



# Billionaire's Surprise

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Fray

I see. I want. I take. That's my mantra, but it's always been applied to business deals. Never in my life have I used it in regard to a woman. At least, not until I met Emerson Blake, the woman of my dreams, who I spied across a crowded bar. I spent ten minutes with her and immediately knew I'd spend the rest of my life loving her. But she lives half a country away, and that's way too far from my bed and my life in New York City. Oh well, I've overcome worse obstacles. She doesn't know it yet, but she's about to get the Christmas surprise of a lifetime.

Emerson

Three months ago, we had ten perfect minutes together. That's all it took for Fraser Cassel to impact my life. Everything shifted, and I didn't even realize it until my thoughts returned to him over and over. I obsessed over a guy I had barely met and would never see again. I longed for him. So when I unexpectedly win a cruise, it seems like a good way to get my head on straight again.

Then Mr. Obsession walks in, and my plans for fun and sun and forgetting him go out the porthole. All I can imagine is spending hours in his arms.

This time, we have more than ten minutes. We have seven days. Will they be enough to last a lifetime?

Yeah. I doubt it, too.

This book was originally released as Billionaire's Christmas Cruise but has been extensively revised and given expanded epilogues.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

# Page 1

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One

Emerson Blake

Eyes wide with awe, I felt like Rose staring up at the Titanic. The gleaming white cruise ship before me washuge!Sure, I knew all the stats on it because that's who I was. I'd immediately looked into the ship when I'd won this all-expenses-paid trip.

And holy mackerel... No one in the office where I worked had even known our security firm had put us all into a pool to win this extra special Christmas bonus. And weren't they all super jealous that Emerson Blake—that would be me—from the coding team had won.

There I was, minding my own business when this group of people,the awards committee, had converged on me, interrupting me at a critical moment in updating a massive line of code and wiping out a couple hours of work that I'd had to re-do. The moment had been a perfect fucking storm—being the center of unwelcomed attention, my project taking a sharp left turn into hell, winning a prize I didn't want...

All I could do was stare at them with a super-fake expression while they presented thisreally expensiveprize.

Everyone was envious, some a little snotty, and I was stuck. How did the new girl say thanks but no thanks?

She didn't. She couldn't. Even if she was deathly afraid of the ocean and more than a little afraid of large bodies of water deeper than her ankles, like lakes and pools and

hot tubs. It was crazy since I lived in Chicago, right on Lake Michigan! But I just didn't go over to Navy Pier or the Lakefront Trail or Lake Shore Drive, if I could avoid it.

Water. Me. Ugh.

And so here I was. Way too close to the ocean, breathing in the salty air from the lapping water. Looking up at a mammoth boat and remembering the cruise ship on its side in the Mediterranean that had been all over the news when I was a teenager.

Okay...deep breaths, Em. You've got this. Ships are safer than airplanes. You know that, and you've managed to fly with no problems.

Because I wasn't afraid of planes. I loved to fly. Just recently, I'd taken a fun, long-weekend trip to New York City for my college friend, Laura's, engagement party. And that had been great. Of course, the Manhattan didn't feature huge expanses of water—if you ignored that NYC was essentially an island, and just like in Chicago, I never saw said water. And I stay way back from the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, as well as the one in Rockefeller Plaza. Just in case.

I sighed, turning toward the huge crowd waiting to board the ship. I'd always envisioned just walking up the gangplank and boarding. Nope. They'd checked my luggage through security, much as would happen if I were flying, and now, I was standing on this maze-like corral, which wove upward toward the ship, along with all the other cattle—um, passengers—waiting to board.

Pulling out my phone, I took a few pictures. People back at the office were sure to ask about the sights. Then I flipped to my photo album to look at how the snaps had turned out. Almost unconsciously, my thumb scrolled me back to the NYC pics from three months ago. I didn't have many since I'd offloaded most of them to the cloud. But there was one I looked at all the time.

Him.

Fraser Cassel.

It was silly, really, that I was so hung up on the guy who'd been in and out of my life in what amounted to a split-second in the whole scheme of things. We'd met at a new club that my friends wanted to check out, though in truth, all the places were new to me since I wasn't from New York. We'd stopped in before the Broadway show we were attending. Then I'd met him.

Talk about being thunderstruck... I'd never had such an instant reaction to a guy. He was like... I don't know. A modern Clark Gable? Yes, my affinity for old movies was showing. But God, he was so put together and smoldering. I'd itched to drag him into a dark corner, push my hands into his hair and kiss him as if he were my last meal. The way he devoured me with his piercing dark eyes told me he'd like the same.

We'd settled for having a drink in the VIP lounge and learning a little about each other. I told him why I was in New York, and he'd revealed he was a businessman of some kind, at the club with his brothers to celebrate closing a deal. The whole time, I couldn't take my eyes off him, and I'd wanted to kiss him so bad. Again with that outlandish need.

I didn't cave, not wanting to be one of those drunk girls who regrets losing control on vacation and hopes the repercussions don't follow her home.

I'd still left with regrets.

My finger traced his image on my phone, inadvertently blowing up the picture and magnifying his model-like features. He had dark hair and eyes like me, but we were hardly a matched set.

I was kind of curvy, kind of bookish, kind of plain. Men didn't give me a second glance, so it had stunned me when Fraser had. I swore the man should be on the silver screen or gracing the covers of books. Women probably swooned in his path. But he'd zeroed in on me, and he hadn't let go until he'd escorted me safely to my cab—along with the other girls with me, of course.

His fingers had feathered over my cheek, such longing in his eyes, as we'd said goodbye. I thought I heard him say for now, but that was probably my imagination. No. There was no probably about it. It was my imagination. I mean...three months had passed. Besides, we were strangers who'd spent ten minutes together in a bar. We didn't even live in the same part of the country.

Now, I was taking a cruise with almost a thousand more strangers over the winter holiday. It could be a good opportunity. If I let it be one. Maybe, I'd meet someone who wouldn't make fun of me for fearing water, yet inexplicably spending a full week on a boat. Nice idea, but all I wanted was the guy I'd probably never see again. At least, the ship had a library and two theaters and a ton of shows, so I'd just keep myself busy that way. Maybe, I'd spend some time in the Caribbean sun getting a tan that everyone back in snowy Chicago would be envious of.

The first order of business was to look over the excursions available and pick what I'd do. I'd been told I didn't have to choose them before boarding. As a prize winner, they were holding open a spot for me in all the activities at every port, but I would need to decide today, so they could open up whatever I didn't want to other passengers. That was a nice perk.

Perspiration was beginning to bead beneath my collar when the line finally started to move and I could see people boarding the ship. As I neared, loud, festive music reached me, and a buzz of excitement thrilled through the crowd. Ahead of me, a group of girls bopped to a dance version of Santa Baby. I grinned, kind of wishing my college friends were with me on this trip. We'd had so much fun in New York.

Who knew what we'd get up to if let loose on a city-sized ship?

Surprising excitement vibrated through me. Anticipating the trip of a lifetime, my steps were rapid as I hurried along the final gangplank into the ship where gregarious crew members took pictures, handed out ship IDs that were keyed to individual staterooms, and welcomed everyone aboard. They directed passengers toward the party on the upper deck for food and fun until we embarked. Apparently, we weren't allowed to go to our rooms until after departure. I didn't plan to spend much time in the cabin anyway, so it was all cool.

I grabbed some fries from the deck grill and avoided the dance party at the pool's edge. The crowd was fun to watch. One of the cute cruise directors was leading the dance, his short springy dreadlocks bouncing with each move.

When it was finally time to go down to the cabin, I was exhausted. It had already been a long day. Who knew it was such a production to get aboard then set sail? If I ever cruised again—Ha! Unlikely—I'd be prepared. But now, I just wanted to sprawl out on my bed for a few minutes before dinner.

## Page 2

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At my passageway, the porter in charge of that section greeted me and told me his name was Marco. After, taking my name, he nodded then led me down to the doorway with my bags outside.

He opened the door and gestured me inside. “I’ll bring these through for you. Take a look around. If you need anything, at any time of day, call the number for the porter on your desk. It will come right to me or whoever is covering for me overnight, and we’ll take care of whatever you need.”

“Okay,” I murmured, overwhelmed as I looked around. I’d expected a tiny interior cabin with no window. Before me was an enormous set of rooms. The main sitting room had yawning double doorways off to the right and left, with a small eating area in one, and a spacious bedroom with a king-sized bed in the other. Straight ahead was a sliding door that led to a wide deck with another table and a pair of chairs. Despite my aversion to water, it was beautiful. Right now, there was nothing but ocean, waves glittering in the sun, for as far as the eye could see. Near that door stood a silver-and-gold bedecked Christmas tree, its white lights glimmering in the evergreen branches.

“Wow...” I whispered.

In awe that this was for me, I turned in a circle. That’s when I realized two things. First, Marco was gone. Second, there were extra bags standing beside mine.

Well, crap. Were my luggage and I in the wrong room?

I started for the door, intent on finding Marco and getting things straightened out. On

the way, a beautiful vase of roses in white and red caught my eye. Instead of baby's breath, spiky holly leaves completed the arrangement, giving it a holiday feel. The envelope beside it drew my attention. My name was emblazoned across the cream-colored surface, igniting my curiosity but reassuring me that I was in the right place.

I'd catch Marco in a minute. First, the message. Carefully, I opened the flap and pulled out the card.

Emerson,

Welcome aboard. Here's to the trip of a lifetime, the first of many.

No signature.

Were these from the cruise line? From the company where I worked?

My brow furrowed, hating a puzzle I couldn't solve. Just then, the whir of the card reader announced the opening the door's lock, and I swung toward it, hoping it wasn't Marco telling me I was in the wrong room after all.

Two

Fray Cassel

"So, everything's set for tonight?" I asked my brother, Luke, for the third time in an hour.

"Jesus, Fray!" Luke ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "Yes. Everything's set. Your trap has been sprung on this poor, unsuspecting girl, okay?"

"It's not a trap," I argued. "It's romantic."



“It’s creepy.”

“Shut your face.” I rolled my eyes at him. “An all-expenses-paid, luxury cruise is not creepy.”

I mean, I’d had to give the security company she works for a huge recommendation in order to bring them in on my plan, but they were highly regarded and on the list of candidates for the new hotel project anyway, so it was good. I’d get the girl and network for my family’s company. That wasn’t creepy.

“It is when it’s a front to get a girl to fall in love with you.” Luke leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I still don’t get what’s up with you and this chick.”

“I don’t know how else to explain it to you,” I said. “The minute I saw her, I knew we were meant to be together. My entire future played out in front of me, and she was there every step of the way. Love at first sight and all that. It was fate that took us to that club that night.”

“It was happy hour that took us to that club that night,” he reminded me. “And she was at an engagement party for a girl who didn’t seem all that enthused to be getting married.”

“Huh,” I said. “I didn’t notice anyone but Emerson.”

“I remember.”

Luke was right; it had been the beer special that had gotten us to decide on Bradford’s that night. We’d just closed a massive deal to win the construction of a new hotel, and my brothers and I were out to celebrate. Our contracting firm was one of the best in the state, but a lot of developers had been pulling in talent from outside the area, so we’d been a little nervous about this one.

But it had all been for nothing. The owner had loved that we're a family-run business, and our portfolio was impeccable. So we'd closed with signatures and handshakes, then all five of us Cassel men had taken to the club to enjoy the fruits of our labor.

We hadn't been inside Bradford's for more than five minutes when I'd seen Emerson. My gaze had been drawn to her like a magnet, and I was a goner. Her dark, sable locks had moved in time with the sway of her hips to the music. She was laughing at something someone had said to her, and the curve of her lips instantly made my pants uncomfortably tight across my crotch.

I'd walked directly to her. I'd had no clue what I'd say, but I'd known without a doubt I had to talk to her. I had to know the name I'd someday yell out in ecstasy.

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She'd seen me approaching, and I'd taken it as a good sign when she'd stood her ground, waiting for me, interest akin to mine lighting her eyes. Had she walked off the dance floor, I wasn't sure if I would have followed her. I didn't want to come across predatory.

But I'd known she was mine, so maybe, I would have pursued.

"Hi," she said, turning that radiant smile up at me.

"Hi." I held out my hand. "Fraser Cassel."

"Emerson Blake." Lightning arced through me as she slid her palm against mine.

"Can I get you a drink?" I asked.

"Have one." She held up her glass.

"Right." I carded my fingers through my hair and looked around. I spotted a hallway that obviously contained VIP rooms, and an idea hatched. "My brothers and I have a lounge." I pointed toward the hallway. "Would you like to join us for some champagne?"

"Champagne?" she laughed. "Are you celebrating, or are you really that smooth?"

"Oh, we're celebrating." I pulled out my phone and shot an urgent text to my brother, Bennett, telling him to get us one of those rooms immediately. "Our firm closed a big deal today."

“That’s nice,” she said. “Well, I’m here with my friends, so I really should get back to them. But thank you for the offer.”

My heart pounded. I couldn’t let her escape.

“Well, obviously, they’re invited,” I said quickly. “I wouldn’t dream of asking you to accompany me alone to a roomful of strange men.”

“So you agree you’re strange?” she asked. Her voice held a note of teasing.

“Not me,” I explained. “My brothers, though? Yeah. They’re all weird. Best to bring your friends along.”

“One drink,” she warned. “We have tickets to a show soon, and we fly out in the morning.”

“Of course,” I agreed.

Emerson corralled her four friends, and the ten of us made our way to the room Bennett had procured. Looking back, it had been crazy to drop five thousand dollars to get a few more minutes with Emerson, but she was worth it. I would have paid ten times that amount. Or more.

I’d been disappointed when she’d stuck to the one drink agreement, though. All I’d been able to learn about her was that she lived in Chicago and had a quick and wicked sense of humor.

The rest of her friends had been nice, and they’d all seemed to get on with my brothers, but that was about all I’d noticed in regard to them. My attention had been glued to Emerson. And when she’d left, she’d taken a piece of my heart with her.

Now, I was about to get hers in return.

“So she accepted the cruise offer,” I said, running back through my ingenious plan with Luke. “Which is good. When I started setting this up, I hadn’t realized it would be over Christmas. That could have been a disaster. She’ll be assigned to the suite, which will be decorated for the holiday and have a big Christmas tree in it. Once I’m sure she’s settled, I’ll show up and let her know the accommodations are actually for two. For us. She’ll find it incredibly endearing that I’ve tracked her down, she’ll fall into my arms, then into my bed, and we’ll live happily ever after. And on Christmas morning, she’ll wake up to tons of gifts under the tree, including one small, very special velvet box.”

“Boy, you’ve thought this all out, haven’t you?” Luke asked, his tone obviously amused. “You’re like Father Christmas. Or stalker boyfriend.”

“I’m not a stalker,” I scoffed. “I told you. It’s terribly romantic.”

“If you say so, but okay, fine. Let’s say it’s romantic. What are you gonna do if she doesn’t remember you?”

“We’re going to get married,” I said. “How could she forget me?”

“Who are you and what did you do with my shark of a brother who strikes fear into competitors?”

“Right here.”

“Um,” he muttered, eyeing me in disbelief. “Well... You are the idiot who paid five grand to spend ten minutes in a room with her. That’s probably pretty hard to forget. I still don’t get what’s gotten into you.”

I glared at him. “Shut up. Look, there’s no way she forgot me. I’m telling you, when our eyes met across that dance floor, we both knew we were destined to be. It was fate.”

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“Whatever you say,” Luke acquiesced, still sounding as he he might sneak me into the psych ward. He wasn’t wrong, though. This was out of character for me, but he’d understand when he met his woman, just like all the stories we’d been told about our older relatives. One look and...lightning.

“Okay, the ship departs tonight at three p.m.,” he sighed. “The jet’s ready, so you should probably get going, so you can get to JFK. You know Midtown traffic will be a bitch.”

I opened my credenza drawer and pulled out the engagement ring I’d purchased the day after that night at Bradford’s. Slipping it into my pocket, I grabbed my briefcase and stepped around the desk.

“My bags are on the plane?” I asked. My brother rolled his eyes, probably annoyed I’d ask him and not my assistant.

Luke stood, rather than giving me shit, and intercepted me on the way to the door. He straightened my tie while he shook his head. “Yes, everything is set, your staff took care of it hours ago. Though I still have no clue why you had the crew contact me, instead of you.”

“I was in a last minute meeting with Brothers Construction about the solar installation for the Grammer and Brixton condos.”

He shook his head. “You’re a crazy person. We have people for that.”

“I’m in love, man,” I replied, rather than address my perceived insanity. My gaze

pleaded with him to empathize with my plight. “You’ll understand it someday. When you meet yourone, you just know. Emerson is it for me. I knew it in a moment.”

“Well, I hope you can convince her of that,” Luke said.

“Christmas miracles happen, Luke,” I told him. “I’ll call you from the ship to check in on things.” I wasn’t exactly running off to woo my woman at an optimal time, but in our business anoptimal timedidn’t exist.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s the least of what you need to worry about.” He slapped me on the back. “I’ve got things covered. Go get her, champ.”

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I made it to the ship with plenty of time to spare, which was both good and bad. I definitely didn’t want Emerson to see me until we were already out to sea. Not that I was worried she’d be unhappy about my arrival. But I figured it would be more romantic to have the ocean on all sides while we enjoyed champagne on the balcony and celebrated our good fortune to be reunited.

At least, that was the story I was sticking to. In all honesty, part of me was nervous she’d be angry I’d foisted this surprise on her. For that the reason, I’d insisted on dual beds in the room. I wasn’t interested in forcing her into bed with me, to sleep or for any other reason. That wasn’t how I operated.

I’d earn her trust first. Which could be tricky. I’d been a little hasty in the details of the trip, so the subterfuge might work against me at first. But I was convinced the ends justified the means in this case. She’d see reason once she realized she was in love with me, too.

My future on my mind, I killed time at one of the bars, nursing a scotch to calm my



nerves. Once the noise level from the on-deck bon voyage party subsided and people started wandering inside again, I figured it was my chance to reveal my presence and my plan to Emerson.

My bags had already been taken to the room, so if Emerson had done any exploring, it was possible she was already aware something was amiss. My heart pounded as I made my way toward the door to our cabin. I couldn't hear anything on the other side, so I steeled myself, pressed the keycard to the reader, and when the lock disengaged, I pushed open the door.

Emerson stood in front of the flowers I'd sent. The Christmas tree was behind her, positioned right in front of the wall of windows facing the ocean. The sight took my breath away. I couldn't have arranged a more perfect reunion than the scene before me.

"Emerson," I said, meeting her stunned gaze.

"Fraser?" Her chest heaved as she visibly struggled to catch her breath. "What the hell are you doing in my room?"

Three

Emerson

My heart slammed against my chest wall, and I could barely breathe as I stared at Fraser Cassel, the man who'd consumed my thoughts, over and over, for the past three months.

"Our room," he corrected.

My head tilted, and I probably looked like a confused puppy. "What?"

“Ourroom.”

“I don’t think so. I won this...” I trailed off when he grinned, and things started clicking into place. Just like spotting an error hidden deep in a line of code, I realized the situation wasn’t what I’d been led to believe. “What do you have to do with this?”

He shrugged. “I wanted more time with you, so...I arranged more time with you.”

I glanced at the king-sized bed then looked pointedly at him, a brow lifted. My hand flung out toward the offending item of furniture that had looked so comfy just moments ago. “I’m not sleeping with you.”

Even if I really, really wanted to. I wanted to kiss him and have him follow through on that all too-brief-caress of my cheek. I needed to feel his lips against mine, his weight on me, all those hard muscles—

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And I needed to get a grip; that's what I needed. And not a grip on Fraser, though I craved the opportunity to touch him. He stepped closer to me, and I nearly got weak-kneed from his spicy scent, undiluted by all the other bodies as it had been in the club. Dear God, how had I forgotten how good he smelled? He smelled like...Christmas and fantasies. Not overpowering but just right.

He glanced toward the sleeping area and frowned. "Yeah, that's a mistake."

"I'd say," I retorted, bristling. "That was quite an assumption to make—"

"I meant it's a mistake there's only one bed. There are supposed to be two. The ship only has single bedroom suites, but this one was supposed to have two beds in it. Let me call the porter."

For some reason, the information disappointed a part of me. Sometimes, my inner self made no sense. I wanted Fraser, and sleeping with him so soon would be wrong. Propriety and all that.

I crossed my arms over my chest, creating a barrier between us when I really wanted to step closer. "What? He's just going to wheel this one out and wheel in two different beds? I don't see that happening." I shook my head. "We're adults. We can figure this out, I guess."

"As tempting as that offer is, I don't want to push you into anything."

I looked around then raised my brow at him again. "Um, I'd say you're a little late on that count. You manipulated me into taking a cruise with you. I

mean...seriousmanipulation that involved other people.”

“I was being romantic,” he defended.

I fought a swoon.No one had ever done anything like that for me.

Still, I shoved aside any soft feelings. “Or a stalker.”

He sighed. “That’s what my brother said.”

“Smart man.”

All amusement left his face. “You’re not frightened are you? Grand gestures aside, I just wanted us to have time to get to know each other. I promise you’re completely safe with me. I just used my connections to find out things about you.”

I coughed into my hand, saying, “Stalker.”

Fraser shook his head and lifted the phone next to the beautiful flowers he’d sent me.

“Hello, I’m calling from the Blake-Cassel suite. We have a small problem that needs to be corrected. I specified two beds, and there’s only one.” He listened for a moment then glanced at his watch. “Yes, thank you. That will be fine. We have second seating, so we’ll be out of your way.”

After he hung up, he turned to me. “Do you want to get ready for dinner? We have second seating today, which means we need to be down there in about an hour. Marco will correct the bed situation while we’re out, so we should keep our things out of the way in there.”

“Marco’s going to...”

Fraser took my hand and guided me into the bedroom. I should have been nervous, having this strange man lead me toward a mattress, but I wasn't. Maybe, I wasn't as smart as purported.

To my surprise, he lifted the edge of the bedding and showed me the base of the bed and the latches holding everything secure. "The rooms come with one or two bed options, and all the beds convert."

"Well, I apologize for calling you a perv. I guess."

"You didn't."

"I thought it." I shrugged and headed back to the other room for my suitcase. "Thank you for the awesome cruise and all the excursion options. I'll decide tonight what I want to do. I intend to make the most of all the money you must have spent on this. Wouldn't want to waste your grand gesture when you could have just showed up and taken me to coffee."

"Coffee." Looking down, he shook his head and huffed a sigh as if that idea hadn't ever occurred to him. He appeared chagrined when he met my gaze again. "We can choose some activities together."

"Well, sure, I guess. I mean, of course." If a hot guy, who managed to lower my IQ by fifty points, wanted to spend time with me, who was I to say no? Seriously, I could barely function while he was in the room. And I should have figured out the bed thing without making accusations. I was a little embarrassed by that, but who knew separating frames was a thing on cruise ships—besides Fraser and the ship's crew, that is?

"Wonderful."

I dragged my suitcase over to the side of the sitting room and opened it to retrieve my toiletries. Then after grabbing my garment case, I headed toward the bathroom. On the way, I paused and turned to face Fraser.

“So...in the spirit of getting to know each other, and since we’ll be planning joint excursions, you should know I’m terrified of big bodies of water. Full disclosure, I’m not fond of small bodies of water, too.”

Horror dawned over his handsome features. “Wait...”

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“You want the bathroom first?”

He shook his head slowly, but I already knew that’s not what he meant.

His hand scrubbed over his forehead, his other hand planted on his hip, as he processed. “So...I gave an expensive cruise to a woman who hates water?”

“Yep. That sums it up.”

“Shit,” he muttered.

I closed the distance between us then went on tiptoe and brushed my lips over his cheek. Dropping to flat feet, I patted the spot I’d kissed. “Gotta bone up on those stalker skills, Fray.”

“Yeah,” he growled, and the self-annoyed sound raked across my senses. To my shock, I felt myself get decidedly warm and damp at my center. That had never happened.

Well, except for in New York when he’d gotten me totally turned on, just by standing there being all sexy and intense.

“Anything else I need to know?” he asked. “Any other fears?”

“No, not really. I mean, after my parents died in a boating accident, I was raised by my aunt, who passed away last year. But you probably know that about me.”

“Boating accident. I’m firing my PI,” he muttered under his breath. “I’m sorry, Emerson.”

“I was pretty young when it happened.” I kinda felt bad for the guy, but he had crossed all kinds of lines to get me here, so it wasn’t too sorry. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.”

And I really wanted to. To figure out things between us. He’d gone to an awful lot of effort to get me here. And there was just something about this man. He drew me.

Hell, he’d been drawing me for months, though I’d known I would never see him again. How many times had I looked at his pic on my phone? Too many. I couldn’t say with confidence, if I had his connections and money, I wouldn’t have snooped into him, as well. Though... Knowing me, I would have gone with the just showing up for coffee option.

Four

Fray

I sat on the edge of the bed and gripped my head in my hands as I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

Her parents died in a boating accident, and she’s afraid of water. Well done, Fray. You moron.

How the hell was I supposed to fix this?

Shooting to my feet, I pulled the box with the engagement ring from my pocket. I could ask her to marry me right now. Maybe, that would prove I wasn’t a total jerk.



No. No, it wasn't time yet. I went back into the living area and tucked the box deep in the tree branches, where it would live until Christmas morning. Much like sleeping together, I didn't want to jump the gun with her.

I heard Luke laughing in my head. Yeah, laugh his ass off at this for sure. Of course, six days wasn't long to wait, and it would still be considered jumping the gun, but whatever. I knew I wanted to spend forever with Emerson, and I wanted that time to start immediately.

Touching my cheek, I thought back to the small kiss she'd given before going to get ready for dinner. Did she sense we were destined, too? She hadn't seemed scared or angry with me, just mildly annoyed. Even a little amused. That was a good sign. Her stalker comments sounded as teasing as if they'd come from my brother.

Wait... They were both teasing, right?

"Emerson?" I called out. I could hear her moving around the bedroom area but didn't want to interrupt her privacy if she needed it.

"Yes?"

"Can I come back there?"

"It's your room," she said.

"Our room," I countered as I walked in.

When I saw her, I lost all ability to think or speak for several moments. She was absolutely stunning. Her long, dark locks were twisted into some fancy hairdo and pinned up to show off her graceful neck and throat. Her black dress hugged every delicious curve of her body, ending with a little flair just below the knee, drawing

attention to her supple calves. Her heels were low, sensible, but strappy, and cute pink-painted toenails peeked through.

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“Fine, our room,” she huffed. She slid dangling silver earrings into her ears then looked back at me. “Did you need something? Are you okay?”

Her eyes narrowed in concern as she stared at me.

“You’re gorgeous,” I said, unable to come up with any other words.

I stalked quickly across the room and pulled her into my arms. Her gaze widened, but she didn’t pull away.

“May I kiss you?” My voice was a rasp, as she’d stolen my voice, too. The fact I resisted claiming her mouth like a caveman showed I had more restraint than I felt. I wanted nothing more than to throw her onto the mattress, rip that dress off her body and never let her go. But in this situation, I needed to be more careful than with the trickiest billion-dollar negotiation I’d ever handled. She had to know I respected and valued her, that I loved her, not just that I desired her.

“On the forehead like a good brother,” she said, a weird twang in her voice.

“What?” I stared down at her in confusion. The words sounded familiar, but I had no idea what she was talking about.

“I’m sorry. You startled me, and you look so much like Clark Gable. That quote’s from *Gone with the Wind*. I’m a movie geek, one of the reasons I’d planned to haunt the ship’s theaters—while I avoided water.” She shook her head then stared toward the floor.

I lifted her chin with my finger, hiding my inner wince at the reminder of my gaff. When her gaze locked on mine, I searched for hesitation, and when I found none, I leaned forward and softly pressed my lips to hers.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” I whispered against her mouth before pulling away. “And I better get ready for dinner before I forget myself.”

She nodded and stepped away. I mourned the loss of her in my arms already, but it was the truth. If I didn’t change, we’d be late—or we’d never make it to the dining room, at all.

I snagged a suit from the closet and headed into the bathroom, glad Marco had gotten most of my things put away before Emerson had arrived.

After dressing, I stepped back into the bedroom and pulled open one of the top dresser drawers. As requested, there were multiple jewelry boxes stowed away there. Pulling out the wide, flat necklace box, I took it with me to find Emerson in the front room.

She sat on the sofa, her legs tucked under her, while she stared out the wall of windows. Her gaze looked calm, but her tension was hard to miss. The ocean view agitated her.

“Em?” I asked softly, not wanting to startle her.

“Are you ready to head down?” she asked, uncurling herself and getting to her feet.

“Almost,” I said. “I thought you might like to wear this tonight.”

I opened the box, and her sharp intake of breath was exactly what I’d hoped for. When I’d seen the necklace at Harry Winston in New York, the chocolate diamond

pendant had reminded me of Em's eyes. It was the first of many purchases I'd made over the past three months as I found things that had made me think of her.

"Is that a chocolate diamond?" she asked, running a finger over the stone.

"Yes," I said. "Do you like it?"

"It's lovely," she said, her tone almost grudging. "But you know chocolate diamonds are just imperfect stones marked up as special to unsuspecting customers." Her eyes opened wide, and her lips clamped shut for a moment. Her delicate hand covered her mouth. "Oh my God, I'm sorry. That was incredibly rude."

I laughed so hard my head actually rocked back.

"You're completely right, love. But usually, beauty is found because of imperfection, not despite it." Still chuckling, I freed the necklace from its box then clasped it behind Em's neck. "Besides, I didn't purchase it to be passed onto our children for future wealth. I bought it simply because it reminds me of your eyes, and that made me smile. There are times that spending money is a chore, and there are times that spending money is the best thing in the world because it's for someone you care about. Don't ever apologize for your intelligence or your savvy."

I lifted her hand and placed a kiss to the center of her soft palm, inhaling the delicate floral fragrance she must have dabbed on her inner wrist. "Let's go to dinner. We're at the captain's table, and I'm afraid people will notice if we're late."

\* \* \* \*

"Mr. Cassel, Ms. Blake." The maître d' smiled warmly when we entered the dining room. "My name is Devon, and I'll be your dining host throughout your travel with us. The captain sends his apologies, but he's running late tonight. He requests that

you start without him, and he will join you when he can.”

“No worries,” I assured Devon.

We followed him to the table, and I noticed it was only set for four. Usually, the captain dined at a larger table, so multiple VIP guests could be appeased at once. Maybe, he didn’t plan to join us at all.

An ice bucket was stationed near the seat I was directed to, and Devon popped the cork of the champagne before returning the bottle to the ice and heading back to his station.

“I thought cruises served food on buffets,” Emerson whispered, as she looked over the night’s menu. “Isn’t that what everyone always says? They gain a ton of weight on cruises?”

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“Would you prefer a buffet?” I asked, concerned I hadn’t taken that into consideration. “I apologize. I should have asked what you wanted to do for dinner. We can leave.”

“Fraser,” she said, a small smile playing at the corner of her luscious mouth. “It’s fine. I was just making an observation. Besides, apparently, the captain will be coming to eat with us. It would be rude to abandon him.”

“He’s late,” I pointed out. “So really, who’s being rude here?”

“That would be me,” a voice said from behind me. “Fray, at least, allow me to apologize before you ruin my reputation with a beautiful woman.”

I stood and shook hands with Captain Jacob Pryor. He’d grayed quite a bit since I’d seen him last, and I’d have to remember to tease him about it later. I introduced Emerson, and we all sat.

“So, you two know each other?” she asked.

“Yes,” Jacob said. “We met a few years ago when Fray helped with the ship’s design. He wanted the captain to have input—which is smart but pretty much unheard of. That’s why he’s the best.”

“The best what, exactly?” she asked. “I thought you and your family built high rises.”

“Among other things. High rises aren’t our only business. Specifically, I’m an architect,” I told her. “Lately, I’ve done a lot of the business stuff for the firm, but

design is where I started and where my heart lies.” I poured her a glass of champagne. “Enough talk about my job. Let’s not bore Emerson, Jacob. Besides, it’s Christmas, and we’re on holiday.”

Jacob nodded, but before he could say anything, the waiter came to take our orders. After the white-coated server departed, Jacob pulled Emerson into a conversation.

“Sir?” I heard from my left.

I turned, surprised to find the porter had come to find me in the dining room.

“Yes, Marco?”

“There’s a problem with the bed.” He crouched beside me and shot a quick glance toward the captain who’d noticed the porter’s arrival. Jacob’s eyes narrowed slightly at the breach in protocol.

“The brackets appear to be broken,” Marco continued. “We’re unable to separate them.”

“That’s unacceptable,” I hissed. “This will look orchestrated.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry. There are no vacant rooms on the ship. I contacted maintenance. They took a look, but they can’t fix it without making the situation worse.”

Worse? What would be worse? No bed at all? Damn it.

“So I’m not sure how you’d like me to proceed.” He looked worried, and he should be. I’d sworn not to force Emerson to share a bed with me.



“Can you supply a cot?” I glanced over to see Emerson laughing at something Jacob had said to her, and I couldn’t help smiling, despite my frustration.

“Well, no, sir. There’s no way to secure a cot.”

I turned back to him and sighed.

“Fine. Please provide extra bedding, and I’ll sleep on the sofa.” Somehow. It wasn’t exactly man-sized for sleeping. Maybe Em and I should depart the ship at the first port and I could fly her someplace romantic—and water-free.

“I truly am sorry,” he said, standing back upright.

“It’s not your fault,” I assured him. There was no point in getting angry with the young man. He wasn’t in control of these things. But I did worry about Emerson’s reaction. I’d promised her separate beds, and now, instead of being apart but close to her at night, I’d be in a completely different room. I’d spent a small fortune on this cruise, only to sleep on a couch. So far, this scheme wasn’t going well. So much for best laid plans and all that.

“Is there anything else, sir?” Marco asked.

“Yes, actually.” I stood, taking a few steps from the table where I slid a fifty into his palm. “Thank you for ensuring the gifts were deposited where I requested. Did the wrapped parcels make it aboard?”

“They did,” Marco assured me. “On Christmas morning, we’ll have them arranged beneath the tree while you and Ms. Blake are at the sunrise breakfast.”

Right. The Christmas morning breakfast on a balcony practically hanging over the ocean. The one I absolutely wouldn’t force her to attend.

“There may be a change to our morning activities that day,” I told him. “Can you have them delivered while we’re on the excursion Christmas Eve instead?”

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“Of course.” He nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you.”

I returned to my seat, and Emerson turned to me.

“What did Marco need?” she asked.

“He was informing me the sleeping arrangements were—are—being taken care of.”

She gave me an odd look, but I just shook my head, indicating we’d talk about it later. No need to bring the captain into our strange arrangement.

Dinner was superb, the multiple courses a feast to all the senses, and the three of us managed to keep the conversation light and fun. Jacob regaled us with stories of sailing around the world on the city-sized ship where he reigned, Emerson shared hershock at winning a trip from her company, and I did my best not to stare at her. But it was difficult to tear my gaze away while I marveled at my good fortune.

She was really here. And by the end of the week, I knew without a doubt, she’d really and truly be mine. Forever.

After dinner, Jacob excused himself, kissing Emerson on the cheek and shaking my hand before heading off. I offered Em drinks, but she declined. Her visible exhaustion was taking its toll on her, so I led her back to our room.

She toed off her shoes then scooped them up and went to deposit them in the

bedroom closet. When she returned, the heels were still in her hand and her eyebrow was cocked.

“There’s still one bed,” she said.

“Right,” I agreed. “Well, that’s what Marco came to tell me. They can’t separate them, after all.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “You promised—”

“I know,” I defended, holding up a hand. “And I’m sticking to it. I’ll sleep on the sofa.” I closed the space between us, removed the shoes from her grasp, dropping them to the floor, then took her hands in mine. “Emerson, I’m not here to push, persuade or force anything on you. I’d sleep on the floor if it were necessary to protect your feelings and your honor. This was an honest mistake and a mechanical snafu. Please, believe me.”

She blinked, studying my face with narrowed eyes. Whatever she saw seemed to ease her mind.

“Okay,” she conceded. “I believe you.”

“Thank you.” I leaned forward and kissed her cheek, wanting to do so much more, but now definitely wasn’t the time. “You look positively done in. Allow me a moment in the bedroom, then I’ll let you get to sleep.”

She nodded, and I excused myself to get ready for bed. I was glad I’d packed sleep pants, since I usually slept in boxers. But I knew the more covered I was, the more she might believe I wasn’t after her body on this trip...well, not only her body.

When I returned to the living room, she was still standing there, her gaze locked on

the couch and her arms crossed over her middle, so deep in thought I didn't think she heard me approach.

"Are you okay?" I asked, stopping behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist, unable to resist touching her. She shifted her hands to slid over my forearms.

"I feel bad making you sleep on that tiny sofa," she said. I felt her take a fortifying breath, and she tapped my arm. "We're adults. I think we can handle sharing the bed."

I turned her around, so I could peer into her eyes. She looked as if she really believed that.

"Emerson, I pride myself on being a gentleman. However, I don't know if I have the willpower to sleep next to you and keep my hands to myself. It's difficult enough not to devour your beautiful mouth right now. I don't want to put us in a situation that could lead to something you're not ready for."

Her gaze darkened as I spoke of kissing her, her pupils blowing wide as she sank her teeth into bottom lip I wanted to taste again. I had to step back to avoid her feeling my body's reaction. I half-hoped, half-dreaded she'd push the issue, that she'd ask me to the bed again, because I was two seconds from being completely undone.

When her tongue darted out to moisten her bottom lip, I actually groaned aloud. And her soft smile told me she knew exactly what she was doing.

"I'm sure we can handle this, Fray."

It was practically an invitation to release my tight control, but I wasn't so sure she meant it to be. This woman... She'd definitely be the death of me.

Five

Emerson

I was a masochist. And maybe, a sadist, too, because I was getting off on Fray's reaction to me. Yet, I knew there was no way we could pursue this tension between us. Not tonight anyway.

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But I was torn. I was just as afraid of not being able to behave as he was, but there was no way I could let him sleep on the sofa. It was way too short for his six-foot something frame, and he'd paid a gazillion dollars for this suite.

Yes, I'd checked to see what exactly my prize was worth when I considered if I could ditch it or not. So the man was not paying five-figures to sleep on anything but a bed.

"Use that bedding to make a Great Wall of China in the center of the mattress. You're not sleeping on the couch." I pivoted toward the bathroom. "I'm going to get ready for bed."

"Emerson..."

"Full disclosure two," I said, digging out what I needed to change into and hoping my nightshirt wasn't too ratty or revealing. "Don't make me mad. You wouldn't like me when I'm mad."

"Okay, Hulk."

"Glad to see you like old TV shows as much as I do."

"Likemight not be the term I'd use. Stuck at my grandparents' cabin with no cable and a bunch of old VCR tapes is more like it."

I laughed. "Not even DVDs? The inhumanity."

"Tell me about it."

“Build the wall, McGuiver,” I instructed, nodding toward the bed.

“I liked him,” he called after me as I shut the bathroom door.

When I returned a few minutes later, Fray stood beside the bed. “I didn’t know which side you’d want.”

“Doesn’t matter. I doubt I’ll sleep much.”

“Look, I can still—”

“It’s the water. We’ve made it out to open sea, a bit away from the shoreline. Can’t you feel the difference?” Seriously, we’d gone from a gentle almost imperceptible rocking I could ignore to a genuine sway that felt as if we were making up and down figure eights through the water.

“Are you okay?” he asked urgently.

“I took Dramamine, earlier,” I assured him. Motion sickness wasn’t my problem. It was the insidious reminder we were on the water. Deep, deep water.

“I’ll just take this side,” I said quickly as I surged toward the nearest edge. My legs were beginning to feel like rubber because I was so unaccustomed to the sensation of being on the ocean.

Quickly, I burrowed beneath the covers, my back to the beautiful temptation sharing the bed with me. I heard him sigh then felt him climb into the bed, the blankets shifting a little despite the “wall” between us. My hand fisted in my pillow. More than anything, I wanted him to toss the barrier to the ground and pull me into his arms. Somehow, I knew his embrace would make me feel safe instead of completely at sea.



\* \* \* \*

Mmm...my pillow felt nice beneath my cheek. Warm, soft...yet firm...and it smelled so—

Holy crap! My eyes flew open then widened even more at the sight of the hard pec right in front of my face.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. How did I...? What did I...? Oh my God!

Fray's arms tightened around me. My first thought was Wow, his arms do feel good. The second was Fray's arms are around me! Help!

I did need assistance because right now, I never wanted to move. And that could be a problem.

“Good morning,” he murmured into my hair then kissed the top of my head.

“Um, okay. How did I end up here? Where's the other bedding?”

“Don't know. Don't care. Not complaining.”

He rolled me onto my back, coming partially over me, then pressed his lips to mine, devouring my mouth while I melted. My arms circled his shoulders while I kissed him back with equal fervor. When I turned, throwing a leg over him in an attempt to get closer, he pulled back. Damn, his gentlemanly ways. I knew he wanted to let loose. I felt it almost as strongly as I felt my own need. And it should scare me since I'd never gone that far with someone I barely knew, but it didn't. With Fray, my fear molecule just didn't seem to exist.

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His fingers buried in my hair, and he drew my mouth back to his.

“Good morning,” he repeated against my lips. “Ready to start our adventure?”

“We forgot to pick our excursions last night.” I stared up into his dark eyes, thinking I might like to take a trip there. We could just stay here. I could explore the glory of Fraser Cassel.

Wow, apparently, my inner sex goddess had come along for this vacation.

Fray let me go when I pulled back, trying to come to my senses. I needed to move away before I was reeled in by his Death Star tractor beam. It’s a trap, Emerson!

I mentally shook my head at my ridiculousness. Fray would figure out what a nerd I was much sooner than later, though I suspected he might be on to me already since I often communicated with movie references.

“It’s okay,” he told me. “I picked some stuff after you fell asleep. If you want to change anything, we can.”

“Okay,” I agreed, kind of excited to see what he’d selected. He’d seemed properly horrified by my fear of water, so I was pretty sure it was safe to say he hadn’t picked snorkeling or swimming with sharks or anything.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the mattress then froze at the pile of bedding on the floor near my feet. On the ground on my side of the bed.

“I didn’t do that,” I claimed, staring at it.

“You sure?” he asked, not bothering to mask his amusement.

Nope. No. I wasn’t sure.

“Yes.” I turned, crossing my arms over the perky nipples poking against my thin nightshirt. “But nice try attempting to blame it on me.”

He smirked. We both knew he’d had nothing to do with it.

It looked as if I needed to have a stern talk with my subconscious self who’d eliminated our Great Wall while I was sleeping.

\* \* \* \*

“So what are we doing?” I asked once we were safely on land. I was dressed in tiny denim shorts and a T-shirt over my bikini that I’d honestly thought I wouldn’t wear on the trip. Now, I wasn’t wearing for Fray. I wasn’t. But I couldn’t wait to see the look on his face when I shed my shorts and tee. And shoes. Fray had insisted I have on good walking shoes, too.

He laced his much larger fingers through mine. “Well, I didn’t think you’d want to swim with the pigs, so...”

“You’re right there. It sounds interesting to see, though.”

“Maybe, we will. I figured we’d stroll the boardwalk. They have one that runs a great deal of this island. Then we’ll have lunch at the Jumbey Grill and hit up the five bars in our own little pub crawl.”

“Sounds dangerous—the alcohol part. And...like we’ll have a bunch of time by ourselves.” Unlike any of the guided excursions I’d read about.

His thumb stroked over the back of my hand. “I may have booked us a private cabana, too. We can be on the beach but not too near the water.”

“The ship’s weather report on the overhead said it’s supposed to be a perfect sunny day, without a cloud in the sky, so I might work on my tan.”

“We’ll have to let your tour guide know.”

“Are you my tour guide for this day trip, Mr. Cassel?” I asked, reading his teasing expression.

“Well, Ms. Blake, I certainly am. I think the first order of business is heading over to the cabana for some sunblock. And some kissing. It’s been at least an hour since I’ve had you in my arms with my mouth on yours.”

I curled my lips together and fought a smile. At the same time, my core clenched in utter delight.

Yes, please. Let’s kiss.

“I might need help with the sunblock,” I said, feeling quite brazen.

He let go of my hand, but a moment later, those same fingers grazed up my bare thigh, lifting goosebumps. “I’m counting on it, love. Counting on it.”

Six

Emerson

When we got to the posh, spacious cabana Fray had reserved, the loungers were pushed to the side and two tables with thick pads on them were in the center.

“Couples massages,” he told me. “I thought it would be a great way to start the day. They have some world-class massage therapists on staff, which is good because you deserve only the best.”

“I’ve never gotten a massage,” I told him.

“Well, you’re in for a treat,” a male voice said from the open front of the enclosure. When we wanted to be alone, a pair of curtains could be pulled over it for privacy, but right now, a blond, tanned guy in a white tee and floral board shorts stood there.

“And you are?” Fray asked, sounding unwelcoming. His body went rigid, and he stepped closer to me. Any minute, I expected him to jump in front of me as if dodging a bullet from the surfer dude before us.

The blond man seemed unfazed, a wide grin stretching his face. “I’m Shane. I’m here for your massage.”

“No, you’re not,” Fray growled. I gave him side-eye because what the heck.

“Fraser,” I muttered through my teeth. “Don’t be rude.”

“He’s not touching you,” he replied back, not so much under his breath.

Shane’s brow furrowed, and he lifted a tablet I hadn’t noticed.

“Uh...” He clicked his tongue in a random tune as he surveyed it. “Two massages. I’m supposed to do yours,” he glanced at Fray, “and my partner, Millie, who should be here in a minute, is doing Ms. Blake’s. You are Mr. Cassel, correct?”

Fray gave a chin lift.

“Don’t worry, dude. I might look tough, but I’ll be gentle,” Shane teased.

My guy shook his head.

“Hey, can we have a sec?” I asked the masseuse.

“Of course. We’ll be ready to get started in a hot minute. You two need to...” He made a quick motion over his sternum and clicked again. “Get naked on the top then climb under the sheets, face up. Be back in five.”

He drew the curtains, enclosing us in shadows.

I closed the distance between me and Fray then draped my arms loosely around his waist. “Relax. He seems harmless, and I bet he’ll be completely professional. He wouldn’t be top-rated if he was on the make.”

“You’re right. Thinking of another man near you just brings out my inner caveman.”

“I don’t mind, but maybe dial it back a little.”

“No promises, babe.” Fray busied his lips over mine, and I hummed. I really liked

when he did that. In fact, truth be told, I kind of looked forward to going to bed tonight and pretending as if I wouldn't end up all tangled up with him again by morning. Waking in his arms had been shocking, but it was also...life changing. As in...I wasn't sure how I'd recover from him after this cruise. He'd been filling my thoughts since New York. Now, my imaginings had taken a turn for the steamy. Well...steamier.

Still...

"Turn around," I murmured, letting him go.

"What?"

"If I'm taking off my shirt and bikini top, you're not watching."

"I could help."

"We're not there yet," I admonished.

He looked hopeful. "But we will get there."

Probably. Likely. Hopefully.

Soon.

I smiled and twirled my finger for him to turn. “Maybe. But for now, turn around.”

Instead, he grabbed me and kissed me hard and fast, leaving me breathless. “I’m turning your maybe into a ‘hell, yes.’ I promise you that.”

I swallowed hard, my thighs pressing together as I tingled. Fray’s eyes were full of heat as he turned, his gaze staying on me until the very last moment. I watched his back and the play of powerful muscles there as he stripped off his own tee. Holy back porn. I never knew how stunning a fit torso could be from this direction. Wide shoulder, muscled, slim hips with low-riding shorts.

“Ready?” he asked.

Take me. Take me now...

“Um,” I squeaked. “Nope.”

“You okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

Except I still had to take off my clothes and lie under a thin sheet with my nipples as hard as little rocks. Damn. It.



Turning, I stripped off as fast as possible then dove under the sheet, crossing my arms over my all-too-perky breasts while I waited for Millie and Shane to come in.

“Okay,” I told Fray, closing my eyes. “It’s safe.”

“What are you doing?” he asked. His amusement was hard to miss. Apparently, he was checking my position, but I refused to open my eyes to glance over at what he was doing.

“Waiting.”

“Is something wrong?”

Yeah, I don’t want you to see my nipples.

“I’m cold.”

“It’s eighty degrees,” he countered.

“Just shut up and get under your sheet,” I growled.

Fray laughed. Instead of doing what I said, he came toward me, startling me when his lips brushed over mine. I hadn’t realized he was that close. He squeezed my forearm then feathered his hand down over my hand. I startled again when his thumb caressed over my cheek. I opened my eyes, my breath shuddering, and stared up into his warm, dark-chocolate gaze.

“You’re a treasure,” he murmured. “A refreshing change from—”

“Ready?” Shane called, interrupting.

“Sure,” Fraser called. I bit my lip, watching him climb onto the other bed.

The two masseuses entered, and what followed was a blur of melty pleasure. The lighting remained low, and they played soothing wood pipe music while their magical hands rubbed every bit of tension from our bodies without getting too intimate.

I was a pile of boneless mush when Millie murmured she was done, to have a wonderful day and to make sure to stay hydrated. Vaguely, I heard Shane speaking to Fray, probably telling him the same thing.

“Oh my God, I don’t want to move,” I moaned once the pair left.

“We can stay here all day.”

“Nah...” I levered myself up slightly before I remembered I was naked from the waist up. I dropped back down and looked over at Fray to find him watching me avidly with a smirk.

“Close call,” he teased.

“You’re a perv.”

“Yep.”

“Stop looking at me and get dressed. You have a busy day planned for us, and I intend to enjoy it all, so I can sleep like a rock tonight.”

“I’m sure I can help tire you out if the fun, sun and island pub crawl don’t do it.”

“Maybe—and this is just a suggestion—you should dial it down a couple notches.”

“Mmm...no. This is part of the cavemen, and we’ve already established he can’t be dialed back.” He tossed back his sheet and pretty much vaulted from the table. After a quick press of lips to my temple, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine, he scooped up his shirt and shoes then left the cabana. I waited a few moments then slipped off my own table, got dressed and joined him.

Fray grabbed my hand, twining our fingers. “Off to get our buzz on and explore.”

“After you—and I’m not getting drunk.”

He leaned in and kissed me, and I realized he’d been pretty free with them today. And I’d let him...enjoying his lips way too much.

“Of course, you’re not,” he agreed. “That would ruin tonight’s fun.”

Tonight’s fun? What?

Seven

Fray

“Shall I get you another Mai Tai?” I whispered in Emerson’s ear as we entered the ship’s casino.

“No, thank you,” Little Miss I’m Not Getting Drunk stated firmly, pretending not to sway on my arm. “I believe I’ve had enough.”

“I believe the fact we left the cabin is proof to the contrary,” I teased her.

“Were you trying to get me drunk to take advantage of me?” she accused, keeping her tone light as if to assure me she was kidding.

“Do I have to?” I asked.

I watched heat darken her gaze and couldn’t resist dipping low for a kiss. She’d allowed me that pleasure all day, and I wasn’t about to give up repeating it as often as possible. Her lips were like the sweetest elixir, candy to my senses, and I hadn’t needed a drop of alcohol to feel punch drunk every time I’d tasted her.

“I’m not a big gambler,” Emerson said as we walked the floor.

“That’s okay,” I assured her. “It’s just play money.”

She shot me a sideways glance, which I ignored.

I’d already purchased the chips while I’d wandered the ship yesterday, waiting for Emerson to get settled in the room. That meant I didn’t have to go through the ritual of exchanging wads of cash in front of her. It was one thing to spend money on things

that brought her pleasure. It was another to flaunt my finances in front of her. She knew I was a billionaire—or wealthy, at least—but I was trying to keep that part of me as low key as possible, without pretending to be someone I wasn't.

“How about roulette?” I asked, steering her toward the large wheel. “How are you with odds?”

“Really good actually,” she said. “Your best odds right now would be to put your chips back in your pocket and return to the room.”

I stared at her, wondering if she realized what she was implying with that innocent statement. She was looking around the casino, so I didn't believe she did. But it wasn't fair of her to tease me.

I leaned close to her ear and whispered, “Em, if you're telling me I'd be luckier in our room than I would be here, I will grab you fireman style and make you prove it.”

Her cheeks flushed as her wide eyes met my gaze. Her hand shook as she reached up to touch my face. Leaning forward, she kissed me softly.

“I don't mean to be a tease,” she said. “I promise.”

“I know,” I assured her. “And I would never push you into anything you aren't ready for. Let's just have fun tonight.”

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She nodded, allowing me to take her hand and lead her up to the roulette table. My heart pounded, and the desire to drag her back to the room caveman-style still ran through my body. I'd never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Emerson.

"Can I get you anything?" a waitress asked, walking up beside us.

"I'll have a Mai Tai," Emerson answered immediately.

I bit back a smile as I shook my head, declining a drink. I was still a little buzzed from our bar crawl today, and I didn't want to risk my control any further tonight. I'd had plenty to drink earlier, and I didn't need to add whiskey to the fire burning in my soul—and my dick.

The waitress returned quickly with Em's glass as we surveyed the casino.

"The problem with umbrella drinks," Emerson said thoughtfully as she wrapped her arm around mine, pressing her beautiful body against my side while she took a sip. "Is that they taste like juice, but before you know it, you can't walk anymore."

"I'll carry you," I offered before I could stop myself.

She giggled, and it was all I could do not to groan. I'd have to build the pillow wall between us twice as high tonight.

"Bets are open," the wheel operator called, bringing my attention back to the game.

I pulled a handful of chips from my pocket and handed them to Emerson. She flipped

one of them over, staring at the \$100 imprinted in gold on the black chip.

“Did you really just give me the equivalent of one of my paychecks to play this game?” she whispered.

I glanced at her hand then met her gaze.

“You’re underpaid,” I answered.

“How loaded are you?” she blurted. Her eyes immediately widened, and a blush crept up her neck, spreading over her face as she clamped her free hand over her mouth.

I couldn’t help smiling at her outburst, even knowing how mortified she must be at asking such a crass question. Rather than leave her in a state of panic, I leaned over and whispered a figure in her ear.

“Bullshit,” she hissed, wide-eyed. “That’s like, your company, right? That’s not just you?”

“No, actually, the company is almost bankrupt,” I said solemnly. “My brothers are idiots. And ugly, too. Completely unattractive and inept.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, and I finally cracked, laughing softly as I caressed the back of her fingers with my thumb. Even in her shock, she hadn’t pulled away from me, and I liked that.

“You have that much money?” she asked, apparently too shocked to be embarrassed again. Her eyes looked wary, not avaricious.

“No,” I said. “We have that much money, Em. If I have my way, what’s mine is yours. Forever.” I pulled her hand to my lips and kissed it softly. “Enough about that

right now. Let's play."

It was forward, and it was blunt, but it was honest. I needed her to understand, as quickly as possible, this trip wasn't a one-week fling for me. She had to know I wanted her by my side for the rest of our lives.

"I think I want to go back to the room," Emerson said softly.

"I've made you uncomfortable," I answered, shaking my head. "I'm sorry."

I was used to plunging forward and going for what I wanted, and now, I'd pushed for too much, too soon. I mentally kicked myself. I shouldn't have let the conversation go where it had. As much as I craved Em, she barely knew me. Of course, she wasn't ready to talk about forever. I knew she was the one. My one. But she hadn't had time to realize I was the only man for her.

"That's not it," she said, shaking her head at the same time. Her drink sloshed perilously close to the edge of her glass. I took it from her hand, setting it down.

"Then what is it?" I asked, meeting her gaze. The heat there made me shut my mouth so hard, my teeth clacked against each other. "Em?"

She bit her lip then stepped into me, her hand sliding into my pocket, depositing the chips back where I'd gotten them. Too soon, she removed her hand from my pants.

"Maybe I need that drink," she murmured, reaching for it. I steered her a few feet away, wanting to return to what she suggested going back to the cabin.

"You don't," I told her.

"Are you implying I'm drunk?" she asked, her hands going to her hips.



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“It’s crossed my mind,” I admitted. “But, no. That’s not what I was saying. Tell me what you want, love.”

“Well, maybe, I just want...something,” she answered.

“What do you want?” I repeated, needing clarification from her. If she was drunk, and this was just harmless flirting, I could deal with that. I could spoil her, kiss her, show her how much I wanted her without letting anything go too far.

But if she wanted me, truly wanted me the way I wanted her, I wasn’t sure I could hold back. Half of me prayed she’d beg off, drop the conversation and move on. But the other half... Well, that part was rock-hard and desperate to find release in my future wife.

“I want you,” she said, meeting my gaze with solid determination.

“Good. Say no more. For now.” I scooped her into my arms, carrying her quickly through the casino toward the deck outside. She wrapped her arms around my neck and laughed but didn’t fight me.

“You really are just like Rhett Butler,” she said, leaning forward to nuzzle my neck.

“That scene where he picks up Scarlett and takes her upstairs isn’t actually romantic,” I said, raising an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re not drunk?”

“Fraser, just take me to bed.”

I didn't need to be told again.

Eight

Fray

I set Emerson down long enough to open the cabin door. As I fumbled with the stupid keycard, she wrapped her arms around me, her face pressed to my back and her fingers running up my chest.

"Why isn't this working?" I hissed, repeatedly running the plastic over the reader.

"Turn it around," Emerson suggested. Her hands slid lower, palms running down my hips to my thighs, her thumbs just barely missing the most sensitive parts of my anatomy.

I was half out of my mind with lust for her, which is probably the only reason I bothered turning around the card as if it would do anything. It didn't.

Growling in frustration, I grabbed Emerson's arm, pulling her around me. I pressed her back against the door and pinned her there, attacking her mouth. Her knee went between my legs, and the pressure of her thigh against my cock was almost my undoing.

This was going way too fast. Suddenly, I was glad the key wasn't working and had forced me to slow down for a moment. Em deserved better than some half-drunk fucking.

I stepped back, smiling at the soft whine that escaped her beautiful lips. I'd just pulled out my cell to call Marco for assistance, when something important occurred to me. I looked up and down the hallway, realization dawning on me.

“Babe,” I said, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles softly. “It’s the wrong room.”

For a moment, I wasn’t even sure we were on the correct deck, but we were.

“Oh my gosh!” She covered her mouth with her free hand, but the giggles couldn’t be contained. “I’m sorry. I swear I’m not laughing at you.”

“Well, you should be,” I admitted, pulling her down the passageway.

“No. All of these doors look the same,” she insisted. “And you were a little distracted.”

“Just a little,” I agreed, stopping at the next door and holding up the card. The lock clicked open immediately. Like magic. Or being at the correct room. Semantics for another time, though.

We stepped inside, and the atmosphere suddenly tensed. For a moment, I worried my stupid mistake had cooled her passion, and I wouldn’t blame her for it. So I wasn’t quite prepared when she threw herself into my arms. My slight buzz combined with the swaying of the ship caused me to lose my balance, and we crashed to the floor together.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” she asked. She’d landed on top of me, and in her concern, she shifted to sit on my hips, her dress hiking up and exposing her creamy thighs, her center directly over my aching hard cock.

It would be so easy to take her. To flip us over, undo my pants and just fuck her senseless right there on the floor. To claim her as mine.

Fortunately, she stood, relieving some of the pressure on my dick and my thoughts

came back online. I followed to my feet, forcing myself to calm the fuck down.

“You look like the big bad wolf about to eat me,” she whispered as I stalked toward her. Yes, I was thinking straight, but I wanted her pleasure, however much she allowed.

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“That,” I said, quirking an eyebrow, “is a fantastic idea.”

Growling, I picked her up again and carried her into the bedroom. As long as I kept my own clothes on, I’d stop myself from going too far with her when she was tipsy. It would be torture for me, but as long as Emerson was happy, I didn’t care. If she were completely sober, I would have asked what she wanted. But she’d had enough to drink I wasn’t comfortable taking advantage of her inhibition.

Laying her in the middle of the bed, I removed my jacket and tie and tossed them aside, unable to wrest my gaze from the gorgeous sight of Emerson spread out on the mattress, her dark locks splayed across the pillows, her chest rising and falling with her quickened breaths and the flush of heat that covered her body.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” I whispered. I crawled up onto the bed, running my hands up her calves, over her knees, against her thighs as I gently spread her legs apart for me.

“Fray, I haven’t ever had that... I mean...shouldn’t you have less clothes on?”

I stared at her. No one had ever gone down on her. Travesty! She was so beautiful, so smart, and so funny. Made just for me. It also confirmed I’d been correct. Nothing between us would be some rushed affair, fueled by alcohol and hormones rather than by the true love we felt for each other. I’d worship her in other ways until I was certain our first time together would be perfect, both of us clear headed and focused on our union.

“I not making love to you right now,” I told her. I held up a hand to forestall the

argument I saw forming in that beautiful head of hers. “You deserve better than a tipsy fuck. You deserve perfection. Tonight, I’m going to worship your body, give you a taste of the pleasure I want to give you for the rest of our lives.”

I kissed her again, my hands feeling around her dress for the secret way to remove it. Pulling her up against me, I ran a palm down her back, resisting a growl at the lack of clasps back there. I lowered her to the mattress, releasing the kiss to trail my gaze down her body.

There was no way I’d admit I didn’t understand her clothes. The fabric wasn’t stretchy enough for her to pull it over her body without some sort of button or hook or something.

Finally, she shifted enough under me that I felt the heavenly bite of a zipper down her side. I kissed her again, my fingers gripping the majestic piece of metal that was my key to her holy land. Unfortunately, the drama of her outfit foiled me again.

“This dress is ridiculous,” I told her when the zipper stopped at her hip. “In the future, I’d prefer quick-release clothes on you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, bossy,” she assured me, leaning up to capture my mouth once more.

As I kissed her, I pushed her dress up over her hips, giving up on getting her naked. It wasn’t possible without having her stand, and I wasn’t letting her out of this bed anytime soon.

She gasped against my mouth when I trailed a finger over her pussy. Even through the barrier of her panties, I felt how wet she was, and the desire to taste her was overwhelming.

I trailed hot, wet kisses over her neck and chest, sliding myself down her body until I rested between her trembling thighs. Her fists were already clenched in the sheets, and I smelled her desire like the sweetest perfume.

Biting at the waistband of her panties, I used my teeth to pull them down to her calves before tearing them the rest of the way off. I returned to her core, desperate to taste her. Her hips canted up, and I took it as permission, burying my face in her alluring, pink folds. My tongue laved at her clit as she bucked against me, her hands threading into my hair.

Heaven. She tasted like the sweetest heaven, and as I felt her first climax erupting over her, I kept devouring. I wanted this release and another. Though, I'd only fuck her with my mouth and fingers tonight, I needed her replete with bliss. She'd never doubt I'd give her every bit of pleasure she could desire.

"Fray," she cried out as she came, and I couldn't help smiling as she shook.

Just as soon as I felt her coming down, I slid a finger slowly into her soaked pussy. Determined, I sucked hard on her clit until she screamed, her body tense and shivering under me again.

She collapsed limply to the mattress, her breaths coming in stuttered pants.

Climbing back up her body, I rolled to lie beside her and pulled her half over my chest. I held her close, placing a soft kiss to the top of her head.

"Are you alright?" I asked. "Can I get you anything?"

"Did you get the number of that train that just hit me?" She sighed. "I still want you, you know."

“And you’ll have me,” I promised her. “For now, though, let’s get you ready for bed. Today was quite the adventure, and tomorrow will be another big day.”

She nodded but just smoothed her dress back down her legs, then snuggled closer to me. In minutes, her breathing had evened out, and I knew she’d fallen asleep.

Unwilling to risk waking her, I just closed my eyes and held her tighter. If she was comfortable, that was all that mattered to me. Her happiness would always be the only thing that mattered.

Nine

Emerson

“When I’m with you, I almost forget I’m on this huge ship on this even more enormous body of water.” I leaned my crossed arms on the boat’s railing and watched as we pulled into port. Fray stood beside me, his hand rubbing up and down my back, his presence making me brave.

I knew he was comforting me as I confronted my fear, standing out here in the wind and facing what scared me the most. Well, notmost, I suppose. I mean, I wasn’t in the water. He did that for me, though. Gave me courage. Like last night when I’d told him I wanted him. I couldn’t imagine ever being so forward with another man. Of course, I’d never felt what I did for Fray when I was around other guys. Only with Fray.



I loved him.

And not because he'd given me the best oral of my life. The only oral actually, but that was beside the point. It was just... I loved him. It had started in New York and grown while we'd been apart, and now on this cruise...

He did everything for me. His every thought seemed to be for me and how I felt or how I'd react, what I'd like or dislike. I knew that couldn't go on forever. I mean...real life waited for us in a few days. Reality meant we'd have to go our separate ways. He'd have to worry about his company in New York, and I'd have to go back to my coding job at the security firm in Chicago.

Maybe, that was why we didn't do more last night. I mean, I think he said it was because I deserved more or better or something. I was a little fuzzy on what had been said. But all I knew was, I'd slept better the past couple nights in his arms than I ever had. Which was shocking, considering we were on a floating deathtrap.

"What's wrong?" Fray asked after the silence between us had stretched for a while.

"Nothing. I just told you things are great when I'm with you."

"And then you went deep into your head."

I shrugged. My drama was my drama. I didn't want to scare him, and I wasn't so sure telling him I loved him was a good idea right now.

I know we haven't been together long, Fray, but I'm super in love with you. I want to

have your babies.

Babies? Oh, God...

“What are we doing today?” I asked.

“Checking out the jungle. Getting the Bob Marley Nine Miles Experience in Montego Bay, where we’ll get to do some shopping, too, if you want.”

“No alcohol?” I said.

“I’m pretty sure they won’t let you do the jungle thing if you’ve been drinking—and I don’t think they’re offered in-flight.”

“In flight?”

\* \* \* \*

Fray slung his arm around me as we sat close together on the chairlift that was cruising along over and through the jungle canopy, “in flight”. Lush green surrounded us, and even on this sunny, warm day it offered cool relief. And we weren’t at all near the beach and water.

I felt a little guilty about that. I mean obviously Fray liked the ocean or he wouldn’t have booked a cruise for us. There were plenty of other ways he could have gotten us alone. Maybe, I could hang out in a lounge tomorrow and drink umbrella drinks while he surfed or snorkeled or whatever they did out there in the water on these trips.

“It’s gorgeous here,” I commented as the ride meandered along.

“Um-hmm,” he hummed, his free hand brushing along my thigh. “I’m liking that this isn’t a popular excursion today.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking up at him as he nonchalantly traced the edge of my shorts’ leg. “I’m pretty surprised we’re the only ones.”

“Yeah,” he echoed, but he actually didn’t look surprised in the least.

My eyes narrowed. “You bought out the whole thing, didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Are you angry? I wanted to get you alone.”

I looked around. We were up in the sky, 700 feet above sea level or so we were told, and there wasn’t a soul in sight since the entire ride had been bought out by the annoying billionaire beside me. “Well, we are alone.”

And damn it, I couldn’t even be irritated by him. It was such a sweet gesture. Over the top. But sweet.

I closed my hand around his when his fingertips started to slip under the edge of my pantleg.

“What are you doing?”

He leaned in, kissing his way up my neck to my ear. “Thinking seriously about how long it would take to give you an orgasm up here.”

Not long. I’d been on the edge of desperate need since we’d woken together this morning. We’d started stirring awake, still wrapped together, Fray spooning behind me. I’d turned in his arms, and he’d rolled me under him for a kiss. But my damn dress had been all twisted up around us. A real mood killer.

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Then reality had started to sink in. Not nerves over what had happened between us, because hell, yes, I wanted it again. If his hard cock poking into me this morning and the way he kept touching me was any indication, Fray had no regrets either. He'd given me two climaxes last night. It had been so natural, and there hadn't been a bit of nerves between us.

With my dress being a cock-blocker, we laughed and gotten up to get ready for the day, so we could eat before the excursion today. As I'd dressed, I'd made myself a vow: I wasn't drinking a lick of alcohol today. Tonight, Fray was making love to me, even if I had to do a throw down and cowgirl him.

I pressed my lips together, hiding my grin at the thought. I had no fucking idea what I was thinking. Cowgirl him? What the hell did that even mean?

I squeezed his hand then let go, dragging my fingertips over the back of it then over to his thigh. I parted my legs a little. "Have at it, then. There's no one around to see."

Fray made that growly sound I noticed came out when he was happy about something—usually something to do with me and giving me pleasure. He pulled at the leg closest to him and draped it over his, opening me up more. The arm still around my shoulder hugged me tighter as he turned to me toward him—as much as the seat-lift bar would allow him to, anyway.

"Give me your mouth," he commanded.

His lips were on me, opening, devouring, kissing me deeply as those naughty fingers pushed into my shorts. He didn't bother with the leg this time, instead, popping my

button and slipping in past the waistband and into my panties.

I groaned into his mouth as he stroked two fingers up and down my pussy, getting me wetter and wetter with each pass.

“You like that?” he whispered against me.

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Tell me. Tell me what you like.”

“I...” My cheeks flamed. I couldn’t do that, um, dirty talk stuff. Sure it turned me on, but I’d feel silly.

Fray’s fingers stilled, and I realized that if naughty words made me hot, maybe it did the same for him. I was being selfish.

“I like you touching me,” I murmured hesitantly. “I like your fingers on...my...pussy. I want them in me.”

“I’ll give you anything,” he promised.

“Anything? That’s a dangerous vow.”

“I trust you. And you’re my everything. Why wouldn’t I give you whatever you want and need?”

“I trust you, too,” I confessed, feeling that truth deep in my heart.

“Do you?”

I cupped his cheeks and brought his mouth back to mine. “I do. Except...”

“Except what?” he asked, concerned. “Babe, what is it?”

“Well, you promised me this orgasm, and you’re not following through.”

He groaned, and his hand started moving again, sliding up and down, flicking and pinching my clit. Fiery strands of electrified pleasure surged through my core, tightening, preparing for explosive release.

Boldly, I reached over and grasped his cock through his board shorts. I needed to touch him while he touched me. He groaned the second I made contact, and I felt his length jump. “That’s right. Oh, fuck. Squeeze him, Em.”

My fingers flexed. “Like this?”

“Yes,” he hissed. The fingers that had been sliding along my slit worked inside me. Slowly...

“Oh,” I gasped. “It’s so full.”

“Just imagine how this tight little pussy will feel when I get my cock inside her, making her mine.”

Said pussy flexed around him, growing even tighter around his fingers.

“Fray,” I whimpered, not even sure what I was asking for. More of those digits? For him to take them out? No, not that.

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“I got you, Em.” He started a sedate in and out that was so opposite of the frantic need pulsing in me. “Match me,” he whispered.

I nodded, realizing that I’d stopped moving my hand. Concentrating, I started gliding my hand up and down his cock again. I wished I was touching his skin, too, but stopping didn’t seem like an option. Especially, when his thumb started flicking over my clit. He kissed me hard, capturing all my cries as I came. I squeezed Fray, overcome in my bliss, and his cry echoed mine as I felt him jerk.

His head dropped to my shoulder. “Fuck, Em.”

“I wish you would. Can I have that for Christmas?”

He chuckled into my throat. “You want me to wait that long?”

A few more days? “No! I’ve been a very good girl. I think I deserve it every day until then—and on Christmas, too.”

And the day after Christmas... The day after Christmas, I’d go home to Chicago with memories that time would never erase.

Ten

Emerson

“I arranged dinner in our room, tonight,” Fray said when we headed back to the cabin at about five. After the morning on the tour then the jungle ride, we’d forgone the

shopping and come back to the boat. I didn't want him spending any more money on me—even if he assured me he was loaded and could take the hit—and I had yet to experience much of what the ship had to offer.

Since Fray seemed to give me whatever I wanted, he'd agreed, and we'd spent time wandering the decks. After a quick trip back to our room so Fray could change his shorts, removing the evidence of our passion over the jungle, we'd visited the nightclub at the very top of the vessel, which had a phenomenal view of the area behind us. It had been closed, but they allowed people in there to wander and relax away from the crowds. Then on one of the decks, we'd laughed and played chess on a giant board fashioned on the floor and pieces that came to mid-thigh.

Later he'd indulged me with a trip to one of the many buffets. We'd eaten... So. Much. Food. I wasn't actually sure I'd be able to eat dinner. Fray had only laughed at my claim and off we'd jogged—or in my case waddled—to a bar at the back of the huge boat where we'd played trivia with a bunch of other passengers and then listened to contestants in the ship's version of American Idol.

Excursions with Fray were amazing, but just hanging out with him and having fun was even better. I wasn't sure he'd let go of my hand the entire day, except maybe when we'd been at the buffet.

“Dinner in the room is cool,” I agreed. “We won't have to dress up then.”

“No. We can even be naked.”

I licked my bottom lip then sank my teeth into it. I couldn't imagine sitting across from him nude while we ate. Not yet anyway. Maybe after we'd had lots of sex? And then a lot more tomorrow. We were slated to be at sea all day.

His smile turned wolfish, and I got the feeling he was thinking of eating me up—or



just eating me as the case might be.

“I didn’t drink at all today,” I added.

“I noticed.”

“And I know exactly what I want.”

“And what’s that, love.”

Love...?I swallowed hard. He always called me that, but it was hitting differently today. “You.”

“You have me.”

Crap, he planned to make me say it. Well...two could play games.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m going to change for dinner. You can have your meal here, and I’ll do the buffet or something.”

Turning on my heel, I marched toward our bedroom. His growl warned me, but I still screeched when he suddenly scooped me up from behind. He didn’t slow until he dropped me on the bed, him following and covering me in one smooth motion. Grabbing my wrists, he held them down on either side of my head while he loomed over me.

“No tantrums. Use your words, Em.”

“I...want...you. To get off me!”

One side of his mouth twitched, and he shook his head. He brushed his lips over

mine. “You want me to get you off? Okay.”

“That’s not—”

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But when he started kissing his way down the V of my neckline, I stopped arguing. He might be infuriating sometimes, but mostly, he just wanted me and wanted me to be happy.

I squirmed against his grasp on my wrists, not to get away but because I wanted to help him get my shirt off me then remove his...so I could touch him everywhere.

“Do you really want me to let you go? Do you want me to stop?” he asked against my lips. “You know I won’t do anything you don’t want.”

“Don’t you dare. Or I’ll...I’ll...” I’d what? That was the thing with threats. You actually had to have something good to back up your ire.

“You’ll what?” The tone of his rumbling voice was a dead giveaway, even if I could only feel his smile as he kissed me near my ear.

“What?” I sighed, distracted. He made me feel so good, melty, tingly everywhere, and just managed to drain my brain of all thought.

“What will you do if I stop?”

“Don’t stop.” My fingers flexed, and I went to reach for him, only to realize he still held down my wrists. It almost surprised me. Usually, nothing threw me off-kilter, but everything about this man turned me sideways.

“Or...?”

“Um...or...um...” Or I’d what? “I’ll never speak to you again! Quit talking about stopping.”

“You’re the one who told me to get off you.”

“Do you want to?” I asked.

He nipped at my shoulder. “Fuck, no. Not in this lifetime.”

Given permission to go forward, though, he did release my wrists. Before I could reach for him, he swept my T-shirt up over my head. It fluttered to the floor while he reached for the strings of the bikini top I wore beneath it.

“I’ve been dying to see these,” he told me as he pushed away the fabric, his mouth already kissing along one slope. “The peek you gave me the other day in the cabana was only enough to torment me. I’ve been craving these little nipples in my mouth for months.”

As if to prove his point, he covered one, sucking it deep into his mouth. I arched, crying out. My fingers speared into his soft locks while his tongue and teeth played over me. I was getting so wet, so needy with every draw, every nip. I writhed, trying to get closer. Needing...more. My entire focus was more of Fray. I just needed Fray in a way I’d never needed anyone or anything.

He moved back and forth between my breasts, driving me higher, closer toward the cliff where he’d push me over the edge, plummeting me into pleasure. But he took his time. There was no urgency to his actions, though the desperate need loomed there, thick in the air. The atmosphere vibrated with our passion, wrapping us in a tight blanket that blocked out everything but each other.

I pulled at his shirt, longing to feel his skin against me. Almost as if reading my mind,

but never missing a beat, he yanked it off and tossed it away to land next to mine.

A groan escaped me as my palms splayed on his warm, soft skin. The firm muscles beneath told the story of how much time he spent taking care of this magnificent body—a lot. I knew he hadn't been going to the ship's gym since he'd been spending every moment with me, but he'd been active and gotten a workout carrying me around. Often. Which I liked.

My fingertips traveled down his sides to his slim hips, hitting his loose waistband. If he could touch me then...

I pushed inside and curled my grasp on his ass, pulling him closer to me. At some point, he'd wedged between my thighs. I lifted them around him, pushing my feet into the mattress while I tried to get even nearer to him. His jean-clad cock pressed into my pussy, grinding into me as I sought my pleasure.

Fray nipped the underside of one breast, making me gasp and shiver before he started a path of fiery kisses down my torso. Itightened my legs around him, trying to keep his ridge firmly against to me.

"Fray..." I complained.

"I've got you." His hands were at my shorts' button. He flicked it open and shoved down the zipper, then my pants and bikini bottoms were skimming down my legs. Memories of last night and the bliss he'd given me returned, all the fuzziness clearing to give me perfect, sublime recollection.

"Yes. Yes, Fray. Put your mouth on me again," I rasped out, still a little reluctant to talk like that, but needing him so much. I knew he liked it. I'd do anything for him. I loved him. "I— Oh, God, yes!" I exclaimed as he spread my folds and buried his face in my center.

His wicked tongue flicked over me, gathering all my wetness and creating more. I bucked when he wasted no time adding first one finger then another to the mix. My groan came from deep in my chest when he started finger-fucking me. I'd touched myself, been touched, but it had never, ever been anything like this.

"You're sweeter than the best dessert," he said against me. "And all mine. This is all mine."

"Yes, yours," I gasped. "Oh please, Fray..."

He sucked hard on my clit, and I tumbled over the edge. But then he was leaving me.

"No," I cried, grabbing at him.

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“Protection, Em. I want nothing more than to fill you with my cum and plant my baby in you, but not yet. We’re not there yet. I want time with you, just you and me before we have to share.”

“Okay,” I gasped. Yeah... He was right, even if a little part of me wanted him to get me pregnant. Or try. Yes, lots of trying...

My eyes went wide when he stood beside the bed, and I watched him take off his pants. I’d felt his cock beneath my hand today, but seeing it... My tongue shot over my bottom lip, wetting it before I swallowed hard. He was...magnificent. Hard. Long. Thick.

I breathed raggedly, thinking of how much pleasure that shaft would bring me—but only because it was attached to the most perfect man I’d ever met.

“You still okay?” he asked. He’d grabbed a condom from the bedside table, and now ripped it open with his teeth. Quickly, he rolled it on, and I almost frowned at the travesty of covering his length.

“Uh-huh. Yup. Very okay.” I held out my arms, wanting him cradled against my body again, wanting him in me, needing him to take me and make me belong to him.

He hummed as he covered me. “Em, you feel so fucking good.”

“So do you. I need you... Now, Fraser.”

He nodded. His hand cupped the back of my neck, and he covered my lips with his. I

felt his glans line up with my opening, and I shuddered a breath.

Fray drew back slightly. “Okay?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “I’m ready. I want you so bad.”

“You’ll always have me. I’m yours; you’re mine.”

I drew him back down to me. “I want you. In me. Now.” I kissed him. “Please.”

Watching me, he pushed forward in response. I expected him to go a little at a time. Hesitate. But he just slowly, steadily pushed forward, never breaking eye contact. It was the most momentous, intimate, shattering, perfect moment of my life. He didn’t stop until he was in me to the hilt. I gasped, so full of him, so exquisitely full.

“Okay?” he asked, as we panted together.

“It’s perfect.” Every breath, reminded me of how deep he was, how stretched I was. “You feel so...good,” I groaned. He moved, and I moaned, my nails digging into his shoulders while I arched beneath him. “Oh my God! Good. Yes, keep doing that.”

He guided me to move with him as he started shallow thrusts. As we gained our rhythm, our frenzy grew, and before I knew it, he was fucking me hard, and deep and just so right.

“I knew you’d be perfect. I knew it,” he rasped. “You. Feel. So. Good. Around me. Squeezing me. God, Em.” Each word was punctuated with a drive, and my eyes rolled back.

Like a tsunami, my climax thundered toward me, out of control and overwhelming, threatening destruction. The waves washed over me, bowling me over, and I clasped



onto Fray, anchoring to him and taking him with me as my pussy clenched around his length and pulled him into the storm.

“Emerson,” Fray groaned into my neck as we collapse together. He rolled to his side, his arms tight around me. He cradled me to his chest, his cock still lodged deep inside me. We pressed together, clutching each other tightly, his face in my hair and mine against his chest.

Tomorrow would come, but in this moment, we were one, and he was...my everything.

Eleven

Fray

Time was moving far too quickly. We’d spent almost our entire day at sea in bed, even going so far as to have Marco bring all of our meals into the room and leave them in the sitting area. Now that I’d claimed Emerson as mine, I couldn’t handle the thought of letting her go.

The ship would be docking in Grand Cayman today, and as much as I wanted to show her the world, I couldn’t help wishing I could just continue showing her pleasure instead.

Emerson stirred next to me, her hand sliding over my chest before she’d even opened her eyes, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“Good morning,” I whispered, placing a soft kiss to her forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Happy,” she answered. “And maybe a little sore.”

“Was I too rough with you last night?” I asked, my hand skimming along her bare hip. We were always vigorous, but on a few occasions, I knew I’d been harder than I probably should be. Her body just responded so well to mine. It was so natural between us that it was easy to forget she didn’t have much experience, something she’d confessed in the dark the nightwe’d first had sex. It was easy enough to remember I’d be her last, though.

“No! You weren’t!” Her eyes flew open, her gaze searching for mine. “You were perfect. You are perfect.”

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I leaned down to capture her mouth, my tongue sliding over the seam of her lips until they parted to allow me access. Like every time I'd tasted her sweet kiss, my cock grew hard against her thigh.

"You're insatiable," she said, running her fingers through my hair.

"I can't help how my body responds to yours. I can only swear I won't pounce on you without permission."

"That's the problem." She giggled. "Every time I feel you hard against me, my body wants you, as well. How could I turn down the pleasure you give me? I need a shower though after last night."

"Let me draw you a bath, then." Making love in the tub sounded like an adventure I was down for. We were lucky. Though most cruise cabins had tiny bathrooms you could barely move in, luxury suites had been designed for just that—luxury. And we had a nice tub for soaking.

"That sounds heavenly," she admitted with a small sigh.

Suppressing my groan, I released her and stood. I pulled a robe from one of the chairs, covering my erection. Em probably needed a rest, too. I'd claimed her so many times the past thirty-six or so hours, we were running low on protection. And I'd meant what I said to her, I wanted to put my baby inside herso badly it hurt, but we had our whole lives ahead of us, and I wanted some time with her as just us. While our children would be the only people I'd ever share her with, they could wait.

After taking care of my morning rituals, I started the bath, ensuring the perfect water temperature and adding bubbles before returning to the bedroom.

“Bath’s ready. Go soak and I’ll order breakfast.”

“You’re too good to me,” she said as she climbed out of bed.

The moment I saw her standing there in all of her naked glory, I couldn’t help but pull her into my arms and kiss her again. I couldn’t wait to spend the rest of my life doing this, every single morning. In fact, it had taken every ounce of my willpower to keep that damn engagement ring hidden in the tree yesterday. Several times, I’d considered pulling it out and demanding she be my wife. Immediately. Jacob could marry us while at sea, right?

But I wanted my proposal and our wedding to be special. I wanted everything, always, to be special for her.

Emerson pulled out of my arms, and I was pleased to see the reluctance to part plainly on her beautiful face. But I released her, catching her hand and giving it a quick squeeze before letting go. She hurried into the bathroom, closing the door between us with a soft click.

I blew out a breath then headed for the phone in the sitting room.

After calling Marco to order breakfast, I got dressed, figuring I could shower later. I wanted Em to relax in the tub as long as she wanted. Her body needed the break, and if I were being completely honest with myself, I needed a breather, as well.

The food was delivered as Emerson came out of the bedroom. She was dressed in shorts and a tank top, her hair pulled up into a ponytail. She looked good enough to eat, and part of me really wanted to take her right back to bed. She was right. I was

insatiable.

With iron will, I settled for a deep kiss before leading her to her seat at the table. I couldn't sidetrack back to bed. I had outside plans for us, and I knew how much she would enjoy the day I'd set up for us. As enjoyable as the sex was, she needed to know we were compatible, friends even, outside the bedroom.

"So what do you have in store for me today, Mr. Cassel?" she asked before taking a sip of her coffee.

"I thought we'd do a little scuba diving," I answered innocently.

"What?" she gasped, and I instantly regretted teasing her.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, reaching over to pull her free hand into mine. "I shouldn't joke like that."

"No, I'm sorry," she said. She shook her head. "I'm such a baby. I know you'd never let anything happen to me."

I stood and circled to her. I knelt, wrapping my arms around her and resting my head on her chest.

"Emerson," I said firmly. "You're not a baby. Everyone has fears, and yours are completely warranted. I shouldn't tease about that. I already dragged you onto a cruise ship without any regard to how you'd feel about it. I don't need to make the situation worse by making light of the situation."

"You're too good to me," she whispered, threading her fingers through my hair. She leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "All is forgiven. Now, what are we really doing today?"

“I thought we’d go to the Turtle Farm,” I said while I went back to my chair. “There are all kinds of animals to see and birds to feed. Would that be alright?”

She grinned at me and nodded. The childlike excitement on her face filled my heart to bursting. I wanted that exuberant look in her eyes for the rest of our lives together. Once again, I thought to grab the ring. Maybe, I should take it with us and propose at the sanctuary. When else would a woman be able to play with sea turtles and get engaged all in one swoop?

No, I reminded myself. Christmas was just a couple days away. We could both wait. I wanted her completely under my spell and unable to say no by the time I asked her. Not that I believed she’d decline. As much as I knew we were destined for each other, I was becoming sure she felt the same. She hadn’t said as much, but whenever I spoke of forever with her, she never showed an ounce of hesitation or disbelief.

“What time do we have to leave?” she asked.

“Soon,” I answered. “We’ll have to catch a bus to get to the farm, so we’d better eat then finish getting ready for our day.”

\* \* \* \*

The bus ride was a harrowing experience, and as we stepped off the death machine, I seriously considered calling the cruise line to demand alternate transportation back to the ship.

“That driver was a fucking menace,” I hissed, pulling Emerson into my arms as if to assure myself she was unharmed.

“It was fun,” she argued, laughing softly as she untangled herself from me.

“Yes, in the way skydiving and swimming with sharks is fun. If you have a death wish.” I shook my head, blowing out a heavy sigh. “I thought he was about to hit people on four different occasions.”

“Aw, were you scared, baby?” Emerson asked, patting my arm. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you on the way back.”

I’d certainly earned her teasing, having acted like a jumpy, startled child during the ride. At one point, we’d turned a corner so fast, the bus felt as if it had tipped to one side, and I grabbed on to her leg so hard I feared I may have left bruises on her beautiful, milky white thigh.

“Enough of that,” I warned. “If you insist on making fun of my concern, I’ll have to take you over my knee when we get back to the ship.”

“And that’s going to discourage me how?”

My gaze snapped to her, and the heat in her eyes warred with the innocent look she tried to give me. A growl escaped my throat, and I pulled her into me again.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” I groaned.

“Not today,” she assured me. “Come on. I want to see some turtles.”

And we certainly did see turtles. The farm had small pools with baby turtles we were allowed to hold as we were told all about them. There was an option to swim with the larger sea turtles, which we declined, but they were so beautiful, Emerson had even been willing to go ankle deep into the water to be nearer to them.

As we walked through the sanctuary, it seemed as if we found something new and amazing at every turn. Lizards ran free throughout, occasionally startling us as they darted across the path in front of us. Gorgeous tropical birds swooped low, practically dive bombing the tourists in search of free food.

Emerson allowed me to leave her momentarily to wander out into the sea to witness the beauty of a shark in its natural habitat. I didn’t stay long, wanting to be with her as much as possible, but I appreciated the opportunity to see something so majestic.

When I came back to her, she had an odd look on her face. It wasn’t worry or fear, but I couldn’t decipher it.

“What is it?” I asked, taking her hand and bringing it to my lips, kissing softly over her knuckles.

“There’s a butterfly on your shoulder,” she whispered. “You have to make a wish.”

“I don’t need one,” I said. “I have everything I could ever want standing in front of me. You take my wish.”



She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply before letting out the breath on a soft sigh. I watched as the butterfly took flight, and Emerson smiled softly, her gaze locked on me.

“What did you wish for?” I asked.

“Oh, I can’t tell you that,” she insisted. “Otherwise, it won’t come true.”

“Love, I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure every dream you imagine comes true. I don’t need a bug to do that for you.”

She laughed before hooking her arm through mine. She steered us back to the baby turtles, saying she wanted to hold them once more before it was time to leave. I was able to snap a few pictures of her as she cooed over one particularly tiny specimen. She looked so happy, and again, I was struck by how lucky I was to have this beautiful woman as mine.

“Are you ready?” she asked as the guide announced it was time to head back to the bus.

“Not in the slightest,” I admitted, eyeing the deathtrap.

“Well, I’ll just have to keep you distracted for the ride back to the ship.”

“And how exactly do you plan to do that?” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“By telling you all the things I’d like to do once we get back to our room,” she whispered, before her vixen tongue ran over my earlobe.

“You are itching for that spanking, aren’t you, Ms. Blake?”

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“Well, that was the first thing I was going to talk about,” she said, before turning and leading me toward the crowd getting on the bus.

Twelve

Fray

“You little tease,” I said as the door to our cabin clicked closed behind us. “I cannot believe the mouth on you.”

A blush crept into her cheeks, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip, and she looked as if she couldn’t believe it, either. She’d been quite a flirt the entire way back to the ship, as if being in a crowd had kept her safe from me acting on the delicious things she’d whispered into my ear. It was almost as if she’d conveniently forgotten I’d have her alone in the room afterward.

“Now, Fray,” she said, backing toward the bedroom, her lips twitching as a grin threatened. “I was just trying to distract you from the scary bus ride. And it worked, didn’t it?”

I stalked after her, unbuttoning my shirt as I went. It had worked so well, in fact, for a moment, I’d actually forgotten we were surrounded by people, and I’d tried to slide my fingers up her shorts.

“Take off your shirt,” I ordered as I threw mine to the floor.

She complied immediately, kicking off her sandals, as well. Her calves bumped into

the mattress, and she froze, her eyes wide but full of heat as she stared at me.

I reached out and pulled the string of her bikini top, allowing it to fall away before lowering to my knees in front of her. In a flash, I'd unbuttoned her shorts, pulling them down along with the swimsuit bottoms, before urging her to step out of them, so I could toss them aside.

"Emerson," I whispered, staring up her body to meet her gaze. "Fuck, love, I can smell how wet you are. I wasn't the only one being turned on by your naughty words, was I?"

"No," she whispered.

I slid a hand up her thigh, brushing my thumb against her soaked slit and drawing a shuddered moan from her full lips.

"Hmm," I said. "Not quite wet enough, though."

I stood, turning us so I could sit on the bed before pulling her over my knee. "Shall we go in order then? First, was... Oh, yes. I remember what you talked about first."

I ran my hand over her smooth buttocks, and she shivered but didn't protest, which I took as permission to continue. My hand raised and landed on her soft, pliant flesh with a crack that echoed through the room. She jumped, but I didn't miss the soft moan that escaped her at the impact.

My cock was already rock-hard, and precum leaked into my shorts while I watched the redness bloom across the perfect globes of her ass. My breathing shallow, blood rushing hard through me to throb in my dick, I spanked her again. And again. And again until she writhed on my knee, and I couldn't stand it anymore.

I picked her up and laid her on the bed, stripping off my clothes while she struggled to catch her breath. Not giving her time to recover, I climbed over her, spread her legs and buried my face in her folds. She was soaking wet, and I feasted on her, reveling in the cries that poured from her mouth.

“Fray, please,” she begged, her fingers pulling at my hair.

“Please what,” I asked her, looking into her heavy lidded, lust-drunk eyes as I slid two fingers inside her flooded channel. “Please touch you more? Please spank you more?” I twisted my digits, rubbing my thumb over her clit and pushing her over the edge. She shuddered and whimpered, her body going taut before collapsing bonelessly to the bed.

“Love,” I said, moving up her body to kiss her. “The last thing you mentioned was me taking you from behind, wasn’t it? Get on your knees for me.”

“Fray,” she whisper-sighed while she obediently rolled to her stomach. I pulled her ass up while she rested on her forearms, then I aligned my cock with her slick pussy. With one smooth drive, I slid into her, and though I wanted to move slowly, to take my time and relish seeing her this way under me, my own orgasm begged for release, and I knew I’d never be able to last long.

Emerson found the strength to keep herself upright, so I grasped her hips and began pounding into her in earnest, watching my cock piston in and out of her, glistening with her arousal. My balls felt as if they’d crept all the way into my body, and I barely managed to pull out of her as I came, spraying my release all over her reddened ass and back.

She collapsed onto the bed again, and I fell to the mattress beside her, my chest heaving as I fought to catch my breath. This woman would kill me, but what a way to go. Even so, I knew I’d fight death itself just to remain with her.

“Are you alright?” I asked, once I could finally speak again.

“Better than alright,” she murmured, her eyelids already drooping as if she were falling asleep. “You’re a beast.”

“You started it,” I reminded her. “I’ll be right back.”

I rolled out of bed and headed into the bathroom to get a warm, wet cloth to clean her up. She was already out when I got back to bed, barely reacting when I washed my release off her body then covered her with a blanket.

After taking a shower and getting dressed again, I called down to cancel our dinner plans, knowing Emerson wouldn’t wake up for some time. I asked Marco to bring some fruit and bread to the room, in case she woke up hungry, but other than that, I planned to let her get as much rest as possible.

Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. It would be our last excursion and the last day she’d be single—not that she really had been since stepping foot on the ship. But come Christmas morning, she’d be my fiancée, and soon after, she’d be Mrs. Emerson Cassel.

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Fuck, that sounded so good.

Thirteen

Emerson

I couldn't believe this was our last day together. Our time on the cruise had flown by so quickly, and tomorrow, we'd disembark in Florida and go our separate ways.

Merry Christmas.

Not.

As we sat out on deck, one of the shelters keeping it from being too windy for diners, I listlessly stirred the creamer in my coffee and thought about my day tomorrow. Since I'd known I'd be away for the holiday, I hadn't decorated. I'd be going back to my bare apartment, with no festive adornments and no Fray. And the latter had weighed heavily on my mind all morning.

I needed to talk about the future with him, what our plans were. Here and there, he'd thrown out words like "future" and "kids" and "forever," but I wasn't sure what it all meant. We lived half a country apart from each other, and I wasn't really versed enough in relationships to know if it was just sex talk. If Fray really wanted us to be together, we needed to discuss the logistics.

"It's going to be a gorgeous day," Fray observed, looking out at the shoreline as the ship grew close for docking.

“It is. We should go to the beach.”

His gaze jerked toward me. “What?”

“You haven’t been able to swim or go in the water the whole cruise. It’s our last day. We should go to the beach.”

“I don’t care about that. I just want to be with you—for you to be happy.”

“I’ll be happy getting some sun on the sand. Soaking up some rays before going back to gloomy Chicago.”

He frowned. “But—”

“So we’re going to the beach, then?” I interrupted, not wanting him to remind me of my fear of water. It hadn’t disappeared by any means, but I was feeling more confident with him at my side.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go into town. You haven’t done shopping for souvenirs the whole trip.”

“I don’t need anything beyond the pictures I have with you. There’s no one to take little gifts back to. Or anything. It’s the memories that are important, not stuff.” I sipped my coffee. “I just want to spend the day relaxing in our bathing suits and watching the waves. I think the ocean is pretty even if I don’t want to be in it.”

“Okay. If you’re sure...?”

“I’m sure. It’s selfish of me to make you do all non-water activities. Obviously, you like the water since you booked a cruise.”

“I do, but it was more about getting you alone where you wouldn’t run off on me.”

I snorted. “I wouldn’t have run off. I’d thought of you every day since those few minutes we had at that club. I can’t even tell you how often I regretted I had to rush off with my friends, how many times I wondered if I should have just ditched them and stayed with you a bit longer.” I shrugged. “I wondered what might have happened.”

His hand caressed my forearm before he squeezed my fingers and leaned in to kiss me. “This,” he said. “Only a lot sooner.”

\* \* \* \*

The waves really were pretty, and the sound was almost soothing as I closed my eyes and leaned back against the lounge while Fray was monkeying around on a boogie board, along with a group of other people from the ship.

I tried not to be tense as I watched him play in the gorgeous aquamarine water as it lapped up on the sandy shore. Nothing would happen. The water was practically clear, and the waves weren’t too rough. A gentle breeze blew around us, and if not for my fears, it would be paradise.

Of course, Fray being Fray kept his attention on me, making eye-contact every few minutes. I’d smile and wave, lifting my drink or my book and silently assuring him I was fine. I hadn’t turned a single page in the novel. It was a romance, and a good one too, but at the moment, it just couldn’t hold my attention.

Maybe, I should just go walk along the water’s edge. I wasn’t hot, but it would give me something to do and take me closer to Fray. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t swim—not that I’d go deep enough to need to. My aunt had assured I’d taken swim lessons for years. I think she’d hoped if I swam well, my aversion to water would go away.



Nope.

Having made my decision, I headed for the foam-edged, ebbing water. I was halfway there when the screaming and yelling started. I froze, pure terror filling me. My gaze frantically searched the water, looking back and forth for Fray. Where was he? Where the hell was he? I couldn't breathe, even though my chest rose and fell in panic. No.

No. Don't do this.

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Where was he? I couldn't find him. I stumbled forward, still searching as yells about someone getting hurt, knocked out, reached me. The undertow was pulling the unconscious body out to sea.

No. The ocean couldn't have Fray. Could not! I started forward again, my feet running before I even realized I was moving. The water wasn't taking one more person I loved from me. Hadn't I lost enough? Fray would not be taken from me this way.

I was chest deep when I saw him. I lunged toward him as he towed in the man who'd been injured. I hadn't seen Fray because he'd been swimming into the deeper water. He'd gone after our fellow passenger to keep him from drowning. Before I reached Fray, another pair of swimmers relieved him, taking the man. Fray's gaze immediately went to where I'd been sitting. I saw worry dawn across his features when he didn't see me, and he started moving toward shore, unknowingly coming right at me.

I didn't slow down, swimming hard for him. I slammed into Fray's body, wrapping my arms and legs around him while I sobbed.

"Em," he gasped, his arms closing around me. "Hey, hey," he soothed, rubbing my back. "It's okay. What are you doing out here?"

"I thought it was you. They started yelling, and I couldn't see you, and I thought you were drowning, and I was going to save you, and I love you."

He pulled back enough to see my face as he blinked, taking in my hysterical

babbling. He cupped my face. “Baby, I love you, too. And I’m fine. You shouldn’t be out here. It’s not safe for you.”

“I can swim,” I muttered into his neck, refusing to un-barnacle myself from him. We weren’t bobbing in the waves, so he had to be touching bottom. There wasn’t much danger of me hampering his movement. Then I felt him walking, probably taking us toward the shore. “I needed to save you,” I repeated. “I love you. I can’t let anything happen to you—nothing can happen to you.”

I knew I was jabbering, words just bubbling from me in my panic, but I didn’t care.

Fray carried me out of the water and back to our chairs. Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it around me then sank into one of the loungers with me on his lap. I leaned my head on his chest, still clinging to him.

We sat in silence for a long while, each of us calming. Our breaths synced, and the steady thump-thump of his heart beneath my ear lulled me.

“Did you mean it?” he asked quietly.

I nodded, not looking up at him.

“Em?”

I tilted back my head and met his dark gaze. “I love you.”

He cupped the back of my neck and leaned forward, meeting my lips. “Christ, I love you so much. You have no idea...”

He trailed off, kissing me hard. We got lost in each other, tangled in the moment. It happened all the time with us, the two of us forgetting everything but the way we

physically connected.

“I’ll always do my best to stay safe for you,” he promised. “But I couldn’t let—”

“Of course, you couldn’t,” I interrupted. “You couldn’t let a man drown if you could save him. I would have done the same thing. I was just scared when I couldn’t see you. And I’m really proud of you. You’re a hero.”

“I want to always be your hero.”

I hugged him tight. I wanted that, too. But the reality was, he’d have a really hard time doing that when we were half a country apart.

“Are you ready to go back to the ship?” I asked him. “I could really use some one-on-one hero time.”

“Babe, you might not know it, but you’re my kryptonite. Anything you want, I’m weak to do anything but your will.”

I shifted, feeling him harden beneath me. It didn’t matter the situation; he always seemed to have that reaction to me. “Hmm...I don’t think you’re weak at all. But by all means, let’s go back to the cabin and test out your theory.”

Fourteen

Fray

She loved me. Thank God!

As we’d waited for transportation back to the ship, I’d contacted Marco to have him prepare the cabin for us. I wanted everything ready and for no one to disturb us

tonight. We were supposed to go to the special Christmas Eve party the crew was throwing, but I had a feeling Emerson wouldn't mind skipping that—not once she saw what was in store for us.

I held her hand, carrying our things as we headed back to our suite. Looking at us, you wouldn't guess she'd been propositioning me and I wanted to jump her.

However, despite appearances, I wanted her as soon as we were in private, but nerves also roiled in my gut. What if she said no to us? What if she hated the surprises I had in store for her?

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My concern notched up when I ushered her through the door ahead of me. As if I hadn't worried enough, Emerson eyed the gifts under the tree warily before turning a glare to me. Hell, she was pissed. Not good.

"What's all this?" she demanded.

"It's Christmas." I shrugged.

"It's ChristmasEve," she huffed as she took in the room.

I led her farther inside. "Love, I intend to spoil you. This is just the beginning."

"I don't need anything," she insisted. "I...have you. Don't I?"

Her anger disappeared, her gaze filling with an apprehension that nearly broke my heart. It was almost enough to make me fall to my knee and propose in that instant, but I held myself in check.

"Of course, you do. Forever," I vowed before brushing a kiss across her lips.

"It's not fair. I haven't gotten you anything," she said, glancing at the pile of wrapped presents. How long it had been since she'd been spoiled with gifts or had she ever been? Knowing her background as I did now, I wondered. She'd be showered with gifts and love from now on.

"You're all I require," I said. I took her hand and led her to the tree. "Open them."

“It’s not Christmas,” she argued again, though she allowed me to sit and pull her to the floor with me.

“Tomorrow will be busy,” I reminded her.

“Yes,” she agreed, frowning. “I still have to pack. What time are we leaving?”

The sadness in her tone confused me. I knew she wasn’t completely happy on the ship, so I’d thought she’d be relieved to disembark.

“The ship docks at eleven.”

“I’ve gotten so used to the warmth out here,” she said, toying with a ribbon on the box closest to her. I hated the hollowness of her tone. “I’m not looking forward to returning to the bitter cold of Chicago in December.”

Anger burned through me when she talked of returning to that place. She belonged with me in New York. I almost said something then remembered we hadn’t discussed the future yet. Again, the urge to slide the ring on her finger, to prove once and for all that she’d never leave my side, grasped my heart.

“Open your gifts,” I said, some of my agitation coming through in my tone.

“Fray, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “I’m just excited to see your face when you see what I’ve chosen for you. I hope I’ve done alright. When I selected things, I didn’t know you as well as I know you now.”

“I’m sure you did fine,” she said. “It’s already too much.”

I grabbed a package and dropped it into her lap, eager to move along. She was probably right. I'd gone a little overboard. But I'd wanted to ensure her Christmas was special. Initially, because I wasn't sure I could convince her to marry me. But now, I wanted her to always look back at the first Christmas with me as nothing more than a drop in the bucket of excess I was prepared to shower on her.

She glared at me again, but she still chuckled as she turned back to the present and tore the paper off the laptop I'd gotten her.

"You're insane," she said, running a hand over the box. "What is this? I've never heard of this model."

"It's a prototype," I answered dismissively. "They promised if there are any bugs, they'll replace it once it's fully released to the public in the spring. I wanted to be sure you have what you'd need for your coding. But honestly, you're a million times smarter than I am, so I have no idea what that entails. If it's not right, we can send it back and get you something more properly suited."

I took the box from her and set it aside then grabbed the next package off the pile. She shook her head but ripped it open.

We repeated the process for twenty minutes. She opened jewelry, electronics, shoes—thankfully in the right the size—and argued with me about the necessity of all of it. I ignored her protests and insisted she continue.

She never got in the spirit as I'd hoped, but she seemed pleased overall by the gesture. When everything from under the tree had been opened, she sat back and looked around with clear amazement.

"Are we done?" she teased.



I glanced around, making a show of inspecting the tree.

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“Are you too tired to continue?” I asked.

“Continue? I was joking.” Her gaze darkened, and the look she gave me made my cock instantly hard. “Do you mean I have another more intimate gift to unwrap?”

Her lips curled into a naughty grin as her gaze slid over me. My body instantly reacted. Then she crawled over to me and kissed me, her tongue running over my lower lip and her hands on my shoulders, pushing firmly to lay me out on the floor underneath her.

“Em,” I said, pulling away from her mouth. “You’re kind of stealing my thunder here.”

“Why?” She nuzzled my neck before nipping at my ear. “You’re my last present, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I assured her, gently pushing her up. “But there’s one that comes before me.”

Disentangling myself, I stood and went to the tree. I held her gaze while I reached into the branches and withdrew the ring box that had been there since I’d first entered the room almost a week ago.

Em’s lips dropped open, her eyes going wide, as I walked back to her then dropped to one knee. Her breath caught as I opened the box. Her hand covered her mouth, not masking a bit of her shocked expression. She didn’t look upset, though. Thank God.

I forged on, more anxious than ever. She had to say yes.

“Emerson Blake,” I said, staring into her suddenly misty eyes. “Will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

“Are you serious?” she whispered.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” I pulled the ring from the box, snagged her trembling hand and slid the solitaire onto her dainty finger. “Please, say you’ll be mine.”

“I love you!” She threw herself into my arms, and I held her as she cried, smoothing her hair and kissing her cheek.

“Is that a yes?” I choked out, overwhelmed by my own emotions.

“Yes! Oh my God, Fray, yes!”

She pulled back, so I could kiss her properly, and I happily obliged. Cupping her face, I claimed her mouth. Our bodies pressed together, and I felt her heart thumping against my chest, her tears running over my thumbs.

“No more talk of cold Chicago winters alone,” I growled, leaning back to look down into her glistening eyes. “You’re coming home with me, and I’ll keep you warm during the long cold New York winters, we’ll barely notice the cold.”

She nodded, wiping the wetness from her face before she buried her face in my chest.

I stood, pulling her to her feet before I swept her into my arms and carried her to our bed.

“I love you, Emerson,” I told her, laying her on the mattress before climbing over her. “I’ve loved you since the moment I first saw you. I knew you were meant for me. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I promise you, I will do everything in my

power to keep you as happy as you've just made me."

"Fray," she said, raising a hand to cup my cheek in her palm. "Shut up and kiss me."

Of course, I did. I would never deny this woman anything, and I certainly wouldn't do it now.

Fifteen

Emerson

"This is amazing," I said from the plush seat beside Fray. After disembarking from the ship a couple hours ago, he'd brought me straight to the airport and his private plane that awaited the trip to his home. We'd have to go to Chicago eventually, but as they were having a storm that had closed O'Hare and diverted all air traffic, it wouldn't be soon. I was doubly glad we weren't headed that way.

"But we should have flown commercial," I added. My fingers flexed on the leather upholstery, enjoying it even as I admonished him. Sure, it was hypocritical, but I'd never experienced so much luxury. I wasn't quite sure how to take it. "Private planes are expensive, and I've heard they're terrible for the environment."

Leaning over, he nuzzled his nose into my neck. "But if we flew commercial, we wouldn't be as comfortable, even in first class. We'd be spending Christmas at the airport where they might lose our luggage, including all the gifts I just gave you."

I lifted my hand where the shiny, way-too-big diamond gleamed with every move. "Not every gift."

He smirked and lifted a brow. "And we certainly wouldn't be able to join the mile-high club."

My breath caught and I squirmed, immediately going all tingly. I squeezed my thighs together.

“Mile-high club?” I echoed, my voice whispery.

He flicked a switch on the table to the other side of his seat then reached over and unfastened my seatbelt. “Yes, and we don’t even have to squeeze into a teeny tiny bathroom in secret.” In a flash, he had me straddling him. “We can have fun right here, and no one will come bother us. Or if you want, we can go back to the bedroom.”

“Um...” I bit my lip, totally turned on at the thought of having him out in the open like this. “Here is good. You’re sure no one will...um...”

“I’m sure. They’d rather not get fired for interrupting.”

“So they’ll know what we’re doing?” I asked on a squeak.

He lifted a shoulder. “I could be on a confidential call.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “On Christmas Day?”

“I’m a billionaire. Every day is a possible workday. But, yes, they’ll probably know what we’re doing, but they won’t care—especially since I’m giving them all hefty bonuses for working today.”

“You are? I think I like you even more now,” I said. I punctuated my statement with a little rock of my hips.

“You do? I’ll keep that in mind for future reference.” He laughed. “For the record,

I'm not so oblivious or self-centered that I don't realize I'm asking the crew to work on Christmas. We—the Cassels—make sure our staff are well-compensated for inconveniences. My family might have money, but my parents were jerks about not letting us be rich kids—and I mean that in the most loving way.”

“They didn't just spoil you and buy you anything you wanted, huh?” I asked. I liked his parents already. They'd raised an amazing man—and not because he liked to be extravagant with me. Over the entire past week, I'd never seen him be unkind or impatient with any of the staff or workers we'd encountered on or off the ship—the male masseuse aside, but I supposed that was because Fray didn't want any guy touching me. Yes, my fiancé liked nice things, but I'd never seen him act entitled or superior to other people.

“No. Not really. But fair warning, our kids will be spoiled to death, but they'll probably think I'm a jerk, too, since I'll probably be just like my parents.”

I leaned forward and kissed him lightly. “But I'll love you for that. I love you.”

“Good, I love you, too, and I'm never letting you go. We're going to be disgustingly happy.” His hands slid up my thighs, pushing under my black skater-style skirt. He growled, cupping my ass and pulling me closer to grind on his cock.

We were both dressed for the family party we'd be attending when we arrived, wearing matching red sweaters with white snowflakes he'd produced from his suitcase this morning. I wore the black skirt, tights and the pair of the Louboutin's he gave me last night. He wore black trousers with his own shiny black dress shoes. In my opinion, we were just too cute for words. And we definitely looked like a couple.

I smiled, knowing we were indeed a couple. And my fiancé was hot. And sweet. And generous. And mine.

“Do you think they’ll like me?” I asked. Since I had no family, it was incredibly important his liked me.

“They’ll love you like I do, though my brothers had better keep their hands to themselves. Or we’ll all see not-so-nice guy Fraser.”

I snorted. I had no doubt they’d behave. I also didn’t doubt how Fray would react if they didn’t. Thankfully, none of his brothers had been remotely interested when we’d met at the club that night in New York.

“I’m just nervous,” I confessed.

He kissed the place behind my ear that always made me shiver, and he pulled me closer. “Then let me distract you.”

\* \* \* \*

As Fray maneuvered up his parents’ driveway in his Rivian, Christmas carols played quietly on the radio. Their home in Sleepy Hollow was large, but not enormous or pretentious. Just a comfortable upper, middle-class home. I was kind of thankful for that.

“A normal house. I was afraid it would be a mansion. That would have been overwhelming, since I have a one-bedroom apartment back home.”

Fray growled and I added, “In Chicago, I mean.”

“Fair warning, our house on Millionaire’s Row in Tarrytown. You’ll see it after the party.”

“Yay,” I’d deadpanned, nerves bombarding my middle. Fray chuckled then leaned



over to kiss me after shifting the car into park. Though I enjoyed the caress of his lips, I grimaced, realizing the gap in my knowledge—of him and geography. “I thought you lived in the city. Where’s Tarrytown?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t live in NYC. You’ll love Tarrytown, though. It’s gorgeous and only twenty-five miles from Manhattan. It’ll be perfect for raising kids. There’s so much nature and history. It’s quiet, almost like a small town. And best of all, our entire family lives nearby. Sleepy Hollow is where I grew up, adjacent to where I live now.”

Which was all Greek to me, but I figured I’d grow accustomed to it all while I learned the place. It overwhelmed me as Fray told me more. Apparently, his best friend, Keiran Brothers, another billionaire of course, lived there too, his company working adjacent to the Cassels’ firm. He’d gotten married recently, and I’d meet his new wife soon. The fact she’d worked for Keiran made me hopeful she wasn’t a socialite I couldn’t relate to.

“You okay?” Fray asked, breaking into my spiral. He held my hand, his thumb brushing up and down and occasionally playing with the ring he’d placed there last night.

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“Mm-hmm,” I squeaked. “I’m okay with moving here—”

“Good. Otherwise, my commute home would be a bitch every day. I mean, I have a private plane, so...it’s possible.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I laughed.

“No, I just love you. Em, I lived without you for three months, and that was three months and a day too long.”

I smiled softly, dipping my chin at his sweetness. “The question is, what will I do here?”

“Plan our wedding,” he suggested. “You can do whatever you want.”

My brow raised, and I glared at him. “Seriously, Fray.”

“I am serious.”

I shook my head. “I’m not exactly one to sit around and do nothing. Sure, it would be nice for a week or two. But after that, I’ll be bored out of my mind. And don’t say you’d keep me busy. You have to work, too. And you know it. You have a company to run.”

“We can use a coder.”

I leveled a look of disbelief at him.

“I’m not making it up,” he defended. “We’ve been looking to expand into security systems. It’s a natural extension of what we do, with many of our clients needing extensive systems. We’ve been developing a team.”

“And you want me to be on the team?”

“Or head it up.”

“So you want me to be on the team?” I repeated, letting him know I wasn’t stepping into some management position he may or may not have created for me.

“We’ll talk about it,” he countered.

“You’re right. We will.” If he took the statement as the threat I meant it to be, good. This was real life where we’d work out our differences and figuring out how to mesh together. And every minute would be worth it. Totally worth it.

He squeezed my hand. “Let’s go meet Mom and Dad.”

“You haven’t met them?” I teased.

“Smartass.”

“Do they know I’m coming?”

“They do, and my mom is so damn excited.”

And she was. The second I met Sara Cassel, she pulled me into a tight hug. I was passed to her husband, Sean, then I was embraced by each of Fray’s brothers, Luke, Bennett, Jameson and Tatum. They each seemed to take pleasure in Fray’s growls.

He yanked me back to his side, locking me against him. I kissed his shoulder. “Calm down,” I whispered. “You know I’m all yours.”

“How about some eggnog?” he said, sweeping me away from everyone. Well, almost everyone. Luke trailed behind us.

Fray lifted his hand to forestall whatever his brother was going to say. “No business talk.”

“You’ve been gone for a week.”

“Aplannedtwo weeks. Whatever it is, it can wait five more days until we’re all back in the office after the holiday break.”

Luke scowled.

I looked up at Fray. “If you need to talk, it’s okay. I should check in with Laura. I haven’t called to wish anyone Merry Christmas.”

Luke perked up. “Laura?”

“Yeah. My best friend. We were celebrating her engagement the night I met Fray.”

His expression darkened. “Is she married yet?”

“Not yet.” My phone rang then, and I pulled it from my purse then laughed. “Speak of the devil.”

“Speak of an angel,” he muttered.

Shaking my head, I took a few steps away. “Laura? Merry Christmas,” I answered.

“Hey, Em. Are you back in Chicago?” she asked, a frantic tremor to her voice.

“Not exactly.”

“Crap. Well, when will you be back? I kinda need a place to stay.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. Concern leaking into my voice, and Fray must have noticed. He came up beside me and wrapped his arm around my waist.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I shrugged, unsure of what was happening while I listened to my friend, who sounded more and more upset.

“I left home. Told them I wasn’t marrying some guy they arranged for me. He was supposed to show up today, and my dad locked me in my room because he said I was damn well marrying Matteo. I had to break my way out!”

“Tell her to come here,” Luke said from my other side, and I realized Laura was so agitated both Fray and Luke had heard her, too. “If they know where you live,” he continued, “they’ll look for her there. They won’t look here.”

“You’re right. Laura, listen...” Quickly, I told her where I was and explained she should come here and why. Then Fray took the phone and gave her directions.

“She was almost to Chicago. She’s turning around and she’ll be here tomorrow morning,” he told me, handing back the phone. I stuck it away and took his hand. He pulled me close, resting his head atop my head. I looped my arms around his waist. I tipped my face up to peer at him. I loved the easy intimacy and knowing I belonged to him.

“Guess it works out that your maid of honor will be here, since I don’t want to wait for the wedding.”

I sighed, albeit happily as contentment filled me. “You have a one-track mind.”

“When it comes to you? Yes, I do. It’s you and me forever, babe. Knew it from the first second.”

I rested my head on his chest, absorbing the sound of his steady heartbeat, the sound of my future. “I know. I think I did, too.”

Epilogue

Emerson

One Month Later

Fray:Is it time yet?

Em:Ten minutes.

Fray:Too long.

Em:You'll live. Just stay out of the water, okay?

We were back on a ship. Crazy, right? I know Fray thought I'd lost my mind when I told him I wanted to get married on the ship where we'd had our Christmas cruise. What could I say? It felt like full circle to have the wedding there. Plus, okay, I wanted to see the baby turtles again.

I'd probably never love the water, but Fray made me not hate it so much. Actually, truth be told, my fear had lessened immensely since I'd "saved" him on Christmas Eve.

"Have I told you how much I love that dress?" Laura asked.

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“Maybe once or twice.” Who knew you could actually have a world-famous designer drop everything to make your wedding dress? I guess when you were marrying a billionaire, dreams could become reality. My gown was a sleek, princess fantasy of silk and beads. It weighed a ton and glittered like diamonds when it caught the lights.

In the reception ballroom, huge black-and-white photos of us adorned one wall. We’d had them taken for our engagement, and our planner thought it would be a great idea to decorate with enormous pictures of our love. I’d thought it would be obnoxious, but they actually looked spectacular, especially as a part of the silver and black décor, with thousands of pink and white flowers filling the room.

Of course, I doubted anyone would notice the decorations once Maroon 5 took to the stage. Yes, my crazy, ridiculous husband-to-be had somehow gotten my favorite group to be our wedding band. How was this my life?

I’d been having a lot of Whoa! moments while I’d acclimated to being the future spouse of someone with literal money to burn. For the most part, we lived a simple life, but that didn’t mean Fray skimped on grand gestures. I was working on dialing him back.

“Luke will go nuts when he sees you,” I said, eyeing the black dress with silver beading that clung to her curves. It was floor-length but featured a slit to mid-thigh on one side. The halter-style showcased her slim shoulders and allowed a tasteful glimpse of her cleavage.

A blush colored Laura’s cheeks. “Nah...”



“Oh, trust me. He’ll spirit you away the first chance he gets—”

A knock sounded on the door, interrupting me, and Fray’s mom, Sara, poked her head into the cabin. “Ready?”

I nodded. “I was ready a month ago.” I grinned. “But someone insisted on a wedding.”

She lifted her chin, unapologetic at not letting Fray and I elope. “You’ll thank me for it later. You can’t trade the memories.”

Sara was probably right. And she’d made sure I had plenty of memories of this whole process. She’d taken me under her wing and mothered me as if I were her own little chick. Not only was I getting a husband, but I was acquiring a Mom, Dad and some annoying brothers in the deal. And I loved them all.

Fray didn’t know it, but his family was the greatest gift he’d given me last Christmas. And as I walked down the aisle to the beautiful man of my dreams a few minutes later, I knew it was only the beginning of many gifts we’d give each other, every day for the rest of our lives.

“Hi, wife,” he said, when I stopped beside him, Jacob before us. Jacob had been overjoyed when we’d asked him to marry us at sea on the ship where he reigned.

“No yet,” I murmured.

Jacob chuckled. “Still time to run, Em.”

Fray quickly grasped my hand. “No. Time ran out the day I saw her. Let’s get this done, or do I need to find another officiant.”

“Good luck with that, mate,” his friend retorted. Still, he lifted the tablet he held, and

welcomes our guests to our wedding. We had a large contingent of family and friends with us, including several of the billionaires from New York who were friends and associates of the Cassels. From what I'd heard, there's been some scuffles over appropriate rooms for the lot, and as a result, several enormous yachts were traveling along with the cruise ship. I didn't care. Fray and I had the same suite as we had a month ago.

A suite I couldn't wait to return to later, since Fray had stayed with Luke since we'd left port yesterday. He hadn't liked it one bit, and no he never took his eyes off me. I had a feeling he wouldn't be much farther away than this for the rest of the cruise.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight," Fray promised as if reading my thoughts.

I grinned, and as I listened to Jacob launch into the ceremony, Fray's plans were just fine with me. He already lived in my heart anyway.

## Epilogue Two

Emerson

Five Years Later

"Where are you going?" Fray grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back into bed with him. I sprawled over him, resting on his chest, my favorite place to be.

"You dragged me to bed so fast last night, I still need to put your last present under the tree."

His arms tightened. "The only thing I want is right here."

His mouth covered mine, and he rolled, covering me with his body. If I'd thought our

desire for each other would wain after we'd been together awhile, I'd have been wrong. We were still going strong.

“Well, I want you to open your presents,” I argued.

“Okay.” He started to push up my pajama top.

“Fray,” I protested, though it was mostly a moan. He had me aroused and ready in a split second. Not a difficult feat, since he could do that just by looking at me a particular way. It was ridiculous really. Thankfully, he was just as bad as I was, always needing me, too. I'd lost track of the number of times I'd beensummoned to his office for somesecurity reviewwhich was usually a breach of my panties...by him.

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This morning, his cock ground against my center while we kissed, and I knew we wouldn't be opening presents anytime soon. Which was okay, since it was just the two of us.

As a couple, we'd spent the last five years growing closer than ever. He was my everything now. Heck, he'd been that from almost the start. Some people might think that was a codependent problem. They'd be wrong. It wasn't an issue for us. He was my best friend, my confidante and support, and I was the same for him. And the instant attraction we'd experienced at that club had only grown stronger.

And remained insatiable. Before I knew it, Fray had me naked, and his cock surged into me.

"Fuck," he groaned. "How do you still feel better every time?"

"Magic," I laughed.

He nipped my bottom lip, before bending to take a nipple in his mouth. "Love magic. You've cast a spell on me."

I wrapped my legs around his waist, my calves crossing over his perfect butt, and rocked up into him. The sensation of him driving so deep into me was the best thing in the world, and he knew just how to slide across my g-spot with each thrust.

We had no more words—none were needed—while we sank into the paradise of each other, our bliss rushing toward us, ready to wrap us in the sweet pleasure again.

“Fray, yes,” I cried out when he circled his thumb on my clit.

“Oh God, yeah, squeeze me like that,” he groaned. “So...good...Em...”

That was all it took, and we tumbled over the edge into oblivion. Moments later, we collapsed together, panting hard, still clutching each other.

“That was fast,” he muttered against my neck.

“Short but oh, so sweet,” I replied, lightly raking my fingers down his back. Sometimes, our lovemaking could last hours. Sometimes, we both went off like rockets. However it happened, it was always good. Fray claimed it was because practice made perfect. I claimed he was perfect—in my head of course. No need to feed his billionaire ego anymore than I already did.

“Can we do presents now?” I asked. Without awaiting his response, I squirmed from his embrace. I hopped out of bed and reached for Fray’s shirt, snatching it up from where it had been dropped last night.

He groaned, rolling onto his back. “If you have that much energy, I must be doing something wrong.”

I knelt one knee on the edge of the mattress and leaned over him to brush my lips over his. “No, you’re doing everything right. I’m just anxious.”

“Okay,” he said, levering himself up. “I’m coming.”

He pulled on his boxer-briefs then swept me up into his arms. I giggled as he headed for the tree downstairs. Thankfully, all of our staff were off for the week, and therefore we had the house all to ourselves, so I didn’t have to worry about Fray’s lack of clothes...or mine. Having people around our home all the time had taken some

getting used to, perhaps being the most difficult adjustment I'd had to make, to be honest.

"I have to go get your gift out."

"I think Marco handled all the gifts last night," he said, reminding me that one of our staff, our house manager, had been in momentarily last night while we'd been at Fray's parents' house.

Yes, Marco from our cruise. He'd been so constantly efficient every time we'd been onboard the ship that Fray had asked him what he'd think of working for us. Ready to move on to another opportunity, Marco had accepted. In retrospect, he'd probably had no idea what he was getting into, but he was thriving and he'd even ended up marrying our groundskeeper, Daisy, last summer.

"There's a present that's not with everything else. Let me go get it."

Fray's brow furrowed, but he loosened his arms. Leaping to my feet, I headed toward the cupboard where I'd stowed the small package. When I came back, I dropped back into his lap. He cupped the back of my neck, drawing me closer to him, and kissed me again.

"I love you so much. You're my best present ever. I never need anything else."

I laughed and handed him the small package. "You might like this just as much. Open it before anything else."

My teeth sank into my bottom lip. I was so excited, and I'd had a terrible time keeping this secret from him. I'd wanted to scream it from the rooftops since it had taken so long.

“Nothing is better than you,” Fray replied, while he opened the present flat present, his arms still around me, keeping me on his lap and giving me a front seat view. I didn’t look at the present, though. I watched his face.

His smile faltered when he removed the box lid and looked at the piece of plastic inside, surprise overtaking his features. We’d tried for a couple years, and now, I got to tell him.

“I’m going to be a dad,” he whispered. “We’re going to be parents?”

I nodded happily, tears filling my eyes. I’d been so excited, but now, seeing his reaction was everything.

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The package dropped, and Fray cupped my face, kissing me. I wrapped my arms around him as my world shifted and my back met the floor.

“Thank you. Second best present ever—after you” he proclaimed, kissing me.

He was my best, too. The best surprise I’d ever received.

“I love you, Fray.”

“I love you. So much.” He lifted me into his arms and carried me back to our bed where we got lost in each other once again. And it was a long, long time before any other presents were opened. It didn’t matter. Together, we had everything we could possibly need.

### Epilogue Three

Fray

Five More Years Later

“Happy anniversary, love,” I whispered to my wife of ten years, the most beautiful woman I knew. She turned her head to look at me from where she lay on the lounge beside me on the beach. The kids were with their aunt and uncle back home, and we were baking on a private beach in the sunny tropics, where we’d flown in rather than cruising.

“Happy anniversary, Fray,” she murmured with a soft, drowsy smile. She sighed as



she rested her head on her arms, no doubt tired after our overnight travel, since we'd had to attend a gala at The Met last night. "This sun feels so good, but I feel like I need a nap."

That perked me up, and I was sitting, my legs swinging over to the edge of my lounge in moments. Em's lips rolled together as she laughed.

"That's not what I meant, but I can get onboard."

I pulled her up. "I'm gonna take you on a very special cruise."

"Oh yeah?" she questioned, leaning her body into mine, her arms around my shoulders. "And what are the amenities on this cruise of yours?"

"I think I need to give you a tour..."

I guided her to the nearby boardwalk that led directly to our private bungalow. Jungle surrounded us for the most part, affording us complete privacy for the week. We could make love on the beach, but...I had other ideas and didn't trust paparazzi from invading our paradise with long-range cameras. Instead, I pulled her through the louvered doors that led right into our bedroom then guided her toward the luxurious bathroom.

"First up, we offer a daily full-body massage."

"Yes?" she asked as I stripped off my board shorts then reached for her, peeling down her tank suit. "Naked massages?"

"They are the best. Most therapeutic." I lifted her onto the counter then skimmed my hands along her sides to cup her breasts that were a little larger than they had been when we'd married. Em was in fantastic shape, even after three kids, our son and our twin girls, but she bemoaned the extra curves. I loved them.

“Therapeutic,” she moaned softly, her head dropping back as her back arched, pushing the supple mounds deeper into my palms. “That’s good. Work’s been taxing lately.”

I pinched her nipples, making her whimper. “No work talk.”

“Okay,” she gasped.

Dipping forward, I laved one peak to soothe it, rolling the other in my fingers. Em buried her fingers in my hair, holding me against her. We still enjoyed each other as often as possible, and I was sure our kids would probably be embarrassed by us someday. I didn’t care. I loved Em with everything in me.

“I’m feeling this...tightness,” she breathed. “Maybe you can help massage it.”

Grasping my hand, she brought it down to her center.

“Here?” I asked, slipping my fingers through her slick fold then pushing two fingers inside her. Her warm walls clenched on the digits. “Oh, I see. Very tight. God, love.”

She sucked in a breath between her teeth, canting her hips into my drives. “That’s not helping. I think you might need to use a different...tool.”

Her fingers circled me, dragging up and down my shaft. Fiery sensation curled along my spine and settled at the small of my back, my balls drawing up at the heaven of her grasp.

“Lucky for you, I have the perfect tool handy.”

“Very lucky,” she agreed, spreading her legs wider to welcome me closer.

And as I sank into her, drawing her closer and turning to brace her against the wall, I

had to agree we were both very lucky indeed. We had the best life. Take everything away, as long as I had Emerson and our family, nothing else mattered. We had love, the greatest wealth of all.