle. “But you’re leaving soon, right?” she adds quickly.

“Yeah, for a little while,” I say, trying not to humor the little jump in my chest that happens when she asks me questions about myself. “This boat trip has been a dream for a long time and it’s finally on the horizon.”

Clarissa smiles, maybe a little sadly. “Nothing like following your dreams,” she says.

I’m about to ask what her dream is when April comes back.

“Alright y’all, ready to order?” she asks with another award-winning smile.

“Yeah, I’ll have the Vamp Burger. And by rare, I mean raw,” I remind her.

“Of course, honey,” she quips back. “You ain’t my first vampire.”

She gives me a little wink before turning to Clarissa.

“And I’ll try the Lone Star Burger,” she replies.

“Excellent choice!” April says, scribbling down our orders. “I’ll be right back with your burgers.”

Once she’s left, I turn back to Clarissa, but she’s already opening her mouth to speak.

“Thanks again for helping me with the bathroom,” she says. “I’d really be screwed without you.”

I feel my cheeks grow cool again and hope that Clarissa doesn’t pick up on the even lighter pallor that gives away my embarrassment.

“Of course,” I say. “Happy to help.”

“So tell me more about your boat,” she says.

As much as I want to learn more about her, I’m struck by her showing an interest in my passion. Not a lot of people

want to hear about cleats, rigging, chestnut paneling, and sail fabric, but Clarissa seems genuinely interested. Unlike my previous standoffish non-answer, I actually delve into the topic this time.

Clarissa follows along as best she can, asking questions along the way, and I realize it's one of the most stimulating conversations I've had in a long time. By the time we finish our lunch, I'm enjoying Clarissa's company more than ever.

"Let me get this," she says when the check comes.

"Oh, no, you don't need to do that," I say, reaching for the bill.

Clarissa reaches out and blocks my hand with hers, and the sudden warmth of her skin stops me in my tracks.

"I insist," she tells me. "You're doing so much to help me. The least I can do is buy you lunch."

Her hand is still on mine, and my brain suddenly short-circuits. "Absolutely not," I manage to get out. "I invited you out, remember? Them's the rules."

It's all I can do to pull myself together. I withdraw my hand and grab the check, instantly almost wishing I had an excuse to touch her again.

"Thanks, neighbor," she finally says.

I give a big grin, trying and failing to force some normalcy into what's just become a very tense moment. At least for me. "My pleasure."

At this, I have to excuse myself to the bathroom to splash water on my face before the cute neighbor thinks I'm a fucking weirdo.

CLARISSA

The last six days have flown by. And as I stand here gaping up at my fixed roof, almost none of which was any thanks to me, I feel a small twinge of belonging. Maybe even a little gratification. The corners of my mouth start to curl, and it's all I can do to keep my smile from turning into a full-on grin.

What kind of person spends consecutive days practically glued to a neighbor's roof? And a vampiric person, too? When I'd asked the good samaritan how he could stand to be in the sun, considering his, well, aversion to all things sunny, his response was amused rather than offended.

"That's not how it works in real life, just the movies," he'd explained when I finally mustered the courage to ask how exactly the whole sun thing worked. Wasn't working in the daytime the antithesis of a vampire's idea of a good time? He was pale and tended to wear a sunhat when working in his garden, but I kept the question to myself for fear of looking ignorant.

"Then how does it work?"

"Vampires are extremely sensitive to light, and can technically die of overexposure. But enterprising witches with a gift for potion-making capitalized on our..."

The way he'd licked his lips and scanned the horizon, searching for the perfect word as he re-shingled the damaged part of my roof, made me glad I was on the ladder. I think here

in the South, they'd call my sudden lack of balance something close to swooning.

"Complexity," he'd finally finished. *"A good sunscreen is only an enchantment away now."*

Even now as I continue cleaning up the bathroom from the last remnants of construction debris, I roll my eyes remembering my reaction.

"That should go on the label!"

"It does." When he'd thrown me the near-full bottle of lotion, my eyes bulged as I caught the thing in between my chin and shoulder. Smooth.

I catch a look at myself in my bathroom mirror now and notice I'm still smiling — and it barely has anything to do with the finished renovation.

"Just the renovator," I admit aloud, not at all excited at the prospect of allowing the feeling to flourish.

But what can I do when it comes to these things really? My only hope is that I've managed not to make a fool out of myself. Even the thought of Emile noticing me gawking makes me squirm. I have no idea if he's interested in me or just being friendly, and there's nothing I can do about it anyway. I'm undercover!

I finish up my chore and wonder if Marcel's help the last two days was planned or not. Given I couldn't do much more than grab tools and other necessities, it first seemed innocent enough that the other vampire stopped by. But once I noticed the coy looks Marcel was shooting between Emile and me, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd let someone else in on my little secret.

Inadvertently, of course, but still. I head for the kitchen and mull the possibility over as I peruse what's left of the vampire-related ingredients I had conveniently delivered to my house along with my own food items. The crimson shepherd's pie recipe I found on the internet was a hit with both supernaturals, who ate double servings of the mostly b-

negative vampiric version of the household dish for lunch one day.

I'd worried about the quality of the thick innards of the pie, which I learned is what supernatural-centric chefs in the know call fillings. But the random choice in blood type was a smash, especially paired with o-positive-laced carrots, peas, and potato bits glazed with honey and nutmeg.

I scratch the back of my neck and try to remember exactly what Emile had said about my third day of making breakfast for the two of us. Whipping up something to eat both first thing and mid-morning is the least I can do, even if it does take a little longer with my bum hand.

"This might be the best thing I've ever put in my mouth..."
I think he'd said about the breakfast crepes I made.

Even now, the b-positive strawberry preserve I'd generously filled each dessert with lingers on my tongue. Though I hadn't tasted the batch, the rich and earthy scent hit me as soon as I'd cracked the seal. Who knew there were so many vampiric substitutes? And ones that smelled pleasing to the average human?

"You guys aren't in a relationship."

My voice is harsh, but I think I need the reminder. I'm dangerously close to growing comfortable with this arrangement. Maybe not all of it, but at least parts, and most of those parts have to do with Emile. I could get used to cooking anything for a man like that, especially when the smell is so... not there.

I make a mental note to ask someone, maybe even Emile, if other enterprising witches have perhaps capitalized on a spell or two that cancels out the scent of blood.

He even likes your humor, though, I think. It's a poor excuse to throw caution to the wind and possibly blow my cover by getting too close. What if something slipped up during conversation? Something that happened to Shauna and not Clarissa?

A small part of me wonders if Marcel would be up for giving me more information about his friend in exchange for a crepe or two of his own. But how to broach the subject without looking certifiable? Or at the very least desperate.

Suddenly, a knock on my door draws me out of my reverie. My heart practically skips a beat as I blush, not at the sound but at the idea that it might be Emile.

“Just a minute!” I holler, running the sticky jar of preserve under the sink in an effort to clean the seal. I’m careful not to lick my fingers, not knowing how the taste will affect me.

Another collection of loud knocks hits my ears, and I freeze, letting the warm water run down my wrist. I know right away it can’t be Emile. His knock sounds different, more inviting and less stern.

“Okay! Okay!” I say the third time there’s a powerful rapping. “Don’t break the door down, it’s not even mine...” I mutter as I pad to the front door, suddenly wondering if that’s just what I need to get more time with Emile. I could break something else and find a new project.

“To what do I owe...” There’s no one on the other side when I finally swing the heavy door open. “Huh...”

I realize I’m holding my breath and need to make a decision. Am I slamming the door and calling Agent Todd? Or do I chalk this experience up to some kids playing their own version of ding-dong ditch?

I’m still gripping the doorknob and furiously staring out when Todd pops out from the side of the house.

“Gotcha!” he barks, then hits me with a few rounds of finger guns. “That was a test, and you failed.”

Rather than admonish the agent for punking me, which would only get me a long-winded explanation regarding the importance of ‘being on one’s toes,’ I heave a heavy sigh and head back to the kitchen. If Agent Todd wants to follow me through the door, he knows how to close it and lock up.

I’m gritting my teeth and trying not to throw something as Todd enters the kitchen. “Took you long enough to answer the

door.”

I spin around and shoot him what I hope is a stern glare. Using my busted hand for effect, I wave it wildly in his direction. “You don’t think I’ve been through enough now?”

“I—”

“I’m still speaking!” My tone shocks even me. Maybe I’m a little more angry about the prank he just pulled than I thought. “You’re a walking contradiction, you know that?”

He crosses his thick arms and stares down at me. I’m just about ready to put my finger on his chest, maybe even two at the same time.

“Am I supposed to hide out or blend in? Do you want me to answer the door or pretend I don’t exist? Which is it?”

Agent Todd’s smirk throws me off, but not as much as his collection of slow claps. Am I getting a standing ovation right now?

“You did it, kid.” His voice is equal parts pride and joy. “You got yourself a nice, shiny spine. That’s gonna help you, you know.”

“It doesn’t feel good,” I snap. “I’m doing everything you say and—”

“Really? You sure about that?” Agent Todd points above himself to the roof, and I feel the blood in my face drain as he gives me a knowing look. “We would have moved you. Fixing a roof is not your responsibility. You should have called me.”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Sure, ma’am. It’s got nothing to do with how smoking hot the neighbor is. You don’t think I noticed that smoke show, too? I may be straight, but I’m not blind. I know what a whole snack looks like, and he’s that way.” Marshall Todd now points in the direction of Emile’s house, which leaves me with no other choice but to roll my eyes.

“I’m allowed to—”

“Just ask yourself if exposing your cover is worth it, that’s all. It’s easy to pretend to be someone from afar. Up close, not so much.”

My mouth is moving, but no words are coming out. Emile is the furthest thing from a snitch. I can have a friendly conversation with him without letting my mask go. It’s not like he’s connected with the Holy Rollers and here trying to detect me in a lie. I share my thoughts with Marshall Todd.

“When I say exposing your cover, I mean slipping up and thinking you can tell the truth, let it all out and the person you’re getting to know will understand. In my experience, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.”

“What—”

“He’ll just want to know more and more about you, that’s all I’m saying. And eventually, you’ll run out of lies and tell him the truth.”

Agent Todd doesn’t stay long after that. And watching his black car pull away from the cottage, I can’t help but think he’s right about staying away from temptation.

EMILE

The maidenhair fern bobs happily in its pot as I make my way down my drive, turning right at the sidewalk. I've already spritzed the leaves and repotted them in a decorative ceramic pot picked up from the local artisanal market. It's a tasteful turquoise, a color that I know will match the tiles in Clarissa's bathroom.

I just hope she doesn't have anything against receiving a plant as a gift, especially after one so unceremoniously barged in through her roof.

"I got this for you," I practice under my breath, hoping the gift isn't too much.

I'm sure I'd give a new plant to any neighbor who just had their bathroom roof fall in. And also spent a week fixing that neighbor's roof. For free. It's like a housewarming gift, that's all. A bathroom-warming gift?

I try not to think too hard about it as I make my way toward Clarissa's house, the fern dancing along the whole way.

When I reach the porch, I take a deep breath, trying to soothe the nerves that are inexplicably rising now that I'm about to see Clarissa again. I'm just about to ring the doorbell when I hear a voice coming through the open window.

"I'm just worried about you," comes a male voice I don't recognize.

"I know, I know," I hear Clarissa say in return. "But I have to find a balance."

“Clarissa,” the man says, and I hear a hint of warning in his voice. “We’ve talked about this. It’s just not a good idea.”

There’s silence for a moment, and I wonder what it is I’m listening to. It’s obviously a serious conversation, and Clarissa’s face comes to mind, her eyebrows knitted together, her almond eyes downturned and troubled. The man’s identity, however, I can’t imagine. Who could he be? I thought Clarissa didn’t know anyone else in North Carolina.

The thought suddenly occurs to me, and I remember the man I dismissed once already as Clarissa’s boyfriend. The one who dropped her off the first day she got here. *Is it possible that Clarissa really does have a boyfriend she never brings up?*

It certainly sounds like an intimate conversation, and the man’s worried and then warning tone implies they know each other well. In fact, it sounds like this man knows details of Clarissa’s life that I clearly have no access to, and an involuntary sense of dread appears in my stomach.

“I’ll be fine,” Clarissa says now, and I hear the scrape of a chair against the wooden floorboards.

There’s another pause before the man speaks again. “Alright,” he says reluctantly. “I’ll see you in a few days, okay?”

Another chair scrapes against the floor, and two pairs of footsteps make their way out of the room. A second later, I hear them in the hallway. Before I know what to do, the front door is opening.

Behind it, I see Clarissa and the same huge man I saw emerging from this house a couple times before. It’s definitely the guy I thought. And here I am, just standing on the porch like a door-to-door fern salesman clutching his bestseller.

“Oh!” says Clarissa, clearly surprised to see me. “Hi, Emile.”

She glances swiftly between me and the big man, obviously a little embarrassed to have been caught like this. The dread in my stomach only amplifies as I realize my

intuition must have been right. This man is clearly involved with Clarissa and suddenly my bathroom fern seems entirely inappropriate and foolish.

I glance at the stranger, noticing just how huge he is. I'm not a small man, yet I can't help feeling like a little kid clutching a dirty weed in his hand.

"Hi. Sorry," I manage to mumble. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

I cast one last glance at the bear of a man, suddenly losing all desire to hand Clarissa my silly little gift. In fact, I'm about to turn around and bring the plant right back to my own house when Clarissa stops me.

"No, not at all," she says, preventing me from turning away. "You're not interrupting anything. My cousin was just leaving."

My brain short circuits for a second, trying to process the information I've just heard. Her cousin. It's her cousin.

The huge man suddenly steps forward, sticking his hand out.

"Marshall T-Taylor," he says with a huge grin.

"Hi, Marshall," I say, jolted back to life. I manage to maneuver the fern into my left hand and reach out to shake his. "I'm Emile. A pleasure to meet you."

Marshall grabs my hand in his enormous bear paw, squeezing so hard and pumping so vigorously that I'm sure my hand, if not my whole arm, is about to be lost. I just barely avoid dropping the fern entirely.

When he finally lets go, Clarissa speaks up again. "Marshall pops in from time to time," she says by way of explanation. "Now that I'm settled down, it's nice to have some family around."

"Oh, I thought you didn't have any family here," I say, trying to piece together the little I know about Clarissa.

"Oh, well, I didn't until now," Clarissa says quickly. "Marshall just moved over from –"

“Australia,” Marshall jumps in with an excited grin. “I’ve been living there for the last ten years, but the spiders got to be a little too much.”

The big man suddenly guffaws at this, as if it’s the funniest thing he’s heard in a long time. I can’t help but chuckle along with him, even if I don’t really get the joke.

“Crazy country. I don’t know how I even survived and came back to tell the tale. Did you know Australia is home to eight of the ten most venomous snakes in the world?” Marshall says once he’s recovered from his joke.

He suddenly appears incredibly serious, and I look to Clarissa for a cue on how to respond. Unfortunately, she’s busy staring directly at her shoes.

“Oh, I didn’t know that, no,” I reply with sincerity. “That must have been... challenging?”

I’m still not really sure what this conversation is, but I don’t want to be rude. He’s polite enough, just a bit disorienting. Besides, he’s Clarissa’s family. I should be nice.

“Oh, yeah, mate,” he says, slipping inexplicably into a bad Australian accent. “I once came upon a death adder in the wild,” he says, broadening his vowels in a way that makes my head hurt. “Nearly bit my leg clean off!”

“Well, Marshall,” jumps in Clarissa. “It was really nice to see you.”

“Oh, okay,” Marshall replies, evidently a little disappointed at being interrupted. I get the feeling he’s even more disappointed neither of us complimented his Australian accent.

Luckily though, he relents as Clarissa gently ushers him to the porch stairs and the big man slowly gets the message.

“Well, nice to meet you, Emile!” he says, back in his American accent.

I silently breathe a sigh of relief. “You, too!” I call to him, waving.

Once he seems to be on his way, Clarissa turns back to me with a sigh.

“Sorry about that,” she says, clearly embarrassed. “He’s well-meaning but he can be a bit much.”

“No problem,” I say. “He’s an interesting character.”

“That’s for sure,” Clarissa replies, looking after Marshall as he climbs in his car and drives off.

“Well, we can’t choose our family, right?” I say with a slight grin.

Clarissa laughs a little at this, but all I can think about is the wave of relief that washed over me the moment Clarissa said the word ‘cousin.’ Was I really so worried that she might have a boyfriend?

Apparently. Even though I’ve spent more than a week now convincing myself not to be. Guess I’m not doing that good of a job of it.

I realize then that Clarissa is looking at me, and that I’m still clutching a giant maidenhair fern that I’ve yet to explain.

“Oh, I got you this,” I say, with the practiced casualness of a friendly neighbor. “For your bathroom.”

I smile, hoping again the gift will be well-received. To my relief, Clarissa’s eyes light up.

“Oh wow, thank you,” she says, gazing lovingly at the fern. “I love maidenhair ferns. They’re my favorites, actually.”

Her eyes rise to meet mine and she smiles again. It’s clear she’s genuinely touched by the gift and it makes something in my heart swell.

“I’m so glad,” I reply, handing her the plant. “Mine, too.”

For a moment we stare at each other, and I can’t help but hope she’ll invite me inside. I know I’ve been here almost every day this week, but somehow I find myself wanting to spend even more time with Clarissa.

I imagine us setting up the fern in her newly renovated bathroom, choosing a spot together. Or maybe I’d just stand

back and watch her choose the spot herself, insisting she'll know the right place. Yes, that sounds better.

When she doesn't say anything more, though, that fantasy quickly dissipates. Instead, the tension suddenly rising between us weighs heavily on me.

"Well, that's all," I say, tearing my eyes away from Clarissa's piercing gaze. "I'll leave you to it."

With a perfunctory smile and a nod, I leave Clarissa clutching the fern and head down the porch.

"Thanks!" she calls unsteadily after me, and I wave briefly over my shoulder without really looking back. I don't want her to see that I was hoping for more, especially since I haven't even decided if I *should* be hoping for more.

Still, as I walk away I can't help but feel a little buoyed that Clarissa wasn't cavorting with a lover. That overheard conversation really got under my skin for a little while there. Even if that's not a thought that should have any room in a purely platonic relationship between two neighbors.

I shake my head, casting a quick glance back at Clarissa's porch just before it passes out of view. All I see is the flash of her slender back disappearing back into the house.

I decide I'll just have to ask her where she put the fern the next time I see her since I can't be there myself.

CLARISSA

The maidenhair fern stares at me from the bathroom's windowsill, rippling softly in the breeze. I take care to spritz its leaves, touching the foliage gently and smiling.

But the moment passes quickly as I recall yesterday's awkward encounter on the porch. My smile dissipates and instead, I let out a low groan, setting down the spray bottle beside the plant.

"Do you want to come inside?" I mutter to myself. It would have been so easy.

But Marshall Todd's warning obviously got inside my head. Not to mention his massacred Australian accent.

I run over the disastrous meeting over and over again in my mind. The shocked look that must have come over my face when I opened the door to find Emile standing outside. The panicked lie that tumbled out of my lips when I introduced Marshall Todd as my cousin. And, of course, the Marshall's terribly unconvincing backstory that was far too detailed and lasted far too long.

Could Emile have suspected something? I wonder, peering down at the plant again.

The plant.

He came over to offer me a thoughtful gift, and I as good as froze him out. I shake my head, running a hand through my hair and down the back of my neck.

Maybe I should invite him over now to make up for it. I walk out of the bathroom to peer toward his house through the living room window. I can't see much through the scrub that grows along the property line, but I'm sure he's there. I wonder if he's tinkering away on his boat this morning. But something itches at the back of my mind. Something I don't quite want to touch but find hard to ignore.

Emile didn't show any obvious signs of suspicion yesterday, but the Marshall's uncalled-for amateur theater performance yesterday is just the kind of thing that could land me in hot water. If Emile so much as suspects I'm lying about my so-called cousin, then he might start to question my whole backstory, and that could unravel everything.

I've already had to give up so much to be here — my career, my wellbeing, my whole life, in fact. I don't want that to all come undone just because I've got the hots for the neighbor.

But I also can't think of much worse than living an empty and solitary existence either. I want to make friends, and Emile is by far the closest thing I have to that right now. I don't know if I want to push him away. Is my life worth saving if I'm not allowed to live it?

There's something else though. Even if Emile doesn't dig any deeper into my past, there's always the chance my past could come and find him. Right now, I'm the one in danger of being targeted by the Holy Rollers, but as long as I'm alone and isolated, I'm the only target. That all changes the moment I get close to someone. If I pursue a friendship with Emile, I might be putting *him* in danger by extension.

I'm torn, and the stress of it starts to make me antsy. Without thinking, I change into my jogging clothes, hoping to burn off some of this nervous energy.

Of course, that means jogging right past Emile's house though. Part of me hopes he's not home, but the other part...

I pay attention to my feet hitting the pavement as I jog down my driveway and turn onto the sidewalk. For a moment

it occurs to me that I could just jog past, even if he is there. Maybe just a nod and a wave and I'll go on my way.

But the moment I cross the threshold between my house and his, I know that's not going to happen. First of all, it would be completely rude of me, especially after everything Emile has done. Secondly, he's working in the garden shirtless.

Under the shade of an elm tree, Emile is working in his garden, bent over with a look of concentration plastered on his face. I slow my jog, and I can't tell if it's because I want to put off the inevitably awkward conversation or because I'm enjoying the view. Unlike a human, who would be covered in sweat right now, Emile's skin appears dry, smooth, and soft to the touch. With his dark hair, pale skin, and fine features he looks like a marble statue, every rippling muscle expertly chiseled into cool white stone.

He looks way too good, and my mind flashes back to the night he offered me a room, wondering if this is the view I would have been greeted with in the morning. Perhaps a glimpse of Emile stepping out of the shower, getting ready for work. Maybe a flash of his muscles flexing as he pulled on a shirt...

I realize I'm well and truly staring now, almost at a standstill at the edge of Emile's property. I know if he looks up he'll find his next-door neighbor straight-up ogling him. Not cool.

I know I can't stall any longer, and as I approach the yard, Emile looks up, thankfully while I'm looking relatively normal.

He greets me with a broad smile, and I can't help but return the gesture.

"Hey," I say, not really knowing where to go from here, especially as the entirely inappropriate fantasy still lingers in my head.

Luckily if Emile is feeling awkward about yesterday, he doesn't show it.

“Hey,” he says, getting up from where he was crouching over the sail and walking toward me. “How’s the fern doing?”

Of all the questions he could have asked concerning yesterday’s interaction, I can’t believe he’s chosen literally the only one I’m capable of answering. I wish I could show him how grateful I am for that, but that would ruin the whole thing. Instead, I just smile widely and answer.

“She’s doing great!” I tell him with genuine enthusiasm. “She really spruces up the bathroom, thank you.”

“She?” Emile asks with an amused smile. “Are you in the habit of anthropomorphizing inanimate objects?”

“Only living ones, I guess,” I answer, trying not to think too hard about the leaf-hands and branch-elbows that terrorized me just one short week ago. “Like that ash tree that crashed through my roof. He was a real bastard.”

Emile laughs heartily at this, and I realize how lovely his laugh is. It comes from deep within him, and it makes me want to tell more jokes just to be able to hear it again.

“So, does the plant have a name, too?” he asks, still smiling.

I wrack my brain trying to think of something funny.

“I was thinking Fernanda,” I tell him, hoping that’s enough to elicit another laugh.

To my delight, it works, and Emile lets out another lovely chuckle.

“It’s perfect,” he says. “Where did you end up placing her?”

I can tell he actually cares, that he’s not just making small talk, and it’s oddly moving. After having to hide and lie and pretend for the last few weeks, it’s actually incredibly significant to have a real conversation, even if it’s about something as small as this. Just the fact that I don’t have to lie about it feels meaningful to me.

“On the windowsill,” I tell him, gesturing back toward the house, even though there’s no way we can see the fern from

here. “The glass is frosted so it shouldn’t let in too much light.”

Somehow, it’s very important to me that Emile knows I intend to take very good care of Fernanda.

“Sounds like you know what you’re doing,” he replies with a grin that warms my heart.

“And how’s the build going?” I ask, gesturing to the sail.

All the resolve I held earlier today about not maintaining a connection with Emile has dissipated, replaced with the joy of conversing with him like this. I truly expected it to be strained, but the words are flowing so quickly and easily. I hardly even feel like I’m lying to him. I guess because, right now, I’m not.

“It’s going well! I’ve actually got two guys down at the dock helping me catch up now,” Emile replies, and I see his eyes light up as he says it. “You remember I told you about the jib and genoa?”

I nod, trying to remember what he told me in the burger joint that day. Mostly I remember being relieved I could get him to talk about himself so I could avoid having to lie to him, but some of the sailing jargon leaked through.

“Those were for the sails for the front of the boat?” I ask, hoping I’ve guessed right.

“Exactly!” Emile replies, clearly overjoyed that I managed to retain something. “They’re just laying them out now, checking that all the stitching is right before I start rigging.”

He looks overjoyed, and I get the feeling he’s waiting for me to say something. When I don’t, he jumps in.

“That means the boat will be ready to sail,” he says, as a hint.

“Oh! That’s huge!” I say, finally cottoning on. “Congratulations!”

“Thanks!” he replies, beaming like he didn’t have to practically feed me the line. “By the time you get back from your jog, it should be close to done!” he says, checking his

cell. I wonder if the time spent working on the roof is what inspired him to get the help.

“My jog? Oh, right!” I’d almost forgotten I was supposed to be going on a jog. I tell myself that I definitely didn’t come out here just to talk to Emile.

I chuckle awkwardly, feeling a natural end to the conversation. “Well then, I don’t want to keep you! You’ve got stuff to do!”

Emile grins again before clapping me gently on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Clarissa,” he says. “Enjoy your jog!”

He turns to head back inside, and I have to muster an inordinate amount of energy to jog off down the street instead of standing there savoring the chill of his hand on my exposed shoulder.

CLARISSA

“So let me get this straight.” Marcel’s voice sounds casual over the phone, but I know he’s really dying to get me talking. “You brought a plant over to someone’s house you see every day, nearly have a meltdown when you overhear a conversation you think is between two lovers, then –”

“I wouldn’t call it a meltdown.” I leap from my chair, suddenly feeling the urge to pace. Lovesick puppies have meltdowns. Grown men have reactions and perfectly normal ones.

“Didn’t you say you froze?” I don’t like where this line of questioning is going. If Marcel weren’t in love with big projects and working on them by hand, he’d have been a lawyer.

Probably a really good one. I suck a breath in through my teeth and keep the thought to myself. He doesn’t need any more compliments on his observational skills. Or his brutal habit of questioning innocent friends.

“I didn’t want them to hear me,” I reply. My tone is all business, just like the plant fiasco. Wait, not fiasco. Odd encounter.

“Hello? Are you there?” Marcel sounds like he’s smiling.

“I’m not stuttering, am I?” I catch a glance of my nearly translucent reflection in one of my bay windows. Though my vampire face is hard to see, my shirt is prominent in the glass

and my arm points out, as if I need to gesture wildly to make the point that yes, yes I am still here.

“Then what did I say?”

“You said, and I quote, ‘Didn’t you say you froze?’” It’s my turn to smile. Marcel likes winning arguments just because, but this time, I’m putting my foot down.

“After that. What did I say after that?”

He said something after that?

My silence speaks volumes. I hear him chuckle into the receiver.

“Go put on some cologne and a clean shirt, get some flowers, and tell her how you feel. Maybe over dinner or some sex. It’s not rocket science.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I decide to play dumb instead. “There’s no way you said all that and I didn’t hear you.”

“Emile, listen to me. Clarissa just might be your mermaid. Do you want to risk losing out on her because the timing isn’t right?”

“It’s not the timing.” The words come out before I can help myself. I wince as he whistles into the phone.

“That’s not a denial,” Marcel says as if I need to be told what I just did.

“It’s also not the end of my sentence so shut up and listen to me.” My voice sounds steady and strong like I meant it to. Suddenly, I’m over the moon that Marcel isn’t here and can’t see my open mouth and wide eyes.

It’s not denial, is it? My nails sink into my palm as I squeeze the thought away. I still have Marcel to convince.

“It’s the fact we’re just friends. We’re neighbors who like spending time with each other. You’re –”

“So she’s not attractive?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t not say it, either. That’s my point. You’re normally pretty open when it’s a no. You’ve met plenty of girls, and you have no problem asking them out. Or dumping them. Or just rejecting them. This is a different Emile,” Marcel says.

I chew my lower lip, careful not to accidentally retract my fangs. It hasn’t happened in years and I’d like to keep it that way. The way he says I go around so casually rejecting girls makes me sound rather heartless, I think.

“This Emile is doing a lot of thinking instead of acting. I’m worried he’s thinking too much for his own good,” Marcel finishes.

I don’t know what to say other than something vague. “You’re entitled to your opinion.”

“And you’re entitled to having a good time with someone you obviously enjoy being around. It’s not rocket science.”

“You said that already.” It feels good to point something out to him rather than the other way around. I can’t wait for the chance to tease him about a crush.

Crush? So you’re admitting you have one? I switch from biting my lips to pacing. Maybe I should reseal some of the tiles in the bathroom to get this nervous energy in me out. So what if I have a crush?

It’s none of Marcel’s business how I feel. Or Clarissa’s, honestly. Crushes are nothing. Crushes are fading fancies, nothing to worry about. Crushes lead to girlfriends lead to exes, when the passing attraction fades and there’s nothing left holding it together.

“Yeah, but you never said anything to it.” I hear Marcel and snap out of my thoughts. “That was a test to see if you were paying attention. You can be good at that when you’re not worrying.”

“Let’s end this conversation on a high note,” I offer, sensing an opportunity to get out of this interrogation with my dignity intact. We’re not in high school. I don’t need advice on

how to deal with my emotions – if a crush is even what this is at the end of the day.

“End it by agreeing to my marvelous idea. I’ve been thinking about it all day.” Marcel actually sounds serious.

I narrow my eyes at the ground since he’s not here to receive the look meant for him. It does nothing to keep me from stiffening in preparation for his next words. What is he about to suggest? I’ve already made myself way too available. What else is a decent neighbor supposed to do? Clarissa would do the same for me – for anyone – I’m sure.

Are you sure? You don’t even know anything deep about her and you’re making assumptions. Remember what happens when you do that?

I roll my eyes more at myself than Marcel. “I’m hanging up now.” And I actually do. Not three minutes later, he texts me.

So you hung up on me. Okay. Everyone gets one. You just spent it. I smirk as the text bubbles continue under the message. *But you also told me how you really feel. Invite her sailing. You need to check the rig out anyway. Don’t make me fire you.*

“You can’t fire me,” I sneer into my phone like some teenager out past curfew.

Ditto, I reply, then slide my phone to Do Not Disturb mode. I don’t want to read whatever he has to say next, even though he has more than one good point. I shoot Clarissa a text, hoping it’s not too late and I won’t be waking her.

How do you feel about sailing? I write, then send it before qualifying the statement at all. *I need a co-captain to test out the old girl...* I wince and erase my ‘old girl.’ I stop when I see the text bubbles.

I feel like it’s a good place to get a sunburn, she sends back. I frown. Is that a no? *I mean suntan, sorry.* I smirk at the second text and send a thumbs-up. I tell her to bring a windbreaker just in case, then wonder if she has one. She

didn't come to Aura Creek with much, which leaves me thinking I should bring an extra just in case.

The next morning, I pack three windbreakers and pick up a slew of snacks. The help I hired to get me caught up has worked through the night, and the boat is looking near-perfect because of it.

Rinsing off the deck and seats is my first goal, and I make an effort to spray off all the bits and pieces trekked in from my shoes. I wouldn't call myself a clean freak, but I do like it when something shines.

A seagull caws overhead just as the cell in my pocket vibrates. I hope it's not Clarissa calling to cancel. The thought fills me with apprehension even before I manage to pull up my messages.

I see two missed calls from Marcel and heave a deep sigh. I sense a text coming soon, something spicy but at the same time PG-13. Marcel likes to leave a lot to the imagination when it comes to his particular line of questions.

After a moment or two without a text, I put the nuisance back in my pocket and carry in the new life vests I've ordered. Plus the emergency raft I hope I'll never have to use. I go over in my head all the questions Clarissa might have about sailing, which I hope she'll want to learn.

I tried sailing with Lauren once, but all she wanted to do was drink and look at the water. Every time I tried to explain how the boat worked, she just sighed and told me I was the man. Couldn't I handle the technical stuff?

"Okay seriously now," I say to the sky as my phone buzzes and sings once more. I grab it and know it's Marcel, answering it without reading the caller ID. "You're asking to get blocked right now. You know that, don't you?"

"You're just upset because you haven't heard my newest idea," Marcel replies. I roll my eyes and shake my head, willing him to read between the lines of my silence. "It's a surefire way to help you ease into a relationship with your mermaid, and it only takes a little bit of lying."

“That’s too much lying already,” I tell him.

“A little bit of fudging the truth, just to see if she likes you back.” I pause and think about the question. Do I want her to like me back? “You know, just when you’re ready to admit you like –”

“I invited her to go sailing already. You can stop prying. You’re right. I need to test this out.”

“And her.” Marcel chuckles. “Make up a potential lover and tell her about it. Just something casual, light to see if she has the same reaction as you did to her cousin.”

I wince. Why did I tell him that last night? I know better by now.

“That sounds like being manipulative.” I remove my hand from my hip before anyone in the marina can see.

“Yeah, for like five seconds. You know you want to ask her about her love life.”

“We’re neighbors,” I explain for what feels like the tenth time. “Neighbors sail with each other. It’s the nice and safe thing to do.”

“Just don’t forget about the romance.” It’s like Marcel hasn’t heard a word I’ve said.

“That’s it. I’m forgetting this number. Goodbye.” I hang up on him because I can. It doesn’t do much to soothe me. It’s one thing if Marcel thinks I have feelings for Clarissa. It’s something totally different if I think it, too.

You do things with friends all the time, I remind myself, not sure if I believe what I’m saying.

CLARISSA

The smell of baking dough mixes with roasted chicken breast, sauteed mushrooms and onions, and a bubbling sauce of stock and cream. It's heavenly. Even the thyme and rosemary are easily picked out in the aromas wafting through my kitchen.

It's been too long since I made a recipe that took hours to complete. But I know when that time goes off in ten minutes, it'll all be worth it. And now with my hand healed and the cast finally off, I can cook properly.

The process itself is always soothing. Kneading the dough, dicing the ingredients, even measuring spices feels like a meditation on life and how we sustain it.

It's the biggest reason why I became a baker. I love every bit of the work involved. Even cleaning the dishes afterward is calming. The other reason I became a baker is that I love good food. I never have to worry about where I'm going to get a perfect pistachio croissant if I can just make some myself, after all.

Being away from my work for this long has been stressful. Honestly, if I could just bake all day, this transition may have been easier to handle. Alas, I have to learn how to handle home maintenance instead. This little break I've planned for myself has been vital for my mental health.

Some girls take bubble baths for self-care. Others get massages and skin treatments. I make chicken pot pie.

The timer goes off, and I grab my oven mitts. Opening the oven door, my face is hit with an incredible aromatic steam that makes my mouth begin to water. The crust is golden and flaky, thanks in part to the egg wash I spread on top. Even the little leaf cutouts I made from leftover dough look delicious.

I set the pie aside for a few minutes to let the contents cool and settle. Nothing good ever comes from putting a spoonful of boiling hot gravy in one's mouth. I help myself to some iced sweet tea while I wait and idly stare out the window. We don't sail until later this afternoon, but I'm still trying to find ways to see him.

Emile seems to be home right now. He isn't working in his garden at the moment, so I can't ogle him while he flexes his muscles and works up a sweat under his almost too-tight T-shirts. Pity.

I briefly consider bringing him a slice of the pie. Do vampires like pot pie? It has meat in it, but I guess no blood. Would it be rude to offer him food without blood? Can he even eat it? There's so much I don't know. Maybe I can use the pot pie as an excuse to learn more about vampires. More about Emile.

I grab two bowls and slice the cooled pie into eight equal pieces. I carefully scoop a portion into each bowl and top them with fresh chopped parsley, then drizzle a basil-infused b-negative gravy onto his. If I weren't in a complete social media blackout, I would be tempted to take perfectly lit photos of the dish and post them with a dozen relevant hashtags. Instead, I take another sip of my iced tea and consider my options.

I smile, thinking about enjoying a slow, lazy meal in Emile's kitchen. Something about the image feels so wholesome and right. I want to linger in that fantasy for a while, let myself get carried away to another reality where he and I are able to be together, completely honest and no holds barred.

Unfortunately, the sound of the front door opening and footsteps on the floor wrench me out of that fantasy and back

into a world where rude government agents help themselves into your home whenever they want.

“Really?” I ask, walking to the entranceway. Todd looks pissed, as always, and frankly, I’m starting to take his criticism less and less seriously.

“What would you do if I were a hitman, huh? Shoot me with a glass of soda?” Todd asks. “You’d be dead before that cup hit the floor.”

“Isn’t it your job to make sure the hitman doesn’t even get to this point?” I roll my eyes and stomp back to the kitchen. So much for softly lit fantasies of domesticity. Nope, I have a U.S. Marshal to babysit.

“Just because you have me doesn’t mean you can get sloppy. You have to maintain vigilance, understand?” Todd asks while following me into the kitchen. “Huh, smells like you took my advice and learned how to cook.”

“I already knew how to cook! That’s why I’m in this mess, remember? I’m a baker!” I cry.

“Baking and cooking are two different things. They’re like the two sides of a successful agent. Baking takes know-how and hard compliance to the rules, but cooking requires instinct and an ability to think on your feet.”

My mouth drops open. I shake my head in disbelief. “That has to be the most correct and insightful thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

“Yeah? Heard it from a senior officer in training. Thought it sounded really smart, so I memorized it.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Of course, he didn’t come up with that himself. “Well, anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure of your unscheduled visit?”

Todd takes off his sunglasses and looks at me with one eyebrow raised. “Well, this was supposed to be a random wellness check. But by the looks of things, it’s about to become yet another lecture on common sense. Two bowls, ma’am? Are you expecting company?”

My face flushes. I silently curse my little excursion into fantasy land, now that it has brought me to this. “Actually, I always make two servings of anything I cook just in case you drop by unannounced.”

Todd chuckles. “You’re still bad at lying. Getting better, but still bad. Keep working on it. So who is this for? The guy next door? The one I keep telling you to stop hanging all over?”

“I’m not! No, I... I was thinking about bringing him a bowl. As thanks for fixing my roof. But I wasn’t sure.” I shrug my shoulders. The truth hurts. I like Emile, in fact, I like him a whole lot! But I’m unsure what he thinks of me. And having to constantly tiptoe around the truth of who I am and what I’m doing here doesn’t make open honesty all that easy.

“Let me make that decision easier for you,” Todd says. He grabs one of the bowls, sits down, and starts to eat. “I’ll take some of that soda, too.”

I sigh in resignation. “It’s sweet tea.”

“Even better.”

I walk to the cupboard, grab a clean glass, fill it with ice, and pour some sweet tea over it. Todd accepts the drink and continues to make himself at home, digging into my hard work.

“Gotta hand it to you, you make a mean pot pie. Not as good as my mom’s, of course, but still good.”

“Oh? How does your mom make it?” I ask, trying to make some kind of pleasant small talk.

“She unwraps the container and sticks it in the microwave. Hey, is that oregano I taste?”

I shake my head. “Parsley. Or thyme. Your palate sucks, there’s nothing even close to oregano in this. Also, I hope you like blood.” I finally take a bite of my own cooking, and the tension of my uninvited guest simply melts away. I needed this. Really and truly needed this.

“So, about that lecture I owe you,” Todd starts, taking another bite while staring me down. I just more or less admitted things, and he knows it.

I sigh. There goes my moment of zen. “Save it. I know what you’re going to say already. You’ve said it a hundred times already.”

“Here’s a hundred and one. Your life’s in danger. Until everyone in the crime ring is behind bars, your life will continue to be in danger. You need to act like that and distance yourself from others. When the day comes that every single person involved is accounted for, then you can go on running around town with your identifiable features on full display.”

I drop my fork in my bowl and sigh. “Todd, you’re asking me to put my entire life on hold for years. Maybe even a decade! With how long the justice system takes, not to mention all those loopholes and lawyers, I might have to stay hidden forever!”

“What would you prefer? Your life on hold, or your life being over for good?” Todd asks. His face goes deathly serious. I hate when he looks like that. “I know this sucks. Hell, I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. Much less some poor girl just doing her job who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But this is your reality now. You need to stay focused.”

I pick at my meal, having lost my appetite. Emile’s invitation rings through my head. I wanted so badly to get on that boat with him. But maybe... maybe Todd is right. Maybe going into the open water, completely vulnerable, where it’s super easy to dump a body isn’t in my best interest.

“Alright, I’ll be more careful.”

Todd shakes his head. “No, you probably won’t. But I’ll still nag you about it regardless. That’s my job, after all.” He finishes his pie and chugs the rest of the iced tea. “Well, other than that, is there anything you need from me?”

I shake my head, feeling really heavy with guilt. How can I cancel on Emile like that? I’d look like the rudest neighbor

ever.

Todd shows himself out, and I dutifully lock up behind him. But then, I see Emile back outside again. He's going over his boat, probably for the fifth or sixth time today, looking for any holes or mistakes in workmanship.

He looks up and smiles as he waves at me. I smile and wave back. I can't say no to him. Maybe I'll still go. I'll just... be careful. Yeah, I'll just be really careful. What else could Todd possibly want from me?

It'll be fine.

EMILE

My face feels like it's about to split in two — that's how wide I'm smiling. It's the wind in my hair, the spray of seawater, the blue skies overhead, and the boat. And Clarissa.

And Clarissa.

“This is incredible!” she whoops into the wind, her suntanned arms grasping the mast tightly. It feels like a day of celebration – her cast is off, I have my boat. All is right in our world.

The boat slices cleanly through the water, barely registering the rolling current that smacks against the hull. It's everything I could possibly have hoped for and the fact that Clarissa is here to share the maiden voyage with me only makes this even more exciting.

I laugh my happiness into the salty sea air, amazed by how beautiful this moment is. The sails whip in the wind like wings that spell out my freedom. The sea air is crisp, light, and refreshing. And Clarissa is smiling just as widely as I am.

“I can't believe you built this with your own two hands,” Clarissa tells me, inching closer to me.

“Not all the way. Still a collective project,” I explain, relishing the compliment quietly to myself.

The sudden proximity thrills me and only heightens the elation I'm feeling at being here on my boat with Clarissa by my side. I feel like both have been a long time in the making.

“I almost can’t believe it’s done,” I add, reefing the sail a little to slow the boat down.

The whipping wind eases somewhat and a new excitement replaces the adrenaline that coursed through me when we were sailing at full speed. I don’t feel like testing the engine, knowing the mechanics I hired to construct the thing tested it as soon as it was put in.

Not to mention the fact I can’t help but be painfully aware of Clarissa next to me, her olive skin no doubt warm to the touch — even warmer than usual with the glow of the sun on it.

I can’t help but stare at her, and I don’t even try to hide it because I’m finally able to admit what I’ve been resisting for so long. And not just to myself or Marcel.

“Clarissa,” I say, the adrenaline suddenly coursing through me again, even though we’ve slowed down to a gentle pace now.

Clarissa looks at me, still grinning widely, but the moment she catches my eye she can tell there’s something different about this conversation. Her smile softens into one of thoughtful expectation and she gazes right back, her eyes unflinching as if she knows what’s coming, or perhaps hopes she knows what’s coming. The silence between us right now is filled only with the gentle lapping of the waves on the boat’s hull and the occasional seagull.

I don’t know exactly what I’m going to say until the words are coming out of my mouth but when they do, they feel exactly right.

“I’m really glad you’re here. I’ve worked on this boat for such a long time. I thought when I took it out for the first time, it would be alone. But I realize now I’d much rather be here with you. Because I really like you,” I say, almost surprised at my ability to suddenly speak so plainly about something I’ve taken great pains to avoid for so long.

Clarissa doesn’t respond — at least not with words. But I see her pupils dilate ever so slightly, her face softening. Her

lips are parting now.

And at that point, I can't help it. Gently, so as to give her the chance to stop me, I lean forward, closing the gap between us. She doesn't pull back, doesn't raise a hand to my chest to stop my approach.

Instead, she leans forward a little too. When her mouth meets mine, my whole body erupts into bliss. I didn't think I wanted to open up like this to anyone. Sometimes I doubted I was even capable of it. But in this simple act of kissing Clarissa, I've handed her my heart, and it doesn't bother me at all.

The softness of her lips on mine, the warmth of her tongue, the fact that she must feel what I feel if she's kissing me like this. It's like a balm to my soul. It just feels right in a way that I'm not sure anything else in my life ever has.

I can feel Clarissa's hands gripping my waist, while my fingers grasp the nape of her neck and the small of her back. It feels like forever that we're locked in this embrace, finally giving physicality to the fire that's been burning between us since the moment we first laid eyes on each other.

The soft lapping of the waves beats a steady rhythm that our bodies seem to follow — insistent but not rushed — as though just allowing ourselves to savor this kiss is enough.

“Hey!”

The sound of the waves is suddenly broken by a shout. Then another, and another.

“Hey! Help!”

“Help us!”

Clarissa and I break away from each other in bewilderment. It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the light and when I do, I see Clarissa has already jumped up and is pointing toward the horizon.

“Emile! Look!”

I peer over her shoulder to see a small rowboat bobbing helplessly on the waves, and when I look closer, I understand

what the yelling is all about. A group of kids, maybe four or five, are waving their arms, still shouting at us for help. As far as I can see, they've lost their oars. I immediately jump up to adjust the sails.

Thankfully, the wind is working in our favor, and within a minute, we're coming up beside them and dropping anchor.

"Catch the rope!" I call to them before hurling a coil of rope toward them, the other end of which is fastened tightly to one of my painstakingly mounted cleats.

A bevy of little hands reaches out, and the kids manage to catch the rope on the first try.

"Hold on tight!" I tell them.

Clarissa and I gently draw the rowboat towards us, and luckily, the waves are gentle enough that the rescue effort is without incident. Once the rowboat is secured to our sailboat, we help the kids aboard one by one.

"I'm sorry, we dropped our oars," the oldest tells us, a boy no more than thirteen years old. "We didn't mean to."

He's obviously on the verge of crying, and my heart sinks when I realize how terrified these kids must have been, floating out to sea.

"It's okay, you didn't do anything wrong, and you're all safe now," Clarissa tells him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You were all so brave."

I'm touched to see her gentleness with the five children, settling them below deck before coming back to help me with the rowboat. We fasten it more securely before turning the sailboat back around and heading toward the marina.

"Some first date, huh?" Clarissa says with a grin as the harbor grows bigger and bigger.

"Any complaints?" I ask.

It's a joke, but part of me is afraid that this unexpected interruption has put a dampener on the passion that flowed between us so easily before.

“Not at all,” she replies before kissing me gently again.

It’s all I can do not to run the boat right into the jetty. When we finally do pull up with the rowboat in tow, a group of adults comes running towards us. We’ve hardly docked before they start yelling names at the tops of their lungs.

“Jenny! Harriet!” yells one man, clearly frantic.

“Jason!” cries a woman, with the other names getting lost in the fray.

Clarissa gets the idea and brings the kids out from where they are below deck. The two of us help the kids off the boat and into the waiting arms of their clearly distraught parents.

Each of the parents holds their children close, as if they were afraid they’d never see them again which, given the circumstances, is probably true.

“Oh my God, thank you so much,” one mother says, turning to us with tears in her eyes.

The other parents follow suit, each one obviously grateful to us for bringing their children back safely.

“Our pleasure,” I say softly, still touched that Clarissa and I were able to share such a special experience together.

There are plenty of hugs and handshakes for us, and of course, many more tears and kisses for the children, who the parents refuse to let go of now that they have them back from the grips of the sea.

“What would you like us to do with the rowboat?” Clarissa asks once things have finally settled down a little.

“Oh, Randy, could you help this couple haul it out?” the tearful mother asks. “I’m sorry,” she says, turning back to us. “I don’t know your names.”

“I’m Clarissa and this is Emile,” Clarissa says without skipping a beat.

I hardly get to process what I just heard because Randy steps forward and helps us take care of the rowboat, but in the back of my mind, I realize my usual instinct to correct the

woman for calling us a couple isn't there. Usually, I'm the type who can date a woman for weeks and still nitpick whether that makes us a couple or not.

It's a thought that brings with it a small warmth in my chest and that warmth only grows the more I think about it.

"Again, thank you so much," Randy tells us, once the rowboat has been hauled onto dry land. "I know it's paltry in comparison to what you've done for us, and for our kids, but is there anything we can do to repay you?"

"Of course not," I say, waving away the suggestion. "Anyone would have done the same."

I turn to glance at Clarissa and see that she's nodding along. I can't help but admire how level-headed she's been through this whole thing. There's no dramatics or airs with her, and it's refreshing.

It takes a while longer to convince the parents, but eventually, the group dissipates. Clarissa and I are left alongside the sailboat, smiling awkwardly at each other.

I don't even care if it's awkward, though, because I'm on top of the world.

CLARISSA

I'M ENAMORED. THERE. I'VE SAID IT.

Not even aloud but to myself in the mirror, where I stand mulling over which T-shirt I should cut into an extra midriff jogging top. I have an excuse to look good and plenty of pent-up energy to burn off.

“Especially trying not to do what you want to.” My voice sounds more judgmental than I intended, and I wonder if it’s the echo of the bathroom tiles making my tone more harsh. “No, it’s the situation you’re in. You need to get it together.”

Since when did I start sounding like Agent Todd? I’m not even halfway through with cutting off the right sleeve of my cotton shirt, conveniently riddled with holes in the exact spots I wanted to trim.

I can’t wait to casually jog by Emile in this. It’s the perfect blend of ‘no, I’m not trying to look good’ and ‘yes, I do look good’ to be a passive smash. I need to start thinking about my future and not the past, and the Holy Rollers are just that.

Sure, maybe they aren’t in the distant past, but I shouldn’t be worried about exposing myself to the right person because my name is different. It’s only temporary and so is the rest of my predicament.

If my nightmares have taught me anything at this point, it’s that I don’t need to be led by fear. Just because I dream about something, doesn’t mean I should stop living when awake. It’s only natural that I’m afraid, but Emile won’t be around forever.

Isn't that kind of another problem, though?

“When did I become Agent Todd?” I practically yell, only realizing on the last syllable that I’ve worry-walked into the spare room. The flowers and their not-so-quiet eyes gaze back at me, and I don’t have the energy to decipher each of their knowing looks. Not right now, at least.

I’ve been meaning to get to some of the boutiques downtown before they close. I’ve missed burning incense and could use a few more plants to complement the beauty Emile dropped off. Maybe I could even pick him up a gift or two, something edible and a touch more difficult than he’s yet to experience at my table. I could get used to planning my days around Emile, at least somewhat, to suit both of our needs.

I take a short jog toward the town, lost in my thoughts. Seeing the expression on his face as I pulled away from his lips on the boat the other day might forever remain as one of my top favorite moments.

Neither one of us had mentioned the ‘couple’ comment, and I wonder if he’s thinking about it as much as I am. We do work well together. There’s a small boat full of kids and a handful of grateful parents to attest to that. I relive the moment over and over as I gather a decent collection of groceries and then check out, before moving on to the next store.

I keep thinking about what to tell Agent Todd when he no doubt accuses me of blowing my cover by ‘heading into town.’ The bouquet of silver bells hanging over The Rare Earth and Vine Boutique chimes in my ear as I enter the heavenly-smelling shop.

“Welcome,” a cheery employee dressed in a dark-brown romper says. “I can hold your bags back here if you want to shop around hands-free.” She extends her hands palms up, and I smile as I hand over my overflowing grocery bags.

“Thoughtful of you.”

“Having a party?” she asks, no doubt noticing the numerous bottles of literal blood wine. “Because I’d be happy to give you a little discount to get on the guest list.”

I note her pale skin and ageless face and immediately realize the woman is a vampire.

“Are they any good?” I ask, hoping her excitement means yes.

“All of them, but I love a good glass or five, so maybe my standards are low?” She tilts her head playfully, and I smile. “Let me know if you need help with anything.”

“Oh, I think I’ve got it, Sandra. Your best customer will show her around,” a familiar voice says from behind a rack of hand-made gifts and postcards.

Before I can turn, Marcel’s pale hand is on my shoulder. He’s somewhat cold to the touch, but his grin more than makes up for it. The warmth of it hits me like a ton of feathers, and I know one thing for sure. He’s grinning like he has a secret.

“Marcel, hi,” I reply lamely. For something to do, I grab a candle from an oak shelf against the wall and inhale.

“Shopping for the new bathroom?” he asks before grabbing another candle and handing it to me. I take a big whiff of sage and citrus. I let my eyes roll to the back of my head as I take another long inhale.

“Okay, now you look like you’re in a commercial shop for the new bathroom.” His tone is gleeful, and I rack my brain for ways to change the subject without looking obvious.

Has Emile mentioned the bathroom to him since the last time they saw each other? Did the conversation drift into any other territory? Such as romance? I chew my lower lip while wondering if I should broach the subject myself.

Hey, you know your best friend, right? The full-grown adult with the killer body and kind eyes? Yeah... does he, like, like me, you think?

“Just trying to get out of the house and enjoy the day.”

“You and Emile are both like that,” he says, almost before I can even get my full sentence out. This might be easier than I thought...

“He’s a great guy,” Marcel offers as we peruse their selection of coasters.

I pick up a particularly beautiful set and run my hands along the yellow and gray mosaic design. Does Emile need a new set of coasters? Maybe a nice wine glass or two?

“I can tell,” I finally say. I’ve never been good at taking hints and running with them. Does he want me to confess my feelings?

“And I can tell you are, too.” His tone is casual, almost too much so. A wave of momentary nausea washes over me, and I wonder if I’ve fallen into some kind of trap.

“I try to be.” The words don’t feel right, and I say them like the burden they are.

“How are you liking Aura Creek so far, Clarissa?” I didn’t expect the question. I think he can tell. He hands me another candle to smell, charcoal and what I think might be cedar. I sniff it deeply so I can think about my reply.

Why did he have to use my name? At least, the name he thinks is mine.

“I’d love to see you here when Emile gets back from his sailing trip. The two of you make a cute pair. I’m glad you’re getting to know each other.”

It’s all but a confession that Emile is interested. And in more than a single kiss on a boat. Did the gardening vampire tell his friend already?

“I’m glad we’re getting to know each other, too,” I try, satisfied with my answer. It’s not a lie, save for the ‘Clarissa’ part.

I run my tongue along the back of my teeth as I scan their inventory of incense and holders. I wonder if Emile is a fan of potent smells drifting from room to room. It would make things easier in the long run when and if we ever live together.

Live together? Can you hear yourself?

I can, and it makes me smile. Maybe Agent Todd is wrong about this, and I can be safe while building something real. If

Marcel is making note of my and Emile's compatibility, doesn't that count for something?

"Well, he can take some time to come around," he replies. "It's like people today just want to play games and lie. And when they're not lying, they're stretching the truth. Emile's always honest, almost painfully so, and I don't think he's cut out for those games."

I try to keep my eyes from bulging out of my head. What's he talking about? He sees my confusion and shrugs.

"Emile isn't great with opening up to people. My guess is that because he grew up around a lot of people who just told him what he wanted to hear, it did something to him. Now he kind of assumes everyone is up to something. There are not many people he trusts, really trusts. Kind of hard to have a serious relationship that way. I guess I'm just saying if he seems to take things a little slow, don't take it personally. He needs a little prodding to make himself willing to get hurt."

"I would never intentionally hurt Emile." My voice is low, and I can't manage to look him in the eye and speak my words at the same time.

"No, no. I'm not accusing you of anything," he assures. "I just see it with Emile a lot. His last girlfriend, Lauren, was always pushing him to make things super serious. But Emile needs time to warm up. A lot of girls don't have the patience. For what it's worth, I think if you give him the chance to adjust, he'll be a great boyfriend."

Marcel gives me a compassionate look, one that's seemingly riddled with what I can only imagine are painful memories. "People can present themselves one way, then be another. Emile likes to get to know someone well. He's just not the type to rush, that's all."

My mouth is moving but no words are coming out.

"Not that I'm saying you're like that," Marcel qualifies. "You two just really seem to click, so I want you to understand how he handles things. He's like an open book with you, and he's never that way. Lauren had all kinds of secrets, but every

time Emile tried to ask, she'd accuse him of not trusting her. Then she turned around and made it seem like it was his fault he didn't have blind faith in her."

An open book? Is he being facetious right now?

"Well, we all have our secrets." I hope my tone is casual. I keep my eyes on the front of the store.

"Right, but some people have more than others, and they don't care who gets hurt in the process of keeping them." He looks at me like I should say something in response.

"That's fair," I try, wishing I hadn't come out today or at least when I did. Why did Marcel have to bring this up?

"And that's why I know you're different. You understand. You're patient."

"Right."

"Look, just don't let any hesitancy on Emile's part make you think you aren't a catch. He's got his trip planned, but when he gets back, I can't see him feeling any less for you. Maybe that's something to think about?"

As I make my way back home, I do just that. Though Marcel's words were friendly, casual even, I know there's meaning behind each syllable. Should I really be so eager to pursue things with someone who doesn't even know my name? And because I'm actively lying about it?

CLARISSA

The darkness follows me. I run down the acrid, damp tunnel, my vision failing, the walls collapsing in on me. A pinprick of light is my only guide. I turn around. The crowd has grown, three dark figures now quickly forging a path straight to me, the distance between us collapsing with rapid force.

“Are they who I think they are?” my dream self gasps.

At a fork, I go with the right tunnel. I find myself trapped within a surreal labyrinth, its walls pulsating with an eerie luminescence that casts grotesque shadows. My heart pounds like a drum, the rhythm of my fear echoing in the cramped space. Ahead, the path forks into more twisted corridors, each one a portal to an unknown nightmare.

As I sprint forward, the tunnel seems to elongate and contract with a bizarre rhythm, like a living entity toying with me. The ground beneath my feet shifts, undulating like a liquid, making every step a dance of uncertainty. Glancing over my shoulder, I glimpse fleeting glimpses of a nebulous, shape-shifting entity that is composed of multiple shadows. It morphs between forms, a grotesque amalgamation of my deepest fears.

The tunnel’s walls begin to close in, the space around me shrinking as if the very tunnel itself hungers for my capture. I can almost taste the acrid tang of desperation, an otherworldly taste that lingers on my tongue.

The pursuit grows more frenzied, the numerous entities drawing nearer with each impossible step. My mind races, grappling with the surreal nightmare that envelops me, and I can't help but wonder if I'll ever escape this twisted, tormenting chase. The wetness of the tunnel disintegrates into whiteness, and the closing in of the walls stops, cramming me in.

They come with the shadows through the threshold. The distance from the door elongates until I can barely make out their faces. They are white and blank with black eyes. They crowd around me in a circle, stopping a few feet from my suspended body. From their dead faces, they emit a low wailing. It's metallic and hollow.

My eyes open. I sit up with a force that shakes the bed. I breathe erratically, and I have trouble filling up my lungs.

That one was much too vivid. I can still see the dark forms in my mind's eye with all the clarity of looking through a mirror. I shift under the covers, but I can't get comfortable after that. So I get up out of bed and get a drink of water from the faucet.

"I need to run," I decide for myself. Outside the window, the first light of day illuminates the sky to a dull blue. Through the trees, patches of the changing sky tower from above.

I lace up my sneakers and hit the pavement, my breath syncing with the rhythm of my footsteps. As I jog through Aura Creek past the few early-morning denizens that make up this wonderful ocean town, the crisp air fills my lungs, invigorating my senses.

I pass by charming cottages with flower-filled gardens, and my eyes meet those of a local shopkeeper arranging vibrant produce outside her quaint store. She wipes away some stray strands of gray hair from out of her eyes. A friendly nod passes between us, and I continue my run, the street hard beneath my feet.

What would Marshal Todd say about me being so friendly with these people? I'm sure he wouldn't approve. Something about blowing my cover, endangering myself by being too

involved. Sometimes I think being all cooped up at the house seems worse than letting the Holy Rollers carry out my demise, though.

Soon, the sounds of laughter and chatter draw me closer to the town square. A group of children play tag. I immediately think of the other day on the boat with Emile, rescuing those children. We were both assured of our attraction with that first kiss. I wanted to melt into him forever.

I slow down to catch my breath and offer a wave to an elderly man sitting on a bench, his eyes crinkling with a warm smile. A pair of artists are busy capturing the essence of the town on canvas, their brushes dancing with vibrant colors.

The path takes me uphill, and as I crest a rise, I'm rewarded with a breathtaking view of the surrounding mountains. A group of hikers pause to take photos, their laughter carrying on the breeze.

"It's beautiful up here," I announce to the one closest to me.

"Oh, it is," the hiker replies. "We come up once a month, and I still take photos every time. It changes from season to season, but I can't decide which view is the best."

"Hmm," I murmur. "I'm new in town. I'll have to come back and see for myself."

"Oh, you should. If nothing else, at least in the fall. The colors are breathtaking."

I nod as if to say thank you for the tip, then stop to take a break beneath a giant oak tree. I wonder if I'll be here in a month. I hope so, but it's hard to say for certain. That thought makes me think of Emile again. I still feel bad and sinister for lying to him, but in the end, it's all about my safety.

My safety.

It sounds so selfish, but it's the truth. How would I feel if it were Emile who was lying? When Marcel mentioned Lauren, I felt an immediate pit in my stomach.

It felt like Marcel knew he needed to warn me that Emile is hard to win over and has difficulty trusting, which can't possibly work well here. I mean, I'm lying about my damn identity. It seems obvious this isn't something he's going to take lightly if he finds out. And what could our future look like if he doesn't?

I don't want to lose him because he feels I deceived him. It's better that I take a step back. I should reevaluate what I want from this before I do anything else.

Is it worth it?

Descending back into the heart of the town, I continue to pass friendly strangers. I'm too lost in my thoughts to pay much attention, though I return the occasional wave or smile.

All my thoughts keep coming back to the same thing, though. I will tell Emile that we should just remain friends. Sad as I am to miss this chance, I don't want to ruin everything. It makes my heart ache, though, because I can't help thinking that if he could have just met Shauna instead of Clarissa, everything would have been different.

"If ifs and buts were candy and nuts," I mutter as I unlock my front door. "It is what it is. And what it is, is a mistake. You're better off with a friend as a neighbor than a nasty ex. It's not too late to back out. Make something up and tell him you aren't ready to date. It's the best thing to do."

EMILE

I t's a strange thing to wake up smiling. I've been grinning ear to ear for a few days now, with thoughts of Clarissa filling my head. Every time I think about our kiss, replaying it in my head, I find myself rubbing my sore cheeks. I can't remember the last time I felt that way about anything.

I find myself getting ready for today's excursion with a giddy, buzzing excitement thrumming through my veins. Clarissa is a little bit reserved, but she's got a smile and a sense of humor that makes me want to go on all kinds of adventures.

This time we're sailing up the northern coast for a few hours and taking advantage of the westerly winds that make the summer so breezy in this part of the world. I hope to show Clarissa a few of the harbors around here that also serve as fish markets, as well as a few local spots for crabbing.

"She's going to enjoy that since she loves cooking so much. It's a good idea," I reassure myself. Secretly, though, I love the way her face lights up when she sees something cool or interesting. I'm really hoping I can bring that look to her face again.

I've already scrubbed the boat clean, and now I'm loading up a personal basket filled with a variety of fruits, cheeses, breads, and even a bottle of wine. Looking down at what appear to be the very obvious makings of a date, I give a small chuckle.

It's true that we don't know that much about each other. Yet when I think about how sweet and easy our kiss was the other day, I can't deny the attraction on both of our parts. There is still that old instinct niggling in the back of my mind, wondering if it's a mistake, but whenever I look at her, all I want to do is remain close.

As Marcel was quick to point out, it has all the makings of a crush. I groan aloud at the childish term, although in this case, it appears to be apt. For all my devil-may-care attitude, I'm getting tied up in anticipatory knots while getting ready for my outing with Clarissa, who appears to have literally dropped into my life from nowhere.

Finishing my preparations by grabbing a few towels, I head out, ready to get underway. As I'm loading up the rest of the boat, the crunch of crabgrass alerts me to company. Turning around, I find Clarissa walking across the edge of the property line.

Already the smile is back on my face, and I find Clarissa smiling, too. The slight sunburn on her cheeks gives her a healthy glow and highlights that thousand-watt smile she has. It makes her eyes twinkle, and it makes my stomach clench. I have to give myself a small shake in order to return to reality.

Looking back up at her again, I see her smile falter a little. A sinking feeling starts to settle in my stomach, and it feels like an anchor. I try not to think the worst even as my senses start firing warning signals.

"Hey there, landlubber," I greet lightly, hoping to get that smile back. "Ready for another adventure in the Carolina blue?"

"Yeah, sure. Have we officially committed to a pirate's life then?" She playfully raises an eyebrow as she asks and couples it by mimicking a drunken swagger.

It's a terrible impression, naturally. A fierce pirate she is not, and I laugh openly as she stumbles forward. Hating to see her face plant in the dirt, however, I reach out to catch her.

There we are, suddenly clutching onto each others' arms. It's not quite an embrace in any romantic sense, but it still sends a shock of sparks up my arms and spine. Similar to feeling static electricity, only it's more gentle and sensational, simultaneously. *Chemistry*, my mind supplies. *Clarissa and I share chemistry*.

It's a powerful, heady feeling, one I've never felt quite so potently despite my long list of girlfriends. This is a strong attraction we share, and despite the warnings my brain wants to supply, I find myself giving into the temptation.

This woman is funny and bright, all sunshine and secrets rolled into one. A package I am finding difficult to resist, and even less reason to say no to.

"Um, listen, Emile, can we talk? I want to clear the air about the other day," she starts, nervousness slipping into her tone.

The words are like a dash of cold water to my head and my heart, like being startled out of a pleasant dream. For how heavy my stomach drops suddenly, my smile doesn't falter despite the creeping dread.

"The air is pretty clear from where I'm standing," I offer quietly, still holding her elbow.

"It's just that you're about to sail out on some great adventure, but I just got here, you know? Our lives don't exactly line up right now, you know what I mean?"

I almost feel like laughing again, but I know if I did that it would sound bitter. I do know that what she's saying is completely practical and reasonable. Heck, it's exactly why I wondered if I should pursue her at all. Yet knowing that still fails to take the sting out of the rejection.

"So... what you're saying is that we should treat that kiss like a heat-of-the-moment kind of thing. Am I understanding that right?"

"Yeah," she replies, visibly relaxing. I try not to wince. "Don't get me wrong, the kiss was great, it's just –"

“Bad timing,” I finish dully, expectantly. She nods in response, still a little bashful but now with a tinge of remorse.

Taking a deep breath I manage another smile, even as my arms release their grip and snap back to my sides. We seem to return to ourselves, separate and apart.

The disappointment hurts, more than I thought it would, but I want to respect Clarissa’s space more than anything. After all of our interactions over the past weeks, I wouldn’t want to make her uncomfortable with me. We were friends up until the other day, and while the possibility of something more was nice, we might be better off as friends and good neighbors.

Clarissa seems apologetic as well, nervously tugging on a strand of hair and twirling it around her finger. It’s more adorable than I care to admit, so I shut that train of thought down immediately.

“Look, it’s a fantastic day out, and once I’m gone, you won’t have a reliable guide.” It might sound like a cheap offer or more like a consolation prize for me, but Clarissa visibly brightens at my attempt at levity. “We’re friends after all, and I’ve got a whole bottle of wine up there, along with one of those fancy snack trays people seem to love.”

She gives me a somewhat incredulous stare. “You mean a charcuterie board?”

“Is that what that assortment is?” Now it’s my turn to scratch my head.

“That depends. Are there any cold cuts?”

“Possibly, come take a look,” I reply, motioning her over.

She chuckles as she jogs around. Just as before, we’re friends again with no awkwardness between us. At least, that’s what I hope, even as I notice the way her hair catches in the early sunlight.

We chat casually on the way to the marina and use decent teamwork to load the boat into the water. Even if she lacks the seasoned experience of Marcel, Clarissa is a quick study and has managed to remember most of what I showed her the other

day. If there is one thing I have no issue discussing, it's my boat.

Swift and breezy, we're out on the water in no time at all. I steer and navigate the waters while Clarissa carefully maneuvers around me, and we continue to act as if nothing happened between us at all.

Our conversations flow regularly, with only a few bouts of awkward silence between us. There are small moments where we stare at each other a few seconds too long that I have to pretend not to notice. If my gaze lingers, or hers does, we're both equally careful not to call the other out on it.

It is an afternoon that is exhausting, for all the effort required to keep it as close to comfortable as possible. Luckily, Clarissa seems to enjoy the view as much as I do and eventually, we leave conversation behind to simply enjoy the tranquility of nature.

The blue of the Carolina coastline is entirely unique. A strange clash of cerulean and pewter, with the deeper notes of the Atlantic shelf sinking in. When the sunlight hits the shoreline, it turns the sand into shimmering gold and the surf sparkles silver.

Such a view makes it easy to believe why sailors and natives alike once thought mermaids lived in these waters. As we glide along those glittering waves though, I find myself looking back again at Clarissa. For the first time, I feel an affinity with those long-forgotten sailors, chasing and longing for something that it appears was never real after all.

CLARISSA

The sweet and slightly sour wine hits my tongue and electrifies my already overwhelmed senses. Marcel's home is filled with the aroma of caramelized onion and fried bacon. No garlic this time. I still don't know how to ask if they can eat it without sounding insensitive. Teaching two vampires to cook pierogies wasn't on my list of things to do someday, but since I'm doing it now, I may as well have fun with it!

It was a little awkward reconnecting with Emile in a platonic sense. I know breaking off any possibility of romantic entanglements was the right thing to do. But damn, it still stings. I really like Emile. I think, had we met under different circumstances, we could have been pretty good together.

But my affection for him is the exact reason I can't be with him. I refuse to be yet another ex-lover, and I can't imagine making this relationship work considering I have to lie about who I am. So, at least for now, I'll happily sit by as his friend and neighbor. Enjoying his company is enough.

I don't really have any other choice.

"Okay, The potatoes are super tender and cooled off enough now. Marcel, you take this potato ricer and start mashing," I say, handing him the device.

"Oh, is that what it's called? I always assumed it had some fancy French name. Like, *la pomme effacer*. Potato ricer sounds so normal." Marcel accepts the masher and gets to work, using it as intended.

I check the dough. It's been sitting covered for about an hour, and sure enough, it's risen quite nicely. I lightly flour the cleaned and sanitized countertop and roll the dough out onto it.

This is my favorite part of baking – just getting to look at the beautiful ball of flour, oil, and eggs. It must be what a sculptor feels looking at untouched clay, or Emile when he has freshly cut pieces of wood. It's a blank canvas waiting to be molded into something delicious.

“What can I do?” Emile asks excitedly.

“You can top me off,” I suggest, pointing at my wine glass. Emile smiles and grabs the pinot grigio. He takes his time pouring it just right, and I allow myself a moment to admire the tension in his muscles as he does.

But then I look back up and see Marcel giving me a knowing look. He's broadcasting a very obvious ‘stand back’ message directly to me. I clear my throat, thank Emile for the wine, and suggest he make sure the onions aren't burning. And I do it with the least motion possible. Marcel seems a little less hostile now.

I don't blame him for being protective of his friend. In fact, I think Emile is lucky to have someone looking out for him as well as Marcel does. I just wish it wasn't me who was the center of his hostility.

I put my attention into rolling out the dough, making sure it isn't too thin or thick. Pleased with the result, I take the round dough cutter and start making little circle cutouts.

“Ooh, can I try?” Emile asks. His hand is on mine before I have a chance to reply. I quickly relinquish the biscuit cutter, not wanting to draw any more judgment from Marcel if I can help it.

Emile carefully cuts out more dough circles, a wide smile on his face while he does so. It's cute, and I hope to high heaven I'm not visibly blushing right now.

“Now what?” Marcel asks. I'm about to be defensive before I realize he's asking about the next step in the cooking process.

“Now, we fill and fold,” I explain. I place a little bit of the mashed potato mixed with the bacon and some shredded cheese and fold the dough over in half to make a little dumpling. Emile and Marcel happily get to work on the rest, and by the end, we have way too many pierogies. What a wonderful problem to have.

I bring a large pot of water to a simmer and drop the dumplings into it in small batches.

“When they float, you remove them from the water,” I explain. “Then, each one gets fried in some butter on each side until it’s nice and toasty brown.”

The kitchen smells even more incredible as we oil and fry each little pocket of cheesy mashed potatoes. When they’re all done, they get topped with some of the caramelized onions and sour cream.

“And it’s as simple as that!” I say, putting on my best celebrity chef voice.

“Simple! It only took three hours,” Marcel says with a laugh.

“Well worth it,” Emile replies. He takes one of the pierogies and eats it in two bites. “Well, you already know what I’m going to say.”

“That it would taste better with blood?” I ask.

Emile nods but smiles wide. “Still, it tastes amazing as is. You really are a fantastic cook.” I blush, avoiding Marcel’s gaze, and invite them to dig in.

The rest of the evening goes by in a flash. There’s more than enough wine and potatoes to go around, and the conversation flows effortlessly. I have a fantastic time. I’m genuinely sad when it’s time to leave, but I do so. If Todd calls the house while I’m gone, he’ll have an angry little fit about it. I’ll need to check my messages.

Still, I don’t rush home that quickly. I take my time, enjoying the scenery of the town right after sunset. More vampire residents come out around now. Not all of them can invest in the ridiculously high SPF sunscreen like Emile and

Marcel can. It's a nice sight, almost like the town has two different lives. Not unlike myself. If I had the choice, I might like to stay here. It's peaceful and beautiful, plus, Emile is here.

Emile. My mouth suddenly goes sour. What if all of this ended, wrapped up neatly in a bow? What if I was able to come clean and tell him who I really am? Would he understand? Take me back? Or would it still count as a betrayal? I consider what it would mean to be Clarissa for the rest of my life. Could I really pull that off?

I sigh. No, I don't think I could live that lie forever. Maybe it would be best if I left this cozy little town once my time in witness protection comes to an end. Let everyone here think they once knew a girl named Clarissa who just couldn't be tied down to one place.

Let Emile think I was just the one who got away.

As I walk up to my home, I spot a familiar car in the driveway. I lower my eyebrows, despair turning to frustration. Todd came over while I was gone. Great. Now I'm going to get an earful about how irresponsible and stupid I am.

I walk inside and, sure enough, Todd is sitting at my dining room table with his arms crossed. His aviator sunglasses rest on the table, his face set in a deep frown.

"Again? Really?" Todd asks. "At this point, I'll be more shocked if I swing by and you're actually here. And alive."

I slam the door behind me and set down my shoulder bag. "I'm starting to think you don't have a job outside of harassing me."

"My job is to protect you." Todd stands up and steps towards me. "Maybe you don't care about your own life, but the Department of Justice does. We need you alive to testi—!"

"To testify, yeah, I know, Just stay in my little bubble and never go out or meet people or do anything forever so I can testify in court for you! Because that's all I am. Not a person who needs to be living a real life, just a means to put a few

guys behind bars.” I put my hands on my hips and bite the inside of my cheek. I didn’t mean to say all that.

Todd squints his eyes. “I don’t appreciate your tone,” he says slowly.

“Well, I don’t appreciate... this! All of this! Alright, I upended my entire life and moved to the middle of nowhere. I’m living in a house that barely passes a basic standard of livability. And then you randomly show up, invade my personal space, and accuse me of not doing enough to protect myself. Well, I am, alright! I’ve sacrificed so much you don’t even know!”

Emile’s face flashes in my mind. The pain of rejection grips my heart all over again and makes me feel like a lying, terrible monster.

Todd takes a short step backwards and looks me up and down. “You’ve been drinking.”

“That’s not the point,” I interject. “I had a nice evening with two neighbors I trust. That’s it. They think my name is Clarissa and have no idea I’m a huge liar who didn’t even realize she was working for the mafia! All they know is I make fantastic pierogies and I’m emotionally unavailable because of reasons I’m not allowed to discuss. Alright? Is that alright with you?”

Maybe the wine is at fault here, but I’m so tired. I’m exhausted from making compromises and putting my happiness on hold so I can do Todd’s job for him. It was bound to get out eventually, at this rate.

Todd quietly walks back to the kitchen table and grabs his sunglasses, despite it being dark outside. I flinch, thinking of how easy it would’ve been for someone to sneak around in the shadows and spring an attack on me.

Maybe I am the idiot here.

“The next time I stop by, you’d better be home,” Todd says.

“We’ll see,” I reply, too worked up to concede anything to him now.

“I guess we will.” He walks past me to the door but pauses with his hand on the knob. “You said you made pierogies tonight? Can you give me the recipe by any chance?”

My eyes go wide at the sudden switch in tone. I shake my head. I’m not giving him anything right now, much less my grandma’s recipe.

Todd shrugs his shoulders and leaves. And I’m left standing there, feeling exhausted and ridiculous. And very, very alone.

EMILE

I must really be a fool to do this to myself. Clarissa has made her boundaries quite clear, and I respect them. I see no harm in continuing our friendship. Well, save for the emotional harm that hits me like a stake to the heart every time Clarissa smiles.

But it's okay. That's my problem to worry about. And maybe one day I'll see that smile and not feel a ravenous need to lay my lips upon it. Even now, doing my best to be a platonic neighbor, I'm finding myself waxing romantically melancholic.

Guess I have a hard time turning it off.

"That's starboard, right?" Clarissa asks. She's pointing to the right side of the boat when facing the front of the ship.

I nod. "That's right."

"And that's port. And that's the aft." She points to the left, then the rear of the ship.

"Wow, look at you. Lady Nautical. You'll be the captain of a ship in no time. Oh, what about that part?" I ask, pointing to the front.

Clarissa stares at the bow, thinking really hard. "I know this. Why can't I remember now? I knew i- the bow!" she yells when the word comes to mind. She doesn't even wait for me to confirm before doing a happy little dance.

"Good job," I tell her. "Now, if you'll sit your aft down, it's ready to set sail."

Clarissa takes a seat and smiles wide. She's so beautiful that it just might kill me. It's our last time sailing together before I start my big trip. It's bittersweet.

In another life, maybe she and I could have taken that trip together. Ah, well. One day, my heart will move on and I'll know it was for the best. But at least we have this one last friendly ride together. And in a weird way, I'm glad I wished she was going with me. It's a relief to know I'm not a complete monster who is incapable of feeling so strongly for a woman – not if it's the right woman.

“You're certainly dressed for the occasion,” I say. I look Clarissa over from the corner of my eye as I back us out of the dock. She's wearing a pale blue button-down, short-sleeve shirt with a seahorse pattern across it. Between that and the cargo shorts, flip flops, and bucket hat, she looks like the cutest retiree in Florida with a clock set to ‘island time.’

Clarissa laughs anxiously. “Oh, well, this is just the best they had at the shop in town. I thought it would be fun to dress up.”

She makes me feel wildly underdressed in my long sleeve button up left decidedly unbuttoned, jeans, and sneakers. At least I have a wide brimmed hat and big sunglasses. Standard vampire attire down here.

I steer us into the open ocean and head very specifically to one spot in particular. I recently spied some Loggerhead sea turtles around the bend up ahead and some dolphin pods further in. If this is going to be our last time together for a while, I want to make it special.

Luckily, I don't even have to point out the dolphins when we get nearby. They happily make themselves known. I hear Clarissa's gasp, even above the sound of the engine. I turn it off and let the boat idle quietly. Clarissa stands and walks to the bow, completely taken in as the little sea mammals swim by. Their dorsal fins cut through the water, leaving tiny wakes behind them.

“Cute, aren't they?” I ask. I join Clarissa at the bow. I admit I'm just as much of a sucker for the creatures as anyone.

But Clarissa is completely enthralled with them. Sometimes, living so close to the coast like this, I can forget there's so many people who don't have the ocean as a normal part of their everyday lives.

"I went to an amusement park that had dolphins once. Seeing them behind a tank is nothing compared to thi – Look!" Clarissa shouts in glee as one of the dolphins graces us with a full breach.

I smile, feeling a cold rush of adoration over Clarissa's genuine childlike wonder over watching the dolphins. Still, something about what she just said is bugging me.

"You didn't get to see the ocean much with your family moving all over the place?" I ask.

Clarissa looks back at me. Her eyes are wide and her smile seems a little less genuine and slightly more plastic for some reason.

"Huh? O-oh, yeah. No, anytime we were near it, I wasn't really allowed to wander around, you know? My, uh... My mom was terrified of tsunamis. So we stayed indoors. Being able to just hang out on the water like this is just incredible. Thank you, Emile." That relaxed sweetness is back, and the glow Clarissa is giving off sets me at ease again.

We watch together as the dolphin pod swims off further north, probably in search of good food. Speaking of which...

"Would you like to find a nice place to stop and eat lunch?" I ask.

Clarissa nods excitedly as I get back behind the wheel. I slowly pull us away from this location and try to find some more nautical magic going on. I don't have to search far, because over on some nearby rocks, I can see some sea turtles drifting in the current. They'll be coming on to shore soon to lay their eggs. Watching the babies crawl into the ocean and float away is always a magical sight.

I pull us to a safe distance away and point out our entertainment for lunch. Clarissa is so hyper-focused on the

green lumps in the water that she's completely oblivious to the spread I'm retrieving from the cooler. I tap her on the shoulder.

"Lunch is served."

Clarissa blinks in shock. "Did... did you make all this?" She gestures wildly at the cheese and fruit platter, deli sandwiches, marinated olives, and chilled sparkling mineral water on display.

"Yes, I became a master culinarian overnight just from being in your vicinity. No! Hah, I bought all this from the McMillan Deli this morning." I pick up one of the napkins, which prominently displays their green and yellow logo.

Clarissa laughs and shakes her head. "Well, it's like they say. Store-bought is fine, too."

We grab our biodegradable plates and pick at the offerings. While we eat, sea birds drift above us, making their calls of curiosity and warning. I admit, the gulls look particularly lovely right now. But I'm more than happy to make do with the food in front of me.

My sandwich has a lovely blood spread on the bread, making it both delicious and digestible for me. Clarissa makes sounds of delight and pleasure as she eats through tiny balls of squeaky mozzarella and kalamata olives drenched in olive oil, red wine vinegar, garlic, and orange peel. The cubed melons and sliced strawberries make for a delicious and light dessert.

Clarissa points and gasps every time another dolphin swims by, its dorsal fin is easy to pick out in this smooth water. We even spot what we think is an otter. It would be strange this far out, but not unheard of.

"This is turning into the best afternoon of my entire life." Clarissa sighs.

"You flatter me," I say, feeling my cheeks go ice cold again. "You're honestly telling me after spending your life traveling all over the place, this little outing is your best time?"

Clarissa looks down at her empty plate. She seems to chew on her cheek and fidget with the delicate paper in her hands.

The sides rip a little, and she finally looks up at me with a toothy smile.

“Guess I just appreciate the company more!”

There’s something off in the way she says it. Like she’s holding something back that she desperately wants to tell me. How could I blame her, when I feel the exact same way? I want to grab those pink cheeks, kiss her deeply, and seduce her right here in the middle of the ocean. I’m not sure if that would be incredibly romantic or horribly inappropriate.

Doesn’t quite matter. I won’t be finding out today, anyway. Maybe I’ll meet a beautiful and more importantly, willing, stranger on my upcoming journey. They’ll spend hours talking to me over endless margaritas, and we’ll share a passionate kiss at the final call. Then we’ll go back to my boat and make love until dawn, where they’ll confess they want to go with me and never look back.

Yeah. That might mend my broken heart. I’d still rather have Clarissa with me, though. Sometimes I think I’m my own worst enemy. One day I’ll find someone who checks all the boxes. Someone I can trust, someone I want to open up to, someone I’m determined to keep around who I don’t lose interest in after a few dates.

One day.

“Ready to continue the tour?” I ask.

Clarissa nods and helps me clean up. We rewrap the leftovers and make sure anything that might get caught in the wind is stowed away in the cooler. Then I get back in the captain’s chair and start the engine.

When I look over again to make sure she’s ready, I notice Clarissa’s face looks beet red.

“Did you forget to apply sunscreen?” I ask.

Clarissa blinks and looks at me dumbfounded. “Huh? Oh, why?” She slaps her palms to her cheeks.

“Look at you. All that effort into looking like a proper seaman and didn’t even use sunscreen. There’s some in the

pack over there.” I gesture towards my emergency supply bag.
“It’s vampire grade so it should be more than enough.”

Clarissa mutters a quiet thanks and retrieves the stuff.
“Guess I thought the hat would protect me...”

“Sunlight reflects off the water. Same with snow, by the way. You can get a sunburn even on a cloudy day. You should always protect yourself, regardless of how nice the weather is.”

Clarissa applies some to her bare arms and face and stows it back in the pack.

“Where to now?” she asks, fidgeting her fingers in the hem of her shirt.

“Wherever the waves take us.”

CLARISSA

My phone rings. The electronic beeping melody interrupts what was an incredibly melancholy and bittersweet mood. This has been, genuinely, one of the best and worst days of my life. For just a little bit longer, I got to live in a fantasy life where it was just me and Emile, sailing into the horizon. Not a single care or worry between us.

It's all a fantasy, though. And my phone flashing Todd's number is a harsh reminder of that fact. I narrow my eyes and briefly consider tossing my phone into the water. His interruption of this small retreat is just too encompassing of everything that's wrecking me right now.

"Do you need to get that?" Emile asks.

I sigh and nod. "Hello?" I ask into the receiver. I hope Todd can easily pick up that I'm not at liberty to discuss sensitive details right now. He's probably just going to chew me out for not being locked up at home with my windows boarded up and my head under a pillow.

"Clarissa? Oh, thank God. Listen, we've got a situation."

The strain in Todd's voice drops a block of ice in my stomach. This isn't his lecture voice. This isn't even his normal 'I mean business' voice.

Emile takes a step toward me. My anxiety must be showing on my face.

"Look, there's no easy way to say this... I lost your file."

I blink a few times, trying to understand the full consequences of this. “And?” I ask.

“And? And the file has your new address, name, and contact information. Most importantly, it lists you as very much alive!”

My mouth hangs open. The sheer incompetence this man has displayed over the course of this nightmare has been astounding. And all this time, he had the nerve to lecture me?

“Well, where did you lose it?” I cry. My voice pitches, and I feel my face going red in equal parts frustration and terror.

“It must’ve been the diner. I had it with me to go over some details with the team. But when I left, I realized I had the menu in my hand instead,” Todd explains. He sounds strained and embarrassed. That should be the least of his worries right now.

“Well, call them!”

“I did! I went back to check and got a hold of the managers. No one who works there saw any files today. I think it might have ended up in the wrong hands. Hell, I’m starting to suspect the syndicate has its paws in a lot more than one donut shop. They might own every eatery in this entire damn town.”

My breathing picks up, my pulse hammering in my ears.

“Clarissa? What’s wrong?” Emile asks.

“Listen, I’m sorry. Whatever you’re doing right now, it doesn’t matter. I need you to get to a neutral safe zone with a lot of people. A grocery store or something. Then text me your location. I’ll have a team there to pick you up in ten minutes.”

My vision starts to narrow. The blues of the ocean and sky blur together into one mass of bright light. With the exception of one small, dark speck on the horizon. And it’s getting bigger. Fast.

“Emile,” I say, turning my head to look at him. “I don’t know how to explain this. But we need to get back to land. As quickly as possible.”

A flash of something like concern, or maybe pain, comes and goes on Emile's face. But he nods and gets to the wheel.

"If you can dock near town, or anywhere that's busy, that'd be ideal," I say.

"Yeah, well, I'll do my best. I need to get out of this other boat's way first. The asshole doesn't seem to want to go around us."

I look up to see what Emile is talking about and feel my breath catch in my throat. There is indeed another boat heading straight for us. Three people are on it, dressed in tropical print button-down shirts and designer sunglasses. And the man front and center is one that haunts my nightmares.

Hudson Judge.

"Emile. We need to do more than go around. We need to get away from them. Quickly. Now!" I scream.

Emile looks at me strangely but gets the boat into motion regardless. Hudson pulls out a rifle and aims it towards us.

"What the hell!" Emile yells. We duck, avoiding the first shot, and Emile's boat takes off faster than ever. We speed through the water, bobbing over waves and creating one hell of a wake behind us. The other guys' ship has some trouble keeping up, but that doesn't stop them from trying.

"You wanna explain what's going on here!" Emile yells over the roar of the wind. His voice is dripping with anger, and I certainly can't blame him. "Why are those 'five o'clock somewhere' meatheads trying to kill us?"

"They're just trying to kill *me*," I explain. "I'm sorry, Emile. I wanted to tell you this whole time. I really did!"

"Tell me? Anything that leads to a gun being aimed in my direction is something you're probably supposed to share!"

We duck again at the sound of the gun. The bullet hits the water, thankfully.

"This guy works for the mob. I mean, I did, too. Kind of. By accident."

“How do you accidentally work for the mob?” Emile screeches. The boat takes a wave a little too hard, slamming us back down and making me fall to my knees.

“By being a baker for a donut shop that’s a money laundering front!”

Emile shakes his head. “Unbelievable.”

“That guy? That’s Hudson Judge. He’s a hitman who tried to kill me. Alright? And that guy who comes by, my cousin? He’s a government agent. They have me in witness protection because –”

Another gunshot. This one hits the boat, making Emile spout a long line of expletives in response.

“Come on! Work on your aim, asshole!”

“So, yeah! That’s my story! And I’m really, really sorry!”

“Sorry isn’t enough,” Emile snaps back. “Who are you really? I’m guessing your name isn’t actually Clarissa. What else was a lie? Does your grandma even make pierogies?”

“My real name...” I bite my lip, not knowing how much is okay to say now. I’m either going to die right here on this boat, or somehow survive. And then what?

There’s no way they’ll let me stay here now. I’ll probably get moved around again, given a new name and identity. I’ll have to start this lying game from the beginning. Again.

How many times will I have to do this? Is it even worth it?

There’s no use keeping anything from Emile. If anyone deserves the truth now, it’s him.

“My name is Shauna. I’m just a baker who was too nice to the cops who ate there. And I ended up living next to an extremely attractive and wonderful neighbor who’s too good for me!”

“Flattery isn’t going to get us out of this,” Emile says. But his lip has quirked into a barely hidden smile. “But I may know what will.”

Emile takes a sudden, hard right turn that throws me on my side. We bounce over waves, taking them faster and faster, while bullets continue to fly overhead.

“You said your cousin is actually a government agent?” Emile yells.

“Yeah. Todd. He’s a U.S. Marshall.”

Emile shakes his head. “They didn’t exactly send their best and brightest, did they? Hang on!”

I do so, grabbing the chair Emile is sitting on and praying he knows what he’s about to do. The boat comes to a sudden slow down, spins around, and kicks back off. And in mere moments, I hear a loud and terrifying crash that sends me into a ball on the boat’s floor.

Emile lets out a long shout of victory as we once again slow down. I slowly stand on my shaking legs to view the scene. Hudson’s boat is in pieces on a pile of rocks. It’s a gruesome sight, but one that’s noticeably absent of bodies.

“Did you bait them into crashing?” I ask.

Emile smirks and gets the boat moving again. “They should stick to dry land. Or at least learn how the water works before trying to do business on it.”

I breathe a sigh of relief as we make our way to the city docks. There are a few flashing police cars already there to greet us. Some of them are piling into a boat. The scene is chaos, between swarming officers and onlookers.

I’ve barely stepped onto the dock when a car comes speeding up. I have to jump back so it doesn’t run over my toes. The driver slams on the brakes, screeching to a stop so abrupt that the car shakes.

Two people hop out and hurry toward me. One is male, one female, and I can instinctively place them as agents even before I see their badges glinting in the sunlight. It must be something about the way they carry themselves that reminds me of Marshal Todd, something I guess they’re taught way back when in the academy.

They start barking orders even as they zip in my direction. The flurry of words and activity makes my head spin, and it takes me a moment to realize they aren't even talking to me. The orders are for the cops, who scatter to process the scene. The ones in the boat take off, heading to examine the wreckage of Hudson's boat.

"Your boys are that way," Emile says, pointing towards the rocks. "But if they're even half the hitmen they think they are, they're long gone by now."

The man nods and takes me by the arm. He's leading me to an unmarked police car with zero explanation, or even a moment to say goodbye. I know once I get in there that I'm never coming back. These are my last moments in Aura Creek. Whether I like it or not.

I look over my shoulder in an attempt to say goodbye to Emile. He looks forlornly at me, then turns his head towards the bay.

Once again, my heart completely shatters. I don't even fight it when I'm stuffed into the car.

The female agent gets into the driver's seat. She looks at me through the rearview mirror and turns on the engine.

"We have a few people collecting your things. You'll be moved out by dusk."

I nod and sink into the back seat as the car pulls away. Aura Creek shrinks smaller and smaller behind me, until it's just a speck in the rearview mirror. A tiny blip in my life. Just a short fantasy that was nice while it lasted.

EMILE

I t's been a whole day since Clarissa or Shauna — or whatever my ex-neighbor calls themselves now — has been gone from next door. I'm currently standing in front of one of my bay windows pretending to be looking beyond the cottage rather than through the windows, which I can't stop peeking in despite myself.

I know Clarissa/Shaina won't be there, but I still find myself hoping to see her exit the broken steps for one of her signature jogs. The whole idea makes my teeth grind together. *You never even knew her. Not really. Let it go.*

"Absolutely not," I say as my phone buzzes in my back pocket. I'm pretty sure it's Marcel, who for his part has been more than accommodating.

Just scrap the whole sailing trip and go to Cabo, he'd suggested when I called to tell him what had happened on the water. The goons had come out of nowhere, leaving me no time to register their motivations. I roll my eyes and shake my head as I send Marcel's umpteenth call to voicemail.

What did the goons after Clarissa/Shaina think would happen with such an over-the-top display of revenge? Though Marshall Todd, which is a job title still too incredible to wrap my head around, had recognized his mistake, the damage was done. And permanently. Both to me, Clarissa/Shaina, and my boat. Well, not really my boat. Most of the scrapes are on me, complete with a few bruises from when I'd dodged the myriad bullets darting our way.

It's like those idiots wanted to get caught or something. I read Marcel's text, thinking the same thing but keeping my face flat and expressionless. I'd already told him the story on multiple occasions, as well as a couple of local reporters.

Aura Creek's *Daily Tidings* newspaper is still covering the situation. This morning's edition came with a great shot of police pulling the limp and sopping wet would-be killers from the water before they could drown. Even still, none of the three goons on the boat have woken up from what commentators are calling 'napping with the fishes.'

"Does this mean you're safe?" I ask my question into the window and frown. There I go, being concerned for someone else's welfare besides my own. Those people had guns for crying out loud.

"And no self-awareness," I add as I pace back and forth. Maybe if I picked up jogging, I could avoid the nervous energy threatening to consume me.

It's not the nervous energy, my mind tries telling me. It's the unanswered questions that are causing the nervous energy.

"Oooh, what an observation." I don't know why I'm being sassy to myself, especially when all I want to do is tell myself I followed her lead. It wasn't just about me getting to know Clarissa.

Do you think they have someone on the inside or something? Marcel's message makes me jump, even though I'd just heard the loud ding of my notifications mere seconds ago. I almost text him back to explain the menu fiasco again and Agent Todd's foolishness, but I know Marcel's heard it already.

It was just such a close call! And who mistakes a menu for a file? Maybe the other agents you saw were onto Todd, too? I, of course, told Marcel all of what I knew about the situation, though I've kept my mouth shut when it comes to the press. I don't even know how I feel about outdriving a trio of mobsters shooting at me and someone I care about, so how can I comment?

It wasn't Todd being dirty, just foolish. I send it immediately, then frown. I always fall into Marcel's talking traps. I hear his ringtone and roll my eyes. Guess I walked into that one.

"I already told you, Marshall Todd was the one who called. I think he told on himself and maybe that's why the other two agents showed up." I don't bother to say hello. Marcel and I need no greetings.

"But you don't know that for a fact?"

I scoff into the phone and hope he hears. "Why are you asking me? I don't know anything for a fact. All I know is three people are in comas and I'm too bruised to sail."

"Do you feel like a hero? People aren't in witness protection for no reason."

I shake my head in the negative, even though Marcel can't see me. "I feel like a fool. She could even be lying about why. For all I know, she could have tried to kill the hitmen. She could be one of them. Who knows?"

"Does Clarissa seem like a killer to you?"

"Her name's not Clarissa," I correct, my heart as still as the breezeless afternoon. I once again peek over at the cottage and grimace at my lack of self-respect. Did I really care about her so much that I'm willing to pine even now? It's never taken me more than about an hour to get over a girl.

"Shauna, I'm sorry," Marcel replies.

"How were you supposed to know what her real name was? You're not a psychic. Nothing to apologize for."

"No, I mean you. That's what you should say when you find her. 'Shauna, I'm sorry.'"

My brow darts up as I open my mouth to reply, a little unsure what to say. What does he mean to apologize? And how am I going to find her, anyway?

"Hello?"

“I’m still here, just wrapping my head around your suggestion.”

“Look, you always wait for people to disappoint you. You assume the worst and wait for them to prove you right. But if you wait long enough, you will always find something bad. You will always find a reason to justify why. Nobody’s perfect, okay? You don’t know how to give anybody grace. Not even yourself.”

I hate where Marcel’s going with this. “She could still –”

“No, she really couldn’t have, Emile.” I suck a breath in through my teeth at this. He never uses my name, not unless he has more to say. “Can you imagine how hard it was for her to navigate this situation?”

“What about me!” I can only throw one hand up in the air since I’m gripping my phone with the other. I blame this equally on Marcel and Clarissa/Shauga — wherever she is.

“What about you? You met someone. That’s great. And I –”

“I just want to get back to the plan. The boat is done, and I’m out of here as soon as my ribs feel better.” Though vampires are known to recuperate quicker than humans, it still isn’t instant. And if I’m spending weeks on end out at sea, I want to be in tip-top shape.

“So you’re not at all curious about where she is?” Marcel’s voice is curt, almost like this has something to do with him, which it doesn’t.

“Why are you pushing this? You don’t have enough work to do?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Where am I supposed to look, huh?” I sound angrier than I mean to. Still, I think the vampire has it coming. I’ve never been this pushy when it comes to Marcel’s love life. Can’t he do the same?

“I admit it’ll be hard, but maybe if you get in touch with Agent Todd, he could get a message to her or something. It’s

worth a try.”

“And how will I get in touch with the agent you think double-crossed her?” I ask, shifting my weight between my feet. “Why would he warn her then?”

“Okay, so maybe I just wanted to broach the subject.”

“And maybe I’m telling you to stay out of it.” I hear Marcel sigh heavily into the receiver. I purse my lips together but stay quiet. If he’s going to suggest a plan, it should be at least thorough.

“I bet there’s some office number you could call. U.S. Marshals aren’t spies. They’ve got locations. Even if it’s jumping through hoops, Clarissa is still on planet Earth.”

“What?” Even I can’t follow that last reply.

“They’ve got her laying low somewhere, but she’s still around. Somewhere. Get the ball rolling and maybe you’ll get a surprise call.”

“Okay, so I’m supposed to just twiddle my thumbs until she gets back or something? She was the one who put the brakes on things in the first place. I should respect that.” I manage to swallow despite my dry mouth. The idea of Clarissa/Shaina sitting around somewhere not thinking of me stings more than I care to admit.

“You should respect the fact *that* decision was most likely because she’s a nice girl,” Marcel almost snaps. I chew my lower lip and silently regret telling Marcel about our shared kiss. Things would be so much easier to forget about if I hadn’t said anything.

“And wherever she is, I wish her well.” It’s not a lie, though there’s more to it than that. Sure, I want the best for her, but I also want answers. What about her life was the truth? Was her mother really scared of tsunamis? Did she ever travel around as a kid like she said?

I listen to Marcel as he explains how he’d run into Clarissa/Shaina while shopping one day. “I mentioned Lauren and how you never trusted her. Looking back, her expression was pretty worried.”

“And your point?” I ask, sounding a little too much like a teenager than I prefer. When was the last time I was so frustrated by a situation?

“She slowed things down because she didn’t want to lie,” Marcel explains. “That should mean something.”

I roll my eyes again, even though maybe Marcel has a point. I just wish I knew if I were more worried or angry about this whole thing. Of course, I miss Clarissa/Shaina and want to know what she’s up to. But sometimes, things need to be forgotten. I’m leaning toward thinking this situation is one of those times.

CLARISSA

I knock the back of my head against the wall. Boredom is setting in rapidly, and being left to silently stew in my own head is miserable. This new safe house, arguably even safer than the last, is dull. It's an unassuming, bland little house in the middle of a suburb where no one knows their neighbor's name. It's perfect for government agents who apparently use this space when they want to avoid notice from just about anyone and everyone.

I'm sitting in a small room with one window. The curtains are closed and mandated to stay that way. The door that used to provide any semblance of privacy is gone. I'm on complete display for my current roommates. They are United States Marshals Beth and Luis. Todd's replacements.

Beth walks down the hallway and pauses at my open door for her regular check-in. They do this every fifteen minutes morning, noon, and night. I'm not sure who was more annoying, Todd and his constant lecturing or these two, hovering like overbearing parents.

Usually, they pause, check that I am still alive, and move back on to their little command center in the kitchen. But this time, Beth lingers a little longer.

"How you holding up?" she asks.

I shrug my shoulders. "I'm alive." What else matters? To them, probably not a lot.

"Are you hungry? You haven't eaten anything since we got here yesterday."

“Don’t really have an appetite,” I confess. After everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours, it’s hard to think about doing anything but sleep and mope. But now sleep isn’t coming, and moping has lost its novelty.

“Hm. Well, it’s my job to keep you alive. And you kind of need to eat for me to accomplish my goal. So why don’t you join us in the kitchen and have some of the frozen pizza Luis just pulled from the oven?”

Frozen pizza. I cringe at the thought of the sodium-laden, tasteless, rubber cheese dish on offer. But the thought of pizza in general sparks something in my stomach, and now the noise it’s making is doing little to sell my story to Beth.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. Come on, we’ve got salad and breadsticks, too.”

I reluctantly stand up and slowly follow Beth to the kitchen. Luis is in there cutting the cardboard pizza into slices with a dull kitchen knife. This place feels like a budget hotel despite being presented like a normal family house. Everything just feels slightly off in the way it’s full of emptiness.

“Hope you like pepperoni,” Luis says.

“Doesn’t look like I have a choice,” I reply with a sigh.

Luis raises his eyebrows and looks at me with concern. “My daughter is a vegetarian. I take the pepperoni off of her slices. I could do that if you want.”

I shake my head. “No, that’s... pepperoni is fine.”

Beth makes me sit at the table while Luis places a paper plate with wholesale grocery store food on display. The sight of it makes me ache for an industrial kitchen with a standing mixer and a fully stocked fridge. But, I suppose, there’s something slightly nostalgic about it.

I try to keep that in mind while I chew through the first thing I’ve eaten since lunch with Emile yesterday. The more I eat, the louder my stomach complains. Beth and Luis, having stared me down to ensure I consume enough calories to exist, take their own seats and start eating.

“I want to apologize about Todd,” Beth says between bites of rapidly cooling pizza. “He’s new and everything, but we had no idea how incompetent he really is.”

“Leadership is investigating how exactly he got as far as he did. No one who makes mistakes like that should be put in charge of a witness’ life. Rest assured, he’ll be sorry for his mistakes.”

I frown and stare hard at the wooden table. Somehow, unbelievably, I feel bad for Todd. Sure, he was annoying and an asshole sometimes. Oh, and he almost got me *and* Emile killed with his stupidity! But still. He seemed like his heart was in the right place.

I hope they don’t ruin him, I guess. Still, it’s nice of them to update me on something for once. I wonder if they’ll tell me about the most pressing issue on my mind right now.

“Did they catch the bad guys?” I ask. I’m too tired to formulate my question in an intelligent way. They know what I mean.

“Oh. Yeah, we got them. Hudson and his three lackeys are in the hospital right now. Hudson himself took a nasty blow to the head. He’s in a coma. They all are. But once they all come to, they’ll be booked and charged for attempted murder. At the very least. We have witnesses who saw him shoot at you and your friend out there.”

My friend. I guess that’s all Emile and I ever were, at the end of the day. Would he even call me that much now? He looked so hurt when I confessed everything. I’m not sure he’ll ever even want to see me again, much less consider me his friend.

But regardless, Hudson Judge being in the hospital means one thing right now.

“So, it’s over then, right?” I ask. “You guys got him. I don’t have to hide?”

Luis looks at me sadly while Beth shakes her head.

“It’s not over yet, Shauna. I’m sorry,” Beth says. She reaches across the table and puts a comforting hand on my

shoulder. “This syndicate is bigger than Hudson Judge. And we still need you to testify against them if we’re going to take them down.”

“Which is why...” Luis turns around and rifles through a messenger bag for a moment. Then my heart sinks as he pulls out a stack of very familiar files. “We thought, because of all the inconvenience, we’d let you pick your new alias this time.”

“Wow. How kind of you,” I say flatly. “Also, because of the inconvenience? Since when is the government run like a department store?”

“Take what you can get,” Beth says.

“Fair. Alright, what do we have?” I ask.

Luis spreads three of the files in front of me. One is the alias of Stephanie, a woman in her thirties who came into a lot of money selling her lotion recipe to a major company. The details of which are under a non-disclosure agreement, so she can’t talk about it much. But she’s so happy to be starting her new life as a novelist in the Ozarks. It’s suggested I buy more jewelry for the look.

I open the next file. “Andrea,” I read out loud. “Always loved beaches. Used to be a dancer but suffered a knee injury that ended her dance career. Decides to make the best of it by moving to Florida. Sells custom-made seashell bracelets online.”

“We’ll set you up with a crafting class to teach you how to make the bracelets,” Luis adds.

“This all sounds very miserable,” I say.

“Hey, Andrea gets to live by the beach again! Isn’t that nice?” Beth asks.

Beth and Luis share a glance. I don’t like the way they’re looking at each other, then me, like I’m a stupid child who is ungrateful for her birthday present.

“Shauna... is there a type of alias you’d prefer?” Luis asks.

“Oh, I don’t know. How about a baker in Aura Creek who lives in a rundown house next to great neighbors and the best

running trails in the state?”

Beth shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I know you’re upset about having to go through this again, but your life is still at stake here.”

“Is it, though?” I ask. Luis and Beth sit back, looking surprised. But I’m serious. Hudson Judge was *the* guy. He was the Holy Rollers’ top hitman.

And he sucked! He was an absolute goof who easily fell into the most obvious trap. If that’s the best they could throw at me, then what the hell do I have left to be afraid of?

“What if... what if I don’t want your protection anymore?” I ask.

Beth gasps. Luis bites his bottom lip.

“Shauna, you need to think rationally. A criminal organization wants you dead. They won’t stop with just Hudson,” Beth says sternly. I know she just wants to watch out for me, but I don’t really care.

“But I’ve seen for myself, multiple times, what these guys are capable of. And they aren’t capable of anything! I’ve already survived them twice now. I think I can take whatever they try to throw at me.” I sit back in my chair, feeling like I’m in control of my life for the first time in weeks.

“If you go back to Aura Creek, we can’t guarantee you’ll be safe. We can’t force you to stay in the program, but we also need to insist you do so for your own safety.”

I smile at Luis. “I know you do. You and Beth, and hell, even Todd. You’re just trying to look out for me. But I know what I’m capable of. Whatever they try to throw at me, I can handle it. And I’ll show up in court to testify for you, too. Just give me the time and place, no problem. But until then... I need to live my life. As myself.”

Luis and Beth look upset but eventually come around. Beth begs me to be careful, and I give her a reassuring hug.

“It’ll be alright,” I tell them before I leave. I know it will.

EMILE

I can't sleep. I toss and turn, trying one side of the bed, then another. My shirt is drenched in sweat. So, I pull it off over my head and throw it across the room. The boat chase makes me cringe as I close my eyes. We could've been killed. And then what?

I touch my cheek and wince at the soft bruise I can still feel. I get up and go into the bathroom to inspect the damage. There it is, a blob on my left cheekbone, aged and nearly healing. It is so bold against the whiteness of my skin. I extend my fangs and inspect my mouth, but everything looks normal there.

I've been avoiding Marcel's calls for a few days now. I haven't gone completely no-contact, but I've mostly limited it to answering his text messages. I just didn't want to answer his questions when I still didn't know what my plans really were, but I think it's time to make a decision. It's time to move on instead of just drowning in what-ifs and could-have-beens.

I take out my phone from my discarded pants, finding Marcel's name at the top of my call log. I hesitate for a moment before pushing the button, wondering if I'm ready for this. But I take a deep breath and steel my resolve.

The ring of the phone plays in my ear, each tone feeling like an eternity. Finally, he answers. "Hello?" he says tiredly. "I know we're vampires, but it's the middle of the night, man."

"Yeah, I know. I know. I just wanted to talk for a minute. Is it a bad time?"

There's a brief pause before he replies. "No, it's okay. What's going on?"

His voice carries a warmth that eases my nerves, and I remember no one has ever had my back quite like Marcel. As much as he annoys me sometimes, he's like a brother to me.

"I'm ready," I tell him.

"Ready to go look up Clarissa?"

"No." I scowl even though he can't see me. "I'm going to take my trip. The boat is checked out and ready to go after the... the incident. It's water-ready. I'm feeling better. It was always my plan, anyway, so it just makes sense."

"Yeah," he says uncertainly. "It was always the plan. But plans can change, right? I mean, this was a pretty surprising turn of events. Are you sure just walking away to spend six months on a boat is the next step? Don't you at least want some answers? Closure?"

"She lied!" I remind him. "What else do I need to know? There was never anything between us. She wasn't even being a real person, just a fake identity! So what does it matter now, hearing the details of how and why that happened? I mean, if I was making a movie or something, sure. But in my real life, does it change anything?"

"Doesn't it?" he asks patiently. "Look, I support you. You know that. I support whatever you think needs to come next. I just think you might decide in a few months that your reaction was kind of a knee-jerk one. And by the time you realize you regret that, it's going to be too late. She'll be so deep in whatever new location they sent her to that no one will find her."

I sigh. "I don't need to find her," I insist again. Still, my eye goes to the window, and I find myself gazing at the empty house next door. Something in my gut coils, and I can't help but worry about her.

Even if she lied, it doesn't mean you wish her harm. That's all this is. You'd feel this way about anyone you thought was in danger. Getting chased by hitmen obviously counts.

The thought doesn't bring me any comfort. Instead, allowing myself to recognize that at least some small part of me wants her to be safe only makes that tense feeling in my stomach turn to nausea.

There's nothing I can do to keep her safe, and no way I can check up on her, so I should just let it go. But I can't, not completely, and the sensation of an impending ulcer tells me maybe I never will.

"Look, I was just calling to keep you in the loop," I tell him, evading the subject altogether. "I'm not calling to talk about Clarissa. Or Shauna. Or whoever she is today. I'm calling to tell you my trip is back on."

"Well, I hope you enjoy it," he says, and I can tell he really means it. He doesn't understand or agree with my decision, but he'll always support my right to make it for myself. It makes me feel a little better, at least.

If it's a mistake, it's mine to make. Not like Marcel's doing so hot in the romance department, either. He thinks the best of every situation and sticks his head in the clouds as if it's going to wrap up like some fairytale, but that's not exactly working any better.

I know the thought is a little bitter, and to most people it would only prove that I'm not quite as indifferent as I'm pretending, but it does leave me feeling justified.

"Thanks, man," I say sincerely. "I'll be in touch. But I'll let you get to bed for now, okay?"

My sleep is restless at best, and I can't seem to settle. By the time dawn arrives the next morning, I'm ready to just get my day started. I don't think I could spend another minute in this bed, tossing and turning.

Within a few hours, I'm all packed up and on my way to my boat at the dock. As I head there, a million thoughts play around in my head. *What if Marcel is right? What if this is a mistake?*

My fingers tense around the steering wheel as I second-guess the decision. "It doesn't matter," I remind myself. "You

don't know where she is anyway. What would you do about it? Take out a newspaper ad looking for her?"

I just want to forget the whole thing. Live my life, sail the seas.

It's the only thing that makes sense. Chasing after someone I don't even know is ridiculous. Isn't it?

I realize I'm still a little bitter about the lie. What is it with everybody and lying? Lying to get ahead, lying in relationships, lying for self-aggrandizement? I'm sick of it. I understand the cut-throat nature that's prevalent in most of life.

I haven't made as much money in real estate as I have to not realize people will tell you whatever they need to make a sale. And I'm smart enough to know how that carries through to more than just business. Girls tell you whatever they need to draw you in, especially when you're rich and they just want to get married. Friends, except for Marcel, tell you things to keep you happy if they know you're going to buy dinner Friday night or the next round at the bar.

It's just never what I wanted in a life partner, and I guess that's why I keep avoiding them. I'd rather be alone than spend a lot of time with someone like that. Someone I'm supposed to be able to trust. How do you guard yourself against that? I don't understand how other people make this work. Nobody is really on anybody's side, so why pretend life is a team sport?

I take a detour back to my neighborhood. I don't know what compels me to. My house is dark save for a small porch light illuminating the wooden door. It looks so lonely there, absent of life, and I wonder when the next time will be that someone is there.

Perhaps someday, this could have been a home with kids and a wife, but I don't think that's in the cards for me anymore. Maybe it never was. The yard probably won't see children unless I sell the damn thing someday.

Next door, Clarissa's house is in complete darkness. It is as if it has been abandoned for one hundred years, with vacant-looking windows and weeds starting to spring up around the mailbox. When Clarissa left, it was as if she took all the spirit of the house with her.

But it wasn't really her home, anyway. It was temporary, utilitarian, strictly for the sake of keeping her hidden. In the long run, she ended up being hidden from me.

After standing in the street observing the houses for what seems like half an hour, I turn around and get back in my truck.

I was right the first time. I have to leave all of this behind. I have to go toward the ocean, where the possibilities are endless.

Until both Clarissa and Shauna, and this house, are but a distant memory.

SHAUNA

When the Uber pulls into my former neighborhood, it's both surreal and heartbreaking. I wish I had told Emile sooner. I wish I had said something about my weird situation. Knowing him now, he would have understood. I know I am able to finally tell myself that risking my life by blowing my cover would have been worth it with Emile by my side. That man is all I've ever dreamed about.

My house, although rather clean and just the way I left it, seems dead and gone. It fills me with a longing I cannot shake, the feeling that whatever I had here once is never coming back. Everything has changed, and it can't be unchanged.

It doesn't help that I have no idea where Emile is. I keep looking for him out the window, but his truck isn't even home.

I try to lounge back and watch some TV. It's some show about two pairs of aging ladies yelling at each other over a fancy dinner. Normally, I would have laughed, but I'm too anxious right now. I still want to have an honest conversation with Emile, though the damage is probably done.

Being restless, I go outside and look across the porch to Emile's house. I'm no longer protected by agents, so I'm vulnerable here, but I feel rather liberated. I can't let fear dictate my life.

I let my body take over, and before I know it, I'm walking toward Emile's house. If he isn't here, I'll leave a note or something. I can't wait any longer. I enter the enclosed porch with the hanging ivy and knock on the large wooden door.

The door opens, revealing Marcel.

My heart races as I take a deep breath, mustering the courage to finally unburden myself.

“Hey, Marcel,” I begin tentatively, my voice betraying my anxiety. He looks at me intently, offering me an inviting smile. “I need to talk to you if you’re willing. Just a minute of your time.”

Marcel opens his eyes wide, giving me his full attention. “Of course, Clarissa... er, Shauna, is it? Look, I know things are... well, you know. But I’m still happy to talk to you. I just want you to know that.” I smile, certain Emile must have mentioned more than a few things about the crash. Of course, he did. They’re best friends.

I pick at the side of the door frame. “I think I owe you some kind of explanation so here it goes. You remember that time Emile asked where and how I grew up? I told him I’d been traveling the world with my parents, living this grand altruistic adventure.”

Marcel’s eyebrows quirk in curiosity. “I do recall that. It sounded quite impressive. What’s this about?”

I inhale shakily, the weight of my deception pressing heavily on me. “I made it up, Marcel. The truth is, I’ve been in witness protection, though I’m sure Emile’s said something already.”

Marcel grins. “I might have heard a little about that. Honestly, it kind of sounds exciting.”

I nod, my heart pounding. “And then some. It’s not as glamorous as you’d think, though. I was involved in something... dangerous. There were some mobsters after me, and I had to go into hiding to stay safe.”

Marcel’s gaze remains fixed on me. “I get it. Of course, I do. But couldn’t you have just told him? I mean, he wasn’t going to rat you out to the mob.”

I sigh, my guilt and shame washing over me. “I thought it would be a way to protect Emile from whatever danger I was in. I don’t know. The whole thing was a mess, and I knew I

wasn't supposed to tell anyone. I shouldn't have even gotten close to him at all."

Marcel leans back, his fingers steepled in thought. "So you regret approaching him?"

My voice is barely above a whisper. "No. I regret ruining it. Meeting him was the best thing that ever happened to me, but I let the circumstances stomp all over that. Now he probably will never want to talk to me again, and I could care less that I blew my cover. I should have blown it sooner."

Marcel's expression softens, and he reaches out to place a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "We all make mistakes. What's important now is how you handle it. You need to talk to Emile and come clean about everything."

I swallow hard, my nerves still frayed. "But where is he now? I need to find him."

Marcel offers me a comforting smile. "He started the boat trip that he was always talking about. He's going to be at a port in the Everglades next. If you hurry, you can catch him and make him listen to you. Hold on."

He turns to open a small drawer in a little entry table nearby. Scribbling something down on a piece of paper, he then hands it to me. "This is the name of the port. And underneath is my number if you need to call me. Go find him."

Relief washes over me, and I manage a small smile. "Thank you, Marcel. I'll talk to Emile and make things right. It's time to face the consequences of my actions."

Marcel gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "He's a stubborn man, but just make him listen. I have a feeling it won't be that hard in the end."



AS THE SUN begins to set, I feel a renewed sense of purpose. I shield my eyes from the setting sun as I watch a familiar boat pulling up to the dock. I wait patiently for him to come closer.

Emile's eyes meet mine when he comes within reach, but he looks away uncomfortably and starts to dock, pulling rope.

"I'm sorry, Emile. I never meant to hurt you. You're the only thing that matters to me."

"How do I know that?"

"I'm no longer in the program. I've exposed myself. I'm free."

Emile still looks pensive, standing there. "So you quit and risked your life, just for me? I mean, what we have here means enough to you that you would die?"

I nod, feeling my cheeks heat up. Was this all a big mistake? Do I look like a complete idiot right now? I hadn't really stopped to think that this might be too grand of a gesture for someone I had, essentially, one date with.

"I guess so," I reply uneasily. "I didn't want to be in the program if it meant I had to leave you. And, yes, I guess that means that this was the wake-up call I needed to just come back and hope we could start over being honest. I understand if maybe that's a little too much pressure on a brand-new relationship, though."

My voice starts trailing off at the end, suddenly very unsure of what seemed like a great idea a few minutes ago. I took four Ubers and a plane ride to get here! I decide to keep that information to myself for now, not wanting to look any more desperate than I already do.

There's a very long, awkward silence, but then he grins. "I guess I forgive you. I mean, it sounds like these weren't exactly normal circumstances. But I want to know the whole story, and no more lies, Shauna." He turns around to finish tying up the boat. "It's going to be hard getting that straight from now on."

I walk onto the deck of the ship and approach Emile. "Permission to come on board?"

Emile turns around to face me and then leans forward, wrapping his arm around my waist. I don't resist. I lean into his hard body, accepting the kiss he so delicately plants on my

parted lips. His tongue probes the inside of my mouth, and I feel a strong electric charge in my chest. It feels as though my heart is going to explode.

“You’re too good at this,” I say. I take a strand of his dark hair and put it behind his ears.

Emile leans back, regarding me. He smiles a handsome grin that makes me lose my breath.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he laughs.

I get hungry and grab his chest while I dig into his mouth with my own.

He pulls away, and I immediately frown. Just when things are heating up.

But fortunately, Emile has something else in mind. He crouches down on the floor of the boat, looking up at me. His eyes open wide in a pleading, desperate gaze. I run my fingers through his dark hair.

“Emile,” I say. “You can trust me. I love you.”

Emile smiles, his long white fangs exposed. “I love you, too.” He begins to run his fingers up my leg. “Let me show you.”

Emile begins to unbuckle my jeans, and I shudder in anticipation of what is coming next. Here we are. This is it. A wave of pleasure electrifies every limb and every inch of skin, every molecule in my body.

He takes my hand and leads me into the bunk area of the boat, where we can have a little more privacy. I follow behind him quietly, practically ready to shriek with glee. It feels like everything is finally coming together – literally and physically.

He kisses me deeply, beginning to pull off my shirt. His hands graze gently over my bra, but I want to make the next move. After all my dishonesty, the fact that he’s so willing to overlook it makes me want to show him my appreciation for his flexibility.

And maybe later, I can just show him my flexibility.

I pull down his pants and then slowly work his already hard cock from his boxers. When I take it in my mouth, a pleasure I haven't known in a long time courses from my face to my toes. He moans out loud, and I feel strangely proud of myself.

"Oh, Jesus," he says, taking his right hand and carefully caressing the back of my head. I work over his shaft a bit longer when he pulls away from me, moving me to lay on the bed instead.

"I want a turn," he declares. He finishes stripping off what remains of my clothing, tossing it into a messy pile on the floor. Then he presses down with one hand on my stomach as I squirm, his nose brushing over my pussy before beginning to use his tongue.

The pleasure continues to build for a while before something changes. It takes me a minute to realize that he's using his vampire fangs to gently scrape over my clit. The sensation is unbelievable, a sweet pain that tears at the exposed nerve endings and sends them into overdrive.

"Oh god, baby," I moan, attempting to catch my breath. "I need you so bad!"

In a moment, Emile pulls back and licks his lips. Then he stops and stares at me. "I can't believe this," he pants. "Tell me I'm not dreaming."

"You're not dreaming," I say.

Emile pulls his tight black shirt over his head and reveals his milky white, hard, muscular core. The light from the descending sun forms shadows that accentuate his ab muscles.

I lean up as much as I can, indicating I want to kiss him. He drops over me on the bed and opens his mouth slightly for my tongue to enter. I probe gently, running my hands down his back. He is cold to the touch, but he is a vampire, after all.

Even as we kiss, he brings a finger to run across the lips of my pussy, making me cry out against his mouth. After a few more minutes of playing with me, he positions himself to slide inside.

I moan as he fills me, enjoying the sensation in the most incredible way. If my mind was more coherent right now, I'd probably be amazed that only a few hours ago, I worried that he might never talk to me again, and now we're making love.

But I'm too blissed out to think about anything that deep. I can only feel my muscles melting into the bed as my impending climax grows.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"Yes, oh, my God," I moan.

In that moment, I experience Emile not as just a crush or romantic possibility, but as a person I care deeply about. Our bodies are connected, and there's a bond here that transcends everything else I've felt up till now. As strong as that was, this defies expectation or reality.

My toes curl and the back of my neck heats up as my orgasm builds. He thrusts into me until the sensation spills over. I cry out, squeezing his cock with the force of my orgasm. He pulls out at the last second, stroking himself a few final times before spraying his warm cum over my stomach.

After we both finish, he starts to move away. I grab his hand as if to stop him, but he just winks and presses a light kiss on my forehead.

"I'm just getting a towel to clean you off with," he promises. He rummages around in a cabinet, returning with the hand towel as promised. It's touching to watch as he gently wipes my stomach clean.

He tosses it aside and cuddles up next to me in the small bed. It's barely big enough for the two of us, and we're forced to touch in more spots than we're not, but I don't mind. He pulls a comforter over us, and I relax into his arms.

"I could get used to this," Emile says, turning toward me and planting a kiss on my shoulder.

"You better," I say.

The boat lists back and forth, tied to the dock. The sound of the sucking water in the undercarriage mimics the rhythm

of our collective heartbeats, and I feel more at home in this bed I never saw until an hour ago than I ever did anywhere else.

EMILE

The air is sweltering, a gentle but persistent heat that seems to burn into every pore. An occasional cloud offers a passing respite from the unforgiving glare of the sun. It would be unbearable, apart from the shade, the swirling sea gusts, and, of course, the company.

Clarissa – sorry, Shauna, actually – is testing the rigging on the topsail right now. Her cut-off shirt exposes her trim, tight stomach, and her shorts stretch delightfully over her long legs. Needless to say, since we’ve departed together from the Floridian shores, I’ve been enjoying the view immensely.

Jamaica is nice also, or at least the sandbar where we’ve parked is decent. The sun is relentless, so we try to do most of our sailing at night when we can both breathe easier. Our teamwork is practically flawless now, and I can’t help but feel a little smug as I send a postcard off to Marcel informing him of our latest destination.

“Come get these drinks!” I call out, balancing on the lower deck steps. Shauna turns around in surprise, spinning over to the open hatch immediately.

“Hey! Making drinks? I have the best boyfriend,” she says, reaching down to grasp at me. It’s been a month and a fortnight since we left Florida together, and we haven’t run out of excuses to touch each other yet.

“I wanted to double-check our heading before we set sail again,” I tell as she grabs a glass. This new Clarissa comes with a new-found confidence, and she wears it well. “Figured

we'd take a break to use up some of that fresh mint you picked up two ports ago, then I could get to work."

"Waste not, want not. Salut," she toasts, tipping our glasses together. Taking an obligatory sip, I watch her lips as she takes a long drink "Very nice mojito, babe. I'm impressed."

I shrug casually, acting like it's no big deal. Secretly, I enjoy the compliment way more than I should for such a simple thing. Anything that makes her happy, makes me happy.

Living in such close quarters as we have been on the boat has given us plenty of time to really get to know one another, without any secrets or reservations between us. These past several weeks have been incredible. Even just simply being with Shauna has been beyond my expectations.

"Drinks are easy enough to handle, especially for someone who has lived on a primarily liquid diet before." The joke draws a laugh from her, and we both head up to the bow. The summer heat is still intense this close to the equator, but it has abated enough for me to enjoy the setting sun as I work my way around the boat preparing for our departure.

"I managed to snag some clams today while I was checking the hull. How about oysters for dinner?" she suggests while I work, and I smile indulgently as I notice the sun playing over her golden brown skin.

"Just don't burn the boat down," I tease. "I know you're a good chef, but it's harder to cook on the water."

"Har-har," she quips back with no bite in her tone. "If you aren't careful, I won't cook anything for you anymore. Then what will you do?"

Shauna shoots me a playfully defiant look. The next thing I know, I sweep her into my arms. Her drink sloshes about, but I pull her close anyway and breathe in her ear.

"Looks like you've been busy learning the ropes. Maybe later tonight, you can show me how well." I can feel her stretch her neck out almost like a cat as my hands grope over her body, and I can't resist nipping at her gently.

But then I let her go, not wanting to get too carried away yet. “So, Shauna, have you decided where we’re headed yet?” It’s back to regular conversation, despite the play of seduction that just occurred. I like to keep Shauna on her toes.

“Mexico, my final answer,” she replies. I told her the next stop would be up to her as I’ve set most of the course so far.

I nod and start heading over to the cockpit. Doing a preliminary check of instruments is always my habit before we set underway, and everything is as it should be.

Actually, as I look at Shauna I know everything is actually better than it should be. Without her here, I would have become even more isolated. I would be cut off from the world, lost in calculations and course corrections. I would have been sailing, but I would not have enjoyed myself nearly a fraction as much as I have with her aboard, all jokes aside.

In fact, I don’t think I’d enjoy any part of my life nearly a fraction as much as I could with her.

“Vive la Mexico,” Shauna continues. “Do you plan on doing a tour of the entire Gulf?”

“Maybe.” I shrug nonchalantly. “At the very least, I thought we could make it a bit of a cooking tour as well. You had so much fun trying the food here in Jamaica. If you want to go to Mexico, you might enjoy some real, authentic molé next, if that works for you.”

“Sounds good to me. Why? Did you think I would ever say no to food?” She jokes more easily these days as well, setting up the kit we picked up to grill on the deck.

“Geographically speaking, we’re still pretty close to the eastern seaboard.” I begin, taking a deep breath before releasing it. “Given your recent troubles, I would understand if you wanted to get as far away as possible right now. Or if you’ve changed your mind completely. If you wanted to turn around and go back into protective custody, I would understand that as well.”

Shauna looks off into the horizon for a long moment, sipping her mojito thoughtfully. The quiet between us is no

longer awkward but peaceful, as she gathers her thoughts and I give her the space to answer me honestly. She is careful but open when she answers me, after taking a moment to really consider what I am silently asking.

I don't want anything to happen to you. How much do you trust me?

“Mexico sounds like a great idea,” she reaffirms after a minute. “The fact of the matter is, we don’t know what’s in store for the future. Judge and his goons could wake up tomorrow, or they could wake up thirty years from now. Who knows?”

She sighs. “I can’t spend my life hiding and waiting for them to find me. Tried that once, and it didn’t work, and it almost got you killed in the process. More importantly, I don’t want to live like that anymore, not if it means hiding from the people I care about the most. I’m going to hope they go to jail when they wake up and that’s the end of that.”

“You deserve to have a good life, Shauna,” I agree. “One that doesn’t involve you always looking over your shoulder. I don’t see how they could track you down on the boat, anyway, so I think you’re probably safer here than most places. And you seem happier, too, and that counts for a lot. If anyone does show up, I’m prepared to deal with that.”

“You’ve taught me so much, Emile. Not just about sailing and the world, but about how to be strong and steadfast in the ways that really matter. So no, it doesn’t matter to me whether we sail to Mexico, to Iceland, or even Timbuktu. Just as long as whatever we do, we do together.”

“Oh, Shauna.” I can’t help but reach out to kiss her. She returns the affection with gladdened enthusiasm, and it’s only the sound of shells popping that breaks our reverie. I wipe some errant moisture from her eyes, and then she backs away to move the clams off the heat, even as I reply, “Timbuktu is landlocked, by the way.”

It’s her turn to shrug as she moves to mix up a few ingredients for a sauce. “That is why you’re the captain, and I’m just the lowly skipper.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll make a true sailor out of you yet. Just stick with the grunt work and leave the navigating to me. We wouldn’t want to turn this baby into a ghost ship just yet.”

“Do you think we’ll find any ghost ships around Mexico?” she asks as she sets the food up. I grab a few pillows to sit on from under the cockpit seats, and we join together behind the helm.

“They say there are plenty of them in the Gulf,” I reply. “Nothing the size of the Flying Dutchman, but there are plenty of coastlines that are rockier than people realize. Ships have run aground all over the Gulf of Mexico for centuries, due to the landscape and the weather.”

“I still can’t believe this is your hobby, of all things.” Shauna pulls some crackers from somewhere, and soon enough, the air is filled with rich aromas from the clams and sauce that are only complimented by the salty sea air. “You’re a vampire who searches out for marine legends, ghost ships, and sunken treasure.”

“Admit it, you’re having way more fun talking about flotsam and jetsam with me than working a shift at some bakery right now.”

“I believe right now they are getting their weekend rush, so yes. I absolutely would rather be playing hooky and talking about ghost ships with you while we’re sitting in the middle of the Caribbean.”

We both share a laugh. Looking at one another, we know what we’re really saying underneath our jokes and light conversation. No matter where we go or what we do, whatever adventures the future holds, we want to face them by each other’s side.

EMILE

Here it goes. It's the third, maybe thirteenth, time I've said it, but I'm still sitting in our cozy bed tucked away below deck instead of out there with Shauna. The symmetrical-ish ring I've made from several strands of T-shirt string braided together looks better now that the knot I tied is secure.

I never thought I'd be enjoying a pleasure cruise for two with my girlfriend instead of the solitary trip I originally planned, even if I'm too nervous to give her this ring yet. What if she doesn't like it? What if it's too soon?

Or what if she doesn't want it? I roll my eyes at the thought. Of course, I'll tell her that she can pick out the biggest, best diamond she can find on land later. This ring is more of a placeholder, a symbolic gesture. *She's way too down to Earth to be upset at you for that*, I reassure myself, trying to remind myself that I know her.

Still, I register the fact that I'm chewing my lower lip. So I must be nervous, at least a little. The most beautiful footsteps echo in my ears and a small smile curves across my lips.

Just man up and do it already. A little bravery never killed anyone.

"Except when it does," I say aloud and immediately flinch, wondering if Shauna had heard. I wonder what she's doing up there and realize I'm still on the bed. My eyes haven't left my palm or the ring.

This is not one of those situations, a more level-headed part of me says, and I agree. At least in theory. This is nothing like outmaneuvering Hudson Judge and his goons while they shot at us on the boat. The fact that we just got word they've officially all recovered enough to be sent to jail awaiting sentencing feels like proof this is the right time. Sure, we'll have to get off the boat for a little while for the trial, but I want her to go back to land as my fiancée. If not my wife.

"Hey, Emile," she calls out, and it's just the motivation I need to get on my feet. "Bring me up some sunscreen when you get the chance, por favor? Just the human stuff is fine."

I love the way all the local dialects we've experienced of late have spiced up her vocabulary. I blink a few times and banish all thoughts of backing out. Shauna needs to know how I feel about her and the commitment I'm willing to make, even if the visual token is a collection of cotton strings.

I smooth back my hair, hoping I look my best. It isn't every day I propose, and I want it to be clear that I made an effort. I brush the eyelash from under my cheek and make a wish.

Please say yes. Please say yes. Please say yes.

I hide the ring in my pocket, already second-guessing the manufacturing process and all of the things I could have or should have done. I don't have time to think much about it as the sun hits my face. Shauna is a vision as always, casually leaning against the railing and watching the water.

"Anything good on?" I ask. We've been playfully referring to the wildlife and detritus in the water as see-sea TV.

"Nothing I haven't seen before." She shrugs with a smile, then lifts an eyebrow before adjusting her sunhat. "No sunscreen?"

"Plum forgot," I confess with a shrug of my own. "I'm terrible."

"No, I get it," she replies. "You're already planning my demise slowly but surely. So it begins."

“How dare.” I laugh. I step to her and lean in for a kiss. She graces me with a long peck from her perfectly plum lips. *And they’re just yours.*

She brushes past me with a wink and heads downstairs. “You know what they say about wanting to get something done right the first time.”

“No, go on.”

She ignores my sarcasm and disappears below deck. I take the opportunity to bask in the sun and practice my proposal. Should I get down on one knee? Confess my complete and utter devotion before I show her the ring or after?

I lean against the railing, crossing and uncrossing my arms in an effort to look casual. I finger the ring in the pocket of my white board shorts and settle on one hand out and the other in. The sole piece of jewelry I’ve ever made clings to my sweaty palm as I grow anxious for Shauna’s return.

“Shauna? You need help?” I wonder if my voice sounds normal to her or not. It doesn’t to me.

“Not in the slightest, unless you’re offering. What kind of help are we talking about?” She comes back up and onto the deck holding two glasses of wine. I sip my favorite as she does the same, warming to notice she knows me well enough to select one of my personal blends teeming with vitamin D and other crimson nutrients.

“Any and all kinds,” I say, winking as I take another drink, this time a more generous one. I let the tart flavor envelope my taste buds as Shauna laughs.

“Famous last words.” She chuckles. “I’ll remember that the next time I want my food chewed for me.”

“I take it back,” I begin. “But this, I never will.” I pull out the ring still clinging to my palm and hold it up to her.

The slight breeze blows it out of my hand, but I catch it before it can hit the deck. I’m painfully aware of how dismal the thing looks and hope Shauna won’t think the same. It was meant to be kind of a funny gesture that seemed cute at the

time, but now the pit in my stomach thinks I made a huge mistake.

“Is there an echo in here?” Her question makes no sense to me, especially with the curious tone. Does she not realize this is serious and I’m proposing right now?

“Echo?” I tilt my head and wonder how I could have broached this subject better. My stomach is doing somersaults, but I take a deep breath and gulp down the fear gurgling up my throat. I need to get this request off my chest before it gets any bigger.

“Sorry,” Shauna begins, opening up her own hand to reveal a ring of her own, only made from what I think is mostly some fishing line. “I could have been more clear. I made it kind of to be funny about a week ago, but then I just keep carrying it around in my pocket. Maybe because girls don’t normally propose. Maybe because it’s just a stupid piece of string.”

I grin broadly at her. “I knew you would appreciate what I was trying to do here.” I start getting down on one knee now, my nerves starting to dissipate in the perfection of the moment even if she still, technically, hasn’t given me her answer.

“Ah! Hot deck! Hot deck!” I bolt up, rubbing my pale leg. I worry for a minute that I’ve ruined the moment, but Shauna is still smiling.

“Need some ice?” she asks anyway, even though I can tell she’s anxiously waiting for what comes next.

“I need you,” I say, proffering the ring for her admiration.

“Oh, wow, this fits perfectly,” she declares as she slides it on.

“It doesn’t,” I tease. “And that’s okay. You can pick out a nice ring on shore sometime, anything you want.”

“This is a nice ring,” she argues. Her face says that she loves it, and I decide to take it as the success that it is.

“Third time’s the charm,” I say, and she smiles.

“That the number of people you’ve made rings for?” she asks playfully.

“The amount of lifetimes I want to spend with you,” I reply. I gaze at her and see nothing but love in her eyes. “For starters,” I continue, qualifying my statement with a wink. “We’ll see how I feel after that.”

“Ditto,” she says, motioning for me to hold out my hand. When I do, she slides on the ring that she made me. It can only fit on the pinky, but it’s better than nothing. “How does it feel?”

I pause for a moment, considering the question. It’s tight, and it only feels tighter with each passing second. Then it stops feeling... Well, it stops feeling like much of anything. “It’s still there, right?”

I try rolling the ring off my finger, but it doesn’t work right away. In a flash, I’m searching my back pockets for my usual Swiss army knife. I’m elated that we’re in the middle of the ocean and not on the side of the road.

I manage to pull the army knife out, but it clatters to the deck before I can use it.

“Nope, I got it,” Shauna offers, scrambling to pick it up. I’m busy rubbing my currently purple-tipped pinkie with two fingers.

“Nope,” I echo. “I was hoping that wouldn’t fall out of your mouth when asking you to marry me.”

She kisses me, nearly taking my breath away but not quite. It takes her decadent smile to do that as she pulls back.

“I hate to break the mood, but if you don’t get this off, I might lose the finger,” I remind her. She giggles and hurriedly complies, making her way through the fishing string so that my finger is once again free.

“Sorry. I guess my ring was more like a trap,” she apologizes. She bites my chin playfully, and I can feel her shoulders shake in what I assume is gentle laughter.

“Your bite skills could use some work.”

“Are you offering your fiance lessons? Because your fiance is accepting.” She kisses me again. “Promise we’ll

outmaneuver clumsy mobsters forever.”

“If they keep coming, absolutely. I’d like to hope we can branch out someday, maybe outmaneuver clumsy salesmen or something new, but I’ll take what I can get.” I rub my fingertips up and down her arm, and I can see the goose pimples rushing on her skin at the touch.

Before long, we’re kissing again. My hands are all over her, and I feel a deep rumble coming from my chest. I run my hands through her brown hair, which has started growing out during this trip.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” I confess. “Shauna, Clarissa. Whatever you want me to call you. Every version of you is a dream come true.”

She smiles. “I love you, too. More than anything. Bagels included. Crepes even included!” She plays with one of my earlobes, then the other. For a big, tough man, I feel a little like melting butter.

“I was waiting for you to include the crepes,” I say instead.

“You can cross it off your bucket list then,” she replies, and I savor the taste of my fiance’s lips, glad I’ll be able to endlessly.

The End

To read more about Clarissa and Emile join my newsletter at:

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