



Go Away, Darling

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Description: How many times can you fall in love? So far I've fallen in love with Olivia Saldana twice. Once when I was five and I thought she was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen, and now again at twenty-five and I know she's the most beautiful woman I'll ever meet.

I didn't move back to the island of Calusa Key for her, but now that I've fallen head over heels (literally off my boat and her dock...on the same day no less) I'm determined to see if my crush has grown up into something more. Possibly the roots I've been looking for my whole life.

*Go Away, Darling is a single mom, small town, friends-to-lovers, beach, baseball sports romance.

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Part I

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Excellent peripheral vision

Chris

The sun was starting to dip toward the horizon. At least I think it was. I had to admit that drinking a six-pack on a hot day of fishing was probably not my wisest decision, but it was my day off and damn it all, I wanted to.

There was a point in every baseball season when I reached my limit. Where I got so fucking sick of the daily games, road trips, and stress that I disappeared for my day off and got shitfaced drunk.

Today was that day. We were 137 games into the best season of my life. The Mantas were on track for a sweet position in the playoffs and everyone had started to say the “P” word. Pennant. I didn’t dare say it out loud, let alone the ones that came after that. Ballplayers dreamt their whole lives of playing in a World Series; I wasn’t about to curse myself now.

Besides, there was a reason I bought a beach house on a quiet island just far enough away from my Mantas teammates. I needed space. I needed home. My life was baseball but at the end of the day I craved settling down in the same place, putting down roots, living my life off the field as quietly as possible. Here I could fish. I was just one of many who enjoyed spending solitary time alone with their beer and their

potential dinner. There was something immensely satisfying about catching your dinner. It called to my baser instincts.

Which was why I was all kinds of fired up and pissed off when I heard the quiet motor of another boat. Generally I was a friendly guy and most days I'd wave, maybe exchange a few words with my fellow fisherman, and get back to it. But not today. Today was Pissed-Off Day. I wanted—noneeded—to brood alone, which required me to sober up enough to tell this interloper to leave as quickly as possible.

I was anchored up in a nice, quiet bay. It was one of those mangrove islands that wasn't really an island so much as it was where a sandbar had collected enough sand to become a tiny spit of land, the mangroves colonized and it grew to a decent size, but no one was going to be setting foot on it, let alone living on it. It was mostly just a great place to fish and have some peace and quiet. Sometimes I found other fishermen, sometimes I found topless women sunbathing, sometimes I found both.

I was far enough away from Calusa Key that I couldn't see it, but close enough that it was a quick sprint home whenever I sobered back up. The salt water and harsh sun had called to me all my life, demanding that one day I return to the sleepy island I called home so many years ago. With such a bright spotlight on me this year, it was time. I bought the house and felt a sense of relief that I had somewhere to escape to. The only problem was that those opportunities for escape were few and far between.

The mystery boat came around the northern tip of the island, the driver standing up behind the steering wheel. The blue bimini top was up for shade, so clearly the boater had been moving slowly around the area. He raised his hand in a wave.

I did not return the wave, hoping my foul mood would be obvious and the guy would move along.

Apparently I needed to be more obvious because instead of turning around and

leaving, the boater pulled up alongside and cut the motor. “Hello!”

The voice was surprisingly high pitched but I didn’t pay much attention. Instead I reeled in my line and jammed it into the holder. Then I grabbed my beer and marched to the opposite side of my boat. And by marching, what I really meant was that I took two angry steps.

“What?” I barked. At this point any moron would be able to pick up my social cues. I expected a quick apology and then to be left alone.

But instead I found myself gaping.

Yes,gaping.

Because he was ashe.

A gorgeous she.

Her dark hair was tucked up under a blue Mantas ball cap. Her skin was golden brown. Her lips full and luscious. Her eyes were hidden behind a mirrored pair of Costas. Over her body was an open Columbia fishing shirt, revealing a hot pink bikini and a slender but unmistakably female body.

Damn.Just...damn. I hadn’t been struck dumb by a woman in...ever? Had I ever been rendered speechless on sight alone? I didn’t think I had. Sure I got a little tongue-tied in college a few times, and every so often a woman would catch my eye in such a way that I found it difficult to look away, but never this. This woman standing in front of me with a lopsided grin looking as if she belonged on a fishing boat, had just short circuited my entire body, brain to toes.

Speak you fucking idiot.“Ummm . . . can I help you?”

She smiled. "I didn't mean to bother you but I saw Marine Patrol working their way through the area." She spoke with her hand moving through the air. Her voice had a lilt to it. This seemed natural and right.

Here she was, kindly giving me a heads up and I was being a grumpy, rude ass. An ass who now had a racing heart and an inability to speak. "All my catches are legal." I always double-checked their size before deciding whether or not to keep them for dinner. "But thanks."

She tilted her head like she thought I was adorably clueless. "That's good to hear. But you might want to finish that beer."

I stared at the can in my hand. "Shit." But instead of chugging the last half, I dumped it over the side, stashed it with the other empties, and grabbed a big, cold bottle of water instead. "Thanks. I wasn't thinking."

"Happens."

"I don't drink and drive," I blurted out for some reason. My skin was tingling and I felt like I needed her to know that I might be irresponsible and very buzzed but I wouldn't power up the boat and move until I was sober again.

"That's good to know." She tilted her head to the opposite side and I got the distinct impression she was studying me. "You're new around here?"

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I nodded as a weird tingling sensation crept over me. The way she spoke...the shape of her face...I knew this woman. “Yeah, about a month ago, but I haven’t really had much time at home yet.” How did I know her?

“Your boat looks very new, too.”

“It is. Part of the reason I moved here was the fishing.”

She laughed, sat on top of the puffy white seat and leaned on her knees. “Usually I hear it’s for the beaches or the shells, although I personally prefer the fishing.”

“Well, those are nice too.”

“They are.” Then she smiled. A giant megawatt smile that floored me. Sent my heart slamming into my gut, made me forget how to swallow or breathe.

I know her.

My entire body went on red alert, all my senses firing, my brain searching for the answer. “Have we met before?” Why couldn’t I place her? Was it a simple run-in on the island? Maybe at the grocery store? No. I’d remember that. This physical reaction wasn’t the kind of thing I’d ever forget.

Like ever.

Which was why I knew we’d met somewhere...

She shook her head slowly. “Maybe? What is it you do...I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

And that’s when it hit me. The way she shook her head, the lilt of her words (despite my inebriated state) triggered a very old memory. It slammed into me like a ton of bricks dropped from a crane above my head. Like hitting a catcher blocking home plate when you’re screaming toward home.

Like a bolt of lightning.

When I was five years old, right here on Calusa Key, all my friends and I were struck by a bolt of lightning. And the girl I had been standing beside was now sitting in front of me.

It was like getting struck a second time. “Olivia?”

I hadn’t quite allowed myself to wonder what happened to my friends after we moved away from the island. I was too preoccupied with winning games to really let my mind wander down that path yet, but it was the first thing on my post-season to do list.

But now I didn’t have to wonder at all.

“Olivia?” I took a step back for some reason. Maybe I was surprised. Maybe I really was slammed by a ton of bricks. Maybe I needed a better vantage point to take all of her in. Regardless, it was a bad choice because once I started moving I couldn’t stop. I had no motor control. Between the weird things I was feeling, the lack of breathing and swallowing, and the beer, I teetered, tottered, and then went right over the side of my damn boat. Ass over head, no less.

Splash.

Cold. Salty. Wet.

Embarrassing.

“Son of a bitch!” I yelled at myself as I pushed up from the muddy floor and stood. We were only in five feet of water and the mud sucked my feet right in.

“Are you okay?” I heard her yell. And giggle. I must have been a sight. Dumb mainlander in his fancy boat falling overboard. She probably thought I was a frat-bro who didn’t know starboard from stern.

“Yep. Just . . . yes. I’m fine.” Holy son of all that is good and right in the world. Olivia Saldana. The Olivia Saldana. We only lived on the island for a year and half when I was five, but my brothers and I loved this island and all the friends we made when we lived here.

For me the most important of all those people was Olivia. I loved her. Well, as much as a five-year-old flirt can love his big brother’s friend. I thought I was tough shit. That if I smiled just right and dropped a line or two she’d swoon for me. I was an idiot. I could see that now. But back then? I couldn’t think clearly.

And obviously nothing had changed because as a grown man I had the same urges. Maybe if I smile just right and say something clever she’ll throw herself at me.

Asshole, she probably doesn’t even remember your stupid ass.

I took a deep breath, slogged my way around to the stern of my boat, and hauled myself back up and in with a wave of water that spilled over the engine well, shedding my sopping wet shirt and sunglasses in the process. I couldn’t look at her. I was too excited and embarrassed—a really unfortunate combination, all things considered—so I searched for a towel and attempted to dry off before facing her. I

expected a laugh for my ineptitude. Or maybe boredom.

Instead I found her staring at me with her mouth hanging open.

Like, jaw unhinged hanging open as she stared at me. “Chris?” She half-whispered.

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My heart stopped. She remembers.

I ran the towel over my hair. “It is you, isn’t it? Olivia?”

She nodded slowly, pulled her sunglasses down and let them lay against her chest so I could see her gorgeous brown eyes and the light smattering of dark freckles that dotted her nose and cheeks.

“Chris?” She asked again, putting her hands up to emphasize her shock, or maybe it was excitement. Then as if she were suddenly jarred into action she grabbed a bowline and looped it around one of the cleats on my boat, binding our two vessels together, then climbed over into my boat.

“I can’t believe it!” she whispered. “You’re not on TV.” She made a square with her hands.

TV? Moron...she watches you play ball.

I looked down at my bare chest, wet trunks, feet, and the water dripping all over the deck. “Nope. I’m right here. How the hell are you?” I wanted to hug her but was that the right thing to do? Or was that too forward? She climbed into my boat, so maybe?

I took a step and wrapped my arms around her. I just meant it to be a quick, friendly squeeze, but then she hugged her arms around my waist, her hands going flat against my skin and I froze. The contact of her hand on my bare back wasn’t sexual or inappropriate in any way, and yet...I felt that touch everywhere. My chest ached and my first instinct was to pull her tighter against me until the ache stopped.

We stood like that—frozen together—for what I estimated to be longer than appropriate. But hell if I'd apologize. Instead I took a breath and laughed. "I'm taller than you now."

Her shoulders moved as she laughed too, looking up at me but not letting me go. Interesting. "You are much taller than me now."

I couldn't help but stare at how beautiful she'd become. I mean, I knew I had a wild crush on her when I was a kid, but this was something else altogether. I let my eyes drift over each of her features individually. Nose, lips, delicate chin and ears, manicured brows, freckles, eyes. God, her eyes.

Mesmerizing.

And the warmth of her body against mine felt too good. I stepped back before things could get weird and tapped her Mantas hat. "I like this."

She looked up and blushed. "I'm a fan." She shrugged, crossed her arms over her chest.

I did not stare at the way it pushed her breasts up in her pink bikini, but I did note them in my peripheral vision. I had excellent peripheral vision, which was part of what made me a good pitcher. You had to have a death wish to steal when I was on the mound.

But we were talking (and not about her breasts or my excellent peripheral vision.) "Really?"

She shrugged again, the blush turning her cheeks even pinker. "The Mantas are our local team and they're having an amazing season, thanks in part to you."

It was my turn to blush. I loved what I did but I had never gotten very comfortable with compliments. I'd rather just work hard and see the results for myself. Hearing a beautiful woman sing my praises was a lot to handle. "Ummm...it's a team effort. Obviously. Cuz we're a team."

She chuckled softly at my babbling. "Christopher Robin, you took my advice, didn't you?"

I froze again, but this time for a very different reason. Hearing my old nickname called up all kinds of old memories, but it also felt like Olivia was throwing up a wall, reminding me that I was a kid several years younger than her. A kid who belonged on the other side of the imaginary wall from her.

It made me angry and I wished for an imaginary sledgehammer to destroy the imaginary wall.

"What advice is that?"

Her eyes drifted over my whole body like she was trying to solve a puzzle. "I told you to never change."

"I was ridiculous."

She laughed and sighed and I really liked the way her whole body moved like it was a part of the way she spoke. "You were never ridiculous. Overly full of yourself..."

"I thought I could get anyone to do anything with a smile." I was such a cocky kid.

"And it worked most of the time."

I let my gaze drink her in. "Not on you."

She paused and I felt her withdraw. I hated it and I wished I could quickly rewind time and take back my words, even if I meant them. “Yes, well, that was a long time ago.” She hopped over the hulls, back into her boat.

With every moment she moved further away from me and I felt a desperate, primal need to close the gap, as if allowing her to leave was somehow wrong. But of course I couldn't stop her from leaving. We were strangers and she came on a different damn boat. “I don't know anyone,” I blurted, looked at my feet, cleared my throat. “Uh, what I mean is, when baseball season is over, if you don't mind, could you maybe introduce me to some people?”

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“Of course.” She released the bowline from my boat.

My heart kept beating faster and faster as she moved behind her steering wheel and turned the key. Her engine roared back to life.

My skin itched. I wanted this conversation to keep going even though there was no way to force it. Rationally I knew this was it, but my body wasn't feeling rational at all. It wanted to spend more time with Olivia Saldana. It wanted to touch her and introduce her to Chris Kaine, the man. “I'll treat you to dinner as a thank you.”

She blanched and then dumped a cold bucket of water on my head. “I'm not single, Chris. But I'll happily show you around and give you an introduction. Now you sober up.”

And with that very unwelcome news she pressed the lever forward and turned her boat away from mine. I watched her navigate to the channel and rev the engine up high, stuck on the words I'm not single. Something about them sat wrong. It was the same way she called me Christopher Robin. Words used as a wall to keep me on one side. She didn't say I'm married or engaged or taken or in love.

She used the negative instead of the positive.

I'm not single.

What if that simply meant not right now?

Just keep your focus

Chris

My brain didn't work properly for a while after Olivia left. Between the alcohol, the heat, and her, the delicate organ inside my skull seemed to be overloaded with input. I set about doing menial tasks while drinking water and electrolytes. Normally I'd sit in my afternoon buzz. Take a nap. Enjoy the feeling of being completely free of stress and expectations.

But today I wanted my wits back. I needed to process what happened. Hell, I needed to be sure it was even real. Maybe I dreamt the whole thing. Yeah that's it. The sun and the beer got to me and I passed out. I dreamt a beautiful adult version of my childhood crush appeared like an angel.

Yes, apparently my angels came in the form of fisher ladies.

I flipped my shirt over on the seat. It was almost dry. And proof Olivia had been here.

That's when I heard an erratic buzzing noise. Since the engine was off and I didn't have any electronics on—no depth finder or fish finder or any other kind of finder—it took me a minute to realize the buzzing wasn't the boat. It was my infernal cell phone.

I dug through the compartment and yanked out the dry bag where it was safely stored, but apparently not off. Normally I powered it down for my day off so I could truly be away from it all. My mistake.

And not an all together terrible interruption since most of the notifications were from my brothers, Ben and Scott. I scrolled through seeing that it was mostly a back and forth over a meme Scott sent. I took a selfie and sent it.

Scott immediately pinged me back. Island time? Jealous!

Instead of messaging, Ben called me.

“Big Ben!”

“Little brother! How the hell are you? You down on Calusa Key?”

I squinted at the horizon in the general direction of the island. “Yep. Just for the day. I’m on call for tomorrow’s game.”

Ben whistled low. “Must be serious.”

“Playoff positioning at stake.” A little of the stress crept back in and I pushed back on the urge to tense my shoulders.

“But to use their best pitcher in relief? Come on. It can’t be that close.”

It was a rare and unusual move, but not unheard of. Some starters had to start. They had to paint on a blank canvas. It was built into the rhythm of their game. Every pitcher has a cadence, a game plan. Mine just happened to be the kind that could be used in any situation. I was cool as a fucking cucumber on that mound. It didn’t bother me to come into someone else’s mess. For all the stress I was trying to offload on my boat, none of that went with me to the field. It made me dangerous because it made me useful.

“Where we’re at in the rotation, using me tomorrow—if they need me—won’t impact my next start. So why not?” I shrugged even though no one could see me.

“Just take care of that arm.” It was a rare and not unwelcome bit of big brothering.

Truth be told, I was starting to think maybe I was lonely. My teammates liked to tease me, call me a hermit because I preferred the quiet and often went off on my own when things got too crazy. As the season wound down and the reality of our playoff chances came up, I'd started isolating more and more.

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Maybe too much if this ache in my chest was any indication. One word from my big brother and I was mush? Not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

“I’ve got the best people in the world watching my arm. Don’t you worry.”

He chuckled. “So the reason I’m calling...I’m actually going to be down there pretty soon.”

“Down where?”

“Sarasota. I’m consulting on a house. It won’t take more than a week or two, but I figured we could spend some time together and maybe I could watch some games?”

“Hell yeah! Stay with me. I have plenty of room. You have your own room.”

“You mentioned that a few times already.”

I had this dream that the island would be our home. The Kaine family never had a home base. With musicians for parents our lives were one long road trip. The eighteen months we lived here while they were the band in residence at the resort was just about the longest I lived anywhere except college. So I bought this ridiculous house with too much space for a single man in the hopes it would be more than justmyhouse.

Bedrooms for everyone!

“Send me your travel info and I’ll get everything set.”

“Will do little brother. Looking forward to it.”

I hit the No Wake Zone and slowed the boat to idle speed as I maneuvered toward my dock. My house stuck out like a sore thumb on this side of the island. Everything was low, older, surrounded by lush tropical vegetation. Except my house. It was big, shiny, and treeless. But I never had to wonder which dock was mine. Point the bow toward the white glistening house four down from the point and you're there.

Unlike the other end of the island where the older homes had been bulldozed and replaced with mansions not unlike my own, this side of the island remained very much unchanged. The families that had always lived on the island still lived there, and I bet none of them had any plans to sell out to people like me. I didn't blame them. If I'd had my choice I would have rather moved into one of the older island houses instead of my gleaming new McMansion. But it was the only house for sale when I was ready to buy that was big enough for my ambitions.

I felt like an interloper and sometimes—to make myself feel better—I pretended I was a spy with my fancy boat and my international mansion of mystery. It also helped me feel better about not knowing my neighbors. I simply hadn't had the time to introduce myself. In a couple of months baseball season would be over and I'd be home for the winter. I'd bake cookies and make nice. Hopefully none of them hated me.

Until then, I simply referred to my neighbor to the left as Senator (because she was a senator) and my neighbor to the right as Family With Kids because early in the morning and late at night I heard at least one kid yelling and having fun.

I came alongside the dock and did a quick reverse to stop my forward momentum. The one friend I did have, Trent Maddox, began tying off the boat for me.

“Whatcha bring home for us, boy?” The gravelly voice of my former coach made me

smile. He had that classic old Florida islander drawl. It wasn't a smooth southern drawl. This was different. It was more of a low growl, like he was always angry about something.

Trent liked to stop by for dinner. And by always, I meant the four other times I'd been in town long enough to go fishing. He lived three docks down, so he could see when I was gone for the day and invited himself over, not that I was complaining. If there was anyone's company I enjoyed it was his.

He examined each catch as I laid them out on the table. "Mmmm, the snapper were biting today, huh? Those look mighty fine."

"Agreed. I even threw one back."

He shot me a glare. "You could have sent it home with me."

"You're eating with me tonight and I know you'll be here for lunch tomorrow, too."

He shrugged, sat on the upside down bucket beside the table. "You make a good point. How's the arm?"

I rolled my shoulder and picked up the knife. "Good. It feels strong and healthy."

"You're going to do fine, Chris. Just keep your focus."

For now I decided to focus on the fish in my hands.

This was the man who looked at a five-year-old kid and saw potential. When I snuck out to the ball field to play with the older kids he didn't send me away. When he found me behind the dugout teaching myself to pitch, he mentored me. In high school he came out to my playoff games at Rhodes Academy, where I'd convinced my

parents to allow me to be a resident student. I wanted to play professional ball and moving every year wasn't going to help me get there.

Trent came out and talked to my coaches. He came to my playoff games. He helped me through the college recruiting process and landing my agent, Roman St. James. In some ways he was like a second father to me.

"I ran into Olivia Saldana today."

Trent chuckled. "Did you now? How is she?"

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“Good. We didn’t recognize each other at first.” I still blamed the sun protection. Hats and sunglasses hid eyes. Eyes were the window to the soul.

“You’re a little bit taller than you used to be, that’s for sure.”

Everyone seemed to like commenting on my height change, as if five-year-olds weren’t inherently short. “I keep meaning to ask about everyone.”

Trent stretched his long legs. “Well, your old teammates Lucas and Chaz are the coaches over at the high school on the mainland. Andy is an assistant coach with that Miami team.”

“I see him sometimes.” Andy wasn’t a bad guy, just worked for the wrong team, was all.

“And of course Everett and Isaac Anson.”

I froze for a moment because I’d honestly forgotten about them. Isaac was seven years older than me, and Everett three. “Isaac played for the Mantas, didn’t he?”

“For one season. He’s a ranger at the sanctuary now. Everett runs the family marina.”

Once again I felt incredibly lucky to have my career. “Isaac was amazing. Everyone was surprised when he retired.” That’s right. Retired. After starting for St. Pete for one season. He wasn’t hurt and they begged him to stay. It was one of those stories you pay attention to because it was so different.

Trent shot me a tight smile. “Isaac’s a good guy.”

There was a story there, I was sure of it. “What about the Anderson sisters?” I had a feeling my brother Ben still had a crush on London Anderson. I was willing to bet my playoff bonus that was one of the reasons he wanted to come visit. The other reason, obviously, being me.

Ben was a pretty typical older brother. Responsible, level headed, a little quieter than me and Scott. Our parents didn’t require us to follow them into the music industry but they did encourage show business. I think it had more to do with living life big and loud and less about the fame. Ben wasn’t interested in any of that. He just wanted to build furniture and fix up old houses. It was kind of an accident that he wound up on television and a stroke of good luck that his show became so damn popular.

But since Ben wasn’t particularly a fan of fame, he’d become even more responsible and quiet, retreating to his mountain cabin every chance he got. How he was going to meet a girl while hiding out, I had no idea. But then again, Ben had never gone googly eyed or head over heels for anyone but London.

“Oh, Paris lives in her mama’s house with her husband and two little girls. They’re a real nice family.”

Paris was married. Good to know. “And Berlin?”

“Became an archaeologist and moved to the Keys, but she’s still here quite a bit. Married some hockey player or something I don’t understand. Why are there winter sports in Florida? I don’t get it! We have football and baseball for a reason.”

“Soccer, swimming, tennis...” I just started listing other non-winter sports.

But Trent spit on the dock. “The only sport that matters is baseball.”

“Whatever you say, old man. Whatever you say.”

“Mmmhmmm. Who writes your paychecks? It isn’t some hockey team.” He was chuckling now.

“Fair enough. And London?”

He grew quiet. “She doesn’t come home anymore. Left after high school. But she has a nice website about traveling the world that people seem to like reading. Olivia works with her sometimes.” He said that last part like he was sharing special information.

“Oh really?”

“Mmmhmmm.”

I didn’t understand what he was trying to tell me and asking Trent anything usually came with a very long story so instead I announced that it was time to throw the fish on the grill.

We ate quickly and Trent offered to bring the dishes into the kitchen before he begged off for his nightly card game at Mr. Willis’s house.

“Did you rinse off the dock?” Trent asked as he started down my crushed shell driveway.

“Crap. No I forgot.” I’d meant to go back while the fish were grilling but Trent got to talking about how the craft beer industry was all about money and I got distracted.

“Well you should do that. Good night, Chris.”

“Good night, Trent. See you tomorrow.”

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I shuffled down to the dock in time to see four pelicans take flight. At least they'd enjoyed the meal of fish guts I left behind for them. It only took five minutes to wash away the remains and get the dock back to normal. I was in the middle of stowing the hose when I decided—for a reason I still didn't understand—to examine the dock beside mine. The one that belonged to Family With Kids.

Typically I didn't look at this dock because the sun set in that direction and I didn't enjoy having my irises burnt to a crisp. The dock was visible now that the sun was below the horizon. It was still older and still had a boat docked, just like the last time I looked at it.

But this time I saw it all in a brand new way. Iknewthat boat now.

It was the same boat that had been tied to mine earlier today.

3

Might as well swim home

Olivia

It took two cold showers when I got home. Two! And I was still hot and bothered from running into—literally I ran to him and gave him a hug—Chris Kaine. Well, technically, I hopped a boat and then acted like a fan girl and then hugged him. But those are details. I didn't understand what came over me. There was something familiar about the grumpy guy who tried to grouch me away but it wasn't until he went overboard, stripped off his hat, sunglasses, and long sleeved sun shirt that I

realized who he was.

I had to admit I watched a lot of baseball. A lot. I always loved the sport but since Chris Kaine, a boy I'd once known, became one of the star pitchers of the Mantas, I'd started to watch every game. I knew what he looked like because the cameras liked to zoom in on his eyes when he was pitching.

I also had to admit I may have seen a picture or two of him shirtless on Pinterest.

I sipped my bourbon on the rocks and closed my eyes. How was it possible to feel hot and bothered by another human being? No, scratch that. I knew what it felt like when I was attracted to a guy. The confusing part was that it was now several hours later, after two cold showers, and I was still burning up.

And it had nothing to do with the sun.

Was it because I was surprised? Maybe. Surprise certainly did things to me. Like never wanting to eat takeout after getting food poisoning. That was a bad surprise.

But something told me seeing Chris was supposed to be a good surprise. He was funny (when he was done being grouchy) and bantered with me. It was easy to talk to him.

"Mom!" My front door opened and the unmistakable sounds of footsteps echoed through the house.

"Out back!" I didn't get up. Lincoln knew where to find me and I was fairly sure if I tried to stand my knees would wobble. They'd wobbled on my boat all the way home and again in the shower.

Linc scrambled through the back door just as I heard my front door close. "Mom! We

had the best week!” He jumped into my lap and hugged me hard around the neck.

Linc was eight and still my little cuddle bug. I hoped he always would be. “I’m glad. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

Heavy footsteps shuffled closer and closer until my ex-husband appeared in the doorway. “Hey Liv. How’s it going?”

Beau filled the entire doorway. He was a massive mountain of a man and always had been. Tall, wide, made of pure muscle, he was the new starting running back for the Tampa Bay Renegades.

“I had a good week.”

His eyes darted to my drink and back, quirking an eyebrow.

I shrugged. “Sue me.”

He smiled. “Never.”

Linc looked up. “We went to the zoo and the aquarium and to Disney! It was the best week ever!”

I knew all of this because Beau sent me pictures of everything, but it was fun to hear Linc’s version. “Which was your favorite?”

He made his eyes really wide and funny looking. “All of it!” He started back to school in two weeks and Beau was already getting busy with football season, but they took a week together before they were both so busy it would require minor miracles to get everyone together.

It was easier now than it had been when Beau played for Green Bay. Wisconsin and Florida weren't close and dressing Linc for the dramatically different climate was a challenge. It's hard to explain to a kid who is wearing flip-flops and shorts that when he gets off a plane it will be below freezing. We no longer had to worry about that and I was grateful.

"You headed back right now or will you stay for a drink?"

Beau shook his head. I wasn't surprised. He hated small towns and quiet nights. It was this difference between us that led to our eventual end. "No thanks. I want to sleep in my own bed."

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“Me too!” Linc howled and went running for his room.

“I understand,” I said to Beau and was honestly a little relieved. I usually didn’t mind hanging out with him, we were friends, but tonight I had another man on my mind. Beau’s presence was weird. It gave me twisty feelings.

On the one hand it made me panicky, like being attracted to another man was cheating, even though I knew Beau dated and we’d been officially divorced for two years.

But on the other hand it was a shocking wakeup call. I’d spent a lot (a lot) of time analyzing what was right about my marriage to Beau Rowland. We had good chemistry, similar problems and expectations from our parents, we found comfort in each other. He was very good looking. He had graced the cover of a dozen magazines. When we met I sizzled. When we got married I had butterflies. Eventually the sizzles and butterflies disappeared. There were very good reasons for that, none of it the fault of either one of us.

And yet today I’d felt something much more potent than a sizzle. Once upon a time I was struck by lightning, so I knew what I felt when I met Chris today was very much the same sort of shocking sensation. And yeah, it didn’t escape my notice that he was the boy I was with when I was struck by that bolt all those years ago.

“Is something on your mind, Olivia?” Beau asked, moving to sit across from me. “Do you need to talk? I can stay if you do.”

“No. No it’s nothing like that.” I could feel my cheeks turning red and I wished there

was some way to hide my face. Mostly I had to hope that my darker skin tone hid it from Beau. “I ran into a really old friend today and I was momentarily distracted with a memory. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for that,” he chuckled. “It looks like it was a good thing.”

“I think it was. Actually, can I ask you something?” It was probably crazy to most people that Beau and I really were good friends who could talk about anything.

“Of course.”

“Have you ever fallen in love?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is this a trick question?”

I laughed. “No.” When we decided to end our marriage we did a lot of talking and decided that while we loved each other it wasn’t that earth-shattering kind of love. Ours was a quiet love that faded into friendship. What I was asking about was the knock-you-on-your-ass, soulmate, forever kind.

“Well, then no. I don’t think so.” He said it slowly and carefully like he didn’t really believe this wasn’t a trick. “I do love you and Linc.”

“I know that. I feel the same way.” I reached over and gave his hand a squeeze of confirmation. “I guess I’m starting to wonder if I will ever fall head over heels or if that’s not something that really happens.”

He stared at our hands. “It happens, Olivia. It does. It just hasn’t happened to either of us yet.”

“How do you know?” I guess I was wondering what the hell I’d felt today. Was it

lust? Attraction? Longing? Or was it the beginning of that magical thing I read about in books, saw in other couples? I'd talked myself into believing people didn't actually fall in love. They said they did because they wanted to believe their relationship was magical, but really it was all a lie.

Beau took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, my brother for one. Clark and Leslie are definitely crazy in love and it happened overnight. I was there."

"Really?" Other than the elopement and Beau's shock, I hadn't heard the details.

He shook his head. "We were out drinking at this country bar. He saw her laughing and trying to line dance with her friends. It was like someone had tied a rope around the two of them. I swear he has never looked at another woman since. And she fell all over herself flirting right back. They went home together and eloped a month later. They're celebrating their two year anniversary next month."

"Wow." Talk about knowing. I couldn't imagine marrying someone after a month.

"And then there's Kirk and Andy."

I had to admit he was right about that. Kirk and Andy loved each other deeply. Also they made out in front of us way too often for me to doubt their chemistry and devotion.

"And Scarlett and Drew. You remember how her jaw was on the floor when they met? Every time he turned around she'd freak out, then paste on this calm smile when he looked her way. They got married six months later."

He was right again. "I just saw them a couple of months ago," I murmured. "They still can't keep their hands off each other."

“So yeah, I believe people fall head over heels and that one day we will too.” Beau smiled at me encouragingly. “Maybe this old friend?”

I blushed again and he smiled knowingly.

“I doubt that. We haven’t seen each other in twenty years. He was five at the time.”

Beau’s smile grew. “That don’t mean shit and you know it, Olivia. Give the poor guy a shot. If he’s making you blush then he might just be that one-in-a-million man you’ve been asking me about.”

“I can’t believe you’re encouraging me to see another man.”

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He shrugged and stood. “If he doesn’t treat you right I’ll murder him. But you want me to fall in love one day right?”

I nodded.

“I want the same for you.”

Knock, knock, knock.

“I’ll get it!” Linc hollered, running for the door despite the fact that it was after dinner. I had no idea who could possibly be knocking on my door at this hour.

“Wait, Linc!” I ran after him.

But Linc already had the door open by the time I got there. “Who are you?” Linc scrunched up his face.

I skidded to a stop behind him and stared.

And stared and stared and stared.

“Chris.”

He filled my doorway. It was the second man to fill my doorway tonight and it was starting to sound like a dirty joke waiting to happen in my head. He gave me a half smile and held up a dish. “I just realized we were neighbors and decided I should bring over a gift.”

His eyes darted back down to Linc and he smiled warmly. “I’m Chris. Who are you?”

Linc looked back at me for permission to answer. I nodded, mostly because I was too stunned to do anything else. What was Chris doing here? Why was I seeing him for the second time today?

Did I look good?

Wait, did he say he was my neighbor?

“I’m Lincoln but my mom and dad call me Linc. And so do my friends.” Then he held out his hand.

Chris leaned forward and shook it, shifting the dish to his other hand. “They’ve also taught you excellent manners.”

“What’s in the dish?” Linc grinned mischievously, just like his father. It was what attracted me to Beau all those years ago and I already worried for all the women who would swoon in Linc’s path years from now.

It was a really good grin.

“The snapper I caught today, seasoned with my special recipe.”

Linc bounced up and down. “Oh can I have it now, Mom, please?”

“Didn’t you already eat dinner?”

“Yes...but I’m still hungry. Dad said I must be in a growth spurt.”

What kind of mother would I be if I denied my growing son fish? “Fine. Take it in

the kitchen. Would you like to come in, Chris?" I made sure to meet his gaze even though it made my knees wobbly.

To my great pleasure he locked his eyes with mine and held before nodding. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"Can I get you a drink? Wine, beer, bourbon?" I asked as I stood to the side to let him in.

"Beer will do." He stopped just inside the door and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"You can go into the kitchen with Linc and I'll grab us some drinks."

I took a breath when he disappeared. My insides were doing backflips again and that sizzle was back. The damn sizzle was going to be the death of me. It made me warm—no, it made me hot—and turned on. It was very inconvenient.

My minibar was just off the kitchen. It afforded me some space and a view. Linc sat at the counter with a plate of snapper and Chris leaned against my stove, explaining how he'd caught the fish. His hands moved with each word as if they were an extension of his mind, forming shapes, creating a visual story that went with his voice.

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Earlier he'd been dressed in swim trunks and—briefly—a long sleeved shirt. Now he had on a worn pair of faded jeans with an equally worn navy blue shirt that pulled tight across his shoulders and biceps.

He looked good.

“And then?” Linc asked, practically falling off his stool as he tried to get closer to Chris.

“Then I took a nap,” Chris said with a shrug and grin that filled me with warmth.

“A nap!” Linc howled. “How could you nap after that? I would have put my line right back in the water.”

I took our two glasses and started for the kitchen.

“Oh really? You fish?” Chris asked.

Linc nodded, mouth full of food as he responded. “My mom taught me. She’s the best.”

For a moment I was trapped between wanting to hide behind the kitchen wall so I wouldn't have to reply to Linc's praise, my desire to remind him not to speak when his mouth was full, and my curiosity over what Chris's reaction might be. So instead of smoothly correcting my son's manners with the cool grace I liked to think I typically employed, I stood frozen in the doorway of my kitchen with my mouth hanging open as Chris's gaze collided with mine. It was soft and, well, nice.

“Really? The same girl who used to squeal over a bait bucket full of shrimp?”

It was true I used to loath reaching my hand into a bucket of live shrimp. “People change.”

I blinked as his smile turned mischievous. His brown eyes twinkled and these adorable slits appeared around his mouth near where some men had dimples. I had the most inexplicable urge to run the pad of my index finger over them and test how soft or rough his five o’clock shadow made the skin feel.

“They do indeed. Take me for example. I’m more than two feet taller than I used to be.” He moved his hands from his waist to over his head. “Lots of changes.”

“You knew my mom when you were little?” Linc asked, shoving the last bite in his mouth.Finally.

“Yep,” Chris grinned. “She was nice enough to hang out with a little kid like me.”

“Mom’s always nice. Except when I pee on the toilet seat. Then she shrieks a lot and yells.” He shrugged his little shoulders likewhatcha gonna do?

And Chris shrugged right back, shaking his head. “I have two brothers. My mom stayed far, far away from our bathroom.”

His comment made me a little sad. I’d always wanted at least two children and there were many days when it preoccupied my thoughts. Mostly I enjoyed it being just Linc and me. We were a little team and we were happy. But I couldn’t help wondering what he’d be like as a big brother, how his life might have been different with siblings.

“Can I fish before bed?” Linc asked, waving his hands in front of my face.

Apparently he'd asked several times while I was stuck in my head with my thoughts.

"Um, yeah sure. Better hurry though, it's just about dark." My favorite part of the long summer days was that night seemed to be as reluctant to appear as I was to see it.

Linc scurried out the back door leaving me alone with Chris. Suddenly I didn't know what to do with my hands, where to look, how to make conversation.

He cleared his throat first. "Is this your father's house?"

"It was, yes. He gave it to me when he decided to move to Miami." It was the only way I could afford to live on the island. Okay, technically Beau offered to buy it but my dad refused. And when we decided to divorce, Beau wanted nothing to do with it. He insisted it was my house and he would be happier knowing Linc and I lived someplace we both loved.

Honestly our entire divorce was that easy. We weren't mad at each other or even hurt all that much. We were both sad because we wanted it to work but it was more a grieving process than anything else. Outside of that it was all about Linc and what was best for him. Beau wanted to see as much of his son as possible in the off-season and I never made him feel guilty for being stressed and busy during the season. My job wasn't a huge moneymaker but it paid the bills. Beau took care of Linc's college fund and had trust funds set up in his name. I knew if we ever needed anything, all I had to do was ask—I tried not to need help but it wasn't as if it was a bad thing to ask. Beau was Linc's father and, again, all we wanted was to give him the best life we could.

Chris's eyes raked over me. "I remember driving by here on the way out to the resort but it didn't click until today."

“Yeah well, it didn’t occur to me the rich guy who bought the fancy house next door might be the kid I knew a million years ago.”

His lips twitched. “I’m still settling in. I haven’t made the rounds yet.”

“You’re a little busy.”

“Just a little.”

Awareness of his attention washed over me and made my skin tingle. It was both uncomfortable and amazing. “Your drink.” I finally handed him the glass. “I know they say beer shouldn’t technically be drunk from a cold glass but I don’t know who ‘they’ are and I know for a fact they must not live in Florida.” It was so hot and humid beer needed to be served freezing cold. It was how we survived the heat of the day.

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“I’ll agree with you on that,” he said, accepting the glass and taking a sip.

It was very hard—and I meanvery hard—to ignore how incredibly male Chris felt in my little kitchen. He was a little over six feet, broad, muscular, tan...he smelled like a man, as opposed to the apple juice, bananas, and bubble gum my son usually smelled like.

“Why did you move back?” I suddenly blurted out.

He paused, stared at his glass, seemed to study the condensation. “This was the only place that ever felt like home.” Then his eyes snapped up and met mine. Held.

I forgot how to stand.

“We should go outside and watch Linc fish. He’s good but sometimes he doesn’t know what to do.” I said that much louder than I meant to, so I also blushed on top of shouting.

Then I left the room before I could do anything else embarrassing.

Chris followed me silently.

I wandered closer to the dock than the porch. The backyard sloped down to the water where we had a little beach area. The dock shot straight out into the water and had a covered area at the end with a fish cleaning station. The mosquitos were out and no-see-ums were biting so I set about lighting the torches—anything to keep from staring at the world-class pitcher watching me.

“I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable, Liv.”

I closed my eyes and sighed, even more embarrassed that he could tell I was uncomfortable. Talk about humiliating.

“What makes you think I’m uncomfortable?” I still didn’t turn around or look at him.

“I invited myself over,” he sighed. “I get it. You’re not available and here I am in your home. I apologize if this puts you in a spot.”

“Wait . . . what?” I spun to look at him. The last streaks of pink still painted the sky so his skin glowed, but his eyes danced sadly in the light of the torches. His hands were shoved in his jeans pockets, bunching his shoulders up around his ears.

“I shouldn’t be here—”

“I got one!” Linc shouted.

I jumped.

“Help!” Linc yelled, whooping. He wasn’t in trouble, just excited.

Chris sprang right into action, running down and standing behind Linc as he reeled in his fish.

Since Chris seemed to have things under control and I needed a moment to sort my thoughts, I took my time walking down. I heard Chris give Linc quiet directions. Slow down, don’t tug, wait . . . now!

And then Chris was holding the line up with a very large redfish flapping at the end.

Linc jumped up and down with the pole still in his hands. “Look Mom, look! I get to keep him, right?”

“He’s big enough to keep, bud,” Chris assured him.

Both of them looked to me with big eyes, like I was about to tell them they couldn’t keep a puppy.

“Of course you can keep him. We’ll have him for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Yeah!” Linc cheered.

“Good job.” Chris winked. Then he looked to me. “Can I help Linc take care of things?”

“Cleaning station’s right there.” I waved to the wood table where we cleaned our fish. “Hose is underneath.”

And then I watched as Chris and Linc worked together in the final light of the day, as if they’d been best friends all their lives and fishing was the greatest thing either of them could think of doing each day. Chris told more fishing stories and Linc started babbling about his week with his dad.

I brought Chris’s beer over, then wandered down the dock where I could still hear, but not feel so overwhelmed by all the things I was feeling. I didn’t understand any of them. Why was I reacting to this stranger? Was Chris a stranger? I didn’t know him, not really. Spending a year with him when he was a kid and watching him pitch on television didn’t mean I knew him.

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And yet it felt like I did. I felt like our conversation this afternoon and this evening had given me a snapshot of who he was as a person. Sometimes grumpy, highly successful, kind to kids, and neighborly.

My ears perked up when Chris's voice rose an octave. "What?"

"My dad doesn't live here. He lives in Tampa. He has this cool house on the water and a pool with a slide. I was just there."

"Why doesn't your dad live here?" Chris asked.

I turned to stop the conversation. I didn't know why.

Linc shrugged. "Why would he? This is where mom and I live."

It dawned on me at about the same time as Chris. When I said I wasn't single earlier today on the boat, I'd meant Linc was my world. I didn't date because I wasn't ready to introduce any new men into our lives.

But Chris had taken it to mean I was married, or at the very least in a committed relationship with Linc's father.

His brows rose, his lips twitched, his eyes found mine. His expression was all excited and hopeful. He tilted his head toward Linc. "You're single, aren't you?"

I got the very distinct impression that if I said yes I was opening myself up to something. What exactly that something was I didn't know. But it scared me.

“Gosh, I wish Mom would go on a date already!” Linc exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

It sent a shower of fish scales toward Chris, who naturally stepped back. Except he was already on the edge of the dock. His arms went out and waved, his heels teetered on the edge of the boards, his eyes bulged.

And for the second time today...he went tumbling into the water.

“Oh no!” Linc yelled, running over. “Man overboard!”

Chris splashed and yelled, finally righting himself and standing up. “Damn it! Second time today!”

And that was kind of funny. Except that it also wasn’t. I was the reason for both his falls. “Are you okay?” I came to an awkward stop beside Linc, just barely keeping myself from going in next.

Chris looked up at me. The smile was back. The glorious, hopeful, dazzling one that made me feel weak in the knees. “Oh, I’m just fine.”

“I’ll get you a towel.”

“Nope,” he said sharply, drawing me up short. “You stay right there. Look me in the eye, Liv.”

I found that his commands were impossible to say no to. I froze and my gaze locked with his, all without me consciously deciding to do so.

His smile softened. “Thanks for the drink. I’ll be home in a week. I’ll stop by.”

“Yeah!” Linc yelled. “Wait, where are you going?”

Chris answered without looking away from me. “I’ve got games to play little man. But don’t you worry. When I get back, you and I are going to catch another fish and make your momma a nice dinner. Sound good?”

I couldn’t feel my legs anymore. Every word out of Chris Kaine’s mouth seemed to remove more of my feeling or ability to form coherent thoughts.

“It’s a date, Chris,” Linc said, leaning over the dock, “I always wanted to make dinner for Mom but I don’t know how to make anything but peanut butter and jelly.”

“I’ll teach you,” Chris said, starting to step backwards. “Next week.”

“Where are you going?” I asked. He kept moving further away and it was almost impossible to see him in the dark.

But I saw one last twinkle in his eyes before he chuckled, “I figure I’m already wet, might as well swim home.”

4

Speaking of love...

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Chris

The game was not going well so I was warming up in the St. Pete Mantas bullpen. Normally we wouldn't get too worked up over a loss like this but things had gotten serious fast. Losing this game would mean no longer having the playoff position we had in our hands a week ago.

So here we were, headed into the seventh inning with our third pitcher of the game and it wasn't looking good.

I threw a fastball that went straight down the middle, and glanced at Rex Little. "How fast?"

"Ninety five."

Right where I wanted to be if they called me into the game. When they called me up. One look at the scoreboard told me Yates was getting yanked if he walked this batter.

"We'll get 'em," Ruiz said from behind the fence. "We're only down by two. Andres can get on base and Seth will crank a homer. As long as you can hold them at five we'll tie them up."

I wanted to laugh. Of course I could hold them. This was what I did better than anyone else on my team—hell better than anyone else in the league—I was cool as ice. Focus was my super power. I didn't hear the jeers from the stands or the jabs from the guys on base. I didn't see the scoreboard after I stepped foot on that field. It was just me and the batter. Every pitch was about outsmarting the man staring me

down. Sometimes it was about speed, most of the time it was about being focused.

Unless it was a long legged, dark haired siren that went by the name Olivia Saldana. Apparently all my focus went out the window. No, that was wrong. I had plenty of focus when it came to her; the problem was that she took all of it. After I swam home from her dock I took a nice long cold shower. She wasn't a dream after all. Everything I thought happened on my boat really did happen—from the embarrassing to the incredibly intense way she made me feel.

“What the hell are you thinking about?” Ruiz barked.

He even threw a balled up piece of paper at me.

“Nothing.”

“Not nothing. You just went a million miles away. You're about to pitch, moron.”

“I'm fine.”

“Is it a girl?” my practice catcher, John Arroyo, asked. He popped his mask up and put his knees down on the ground. “It's a girl, isn't it?”

“What the hell is up with you two? I'm fine. I was just thinking about whether I was getting out there before or after Hians bats.”

“Right,” Arroyo said really slowly like he didn't believe me.

“Is she pretty?” Ruiz asked.

“There's no girl!” I yelled. “You ready to catch?” There was no girl. There was a woman. A five-foot-seven-inch woman who was single but not.

I really liked Linc. The kid was fun and blunt and honest. Plus he was a tiny version of Olivia. Did he like baseball? He sure liked fishing. The kid was pretty awesome in my book.

I didn't have another second to think about him though because I was called up to pitch a minute later. The moment I stepped onto the grass of the outfield I went into what my mom used to call "Robot Mode." By the time I met the coach on the mound nothing else existed but the ball in my hand and Wes Allen's catcher's mitt behind home plate. The batter was my enemy and my job was to be smarter than he was for the next inning and a half.

I was on fire. I hadn't been this hot in weeks, maybe all season. I ended the game with no hits. Not one. They didn't even bother to call in our closer. And everyone else did their jobs, too. We won six to five and held our superior place in the run up to the playoffs.

"Your brother is waiting outside," Erik, our second baseman said, hitting me in the arm as he walked by.

"Ben or Scott?" I wasn't expecting either of them.

"Scott."

"Really?" It was a stupid thing to say. Obviously Scott was outside if Erik said he was outside. What I didn't understand was why.

So I yanked on my pants and went to get him. Sure enough, leaning against the cinderblock wall beside the locker room door was Scott. I hadn't seen him in three months—not since his last movie started shooting in Vancouver. He didn't even call me like Ben did.

“Hey.” He smiled and stood up when I opened the door. All three of us looked a lot alike. Scott had the darkest hair. It was always perfectly cut and styled—had been since he discovered style around the age of nine. This also explained why he was in a suit. In Florida. At night. At least he’d taken off the tie and opened up the collar.

“Why didn’t you call?” I pulled him into a hug. We were almost exactly the same height. I was the shortest by three-quarters of an inch.

And no, I would never, ever just round it up and call it an inch. Not gonna happen.

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“I did but you never check your damn phone on game days.” He pushed me back and ruffled my hair the way he had since I could remember.

“Okay, let me rephrase, why didn’t you call before today to let me know you’d be here? Did you watch the game?” I waited to invite him in until I knew whether his surprise visit was a good thing or a bad thing.

“It was last minute. My flight to New York got canceled and I decided to hop a plane to Tampa instead.” He shifted on his feet but otherwise my brother didn’t look like he was suffering.

“Aw shucks, you came to see me?”

He shook his head. “It’s been a while. I thought I might go see Grandma Kaine too.”

I opened the locker room door and ushered him into our domain of maleness. “This doesn’t have anything to do with the playoffs does it? Because you know I’ll get you tickets. You didn’t have to come grease the wheels ahead of time.”

He smacked me up the backside of my head. “You better get me tickets. You think after all these years of baseball practices and tournaments and camps I’m going to miss out on the party of your career? Hell no.”

“Scott!” Wes yelled from the other side of the locker room. The whole team knew my movie star brother. Wes, being our loud-mouthed catcher and resident movie aficionado liked to think of Scott as his friend, even though they barely knew each other.

“Wes!” He yelled back, chuckling.

“You don’t have to encourage his bad behavior.”

Scott shrugged. “Of course I do. When you guys win the championship I’m going to milk all your fame. I need signatures and photo ops. Especially Mr. Instagram.”

It was true Wes was Instagram famous. And I didn’t doubt Scott would use that to his advantage, however I also had a feeling there was more lurking beneath his sudden and unplanned visit.

Scott worked the room while I finished dressing. Ruiz and Arroyo both cornered me before I could escape.

“Great game. Sorry we gave you a hard time.” Ruiz said.

But Arroyo grinned. “Is she pretty? Just tell us if she’s pretty.”

“I have no idea what you knuckleheads are talking about.”

“She must be gorgeous,” Ruiz nodded.

“No way our cool cucumber pitcher could be this flustered if she were ugly.”

I saw red for a moment, which was, of course, exactly what they wanted. My expression must have been somewhere between murderous and jealous because they both busted out laughing. “He has it so bad!” Arroyo laughed and laughed and laughed.

“Who has it bad?” Seth Butler asked, joining them.

The exact last person I needed to know anything about my personal life was our gossipy left fielder. “Nothing. Ruiz and Arroyo are just being assholes.” They were. There was nothing false in my statement.

“So what’s new?” Seth shrugged. “They don’t know how to be anything different.”

They teased me for another minute before finally leaving me alone. At the rate my teammates were going I wasn’t going to be able to enjoy my evening fantasies of Olivia. Instead of her smile I’d see their dumb faces. Instead of her sweet voice I’d hear theirs.

Seth leaned closer. “You okay? You look like you’re going to murder someone.”

So of course I had no choice but to make myself cool off. “I’m fine. They just got to me today.”

“You need to bunk at my place tonight?” Seth’s roommate, Erik, wasn’t exactly using his room most nights anymore and Seth had offered it up to me for future use.

I’d turned him down every time he offered because the thought of spending any unnecessary nights away from the island turned my blood cold. I’d been looking forward to this night all week. Ever since I fell off Olivia’s dock and swam home. Seven straight nights of wondering why she’d told me she wasn’t single when she clearly was, wondering if I had a shot.

“Naw, I’ll grab a late dinner with Scott and head home to my own bed, but thanks.”

He nodded, his eyes telling me he suspected I was upset for another reason. “Another one bites the dust,” he mumbled as he walked away.

What I didn’t realize was that my brother had come up behind us and was listening in

on our conversation. Not until he dropped his big paw on my shoulder and scared the piss out of me. “So who is she?”

Not. Again.

I was going to kill Ruiz for starting this.

“There is no she. I wish everyone would stop assuming there is a she.” And why did anyone care? This investment in other people’s love lives baffled the fuck out of me.

“Oh, there’s a she. It’s written all over your lovesick face, but lie all you want if it helps. How’s the house?”

“You’re not going to drink?” Scott stared at me like I’d instantly grown a full beard.

“Naw. I have to drive.”

He set his beer down and slid it towards me. “I’ll drive. You drink. You just pitched a hell of a game.”

I slid it back to him. “Seriously. I’m good. Maybe I’ll have something when we get home.”

Scott shrugged and took the beer. “I drove off the road one time. One.”

“That was like, ten years ago. You think I’m still worried about that?” Considering all the other shit my brother had done since going “Hollywood”, swerving off a road a decade ago in an ice storm was not even on my radar.

He ran his hand through his hair and sighed. “I don’t know anymore. I just wanted to

offer.”

Scott looked tired. I hoped it was the travel, but the more I watched him fidgeting, the more I wondered if he was upset. Dealing with Scott was always a delicate balance between forcing him to talk about the things he didn't want to talk about, and not pushing him so hard he ran away.

I focused on the appetizers. “So how long will you be around?”

He shrugged. “I'm supposed to be in New York to meet with my agent and do an interview, but with this weather system fucking all the flights up, they pushed it at least a week.”

“And you'll stay here?”

“Yeah. You sent that photo last week and I haven't stopped thinking about it. You looked happy and the sky was blue and...I don't know. A change of scenery seemed like a good idea.”

“Grandma will be happy to see you.”

He smiled. “She's been texting me series of emojis all week. It's like interpreting sign language.”

I flashed him my phone. “She sent me this after the game.” It was a message with nothing but a baseball mitt, a baseball, a bat, and a bunch of celebration emojis.

“Why'd she send so many of those?” Scott asked, turning my phone back.

“I think it's the number of batters I struck out.”

He groaned. “She would do that. She’s crazy and I love her.”

Our grandmother was...well she was kind of like all the Golden Girls rolled into one, mixed with a Broadway star, and a fortune teller. She drove our parents absolutely nuts, but we loved her to pieces. Partially because she always baked us cookies and snuck us more when our parents weren’t looking.

“Speaking of love,” Scott drew out the words, “who is this girl you’re into?”

I groaned and reached for his beer, taking one huge gulp. “She’s not a girl.”

“Ah ha!” He practically leapt out of his chair pointing his finger at me. “I knew it!”

I didn’t want to even mention Olivia’s name to my teammates. It was too soon and there was nothing to tell. But Scott? Scott knew her. Knew I had a crush on her way back when. And honestly? I didn’t like keeping things from my siblings. So while I didn’t particularly want to discuss something I didn’t even understand myself, I wasn’t about to avoid the topic either. Not with Scott sitting across from me asking questions.

I grabbed a chip piled high with beans and cheese and sat back, taking a moment to chew and think. “It happened a week ago,” I explained, “and so far it’s just a...a spark?”

Scott seemed to find me fascinating. At least his eyes did. They examined me from head to hands. “A spark? This isn’t some sex thing. You’re...” he whistled and wiggled his fingers in the air, “gone.”

Yeah. I was. All it took was seeing her. I wish I understood how it was possible, but from the moment she flagged me down she’d inserted herself into my thoughts and refused to leave.

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I licked my lips and stared at my silverware. “You remember Olivia?”

Using my excellent peripheral vision, I watched Scott frown, think, and then jerk. “Saldana? No!”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“Still?”

I laughed. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

“And she...reciprocated these feelings?”

I didn’t blame him for being skeptical. Twenty years ago a five year age gap was laughable. But now? It was still a small stretch. “I...I think so. Like I said, thisjusthappened.”

Scott demanded to know everything. Every detail. And over the course of dinner I actually enjoyed reliving the experience and getting someone else’s perspective. He whistled low. “Divorced with a kid? You’re sure you want to sign up for that?”

I thought about it a lot over the last week. All the “what ifs.”What ifwe go on a few dates and it turns out it was just infatuation?What ifwe date over the off season and

then everything goes to shit when baseball starts up again? What if we date and fall in love and I have to grapple with an ex and a child who isn't biologically mine?

A vision of making dinner with Linc flashed through my mind and I smiled.

"Yeah. I do. If she's interested. Linc is a great kid. I have to believe a child who talks about his parents the way he did has to be in a good situation. And I can't explain it, but I kind of fell in love with him just as fast as I fell for Liv."

"Dude, you just said love."

I backtracked over my own words and realized it was true. And ridiculous. And right somehow. "I don't know what this is, but I do know I want to find out and I'm in for all of it."

Scott studied me again, his eyes focused and serious, and then unfocused as his mind went somewhere else entirely. "I wish I had your confidence. Would you mind teaching me your ways?"

Scott definitely had something going on. Something that had him messed up and deeply unhappy. "I can try."

5

No one looks good with bangs

Olivia

"Hey mom?"

"Yeah?" I yelled from the kitchen where I had just finished cleaning up and was now

making some tea.

“Is that Chris?”

My heart stopped for a split second before I heard the roar of a crowd and realized he must be on the television. I picked up my mug and moved to the living room where I found Linc standing a foot from the screen, practically nose-to-nose with Chris before the screen flashed to a commercial.

“Yes. That’s Chris. Was he just called in to pitch?”

“Yep! They said ‘it’s an unusual move’ and then everyone got really excited.” Linc grabbed a few couch cushions and set up a cocoon on the floor under the TV just like he did when Beau was playing.

My kid thought it was perfectly normal for the people in his life to appear on television. Go figure. Watching football and your dad has a closeup? Just another Sunday afternoon. Baseball is on and your next door neighbor is about to pitch? Pass the popcorn.

We always had baseball on these days, usually to watch the Mantas, but we occasionally went crazy and watched the Waves. It was nice background noise since there was a game everyday for months at a time. Plus I thought Linc might have a natural gift for the sport and wanted to sign him up for fall ball, which I knew would go a lot better if he already understood the sport.

I had not planned on an expert moving in next door.

And I couldn’t help wondering how Chris Kaine was going to fit into our lives. Friendly neighbor? Absolutely. Baseball mentor? Possibly. Kissing partner? A shiver raced down my spine and I was suddenly very hot.

Very, very hot.

Especially when the game came back from break with a tight shot of Chris's eyes. He stood on the mound leaning forward with his arm on one leg. His uniform was crisp white and his dark blue hat sat low on his brow. His eyes were totally focused on Wes Allen behind the plate and I imagined they had some sort of psychic connection because once they synchronized they always seemed to be unstoppable.

Chris had really nice eyes.

Really, really nice eyes. They were the shade of brown that resembled bronze but also gold. They crinkled in the corners like he smiled all the time. Except right now he wasn't smiling at all. His jaw was set and ticked twice as he stood up tall, bringing his hands up near his chin. He stared down the batter on first base with a look that was downright scary, then went into his pitching motion, sending the ball to the batter for a swinging strike.

The announcers all started talking excitedly at once.

"It's amazing how he can come into a game this late, with runners on the bases, and pitch like it's the first inning." The first announcer said.

"I agree," the other announcer said, shaking his head in wonder. "It really makes you wonder if anyone can beat him."

"No," the first announcer said flatly, "I don't think anyone can. The question I have is...what magic will he pull off in the playoffs? I can't wait to watch him."

Chris threw another strike. Cool. Focused. His jaw ticking like he was chewing gum maybe? It was sexy and I couldn't stop thinking about how different he was in my kitchen just a week ago. Smiling, casual, chatting with Linc like he had nothing better to do.

So different from the strike throwing machine on my television. He struck the batter out and took a lap around the mound shouting something to himself the cameras couldn't pick up, but I was pretty sure it was full of swear words and smack talk.

I found myself wondering what it was like to touch Chris Kaine. To soothe away his stress and make him smile. Our one hug had been a surprise, but I remembered all of it. He smelled like saltwater and sunscreen. My head fit against his shoulder just right. His hands large on my back. His body hard and muscular. That multimillion dollar arm that might win a championship had been wrapped around me.

A very strange thing happened inside me when I thought about that. A heady, lusty, possessive fog filled my mind and body. After Beau, I swore I'd never date another athlete. They were too full of themselves. Too addicted to the spotlight and celebrity lifestyle. I didn't need or want to date a champion.

I wanted my quiet island life watching my kid grow up. Was it simple? Yes. It was also stress free and happy.

And yet here I was coveting an athlete. Getting, if I'm being honest with myself, a little turned on by his focus and passion, not to mention that killer arm. And unlike Beau, he wanted to live on our little island. He called it home. Maybe it was wishful thinking on my part, but I wanted to believe Chris and Beau were two entirely different people.

I stared at my computer screen not getting much done on my project because my brain seemed to only want to focus on one thing today. It had been a week and Chris was

supposed to be back.

But would he return?

He certainly didn't have to if things changed. There was no contract between us. Heck, I didn't even have his phone number. He could just as easily decide to stay in Tampa and relax with his friends.

A message dinged into my inbox and I forced myself to think about work again. I got up extra early during the week to get most of my email and editing work done before Linc got moving. Outdoor photo shoots took place at different times of day depending on the project and I scheduled those around Linc's routine and, soon, school days. Otherwise they took place here in my studio. My parent's old art studio was now my state of the art photography studio and lab. It had great lighting and opened up to our yard, which also served as an easy outdoor studio.

The bulk of my work was celebrity portraits. I carved out a niche here on the island. So many politicians and celebrities had homes here that it was a natural but strange specialty to develop. I became semi-famous for the unique way I captured people with their most beloved possessions. The island served as a gorgeous permanent backdrop. I had the final portrait printed in large scale as a work of art that hung in the owner's homes. Sometimes the work was exciting, sometimes it was monotonous. I knew in the back of my mind that I was stifling my creativity by focusing only on the money, but I didn't focus on that too often.

I scanned the new email and found it was from London Anderson asking for a quick edit to a photo she'd sent me last week from her trip to Monaco. Instead of replying to the email, I picked up my phone and called.

"Good morning sunshine!" she sang into the phone. "It is morning there, right?"

I laughed. “It is. And where are you?”

“Paris. I’m currently munching on cheese and sipping wine.”

“You have the worst work environment.”

Then she sighed heavily. “Yeah. About that. I think I’ll be back pretty soon. My grandmother isn’t doing well.”

“Oh London, I’m so sorry.” I compulsively clicked on the file for the local history project I was part of and opened the images of London’s grandmother I’d been working on editing.

“It will be a quick trip. I want to see her.”

Every trip for London was a quick trip. She simply couldn’t bring herself to stay and face all the memories. I missed her but I didn’t blame her. As much as she repelled the island, I clung to it like a life raft. “If you have time for a visitor let me know. It can be a purely friendly visit, or we can combine work and pleasure.”

“Oh yes! Perfect. We can talk shop over a coffee. I have so many ideas for my next book.”

The idea of a new project filled me with adrenaline. After a long summer with Linc, and now the unsettling reaction I had to a neighborly pitcher, I craved a new project to plan, ponder, and puzzle out. “Excellent. Keep me informed. And really, try and find a better place to work than hideous old Paris.”

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She was still giggling as I ended the call. I finished my morning work session with a visit from another Anderson sister, Berlin. Even though I worked with London now, it was Berlin who was my best friend, seeing as we were the same age and were always in the same grade. We bonded over being sisters. My sister Summer was on a year long international tour opening for Travis Brantley and Kristen Holt. I couldn't wait for her to get back in a couple of weeks. I missed her terribly.

"Hello, hello!" Berlin called from the front door. I knew she was coming so I left it unlocked.

"In the office!"

I listened to Berlin stop and chat with Linc about the cartoon he was watching, and then a minute later she flopped down onto my office sofa that sometimes served as a prop. "What a day!" she sighed.

"It's not even eleven."

"And it's already been a day!" Her brown hair was French braided and her tan legs on full display beneath yellow shorts. She got bangs a month ago and I hated her because she looked great with bangs. No one in real life ever looks good with bangs, but Berlin sure did.

I spun in my desk chair to face her, leaning back. "Okay spill it. Why has it already been a day?" This is how Berlin worked. She loved to over share, but for some reason she required a prompt to do so.

“So...I have to tell you something.”

Again, needing a prompt, I waved my hand for her to continue.

“I met someone.”

“Today?”

She scowled. “No not today. About a month ago. His name is Ryker and I think he might be the one.”

Berlin was once upon a time married to her college sweetheart, Jack Cassidy. They were what I would call soulmates. But they were young and Jack was an ass who showed his ass and Berlin, not willing to take being shat upon, left him. He was still hopelessly in love with her, but Berlin was determined to move forward, not backward. I didn't blame her. What Jack did was selfish and stupid. But he also—quickly—learned from his mistake. I felt for him because as an outsider it was plain as day that Berlin and Jack complimented each other, put up with the other's weirdness, and were hopelessly in love.

But Berlin had taken off the love goggles and was blind to Jack now.

And so she found Ryker. “All right. Tell me about him.”

“He's a real estate developer out of Miami. He's got dark hair and a kind smile. He's...awkward, but after Jack I kind of like awkward. He calls me all the time, loves my work, and I miss him.”

So, if I was translating Berlin's words correctly, this Ryker was steady, nerdy, rich, supportive, and, above all, safe.

I should note that Jack is mostly none of these things. He's a hockey player turned coach of the Miami Pythons. He's an alpha (thus the selfish jackass part that got him in trouble), bordering on alpha-hole, unpredictable, emotional, and insensitive.

Or he was. Like I said, he learned from his mistakes.

Anyway, back to the matter at hand. "Well that sounds nice."

Berlin frowned. "Nice?"

It wasn't like I was going to tell my best friend to go back to her selfish ex, but safesounded like another relationship disaster in the making. Berlin was a fiery personality. That's part of why she and Jack worked. He could stand up to her and take whatever came at him and throw it right back. While "safe" Ryker, I suspected, would roll over and play dead.

Not that I'd met the man. I probably shouldn't judge. "Missing someone and being missed sounds nice. That's all I meant. I'd like to be missed one day."

And that set off the Chris ache in my chest again. I missed him. After one freaking day. And I wondered if he missed me. I felt like a teenager who didn't know any better. Because I knew better than to pine for a guy I just met. It was just pheromones and the lack of sexy times in my life.

"Olivia Alina Saldana...who is he?" She sat bolt upright, jaw slack, eyes wide with excitement.

Was I that obvious? "I just met him. It's probably just lust." I definitely lusted his athletic body. I never thought I had a type, but clearly I did. I had the hots for athletes. And not just any fitness focused guy, elite performance professional athletes.

I was a disaster.

“Lust has a purpose.” She swung her legs to the ground. “It’s called sex. Lots of it.”

I waved to the giggling kid in the next room. “I retired my sex card a long time ago.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s okay to have a fling. It’s okay to fall for someone. You’re not boxed up and stored away just because you have a son.”

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Did I feel boxed up? Maybe a little. It's just that Linc was still so young and more important to me than anything in the world. I couldn't—wouldn't—be impulsive or reckless (even if my body was screaming to stop thinking already.)

“It's too soon to know anything yet. Like I said, we only met the once.” And it was unforgettable.

“Well what's he like? What got the engine roaring back to life?” Her hands waved through the air, trying to physically coax details out of me.

“His body is smokin' hot, but I think it's his eyes that did me in.” Just remembering the way his eyes smiled and twinkled sent a shiver down my whole body.

You're single.Eye twinkle.

“Where'd you meet, what's he do? Come on, woman!”

I winced because I had a feeling Berlin wasn't going to be so enthusiastic once I confessed the truth. “Uh, you actually know him.”

She frowned. “Ugh, someone we grew up with? No.” She made spitting sounds.

The island was so small that everyone we grew up with was essentially a sibling. “Well, we didn't technically grow up with him.”

She waved her hands in front of her face. “Speak plainly.”

“You remember Chris Kaine?”

Her eyes went wide. “The fucking pitcher? No. We swore off athletes, Olivia. You can’t be serious right now! You have a kid!”

I tried to swallow the laugh that burst from inside me and mostly succeeded. “Oh, now having a kid is a reason to stay on the shelf?”

“No! Yes! I mean...anyone but a fucking ballplayer. They’re all narcissistic alpha jerks. You know it. I know it.”

To be fair, Jack really was all those things until Berlin left him, and Beau had many of those tendencies, but he was also a kind and a good father. But I suspected Chris did not fall into this one-size-fits-all box. He was different somehow.

“I don’t know it. Not yet. Shouldn’t I give him a chance to prove he’s a narcissistic ass before I send myself back out to pasture?”

Berlin frowned. “This sounds like a terrible idea...but so is denying yourself some fun. Fine! I will withhold judgement...for now.”

6

Well that escalated quickly

Olivia

He appeared like a ghost—a daytime ghost—just after three, holding a bait bucket and fishing rod. “Hello Olivia Saldana.” The smile was back. Eyes crinkling, almost dimples flashing. Had it been a week since we stood here awkward and confused? I counted the days, curiosity practically killing me, to see if the weird lightning strike

of desire would strike again.

Boom. There it was. All it took was seeing him and hearing my name on his lips. Electricity crackled between us.

“Hello Chris Kaine.” I sat under the shade of a tree watching Linc snorkel around the dock.

Chris set his stuff down and sat in the chair beside me. “How’ve you been?”

I held my breath hoping it would somehow slow the eruption of butterflies in my chest. It did not. “We’re good. Hell of a game last night.”

His grin remained intact, but his eyes began to dance as he stared at me. “Thank you. It was fun.”

His smile was fun. “Really? You seemed almost mad.”

He bit his lower lip, pulling it through his teeth as he gazed at me. “Not mad. Fired up. I get...passionate about my work.”

I wondered what it was like when Chris was passionate about people. Me, specifically. I wondered what it would be like if he was that passionate about me. If it was anything like what I glimpsed last night it would be a heady, intense experience. “I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“But you watched me?”

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The way his voice came out all low and quiet...it had a reverberation to it. A sexy vibration that made my skin hot and made me think of kissing. “We did. Linc recognized you right away.”

His eyes flicked to the water where Linc was presently kicking up enough water to soak the dock. “Nice to know I made an impression.”

“Understatement. He hasn’t stopped talking about his ‘new friend Chris.’” Linc hadn’t attached himself to anyone—kid or adult—like this...ever. And it made me wonder what kind of magic surrounded Chris Kaine to entrance us both so completely.

His gaze moved to me and he turned in his chair. “Is that why you said you weren’t single? Because you’re protecting him?”

Relief washed over me. I was so worried I would need to explain the delicate emotions of an eight year old and why I kept my dating life (or lack there of) separate. “Yes.”

“Have I fucked things up already?”

“No.” I tried not to get too excited by the unsaid implications of his statement. He likes me too.

“I shoved my way into your life. I fully understand if you want to shove me back out.”

“Chris.” I waited for his worried gaze to return to mine. “You are our next door neighbor. He was going to meet you at some point and I have no doubts you would have been friendly, whether I was involved or not.”

He half smiled at that. “He reminds me of me.”

“He better not be flirting with girls behind my back.”

Chris barked out a laugh and slapped his knee. “I was a particularly girl crazy kid, but that isn’t what I mean. He’s friendly and enjoys talking and fishing and telling stories.”

Oh. “Well then yes, you two are very alike.”

His eyes danced again and his smile returned. “And for the record, I was only ever a flirt with you.”

Now I knew he was lying. But I didn’t challenge him. Mostly because I liked being the center of his attention as well as the idea that I might be his current subject of flirtation. He tangled his fingers with mine.

“Liv?”

“Yeah?” I stared at our hands, touching but not, the electricity surging up my arm.

“I don’t have a crush on you anymore.”

My heart fell. “Oh?”

He shook his head. “No. My five year old crush was a shadow of what I’m feeling right now. It crushes that old crush.”

“So you don’t have a crush on me?”

“Nope.” He curled his fingers around mine, completing the circuit. “My maleness is attracted to your femaleness. In ways that a crush simply cannot compete.”

Maleness. Chris was definitely very male. Masculine. Strong and sexy and...I needed to concentrate. “So what you’re saying is?”

“I want to be more than next door neighbors.”

Suddenly I found that breathing was rather difficult.

“Is that so?” I liked the way he made something so honest and intimate a little bit funny.

“To clarify, I am very attracted to you physically and mentally. I know we don’t really know each other, not really, but so far I’ve learned that you are kind—who else would stop a fellow boater? You’re neighborly and you have a great kid, which speaks volumes about you. I’d like, very much, to get to know a lot more about you.”

Linc popped up out of the water, lining up shells on our little beach area. He remained solidly focused on his collection, ignoring us completely.

“I’d like to get to know you as well. But in front of Linc we need to be neighbors. Until we decide if we actually like each other.”

The corner of his lip twitched like he was both amused and victorious. “Deal.” Then he removed his hand from mine and called over to my son. “What you got there?”

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Linc's head popped up, searching for the voice, then he tossed off his mask and snorkel. "Chris! You're back!" He came running over to us.

"Well of course I am. We have to make dinner for your mom. Remember?"

"Of course I remember!" Linc rolled his eyes and gave me a wide-eyed look like can you believe this guy?" "Here Mom. I have a half a conch for your garden and these olives are pretty." He plunked three shells into my hand, then turned back to Chris. "Oh good, you brought bait and your own pole. We should get started."

"I agree. Grab your pole."

While Linc ran up to the porch, Chris picked up the book I was reading. "Relax and enjoy. Linc and I are taking things from here."

Then, and I still haven't recovered from it, he winked at me. But it wasn't silly or cheesy. It was damn sexy. My knees went weak and thankfully I was already sitting.

"Well let me know if you need anything."

He shot me a damn sexy smirk as he retrieved his stuff and sauntered down the dock just ahead of Linc. I watched them for a long time. Linc never once looked my way. He had complete faith in his new friend and, I suspected, a strong desire to do something so grown up (even if making dinner would one day seem like a miserable chore.)

And Chris devoted his attention to Linc, only glancing my way when their lines were

in the water. It took them an hour and a half to catch dinner and another hour to clean the fish and ready them for cooking.

I was not allowed in the kitchen, but I enjoyed the show from the comfort of the couch with a glass of wine I didn't even have to pour myself. Chris moved around the kitchen naturally and was surprisingly good at giving simple instructions.

After dinner we took Chris on a walk along the beach. The whole time my hand itched to grab his. To have that easy comfort and familiarity again (with a man.) I hadn't realized how something so simple could make me feel like I was missing such a key component to my life. Hand holding was just that: hands pressed together. And yet it was so much more than that. It was connection. An unspoken I want to be with you and only you. You are precious to me.

By the time we returned home the sun was set and Linc was exhausted, so I let him turn on a television show while I helped Chris restore the kitchen to order.

"Thank you for this."

"You shouldn't be cleaning up my mess." He tried to shoulder me out of the way.

"It's hardly a mess. You cleaned almost everything as you were cooking." Aside from the pan soaking in the sink during our walk, everything was neat and tidy. The dishwasher was nearly done running.

"Stop it! Do not touch that pan." He turned and put his entire muscular body between me and the sink.

I was not complaining about his tactics. Not one bit. "Or you'll what?"

His gaze flickered past me to the couch then back again. His eyebrow waggled and

his eyes darkened. His voice came out low and rough. “Or I’ll kiss you.”

I should lunge for this sink. But no, not in front of Linc. “Dirty move.”

He shrugged. “Is it though?”

I turned and found Linc asleep. Mouth open, maybe a little drool, arms lifelessly dangling toward the floor. Chris moved behind me, hands on my hips, lips at my ear. “What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him.” Then he kissed me once lightly below my ear.

I gasped. A shockwave went roaring through my body and I instinctively arched into him, sending my breasts up and my butt back.

Chris groaned.

Oh yes, this physical attraction was very, very real. Age and athlete be damned. Sure I didn’t know much about Chris except he was an excellent baseball player who was nice and friendly, but my body wanted me to get to know the rest of him. Immediately.

This was both exciting and disconcerting.

“I think I better say my good nights,” he whispered, clearly fighting back his own desires.

It warmed me inside and out to know his reaction was as fierce as my own. “Yes. Okay.”

“Do you need help putting him to bed?”

I'm ashamed to admit that instead of thinking of my son, my brain went right to putting Chris in my bed. "Uh, no. I might let him stay right where he is, actually."

"Yeah. Okay. Well then. I guess I'll be going."

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I followed him to the door, walking a half step behind and staring at the hand I wanted to hold. I bet it was rough and strong and big. It certainly looked rough and strong and big.

He stood on my front porch and turned back with a smile. “We’ve got three home games this week, so I’ll be back and forth. Would you be available for lunch one day?”

I nodded quickly. “Yes. Yes I could be.”

“Okay then. I have to be at the field early tomorrow, so how about the day after?”

“Yes. I say yes.” Oh my god. I didn’t even sound like myself. I was never giddy.

His eyes dropped to my lips and held. “Good night, Liv.”

My heart began to pound. And I do mean pound. The sound filled my ears and forced my lungs to work harder. Chris wanted to kiss me goodnight. And even more importantly, I wanted to kiss him goodnight.

But he wasn’t going to because of Linc. Which meant if I wanted this kiss, I would have to be the one to initiate it.

I glanced into the house to be sure he was still asleep, and then crossed to Chris in two strides, cupping his face with one hand, my fingers sliding around his neck to his hair, and pulled his lips to mine.

If I thought the peck in the kitchen was overwhelming, then this was a full blown explosion. Lip contact quickly turned into full on make out as Chris groaned, tilted his head, and deepened the kiss. His arms went around me, and mine around him, our bodies pressing, moving, rubbing. Then my legs were around his waist. Did I jump or did he pick me up? I honestly had no recollection of the actions that got me there. I was too absorbed in the moment. Chris was warm and strong, his tongue was soft and urgent, the sounds coming from his chest made me feel powerful.

He turned and pressed my back against the column and I tore my lips from his to gasp, to gulp air. It was too much and not enough all at once.

Chris groaned again, his head dropping to my shoulder. “Well that escalated quickly.”

I laughed, running my fingers through his hair. “I liked it.”

He sucked a kiss at the joint between my shoulder and throat. “So did I. Maybe we can do it again sometime.”

“Maybe the day after tomorrow.” It was high time Linc had a playdate with Emerson.

He looked up and the depth of emotions in his eyes took my breath away. “I won’t have much time, but whatever I have is yours.”

I unwrapped my legs and finally slid down to earth. “I understand.” Was I really going to do this to myself again? Date another athlete who was only home for scraps of time?

He dropped his forehead to mine and erased my doubts as he cupped my face, his thumb stroking my cheek. Yes. I was going to see where this went, even if it was a dead end. “Goodnight Olivia.”

“Goodnight Chris.”

7

Doesn't sound familiar

Chris

“You look damn chipper,” Scott muttered as I slid him a cup of coffee.

“I am damn chipper.”

He grunted into his mug. “This because of Olivia?”

“I have a lunch date.” After my morning run and shower I had two hours before I needed to be on the road to the stadium and I was spending all of it with Liv.

“So it's going well?”

Once again I felt conflicted on what to share. Could vocalizing my hope somehow cause it to evaporate? I knew that wasn't possible, but it all felt too delicate to put too much pressure on, either. “I don't know yet. Until I do, let's keep it between us.”

He smiled wryly and grunted agreement.

“How was Grandma Kaine?”

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Scott grunted again. “As usual, full of wisdom and caftans.”

He basically moved in after his surprise visit. With my schedule and distractedness, I hadn’t had time to pry the why out of my brother, but I was determined to do that soon.

“Just remember,” Scott said suddenly, “we’re all doomed until the old is new again.”

I stared at him for a few long moments wondering if he’d lost his damn mind. “What?”

He shrugged. “When we were struck by lightning. Remember what Grandma Kaine said? We wouldn’t find love until the old was new again.”

I kept staring at him because clearly Scott had lost his marbles in Hollyweird. It was one thing to entertain Grandma’s stories, it was another to believe them.

“Seriously.” He sat forward, ruffled his hair and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately.”

“Why?” Why would he ever think about Grandma Kaine’s crazy ramblings? I loved the woman, she was my Grandma after all, but she was wacky. Always had been. She read tarot cards and went to psychics. She said lots of crazy things growing up. Sure, we were only struck by lightning the once, but still.

Scott sighed like he was carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders. “You’re married to your work, Ben hides in his cabin, and I . . .”

He stopped talking mid sentence so I prompted him like a good little brother. “And you are an asshole.”

He glared at me. “Shut up.” Then he frowned. “I mean, I am. I am an asshole. And I can’t seem to get shit right with Lucy.”

Lucy was Scott’s long time girlfriend. She put up with his assholeness, so I considered her a saint. “And you think it’s some silly prophecy from our lighting strike instead of, I don’t know, your inability to be less of an asshole?” Maybe the fame had gone to his pretty little head? Because by his logic, my new potential relationship with Olivia was already doomed to fail.

And I was not okay with that.

I remembered Mom and Dad shushing Grandma Kaine and telling her to stop bringing her prophecy up around us kids. Mom and Dad believed firmly that words became reality, so why put that on us? But she didn’t agree. She said the lightning strike was a sign and, combined with her cards, the universe was clear. The old had to be new again before this cycle was complete.

Whatever the hell that meant.

“I’m working on it, okay?” Scott sighed. “But I swear the universe is conspiring against me. We’re good. Solid. I love Lucy and I know she loves me, but every fucking time I start to think I should ask her to marry me, something happens. A shoe drops.”

“What kind of shoe?”

He flinched. “Usually pictures of my good old days. Occasionally a girl I used to party with wanting to sell a story. Stuff like that.”

As was typical, Scott was talking to me about his past. I think he felt safer with me than Ben. We both saw Ben as the older, wiser brother we didn't want to disappoint, and as a result we avoided confessing our worst sins to him. Ben knew Scott partied hard during his early Hollywood years but he didn't know the details.

I, unfortunately, did.

"There can't be much else to hide," I said. "The stories have been going around for years. Besides, Lucy doesn't care." She probably knew more than I did because of who she was. Before she ever met Scott she was a talent agent. If anyone knew all the dirt in the industry, it was her.

"I care. And I refuse to be the black stain on her life."

"Got news for you buddy, she's with you no matter what. You might as well get over yourself and marry her already."

He shook his head and looked away.

It made me sad for him. He was a good guy who made bad choices when he was young. Almost everyone did something stupid. The difference here was that Scott was already rich and famous when he made his choices. He got pulled in deeper by people who wanted to exploit his position, use his deeds as leverage.

These were all in the past and he'd pulled his life together. To me—and to Lucy—his past didn't matter. It was the man he became that mattered. But Scott refused to see it that way and was punishing himself. I'd let him do it forever if he wasn't taking Lucy down with him.

"How about this." I knew my brother. Knew he liked definitions and goals. "If you go a year without any more drama you let it go. Propose to that woman who loves you

and give her the life she deserves.”

That got his attention. “A year?”

“A year. At some point enough time will have passed that even you will have to admit it’s time to move on. Pick a time. Any time.”

“A year,” he said again slowly. “You’re pretty smart for a little brother.” Then he smacked me on the shoulder, put me in a headlock, and gave me a noogie.

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“Stop it you jerk!” I elbowed him in the ribs and twisted away.

Before I could take him to the ground he dumped a bowl of sunflower seeds down my shirt. Some of them made it into my boxers.

“What the hell?” I howled, ducking away and shaking the seeds out.

“Gotcha!”

“You son of a bitch.” We had a war going back to my first game for the Mantas. My brothers came to support me, cheer me on, fill my bag, shoes, and locker with sunflower seeds. In retaliation for their “support” I rigged a sunflower seed shower in Scott’s condo and filled Ben’s favorite toolbox with seeds.

And the war had been ongoing ever since.

“You’ll pay for that!”

He just laughed as he skipped back toward his room. “I look forward to it little brother. For now I’m going back to bed. Have fun on your date.”

Liv should always be in charge of our dates. At first I was worried, but she assured me she accounted for my schedule. Therefore I followed her blindly into the best first date of my life.

“We have fifteen minutes left,” she said, glancing at her watch. We had a picnic laid out on her boat and were anchored just off a little spit of sandbar. Our docks were still

visible, but tiny from here.

She wore another bright bikini—electric green this time—with a blue Columbia shirt open at the front and a Mantas ball cap on her head. In short, she was the most beautiful woman who ever lived. Between her athletic body and her propensity for bikinis and boats, I couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect woman.

I was smitten. Entranced. Obsessed. This level of worship wasn't healthy and therefore I knew I was incapable of making logical decisions. I was thankful for my schedule, otherwise I might throw my life away to spend every minute with Olivia.

“Do you want more mango?” She tilted the Tupperware my way. The whole spread was delicious. Lots of fruits, plus sandwiches from the island deli, salt and vinegar chips, and seltzer's all around.

I grabbed a large slice of the fruit. “I'm good now. Thanks.”

She sealed up the container and packed everything away except the blanket we sat on.

I scooted closer. “Thanks for doing all this.”

“It was my turn. You made dinner.”

I was wrong when I said it was satisfying to catch one's own dinner. True satisfaction (food wise) was catching and preparing dinner for a woman. “I believe I made a promise when I left you last.” I maneuvered until we were nose to nose. “Something about kissing.”

“Mmmm.” She appeared thoughtful. “Doesn't sound familiar.”

“No?” I teased back. This was fun.

“No.”

“Then why didn’t you bring Linc? He’s my friend too.”

Her eyes flashed with mischief. “Oh you know. Just wanted some me time.”

“Then why am I here?” I tilted my head off to the side. I could feel her lips even though we weren’t touching.

“You’re pretty to look at.”

Unlike the other night she wasn’t going to kiss me. And I didn’t want her to. This was my kiss to take and I spent a lot of time imagining how it would go. “Is that all? I’m just here for your visual pleasure?”

“Mmmm. I appreciate your lack of shirt very much.”

“I feel used.” Our lips remained not quite touching and it was the sexiest fucking torture I’d ever experienced.

“Do you have anything else to offer? Other than visual pleasure?”

I couldn’t take not touching any longer, so I reached up and traced my finger over the shell of her ear. She took a deep shuddering breath as I wrapped my hand around her jaw and neck. “I can offer this.” And then I finally—finally—pressed my lips to hers.

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I took it slow. Painfully slow. Partially because I wanted to savor the experience, but mostly because going any faster was impossible. She was too soft. Too sweet to taste. The hair on my arm and my scalp all pricked. Somehow our lips touching set off every sense I had. My skin felt more, my ears heard the water, the wind, and Liv's soft pants.

My body wanted more. A lot more. But if the porch taught me anything, going even just a little bit faster, deeper longer, would result in uncontrolled fire. A fire I almost couldn't put out when I got home. And I was not about to repeat the pain of that experience with an hour long drive and a baseball game ahead of me. Plus it wouldn't be fair to Olivia.

I wanted more. And I wanted it right.

So we slow kissed on the deck of her boat for the full fifteen minutes. And when I pulled away it still hurt, but it was the kind of hurt that made me look forward to getting my ass back here as soon as possible.

"You need to be careful," Liv murmured as she brushed her lips over mine one last time.

"Why is that?"

Only her eyes moved up to meet mine as she smiled. "Your kisses are deadly."

The names might be offensive but the food is delicious

Chris

Scott was back a week later and a little less moody, so I asked him to come run errands with me. “You heard from mom and dad this week?” We rarely spent physical time together, but the Kaine’s were experts at online quality time.

“They’re getting their Vegas residency up and running.” He picked up a jar of paint and held it up. “You mind if I paint my room?”

“It’s yours. Do whatever the fuck you want with it. So did you talk to them?”

He placed the small jar of paint in the cart and then grabbed a swatch, taking it over to the paint mixing station where the woman behind the counter could mix up a batch of light blue paint. “A gallon of the eggshell please.” Then he turned back to me. “Uh, yeah. Two days ago? I was on a flight back from LA when they called. We only spoke for maybe five minutes?”

“They sound good?” It wasn’t unusual for me to miss a week or two at this point in the baseball season.

“Yeah. They’re...I don’t know...thrilled? I think this is the feather in the cap on their career.”

Mom and Dad never craved mega fandom. They had their hits, but their career was mostly about the music, and that meant being famous enough to have a fiercely loyal fan base that kept them comfortably compensated between record sales and shows, but not so famous they ever felt like their lives weren’t their own.

They were like sleeper musicians. Some fans had been there since I was a kid, while

others were just finding them now, and it was building to a career affirming crescendo.

“I’m really happy for them.”

Scott turned, leaning against the counter. “You know I’ve been thinking about this. I think letting us all go our own ways turned out better for them than if we formed the Kaine Brothers Band like they wanted.”

“Oh yeah? How so?”

“Well I’m a movie star. I have my own fan base. And when they find out my parents are Paint the Wallflower Gold, they gain some new fans. Ben’s a TV star. And when his fans find out his parents are the singers behind that song their parents always danced to in the living room, they gain some new fans. And you’re a sports star...”

“I see what you mean. We’ve naturally helped them go viral.”

“Exactly.” When his paint was ready we finished grabbing a few more things for the house, then made our way over to Trent’s with wings from The Red Tourist Bar & Grille.

Trent rubbed his hands together and we unpacked the boxes in his kitchen. “Did you get Scorched Tourist Wings?”

“Of course.” I pushed the hottest wings on earth his way.

Scott frowned. “I feel the name of every dish at this restaurant is somehow offensive.”

Trent looked him straight in the eye. “That’s because they are. In case you haven’t

noticed, you're in Florida now. We do dumbassed shit and make fun of tourists to take away the pain. Eat."

"I think the heat just gets to everyone's heads," I said, shoving a much milder Sweet Susie wing into my mouth."

"The names might be offensive but the food is delicious," Scott groaned as he licked his fingers.

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“Here, try an onion ring.” Trent pushed one Scott’s way.

“Do they put fairy dust in these?” he asked incredulously. “I don’t think I’ve ever had anything so flavorful and light, considering it’s basically fried batter.

Trent snorted. “They should name a new wing sauce after Chris. The Fried Batter.”

Scott thought that was hilarious and they traded jokes for the rest of lunch. Then we followed Trent out to his dock where he pointed out which boards needed replacing. With my brother’s help I was able to get it done in record time and still leave for the game without rushing, so I stopped at the grocer on the end of the island to grab a drink and snacks.

That’s when I ran into the Anderson sisters. Well, at least Berlin and Paris. “As I live and breathe!” Paris cried out. “The rumors are true!”

Half the store (which was a whopping five people) turned to see what the fuss was about. And even that little bit of attention was enough to make me blush. “Hey Paris.”

“Look at you.” She walked a circle around me while Berlin stood scowling like I’d kicked her cat.

“How are you?”

Berlin didn’t answer, but Paris stopped in front of me. “I’m fantastic. How are your brothers?”

“Good. Scott’s at the house and Ben will be around next week.”

“Really,” she drawled, throwing a look at her sister. “It’s too bad London isn’t here.”

I saw where this was going real fast. “It’s a damn shame. I’d love to see those two in a room together now.”

“You and me both,” Paris grinned. “Maybe we can figure something out one of these days. Accidentally on purpose get them in the same room and see what happens.”

I grabbed a bag of chips off the shelf behind her and winked. “I will happily be your co-conspirator. Just let me know when and where.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Then she scowled at her younger sister. Once upon a time Olivia and Berlin had been best friends. I wondered if the scowl currently trained on me was because they werestillbest friends and she didn’t like that Olivia and I were getting close. “What’s wrong with your face?”

Berlin finally tore her eyes away from glaring at me and instead glared at her sister. “There’s nothing wrong with my face.”

“Yes there is. It’s all scrunched up and angry. Is Ryker not good in bed? Are you orgasm-less?”

I thought for a split second Berlin might strangle her sister. Instead she hissed, “My sex life is great, thank you very much, and not up for discussion.”

“Then why are you scowling?” Paris refused to give up and I couldn’t figure out how to gracefully disappear.

Berlin waved at her sister. “Can you just go pickup the vegetables we need for dinner

already and leave me alone? I bet Chris is off to Tampa anyway and here we are holding him hostage in our rinky dink small town grocery store.”

Paris mouthed I’m sorry with a shrug. “Fine. Meet you at the cash register. Nice seeing you, Chris!”

But Berlin didn’t budge. She waited until Paris was out of earshot before glancing at me, which is when I decided to cut her off at the pass.

“I like that Calusa Key is small and quiet. Why do you think I stopped here instead of Sarasota or St. Pete? I like that Kelly knows me at checkout and remembers that I always forget to get more butter. I can live anywhere. I want to live here.”

She kept that scowl on her face, but her eyes softened a little. “I don’t trust you or your money or your fame. Not for one second. The last thing Olivia needs is an egotistical athlete to woo her and then leave her when he decides fame and money are more exciting in the city.”

The shadow of Beau hung heavy, as I feared. “I understand your concerns. I have no intention of changing my personality any time soon.”

She blinked like I surprised her. “You hurt her and I’ll find a nice electrical storm to strand you in. You can’t get lucky twice.”

I shrugged. “It was a near miss.”

She leaned closer. “I’ll make sure it’s a direct hit next time.”

And while the banter was fun, it was also tedious and unnecessary. “Duly noted. Now if you don’t mind, I have puppies to murder and candy to poison.”

“Ha. Ha.” She stepped to the side, allowing me to finally pass. “I mean it. You’re either in or out with Olivia. She’s not someone you can have fun with and forget.”

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I turned to walk backward so I could see Berlin as I offered her this one last reassurance. “I’ve never forgotten her. And I never will.”

9

Sneaking out of my own damned house like a teenager

Olivia

I was in the middle of daydreaming about Chris teaching Linc how to throw a baseball. When he was done he stood up and winked at me. Then we lived happily ever after.

Yep. I had it bad.

In fact, I was fairly certain I had never had it this bad in my entire life. Not at seventeen when Drew Prescott asked me to prom. Not when Beau Rowland asked me out. Not ever. I wasn’t a happily ever after kind of girl. My parents fought constantly when I was young and had a messy, drama-filled divorce. I knew, first hand, that love could be as constructive as it could be destructive. I never fancied white wedding dresses or an ideal life. I assumed things would be rocky and that the best I could do for myself was to be content in the moment.

Chris Kaine must have some powerful male hormones to do a number like this on me.

“So what have I missed?” My younger sister Summer asked as she sat down across from me with a fresh iced tea.

“Not much. Having Beau closer is so nice for Linc. We’ve had a great summer but I’m more than ready for him to get back to school.”

Summer looked a lot like my twin, but three years younger. Her hair was also dark and long, her skin was ever so slightly more copper than mine, and her brown eyes were also slightly more coppery. Other than that, people used to assume we were twins.

“I feel a disturbance in the force.”

“Is it food poisoning?” I joked.

She scowled at me. “You are smiling like a loon. So either you just produced the greatest photograph of all time or something else is going on.” She dropped her voice down low. “Did you sleep with Beau?”

“God no!” I shuddered even thinking about it. At this point we were essentially brother and sister. Whatever romantic or sexual feelings I had for my ex were gone. I’d say I couldn’t remember feeling that way, but I could. It was more like watching a movie and remembering how you felt the first time you watched it.

“Hmmm. You didn’t go on vacation. Honestly, I’ve never seen you smile like this so I have no idea what’s causing it.”

“Maybe I’m just happy.”

“Maybe,” she agreed. “And I hope that you are. But it would be fun if there was something exciting causing it...”

I studied my sister. The same woman who’d just spent the last hour gushing about her world tour. She told me every (sometimes gross) detail of fame, love, and singing for

a year on the road. She shared without reservation.

But this sickly sweet feeling I had every time I thought of Chris was special. Plus, we agreed to keep this quiet while we figured it out. If Berlin was any example of the drama I was in for, then the quieter the better. “This summer has been enlightening. I’ve realized I’ve been living in default mode since the divorce.”

Summer relaxed. “Oh thank god. I was starting to worry.”

“Little sisters aren’t supposed to worry about big sisters.”

“That only applies when we’re kids. As adults we get to worry about each other whenever we want to. Tell me more.”

I huffed as I stared into my lemonade. “Berlin says I put myself on the shelf, and even though I really hated hearing that description of me, I realize she’s right. I have been on the shelf collecting dust. Afraid to change too much since so much had already changed.”

“But has it?” She set her tea down. “I’m not trying to be confrontational or anything, but you and Beau had been living separate lives for a long time. I love the guy, but I never thought he was the guy for you.”

I thought back on the time leading up to learning Linc would be part of our lives, how I was ready to let our marriage go until that pregnancy test came back positive. And while Beau was attentive and excited, we never found a way to make us both happy. Summer was right.

“I feel like I’ve upset you,” Summer hedged. “I love you.”

“I love you too. And I’m not upset. I’m...thinking.”

“While you think, I’m going to make lunch. Sandwiches?”

I nodded my agreement, already lost in my thoughts. “Why didn’t you think Beau was the right man for me?”

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Summer busied herself in the kitchen, pulling out bread, fruits, and sandwich fixings. “He was safe. You were with him because he made you feel safe.”

That hit me like a ton of bricks because those were the exact thoughts I had about Berlin and Ryker. Was Beausafe?

Yes, actually.

He protected me from the pain I felt towards my parents because he had the same pain. Highly successful parents who expected nothing less from their children. We both had strict, stressful childhoods. We bonded over our shared problems and I always had him as a confidante. Marrying so young was an escape for both of us. A team we built together to face the pressures we didn’t want but couldn’t avoid.

“Fuck.”

Summer giggled.

“What?”

She shrugged, knife in hand as she slathered mustard over bread. “You never swear anymore. I miss it.”

“You miss my foul language?”

“Yeah. You know what I love about swearing? It comes out of emotion. Emotion is passion and creativity. So hearing you swear gives me hope your creativity will return

too.”

She might as well have slapped me. My entire business was built on creativity. “Excuse me?” My creativity was not gone. In fact I was excited about working on London’s new book! I loved a new puzzle to figure out and every project was precisely that.

Summer set the knife down and placed her palms flat on the counter, taking a deep breath before looking me in the eye with an intensity that knocked the air from my lungs. “From one artist to another, you’re not creating anymore. You’re reproducing. And I get it. Those celebrity portraits pay the bills. And by all means, pay those bills, girl. But you have to have creativity too, or else your art dies. Doing London’s books isn’t your art. It’s hers. You supply the visual vessel through which her narrative is told. And it pays the bills. The bills are paid, Liv. You are an independent single mother who is taking banging care of her kid. Where’s your creativity? Where’s your art?”

I was winded by my sister’s attack. Or intervention. Yeah, that’s what this was. A creative artist intervention. Truth being rained down on me whether I wanted to hear it or not. I married for safety. Put myself on a shelf. And lost my art along the way.

Who the fuck was I? I didn’t even know myself.

Suddenly Summer was beside me taking my hands, her voice low and soothing. “I love you. Please don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you.”

She searched my eyes, checking for the truth. “Our parents are cold, driven, selfish people. Their art is...crap?” She laughed and it brought a smile to my lips to hear the truth of that as well. “It’s pretentious bullshit. It’s designed to get praise from critics

and sell to wealthy people who will never look at it again. That's not real art and it's not what you or I want to put out into the world. Remember?"

Oh, I definitely remembered our whispered promises under the covers of my bed while our parents screamed and fought. "Your music is beautiful."

She squeezed my hands. "And your photography is breathtaking. The world needs to see your vision through your lens again. When was the last time you put out a project for you?"

The fact that I had to think about this spoke volumes. "Linc was three."

"The Everglades wildlife project."

I nodded. It won awards, appeared in magazines, and earned money to safely remove pythons from the Everglades. I was so proud of that project. And then I buried myself in motherhood and paying the bills.

Summer was also right about the bills. They were paid. I had my own money in savings, not just Beau's. I was safe and I needed to stop living like I wasn't.

I tucked Linc into bed and waited for his breathing to grow heavy, then like a teenager, I snuck out of my own damn house. Because I wanted to.

"Chris?" I hissed at the edge of his property.

He appeared out of the shadows, taking my breath away. His post game shower made his hair lighter and his smile was whoa.

"Get over here," he urged, reaching for me at the same time he moved toward me.

And then I was in his arms and his lips were on mine. And holy hell what a kiss. I sizzled. My fingers were hungry, needing and wanting to touch him, to massage his neck and thread into his hair. And his seemed to be just as hungry, skating along my back and pressing me to him.

He ended the kiss by pressing his forehead to mine. It was so sweet. “I wish we could do this all night but I’m smashed, Liv. I can barely stay upright.”

He’d pitched the early afternoon game in New York, then the team hopped a plane home. He just got in. “How’s your arm?”

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He smiled with his eyes still closed. “Tired but good.”

“You were kind of amazing.”

His eyes opened and found mine. “Only kind of? I’ll have to be even better next time.”

“Chris.”

“What? I want to impress you. I want you to gush that I’m amazing full stop.”

The things he made me feel were amazing. I felt young and alive. I felt the stirrings of ideas and dreams again. Not just about us, but in general. My creative mind had been asleep and with the cajoling of my sister and the rousing of my body thanks to this man, I was awakening.

This was special. We were special.

I massaged his neck as I kissed him, feeling his body relax and drift into mine. “Go get some sleep.”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, then my cheek, then my lips. “I hate hiding. Kisses in the shadows aren’t nearly enough.” Then his lips dragged down my jaw and neck, stopping at my shoulder where he took a shuddering breath and stepped back. “Good night, Liv.”

“Good night, Chris.”

He waited, watching me until I waved from the door. I shut it and slid the deadbolt into place before going about my usual evening routine of checking doors and windows, turning off some lights and dimming others, until the house glowed.

I didn't like hiding anymore than he did, especially considering how different he made me feel. But as I stopped in Linc's room to adjust his blankets and remove the book from his hands, I was reminded that there was a very good reason for patience and caution. I could get to know Chris without putting myself back on the shelf. For now, midnight kisses in the dark would have to do.

10

No one shares in this house?

Chris

When I got home for my next off day, I filled all the empty pockets of Scott's carry-on luggage with sunflower seeds. He was going to have a lot of fun trying to get through security at the airport.

And honestly? I needed the distraction. The Mantas were now officially in the playoffs and favored to win, and a huge part of that was because of me. I was proud, focused, and stressed as all hell. I spent a lot of time listening to music and ignoring televisions, social media, and newspapers.

Newspapers were the bane of my existence.

Championship Sits on Young Pitcher's Shoulders.

Fuck that. Baseball was a team sport. I didn't pitch every game. This wasn't all on me. We were where we were because we all showed up and put in the time. Wes ran

the field like the captain of a ship and called pitches brilliantly. He knew every pitcher and their preferences. Erik was solid, consistent, and steady at second base. Seth rocked home run after home run, all while holding down left field. Even Yates pulled out of his pitching slump and was a solid mid-reliever after I had to save his ass.

Whether we won or lost wasn't my burden alone to bear, but I was a key factor. The fact that most teams couldn't even get a bat on my pitches this year made me deadly and it intimidated the heck out of our rivals. I would start game one and the intention was to solidly put us first in the series.

So it was a lot.

And selfishly, one of the things that bothered me most was that I couldn't tell everyone I was dating Olivia. I wanted her by my side. And, truth be told, I wanted to lean on her. It would be a lot easier to stay distracted if I could kiss her without hiding.

So, selfish bastard that I was, I showed up on my final off day with a plan. An ill-advised plan I wish I could take back. In retrospect I could see that it was incredibly unfair and probably, ultimately, set up my downfall.

I had a bouquet of pink and purple flowers, chocolate from Dawkins Chocolate Shop, and ice cream from Rosie's for Linc. Also, I was wearing the worn jeans Olivia loved and a white t-shirt that I was once told by a public relations person "made me look like sex."

So now I was nervously standing on Olivia's doorstep trying to figure out how to knock on her door. I ended up setting the flowers down, knocking, and then picking them back up. Inside I heard Linc yelling and Olivia threatening him with no video games if he opened the door. Their banter made me smile. Also, I kind of wanted to

play video games with Linc.

Two beats went by before the door opened. “Hey.” Her eyes dropped to the flowers, then darted to the ice cream and chocolates.

“Hey.” I held up my prizes. “These are for you.”

She stared at the flowers as I passed them to her. “And the ice cream?”

“Sorry, that’s for Linc.”

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She shook her head, laughing. “Well I can’t let you in then. I only allow strangers with candy into my house.”

“Good thing I brought Dawkins Chocolates then.”

Her gaze softened. “Oh, well then you have to come in.” She snatched the bag from me and stepped to the side.

Linc stole the ice cream as fast as his mother grabbed the chocolates.

“No one shares in this house?” I laughed, loving it all.

“No.” Her mouth was already full. Which of course meant I was appreciating the look of pure ecstasy on her face as she sighed and slumped against the door. “Dawkins is my favorite.”

While she was busy closing her eyes and making sex noises over chocolates I took a moment to appreciate seeing her for the first time in three days. Her dark hair was looped into a messy bun. She wore a black tank top and blue leggings. Her feet were bare. Olivia was a natural beauty from her dark eyes to her full lips. Lips I was having the strong urge to kiss.

I cleared my throat. “So, how was your week?” I hated that I was gone so much. The end of the season was long and hectic and the playoffs were going to be even worse.

“Good. It was movie week.”

I followed her into the kitchen. Linc was halfway through the pint of moose tracks.
“Which movies?”

“The Sandlot, The Last Starfighter, Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark, and A League of Their Own.”

I noted that two of those four movies were baseball movies. “So all the best ones? Which was your favorite, Linc?”

“The popcorn!” His whole face was covered in ice cream smudges.

“The popcorn, huh?”

“Yep.” He nodded vigorously. “When we do movie week we always have popcorn, pizza, soda, and cookies.”

Olivia shrugged. “We go a little wild.” Then she whispered, “It’s the food. I bribe him with it so I can watch what I want.”

“Ahhh . . . so that’s where A League of Their Own came from.”

She rolled her eyes. “How else is Linc supposed to learn ‘there’s no crying in baseball’?”

“I can teach him.” And it occurred to me I really wanted to. I could see us in the backyard throwing the ball around, me cheering way too loudly from the bleachers at his games, showing him my pitching tricks.

And I didn’t think it was just because I was attracted to Olivia, who was now staring at me wide eyed. I felt a genuine connection to this funny kid. “So what’s this I hear about video games?”

Linc bounced on the barstool. “I love Lego Batman! Do you play Lego Batman?”

“Not yet but I learn real fast. Want to play?”

“Can we, Mom?” He bounced faster and faster until she waved her hand.

“Sure. If Chris wants to, you can play for a little while.”

We plopped down in front of the living room television for what turned out to be an hour and a half of three different Lego games: Batman, Pirates of the Caribbean, and Ninjago. All the games were essentially the same, but with different characters and missions. I had to admit it was pretty fun to play, but it was Linc’s jumping, hopping, and shouting that really made it a good time.

“And then you can make them roll all the way down the hill!” he howled as Captain Jack Sparrow destroyed a giant rolling ball. It was apparently hilarious.

As in, the kid was rolling on the floor laughing so hard he could barely breathe. “These video game designers are geniuses,” I laughed.

“They really are,” Olivia said from the doorway. “And we pay them handsomely for it.”

I was struck a little dumb by how beautiful she was standing there. I completely forgot I had the hopes and dreams of thousands of fans riding on my shoulders. “Hey kid, mind if I skip the next game?”

“No problem!” he yelled, hopping up and down as he played. He didn’t even notice that I walked away with his mom.

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I nodded toward the kitchen and she followed.

“Having fun with Linc?”

“He’s a good kid. He’s fun.” I lingered in the doorway.

She smiled. “I appreciate you making him feel included.”

“We’re neighbors. I figure I should know what trouble he likes to get into.”

“I also appreciate the flowers and chocolates.” She eyed me warily.

I wanted to wine and dine her, take her fishing all day, buy her presents. She was that kind of woman. The kind you never felt entirely worthy of, but tried to impress anyway. I didn’t want to hide it from Linc or anyone else. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“So,” she drawled, “how are you?”

I was so sick of hearing that from everyone but her. From Olivia it felt genuine and in concern forme,not the championship. “I feel it. The intensity. I’m stressed.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

I stopped short of blurting out what I really wanted and instead tested the waters. “I want you to come to the games. Linc, too.”

“We’d like that.” She gave me a small, gorgeous smile.

“And I’d like to tell people about us. That we’re together.”

She blanched. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Because you don’t want to be with me?” Why did I say that? Even if it was true, I didn’t want to hear it. Not now.

“Chris.” She rubbed her temples, sighing. “God no. It’s not that. It’s...”

“It’s what?”

“It’s the playoffs. Everything is bigger right now. More intense. I don’t want us to get caught up in the whirlwind only to get blown over in the process. I’ve done this before. I know how it works. Every spare thought and moment you have will be sucked up by this until it’s over. And when it’s over, win or lose, there’s nothing. For weeks and weeks and weeks. And then it starts all over again. I told you when this began it needed to be slow. I need to see for myself and for Linc that your world is one we can live in.”

I felt a cool sweat break out over my skin. No matter what happened in a game I never got nervous. But I was nervous now. “You know me, Liv. You know I’m not like him. What has you so worried?” I wish I could erase the connections she saw between me and Beau because we were nothing alike.

On road trips I dug into her ex just so I’d have information on what I was dealing with. Between my agent, a few mutual friends, and some news articles I was able to piece together a snapshot of Beau Rowland. He was an excellent running back. He was focused and intense, he liked his money and knew how to party—all things I would never associate with Olivia. So it made sense that they divorced and went their separate ways.

What I didn't understand—couldn't without hearing it from her—was what she connected between Beau and me. I really hoped it was very little.

She cleared her throat. "I like it here, Chris. Beau hates it. Island life is the right life for me. Quiet, warm, small. I like that my kid knows everyone on his walk to school. I like that every business knows us. I can spend days at home in my studio working and it's fine. But Beau likes the city. He needs the pace and the twenty-four hour services. He's a night owl and I'm not. He loves restaurants and I love cooking food I grew in my own garden. We got to the point where I was crying in the bathroom before cocktail parties and having panic attacks because I didn't want to be there. And Beau was dreading coming to the island. He told me once that his skin starts itching the moment he thinks about how quiet it is here.

"You scare me," she whispered. It physically hurt to hear those words. "Your schedule, the things I feel when you kiss me...I never wanted to date another athlete."

I went to her. Fuck space. Fuck hiding. I pulled her into my arms and sighed with relief when her arms went around me and she pressed her cheek to my chest. "Lots of people travel for work. And then they come home. I'll always come home, Liv. This is my home." I should have meant the island—and I did—but as the words left my mouth I knew they weren't technically true. This specific slice of the island was my home now. This woman and the little boy in the next room.

It was everything I ever wanted.

I brushed my fingers through her hair and swayed a little to the jaunty music filtering in from Linc's game. "I'll prove it to you."

She looked up at me and nodded. "Okay." Then she rose up on her toes and pressed a fierce kiss to my lips. "I believe you. I do." Then why were her eyes so sad? "But you're about to go through something huge. I worry I'll put my feelings from the past

onto you, or that you'll confuse the emotions of your playoffs with what's happening between us."

Valid concerns. I hated that they were valid. "So what do you propose?" I couldn't bring myself to let her go.

But she pressed away from me and I refused to hold her against her will. She retreated a few steps away, hugging herself instead of letting me do the comforting. I had a feeling that was normal for her and I vowed to one day fix that. "I propose, as much as it sucks, to keep things as they are. Unless that's a dealbreaker for you, which I totally understand."

"It's not what I want. I want to tell my teammates about us. I want to share all of this, all the excitement, with you."

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She chewed on her lower lip as she thought. “Okay, how about this? Go talk to Linc. Ask him what he thinks about life with Beau. If afterward you feel confident telling him about the playoffs—the traveling and the uncertainty—and answering all his questions and concerns, then we can have this discussion and decide how to proceed.”

My mouth fell open. Mostly because the thought of disappointing Linc terrified me.

She smiled sadly at me. “I like you so much, Chris. I like you so much I can almost ignore the fact that you’re an incredibly famous athlete. But at the end of the day I’m a mom. I can do anything—even if it means waiting a few months to have what I want.” She took a deep breath and looked out at Linc. “I’m going to go look at the stars from the dock. Come find me when you’re done.”

I squeezed her hand and brushed a kiss against her cheek before she left. Then I watched as she moved into the yard, and then eventually down the dock. I was stuck in a trance. Her fierce maternal instincts put me to shame and I found that a protective mother was, in fact, an incredible turn on. I wanted her more than ever.

“Chris?”

I moved from the kitchen to the living room. “Yeah, bud?”

“Oh good, you’re still here.”

I sat beside him on the floor again, watching him play. “Do you miss your dad?”

“Oh sure.”

“Do you wish he were here more?”

“Pshaw. No. Dad hates it here. I like visiting him in Tampa.” He bounced up on his toes as Captain Jack Sparrow fought on screen.

“How often do you see him?”

“Ha. Take that!” He yelled at the TV. “I’ll see him in the spring and summer.”

That...was a long time from now. “Do you ever go to his games?”

Linc hopped and twirled, finishing his mission with a howl of delight, then set his controller aside and sat on the floor facing me. “Sure. Like one or two. I don’t like them too much. It makes me crazy. Plus we don’t really get to see him when we go. He works the whole time.” He shook his head back and forth. “I like talking to Dad on video. He calls me most nights and sometimes in the mornings.”

A video father. Linc’s indifference to his absence worried me. “Do you like traveling?”

“Uh yeah. On planes I get to drink soda and watch as many movies and play as many video games as I want. It...isawesome.”

I laughed because the way he said everything was funny. He was a funny kid. “What kind of soda?”

“Sprite.”

So the safest uncaffeinated kind. That sounded just like Liv. I was beginning to get a

picture. One I think I liked. Not the absentee father part, but the rest. Linc didn't like football games. Okay. That made sense. They were wild, loud, and filled with belligerent fans. Baseball was a little different. More relaxed. He might like it. Plus most of my season was played over summer when Linc and Liv could travel with me...something Linc just said he enjoyed. It wouldn't just be me on the road leaving them behind at home. There were lots of families on the road and I wanted Linc and Olivia with me, if they'd have me.

“Do you know Trent?”

The question caught me off guard. “Uh, yes?”

“Can you help me set him up on a date with Mom?”

I think describing me as a cartoon character whose jaw had somehow fallen all the way to the floor and had to be picked up with his hands, would probably be pretty accurate right now.

Liv and Trent?

No. Absolutely not.

But I couldn't say that to Linc. “Why would you want to do that?” I asked instead, like a proper adult.

He shrugged. “Mom's alone all the time and Trent likes to fish, plus he lives down the street. They could fish together and not be alone anymore.”

So logical it hurt. “I think Trent might be a bit old for your mom.”

He frowned. “Well who else?”

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I wanted to say me. I wanted to know why he didn't think of me. I was young. I was here. "Are your only requirements that it be someone who likes to fish?"

"Well...yeah. And she should laugh. Laughing means you like someone. She laughs with you and you fish, but you leave all the time, so she'd still be lonely."

And he didn't need another man in his life to visit on video at night. The reality hit me like a train. If I told him right here, right now, I wanted to date his mom, he'd see me as Beau 2.0, not someone who made Liv happy. Not someone who'd be here for him. It wasn't just Olivia I needed to show, it was Linc.

And it was something that only time could teach, unfortunately.

I ruffled his hair. "I'll keep a lookout, okay?"

"Yeah fine."

I left him to another round of Lego video games and joined Liv on the dock, our legs dangling in the water together. "I'm sorry I pushed."

She bumped her shoulder into mine. "I don't blame you. I don't like waiting, either."

I looked out at the horizon trying to find a way to explain this urgency I felt building inside me. Like every minute we weren't together raised the threat level in my body by a point until one day it would reach Red Alert.

"I got caught up in it all. This is my last true day off until we lose. Everything from

this point forward is special.” I chanced a glance her way to take in her eyes, her lips.
“And I wanted to share it with someone special.”

“Past tense? You no longer want to share it?”

I waited for her gaze to meet mine, for the electric shock to jolt through me like always. I savored it. Savored her. “No. I very much want to share it with you, but you’re right. We need to do this slow.”

“What did Linc say?”

“He asked me to fix you up with Trent.”

She burst out laughing. “What?”

“It’s true. Trent likes to fish and lives down the street so you won’t be lonely anymore.”

“Oh Chris.”

“You were right. We need to take this slower than I want to. And that’s okay. When we make this official, I want it to be with no doubts in your mind. I never want you to look back and have questions about us because we rushed or you felt pushed. And I want Linc to understand that just because I play baseball doesn’t mean I’m gone all the time. I’m here. And he’ll know it and believe it.”

We sat quietly together, our toes in the water, the moon rising high in the sky. “I really like you, Christopher Kaine.” She rested her head on my shoulder.

It felt incredibly nice, so I put my arm around her and rested my head on top of hers.
“I really like you Olivia Saldana.”

“I only like Trent as a neighbor.”

That set me off laughing, and the more I tried to keep quiet, the harder my body shook. “Well that’s good because he’s my mentor and I’d really hate to have to fight him over you.”

She started laughing too. Then her hand was on my face guiding my lips to hers. We made out in the moonlight, the waves gently washing ashore beneath us, my tired body electrified by her warmth and touch. It energized me, made me crave things I couldn’t have...yet. It wasn’t what I wanted, but it was enough.

11

I’m going to need to kiss you

Olivia

Itold Chris he didn’t have to keep us a secret from his teammates. It wasn’t like they were going to come over and tell Linc or line up to sell our secrets to the island gossips. It was a peace offering and it was accepted like a delicate piece of glass: with awe and appreciation.

And lots of making out.

The playoffs were every bit as hectic and wild as I expected, but they were something else as well. My creativity came calling. It struck me suddenly and I went with it, capturing the guys in their native habitat: the field. It started with Chris laughing in the bullpen in the middle of game two. I walked Linc over to say hi but he had to stop and pee because he’s eight and seems to need to pee at every inopportune time. Luckily there was a bathroom just a few steps away. I brought my camera because being at a playoff game felt more important (as a photographer) than a cellphone

camera. I only intended to grab a few shots to surprise him with later.

And then inspiration struck as he sat back with his arm over the chairs beside him. His leg was crossed over his knee at the ankle. He laughed and joked with the other pitchers and catchers. The light of the stadium hit him just right.

Snap.

I checked the shot and made an adjustment because it hadn't quite caught what I saw in my mind. Snap. Snap. Snap. This wasn't a picture of Chris—this was an award winning pitcher caught in a moment in time. He stood and demonstrated something to another pitcher. They both made a face. Snap.

“Mom. Mooooooooooom. I'm ready.”

Snap. Snap. “Okay. Let's say hi.” I was flushed. My heart pounded in my chest.

I felt alive again. Especially because as I looked around I saw more and more and more. I wanted to capture the way Seth laughed as he dumped sunflower seeds in his hand. The puff of clay as a runner clapped his hands together. The look of hope as they glanced up at the lights.

“Hey bud!” Chris called, stepping up to the fence to fist bump Linc.

His eyes immediately found mine and sharpened. “What's got you so excited, Liv?”

“I'll tell you in a minute. Talk to Linc.”

Snap. The way Chris leaned down to talk to Linc was now immortalized in my camera. I flipped back through my shots as Chris explained the bullpen and introduced him to some of Linc's favorite players. The pitching coach, Rex Little, was Linc's favorite because of course a coach was Linc's favorite. He signed a ball and handed it to my son.

Chris did that sexy man quick nod thing that in a simple motion indicated immediate response. I hopped to his side. He leaned close and lowered his voice. "It's good to see you."

"You too. The game has been exciting so far."

He grimaced a little and looked up at the scoreboard. "I'd feel better if we were up by more." Then, without looking, he looped his fingers through the chain link fencing and snagged mine. "So what's got you so excited."

"You'll have to let go of my hand if you want to find out."

"I can wait a minute." His eyes danced.

I let mine dance right back. "I'm leaving right after the game to get Linc home and to bed. His teacher said he can come in late since it's a very special occasion."

"Is he having fun?"

"The time of his life."

"So what's got you so excited?"

I reluctantly slipped my fingers away and turned the screen of my camera on. I double checked that it was as perfect as I remembered, then turned to show him the image of him sitting and laughing.

He blinked. "Shit. Liv, this is stunning." He leaned closer. "I feel like a goddamned work of art." He looked up at me with so much admiration it took my breath away.

"No one can make someone this ugly a work of art." Ruiz sidled up next to Chris and

threw his arm over his shoulder. “So is thisher?”

“Kid. Three o’clock.” Chris elbowed him in the ribs. “And yes.”

“I figured based on the bruising.” He cursed and rubbed his ribs which I doubt hurt that much. “Nice to meet you, Olivia.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“Holy shit. Did you take that picture?” Ruiz leaned down just like Chris had.

Linc bounced back beside me. “My mom is a famous photographer.”

He flicked Linc a smile. “No kidding. This is really amazing, Olivia.” Then I clicked through the other images I shot just while standing here. Two ballplayers became seven, all of them whistling and drooling over my small unedited images.

I felt like a million bucks.

“I didn’t know you were dating a sports photographer,” Little whistled.

“I’m not...technically. I mean, I have shot sports before. Football in particular.” In college it was easy to make some of my projects sports projects, which incidentally got me on the field where my boyfriend/husband was playing. I also wound up doing some more in his first two professional seasons. But by that point it was about helping my husband out, not about creativity or art or anything like what I felt pulsing through my veins right now.

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Ruiz pointed at my camera. “You coming to all the games? Because I’ll pay you for shots like that. I want to remember every minute of this for the rest of my life.”

The creative rust began to fall off. “How about this. I’ll work on getting press credentials and see where the creative juices flow.” It would take a few days and pulling some strings, but I could be on the field by the time they returned for the next series.

“Deal.” The guys all said at once.

And that’s how I wound up in a creative fervor. At night I was on the field, in the bullpen, the dugout. I was part of the action and a ghost all at once. I somehow felt part of it all, the documentarian, the record keeper—not of statistics or facts, but of emotions and personalities. My job as photographer was to record people as they were. It was something I’d always done, but this new twist was the breath of fresh air my artistry needed.

I could barely sleep I was so excited to get back to my computer each morning to edit the images from the night before. Relief and a sense of completion washed over me each time I edited an image to perfection, knowing the job was complete.

I had orders from every member of the team, the coaching staff, and corporate offices who wanted to use them for a combination of artwork and promotional materials. I finally had to tell everyone to wait until the playoffs were over. We could finalize photographs and artwork after all was said and done.

They swept their competitors and were the much more well rested team in the

championships. Chris pitched a brilliant Game One that left everyone in awe. And me? I was so proud of him. I was grateful for my project because it kept me busy and distracted, otherwise I might feel the intensity of the playoffs, of Chris's distractedness and distance. Instead I was there with him, feeling all the same stress, seeing it on the faces of every teammate. It was my job to capture, not dwell in my own doubts.

They lost game six, bringing the championship series back to Tampa to determine the winner with Chris back on the mound. Since I was working, Summer and Beau brought Linc to the game to "watch his best friend win the World Series!"

I had lunch with Chris. He was a ball of cool, calm, collected nerves. I knew this because he was quieter than normal, much more like that grumpy fisherman I pulled up alongside weeks ago.

"I just wanted to let you know Marine Patrol is nearby."

He scowled at me, confused. Probably because we were at a nice restaurant in a quiet, dark alcove where we couldn't be seen.

"You're grumpy and distracted. It reminded me of the day we met."

His gorgeous face broke into a breathtaking smile. "Metagain," he clarified. "I can't wait to go fishing. I fucking miss it."

"You'll have all winter."

He toyed with his silverware. "Speaking of winter, I think we should have a standing fishing date."

"Like every Tuesday?"

He switched his fork and knife. “Something like that. I don’t want to interfere with your work though.”

“I think a weekly adventure sounds manageable. I already have times set aside to get out of the house and away from my work as part of my pre-Chris life.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Otherwise I don’t leave the house. I work and work and work, and then get so cranky because I haven’t, you know, gone outside, that I become miserable. So I started making weekly lunch dates with my friends or on Fridays I usually visit one of the island art centers or museums. So a weekly fishing adventure with you sounds perfect.”

His eyes narrowed and I wondered if it was because I used the word adventure instead of date. The truth was I felt like I was slipping, sliding down a slope and I was trying very hard to get my feet back under me. There was Chris my friend and Chris the man I wanted to spend all my time with. But our reality was in the middle somewhere and I found it almost impossible to live in that in between space.

So I did little things, like change the word date to adventure.

I had no idea how I was going to last the entire winter like this.

“So tonight you’re going to win the World Series.”

He laughed and sighed. “Yeah. That’s the plan.”

“You will. Every batter is terrified of you.”

“Unless they figure me out. Then I’m screwed.”

“They won’t figure you out.” He was so smart on the mound. Yes he threw hard, but he knew every batter. Their likes and dislikes, what they swung at and what they sat on. And he used that information to play with their minds, convince them one pitch was coming when he was really throwing something completely different. He toyed with them masterfully.

“Have you?” he asked quietly.

“What do you mean?” My stomach turned over with nerves and butterflies. It was a nauseating combination.

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“Have you figured me out yet?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever figure you out,” I breathed. Chris was grumpy and youthful and brilliant and sweet, and he switched between those aspects of his personality at random. Or at least it felt random to me.

“I’m a pretty simple guy, Liv. I promise, what you see is what you get.”

I wanted to believe him. I really, truly did. But I couldn’t change the fact that I was a little bit scarred by my past experiences with Beau and my fiercely protective maternal instinct was a beat of its own.

“So walk me through tonight.”

He sighed with resolute frustration, letting the topic offing each other outdrop. “If we win, the field will be chaos. A pile on the field. The celebration there will last for a while. There will be on field interviews and I’ll definitely be caught up in several of those as the starting pitcher. Then, like the other series, we’ll wind up in the locker room for the champagne and beer.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed. “After that, I’m going to need to kiss you.”

My stomach knotted and squeezed with desire. “Yes.”

“It will be a late night.”

“Linc is with Summer and Beau. After the game we’re crashing at his house and then Summer and I will take him home in the morning.”

“I want to see him.” He said that with vehemence. Fierceness.

“Yeah okay. Just let me know when and how and I’ll arrange it with Summer and Beau. You know the crowd will part for him.”

Chris’s eyes flashed with annoyance. “Yeah. Good. I’ll text you all the information and you can send it on.”

“I’ll give you their numbers just in case, too.”

“Wonderful.”

The rest of lunch was oddly quiet, but ended in a devastating kiss that made my toes curl.

As Chris took the mound later that night, the air, which was already super charged with electricity, became so intense I would have sworn the hair on my head was standing up. From my perch beside the dugout I could see the way his jaw flexed as he chewed gum, the intense focus of his eyes. Everyone was jumpy, moving and stretching, bouncing on the balls of their feet, waiting for the first real pitch of the game. All the pregame antics—the national anthem, the celebrity first pitch, the other celebrity first pitch, the announcing of every coach and team member—were fun, but also served to amp up the energy inside the stadium.

And now it was finally game time. A potentially history making night for Chris. The crowd went wild as he threw a strike. I snapped a picture of his cool confidence. He appeared neither pleased by the strike, nor frazzled by the volume of the crowd. He threw another strike, his eyes laser focused on Wes, the catcher, communicating something silently, then returned to the mound, delivering a decisive three strike lead-off. This time that passion came out, he began circling the mound without even looking at the batter swinging or Wes catching the ball. Heknewwith complete

confidence that his pitch was a strikeout.

Snap. Snap. Snap. I loved how the stadium lights cast things in stark contrast. It was my job to suss out the shadows, the angles that brought out each player's personality. In this moment, as he yelled and talked to himself, I wanted to capture the stress, pride, and brilliance as each flashed over his face before returning to the mound as cool and collected as ever.

He pitched like a man possessed, with fervor and an almost clairvoyant knowledge of exactly how to pick apart each batter. These were the best of the best. And yet they could barely keep up with Chris Kaine's arm. He lasted until the end of the seventh inning when, with a five run lead, they decided to switch to closers for the eighth and ninth innings, winning the game and becoming world champions.

"Olivia!" I stopped snapping pictures and turned toward the booming sound of Beau's voice.

He stood just to the side of the dugout waving at me, Linc in front of him and Summer and Trent beside him. As I suspected, his size and celebrity cleared his path to the field with relative ease.

I waved back and then moved over to where Chris was giving an interview. When he was done I caught his eye.

My heart skipped at the heated way he smiled at me. "Hey, Liv." He rested his hand on the small of my back. High enough to seem friendly, but oh my god, so intimate with the electricity in the air. He had to lean down and whisper in my ear to be heard over the noise in the stadium, which of course only made things even more intimate.

I tried very hard not to be turned on but...I was. I was very turned on.

“Linc is here.”

“Show me the way.”

He kept his hand on my back as I led him over to the stands, only letting go when Linc started bouncing up and down.

“Hey bud!” They high fived and performed a handshake of some kind.

“Beau, thanks for helping out.” He shook Beau’s hand. “And Summer. Thank you so much.”

“Uh, I think I should be thankingyoufor tickets. Congrats, by the way.” They hugged.

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“My boy!” Trent had been in tears most of the game, according to texts from Summer. So we all gave them some space to hug and cry together. It had to be just as big of a thrill for a coach to see one of his players reach the biggest game in baseball and win.

Chris returned to Linc, pulling him out of the stands and onto the field. “You want to come with me for a bit?”

My son’s eyes went wide. “Can I Mom?”

“Of course.” I watched as Chris gave him a used baseball from the dugout. He introduced him to Wes and Erik who were finishing up their interviews. Then he found a shirt that was entirely too big for Linc and draped it around his shoulders.

“He’s really good with Linc,” Beau murmured, watching me carefully.

“Linc started calling Chris his best friend. I can’t decide if it’s because of the championship or because he plays video games with him.”

Beau shrugged. “Maybe it’s both.” He didn’t say much more. Just kind of let his approval hang in the air while giving me meaningful looks.

If I wasn’t mistaken, my ex-husband was giving me the greenlight on Chris.

“So we’ll see you back at the house?” Summer asked very slowly. Hesitantly.

“Yeah of course. I still have to shoot the locker room celebration. I’ll be late.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Take your time. No rush at all.”

Before I could ask my sister and Beau what they weren’t actually saying, Chris and Linc returned, Linc on Chris’s shoulders.

“Aren’t you a little tired to be hauling around a kid?” I reached for Linc who batted my hands away.

“I haven’t been able to feel my arms for at least an hour. I’m fine,” Chris laughed as he bounced around on his feet, making Linc howl with delight.

“I know the feeling, but be careful. It will all come crashing down soon,” Beau admonished.

“Where’s your family?” I asked. The Kaine’s were in a box with the other close family members.

Chris finally put Linc down. “Scott’s already in the locker room and Ben took mom and dad back to the hotel. They fly out first thing so they don’t miss anymore shows.” His eyes lingered on me.

I felt a thrill shoot down my spine at the intensity of it. Then he returned his gaze to Linc. “Did you have fun?”

“Best day ever!” he howled, arms in the air.

I saw Beau frown a little. “Come on little man. We need to get you to bed.”

Linc let Beau pick him up. The minute his feet touched the ground he turned to me. “Good night, Mom.”

I gave him hugs and kisses. “See you in the morning.”

I left my favorite camera safely tucked away inside her case and bagged my second favorite camera with plastic bags and rubber bands before taking up a spot inside the locker room. The team was done with field celebrations and interviews, and was ready to storm the locker room to spray champagne and beer all over each other.

Before I moved inside I took pictures of the guys laughing and pulling ski goggles on to protect their eyes. Then I found a spot just off to the side where I could get shots of the guys coming in, of the speech in the center of the room, and the explosion of alcohol. I was prepared to be absolutely soaked by the time this was over and I was pretty excited to be part of it all.

I took hundreds of pictures as the celebration unfolded, constantly cleaning my lens. I got fist bumps from the guys and offered my own beer shower. After the speeches were more interviews from an equally soaked press corp, more celebrating, and just constant smiling. The Mantas locker room was a bubble of pure joy and I was carried away with it, too. I couldn't remember the last time I took so many pictures. My eye became my lens that day in the bullpen. I saw this entire playoff experience through my camera.

I fully admit that sometimes a picture is just a picture. That I use all my skill and experience to create a technically excellent composition. But that's where photography and art diverge. When, as the photographer, I see the raw emotion, the subtle contrast, the natural state of my subject and know without thinking, exactly how to capture that moment in time with my camera.

That's what I'd spent my last few weeks doing and it was exhilarating to look around the locker room and see the conclusion to the story. I snapped picture after picture of hugs, smiles, and singing, of beer cascading in a river over Wes Allen's forehead and down his cheeks as he grinned, of Chris roaring and chanting with his fellow pitchers.

A hand wrapped around my arm just above my elbow and I felt Chris's already familiar presence behind me. He whispered against my ear. "Follow me." His breath and nearness sent a shiver down my spine.

My clothes dripped and my shoes sloshed. He took my hand in his and we rounded a corner and down a hall away from the noise. A door opened and then we were in a darkened training room.

And Chris wasted no time taking my face in his hands and kissing the air from my lungs. "Fuck, I've been waiting to do this. I hate that I couldn't kiss you on the field." He kissed deeper, his tongue capturing mine.

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I didn't think. I just kissed. And kissed and kissed and kissed. It was natural to get so swept up in kissing Chris that I forgot about everything else. We bumped into walls and banged against a table or counter or both, before I caught a corner on my hip and jumped away in surprise and a little bit of pain.

"Ow!"

Chris reached out and steadied me. "Are you okay?"

I rubbed the bruised spot. "Fine. I'm fine. I just took a sharp angle to the hip."

He pressed his hand over the spot. "Better?" His voice dropped to a low, protective vibration that made me shiver.

"Yes." Then I looked up and got caught in the tractor beam of his slightly drunken gaze. "Congratulations."

He blushed a little. It was one of the things I adored about him. "Thanks."

"How does it feel to be Most Valuable Player in a World Series Championship?" Even though he was my Chris I couldn't help looking at him with a little bit of awe. He was, essentially, the best pitcher in the universe.

He blushed again and raked his hand through his wet hair. "It's a dream come true. Every kid who picks up a baseball dreams of winning a World Series. I used to stand out on the mound and pretend I was pitching a perfect game to win a World Series." He stopped and stared at me, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open a little.

He was truly shocked to be that guy—the man who everyone dreamed of being.

“Well...you didn’t pitch a perfect game. But you pitched seven scoreless innings with only three hits. For a World Series final game, that’s as close to perfect as anyone can hope for.”

He shook his head a little like he didn’t believe me. “I know I was there. I know I’m the guy who threw all those balls, but I swear, Liv, it doesn’t feel real. I’m going to wake up and this will all have been a dream and I’ll still have to go and pitch.”

I moved back to him, put my arms around his neck and pressed my body against his. “You’re not asleep. The game is over and you won it.” Then I pressed up onto my tiptoes so I could reach his lips. I kissed him slow and deep until my entire body tingled from head to toe. “How do you feel now?”

His eyes were still closed. “Like I have enough adrenaline to run a few miles. Maybe compete in a log toss?”

I laughed because even from the sidelines I was amped up, so I could only imagine the energy coursing through Chris’s veins. “I don’t know of any log tossing competitions nearby.”

His arms tightened around me. “Well then I guess kissing will just have to do.”

All the restraint we carefully applied to our kisses over the last few weeks disappeared. We caught fire. Suddenly kissing wasn’t nearly enough.

“Don’t go to Beau’s,” he pleaded, his hands roaming my waist and finding skin. “Come back with me. I don’t want to be alone.” He pulled away, pressing his forehead to mine, eyes screwed shut. “I hate myself for asking you this, by the way.”

“Don’t hate yourself.” Did I want to go? Was I ready to be alone with him when we were so adamant things stay friendly in public? Could I cross these lines back and forth as we danced with the future?

That was what scared me most. I knew what I felt with Chris was impossible to ignore. That I wanted to get swept away in it all.

But I didn’t know if I could go back. Tomorrow, when the dust settled and reality set back in, would I be able to navigate the minefield of feelings that involved a relationship with a professional athlete while being a protective mother?

“Don’t say yes.” He kissed me again. “Be stronger than me.”

His hand slid along the small of my back and I sizzled everywhere. “Oh...”

“Nope. Don’t do that,” he growled.

“You’re the one who keeps kissing me.” And I was the one who’d lived on a shelf for far too long. Chris was the first guy I’d really kissed in ages, let alone anything more. My body screamed to be allowed to feel and to react.

It wanted.

I wanted.

“It’s the adrenaline. And the fact that you’re the vision of a wet t-shirt contest.” His hand grazed up my side, then moved away from touching my breast and instead moved to cup my face. “I’m really glad you were here to see this.”

My insides flipped and turned as he paced away from me once again, breathing heavy.

“Where are you going?” I felt more than empty when he walked away. Like someone filled me up to overflowing, then flipped open a trap door and everything rushed out.

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His eyes went wide and he waved his hand between us. “I need space or I’m going to maul you. You’re too damn sexy, Liv.” Then he muttered under his breath. “Too damn sexy.”

It made me smile. And my silly heart did backflips because I had my own adrenaline coursing through my veins. I hadn’t done anything like this in years, and to do it with and for someone I had so many feelings for? I was so mixed up and confused and hot.

I reached for him. He moved away, staring at my hand. “What are you doing?”

“I want to kiss you.”

“Nope. We’ve kissed and now we’re done. We should get back to the locker room.”

I blocked the door, confusing myself, but my body seemed to have taken over control of the ship. “Take me to your hotel.”

He jerked away, looking around the room like a second door might magically appear. I grabbed his soaking wet shirt and hauled him against me. “We need to celebrate. Take me to your room, Chris. Or I’m walking out that door and going to Beau’s.”

His nostrils flared and his eyes darkened in a way that made my shiver. “Tell me you mean it. Say you want me.”

It was like taking a step off a cliff into nothing but air. “I want you, Chris. Desperately.”

His hands came crashing in around my face as he kissed me with such ferocity it made everything else disappear.

12

The relief and the ecstasy

Chris

I booked a hotel room so I wouldn't have to worry about travel or driving, no matter the outcome of the game. If we won it would be a late night and a busy following day. More interviews, more celebrations, appearances. Eventually a parade. If we lost, it would mean getting good rest and reporting to the field ready to help in any way possible.

But we won. Oh my god, we fucking won. I was the starting pitcher for a World Series winning game. Every boy who picks up a ball and a mitt dreams of winning everything. We imagine being the guy who brings it home, knowing it's probably not going to happen.

It did happen, though. I lived it and now I got to celebrate it with the woman I was falling head over goddamned heels for. I was the luckiest son of a bitch who ever lived. Ever.

And to do it with my family and Trent in the crowd, with Liv right there on the field and Linc up in the stands. I had everyone I cared about surrounding me on the biggest day of my life. It was beyond special. And it seemed to only be getting better (as if that were possible.)

She came at me the minute the door closed. No awkwardness. No questions. I met her, abandoning any plans I had to talk or whatever foolish nonsense I thought was

right. This was a woman who needed kissing. Good kissing. And I was ready to provide.

“Liv.”

She groaned as the kiss became painful. Her fingers tugged on my hair and she pressed her body against mine. My response was to tilt her head back and take her mouth, all while grabbing her thigh and pulling it to my hip.

We didn’t talk. Not really. Directions, names, sounds, that was it. Mostly it was a frenzied race to rip each other’s clothes off while trying to keep kissing and touching.

I shoved my hands into her jeans and finally—finally—cupped the ass of my dreams. It was firm and a perfect handful.

“Take them off. Take them off!” she said, but also ground against me so I couldn’t do anything except grip her ass harder and pull her against my erection. Then she growled with frustration and stepped away, pushing the jeans to the ground before launching herself back at me.

I am not complaining. The rest of our undressing was equally frustrating and simultaneously arousing. The push and pull of clothes felt good. The first contact of each inch of skin a momentary pause of shock before we resumed panting and grinding until we were finally naked.

From the moment the game ended I’d been chasing something to make me stop. Something to ground me. At first it was the pile on the field. I got trapped under at least ten other guys who all wanted to shake me, hug me, scream at me. But I liked it because it was all so overwhelming I needed to do all of the same things. Then it was beer and champagne, more hugging and high fiving and screaming and singing.

None of it slowed the adrenaline. I was floating, coming out of my skin, my heart pounding wildly.

Until Liv.

Yes our kisses were frantic but it was the only thing that felt real at this point. Her warm body, her soft kisses, her moans. I could focus on those and channel my energy into her.

My hands shook as I touched her bare skin for the first time. Not a slip under her shirt or over her bikini. This time touching was intimate because it was intentional and meant to bring pleasure. We'd seen each other in scraps of bathing suits dozens of times. It wasn't like we were unfamiliar with our bodies. But this was entirely different.

I wanted Olivia. All of her. She was the home I was seeking when I came back to the island.

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“You taste like stale beer,” she giggled as she kissed me, hands everywhere.

“So do you.” And I didn’t mind it one bit. In fact, I was pretty sure the smell was baked into every memory of today, and it was going to etch this experience into my mind forever.

I loved that Olivia couldn’t stop smiling. That there was no hesitation, no second guessing. We spent the last couple of months getting to know each other, and even though it was a weird, stressful time, I felt like I knew everything I needed to know.

I memorized her body with my hands because I couldn’t be bothered to stop kissing her long enough to memorize her with my eyes. There was time for that later.

“Yes, there,” she panted against my ear as I entered her. I froze, completely overwhelmed by the head to toe sensations washing over me. “More, Chris. Please?”

And how could I ever say no to her? Not now, not ever. So I began to move, our bodies combining into one, a feeling of completion filling me as I filled her.

“Oh, Liv,” I groaned, burying my face in the crook of her neck. Images of the day flashed through my mind. Standing on the field, throwing the first pitch, my last strike, celebrating...and then it all vanished into a black void. All I could hear was my heart pounding and Olivia’s gasps of pleasure, the taste of her salty skin mixed with our celebratory beer showers, the feel of her silky skin against my rough cheek.

Olivia coming for me.

“Oh my god, Chris!” Her arms and legs wound around me tight, her muscles locking and squeezing as she erupted in pleasure.

It overwhelmed me completely and I had no choice but to chase my own pleasure, to give myself completely over to the relief and the ecstasy.

I woke up blinking. The first thing that hit me was the scent of soap. After we made love we took a long hot shower together that ended in more pleasure for both of us. Then we passed out. Hard.

So it was a welcome scent filled with memories.

Then I realized I was cold and alone.

I sat up quickly, my head swimming so I had to stop and take a breath. Then I heard a crinkle. Looking down I realized there was a note on the bed beside me.

Chris-

Sorry to leave but I have to get Linc to school. Thank you for last night.

And congratulations!!!!

xoxo,

Liv

“Fuck.” I knew better than to think Olivia would still be here in the morning, that I could enjoy waking up beside her...or relive last night with her.

I scrubbed my face, found my phone, and dashed off a quick text.

I miss you and my bed is cold. Last night was the best night of my life, and I'm not talking about the game. See you soon. X

Then I ordered room service and tackled the text messages first. I smiled as I skimmed over the ones from friends and family, and opened the series from my media manager. She warned me last night that I'd have interviews starting at noon and she wasn't lying. I had back to back interviews from noon until after dinner. All the sports channels, most of the baseball journals and apps, and local evening news. Then first thing in the morning I was booked into every national morning news show.

There were also media requests from Japan and South Korea.

And that wasn't even dipping into the appearances or the parade. I knew winning would be exhausting, but damn. This was alot.

There was a soft knock at my door that I assumed was room service. It was not.

"Knock! Knock!" Wes said in a falsetto. "Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey!" He pushed right past me and threw himself on my bed.

Erik shuffled in after him. "Sorry. But we were sent to make sure you were awake." Then he glared at Wes. "Someone has no boundaries."

Wes curled up in my sheets. "Ah! The fresh scent of stale beer, soap, and sex."

I slammed the door. "Really?"

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He shrugged. “You did, right? You finally sealed the deal with the world’s best photographer. A.k.a Hot Momma Extraordinaire. A.k.a. MILF of the Year.”

“Please, please never use any of those words ever again.” I even laced my hands together and physically begged.

Wes looked at Erik and then back at me. “What? All of it’s true!”

“You’re just so naturally an asshole you can’t see when you’re an asshole,” Erik grumbled.

Wes threw his hands in the air. “What? Olivia is super talented and super hot. And she’s a mother. Where am I wrong?” Then he turned to me. “We’re just super happy for you. On your big day you got to celebrate in all the ways. Right?”

I sighed because Wes was a force and there was no reasoning with him. He was like a tarpon on a hook, the more you fight him, the longer and harder he fights back. So I gave in. “Yes. Olivia and I had a celebration of our own last night. Happy?”

Wes beamed. “Yes. I am very happy for you!” Then he leapt out of bed and put me in a headlock.

Erik shook his head. “Anyway, no one had heard from you this morning so we were sent to make sure you were up and checking your schedule for today. The three of us have the same rotation so we can give you a lift if you like.”

“Yeah sure.” I grabbed the dress clothes set aside for today’s interviews. “I have

breakfast coming up. Can you let them in while I get changed?”

Erik threw himself into the armchair in the corner while Wes took the rolling desk chair. “I think we can manage that.”

Twenty minutes later I was dressed, fed, and walking into my first round of interviews. I had just enough time left to send Olivia one last text.

Going to be crazy for the next couple of days. I’ll call when I can. Miss you. X

Then I steeled myself for the media circus. “All right. Let’s do this.”

13

Only if it’s you

Olivia

It was weird to meet up with Summer and Linc after spending the night with Chris. Even weirder to return to our normal lives. The island almost felt foreign after the weeks of playoffs. For a small pocket of time we lived in another universe—one dominated by a drive for success and frosted over with my newfound creativity. I wasn’t the person I was when all this started. The house felt different.

It was quiet.

I had nowhere to be. No exciting new day to capture with my lens.

I tried to equate it to returning home after a vacation. When you realize your home has a scent you never otherwise notice. You see the clutter on your bedroom shelf or the disorganization of the bathroom in new ways.

In a few days everything would fade back into normality.

And for some reason that made my skin itch.

So I set about giving the house a good once over and then settled into my office to edit. I lost hours fine tuning the shades of gray, cropping images to draw the eye to a particular point. By the time dinner rolled around I threw together a salad and mac and cheese and looked at my phone, realizing I hadn't heard from Chris all day.

This was perfectly normal. He had non-stop interviews scheduled. I shot him a text letting him know I missed him. I got Linc, grabbed a seltzer, and sat on the back porch to listen to the crickets as I checked the news. Chris's interviews were already everywhere and I enjoyed watching them.

But I was also sad that after so much time together, we were apart.

I got an apology message at two in the morning. The next day was more of the same. As I shot off proofs to each of Chris's teammates and coaches, getting almost instant replies and thanks, I began to feel the weight of Chris's fame. He wasn't just any ballplayer. He was the ballplayer of the moment.

So I was irritated—rationally or not—when he did finally call.

“Liv. I'm so sorry. It's been nuts!”

I found it hard to hold a grudge considering the circumstances. “I've seen some of the interviews. They're keeping you on your toes.”

“It's no excuse. I should have found time to call. How are you?”

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I closed the project I was working on so I could focus on the conversation. “We’re good. Back to normal for us. Linc has an art project due tomorrow and I’m trying very hard to let him do it himself.”

Chris laughed, and it soothed some of my wounded emotions. “I can only imagine. What else? Tell me everything.”

His enthusiasm made me smile and I tried to forget that we had barely spoken since our night together. “I’ve been editing and sending off proofs. The orders are coming in hard and fast and I’ll have to stop editing so I can send out invoices.”

“It’s incredible. The guys can’t stop gushing. The only thing better than winning a World Series is having a work of art commemorating all the hard work. I’m so happy for you.”

“I guess I should thank you for the inspiration. It wasn’t planned.”

“My parents always say that’s the best work they ever do—unplanned creative inspiration popping up out of nowhere and consuming everything. I can see a lot of you in them these last couple of weeks.”

Since Paint the Wallflower Gold were amazing musicians, I took that as an enormous compliment. “Thank you, Chris.”

“I miss you. I hate that we’re apart after what happened,” he said in a rush.

My chest ached. “I hate it too.”

We were both silent for a while, but then I heard him clear his throat. “Do you regret it? Because I don’t.”

Did I regret crossing that line? I sat up every night thinking and thinking, trying to understand how I felt. The answer I always came back to was complicated. “I don’t regret being with you because it was what I wanted and I honestly think I might have combusted if we didn’t do something. But I have doubts, if I’m being honest.”

It was too familiar. All those nights alone while Beau traveled or simply didn’t want to come home. I knew they were different men in different circumstances, but the icky feelings inside my heart couldn’t distinguish between the two at the moment.

“Doubts?” His voice was rougher now, tinged with emotions. “Because I’ve been gone?”

“Yes and no. This has just been a reminder of all the things that scare me. It doesn’t mean I believe we’re doomed.”

He chuckled without humor. “Ah, doomed. So great. The bar is set really high.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

He was silent for several beats. “I know. And if I’m being honest, I have doubts as well.”

That confession was like a stab to the heart, which, of course, made me a hypocrite. It wasn’t fair of me to say those same words and yet hate hearing them sent right back to me. “What are your doubts?”

Another pause and heavy exhale. “I didn’t want to do this over the phone.”

“Well we’re in the weeds now.” If we stopped I’d do nothing but obsess until he got home in a few days.

“Fuck. Okay.” More empty silence. “I made you a promise and I’ve already broken it. I’ve been beating myself up over it between every interview, every second I have to breathe, I analyze and over analyze where I should have stopped us.”

“How? How could you have stopped us?” I was angry now. I hated the insinuation that sex was somehow wrong. “We’re adults who are more than attracted to each other. What we did was natural and quite frankly, took an amazing amount of strength to wait as long as we did.”

He huffed a laugh. “You have no idea.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea actually.”

“Fair enough. I’m not saying the sex wasn’t mind altering. In fact, that’s exactly what I’m saying.” His voice grew louder, more frustrated, more determined with each word. “I made a promise to you and to Linc, and now I’m in very real danger of breaking it. Smashing it into a million pieces. I need both of you to know I’m all in. I’ll always come home.”

But I did know that. I didn’t need more time for him to prove his heart was built with the same stuff as mine. “I’m just having a bad day. Nothing more.”

I heard him swallow as the line went silent again. “I...I don’t like you having bad days. Ever.”

“They’re going to happen, Chris.”

“Not if I can help it.”

I smiled because I knew he meant it. “We’ll talk more when you get home.”

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“You better believe it. I miss you like crazy. I’m so overwhelmed with everything. I just want to sit on my boat alone for like, three days straight.”

My mind immediately flashed back to grumpy half-drunk Chris. “Do you want company?”

I could feel his smile through the phone line. “Only if it’s you.”

“I’m so pleased to meet you, Carmen,” I gushed. It wasn’t often I was so starstruck I could barely speak, but taking a video call with Carmen Ayres—the writer, director, and producer of my all time favorite documentary—was definitely cause for complete meltdown.

“The pleasure is mine. Your work at the World Series caught my eye and then I realized I’ve admired your work in the past. I’m glad to see something new from you again. It’s been a while.”

Oh. My. GAWD. I went thermonuclear from the praise and embarrassment. Carmen Ayres admires my work! “That’s an incredible compliment. Thank you.”

“Your Everglades project definitely hit my radar a few years ago, but it was your series on the 2010 oil spill that really put you on my watch list. The way you captured the people fighting to save the environment really spoke to me.”

I was...I was speechless. I was on Carmen Ayres radar all those years ago? So much so that she remembered me now? How was this possible?

“So here’s the reason I requested to speak with you. I’m about to launch a new project. A documentary on how baseball has shaped culture in America, and how culture in America has shaped the sport. I want you on my team.”

I die. I’m fairly certain that’s what this was. My heart had stopped, my brain synapses no longer fired, there was no air in my lungs. “Me? In what capacity?” Sound professional! It was a miracle I hadn’t burst into tears!

“Have you seen my work before?”

Had I seen her work? Had I seen her work?

“The History of History changed my life. It completely altered the way I see my role as photographer and encouraged me to help launch the Calusa Key history project.”

Carmen smiled warmly. “Now that is truly a compliment. So you’re familiar with how I mix interviews with video and photographs?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I don’t have a photographer yet. No one has clicked. I need someone who can see the person inside and manages to bring it out. I don’t think anyone I’ve worked with in the past can do what you did with the Mantas. I need a combination of raw talent and a deep understanding of the sport. That’s what I see in your work.”

How many times could someone die in a conversation? I was now at three. I hoped I lived through it so I could take this project. “Again, thank you so much, Carmen. Your praise means everything to me.”

“So you’ll consider it?”

“Absolutely. What will the schedule look like?”

“I’ll warn you first. It’s intense. I have twenty-five interviews set up over the next four months, plus about a dozen locations to shoot. If things go as planned this will take up a better part of your next six months.”

I knew I should think about how I was going to be there for Lincanddo this much traveling, but all my brain could process was that this was a chance of a lifetime. In the back of my mind I could hear a miniature version of myself chanting “hypocrite” over and over. I shushed her with the reminder this was a one-time project, not a lifestyle.

“Can you send me the agenda?”

“I’ll send you all the details and a contract to your agent. I’m really looking forward to getting to know you better, Olivia.”

I stared at the computer for a long time after the call ended. I was still sitting there when Carmen’s email pinged into my inbox with all the information I’d need to make a formal decision and start planning a very different life for the next few months. A quick scan of the agenda calmed my nerves. Yes, I’d be gone a lot, but it was all manageable. Summer was taking a break from touring to record her next album, so she’d be able to cover most of this.

Chris would probably happily help, too. The thought popped into my head and while I knew it was true it also reminded me of how I was asking him to prove he would be around all while I was about to spend time away.

And of course Beau would be available as well once football season was over, but picturing him trying to be happy here even for an occasional week made me cringe.

But then I thought about how alive I felt these last few weeks. I was off the shelf, the dust cleared away. I followed my creativity and my heart. I couldn't put myself back into cold storage because I was afraid of a few complications.

Right?

This project was the opportunity of a lifetime. It was the kind of platform that could open doors for me I didn't even know existed. But it would also take me away from Chris just when we finally had a chance to spend real time together.

I closed the agenda and paced around my office, trying to clear my mind of possibilities and doubts. And when I couldn't think straight, I called my little sister.

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I rounded the kitchen counter with a bowl of popcorn. “So what’s your sisterly advice?” I’d just finished pouring my heart out to Summer. All the sordid details of how I gave Chris the green light, a quick overview of the night, and our earlier phone call. Then I dropped the Carmen Ayres documentary news.

Summer grabbed a handful and began thoughtfully munching. “You’re falling for him. And from the sound of it, he’s already fallen for you. I don’t see what the problem is.”

I sighed because I made my concerns—and Chris’s—abundantly clear. “His lifestyle, my past, this little thing called my son...”

“Yes, I heard all that the first time. I still don’t see what the problem is. He’s not Beau. I love Beau, but you two were never going to grow old together. You were always friends first and foremost. He loves nightlife and parties. You...don’t. And now you’ve found someone just as happy with a quiet island as you. Someone who seems to really like Linc. I’m all for taking your time because you do have Linc to think about, but I don’t see how self torture is going to do anything but make you both miserable unnecessarily.”

The last thing I wanted was unnecessary misery. “I wish I had a crystal ball that could tell me everything works out in the end.”

“Olivia, everyone wants that. No one has one. We’re all taking leaps of faith. Do you think agreeing to that world tour was easy? It meant delaying my next album, but it also meant exposure I’ve never had before. It was a risk and I’m still not a hundred percent it was the right thing to do.”

She never once mentioned doubts about the tour. Summer was all confidence from the moment she announced her decision to the day she came home. “Well for what it’s worth I think it was the right thing for your career. I just...ever since I found out I was pregnant, I get stuck whenever something isn’t clear. I know I have this overly intense maternal instinct, and I try talking to myself logically, but nothing terrifies me more than making a choice that negatively impacts Linc’s life.”

Summer frowned. “You have analysis paralysis, sister dear. And as you well know, that is the death of creativity and good times.”

Our parents used to say that all the time. Seeing our interest in the arts, they took it upon themselves to guide us early on. According to them, the world is deprived of the art it deserves because too many creators are spending all their time striving to be better, to find perfection that will never come.

Was I striving to be a better mother, to find maternal perfection? It was entirely possible.

“But you want to know what I really think?” Summer scooped up another handful of popcorn and sat back, dropping one kernel at a time into her mouth.

I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like what she had to say. At all. But Summer didn’t offer up advice unless she thought it was important. So I steeled myself. “What do you really think?”

“I think you use Linc as a shield. You love it here, but you also hide here with Linc as an excuse so you can justify not dating, not traveling, not putting yourself out there. And you can do that because we’re lucky enough to have paying careers in the arts. Even without Beau in your life you could have made ends meet with just your celebrity photography business.”

Guilt started to paint over my doubts. Here I was debating the merits of dating Chris and taking a job with a famous filmmaker, meanwhile there were artists all over the world struggling to be noticed.

“You’re privileged to be able to choose your projects, to be able to stay home with Linc, to hide here. That privilege naturally makes small problems into big ones.” She sighed and squeezed my hand. “And I’m not trying to diminish your problems. They’re yours and they are real, but debating whether you can trust a smokin’ hot ballplayer who lives next door and has already professed undying devotion to you, is small potatoes compared to wondering where your next meal is coming from. Take the job. Let us help you. Stop hiding.”

14

A man with only one night

Chris

Throughout the interviews, the parades, and everything else, there was something distant about Olivia. She was there. We talked. She brought Linc to the parade. But there was something in her eyes that had changed. It had me nervous, especially when she invited me over for dinner my first night back.

Alone.

Just the two of us. Linc was at his dad’s.

It felt final. And I was never going to be okay with final. Of course I had no idea what was going on. She could throw herself at me, declare her undying love, and insist we get married this weekend. I liked the second option. It was a very different kind of final.

“Hello?” I called out. She texted and asked me to come in the back. The house smelled delicious and I could see our meal set out at a table all properly set with a tablecloth, wine, and a plate of caprese. Liv was real proud of her tomato and basil crop this year and often had this prepared as an appetizer. It was just one of the little things I knew about her, loved about her.

“Hi! I’m here!” She came rushing out of the hallway that led to her bedroom. And fuck she was a sight, her hair down and straight, just a little makeup, and a comfortable sundress. “Oh is that for Linc?”

I looked down at the bag of souvenirs in my hands. I completely forgot I was holding the thing. “Uh, yeah. World Series merch. There were some limited edition badges and stuff around. I made him a bag.”

“Thank you.” She took it without quite looking at me, and definitely not kissing me. Then hurried into the kitchen to check a pot on the stove. “I made stir fry. It’s an unusual recipe but it’s amazing. I promise.”

“You have yet to make me anything but amazing.”

“Can you pour the wine?”

“Of course.” I sampled some tomato and mozzarella as I uncorked the bottle and served us each up a glass. “Everything smells delicious.” But her distance was only making me more nervous.

“I have something to tell you!” she blurted out, her cheeks flaming red.

I steeled myself. “Okay.”

“Drink some wine first.”

Definitely not good. I handed her a glass and we each sipped. “Don’t leave me hanging, Liv.”

Her eyes darted down and away, avoiding me. “I got offered a job. An amazing job!” She took another sip of wine. “It will mean a lot of travel for the next few months.”

I heard all the words she said, but they ended up scrambled in my brain, mostly because they weren’t what I was expecting. At all. “A job? What kind of job?”

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth, breathless when she finally spoke. “A dream job. My work these last few weeks caught her eye and she—Carmen Ayres who is my very favorite documentarian—offered me a job as photographer for her next project. It’s about baseball and she said they couldn’t find anyone who captured the sport the way I do.”

I didn’t need to fully understand everything she said to get that it was a big deal to Liv. Maybe even the opportunity of a lifetime. “This is great news.”

“It is. At least I think so. It will complicate everything though.”

I wanted to touch her. To soothe her. But the way she held herself away from me still set alarm bells ringing in the back of my mind. “Why don’t you tell me everything over dinner.”

“Yes,” she began nodding over and over, “yes, that’s a good idea.”

And that’s how we spent the next hour. We ate slowly and drank a lot of wine, which also loosened up our shared anxiety about seeing each other. She explained who Carmen Ayres was and why she was a hero of Liv’s, all the project details, and finally her worries.

“I’m always going to be nervous about how change affects Linc.”

“He’s a happy kid. I don’t think this is going to affect his life.”

She smirked. “Are you saying I’m irrelevant.”

“You know I’m not.” I shot her a look that told her I thought she was very relevant.

“Intellectually I know six months is nothing, plus seeing his mother pursue her dreams with as much excitement as his father does will be very healthy for him, but...” she went back to worrying her lip.

“But?”

She shrugged. “Maybe I’m a control freak. I’m having trouble with the idea that someone else will pick him up from school. Someone else will tuck him in at night.”

“His life will be richer, not poorer, for having more people in it.”

She blinked at me. “You’re right.”

“What else worries you?”

She glanced away from me, taking a slow, deep breath and blowing it back out.

“You’re trying to show me that you’re here, meanwhile I’m going to be the one traveling.”

Ah. Now we were really getting somewhere. “You know what?” I rapped my knuckles on the table. “This will be even better. Life changes all the time. I know that better than most. We picked up and moved constantly, or lived in an RV on the road, waking up in a new city everyday. I’m going to play ball until my arm can’t throw anymore. I don’t know what I’ll do after that. Maybe I’ll just fish all day for the rest of my life. The point is...I don’t know. My career could end tomorrow or maybe I’ll learn I’m hilarious on camera and become a sports commentator. This could be the first in a long line of new and interesting projects for you. If you really want to know if we have what it takes to stay together and make each other feel loved and appreciated, then this is it.” We were not breaking up over good news. It wasn’t happening.

She finished her wine and stared into the glass. “You’re absolutely right.”

“Then why do you look so sad?”

“Because,” she swallowed, “I’m scared.”

We’d been moving closer and closer as dinner wore on and conversation took over, so I finished the job and pulled her chair to mine. “Why?”

“I’ve never done anything this big before. I’ve...I’ve never taken a real chance on my career.”

Sometimes—rarely—it felt like we switched places. She was the younger and less experienced of the two of us instead of the other way around. I cupped her face. “Babe, you’re going to do great things. I’ve seen your work and it needs space. Room to grow. You’re ready.” A tear slipped out and ran down her cheek. I swiped it away

with my thumb. She was so worked up I could feel the anxiety coming off her in waves.

It reminded me of the first time I got called up. They'd been talking about me ever since I signed my contract, ranking my potential, stoking the fires of excitement, so when I finally got my shot, walking on that field felt like walking into the Colosseum as a gladiator. I either survived or I didn't.

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Luckily I survived that day. It wasn't amazing, but it was a solid first showing. They decided to keep me up and I focused everything in my life on making my debut stick, proving to everyone I was an elite professional pitcher. I didn't date. At all. I didn't even look at women for the rest of the season. I worked out every spare minute and followed my trainer's advice to the letter. I didn't go out with the guys except to dinner. I stopped drinking. Not even a celebratory beer.

I dedicated my life to making my big chance as big as it could possibly be.

I spent a lot of time over the last week thinking about what happened between Liv and me, and where I wanted things to go from here. I already felt like I knew, but now I was confident. I tucked her long hair behind her ear and cupped her chin so she looked into my eyes. "I think we should keep things slow and friendly until this all settles down. You need to focus and things will be complicated enough without adding a new relationship to your plate."

Her eyes darted between mine, searching. Then her lips trembled and I almost took everything back. "I think you might be right."

"I don't want to back off, just so you know."

She nodded silently. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

I heard the echo of my own words from the week before, so I knew how genuinely she meant it. "Then I'll stay." There was a finality to our kisses that I didn't like but I ignored it and instead focused on the intensity.

The zings turned to a five alarm fire when she climbed into my lap and took my face in her hands. “I’m not good at relationships. I’m pretty terrible, actually. But I’m trying to figure it all out for you.” Her eyes darted between mine and I found it really damn hard to breathe with that much desire directed at me.

So I put my hands on her hips and pulled her down against me, giving me something to feel to balance out everything else. “I’m just a boy, sitting under a girl, telling her I’ll be here when she’s ready.”

She smiled and ground against me. “I’m ready to have some fun, Hugh Grant.”

I smiled right back. “Then that’s what we’ll start with.”

And I meant it. If we had fun tonight and she didn’t touch me again for a few months, I would live with it. If she wanted to sneak away and relieve stress with me, I’d be okay with that too. Hell, if she changed her mind and wanted to have a full blown secret relationship, I’d figure that out.

She fumbled with my shirt. The moment her hands touched my chest I hissed. It was incredible how something so simple—her hand on my skin—could change everything. My mind switched off. I stopped thinking about the future and all the different possibilities.

“Liv, we need a bed,” I groaned. As hot as the idea of chair sex was, I needed to move, to touch every inch of her, and, quite frankly, to be in control.

She nodded as she kissed my neck. I took that as permission and stood up with her in my arms. Her legs automatically wrapped around my waist as I walked us to her room. Last week I was a ball of adrenaline and need.

Tonight I was a man with only one night.

And I was going to make the most of it.

I set her gently on the bed and removed her clothes one piece at a time. Her eyes remained locked on me, watching my every move. I never thought of myself as a controlling kind of guy. In fact, I was usually pretty go with the flow. Whatever felt good or right in the moment. But with Liv, I was beginning to realize, I felt a powerful need to please and pleasure, and I couldn't do that if I wasn't in control.

Like when I was pitching. On the mound I was in control, the game designer, the master of puppets. I loved knowing the game was mine to win or lose. Those games mattered to me.

Olivia mattered to me.

I ripped off my own clothes and condomed up, then took her slowly so I could savor and memorize how it felt to be with her. It was all eyes and hot breath as I filled her. I felt every inch, every quiver, the build, the tension, the need.

I loved her legs around my hips, her ankles at my back, her breasts in my hands or against my chest as we kissed. I held her hips in place as I drove into her over and over again.

“Chris! There. Please?”

Her words drove me wild. I wanted to hear them for the rest of my life. “I can feel it. You're close, babe.”

“Yes.” She nodded furiously, eyes screwed shut as she arched up to me, meeting my thrusts.

“Eyes, Liv.”

She forced them open. They were unfocused and wild. The connection from our eyes to our bodies complete. “Yes,” she whispered, her hand coming to my face and stroking my cheek.

I drove into her again, deep and powerful. Her eyes rolled back as her orgasm took hold, but she blinked, refocusing on me, and all the pleasure I saw, mixed with her naked adoration, pitched me over the edge with her.

We slept backto back all night long. I made her breakfast and we wound up using the kitchen counter for another round of fast, intense love making. Then Beau texted to let her know they were on the way.

“I have nothing better to do until February. I’m here to help whether it’s picking Linc up from school or taking you out fishing to get away from everything.” I kissed her one last deep time, knowing it might be weeks or even months before we could really move forward. “I’m going to be the best next door neighbor you’ve ever met and Linc is going to get so used to having me in his life he won’t ever worry about me leaving you—or him—lonely.”

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She smiled up at me sadly. “You really think everything will work out?”

I gave her chin a shake. “I know it will.” Then I hopped down her front steps, waving goodbye before Beau pulled into the drive.

Yes, I was a man well pleased and satisfied, but I was also a man who had full confidence the world was at his feet. Liv and I were solid and once we navigated these murky waters we’d be together, once and for all.

But in the meantime I had someone else to win over.

As soon as I got home I pulled out my phone, hitting the speed dial. “Hey Trent. How do I become a baseball coach?”

Part II

15

Friend Zoned

9 Months Later...

Chris

To say things didn’t go quite as planned would be an understatement. I’m still not quite sure how I wound up so firmly in the friend zone, but here I was. Linc and I were thick as thieves though. And I was so close to Summer I was dangerously close

to calling her my best friend.

And that pissed me off because my best friend was Liv and just two hours ago she called me “buddy.” Likebuddy old pal. It was as if she were deliberately pushing me further into the friend zone and I didn’t know why.

“Has she met someone else?”

Summer frowned. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. My sister is the definition of monogamy. If she were moving on she would tell you.”

“I feel like she’s telling me,” I grumbled, catching the baseball Linc rocketed my way and threw it back. He’d turned into a pretty good ballplayer. I helped coach his fall ball team and between me, Summer, Trent, and occasionally, Beau, Linc’s home life had barely registered his mother’s new schedule.

That’s right, I was friends with Beau. We were one big modern family, minus the actual relationship-with-Olivia part of the equation.

“She’s...I don’t even know,” Summer sighed. Linc threw another ball that made my glove pop. “Dang, kid. Take it easy on the old man. He’s got to pitch tomorrow.”

Linc snickered. “I don’t throw half as hard as Wes does.”

Wes being Linc’s new favorite player. Linc had become friends with a lot of the guys this season. Getting to know Beau I also got to understand how very different we were. Not just the whole city nightlife part, but professionally as well. He almost

never took Linc to games and rarely introduced him to his teammates. It was as if Beau's football life was on another planet.

Whereas I wanted Linc there all the time. Every game he could come to, he was there. Over the summer break Summer traveled with Linc to my away games, Liv meeting up with us when she could. He came to dinners with my teammates and spent real time with them away from the field. He even helped me teach Erik and Wes how to fish. I suspected he'd have a full bleacher section at his fall ball classic this year.

If only I could figure out where I went wrong with Olivia.

Working with Carmen was a raving success for Liv. I was so fucking proud of her and excited for everything happening. After Olivia was done with her part of the baseball documentary, Carmen asked her to take on an oral history project she'd had back burnered for years. It was now Liv's baby and it consumed her. So even though the six months of travel had come and gone, she was still working long hours and taking the occasional trip for her new project.

"It's like," Summer suddenly said, "like she's burying herself in her work. I've never seen her like this."

I caught the ball, sent it back, and took the opportunity to glance at Summer. She stood a couple feet away chewing on her lower lip the same way Liv did. It was easy to fall into friendship with Summer. She and Liv were tight like I was with my brothers—both of whom were currently living with me. Ben because we'd (we being me, Paris, Berlin, their mom, and Grams before she passed) tricked London into coming home and Ben into renovating Grams old house. We basically shoved the two of them together and, I'm proud to say, it was working. I liked to think I was fully entrenched in Calusa Key society, just like I promised. Oh, and Scott decided to abandon his Hollywood life, his girlfriend, and all of reality to live in a hammock.

Pretty sure he was having a full blown life crisis, but aside from the moping and meditation, he was generally in good spirits.

So I had my brothers, my friends, and Linc, but I only had a shred of Olivia. We needed a shove back in the romantic direction. “I could ask her out.”

“No. Don’t do that. She’s like a mouse. She’ll get one look at you and run back to her hidey hole.”

“One look at me?”

Summer sighed. “I think she’s put up a mental block. You are her friend. Just a friend. You are not the sexy ballplayer who swept her off her feet. If you give her that hungryyou are my womanlook, she’ll have to take the block down and remember what it’s like to feel.”

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So I needed to get past the block. Or, to put it in baseball terms, I needed to start tipping my pitches. No more laying back, no more playing her game. I was going to remind her I wanted her, that my feelings were physical and intense, and that I would accept nothing less than everything.

I spent my next off day helping Ben track down supplies. I wound up at the hardware store, the grocery store, and finally, the outdoor rec shop to pick up a fake alligator. No, I didn't know why and also no, I didn't want to know why. It was Ben. There was a one hundred and seventy five percent chance it was a prank. My big brother loved pranks. It was how the whole sunflower seed war began.

And on that note, I grabbed a few bags of sunflower seeds at checkout. I wasn't sure what my next prank would be, but I needed supplies to pull it off.

"Chris," Paris Anderson hissed from the sunglasses rack twenty feet away.

I dropped the seeds into my basket and moved her way. "What's up?"

She waved her hands to indicate I needed to keep my voice down. "Shhh! There are ears everywhere."

So this was about Ben and London. "As far as I know Ben is head over heels. I think we're in good shape."

Paris beamed. "London is so completely frazzled. I know I shouldn't enjoy this so much but...well I am. It's nice to see her foundation shaken."

“I’m just glad Ben’s smiling again. He can be a grumpy bastard.” Says the man who was a grumpy bastard. Maybe it ran in our blood because Scott was full blown grumpy bastard at levels that put Ben and I to shame.

“So do you think we need to do anything else? Trap them in a room together? Accidentally make them reservations at Moonlight Tides?”

“I don’t think we need to send in reinforcements just yet. Let Ben work his magic first.”

“Okay.” Paris frowned, finally standing upright again and returning her voice to normal. “How are you, by the way?”

“I’m good.”

Then she arched her eyebrow and zeroed her gaze in on me in a way that made me feel like someone had just turned on a spotlight. “Do I need to lock you and Olivia Saldana in a room together?”

“Shhh!” I glared at her. “There are ears everywhere!”

She giggled. “Like the whole island doesn’t know.”

Great. Just...great. “Again, no meddling needed. Let me work my magic.”

She pursed her lips. “There’s no magic happening, Christopher Robin.”

I glared at her. “There will be very soon.”

“I’ll get the popcorn ready.”

“Smart ass.”

She grinned, clearly proud of her meddling ways. “Oh hey Mr. and Mrs. Rossi. Getting a new kayak?”

A man and a woman about my parents age, maybe a little younger, had an orange tandem kayak in their hands. “The old one finally cracked,” the woman said. “Hopefully this one lasts ten years as well.”

“Wow! My kids destroyed one in under a year. I’m impressed. How’s Sam? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Oh she’s well. She was just here for the weekend. You know how she likes to lay low. I’m Jean, by the way. And this is my husband Cal.”

I shook each of their hands. “Chris.”

The husband grinned. “I’m a huge fan, Chris. Will you sign our kayak?”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how I signed my first and only kayak with a Sharpie from aisle four at the Calusa Key rec shop. “Now it has to last ten years,” I said as I added the marker to my basket.

Jean shook her head, pushing her husband toward the end of the registers. “It was nice of you to indulge him, Chris. See you around!”

“Don’t blame me if they charge you double for the kayak now that it’s a collector’s item,” I joked.

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“You should have had him sign it after we paid for it!” Jean sighed.

“That was really nice of you,” Paris said quietly.

I shrugged, feeling a little embarrassed for some reason. “They were really nice people.”

“Their daughter Samantha is really nice, too. She’s a researcher in Gainesville, but she comes home all the time to see her parents. You might meet her one day. She was tight with Summer growing up.”

Well, if they were friends with Summer then I’d sign anything for them. Maybe I’d make it a joke and secretly sign random things for her to pass on to Sam. That could be pretty funny.

I dropped Ben’s stuff off at Gram’s house, stopped by Trent’s to fix a leaky pipe he couldn’t reach, and got home in time to see Summer driving off with Linc for his afternoon adventure club meeting.

My eyes tangled with Liv’s as she finished waving goodbye. I saw them flare in panic but instead of backing off like I’d done every time for months, I found myself propelled forward, my feet eating up the ground between us. I swear she looked around for a way to escape and realized there was no possible way she could, so instead she stood frozen, eyes wide, like a deer trapped by oncoming headlights.

“Hey there, Liv.”

“Hi Chris.” Her voice was steady but remarkably quiet.

“I was thinking of taking the boat out for an evening run. Does my fishing buddy want to tag along?” I intentionally used the wordbuddysince she’d just used it on me, and because I hoped I could convince her my intentions were friendly.

When they were, in fact, not friendly at all.

“I...” her eyes darted around as she tried to come up with an excuse.

“You?”

“Uh.”

“Linc’s at his meeting for the next two hours. They’re learning about the lifecycle of sand dollars tonight. Come on. You’ve been working nonstop. We haven’t hung out in at least a week.”

She swallowed and stared at my chest. “Yeah. Okay. It would be nice to feel the wind in my hair. Let me text Summer and change.”

“I’ll meet you at the boat.”

I waited until she slipped past her front door before I walked back to my house with a spring in my step. I was going on a date with Olivia Saldana. She just didn’t know it yet.

Chris

Even with the roar of the engine and the sound of the wind racing past my ears, I could hear Liv's sigh as that same wind washed over her face and danced through her hair.

It made me sigh to see her shoulders relax and a smile curve her lips.

It had been too damn long since I touched those lips. I remembered every second of what it felt like, tasted like, to have her lips on mine. Every morning and every night I remembered with excruciating detail the heaven that was her body moving with mine.

The water was smooth today, like glass in some places, a slight ripple in others. The sunlight reflected off it almost painfully as we headed west, and then eased as I turned the boat south.

"Where are we headed?" she yelled.

"It's a surprise!" As much as anything could be a surprise. She knew the area better than I ever would. She'd probably guess my intentions pretty quickly.

A large boat crossed ahead of us and I adjusted course slightly to take his wake a little less brutally. Liv braced her hands on either side of the windshield, bent her knees, and absorbed the impact as we passed over the waves. As soon as we were clear and back onto smooth waters she moved to the bow, looking over the side.

She paid almost no attention at all to where we were going and instead seemed to make the most of her opportunity to relax. To breathe in the salty air, feel the sun on her skin. She smiled the whole way there.

"Are we headed to Cabbage Key?" She finally asked with a confused look on her

face.

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I shrugged. “Want to get a beer with me?”

I couldn’t see her eyes, but I could feel her looking at me. “Yeah. Sounds great.”

Since it was weekday afternoon it wasn’t busy and I was able to pull right up to the dock. I fell in love with this place the first time Liv took me here. It was a small island with a historic house that was now a lodge. There were several cottages on the island you could rent for a few nights. It was also easy to wander the island or eat at the one and only restaurant. There was no way to reach the island except by boat. It was the kind of place that had dollar bills stapled up everywhere and surprisingly delicious food.

We snagged a table that looked out over the water and ordered two beers. She still had that blissed out look on her face, but her hands had begun to fidget with the paper napkin in her hands.

“Maybe we’ll have time to walk around before we head back.”

Her eyes drifted to the grass and then down to the rocks and sand. “You know it’s weird. This is the same water outside our houses, same sand, same everything, but it feels different.”

I could say the same about us. We were the same people who were on a collision course last year, but we didn’t feel the same anymore. “The wind is different. The shade. The island isn’t like Calusa Key at all.”

“That’s true. It’s a nice day.”

It was warm but not oppressively hot. I wanted to make small talk but every topic that jumped to mind was work related—hers or mine—and that felt like a huge part of what was holding us permanently in the friend zone. There had to be more to Olivia and Chris than baseball and photography. That was part of why I wanted to get in the boat and just go. “I found a new—well new tome—band that I can’t stop listening to. They’re super popular so you probably know them already. The Brothers Osborne.”

Her eyes unfocused. “I’ve heard of them but I don’t know that I can say I’ve heard their music before. What do you like about them?”

Aha! We could talk about something other than work. I felt like I’d just struck someone out and was doing a victory lap around the mound. “They’re a little bit country, a lot southern rock. All their music makes me smile and want to relax. It reminds me of you.”

She blushed. “I make you smile and relax?”

“You know you do.” I didn’t push the topic. Instead I sipped my beer and enjoyed the view of the water, hearing “Pushing Up Daisies” in my head.

“How’s the commute?” She didn’t look at me.

“Not bad at all. Every so often I wish I could just crash after a late game, but then I think about waking up anywhere but my beach and it makes the drive seem like nothing at all.”

She studied me for a minute, looking like she was wrestling with something. “You know in all the time we’ve spent together I’ve never asked you what you want out of life. You’ve already got a World Series under your belt and more awards than most ballplayers dream of, a beach house...what else is there for Chris Kaine to conquer?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said quietly. “But since you asked first I’ll answer first.” I stared at my half empty mug, the condensation making rivers down the glass and soaking the cardboard coaster underneath it. “I want a home. A family. Something permanent. I’ve never had it and I’ve always wanted it. I’ve lived on my own since I was fifteen, Liv.Fifteen. I’m tired of being alone.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “I knew you mentioned residency in high school baseball, but it didn’t sink in...” I knew she was calculating Linc being gone in six years instead of ten.

“Yeah,” I laughed and sighed at the same time. “I was an ambitious kid. I knew what I wanted and my parents weren’t going to settle down for three or four years while I finished high school. It was a solution that let everyone keep on living their dreams. But ten years later...I’m so fucking tired. I travel for work and I love it, but at the end of the day I want to come home, and when baseball is over, home is the only place I want to be.”

She sat quietly. I knew she was staring at me because the hair on my arm kept pricking. “My parents were never going to last. Like Beau and me. I think that’s why I’m so attached to this house. I always wished we could just be happy. First with my parents and then with Beau. I think I’ve started to believe it’s impossible.”

“It’s not,” I blurted. “The island is seductive. The sunsets, the beaches, it’s like a trophy. But that doesn’t mean it’s for everyone.” Liv’s parents weren’t the first artists who wanted an exclusive beach getaway where they produced their art, and they wouldn’t be the last. Just like Beau wasn’t the first or last athlete to mark a stretch of beach as his own.

“You’re right and I hate it. I wish all the celebrities who have houses here that they never visit would give the space to all of us who love living here.”

I wanted to say a lot of things in the silence but instead I dropped cash on the table that more than covered two beers and a great tip and took Liv's hand. "Let's get that walk in."

I held her hand as tightly as I felt comfortable, refusing to let it go when she tugged at the swinging door to the beach. She didn't try again and I considered that a victory. We walked aimlessly which was kind of fun. I felt her everywhere. The anticipation of being so close and yet knowing I had no right to kiss or touch her yet made her presence all that much more intense.

When I couldn't take anymore I led her back to the boat and took us home. I made my case. Liv was smart. She knew I was making my way back into her life romantically and if she didn't want me, now was the time to tell me.

Instead she waved goodnight and thanked me. The minute she disappeared I fell backward off the dock into the cool evening water, hoping it would help save me from the fire raging inside my body.

17

Operation Linc

Chris

Over the next two weeks I wasn't friendly with Liv. My smiles weren't nice. They were "I know what you look like naked" smiles. When I left town I had flowers delivered. When I came home I brought chocolates and ice cream.

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I wrote her a goddamned love note.

A love note. The fuck? But that's where we were and it was what needed doing.

Liv,

I miss you. I want to grow old with you. I want to coach all of Linc's fall ball games and kiss you goodnight. I want to drink whiskey as we watch the sunset each night and then take you to bed. It's an adventure I can't have with anyone but you.

Love,

Chris

It took me two hours and almost an entire notebook of paper to get that simple little note right. And maybe a few of the guys helped. I left it tucked in with the chocolates.

Then Summer handed Linc off to me for adventure club. This week they were collecting and identifying shells on the beach. It was the perfect day for this activity since there had just been a tropical depression that moved through. It churned up the Gulf and brought ashore items that wouldn't normally wash up on the beach. It was also why we were having to supervise the kids more than normal. They were all islanders, so they knew their jellyfish from their plastic, but some kids just can't help putting their fingers in light sockets, if you know what I mean.

"Julian!" Isaac Anson yelled at the nine year old ten feet away. "Donottouch that crab again. Let it go!"

The crab was very much alive and just trying to get back in its hidey hole. We'd chased Julian off three times already. The kid just wouldn't quit. "I think we're going to have to redirect." Isaac started teaching me parenting words like "redirect" when I helped him coach fall ball.

He found this hilarious. "You're doing well young padawan." He patted my shoulder. "Julian! Go help Rosalinda carry the buckets."

Julian gave one last forlorn look at his prize crab and finally ran the thirty yards down the beach to where a group of kids were lining up the buckets we'd given them for group inspection. We had to keep the kids out of the water today because the weather was still fairly windy which was causing the rip currents to be stronger than usual and giving the stingrays a playground just a few meters offshore. We could see their wings popping out of the waves every few seconds as they swarmed.

The last thing either of us wanted or needed was to perform a water rescue in these conditions.

Linc squatted in front of the dead horseshoe crab we flipped over so the kids could inspect the body hidden under the hard outer shell. He pointed at something and looked up at Isaac's daughter, Rosie.

"You ever miss it?" I asked. I didn't need to say what "it" was. Isaac Anson played baseball before me and he was good. Could have been legendary good. He lasted about a second in the minors before getting called up to St. Pete. He played one magical season, breaking records and probably hearts, and then he suddenly retired, never playing another professional game.

His brother Everett had a similar story. He lasted two very promising seasons in the minors and then also retired.

The mystery of the Anson brothers was one of those that came up in locker rooms every so often. Usually deep into the season when everyone was tired of traveling and worried about the future. Remember that guy that just...quit? What's he doing now?

Now I knew. Isaac became a father. I didn't have the details or even the full circumstances, but between what Isaac mentioned and Trent's gossiping, the gist I got was that he was an instant single dad and needed to come home to run the family business. It didn't make sense to me. He had a very lucrative career at his feet. He just needed another year, maybe two, to reap the full benefits. With that kind of money he could set himself and his daughter up for life.

But instead he quit and came home. It was the kind of story I wanted to fix, even though it wasn't mine to touch, mostly because I could see it in his eyes when we were coaching. Isaac missed baseball.

Not that his life wasn't good. He seemed happy and they didn't hurt for money at all.

Isaac became very quiet and still at my question, his eyes trained on Rosie. "It's in the bones. When I turn on a game they ache. I don't usually miss that life, but every once in a while it actually hurts to think about."

"You're not too old to take a second swing at it."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow and shook his head. "I don't have the same wear and tear the other guys my age have now, but I'll never be the ballplayer I was."

I glanced at our kids giggling together and wondered if I would drop everything for Linc. It was easier for me to say yes. I'd already accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. Walking away wouldn't leave me with regret. I honestly didn't know what I would have done in his shoes, but it made me respect Isaac one hell of a lot.

“Well, we have a workout at the end of the month where we get to bring guests. If you and Everett want to join me...”

“Yes. We want.” Then he smiled. “Thank you, Chris.”

“No problem. I think we better start the lesson or we’re going to lose Julian.”

Isaac jogged over to the line of buckets and began his lecture on the different types of shells that made our beaches so inviting to tourists. I was in charge of the jellyfish, horseshoe crab, and sea urchin.

“The horseshoe crab has very special blue blood because it contains copper,” I recited from the article I read earlier today. The kids all made various noises of wonder and disgust. I turned the large creature over to show off the hard, protective outer layer, and then flipped it back over to point out the body parts. “Scientists use this very special blood to test medicines and vaccines. They’ve been around for 450 million years, so they’re like our local dinosaurs.”

Linc’s arm shot up. “We have a lot of living fossils here Chris. Alligators, starfish, orange roughy—”

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Isaac held up a shell. “Nautilus shells.”

“Okay, okay. We live in the Bermuda Triangle and time has no meaning here.”

Rosie gasped.

Isaac waved his hand at her. ‘We don’t actually live in the Bermuda Triangle. He was just joking.’ Then he shot me a warning look.

I shrugged. What could I say? I was still learning this parenting gig.

We walked home from club since it was only a mile down the beach from our houses. Linc kept stopping to pick up shells he thought Olivia would like.

“Hey Linc.”

“Yeah?”

I debated whether this was a good idea or not. But in the end I decided that Linc was an integral part of this and he should be consulted. “I’m in love with your mom.”

He slowly turned my way, his little eyes narrowed into slits. For a split second I worried I ruined our friendship. Especially when he fisted his hands on his hips.

“What do you mean?”

The blood drained out of my head. I think I was more afraid of Linc than I was of my

team manager. “I love her. I want to marry her and spend the rest of my life with her...and you.”

He didn’t move or say anything. Then his chin lifted a little. “What took you so long?”

What took me so long?“Uh, I didn’t want to rush things. You know, go too fast and mess things up.”

His hands fell to his sides and he threw his head back groaning. “Oh my god. You two are the worst. Just kiss her already.”

I had to laugh at his obvious exasperation with the adults in his life. “I have kissed her. And I liked it. I’d like to kiss her all the time.”

“Gross.” He waved his hands like he was erasing me. “Don’t kiss in front of me. That’s adult stuff and I’m too young to see it. You really blew it last year.”

I blinked at this kid. He went from mad to exasperated and back to mad. “How so?”

He rolled his eyes. “Uh, you won a World Series and didn’t pick my mom up and kiss her on the field like they do in that movie. She would have fallen in love with you right then and we’d be a family already.”

Like they do in that movie?I racked my brain trying to figure out what he was talking about when I landed on the end ofMajor Leaguewhen Tom Berenger lifts Rene Russo out of the stands and kisses her.

“Your mom let you watchMajor League?”

He rolled his eyes again. “I know not to repeat all the bad words. Besides, if I’m not

exposed to these things I'll never learn how to navigate them."

I heard Olivia coming out of his mouth. Word for word.

"I kissed her in the locker room after the game."

He shook his head. "Not good enough. That was secret—even though Aunt Summer and Dad both knew what was up. Love can't be secret, Chris."

He was far too smart for his age. "We didn't want to hurt you."

He sighed again and walked up to me, taking my hand in his much smaller one. "Chris. You're my best friend. You'll never hurt me."

His conviction and confidence in me choked me up. This empty ache in my chest? Only Linc could fill it. I knew right then I'd find the same courage as Isaac and do whatever it took to give Linc a good life.

Linc tugged on my hand until I went down on my knee. He leaned closer and whispered in my ear. "If I help you win Mom over...can I have a little brother or sister?"

I couldn't help it. I hugged Linc tight and sighed with relief. "I'll see what I can do, kid. I'll see what I can do."

18

When we're all together it feels good

Olivia

Being part of a project and being in charge of a project were two very different things. In short, I was exhausted. But I was also happier than ever. I hadn't realized how stifled I felt or how much I needed this feeling of accomplishment. All these years I genuinely believed I wanted a quiet little photography business when what I really wanted was a quiet little photography business and big, huge, larger than life projects. I loved that I now had two worlds to move between. I could be a quiet little hermit at home when I needed to focus on my business (and being a mom, and being me.)

But now I had this whole other life to jump back into when the right project came along.

I was looking forward to a little quiet for the next few months. Carmen was handing me the reins to a documentary on the microcosms of suburbia in January. Until then I got to focus on my hometown. My island. The history project I started and needed to finish.

As I edited the photographs I took of Grams over a year ago, I was sucked back in time. First to taking the pictures, then to my childhood eating cookies in her kitchen with Berlin and her sisters, and then finally to a time long before me, the years Grams described in her oral history of building their house on this out-of-the-way island that could only be reached by boat.

She described the alligators that blocked the roads at night, how large the shells used to be on the beaches after the high tides, the lighthouse keeper, the mailboat, the wooden one room schoolhouse she sent her kids to. It wasn't that long ago and yet it felt like it was part of some ancient history.

I was just finishing up for the day when I heard the familiar and welcome sounds of Linc bursting through the door and Summer right behind him. "We're back!"

I saved and closed my projects and appeared in the living room just in time to see Linc sneak a cookie. A sweet ache hit me as I remembered sneaking cookies in Grams kitchen, of mischievous little Chris smiling and winking for another.

"You're supposed to ask first!"

Linc froze, smiled. "Can I have a cookie?" he asked, mouth completely full.

I rolled my eyes and found it impossible to punish him. Apparently being devastatingly cute and adorable could get you far in this world. Or at least our house.

"Yes you can have a cookie. Ask next time."

"Yes, Mom."

Summer closed the refrigerator. "I grabbed more milk because Linc claimed you were out."

My eyes swung back to my son. "Why are we out?"

He shrugged. "What? I'm a growing boy!"

"Hey," Summer laughed, "at least he got more."

I had to admit that was a smooth move. “You staying for dinner?”

Summer grinned and her eyes glinted. “I...have a date.”

“Ooooooh!” Linc made a high pitched squealing noise that I was pretty sure was supposed to approximate a girl.

“Details?”

She turned to the door. “We’ll see how tonight goes. See you tomorrow!”

“What’s for dinner?” With the cookie gone Linc was apparently ready for real food.

“It’s an exciting meal. A thrilling meal. It’s...spaghetti and salad.”

Linc immediately began pulling out the jar of pasta sauce and noodles. “Let’s get going!”

While I cooked he worked on his homework which was, unfortunately, still somewhat parental supervision heavy. I called out multiplication problems and spelling words as I cooked and we were somehow done in time to eat.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?” I twirled the noodles on my fork and waited to find out what his question was. These days it could be anything from “can I stay up late” to “what is reproduction?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

Oh god, this was going to be a long one. I shoved the food in my mouth and got to chewing while I could.

“I need a brother or sister.”

I practically spit out my spaghetti but somehow managed to swallow it.

“And I think that means you should get married. To Chris.”

I was speechless. Absolutely speechless. In fact, all I could do was stare at my son. He seemed so angelically innocent only moments before, but now all I could see was Beau. His mischief, his complete confidence that his smile could get him anything.

I carefully set down my fork and folded my hands on the table in front of me. “Let’s take this one at a time.”

“Wise.”

What the what? “You need a brother or sister?”

“Yes. I am growing up alone. You have Aunt Summer and Chris has Ben and Scott. I won’t have that when I’m old like you.”

“I’m not old!”

Linc looked everywhere but at me, the little stinker.

“You’ll have friends. You’ll have me and your father. Your life is completely different from mine.”

His eyes narrowed. “But it would be better with a brother or sister. Don’t you like Chris?”

I sputtered. “Of course I like him. But that’s very different from marrying someone. Spending the rest of your life with them.” I did not point out that I wasn’t spending my life with Beau.

Parenting had become obscenely complicated!

“If you like him and he likes you...why not get married? You’re his favorite person. Besides me, of course. And I know you like him.”

There were too many things to tackle at once. For some reason I grabbed onto the last thing he said. “How do you know I like him...like that?”

My devilish offspring took a bite of pasta and chewed slowly. Then he gulped down more milk, finally smiling up at me sweetly. “Because when Chris comes over you’re happier. Because when you see him you smile real big like when you see me. And, mostly, because when we’re all together it feels good.”

When we’re all together it feels good. I couldn’t argue with that. And I didn’t want to.

Linc’s dinner statements threw me for a loop. I stared at the ceiling for half the night. I zombied my way through breakfast and walking to school. The warm walk helped clear the cobwebs from my brain.

I always wanted more kids.

And holding Chris's hand rekindled all the tingles and zings I'd tried so hard to repress. It was just so...overwhelming. Like my brain disconnected from my body and my heart took over. Well, my heart and my body. It was some sort of combined effort to launch me physically at Chris. I didn't like the feeling of being out of control, but I very much liked the feeling of being near Chris.

I never felt anything so powerful with Beau.

So, long story short, I was scared. Scared, scared, scared.

But also excited, because all of this waiting and separation was to test whether we had the kind of relationship that could survive baseball and divorce and kids. The surest sign we did, in fact, have staying power was the fact that it was Linc who wanted me to marry Chris.

Clearly my kid had no qualms about his "best friend's" staying power.

And I had to admit, Chris was here rain or shine. He made the extra effort. He always came home. That was my biggest worry—that he'd grow sick of the island and leave just like my parents and Beau. Every day it became clearer to me that Chris and I were cut from the same cloth. Different parts, but the same fabric bound us together. He'd become part of our family whether I consciously acknowledged it or not.

He was here to stay.

So the only question now was: did he stay as a friend or as more?

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Luckily Berlin was home for the weekend and we had our regular lunch date scheduled. After I popped into the history museum under the canopy of oaks and pines, I made my way to the patio of The Red Tourist. Berlin was already sitting at a table under a red umbrella near the end, looking at a menu.

“Did Clint change the menu?”

“No,” she sighed, closing the large plastic covered tri-fold. “I’m just in a mood and I thought looking at things would help me decide.”

“You’re going to get salad. You always get the salad.”

“I know,” she grumbled. Today she wore loose white shorts with thin blue stripes, a matching blue tank top, and strappy brown leather sandals. Her hair was up in a braided bun that looked straight out of a science fiction movie.

“So what’s with the mood?”

She twisted her lips off to the side. “My sisters don’t like Ryker.”

I tried not to make a face, but I’m pretty sure I failed because she groaned and slumped in her chair. “You too?”

“He’s...different. But you like him and he seems nice. So maybe we just need to get used to different.”

“Is it the polo shirts?”

I winced. “Yes and no. It’s more what the polo shirts represent.” He always wore polo shirts. Always. Not sometimes. Casual lunch? Polo shirt. Date night? Polo shirt. Saturday morning? Polo shirt. Walk on the beach? Polo shirt. I was almost positive he didn’t own a regular old t-shirt, let alone an athletic shirt or even a UPF shirt, which nearly everyone wore on the island. Heck, I’d even take a Hawaiian shirt at the point.

She waved her hand in a “go on” gesture.

“Well, he’s rigid. He’s not an islander. He can’t seem to relax or change or adapt.”

“He’s learning.”

Is he? “It just feels like a square peg in a round hole. Does he want this kind of life? Really? Or is he twisting himself up to fit you?”

She blanched. “I don’t know.”

“I think, more than anything, that’s what worries me. If he doesn’t want to wear swim trunks to the beach that’s fine. That’s his quirk, we all have them. But if he lives on land and you live in the sea, then one of you has to grow legs or a tail to make this work.”

“Are you Little Mermaiding my relationship?”

I shrugged. “Maybe?”

She groaned just as our regular waitress, Annabella, came up with our waters and Red Tourist garlic cheesy bread. “How are we today?” Her gaze caught on Berlin and darted back to me.

“We’re good. We’ll have the usual.”

“Of course. Dressing on the side, Berlin?”

“No. Drench it. Give me all the calories.”

Annabella shot me another wary gaze before darting off.

“What about you? What’s happening with Chris?”

Berlin was still skeptical of my relationship as well. I think the only thing that kept her from giving me a hard time was the fact that Chris and I were in the friend zone again.

“I’ve come to the conclusion we’re both square pegs.”

“He’s still a professional athlete.”

I didn’t bite back immediately like I wanted to because the last thing we needed was a tit for tat fight over men when really we just cared about each other so much we got emotional. “Maybe baseball players are just different. Chris isn’t like Beau or Jack.”

Berlin watched me as she sipped her water and selected a slice of the delicious bread. “Football and hockey are both aggressive contact sports. Baseball is not.” She chewed as she thought through her theory. I liked where this was going. “I suppose there’s a lot of individualism in the sport as well.”

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“Most of the guys are like Chris. There are absolutely a few Beau’s, but by and large, from Chris’s teammates to all the former players I interviewed over the winter, they all had a different attitude. Calmer, more introspective. A desire to be both a teammate and individually excellent. Plus, baseball is just not as glamorous as football.”

“I can see that. So you’re happy?”

I took a moment to breathe, to think through all the swirling emotions and possibilities. “He loves it here. He’s not an islander by birth, but by spirit. This is his home and he’s become so a part of our lives I can’t imagine him not being here.”

“He really stepped up while you were traveling.”

My heart skipped a few beats at the thought of how devoted Chris was to Linc. He was the kind of father I dreamed of. Attentive, funny, and he took the time to learn about Linc’s interests, even if they seemed weird. “You think so?”

“Yeah.” She pushed her melting glass of water around, creating a pool of water on the table. “I saw them a couple of times. Once with Summer at the ice cream shop, and another time when he was picking Linc up from baseball. He’s...well, he’s a natural. They both looked so happy. I realized I was being judgmental and putting my own crap on your relationship. Plus, I caught a couple of games where the camera panned to Linc, you, and Summer, and it all just looked so right. Every single one of you was smiling and happy.”

“Linc wants us to get married. He informed me last night over dinner.”

Berlin laughed loud and clear. “I love that kid.”

“So will you give him a chance? For me?”

“He plays ball because he loves the game, not because he wants the fame.” She snorted. “That rhymed. That’s awesome.” She chuckled again, pleased with her word play. “Anyway, Chris looks at you the way my dad looked at my mom. Like you’re a gift in his life and every day is a present he can’t wait to unwrap. Let him unwrap you, Olivia. And enjoy it.”

“That’s beautiful.”

She shrugged. “I was wrong.”

I noticed she didn’t ask me to support Ryker. I would if she asked, but I firmly believed they were too different for this to work out. “So...Jack’s brother is one of Chris’s teammates...” Erik and I had a chance to chat about Jack and Berlin on several occasions. Jack was torn up over their divorce and I wasn’t sure if I was doing the right thing or not by telling Berlin.

But I did it anyway.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “It’s hard to miss Erik Cassidy in the news. If there’s anything I regret losing in the divorce, it’s Erik. He was always so good to me.”

“He comes down to fish with Chris sometimes. Maybe I can arrange a lunch or something the next time you’re both in town? Zoe is amazing.”

Berlin smiled. “I might stalk Zoe Hyde’s Instagram account. They seem really, really happy together.”

I tossed some bread at her. “Get real. You stalk Wes Allen’s Instagram account.” Wes was Erik’s best friend and he frequently posted shirtless videos and pictures. Wes Allen’s account was a delight to follow for women everywhere.

“Everyone stalks Wes Allen’s account. But when I saw Erik got together with Zoe I was curious. I follow her now too.”

Annabella dropped off our food and scurried away without a word. I dug into my food and let the subject drop for a few minutes. So I was surprised when Berlin did the questioning.

“So...how is...he?”

“Jack’s good. Healthy but sad, according to Erik. He’s...different.”

Berlin’s eyebrow shot up. “Different how? He bosses around a new woman every day or just every week?”

I winced. Her pain was so valid. “Erik thinks Jack was a selfish jerkoff, but because he didn’t know he was an asshole until you left him, he’s had an awakening. Apparently he’s no longer selfish or a jerkoff.”

“According to his little brother.” Berlin shook it off. “Well I’m happy for whatever woman reaps the benefits and I’m glad I’m no longer stuck with a selfish prick in my life. Ryker may be boring but he’s kind and he cares about me.” She dug back into her food.

I let the entire subject drop. I finished my food and pushed the plate away. “So what’s the latest on London and Ben?” The last I heard there were sleepovers taking place at Chris’s house, which seemed like very good news for everyone on Couple Watch.

Seriously, there was a whole island dating pool going. I'm ashamed (I'm not ashamed) to say I had a bet in and my day was fast approaching. So them getting together was kind of critical.

Berlin didn't meet my gaze as she shrugged, but the pink on her cheeks told me something big was coming. Whenever Berlin tried to lie she blushed. "Well, all I can say is there is a plan that may or may not involve all the Kaine brothers, so you might want to ask your future husband for details instead of me."

My future husband. "I think Linc is putting the cart before the horse. Maybe we should just date for a little while. Like normal people."

But Berlin scoffed. "Normal is boring. Don't be boring, Olivia. It doesn't suit you."

19

Let gravity, Newton's first, second, and third laws, and fate take over

Chris

I bent down to Linc who cupped his mouth and whispered in my ear. "I laid the groundwork. It's all up to you now."

I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing. It was the way he said it. All serious and spy-like. I schooled my features. "What exactly did you do?" I pictured him gushing about how awesome I was.

That was not what happened.

"I said I needed a brother or sister and that you should get married to make that happen."

I blinked in surprise. "You have no subtlety in you."

"What's that mean?"

"You're blunt. Straight to the point. Brutally honest."

Linc frowned. "I've waited long enough. No more games. Ask mom to marry you already."

I could only imagine Liv's response if I walked across the yard and proposed marriage. She'd kick me out or die laughing. As much as I wanted Linc's plan to work, I had serious doubts.

"How about we put your skills to good use helping me first."

Linc shrugged. "Okay. What do you need me to do?"

I pressed my finger to my mouth in the universal sign of silence and then waved him into the kitchen behind me. Scott was in his room taking a nap like usual, so we needed to be quiet and quick before Ben got back. We crept over to the butler pantry and in the back of an unused cabinet stood the secret bag of sunflower seeds I'd been accumulating for the last two weeks.

I showed Linc what was inside and he nodded solemnly. This was not his first rodeo after all. He'd participated in multiple hijinx over the months. The traitor even helped punk me.

Then we crept upstairs to Big Ben's room. It was dark but the bed was neatly made as usual. I pulled back the covers and we got to work covering the fitted sheet in seeds. Then we carefully replaced the pillows and top sheet (because of course Ben was a top sheet kind of guy) and then finally the duvet. We collected our trash and snuck downstairs just in time.

Even better? Ben had London with him. This was going to be awesome!

And I didn't even need to coach Linc. He was a natural at pranks. "Hi Ben! Hi Aunt London!"

"Well hello Mr. Lincoln," London said. "And how was school today, good sir?"

He shrugged. "Fine. On Friday we get pizza, so that's cool."

"Pizza's always cool," Ben agreed. "Any big plans this weekend?" He looked between us.

Other than win over the love of my life with the help of her sneaky son? Nope. Nothing comes to mind. "I want to get some fishing in."

Linc nodded enthusiastically and fist bumped me. "Yes!"

"And you lovebirds?"

London blushed a little. "Nothing in particular."

Sheba, Ben's dog, finally decided to wake up from her afternoon nap and trotted over to Linc.

"How's she been?"

"These last couple of days have been brutal," Ben said. "Thanks for letting her stay here."

I bent down and ruffled the hair on her back while Linc rubbed her belly. "She's a good dog. No worries."

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The sound of our voices must have roused the sleeping giant, because a half-awake Scott appeared in the doorway. “Hey guys. Happy Friday.” Then he ran his hand through his hair and opened the fridge, pulling out a soda.

“I think Scott and Sheba are on the same schedule,” London laughed.

“Ha. Ha.” He glanced at us and then focused on his drink.

Scott was permanently stuck in this odd place between healing and self loathing. He whipped out wise adages like, “If you let the fear into the room with you it will always win. Don’t let the fear in, Chris. Only take the truth with you.”

But he couldn’t seem to stop hating himself for his past mistakes. He refused to speak to Lucy ever since the latest hit piece on my brother dropped. I think in the past he was embarrassed by his mistakes, but now that he was in love, he felt responsible for Lucy’s happiness and wellbeing. As if his mistakes would somehow ruin her life.

So he lived life in nap mode. Constantly meditating and sleeping, but not moving forward or backward.

“Any plans tonight, Scott?” London asked.

He grunted.

Ben kept hopping from one foot to another. He was anxious. I had a feeling he wanted to get up to his room for some alone time with London, so I served up the opportunity. “Well, I think Linc and I are going to head out.”

“Yeah,” Linc stretched. “We need to make dinner for mom. Chris is teaching me how to grill.”

“Oh really?” Ben said. “That’s very impressive. Will you make dinner for us?”

“Maybe after I learn what I’m doing. Come on, Chris.” The kid was so deadpan matter-of-fact. I loved it.

And so did my family. Ben and London giggled their way upstairs. Which is when Linc and I doubled back to the kitchen to Scott’s confusion. “What are you two doing?”

“The whole point of a prank is to hear or see the results.”

Understanding dawned on Scott’s scruffy face. “You’re brave dragging the kid in on this.”

Linc scowled.

“Hey, you’re the one who got to him to help prank me.”

Scott shrugged. “I knew you’d let the kid live. I’m not sure Ben will.”

“Ben’s a gentle giant,” I countered.

“Not when you mess with ‘alone time’ he’s not.”

And right on cue we heard a shriek. And then, “Ow! What the hell?”

And then, “Chris Kaine you are DEAD!”

And then I heard footsteps on the stairs. I looked at Linc. “We’ve got to go!”

We ran outside and I had no idea where to hide. Luckily I was with a kid. Linc yanked on my arm and dragged me down the dock to the boat. We huddled up, knees to chest, and waited out the shrieking.

“I like pranks,” Linc said quietly. “It’s doing something you’re not allowed to do, but it’s okay.”

“To be clear, you can’t do something wrong and call it a prank. This is a long established game with my brothers. There are rules.”

“Are there though?”

This kid. “Yes. Number one being do no harm. Did we make a big mess? Yes. Was it intended to mess up Ben’s bedroom? Absolutely. But no one got hurt and if he was really mad I’d help him clean up. And if I ever step over the line and do something wrong, I understand that it is within my big brother’s rights to be angry and maybe even wrestle me, because that’s what we do. You’ve always got to be ready to accept the consequences of your actions.”

“Now you sound like Mom,” he grumbled.

I ruffled his hair just as London yelled across the lawn, “You’ll pay for this Christopher Kaine!”

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Linc and I looked at each other.

“See? Now she’s super irritated with me, but she’s not mad. I can expect an equally awful prank to be pulled on me in the next few days and I’ll just have to accept that I deserve whatever Ben does to me. No getting angry about it because I basically asked for it.”

“But...you do want it. That’s the fun.”

“Exactly.” The sound of a shop vac getting to work in the house echoed through the air. The thought of Ben and London finding seeds for the next few days made me smile. I was happy they were happy, but there was definitely a little bit of a smartass little brother in me that wanted to pay them back for having so much sex in my house. “I think we’re in the clear. You want to head home now?”

“Yeah sure. Are you going to ask Mom to marry you tonight?”

“No, bud. It’s too soon.”

He shook his head as we stood up like he was completely, utterly exasperated with me.

“There you are!” Liv yelled. She was right in front of us on the dock and she looked terrified.

At the same time that I jumped from the sound, Linc bounced up and down and I had to sidestep to keep from taking a head to my chin. “Mom! We put sunflower seeds in

Ben's bed! It was awesome!"

I couldn't get my feet under me. Every time I moved, Linc moved, then the boat started moving.

"Oh no!" Liv reached for me, her eyes all big.

But if she grabbed my arm she was going over the side with me and I couldn't let that happen. So I gave up the fight. I let gravity, Newton's first, second, and third laws, and fate take over. As my knees hit the hull, sending me head over ass into the water again, I was struck by the timeliness of it all. I first went over the side of this very boat because I wanted Olivia (even though I didn't know it yet.) And now that I'd let time take its course, now that I wanted to move forward into forever with her, here I was right back where it all started.

Cold. Wet.Excited.

20

Now do her

Olivia

Ifelt a little bit bad that Chris went overboard, but mostly it was adorable and really funny. Chris went inside to change and I took Linc home to do the same, with the promise we'd all go fishing.

So here we were, anchored up with enough fish for dinner and time to kill.

"Why don't we go to Cayo Costa?" Linc asked.

“It’s not a bad idea.” I looked to Chris since it was his boat.

He shrugged. “Sure why not.”

The ride from our fishing hole was about fifteen minutes of afternoon sun and wind. I loved feeling it move through my hair even though I knew it was whipping it into a salty mess. I had my usual outfit on. Surf bikini and a protective Columbia shirt, plus my Mantas hat. I used to switch hats depending on the day and bathing suit, but not anymore.

Mantas all the way baby.

I liked that we went to Chris’s games, that I knew all the guys and they knew us. It was like a family. It was so different from Beau and his football teams. Maybe it was the nature of the sport, but I had a feeling it was also my ex. He liked his worlds separate.

“With this weather it will be easier to come in on the east side of the island instead of going around,” I yelled over the engine and wind.

Chris nodded. I caught him looking at me out of the side of his sunglasses. Was that a look of longing and appreciation? I think it was, and that made my heart skip a beat.

Last year everything was too fast, too much, too different. I couldn’t blame past me for feeling scared or skeptical. I needed time. And now that I had it, combined with finding a piece of me I didn’t know I needed to find, I felt excited and confident to see where this next chapter took us.

“This a good spot?” Chris asked as he pulled the boat as close to the tiny speck of beach as possible.

“Yep. Anchor here. We won’t be here too long.” We secured the boat, shed our outer layer of sun protection, and waded into the beach. “Summer and I used to race each other through the hammock.” Cayo Costa was a state park so it was mostly mangroves and tree hammocks surrounded by beaches. There were a couple of houses, wild boar, an old cemetery, and camping though.

“I don’t have anyone to race since I don’t have a brother or sister.” Linc looked pointedly at me.

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“I’ll race you!” Chris moved between us, ending the staring match.

Thank goodness. I could only imagine what would happen if Linc decided to clue Chris in on his plans now. I followed them close behind until we burst from the hammock out onto the much wider, sandier beaches of the island’s west side. Linc immediately went running down the beach, hands in the air as he screamed at a seagull.

The wind was strong as usual, whipping around us as we wandered. “Game tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Three game home stand. You coming?”

“You pitching?”

He paused and grinned. “That sounded almost like a dare.”

I shrugged. “It’s just more exciting when you’re in the game.”

“Well you’re in luck. I’m the starter tomorrow.”

“Well then I guess we better come.”

A look flashed through his eyes as they wandered over me. It was a curious look. “How have you been? Really?”

I shuffled forward, toeing the soft sand. “Good. Now that I’ve had a few days to rest

and relax I'm feeling really good, actually. Like everything is in front of me."

"What do you mean?" He stopped to pick up an olive shell.

"When we met last year? I was living in the past. I didn't know it at the time but I've had this slow realization ever since and now I can finally say that I've put the past where it belongs. Behind me."

He stopped and turned to face me. "And what is this future in front of you?"

Did he realize he was standing in front of me? I didn't think he did. It was an accidental physical representation of my thoughts. "I'm not entirely sure but I'm not going to use Linc as a reason why I can't travel or work long hours or date who I want to date." I held my breath after that. It felt entirely too honest and yet, somehow not honest enough.

"That's great, Liv. Sounds like things are really starting to move in the right direction for you then." He moved to the water lapping onto the sand, picking up and chucking a couple of broken shells into the waves.

I stood still watching him, confused by how I felt. Something in his words sounded wrong, made me want to protest and correct him, but I wasn't exactly sure how. Things are moving in the right direction. That. Why didn't I like it? It wasn't wrong. Things were moving forward for the first time in a long time.

I followed behind him a few feet watching Linc run up and down the nearly empty beach with complete abandon. That's when it struck me. For years I'd been standing with my feet in the sand, letting the incoming tide suck them deeper and deeper, all while I tried to keep everything in balance, not change too much, get through each day so I could tackle the next.

I was done living like that. I didn't think I could go back.

I wanted to live like Linc, to not always be thinking about how every single thing I did might have a domino effect down the line. I wanted to run head first into my future with the wind in my hair.

So when we finally pulled back up to the dock at sunset and Linc had run off into the yard to play with Sheba, I handed up a cooler to Chris and blurted out exactly what I was thinking.

"I want to start dating again."

He blinked at me, in a full crouch, cooler in hand. "I'm...okay...that's good."

"You. I want to date you. If you're still interested."

Understanding washed over his handsome features and he practically threw the cooler to the side, then hopped down into the boat beside me. "Oh I'm interested. What are the terms I'm signing on for?"

Forever. "No terms this time. Just out in the open for real dating."

"What about Linc? He'd know we were together? Will there be adult sleepovers?"

My heart rammed against my chest at the thought of all the possibilities. "Yes and yes."

"Your sister, my brothers, my team, Trent?"

"Everyone will know this time." In fact, if I could never be asked to keep another secret, that would be great.

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“I don’t know.” He stood there staring at me, not moving.

He didn’t know? I held my breath as I tried to hold back extreme disappointment. “I...I understand. I’ve asked you for a lot.” Plus adding a child to his life? Permanently?

He stepped closer and slid his hand over my hip. “Oh, don’t misunderstand me,” he growled. “I’m in. One hundred and ten percent in. What I’m not sure about is the speed of things.”

“Speed? Well we can go slow.”

“No.” His other hand landed on my other hip and our sun kissed skin radiated a heat bubble around us. “I’m sick of slow. I propose we go fast instead. I’ll move in with you and Linc as soon as you accept my marriage proposal and we can get started on giving Linc a brother or sister as soon as possible.”

I think my brain exploded. “That little stinker. He set us up.”

“He set no one up.” Chris’s eyes locked on mine. “He only said what we were both already thinking.”

I sputtered. “You want an instant family?” Ridiculous!

“I do.” He nodded once. Definitely. “We’ve already been dating for over a year. It’s not like I’m rushing into marriage with a stranger.”

“We have not been dating a year!” I had no idea why I felt the need to protest the detail.

“I disagree.” His gaze dropped to my lips, sending a zing of anticipation through my body. “We’ve never stopped dating, Olivia. We just decided to take things extremely slowly...and from further apart. But by no means fool yourself into thinking I haven’t been courting the shit out of you these last few months.”

I kind of wanted to melt in his arms the way he said all of that so firmly. His confidence infected me. “Why are you moving into my house? Yours is newer and bigger.”

He shook his head. “Our home is in your house. It always has been. I bought that house,” he nodded to the big white McMansion behind us, “to start a home, a home I found next door instead. I’ll keep the house for Scott and guests and graduation parties. It won’t go to waste.”

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. A minute ago I was handing Chris a cooler and now we were...engaged? And moving in together? And maybe having a baby?

He cupped a finger under my chin and closed my mouth with a smile. “There, that’s easier for kissing.” Then he pressed his warm, soft lips to mine.

And holy amazing kisses! This might be our best yet. It was soft and intense and so full of hope for our future. It quickly turned deeper and more intense, which is when I pushed back. “Why do we need to have a baby so quickly? Shouldn’t we enjoy just being together first.”

“Naw.” He kissed me again. “We have our whole lives for that. If we don’t get started right away, Linc will be ten years older than his siblings. I don’t want him to

feel like he's part of one family and our kids are part of another. I want all of us to always be one big happy family."

This time I did melt into his arms. "You're a little young to be a dad."

"No I'm not. Besides, I've gotten some practice in this year."

Plus he was three years older than Beau and I were when we had Linc. All the rest of my protests evaporated because...why was I protesting? This was what I really wanted wasn't it? To run full speed into the future with the man I loved?

"Okay."

A triumphant grin exploded over his lips. "Well then. I guess we have a deal. Hold on just a second."

He hopped up onto the dock in a single sideways motion and jogged up to the house while I stood there in shock. Did I just do that? I did, right? Chris was moving in with me and we...were getting married?

My heart had just started to pound in my chest when Chris came jogging back with Linc at his side. My son had the hugest grin on his face. He followed Chris down into the boat and looked up at him expectantly.

"Olivia, right here on this very boat we met and I was so struck by you that I fell overboard. So I think it's pretty amazing that right now the three of us are standing here ready to take the next jump into the unknown together. I love you so much and I love you too, Linc." He broke his gaze away from me and looked down at the boy by his side.

"I love you too, Chris." Then Linc leaned closer, cupped his hand beside his mouth

and whisper-yelled, “Now ask her already. Come on!”

“I’m on it.” He winked at Linc. “Go stand by your mom.”

Linc scurried to my side and took my right hand. Chris got down on one knee in front of us. “There’s a reason we get down. It’s to humble ourselves and beg for your hand because we know we’re not worthy. At least I’m not. You amaze me everyday, Olivia, and it makes me want to be a better man for both of you. So I’m down here on my knee today, asking you to welcome me into your lives because I can’t imagine living another day of my life without you. I want to be the man who stands beside you, who builds a life with you, and always comes home to you.”

He opened a black velvet jewelry box. Instead of a ring in the center, there was a pin of the infinity symbol. “Lincoln, will you let me become part of your family?”

Linc let go of my hand and threw his arms around Chris’s neck. I tried not to cry at the sight of the man I loved and my son holding each other so tight. Then Linc stood back. “Welcome to the family, Chris.” He took the box from him and grinned up at me. “Now do her!”

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Chris's eyes glinted with mischief. "Olivia?"

"Yes, Chris?"

"Will you marry me?" He slipped a second box out of his pocket. This time a beautiful diamond sat right in the center of the box. He pulled it free and held it up, an eyebrow cocked as he awaited my response.

Meanwhile Linc vibrated beside us, clapping his hands and chanting, "Yes! Say yes! Say yes!"

It was fast and crazy and perfect. I fell to my knees in front of him, grabbed his face in my hands, and kissed him hard. "Yes I'll marry you."

21

A cruel joke

Chris

We waited long enough. That much was true. Linc was more than ready for us to be a family. He insisted I sleepover that night and move in immediately. I agreed to stay the night, but Olivia wanted to break the news to Beau before we got too far down the road.

Plus, there were other things to discuss.

Linc sat at the counter, his legs dangling and kicking the wall as he munched on pancakes. “So will your boat stay at your dock, or will you move it to ours?”

“I’ll leave it at mine.”

Linc chewed thoughtfully. He had been grilling me for thirty minutes. “I guess the only thing that’s changing is where you sleep.”

“Pretty much.”

“I’m really happy.” He grinned up at me, mouth full of the last bite of pancakes.

“I’m really happy too.” I took his plate and rinsed it. Then jumped when a FaceTime call rang through on Linc’s iPad. We knew it was coming. That was part of why I was so jumpy.

“Hey Dad!” Linc crowed. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Did you sleep well?” Beau asked.

“Not really. I was too excited.”

“What were you excited about?” Beau laughed.

“I’m not supposed to tell you. Mom said she will.”

“Oh really?”

I put my head in my hands and sighed as quietly as possible. Linc...he was a force. When he used his powers for good I was all for it, but when he wielded them against me...not a fan.

“Lincoln!” Olivia admonished as she came rushing in from the bedroom. She was dressed but her hair was still wet from the shower. “Hey Beau.”

“So what’s this big news?”

Liv shot Lincoln a look and then nodded at me. I cautiously walked into the shot. “Oh hey Chris. How are you?”

“I’m good.”

“So…” Liv took over. “We have news.” She held up her left hand, displaying the diamond I just gave her. “I’m getting married.”

I held my breath, completely clueless how Beau would react. We were friends and he knew Liv and I were moving toward dating, but he was also a classic alpha. I wasn’t completely sure he’d be happy to see his former lover with another man. Officially.

So I was pretty surprised when he winked at Linc. “Told you it would work.”

Liv gasped.

I laughed. Hard. “You were both in on it?”

Beau shrugged. “My boy told me the problem and we brainstormed a solution. Clearly it worked.” They air fist-bumped through the video and did a variation on a Beau “The Bull” Rowland touchdown dance.

I pulled Liv to my side and kissed her cheek. Maybe it took a while, but we seemed to have done it right. We had Linc and Beau’s blessing.

Things felt right.

Things were very wrong. I was sick to my stomach and angrier than I’d ever been. We were good. Careful. Patient. And the universe was rewarding us with more problems?

Bullshit.

I call bullshit, Universe! I even shook my fist at the sky, for all the good it did.

“I...I don’t understand,” was all I managed to say.

Roman St. James, my agent, sighed wearily. “She’s clearly out to unsettle all three of you.”

We had a stalker. Well, my brothers and I did. I thought it was a one-off or a super fan of Ben or Scott. I genuinely didn’t think much would come of it. But here we

were. A photograph of Ben, Scott, and me had been delivered to Roman's office. This was not a one-off and it very much included me.

I looked around our house and felt a protectiveness surge through my veins. I wanted to board up every window, lock Liv and Linc inside with me forever. "What are the next steps?"

So far I'd mostly let Ben and Scott handle things. I knew security cameras had been installed and bodyguards hired, but I didn't know anything specific. I kicked myself for not paying more attention.

"Let the security team do their job. I've worked with them before, Contention is the best. Your pitching schedule isn't exactly top secret information, so assume whoever this person is knows exactly when and where you'll be. I'll contact the team to inform them of the situation. They'll want to increase security at the field."

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. "There's more."

"Oh?" Roman sounded curious. He was a good guy. A friend in more ways than helping me navigate the business side of baseball. His wife was the trainer who looked after my arm and kept me healthy, his best friend was my catcher. We weren't super close, but we had a lot of strings that tied us together.

So it was easy to share my personal shit with him.

"I'm engaged."

"Holy shit!" His happiness for me came through loud and clear. "Who? Olivia?"

"Yep. It just happened last night." I raked my hand through my hair and sighed. "This is not good timing."

Roman was painfully silent for a moment. “No, it’s not.” I heard his desk chair creak. “I have an idea you might not like.”

Fuck. “Say it.”

“Don’t tell anyone you’re engaged. Not yet. If this stalker is the jealous type, then you’re putting a bigger target on Olivia’s back than she already has. Regardless of the jealousy issue, it will be clear Olivia and Linc are important to you, and that...” he let the implications hang unsaid.

I didn’t want to hear them and Roman seemed to worry about putting them out into the universe. But to keep our engagement a secret after secretly dating? The universe was playing a cruel joke on me.

“I’ll talk about it with Liv.”

“I’ll send you an email with information. Keep me in the loop on everything and I’ll let you know what the Mantas say.”

“Thanks, Roman.”

“You’re not the first client of mine to have a stalker. These things happen with high profile athletes. We’ve got the best people on this.”

And yet it didn’t make me feel any better. The churning in my gut only got worse. “Okay.”

“Hey Chris?”

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“Yeah?”

“Congratulations. I better get an invitation when you set a date.” He clicked off the call.

I wouldn't be setting a date if Olivia ran away from me before we got started. I wouldn't blame her if she took this news as a sign we were doomed, or that it was too dangerous to be with me.

“Making sandwiches?”

I spun at the sound of her voice. “Uh, yeah. I was hungry and figured we could both use some sustenance.”

She looked at me like I was talking in gibberish.

Maybe I was talking gibberish. “Is everything okay?” she asked slowly. Linc was in his room watching a show on his iPad and “taking a nap” since he didn't sleep much last night.

“Everything's great!” Oh my god, I sounded insane.

Olivia stared at me.

“Fine, everything isn't great. Everything is bad. Very bad and I'm afraid when I tell you what's happening you'll be mad and leave me and never let me love you again.”

Now she really stared at me.

“I think I need some coffee before whatever this is,” she waved her hand at me, “happens.”

I whimpered a little and handed her a mug. I didn’t want any. I had enough nervous energy and adrenaline running through my system to power a small country.

Olivia sat at the counter and watched me finish assembling sandwiches. Okay, watching is probably the nicest way to say she was studying me. Probably searching for signs I’d taken drugs or been taken by aliens.

I repacked all the meat and cheese, plated our food, and set it on the bar. “Do you want to eat first or last?”

She picked up a chip and took a bite. “How about I eat while you talk?”

I whimpered again, paced the kitchen, pulled my stupid hair some more. None of it told me how to share this new information with Olivia in a way that wouldn’t freak her out.

“Chris? Start at the beginning.”

Right. The beginning. “Roman called. He’s my agent.”

“Are you being traded?”

“No! It’s nothing about baseball.” Thank God.

“You’re the new spokesman for a cereal box?”

No wonder Roman had a hard time breaking the news to me. This was fucking impossible. I pulled out my phone and called up the images he sent me. “Roman received this letter. Ben and Scott’s agent received the same thing.”

She took my phone tentatively, scowled at the image, swiped the next, and the next.

“What kind of fucked up shit is this?”

God, I loved her. “We don’t know but we don’t like it.”

“No kidding!” She stood up, taking her sandwich with her. I thought she was going to pace around too, but instead she came to me and wrapped her arms around my middle. “I’ll cut anyone who hurts you.” Then she took a bite of sandwich like getting threatening letters happened everyday.

“Really?” I stroked her hair, thankful that she was touching me.

“You should probably know now, I may like my nice quiet days at home, but I’m a Momma Bear. I’ll take anyone out who hurts my family.”

I squeezed her against me because, if I wasn’t mistaken, she was saying I was family. “Don’t leave me.” Celebrating last night I was all caveman, but I couldn’t caveman Olivia about her life. In this I was powerless. I really preferred when I got to be a caveman.

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She pushed back enough to look up at me. “You’re stuck with me now.” She shrugged. “No take backs.”

I crushed her to me all over again and I think I heard some sandwich hit the tile floor. “Oh thank God.”

She nuzzled against my chest. “I’m worried, Chris.” She squeezed me tighter.

I held her just as tightly. Hell, I wanted to crush her into me so we could become one. “I’m worried too. Mostly about you and Linc. Come with me on the road, or go stay with Beau.”

“Linc has camp this week. He’s been looking forward to it all summer.”

Crap. “I’m getting you both bodyguards then. Don’t fight me on this. If you won’t leave and I can’t be here, then this is the way it has to be.”

“Okay.”

“And I’ll have to tell my brothers about us. I’ll want them to look in on you too.”

“Okay.”

“Please don’t argue with me,” I sighed. “You and Linc are my whole world and if anything happens to you—”

“I’m not fighting you.” She shook me.

I thought back over the last few things she said. “You said okay?”

“I did.” She smiled up at me.

“You’re not fighting me.”

“I’m not.” Then she rose up on her tiptoes and kissed me. “If there’s someone out there watching you and your brothers then they’ve seen you spend all your spare time here. Yes, I want protection and you better have some too.”

“I will.” God, she was so beautiful and smart and way too good for me. I brushed back her hair and just stared at her. “Maybe I can call in sick with the stomach flu. Pretend I’m not fit to pitch for the next week.”

“And what if this goes on and on? Are you going to quit pitching for the rest of the season to stay by my side?”

“Maybe.” Honestly it sounded like the best idea either of us could come up with.

“No. That’s what people like this want. They enjoy seeing their victims panic. They want to throw us off and get us to change our patterns. They feed on the chaos.”

“You’re really pretty and smart. And...wait, have you done this before?” She sounded experienced.

She shrugged. “My mom had a stalker when I was in high school.”

“Whoa.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Even sculptors have their mega fans.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing but letters for a long time. Then at one of her exhibits the stalker handcuffed himself to my mom. After that he was in jail for a little while, but when he got out I had a bodyguard. So did my mom. That went on for months until...”

“Until?” I really didn’t like the way she looked away. It sent a chill down my spine.

“Until he snuck into our house with a gun and held my mom hostage. He died in prison five years ago.”

“Were you home?” Fuck, I’d never wanted to bring someone back from the dead so I could kill them all over again, but I sure wanted to now.

“No. I was in college at the time. Mom was living with her boyfriend then.” She squeezed me again. “So you see, there are many reasons why I like life to be quiet and steady, and I’m not about to turn down professional protection when there is a known danger.”

I knew she meant all of that to comfort me, but it didn’t. It just made me feel even more helpless. We lived in a world where anything could happen and there wasn’t a whole lot I could do to change that.

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“Will you travel with me for the rest of summer? After camp? I think I might go nuts if we’re constantly apart.” I was already coming out of my skin at the thought of being away this week.

“Of course. We’re all yours until school starts.” She smiled. A secret, shy kind of smile. “I’m looking forward to all the travel and...being an official WAG.”

I groaned and kissed her. Just thinking about Liv being with my team as an official team wife, officially mine, brought the caveman back. “There’s something else we need to discuss.”

“What?” She only stopped kissing me enough to get that one word out and she didn’t open her eyes.

“Roman thought...maybe it might be a good idea to keep the engagement under wraps until this stalker blows over. And I think he might be right.”

Her eyes opened and locked on mine as her shoulders sagged. “I agree. I don’t want to upset someone who’s already obsessing.”

I cupped her face. “I’m telling my brothers though.”

She smiled up at me. “I hear we might not be the only ones with good news soon.”

My gaze drifted over her face. She was my fiancée. Soon to be my wife. “Seems the Kaine brothers have a thing for Calusa Key women.”

“We are pretty special.”

I kissed her forehead, her nose, her lips. “I love you so much.”

22

Personal cheering section

Olivia

I did not like staying home. Not one little bit. Before we got engaged it seemed so logical. I would work while Linc enjoyed his summer camp. Chris would travel. But now that we were engaged I hated it. It felt wrong to be apart. It felt even wronger to be apart knowing there was someone out there watching us.

I didn't mind the bodyguards. They might be the only thing keeping me sane, actually. So I settled into our fancy hotel suite in Houston with a great sigh of relief.

It felt good to be away from the tension on Calusa Key. It felt even better to be with Chris.

“I HAVE MY OWN ROOM!” Linc yelled from down the hallway, as if he didn't always have his own room at home. I suppose a hotel room was different somehow.

The Four Seasons had a separate residential tower and this was where they placed their high profile guests. Not only did it have a second, guarded entrance, but the suites had more apartment like features. In this case we each had our own bedroom, plus a regular, small living room and kitchen. It wasn't opulent but for a hotel it was spacious.

And apparently, exciting.

The team knew we were dating (but not engaged) and so far had treated us to a bottle of champagne and a little welcome basket of snacks. Linc liked the bucket of bubble gum and couldn't stop giggling over the sunflower seeds.

I wore my engagement ring on a chain around my neck that was long enough to keep tucked inside my shirt. After all this time I hated to keep yet another secret, but since it didn't technically change anything, I didn't mind.

At the game that night we sat in the crowd as Chris Kaine's personal cheering section. As much fun as I had on the field last season, this was just as exciting. It was completely different to experience the game as it was happening, and something else entirely to sit in the crowd with your heart in your throat, cheering on someone you love.

We sat a few rows away from some of the other wives and girlfriends. They all waved at us and welcomed us to the club. No one else had kids but over the summer so far Linc took that as an opportunity to be special. Whenever someone had an extra souvenir, treat, or soda, it always went to Linc.

Chris strode out onto the field so sure of himself. He searched the crowd, smiling when he found us waving at him. Then he shot me a wink.

I felt like a teenager with a crush on a famous baseball player. Except my crush was real...and it was returned.

"Cotton candy?" Carrie, Wes's wife, stood beside us with a big blue ball of cotton candy in her hands.

They all seriously spoiled my kid (and I loved it.) "Sure." I took the cone from her but before I passed it to Linc, I took a handful for myself.

“Hey!” Linc protested, hungrily grabbing the rest from me.

“Hey what? It’s the mom tax.”

Carrie shrugged. "Sorry. Even adults enjoy treats."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Why not?" Carrie asked, sitting in the empty seat in front of me and turning sideways so we could talk. There were a handful of empty seats in the part of the stands where we managed to get tickets. "It's fun and I enjoy it."

"Yeah, mom. It's fun and she enjoys it." He said all this with a blue mouth.

I ruffled his hair. "Say thank you."

"Thank you Dr. Carrie!"

"You're welcome." Then she smiled back at me. "Our men are quite the team." Chris threw, Wes caught. And together they seemed to be psychically linked. Last year they were the talk of the championship and while we weren't quite to playoff season, the chatter was already heating up again.

"I guess we're stuck with each other, then." I really liked Carrie. She was the team's orthopedic surgeon, so if Chris hurt his arm it was her hands who would fix him.

She smiled, then turned back to the field to watch Wes smack a double into the hole in the outfield. "We've all expected you two to get together at some point. We're really happy for you three. Did you get our gifts?"

"We did. Thank you so much. You really didn't have to do that."

She shrugged. “The Mantas are a family. Welcome.”

She sat with us through the rest of the inning, and then we all went out for dinner once the guys were showered and cleaned up.

“So Chris’s beach house is available for vacations?” Zoe, Erik’s fiancée asked. “Because I’m always looking for vacations and writing retreats.” Zoe was a pretty famous writer. Wes, Mr. Instagram, was even on some of her covers.

“Yeah,” Chris chuckled. “The house is available for a select few cool people.”

Zoe leaned closer and whispered. “Am I cool? Because I can pull strings and get Linc’s favorite author to say hi or send an autographed copy.”

“Oh, you’re every cool then,” I said, answering for Chris. “When would you like to reserve?”

Chris rubbed his thumb over my knee. The gesture was so naturally intimate and it set off a round of butterflies in my belly. “Maybe after the season’s over. Right now my brothers are occupying half the house.”

“Oh, how’s that going by the way?” Erik asked, his arm slung comfortably around Zoe.

“Ben will be moving out in a few weeks. London’s house is almost done. And Scott is anyone’s guess.”

Then Erik’s gaze drifted my way. “And Berlin? How is she? Still with this Ryker guy?”

“Yeah. She’s gone as opposite of Jack as humanly possible.”

He grimaced. “I don’t blame her. He was such a jerk.”

“I told her you said that. She also said if you two were ever on the island at the same time she’d like to see you. She misses you.”

“It’s hard to go from having someone in your life for over a decade and then suddenly they’re gone. I get it though. I probably bring up some bad memories.”

I tried to be as sympathetic as possible from my expression to my words. “You do look a lot alike.”

“He got what he deserved. I wish Berlin nothing but the best. But I do miss my sister. It would be nice if we could find a way to keep our relationship alive.”

Maybe our connection would help that happen. “Why don’t you two pick a post-season week to come stay at the house and I’ll arrange for Berlin to be in town the same weekend?”

He blinked a few times, seemingly overwhelmed with emotion. “I appreciate that, Olivia. Thank you.”

“Not a problem.”

Chris’s thumb kept strumming my knee, causing a reaction in my body that I could only describe as thermonuclear hot. Then he looped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to whisper in my ear. “You’re sexy when you help out my friends.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:45 am

I turned to find his lips waiting for me. And I didn't mind kissing him in front of all his friends one little bit.

I almost forgot about the bodyguard following me around in Houston, but it was hard to ignore back home. While we were away new security cameras were installed. But it became our new normal and there was really nothing to do about it. Besides, we all got caught up in the news of Ben and London's engagement. Like us, they kept it fairly quiet and got straight to wedding planning.

In a way it was funny because they were jumping straight into marriage which made my head whirl, but here Chris and I were working on expanding our family. I had no idea how or when I wanted to get married. Probably because in my head we already were. I also couldn't imagine tying the knot in the middle of baseball season. Winter seemed like a good time. Besides, the weather would be much, much nicer.

"What are you thinking about?" Chris chased a finger up the inside of my thigh. My breath caught and my center grew hot.

"That we're doing this before we planned a wedding."

He replaced his finger with his lips. I trembled.

"Then let's get married now."

My eyes closed and I had to lean back on my hands to stay upright because the things his lips and tongue were doing to the skin of my thigh were tantalizingly close to exactly how it felt when he did those same things between my legs.

“Wait, what?” Did he say let’s get married now?

Unfortunately my question caused him to stop kissing me. He looked up and shrugged. “Let’s get married now. Or however long it legally takes in Florida. We can get a marriage license and either do it at the courthouse or plan something here. I don’t really care as long as it happens.”

I blinked down at him several times. I don’t know what I was thinking. Ben and London were planning a small but lavish wedding. My wedding to Beau had been large and out of my hands. I guess I assumed we were doing something equally ostentatious. He was a hugely famous pitcher after all. Celebrity wedding all the way.

Or not at all.

He moved over me, his naked torso so lean and muscular and delicious to touch, lick, and simply gaze at. He planted a hand on either side of my hips and held himself up so we were nose to nose. “I have two home games next week and then I’m off on Thursday. Want to get married on your beach?”

“On a Thursday?”

His eyes danced. “Why not?”

I couldn’t think of a single reason. I bit my lower lip to keep myself from flying apart with excitement. “You, me, Linc?”

“We can invite our siblings if you like.”

“We do need witnesses.”

He kissed me until I had no choice but to fall back against the bed. “You, me, Linc.”

He pressed between my legs with his insistent erection. “Ben, London, and Scott.”

I cupped his face as he pressed my legs wide. “Summer and Berlin. Maybe Trent.”
And no one else. “We’ll get a dinner catered and eat on the back porch.”

He pressed into me, spreading me, filling me. “I’ll ask Ben and London to take Linc for the night.”

I looped my legs around his hips and pulled him deeper into my center. The stretch took my breath away. I pushed on his shoulder and he spun us. Now I was on top, straddling him, knees on either side as I rode him slow and deep. He used the opportunity to play with my nipples, sending jolts of electricity to my core and causing my inner muscles to squeeze him tight.

“Damn, Liv,” he breathed out.

I glanced down at his handsome face. “What?”

He shook his head, his eyes wide with wonder. “We’re going to have the best life.”
He gripped my hips in his large, capable hands, and thrust up. “And I’m really not going to mind working on making babies with you. Not one little bit.”

Epilogue

Scott

I knew she was there without looking. It had always been that way with Lucy. From the day I met her I could feel her presence. Like a lovesick fool I’d stared at her that day, unable to look away until I’d memorized everything about her.

She was beautiful, yes, of course she was beautiful, but that wasn’t what captivated

me. It was her no-nonsense confidence. Lucy was a brilliant ballbuster, she got shit done, but she did it with heart. She loved her friends and would fight to the death for them.

I wanted that.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:45 am

Selfish bastard that I was, I wanted her to love me in that brash, brilliant way. But I knew it was selfish so I'd stayed away, working on myself, attempting to be less of a jerk and more worthy of her love.

But at my core I was too weak. I couldn't live without her.

And that's how we ended up here.

"What are you doing up so early? It's what? Two in the morning your time?"

She stopped beside me, the wind making her bathrobe flutter around her body. "I took a sleeping pill when I got in. I've had ten hours of sleep."

Lucy was always so good about adjusting to time zone changes. She was a master of jetlag and a conqueror of travel.

Or maybe I just thought everything she did was supernatural.

"Mmmm." I made some sort of noncommittal sound but kept my eyes trained on the horizon. The sun didn't rise in the west but I enjoyed watching the sky change anyway. Besides, I couldn't look at her. I knew the minute I did I'd dissolve.

She arrived unexpectedly early while I was at the Anderson house helping Ben with a piece of furniture. By the time I got home she was asleep.

"It's beautiful here."

Not as beautiful as you. “I’m sorry I wasn’t home when you arrived.”

“I took an earlier flight and didn’t tell you. It was my fault.”

“Thank you for coming.” She didn’t have to. She could have told me to jump off a bridge—should have told me to go fuck myself. But she didn’t. She was never spiteful. A grudge holder, but not spiteful. I called her the honey badger. She was all sweet and adorable unless you crossed her.

And then, well, good luck, mate.

I didn’t understand why she hadn’t annihilated me.

“We have things that need dealing with, Scott.”

I winced at the business tone she took. “I should have come back. I apologize.”

“Don’t apologize.” She waved me off. “Are you kidding? I’ve been trying to get you to take time off forever.” She turned to face me. “You needed time with your brothers and I’m happy you came here.”

I couldn’t help it. I glanced her way and fell into the abyss. Her eyes always did me in. They took me to another plane of existence where I’d never made idiotic choices, where anything was possible. “It’s good to see you.” So good. She still had wrinkles from her pillow on her cheek and her hair was haphazardly looped into a bun on the top of her head, but my God she was gorgeous. My mind instantly ran through the catalogue of her face each morning she woke in my bed.

Every good memory I managed to fuck up with my issues.

She stepped closer. “I’m so fucking pissed at you.” Her voice was a soft whisper. “You left me. You walked out the door like...like—”

I kissed her. It was stupid, I know. Insane. And yet I wrapped my arm around her waist and crashed my lips against hers, so hungry for her it hurt—physically hurt—to be apart from her.

It took everything I had to stop. She didn't push me away even though she remained stiff as I pressed my forehead into hers. "Like my pain was more important than yours." I finished for her. I opened my eyes and saw that hers were closed. "I told you before our first kiss that I was a selfish asshole. That I'd hurt you. I can't tell you how much I regret the things I've done to prove that true."

Her eyes flew open. "You let the past control you, Scott. It's your only weakness."

She was wrong. I had so many, but that was one of my worst offenders. "Fuck the past."

Her gaze narrowed like she didn't believe me.

"I mean it. I'm done with it. I've let it go or told it to fuck off or just forgotten to care about it anymore. I'm not sure which. Maybe all three." It was so freeing.

She stared at me for several beats and then kissed me. Fiercely. Passionately. As if she were starved for this kiss. Then she shoved me back, panting. "You know what my weakness is?"

She had no weaknesses. Not one. She was perfect and amazing and so much more than I deserved in a hundred lifetimes. If I could fix this I'd be grateful every single day, make her understand how completely amazing she was.

I couldn't stop staring into her fiery eyes. Fuck, how her passion turned me on, even when it was frustration at my bad choices.

When I didn't answer she grimaced, ran a hand down her face. "You," she spat. "I see

so much in you. Your heart, your kindness to everyone but yourself, I look into your eyes and I forget to care about my own heart.”

I went to her, took her in my arms. “Thank you.”

Anger, hurt, love . . . it all passed through her eyes in the heartbeats of silence. Then she took my chin in her hand and kissed me again. A light brush of her lips against mine. It was a tender, loving, intimate gesture that undid me, ripped open my heart and left me open and exposed. Without letting my chin go she whispered, “Prove it. Show me how much you love me. I’m going to hate you and not going to be nice while we fix the problems with the company.”

Then she let me go, stepped back, glared at me. “You have one week.”