



Journey to Love

Author: *Tanya Reed*

Category: Romance

Description: In the wake of a toxic relationship, Anya finds herself navigating the treacherous waters of self-doubt and mistrust. Scarred by the abuse of her past, she struggles to believe in love, wary of hidden agendas and the potential for hurt. But when she meets Jacob aboard a cruise ship, a glimmer of hope ignites within her guarded heart.

Despite the sparks between them, Anya's reservations about diving into a new relationship loom large. Living in different states and haunted by Jacob's impending military service, she grapples with her fears and insecurities. Yet, Jacob's unwavering determination to prove his love and unwavering support begin to chip away at her defenses.

As their summer romance blossoms, Anya finds herself caught between the desire for love and the fear of reliving past trauma. Steadfast in his devotion, Jacob stands by her side, reassuring her that she is worthy of love and happiness. Together, they embark on a journey of healing and self-discovery, determined to overcome the shadows of the past and embrace the promise of a brighter future.

Journey to Love has some explicit material that is not suitable for those under the age of 18. Some trigger warnings are; sexual assault, smoking, foul language, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. If you feel like any of those will potentially trigger you, I would rather you keep your mental health than buy my book. Your mental health is more precious than money.

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Prologue 1

Two Years Ago

Anya

Work today was utterly exhausting, dealing with demanding customers and the discomfort of fending off unwelcome advances from drunken patrons. I reluctantly made my way to Paul's store, dreading his shift's end and hoping he wouldn't be in a foul mood. The last thing I need is another night like last night, especially with Paul. If he's in a good mood, maybe he'll decide to stay with me tonight, but that's a mixed blessing at best. As I watch him exit the store, I can't help but feel a twinge of unease. He's on the phone, and when I ask who he's calling, his dismissive eye roll only adds to my apprehension. With a muttered excuse about calling a cab, he tells me to wait outside. I can't help but wonder why he hasn't gotten his license yet. I begrudgingly obey, knowing full well the frigid weather outside. I can't wait for my car to be fixed after Marcus, Paul's friend, crashed it last week. They didn't ask; they just took it. As I stand there, I can't shake the feeling of dread that seems to hover around Paul, like a storm cloud waiting to burst.

Standing outside the mall, I finish my second cigarette just as the cab pulls up. I quickly text Paul to let him know the taxi has arrived. He emerges from the mall, his voice raised in anger as he argues with someone on the phone before abruptly hanging up. I sigh inwardly, knowing that his foul mood spells trouble. "Great, someone's managed to piss him off," I mutter to myself, rolling my eyes. Despite knowing better, I can't help but ask, "Who was that on the phone?" His gaze turns stern, and a chill runs down my spine as he growls, "Don't worry about it. Mind your

business. I just had to remind someone of their place!" His eyes pierce into mine, conveying a clear message: I should also remember where I stand.

"Was it one of your soldiers again?" I ask, genuine concern etched on my face. Paul's reaction is immediate and explosive. "Anya, I told you to mind your goddamn business!" he shouts, his anger palpable. Feeling chastised, I bow my head and silently walk past him, murmuring, "I'm sorry, you're right. I shouldn't have asked." I make my way into the waiting taxi, trying to diffuse the tension. Paul joins me from the other side, his exasperation evident as he exhales heavily. "Yes, if you must know, it was one of my men bothering me with useless information," he begrudgingly admits. I nod quietly, opting to keep my thoughts to myself, not wanting to further aggravate his already volatile mood.

As Paul's hand rests on mine, squeezing gently, I force a smile, though inwardly I cringe. His stories from his time in the military have never quite added up, but I dare not challenge him for fear of his potential anger. "Anya, you have no idea what I went through in Afghanistan," he begins, his voice laden with emotion. "It's hard, and when I was a P.O.W., it was even harder." I offer a sympathetic nod, keeping my thoughts to myself as I sit quietly, waiting for him to continue weaving his narrative. "Like I've told you before, your picture is all that I focused on to get me through all the torture," he continues, his words a familiar refrain. "The letter I wrote to you that I couldn't send, in fear of them finding you, Anya. I can't lose you. I've been through way too much over there to not have you. I mean, damn, Anya, I shot an 8-year-old boy who had a bomb strapped to his chest because I needed to get back to you." His confession hangs heavily in the air, and I struggle to maintain composure. Managing a tight squeeze of his hand, I reply softly, "I know, Paul. You've told me this already, and I'm so sorry you had to go through that." His smile in response feels strained as he turns to gaze out the window, the landscape passing by unnoticed as we journey to wherever he's taking us.

As a military brat myself, I understand the unspoken code of silence surrounding

deployments. But Paul's stories just don't add up. Still, I can't risk his anger anymore than it already simmers beneath the surface. So, I nod along, pretending to believe him, just as I've done for the past year.

Paul's effectively cut me off from everyone else. My parents can't stand me, and my friends are long gone. Even if I could reach out, Paul would accuse me of cheating. There's no point. He's made sure of that. There was a time when Paul was different. He was sweet, caring – even bought my mom flowers. But something changed, and I can't pinpoint when. He's not the same person anymore.

I want to leave, but the thought of what he might do stops me in my tracks. I'll have to hold on a little longer, just until I can figure out a plan. I just hope I'm strong enough to make it through.

As the cab rolls to a stop in front of the motel, a sickening sensation churns in the pit of my stomach. I recognize this place all too well—it's a motel I've passed countless times during my ten years living in New Jersey. Nestled near the beach, our area boasts numerous hotels and motels catering to tourists. Yet, of all the options available, Paul has chosen the one situated in the seediest part of town, infamous for its drug activity.

Just by glancing at it, you can tell this place hasn't seen an upgrade in over two decades. The brick facade is marred by peeling paint, trash litters the grounds, and it's hidden behind other buildings, easily overlooked. It's a place only locals know is still operational; to an outsider, it might appear abandoned.

My heart sinks as I realize the gravity of our situation. This isn't just a random motel—it's a symbol of the darkness that has crept into our lives, a physical manifestation of the turmoil we endure behind closed doors. And now, we're about to step into its shadow once again.

As Paul takes the envelope filled with my hard-earned money, why he never uses his money, I have no idea. He disappears into the motel office, a sinking feeling settles in my chest. When he returns, paying the taxi driver before leading me toward one of the rooms, I can't help but voice my discomfort.

"Paul, why are we here?" I ask, my voice trembling with unease. "This place gives me the creeps. Why can't we go to your house instead?"

It's a futile plea, I know. This motel is just another in a long line of seedy establishments he's dragged me to over the past year. But still, I can't help but hope for a different outcome.

Paul's gaze hardens as he stares back at me. "You know exactly why we can't go to my house!" he snaps. "My aunt and grandmother don't want people coming over. Now quit your whining and let's go!" With a forceful tug, he pulls me out of the car and into the dimly lit room, shutting the door behind us with a resounding click.

Stepping into the room feels like diving into a nightmare I can't escape. The wallpaper hangs off the walls like it's trying to escape too. Stains cover the carpet in all sorts of gross colors, each one telling a story I don't want to hear. The bathroom reeks of pee and stuff I don't even want to think about. The bed sheets look like they've seen better days, but it's hard to tell with all the yellowish stains and wrinkles. And that pull-out couch near the door? It's practically falling apart, with stuffing poking out like it's trying to break free.

If someone brought a blacklight in here, I swear it'd light up like a neon sign, revealing all the nastiness lurking in the shadows. It's seriously disgusting, and I can feel my skin crawl just from looking around.

"Gross," I whisper to myself, my voice barely above a whimper. This place is a nightmare come to life, and I'm trapped right in the middle of it.

As soon as I shut the door, his hands are all over me, invading my space before I even have a chance to set my bag down. Exhaustion weighs heavy on my shoulders, and all I want is a moment of peace, a chance to unwind after a long day on my feet. But Paul has other plans, his touch igniting a fire of frustration inside me.

I try to pull away, to create some distance between us, but he refuses to relent. His hands roam freely, and I feel suffocated by his relentless advances. "Paul, no!" I protest, my voice barely a whisper against his persistence. "I'm exhausted."

But he doesn't listen. Paul never listens when it comes to this. With a forceful shove, he pushes me towards the bed, and before I can even comprehend what's happening, I find myself on my back, pinned down by his weight.

No. This isn't what I want. This isn't what I need. Panic sets in as I realize the gravity of the situation. We need to stop. He needs to stop. But I'm paralyzed, trapped beneath him, as the darkness of the room closes in around me.

The words erupt from my lips before I can stop them, fueled by a surge of courage mingled with fear. "Paul! NO! You need to stop! I don't want to do this!" I shout, the weight of exhaustion and frustration heavy in my voice. "I just want a normal night, preferably somewhere where I'm not on the verge of puking!"

His reaction is immediate, a furious glare cutting through the dimness of the room. "What the fuck did you just say!" he bellows, his rage palpable. But I refuse to back down, summoning every ounce of strength within me to stand my ground.

"I don't want to have sex tonight," I continue, my voice trembling but resolute. "Why is it that every time we're together, that's all you want to do? Why can't we just spend time together, maybe watch a movie or go out to eat?"

He ignores my words, pressing his lips against my neck and reaching for my hand,

guiding it toward his pants. In that moment, something inside me snaps. With a surge of determination, I push him away and rise to my feet. "Paul, I said NO!" I declare, my voice shaking with a mixture of fear and newfound resolve.

His face inches from mine, his fury evident in every line of his expression. Without warning, his hand swings out, the force of the blow sending shockwaves through my body. The sting of pain blooms across my cheek, and for a moment, everything goes still. But even as tears threaten to spill from my eyes, I refuse to yield. "I won't let you do this to me anymore," I whisper, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm done being afraid." His laughter, cold and cruel, sends shivers down my spine, my insides cowering in dread. "Afraid?" he taunts, the word dripping with malice. "Bitch, you don't know afraid!" Each word is like a dagger to my already trembling heart.

I stand there, my facade of strength crumbling beneath the weight of his words, but I refuse to let him see my fear. His face contorts with rage, a dangerous shade of red, as he paces the room like a caged animal. My heart pounds in my chest, the sound deafening in the silence that hangs between us. Then, without warning, he turns his fury towards me. "Fuck this," he snarls, his voice low and menacing. "You're not telling me NO! I can do whatever I goddamn please!"

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With a primal roar, he charges towards me, and I brace myself for the inevitable onslaught, steeling myself for the violence I know is about to be unleashed.

His grip on my arm is like a vise, crushing and unyielding, sending sharp waves of pain shooting through me. I know I'll have another bruise to hide beneath long sleeves. With a forceful push, he thrusts my arm behind me, the agony intensifying as he shoves me onto the bed.

I land with a jolt, the air knocked out of my lungs, and before I can even comprehend what's happening, he flips me onto my back with a savage strength that leaves me reeling. His hand clamps down on my throat, cutting off my air supply, while the other pins my arms above my head.

I struggle against his hold, kicking and thrashing with all the strength I can muster, but it's futile. He's bigger, stronger, and his grip is unrelenting. Panic rises within me, a suffocating dread as I gasp for air, his fingers tightening around my throat with each desperate breath.

I fight against him for what feels like an eternity, but exhaustion soon overwhelms me, draining my strength until I'm left trembling and helpless beneath him. In that moment, as darkness threatens to engulf me, I know that I'm utterly at his mercy, trapped in a nightmare from which there seems to be no escape.

He lets go of my throat and pulls my pants down to my knees, then pulls his cock out. He pushes it inside me and I scream, he then covers my mouth with his hand. I CAN'T BREATHE! I try to move but he still has me pinned beneath him and I'm losing oxygen from him covering my mouth. I try to bite him but he puts all his

weight on me and continues to thrust inside me. As my vision begins to blur and darkness encroaches around me, panic grips my heart with icy fingers. I muster every ounce of strength left within me, fueled by adrenaline and sheer desperation, but it's no use. My body feels heavy, sluggish, as if weighed down by invisible chains, and I struggle in vain against the suffocating pressure bearing down on me.

Despite the overwhelming sense of doom closing in, I refuse to surrender. With every fiber of my being, I fight against the encroaching darkness, clawing desperately for a breath of precious air. I try to scream, to call out for help, but my voice fails me, choked into silence by the vice-like grip around my throat. And then, in an instant, everything fades to black. The world falls away, swallowed by the void, and I'm consumed by a profound sense of emptiness. In that moment of darkness, I am utterly alone, lost to a nightmare from which I cannot escape.

Moments later, I wake up with a sickening realization: my pants are still down, and I feel utterly violated. Hastily, I stumble towards the toilet, barely managing to reach it before the contents of my stomach empty themselves into the bowl. The combination of what just happened and the putrid smell of the room overwhelms me, leaving me shaking and nauseous.

After what feels like an eternity, I emerge from the bathroom, only to find that he's gone. Panic surges through me as I reach for my bag, my fingers closing around empty air. It hits me like a punch to the gut: he's taken all my money.

Defeated and disgusted, I slump against the wall, realizing that I've hit rock bottom. I have no money, I'm stuck in this filthy motel room once again, and I've allowed myself to be used and manipulated by a man who cares nothing for me. Tears sting my eyes as I come to terms with the harsh reality of my situation.

For 12 months, I've bent over backward trying to please him, sacrificing my relationships with friends and family in the process. I've endured his yelling, his

belittling, his violence, all for what? All he ever wanted was sex, and he's never shown me an ounce of genuine care or affection. But no more. With a surge of determination, I vow to myself that I'm done with Paul and this toxic existence. It's time to reclaim my life, to break free from his grip and find the strength to build a future for myself, one where I'm no longer a victim, but a survivor.

With trembling hands, I reach for the tarnished piece of metal adorning my finger, a symbol of the lies and manipulation I've endured for far too long. Without hesitation, I tear it off and hurl it across the room, watching with satisfaction as it clatters against the stained walls.

Pacing back and forth in the dingy motel room, I'm consumed by a sense of desperation. My mind races, searching for someone to call, someone who might be willing to help me in my darkest hour. But my options are painfully limited. My parents despise me for staying with him, and he's succeeded in isolating me from any semblance of a support system. I'm stranded, alone and helpless, with no car, no money, and no one to turn to. Desperation grips me as I step outside, seeking solace in the familiar comfort of a cigarette. As the smoke curls around me, I'm struck by a sudden realization: there's one number I still have memorized, a lifeline to a past I thought I'd left behind.

With trembling fingers, I dial the number, my heart pounding with uncertainty. Will she still be there for me, after all this time? Will she understand, or will she turn me away like everyone else? Only time will tell, but in this moment, she's my last hope for escape from this nightmare.

"Hello?"

"Heather?" My voice cracks, tears threatening to spill over.

"Anya? Is that you?" Heather's voice is soft, tinged with concern. "Anya, are you

okay? Why are you calling me at 12:30 in the morning?" I can hear her shuffling on the other end of the line.

"Heather, I'm sorry for everything I did and how I stopped talking to you," I blurt out, my words rushed and choked with emotion.

"Any, stop," Heather interrupts, her voice gentle but urgent. "What's going on? Is Paul with you?"

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself to speak. "Heather, can you please come pick me up? I'm stuck at the Americana Motel. Paul erased all my contacts, and yours is the only one I remember from memory. I'm sorry for waking you," I plead.

"Shit, yeah, of course, Anya," Heather responds without hesitation. "Are you okay?" I can hear the jingle of keys as she moves, her concern palpable even through the phone.

Then, unable to hold back any longer, the floodgates open, and I start sobbing uncontrollably. I pour out everything that's happened, every moment of fear and pain that Paul has inflicted upon me. I sob into the phone, my words choked and fragmented, uncertain if Heather can even make sense of them.

But then, like a beacon of hope, I see a pair of headlights approaching, and Heather rushes towards me. Wrapping her arm around me, she guides me to her car, offering me the comfort and support I so desperately need in this moment of vulnerability. And as we drive away from that motel, away from Paul and the nightmare he's created, I feel a glimmer of hope stirring within me. Maybe, just maybe, there's a way out of this darkness after all.

Prologue 2

Two Years Ago

Anya

As I slowly awaken, the pounding in my head reminds me of the events from last night. Calling Heather was a lifeline, and despite everything, she came through for me. Emotions threaten to overwhelm me again, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, but I shake my head, forcing myself to focus.

Looking around the unfamiliar room, I realize I'm wearing an old N'SYNC t-shirt and cotton shorts – Heather's clothes. She must have let me borrow them last night. Grateful for her kindness, I slide out of bed and make my way to the vanity mirror.

My reflection stares back at me, my eyes still swollen from crying, and I wince as I notice the beginnings of a bruise forming on my neck from Paul's grip. The sight fills me with a mixture of anger and sadness, but I push the emotions aside, refusing to let them consume me.

Suddenly, Heather enters the room, and I startle at the sound. She winces apologetically. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," she says softly.

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"It's okay," I reply, offering her a polite smile.

We stand there awkwardly, the weight of the previous night hanging heavy in the air between us. Heather clears her throat, breaking the silence. "I... uh... made some breakfast if you want some," she offers, then starts to leave but pauses by the bedroom door. "Anya, you're safe... and... uh... if you want to talk, you don't have to, but... I'm here, ya know, if you want to."

Her words are a lifeline, a beacon of hope in the darkness. With a nod of gratitude, I watch her leave the room, feeling a glimmer of warmth in my heart. Maybe, just maybe, I'm not as alone as I thought.

Turning back to the mirror, tears trace down my cheeks, a silent testament to the turmoil within. Oh god, what a mess I've made of things, I think to myself, reaching for a tissue to wipe away the tears. After a few steadying breaths, I gather the strength to leave the bedroom and head to the kitchen. Heather is already there, setting down a plate for me with a small smile. The sight of her kindness brings a lump to my throat. We used to be inseparable in high school, but now, the weight of my mistakes hangs heavy between us, casting a shadow over our once vibrant friendship. Still, I manage a smile of gratitude. "Thank you," I say softly, and she nods in response.

As I stare down at the plate she's prepared – French toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon – the floodgates of emotion threaten to overwhelm me once more. "Heather, I'm so sorry," I blurt out, my voice breaking as tears stream down my face. "I never wanted our friendship to end. I'm sorry I became such a horrible friend to you."

Before I can fully comprehend what's happening, Heather is beside me, wrapping me

in a comforting hug. "Anya, you have nothing to be sorry for," she reassures me, her voice gentle and understanding. "I understand how hard it was for you, and you were being manipulated to believe all kinds of lies. I never stopped being your friend. I was always here, waiting for you to figure out the truth about Paul."

Her words wash over me like a soothing balm, easing the ache in my heart. I let myself cry, the weight of guilt and regret lifting with each passing moment. Eventually, I manage to calm down, and Heather reheats my food as we settle into a companionable silence.

The food is a welcomed distraction, filling the void in my stomach and momentarily easing the ache in my heart. I hadn't realized just how hungry I was until I started devouring the breakfast Heather had prepared. With each bite, a sense of normalcy begins to creep back into my shattered world.

But as I shovel the food into my mouth with reckless abandon, I notice Heather's amused expression. Her lips are pressed together, as if she's trying to suppress a laugh. "I'm sorry," I mumble through a mouthful of food, suddenly self-conscious.

She chuckles softly, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "I haven't seen you eat that fast since our junior trip," she says, a fond smile tugging at her lips. "Remember when we all woke up late and had to scarf down breakfast before hitting the road again?"

A wave of nostalgia washes over me, and I can't help but grin. "Yeah, and then Alex and Caleb decided to see how many doughnuts they could fit in their mouths at once," I recall, laughter bubbling up inside me.

Heather's laughter joins mine, filling the room with warmth and joy. "Oh my god, and then Pastor Wright scared them, and all the doughnuts came flying out!" she exclaims, her laughter contagious.

Before I know it, we're both doubled over with laughter, the weight of our troubles momentarily forgotten. But as I laugh so hard that I topple out of my chair, the absurdity of the situation hits me, and we laugh even harder.

As the laughter fades, a sense of gratitude washes over me, and I turn to Heather with a heartfelt expression. "In case I didn't say it already, thank you for last night. I honestly wasn't sure you would actually show."

Her smile is warm and reassuring as she places her hands on mine. "Of course, I showed up. Plus, you sounded like you needed help. Anya, I meant it when I said I would always be here for you. We may not talk as much as we used to, but I'm still here whenever you need a friend," she says, her sincerity touching my heart.

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. "Thank you, Heather. I really appreciate it," I reply softly as she gathers our plates and begins washing the dishes.

"So, what's your plan?" Heather asks, breaking the silence. "Do you have a place to stay?"

I freeze, the weight of reality crashing down on me. "My plan?" I echo, my mind racing. "Yeah, I technically still live with my pare-"

But then it hits me like a ton of bricks – my parents. Panic surges through me as I frantically search through my purse for my phone.

Heather notices the fear in my eyes and reaches out, her hand a comforting presence. "Calm down," she says gently. "I noticed they were calling, and you were already asleep. So, I told them that you were staying the night here."

Relief floods over me, and I sink back into my chair, the tension draining from my body. I can handle my parents being angry because I didn't tell them I was with

Heather, but facing their wrath for being with Paul is a nightmare I'm not ready to confront.

My relationship with my parents has been strained ever since my dad voiced his suspicions about Paul. Deep down, I knew he was right, but my pride got in the way. I couldn't bear the thought of admitting defeat, so I defended Paul and lied to protect him.

But now, as I reflect on the mess I've made, I realize that my pride has cost me more than I ever imagined. And as I sit in Heather's kitchen, surrounded by her unwavering support, I vow to set things right, no matter the cost. I meet Heather's gaze, gratitude swelling within me once more. "Thanks, you're a lifesaver," I say, my voice filled with sincerity.

Her smile is infectious, radiating warmth and understanding. "Of course," she replies. "So, I'll ask again, what's your plan?"

I pause, considering my options carefully before responding. "I'm going to go back home and try to repair the relationship with my parents," I declare, determination firm in my voice. "Deep down, I knew everyone was right about Paul. But I just didn't want to see it. So I guess, I just thought that if I didn't acknowledge it, then it wouldn't be real."

Heather smirks, a playful glint in her eyes. "I think there was something said in Bible class in high school about pride coming before the fall?" she teases, her grin mischievous.

I can't help but laugh, the tension of the past few days melting away in the warmth of our banter. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know," I reply, matching her teasing tone.

As we finish tidying up the kitchen and the room I had stayed in, Heather suggests,

"Come on, I'll take you home." I nod in agreement, grateful for her continued support.

Quickly, I dress and grab my purse, the weight of the previous night's events heavy on my mind. I breathe a sigh of relief as I step outside into the cold, thankful that the chilly air will help conceal the bruise on my neck.

Before we leave, I stop Heather, my hand resting gently on her arm. "Hey, can you not say anything to my parents about what happened last night?" I ask, my voice tinged with apprehension.

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She meets my gaze with understanding, offering a reassuring smile. "It's not my story to tell, Anya," she replies, her words a comforting reassurance.

With a nod of gratitude, I follow Heather to her car, the familiar sense of homecoming mingling with a newfound sense of uncertainty. As we approach my childhood home, I steel myself for the inevitable confrontation with my parents. It won't be easy, but it's a step towards healing and reclaiming control of my life.

As I approach the door, my heart sinks as it swings open to reveal my mom's glaring gaze. She forces a smile and waves goodbye to Heather, her facade crumbling the moment we're alone. I brace myself for the storm of her wrath, knowing that there's no escaping it.

"I'm sorry," I murmur softly, my voice barely above a whisper.

"YOU'RE SORRY? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW WORRIED YOUR DAD AND I WERE?!" she bellows, her anger reverberating through the air.

I shrink back, the weight of her words crushing me. Without a word, she drags me inside, her grip tight and unyielding. I've learned long ago that there's no reasoning with her when she's like this. I simply endure the onslaught of her fury, my silence a shield against her onslaught.

"ANYA! I'm TALKING TO YOU!" she shouts, snapping me out of my reverie.

I raise my eyes to meet hers, bracing myself for another barrage of accusations. "I'm sorry I made you worry. It wasn't intentional. Time just got away from me, and then I

fell asleep," I plead, my voice trembling with desperation.

But my words fall on deaf ears as my mom continues to glare at me, her anger palpable in the air. "WERE YOU WITH PAUL?!" she demands, her tone accusatory.

My heart clenches at the mention of his name, and I instinctively recoil. "No," I lie, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. It's easier than telling her the truth, knowing that she wouldn't be able to handle the reality of my situation. So I bury the truth deep within me, another layer of deception in a life filled with lies.

As my mom's anger dissipates, she sighs and attempts to regain her composure. "You better not have been!" she warns, her tone stern.

I nod meekly, averting my gaze. "I wasn't with him. I spent the night with Heather and lost track of time. I'm sorry again for worrying you," I apologize, the weight of guilt heavy on my shoulders.

To my surprise, my mom pulls me into a hug, her embrace a mix of relief and concern. "Okay, I'm sorry for yelling, but you had me worried all night. You'll understand when you have kids of your own," she says, her voice softer now.

I nod, reciprocating the hug before retreating to my room. But before I can escape, her words cut through the air like a knife. "You know if you had listened to us in the first place, this whole thing with Paul wouldn't have happened," she remarks, her tone tinged with accusation.

I freeze, her words echoing in my mind. Is she suggesting that everything that happened with Paul is my fault? The injustice of it all stings, but I swallow my indignation, knowing that arguing would only escalate the situation further.

As I sink onto my bed, frustration and hurt swirl within me. My parents may never

understand the truth of what happened, and I can't risk being blamed for something that wasn't my fault. With a heavy heart, I realize that keeping secrets is the only way to protect myself.

Heather asked about my plan, and now it's crystal clear. I'll keep my head down, go to work, and pray for a brighter future. Because right now, my life seriously sucks, and I'm the only one who can change it.

PART ONE

The Beginning

Chapter One

Present Day

Anya

I step into the bustling kitchen, the aroma of breakfast filling the air. It's Sunday morning, our designated time to gather as a family and share a meal together. Kora and Mateo, my younger siblings, are already seated at the table, engrossed in their phones. I can't help but roll my eyes at their digital distraction before joining my mom in preparing the food.

"Thank you, Anya, for helping me bring the food to the table," my mom says loudly, her words intended to catch the attention of my siblings. Despite her efforts, they remain absorbed in their screens. My dad clears his throat, his stern gaze fixed on them.

Mateo finally looks up, confusion evident in his expression. "What?" he mumbles, glancing between our parents.

My dad's deep voice cuts through the air as he addresses Kora. "Kora?" he calls out.

Startled, Kora looks up from her phone. "What?" she responds, her attention divided.

My mom gestures subtly towards their devices, silently urging them to put them away. "Put it away. This is our Sunday breakfast. You both can talk to your friends later," she instructs, her tone firm yet gentle.

With resigned sighs, Kora and Mateo reluctantly comply, stowing their phones away. As the digital distractions are set aside, I can't help but feel a sense of gratitude for this brief moment of family togetherness amidst the chaos of our lives.

We all gather around the table, and my dad leads us in prayer, his voice resonating with reverence. As we bow our heads and join hands, a sense of unity washes over us.

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"Father, thank you for bringing us all here today, thank you for providing the food we are about to eat, and may you bless the hands that made it. In your name, we pray, Amen," my dad's words fill the room with solemnity and gratitude.

Mateo is quick to reach for the food, but my dad gently reminds him of the proper etiquette. "Your mom made the food, so she is the first one to fill her plate," he admonishes, his tone firm yet loving. Mateo slumps back in his chair, a pout forming on his lips as he waits for my mom to serve herself.

"Honey, it's fine, let him grab some food," my mom interjects, her voice warm and reassuring.

Without hesitation, Mateo and Kora seize the opportunity to fill their plates, eager to indulge in the meal. I wait patiently, observing the scene before me, before finally helping myself to the dishes.

With everyone settled and food on our plates, my mom breaks the silence with a question. "So, what have you all been up to? How is school going for you guys?" she inquires, her genuine interest evident in her tone.

Mateo's voice is muffled by the food in his mouth as he eagerly shares his plans for the future. "I can't wait for senior year to be over and done with, then I'm taking a break and will start college next spring," he declares between bites, his enthusiasm palpable.

Kora chimes in, her words slightly garbled as she indulges in another forkful of pancakes. "School is fine, just been studying for the finals coming up but other than

that, it's fine," she reports, her focus already shifting back to her meal.

When my mom turns her attention to me, I offer a small smile. "Work is work, to be honest. It's your typical fake Mexican restaurant," I explain with a soft chuckle, knowing that Lonestar Mex may not be authentic but it gets the job done. Despite its shortcomings, the food there is decent enough.

My mom's exasperation fills the room as she expresses her frustration with our lack of detail. "You guys can do better than that," she insists, her disappointment evident in her tone. We exchange confused glances, unsure of how to respond to her plea for more substantial conversation.

"I don't know what else you want us to say, Mom. Our lives are pretty boring," I admit, carrying my empty plate to the sink. Kora and Mateo nod in agreement, echoing my sentiment.

Mom lets out a dramatic sigh, lamenting, "Is it too much to ask for a mother to want to know what her kids are up to?" Kora stands up, offering her perspective. "Mom, it's not too much to ask, but we can't give you details that are the same as last week," she reasons, gathering Mateo's plate as well.

"Yeah, Mom, it's the same old same old. School, basketball, play video games, sleep, and repeat," Mateo adds with a shrug, before wandering off.

Mom sighs once more and rolls her eyes, resigned to our lack of excitement. "I can't win with you guys, can I?" she laments.

Kora heads towards the door, signaling the end of breakfast. I approach my mom and give her a grateful smile, thanking her for the meal and giving her a kiss on the cheek. Her demeanor shifts as she announces her upcoming trip to Greece.

"Oh, by the way, I need to let you all know that I'll be gone for the month of May. I'm taking a trip to Greece to visit family, but I fully expect you all to behave once I am gone," she declares with a stern look.

Mateo scoffs, asserting our adulthood. "Mom, we're all adults, we can handle ourselves," he retorts. I silently convey my disappointment, but Mom places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, acknowledging my unspoken desire to accompany her.

"I'm sorry, Anya. I can't take you this year. Maybe next time, okay?" she offers sympathetically. Disappointed yet understanding, I muster a smile and express my excitement for her trip before heading off to work.

Pulling up to Lonestar Mex, I park discreetly behind the building as usual. George, the owner, insists we use the back entrance to avoid being seen by guests. It's a strange sight, considering the mismatch between his name and the cuisine of the restaurant. But authenticity isn't the priority here, and the customers know it.

Stepping inside, I'm immediately engulfed by a symphony of scents. The air is thick with the smoky aroma of slow-cooked meats, the rich fragrance of barbecue sauces bubbling on the stove, and the enticing smell of freshly made tortillas. Over it all, the tangy scent of peppers and Mexican spices sizzles on fajita hot plates, creating a mouthwatering atmosphere that's hard to resist.

I quickly secure my apron around my waist, exchanging nods with Manuel, our head cook, as I clock in for my shift. Preparing for the incoming rush, I grab a handful of straws and a few boxes of crayons, essentials for efficient service.

The restaurant is already bustling with activity, and I notice I've been assigned two tables simultaneously. "Just what I needed, double sat," I mutter quietly to myself. One table is filled with boisterous teenagers, while the other appears to be a more

reserved group, likely just coming from church. Suppressing a sigh, I approach the church crowd first.

"Good afternoon, folks. My name's Anya. Can I start you off with some drinks?" I inquire politely. One of the men looks up at me with a brusque demeanor, "We're not ready to order yet," he retorts. Though a pang of panic hits me, I maintain a calm exterior. "Not a problem, sir. Take your time, and I'll be back shortly." As I turn to leave, he grabs my wrist firmly. My pulse quickens, but I force myself to stay composed. "Sir, please release my arm," I assert, gently pulling away. Anger flashes across his face, and he starts to rise from his seat, but a hand lands on his shoulder, prompting him to sit back down.

I automatically take a step back, trying to regain my composure. "I can handle this," I tell myself silently, mustering up some confidence. My eyes flick to the man who intervened, and I'm momentarily struck by his presence. He's tall, with broad but lean shoulders that hint at strength. His biceps flex subtly as he talks to the guest, and his black shirt and jeans fit him perfectly.

When he turns his head and looks at me, my heart skips a beat. His smile is dazzling, and his deep green eyes seem to pierce right through me. I feel a blush rising to my cheeks as I realize he's addressing me.

"I'm sorry, what?" I manage to stammer out, my voice barely above a whisper.

The man chuckles softly, his smile never fading. "Are you okay?" he repeats, his concern evident.

Trying to regain my composure, I nod quickly. "Oh, yeah, I'm totally fine," I reply, hoping I sound more confident than I feel.

Internally, I'm berating myself for my lack of eloquence. What was that, Anya? I

scold myself, feeling flustered and embarrassed.

Straightening my already impeccable apron, I clear my throat. "Yes, I'm good, thank you," I manage to say, hoping my voice sounds steadier this time.

He gives me another warm smile and taps the back of my shoulder. "That's great to hear. If this man bothers you, or anyone really, let me know. I'll be at the bar," he says before walking away.

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As he disappears into the crowd, I'm left wondering who he is and why he intervened. Shaking off my thoughts, I return to my duties, grateful that the rest of the shift goes smoothly.

I walk out to my car when I hear my name being called behind me, "Hey Anya, wait up" and I see Lana coming toward me. Lana is one of the good friends that I have made since I started last year. She's short like me, curvy around her hips and thighs, and her blonde hair is pulled up into a messy bun. "Hey Lana, how was your shift?" I ask her as I unlock my car to put my things inside. "Oh, it was fine, no complaints," she says as she takes out her messy bun and allows her long wavy hair to fall down her shoulder. We pull out our cigarettes and start talking about our day and I tell her about the rude customer from lunch, when I notice a tall figure walking our way. "Hey" he calls out and I notice it's the guy from earlier, my eyes go wide and I look at Lana as if to tell her that he was who I was talking about. She understood our non-verbal communication and we both turned to look at him. "Oh hey, how's it goin'?" "How's it goin' geez Anya can you be any more awkward," I mutter to myself. He smiles, not sure if he notices my awkwardness or doesn't care but I just smile. "I just wanted to make sure that you were okay from before."

"Oh yeah, I'm good, honestly rude customers are a daily occurrence."

"Well, it shouldn't be, I'm Joe by the way" he reaches out his hand. I take his hand and shake it; his hand almost envelops mine and his touch is warm and smooth. I quickly pull away, noticing my hand is still in his. "Uh yeah, well, gotta go," I say, quickly putting out my cigarette and get in my car. I'm about to start the ignition when I hear a tap on my window. I look over and Joe is bending down smiling at me, I roll down the window, "Yeah? What's up?" I sheepishly say. "You never told me

your name,” he says with that smile that melts my insides. “Oh right, it's Anya,” I say nervously, why am I so nervous, get a hold of yourself, woman! Joe taps my door and smiles from ear to ear, “it was nice meeting you Anya, hope to see you tomorrow” he turns and walks away. Immediately, Lana comes to the window, “okay what was that?” she exclaims. I let out a small chuckle, “I have no idea” and I leaned back in my seat shaking my head. “Well, that man is FINE! With capital F.I.N.E.!” she exclaims. I laugh and start my car, “okay Lana, I’ve gotta go, I don’t want my parents to worry”. She just shakes her head, “girl, you need to let loose sometimes” she says and walks toward her car. I give her a small giggle, but she doesn’t understand, I can’t let my parents down again, even if it means I don’t do what I want.

Chapter Two

One month later

Anya

I finish up work and close out my station, I’m physically and mentally exhausted from working a double shift. My mom leaves next week for Greece, and all I can think about is how jealous I am that she gets to travel. Where I’m stuck here dealing with my two younger siblings who barely speak to me since I stopped talking to Paul. We acknowledge each other’s presence, sure, but we are not as close as we used to be. I remember Kora saying that she hopes that she is nothing like me when she gets older. I can’t say I blame her; I made some really stupid mistakes when it came to Paul. But I just wished that we could go back to normal. I mean, it’s been two years and I still feel like an outsider in my own family. Everyone looks at and treats me differently. I try so hard every day to prove to them how sorry I am for letting them down, to prove I’m still worthy of them. But, how long can this last, how long can I push my feelings and wants aside to please them, how long will I need to be punished for the mistakes of my past?

I pack up my belongings and clock out, making my way past the bar where Joe is finishing up his tasks. "Hey, gorgeous, I'm almost done. Want to walk out with me?" he asks with a wink. Our playful banter has become a regular occurrence ever since he stood up for me that day when a guest got too handsy.

"Well, if you were as quick on your side work as you are with your flirting, you'd be done already," I tease, matching his playful tone.

He grins. "Ooh, well, maybe I just wanted us to be the last ones here," he quips, winking again.

I roll my eyes, trying to hide my smile. "Well, aren't you the charmer? But who says I would want to be stuck with you?" I reply, playing along.

Joe dramatically clutches his chest. "Oh, you wound me," he says, pretending to collapse to the ground.

I chuckle and shake my head. "Get up, you overgrown child. You're going to get all sticky," I warn, unable to suppress my amusement.

He smirks, about to continue our flirtatious banter, but I quickly raise my hand to stop him. "Oh, I-" he starts, but I cut him off.

"Stop, nope, not going there," I interject firmly, turning to leave. "I'm going home, Mr. Charmer, and no, that's not an invitation for you to come over," I call out with a laugh as I head towards the exit.

Before I know it, Joe grabs me and turns me around, his hands resting on my waist. "Wait, please, come out tonight. We're both off tomorrow, and we can have some fun," he says, pulling me closer.

"Oh? You want to have some fun together?" I tease, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling his head down towards mine. I feel him squeeze me tighter, his breath becoming heavier. Then, I bring my mouth to his ear. "SUCKA!" I shout, pushing past him and ran towards my car, laughing.

He groans, a mixture of frustration and amusement. "You're a tease, Anya Parker! A TEASE!" he yells out as I hop into my car.

I pull out of my parking spot just as he walks out of the restaurant. I roll down my window. "Later, hot stuff!" I shout, winking and blowing him a kiss.

"One of these days, Anya, I'm gonna get a real kiss from you!" he shouts back from his car as he pulls away.

I smile and drive off, feeling a rush of adrenaline from our playful exchange. Flirting with Joe has always been the highlight of my nights at work. I'm not looking for a boyfriend; I just enjoy the thrill of playful banter. But that distraction is short-lived when I see my mom calling me.

"Hey, Mom, I'm pulling out of the parking lot now," I say as I start my car, the engine rumbling to life.

"Where are you? Why are you there so late?" she responds, her tone stern and disapproving.

"Mom, I just told you, I'm pulling out of the parking lot now. Friday nights are always busy," I answer, feeling the tension building up in my chest.

"Anya, I don't like you being out this late," she persists.

"Mom, it's only 11:00. Like I said, I'm on my way home now," I reassure her.

"We need to talk when you get here," she says firmly before hanging up abruptly, not waiting for my response.

I toss my phone onto the passenger seat and let out a frustrated sigh. Lately, my mom has been increasingly overbearing, always questioning my whereabouts, my activities, and the people I'm with. While I understand it's just her being a mom, her behavior has become excessive and suffocating. I'd be okay with it if it weren't so over the top.

I pull into the driveway, and there's my mom standing on the porch, arms crossed, a stern expression etched on her face. I take a deep breath, mentally preparing for the interrogation that awaits me. As I approach, she blocks my way, her foot tapping impatiently on the ground.

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"Mom, can we do this inside?" I suggest, motioning toward the door. But she remains unmoved, her glare unwavering.

"Okay, I guess we'll do this out here then," I sigh, dropping my bag and mirroring her crossed arms. "Don't you dare sass me, young lady," she scolds.

"Mom, what do you want me to say? I can't help it if my last table didn't leave until 10:30," I retort, feeling my frustration bubbling up.

"You should have told me that you were going to be late!" she insists.

"I did!" I feel my voice rising, and I quickly take a breath to calm myself. "I texted you, saying I still had a table and would call as soon as I left the restaurant."

"That's not good enough!"

My anger begins to simmer beneath the surface. Why is she blaming me for something I had zero control over? "Mom, this isn't anything new. It's not like this is the first time I've had to stay late because of a customer," I say, hoping she doesn't detect the annoyance in my tone.

"Don't talk back to me! I need to know where you are at all times!" my mom yells, her tone dripping with authority.

I can feel my frustration rising like a tide within me. Why does she always treat me like a child? I'm not a little girl anymore. I clench my jaw, trying to keep my temper in check.

"Yeah, because I'm not 21 or anything, right?" I mutter sarcastically under my breath as I grab my bag, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Before I can take another step, she grabs my ear and pulls me forcefully inside the house, her grip like a vice. "Excuse me! What was that?" she demands, her eyes flashing with anger.

"LET GO OF ME!" I shout, wrenching my ear from her grasp, my frustration boiling over.

"That's it! Go to your room and don't come out until you've learned how to show some respect!" she orders, her voice cold and stern.

I feel a surge of indignation and anger, but I swallow it down, knowing that arguing further will only make things worse. With a heavy heart and a deep sense of frustration, I trudge up the stairs to my room, feeling like a child once again, trapped in a world where I'm not allowed to be an adult.

Ugh, I am way too tired for this bullshit right now! I think to myself and head to my room. My dad walks in shortly after, "Hey kiddo, you wanna tell me what happened?" We sit on my bed and I explain everything that just occurred in the last 10 minutes.

My dad nods, "well, you know she's just trying to look out for you?" he says.

"I know but does she have to berate me and treat me like a little kid in the process? I'm 21 years old and she treats me like I'm still 14!"

My dad sighs, "I don't think she's trying to treat you that way, I think it's more she got worried and didn't know how to handle it".

I nod and let out a breath, “I understand she’s worried but I did tell her I was going to be late, and it's like she didn’t even listen. She never listens, if I’m being honest. Ever since Paul, it was like she stopped seeing me, and only saw a little girl. No matter what I do, or what I say, I will never be seen as an adult in her eyes”.

I get up and pace around my room trying to calm my nerves. “I want to go out with my friends after work, but anytime I mention it, she immediately turns it down! All of my friends are in their 20s and not one of them has to ask permission to go out to a bar or a club! Out of my whole friend group, I’m the only one who still needs to ask mommy and daddy! Do you know how embarrassing that is?”

My dad stands up and I can see frustration on his face, “Anya, we just want to keep you safe that’s it! Going to clubs and bars is overrated. You don’t know what it’s like out there in the real world and the dangers-

“That’s because you guys don’t let me! You can’t keep me cooped up in the house all bubble-wrapped, worrying about what may or may not happen. You guys have to allow me to live my life and make my own choices!”

My mom bursts open the door “WE LET YOU DO THAT ONCE AND LOOK WHERE THAT GOT YOU HUH!” she screams.

“Are you kidding me! That’s what this is all about?! PAUL?! You’re worried I’m gonna repeat what happened between me and Paul?! You don’t trust me to not make that mistake again?!” I am now shouting and pacing faster around my room.

“Its not that we don’t trust you, its just we are trying to make sure it doesn’t happen again” my dad says.

“You know what he did Anya, you know how many people he hurt in the process, and how it made us look at church” my mom blurts out.

Frustration and anger have now taken over, “OF COURSE I KNOW WHAT HE DID! I WAS THERE! I FELT IT FIRSTHAND!” Breathe Anya, just breathe, don’t cry, don’t cry. “What Paul did or didn’t do was NOT my fault! What happened between us, WAS NOT MY FAULT!” I feel the tears running down my face. “So..stop...bla..blaming me....for what HE did!” my voice cracks but I’m not gonna show weakness, I have to show them that I am strong. I have to prove to them that what despite what Paul did, he didn’t break me. I am not broken.

My parents leave my room and I collapse on my bed, I allow myself to cry, to let out all the anger and frustration. Then I get up, wipe my face and pull out my phone.

ANYA: “Hey what are you doing right now?”

JOE: “Not much why?”

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ANYA: I need to get out

JOE: “You okay?”

ANYA: “Not really, but I will be as soon as I have some alcohol in my system”

JOE: “Okay, wanna meet at Rave?”

ANYA: “Actually, can you pick me up a few blocks away from my house, I can’t let my parents hear me leave?”

JOE: “Aren’t you a naughty girl ;-P”

ANYA: “Not right now Joe, please?”

JOE: “Okay, my bad, I’ll be there in 20 minutes”

ANYA: “Thanks”

Chapter Three

Anya

I swiftly change out of my clothes, hastily applying makeup to conceal the telltale signs of tears on my cheeks. Determination courses through me like a surge of electricity. If they refuse to treat me like the adult I am, then I'll find a place where I can be respected as one. It's a decision tinged with irony—I'm about to resort to what

might seem like a childish act, yet they've pushed me to this point.

Rummaging through my closet, I unearth the luggage bags I used during our trip to Greece four years ago. Without hesitation, I begin stuffing them with my belongings: clothes, makeup, shoes, and a handful of cherished books. Each item I pack feels like a step towards freedom, a declaration of my autonomy.

With my bags packed and ready to go, I reach for my phone and send a message to my grandmother.

Anya: "Hey Nana"

Nana: "Hey sweetie, what's wrong? Why are you texting me so late?"

Anya: "I'm sorry to wake you, but can I live with you?"

Nana: "What's going on Anya?"

Anya: "I'll explain later, I just need an answer"

Nana: "If that's what you want Anya, you know you are always welcomed here."

Anya: "Thanks Nana, I'm going out with friends tonight but is it okay if I come straight there after?"

Nana: "Of course, you know where the spare is"

I take a moment to write a note to my parents, explaining my decision to move out and stay with Nana for a while. I reiterate my need for independence and the desire to be treated like the adult I am. Folding the paper neatly, I place it on my bed where they're sure to find it.

With my phone safely stowed in my purse, I gather my bags and slip out of my room, tiptoeing past my parents' bedroom to avoid waking them. Carefully navigating the familiar path, I reach the window and quietly open it, breathing a sigh of relief as I climb out into the cool night air.

I walk around the house and open the gate slowly, then walk down my street. Joe picks me up halfway to our meeting place, he gives me a confused look as he stares at my luggage and back at me. I put my bags in the backseat and hop in the passenger seat. Joe looks back at the luggage again and then at me, his brows raised as if he's waiting for an explanation. "What?" I ask trying to act like I don't know what he's referring to. "Listen, babe, if you wanted to move in with me all you had to do was ask" he playfully says. I slap his arm and laugh, "I don't want to move in with you, dummy. I'm moving in with my grandma" I playfully slap him again. We both laugh and leave it at that.

As we pull into the Rave parking lot, Joe turns to me, concern flickering in his eyes. "Hey, in all seriousness, are you okay?" I take a deep breath, gathering my resolve. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm finally taking control of my life." His gaze lingers on me for a moment, assessing. "Alright then, let's go have some fun," he says with a hint of reassurance. He walks around and opens my door, a playful grin on his face. "Wow, if I had known you were wearing that, I would've taken you somewhere private," he jests. I roll my eyes and playfully shove him aside. "In your dreams, Romeo," I retort, trying to lighten the mood. "Oh, trust me, I will be dreaming about you in that dress," he says with a smirk, his tone laced with playful flirtation.

As I glanced down at myself, I couldn't help but realize that getting dressed in the dark was probably not my brightest idea. I had managed to fish out Lana's dress from the depths of my closet, where she had hidden it to keep her parents from finding it. The dress was a striking red, with delicate spaghetti straps and a form-fitting silhouette that hugged my chest and hips snugly. It would have been perfect if I were Lana's height. But being a few inches taller, the dress only reached the top of my

thigh. This was definitely not the kind of attention I wanted to draw to myself tonight, I grumbled inwardly.

Joe's hand on the small of my back guides me through the bustling club entrance. We settle into a booth near the bar, and he rises to order our drinks. Attempting to adjust the hem of my dress only results in revealing more cleavage. Oh well, might as well roll with it. At least Joe's here with me; maybe guys won't bother me too much. Besides, Joe's not bad to look at. He returns with a Long Island iced tea for me and a beer for himself. I narrow my eyes at him, "Are you trying to get me drunk, Joe?" He chuckles, "Only if you want me to get you drunk, babe," he says, winking. At this point, I'm not sure if he's joking or being serious, but I don't really care anymore. I'm determined to have a good time and celebrate my newfound freedom.

After we finish our drinks, I'm already buzzed, freaking lightweight, my inner voice teases. I pull Joe with me to the dance floor; he pulls my back toward him and wraps his arms around my waist. I rock my hips along to the song, my ass rubbing against his pants. He starts moving his hands lower toward my hips and pulls my ass tighter against his groin. I feel myself getting hotter, I'm not sure if it's because the club is packed like sardines or if it's the heat coming off of Joe, but I feel my sweat dripping down my chest. I lean back my head to give some air to my glistening neck, Joe then leans down and starts kissing the sensitive part between my shoulder and neck. The softness of his lips sends shivers up my spine and down between my legs. I feel his tongue lick my skin as he moves up and down my neck. He brings his one hand lower to my inner thigh and slides it between my legs, teasing the side of my core. His other hand moves up between my breasts, he squeezes and sends a jolt down to my core. I'm breathing so heavily and hard, and then I feel Joe's hand move underneath my thong. My eyes go wide and I push away from him. I run straight to the bathroom and splash water on my face. What the fuck are you doing ANYA? I slapped myself to snap out of whatever that was between Joe and me. You can't trust guys, even guys as hot as Joe ESPECIALLY guys as hot as Joe! I say pointing to myself in the mirror. I dry my face off with a paper towel and take a breath before walking back out.

I see Joe sitting at our booth and he is texting on his phone. I sit across from and he still doesn't look up. "Hey?" I say to get his attention, he just puts up his index finger to tell me to wait. "Okay, that was rude," I say to myself, well you did just walk away from him when he was about to-I shut down the inner voice in my head before it continues that thought. "Joe?" He finally looks up and he has a hard look on his face. "Joe, I'm--"

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“It’s whatever, I can get a piece of ass anywhere” he cuts me off.

“What the fuck?” I snap back, “What the hell is your problem?”

He glares at me, “My problem, is that we were having a good time and then you just run off like some bitch!”

“What the fuck did you just call me?”

“You fucking heard me!”

“Wow Joe, and hear I thought that you were a decent guy who ACTUALLY cared! But it turns out, you’re no better than the rest of them. All you want is a piece of ass to get your tiny dick wet!”

I walk out of the club toward his car to grab my bags, and he continued cursing at me.

“Fuck you, you bitch!”

I turn around, “ooo, big tough guy calling a woman a bitch! You can’t handle a little rejection that you resort to name-calling! Sounds REAL tough to me!”

I swing open the back door of his car, but before I can step out, he shoves me roughly, nearly causing me to lose my balance. Anger surges through me as I whirl around and snatch my bags from his grasp. "You were asking for it, wearing that," he snaps as I prepare to storm away. I freeze, feeling a seething rage bubbling up inside me. Without a second thought, I whirl back around and deliver a resounding slap

across his face. "Don't you dare talk to me like that! You're nothing but a pathetic excuse for a man!" I seethe, my voice trembling with fury. "And don't you dare ever speak to me again, you worthless piece of garbage!" His retort is drowned out by my enraged words as I turn and march away.

"Whose name calling now?" he shouts.

"Go fuck yourself, Joe!" I shout back over my shoulder.

As I'm about to request an Uber, I notice an open chat with Lana and decide to give her a call instead. "What the hell, Anya!" she whispers loudly as she answers. "What now?" I snap back. "Okay, what's with the attitude?" she retorts. "Sorry, Joe pissed me –"

"Whoa, hold up! Joe? What are you doing with Joe? Where are you? Why is there music in the background?"

"Okay, Mom, calm down the crazy," I sass back.

"Yeah, okay, whatever," she says in a hurried tone. "Back to Joe? Start from the beginning." I find a bench and recount everything that happened with my parents and then with Joe. "Lana? You still there?" I ask when I don't hear anything on the other end of the phone. "Wow, Anya, you had some crazy night," she finally says. "Yeah, you're telling me. Hey, do you think you can pick me up? I don't trust rideshare apps this late at night."

"Yeah, of course. Do you have a place to stay? I mean, I'd invite you over here, but I don't think my parents would appreciate you walking in at 3 in the morning," Lana asks with concern. I laugh, "Yeah, I'm gonna be living with my grandma. But maybe after some much-needed sleep, you and I can get lunch?"

"Definitely, just give me 10 minutes and I'll be right there," Lana responds promptly.

Lana picks me up and drops me off at my grandparents' house. Aww she left the porch light on for me, I think to myself as I walk up to the porch. I remember they usually hide the spare key under the lighthouse. I look around, there's a lighthouse to the right of the door, a lighthouse to the left of the door, a lighthouse on the end table, and a lighthouse in the far corner of the porch. Crap, which lighthouse did you put it under Nana? I mutter quietly as I check each one. By the time I find the key, I turn around, "ahhhh" I scream and jump back almost falling off the damn porch. "will you shush, you're gonna wake up the whole damn neighborhood" my Nana mutters as she walks out in her fluffy pink robe. "Now get inside its cold out here and you're walking around looking like you're trying to sell yourself on the street" and she hands me one of her robes. I walk inside and she gestures me to the back bedroom, "You can sleep in the room, and then in the morning we can talk" she says sleepily, then yawns and heads to her room.

Chapter Four

Anya

I wake up to the smell of bacon and coffee, and I hear distant voices coming from the kitchen, then I look at my phone, 7:30 A.M. I grumble, and pull the covers over my head, hoping that will dull the noise and smell. I must've fallen back asleep because I woke up to the sound of knocking on the bedroom door. I pull the covers down and check my phone again, 9:43 A.M. Okay I guess I might as well get up I mumble to myself. "Anya are you awake?" my Nana says as she opens the door. "I am now" I groan. She walks into the room with a cup of coffee and sits on the side of the bed. "I'm sorry for waking you up, but I thought we would have that talk before your parents start blowing up my phone again."

Again?!

I sit up, my heart pounding with anxiety. "Wait, what do you mean again?" I'm wide awake now, dread filling me at the thought of my parents showing up any moment, demanding I come home. Nana pats my leg reassuringly, "Don't worry. When your father called around 3 A.M., just as you arrived, he asked if you'd made it here and if he could speak with you." Panic takes hold. I'm sure Nana sees it on my face. "Oh, don't fret, dear. I told him you were fast asleep and promised you'd call when you woke up." I glance at my phone, seeing 15 missed calls and numerous texts from both mom and dad. "Let's go to the kitchen for a chat, then you can deal with your parents," Nana suggests, tapping my leg again before heading down the hall. Grabbing my coffee, I follow her, my mind racing with worry.

I sit at the table, Nana opposite me, her coffee cup in hand as she waits patiently for me to begin. With a heavy sigh, I launch into the events of last night, omitting the more scandalous details—after all, she's still my Nana, and there are some things I'd rather keep to myself. As I recount everything, from my argument with my parents to the encounter with Joe, I can see her processing it all.

"Okay, I understand your perspective, but you're putting me in a difficult spot with your parents. It's already a delicate situation," she remarks, taking another sip of her coffee. I slump forward, feeling guilty. "I know, Nana. I didn't mean to drag you into this mess. I just didn't have anywhere else to turn, anyone else who would understand why I needed to leave," I admit, picking at the remnants of bacon on my plate.

She nods solemnly, and we lapse into silence for a moment. Then, she speaks up again. "Anya, I meant what I said last night. You're always welcome here, but living under my roof means following my rules. You'll still need to keep me informed about your whereabouts and plans. Do you understand?" I nod, a sense of relief washing over me.

"I understand, Nana. And I have no problem with that. My issue with my parents was that, no matter how much I told them about my plans, they'd still refuse out of fear

that something terrible might happen to me," I explain, finishing my coffee and placing the cup in the sink. "I refuse to live in constant fear of what might happen."

"I understand, Anya, and you shouldn't live your life in fear. So, you can stay here as long as you want. But, you still have to call your parents and let them know you're alright," Nana says, sliding my phone toward me before heading to the sink. I feel a wave of anxiety wash over me at the thought of speaking to my parents after last night. "I'll be right back, Nana. Just gonna step outside for a few minutes," I announce as I head for the door.

"You know those things will kill you," Nana calls out from the kitchen.

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"Yes, Nana, I know," I reply with a smile, already feeling the need for a cigarette.

"Okay, just doing my due diligence as your grandmother," she shouts back, and I chuckle as I step out into the fresh air.

I finish my cigarette and take a deep breath, steeling myself for the conversation ahead. With trembling fingers, I dial my dad's number. "Hello?" His voice sounds tired, worn out.

"Hey, Dad," I reply softly.

"Any?" He sounds surprised, maybe even relieved. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I assure him, though my voice wavers with emotion.

There's a long pause, filled with unspoken tension. "I'm sorry," I finally offer, breaking the silence.

Then I hear my mom's voice in the background, raised in anger. My dad speaks to her, his words muffled through the phone. Finally, he returns to the call. "I'm putting you on speaker, hang on," he informs me.

I mutter to myself, "I need another smoke for this," and light another cigarette as I wait.

Then my mom's voice explodes through the phone, full of hurt and frustration. "WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS TO ME! TO US! ANYA!" Her words pierce through me,

and I instinctively pull the phone away from my ear.

My dad intervenes, trying to calm her down. I can hear her sobbing now, and it breaks my heart. I hate hearing her cry, knowing that I'm the cause.

After a while, my dad and mom both return to the call. "Anya, why? I just want to know why?" my mom pleads.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, wiping away tears that have begun to fall. "Because I felt like I was suffocating," I confess, my voice trembling with emotion. "You keep me in the house and won't allow me to go out and be with my friends. I know that sounds childish—."

"You're right it is childish, you don't get what you want, so you run away from home!" My mom interrupts, her voice sharp with anger.

"Let her finish," my dad interjects, his tone firm but calm.

I clear my throat and take another deep breath, trying to steady myself. "I know it sounds like something a teenager would say, but even when I told you guys that I had no problems telling you where I was gonna be and who I was gonna be with, you still said that it was too dangerous for me to go anywhere I wanted," I explain, trying to keep my voice steady.

My mom scoffs incredulously, "What are you talking about? You come with me to women's bible study, you leave to go to church, and you even went to the birthday party last week after church."

I let out a frustrated sigh, feeling my patience wearing thin. "Mom, those are all things you wanted me to do. The women's group are all women your age, the birthday party was for one of YOUR church friends, and I don't like going to church

anymore because everyone there looks at and treats me differently ever since Paul. So, no, I could not do things that I wanted to do,” I explain, my voice tinged with frustration and hurt.

“Well, why didn’t you just talk to me about it?” my mom snaps, her frustration evident.

“Because then I would still be stuck at home. So, I figured I would rather tolerate the fake people at church and deal with the sideways glances from your friends, than stay at home bored out of my mind,” I reply, my tone edged with frustration.

“They are not being fake, Anya! Everyone at church cares about you,” my mom insists.

“No, Mom, not everyone,” I say firmly, feeling the tension rising. I pinch between my eyes again, feeling the start of a headache.

“How can you say that!” she exclaims.

“Mom, not everyone at church cares! Because shortly after the whole Paul situation happened, I was in the bathroom stalls and I overheard a few of the elders, I won’t say names. But they were making comments about how I, ME! They used MY name! Talking about how I embarrassed the church and how I could let that man manipulate everyone!” I take another calming breath. “So no mom, they don’t care about me.”

I wait a few minutes, the silence heavy on the line. “Look, I’m sorry that my actions hurt you, and I am sorry that I’ve disappointed you. But I need to figure out my life, on my own terms, and in my own way,” I finally say, my voice softening with sincerity.

My dad clears his throat once more and then lets out a breath, “Okay, we can accept

that.”

“Thank you,” I say with a breath of relief.

“You can have Nana bring you over here if want, so you can grab your car,” my dad replies.

“Okay, we’ll come by today...and dad?” I pause.

“Hmm?” he responds.

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“Thank you,” I say sincerely.

“Yup,” he replies simply.

“See you later, dad,”

“Yeah...uh...see you later,” my dad responds before hanging up. I sigh, feeling a mix of emotions swirling inside me. My life is a mess, I think to myself as I finish my third cigarette and head back inside. Nana is sitting on the couch reading a book, and Pop is at the computer. They both look up at me as I walk in.

“How’d it go?” Nana asks, setting her book aside.

“It went as well as to be expected,” I reply, trying to keep my voice steady.

They both nod in understanding. “So, what’s the plan?” Pop inquires.

“They’re allowing me to go by and get my car, so that’s a plus,” I answer, feeling a glimmer of relief.

“Well, that’s good. Now you don’t have to worry about finding someone to take you to work,” Nana replies, offering a comforting smile.

I exhale a mixture of relief and nervousness. It's a relief to have my car back, but I can't shake the nervous feeling that this decision is going to change everything. Sitting down on the edge of the couch, I run my fingers through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts.

Nana leans forward, her expression thoughtful. “Have you thought about what you're going to do next?” she asks gently.

I shake my head, feeling overwhelmed. “Not really. I just needed to get out of there, you know?”

She nods sympathetically. “It's okay to take things one step at a time. You've already taken a big step by leaving. Now, you can focus on figuring out what's best for you.”

I appreciate her words of wisdom, but the uncertainty still gnaws at me. “I just wish I knew what I wanted,” I admit, feeling a pang of frustration.

Pop looks up from his computer, his eyes filled with concern. “You'll figure it out, kiddo. Just give yourself some time.”

I offer a weak smile, grateful for their support. “Thanks, Pop. Thanks, Nana.”

They both smile back at me, their love and understanding comforting me in a way that words can't express.

Chapter Five

Anya

A couple days later, I come home from work and slump down on the couch. Joe listened and stayed on his side of the restaurant. On occasion, I would catch him glaring at me but I didn't have time to baby a man's ego. It's not my problem if he can't handle a little rejection, which is crazy since I didn't fully reject him, I just wasn't ready for it to go that far. I haven't allowed a guy to touch me there since Paul, and when Joe put his hand there, I started to get flashbacks of that night in the motel and I panicked. Either way, I'm glad I saw the real him before it went

anywhere.

Nana walks into the living room with her purse hung over her shoulder, “I’m going to the store, do you want to accompany me?” I politely smile and shake my head, “No thanks Nana, I’ve been on my feet since this morning, I think I’m just gonna rest for a while”. She pats my cheek “Okay sweetie, you rest up. Would you like me to grab anything while I’m gone?” she asks as she heads out the door. “No thanks Nana, I’m okay.” She smiles and then gives me a wave goodbye.

I pull out my phone and scroll through my social media apps. I noticed pictures from my mom’s page, she’s in Greece now. I do miss talking with her but since I moved out, she’s been distant. When we do talk it’s one-word answers or just small talk. I don’t regret standing my ground but I do regret how I did it. I keep scrolling until I come across an ad for a cruise vacation to the Bahamas. It’s a 5-night trip for only \$500. You could use a vacation, Lord knows you need it, my inner voice nudges me. I immediately pick up my phone and text Lana.

ANYA: “Hey crazy idea!”

LANA: “Oh, I’m intrigued, do tell”

ANYA: “Lol your birthday is next month right?”

LANA: “Ouch! I’m hurt that you don’t know my birthday! ;-P”

ANYA: “Shut up brat, I’m just confirming lol”

LANA: “Yes, my birthday is next month. I’ll be the big 25!”

ANYA: “What are your thoughts about going on a cruise the week of your birthday?”

LANA: “OMG! YES!!!!”

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ANYA: “Perfect! I’ll buy the tickets today!”

LANA: “Wait, how much is it?”

ANYA: “It’s only \$500 a ticket”

LANA: “Damn! That’s cheap for a cruise!”

ANYA: “I know right? I’ll send you the confirmation as soon as its booked”

LANA: “Great! I’ll venmo you the \$500”

ANYA: “What?! No! It’s my birthday gift to you!”

LANA: “Any, I know where you work, which means I know how much you get paid. So, I will send my \$500 and you can just buy me a souvenir.”

ANYA: “Okay, fine! Party pooper!”

LANA: “lol, you love me anyway”

I booked the cruise and then sent the confirmation information to Lana. Within two minutes she sends me her half. She can be so stubborn sometimes, but she was right. Paying the full amount would have taken a huge chunk of my money. Looks like I need to start picking up more shifts to put some money aside for the trip! This is gonna be great! I say to myself.

Later that night, I sent pictures of all the stores, restaurants, and activities the cruise offers. I even sent over information about possible shore excursions that we could do when we get to each destination. I continue looking through all the photos when Lana's name pops up on my screen.

"Is that a nightclub?" she excitedly asks.

"Yes," I reply.

"Oh my god! Girl! We are going to have so much fun! I can't wait!" she squeals.

I chuckle as I continue browsing through the photos on the computer. We go over the details of transportation and food, planning out our upcoming adventure.

"Any, you have no idea how excited I am to go!" Lana exclaims, her enthusiasm infectious.

My ears know exactly how excited you are, I mutter to myself with a smirk. "Have you ever gone on a cruise before?" she asks with anticipation.

"Yeah, my parents took us four years ago to Bermuda," I reply, recalling the memories of that trip.

"We should totally go there next!" Lana suggests, her excitement palpable.

"Yeah, maybe," I respond with a hint of hesitation. "Just let me lose a few pounds first. I already have enough anxiety about lying by the pool on this cruise, I can't even think about the beach" I admit, feeling self-conscious.

"Girl, stop! You are gorgeous!" Lana insists, her tone firm. "I bet you'll have all the men eating out of your hands."

I let out a snort, feeling a mix of amusement and disbelief. “Yeah, right? Men don’t want someone like me,” I retort, my insecurities bubbling to the surface despite Lana's reassurances.

flashback

“What the fuck are you wearing?”

“What? It’s a dress that I bought” I look down at my blue dress, it goes to the middle of my thighs. Then it hugs the curves of my hips and waist. It has a heart-shaped neckline, my cleavage barely makes an appearance and the straps clip together at the back of my neck.

“You look like an idiot” he scoffs and looks down at his phone.

“I do not!” I say as I recheck myself in the mirror.

“Any, please look at yourself again, that dress isn’t meant to be worn by someone your size”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean” I snap.

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“It means you need to lose weight before you’re seen with me wearing something like that” he barks.

“Fuck you, Paul!” I quickly slam my hand over my mouth. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean it, I swear it just came out” I panic but it’s too late. Before I know it, I feel the sting on my cheek and his hand firmly grabbing my jaw. Tears are running down my face as I try to pull Paul’s hand down. “Don’t you ever speak to me like that again!” I’m wincing and the taste of metal hits my tongue. Paul lets go and I bring my hand to my mouth. I cut the inside of my cheek against my teeth.

“Anyaaa? You there?” Lana’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts. “Yeah, sorry, I zoned out. What were you saying?” I reply, trying to sound confident.

“I asked you if you wanted to go out tonight,” Lana answers, her excitement evident in her voice.

“Oh...” I glance at the clock, it reads 10:28 P.M. “I would love to, but I have to work a double shift tomorrow. Raincheck?” I suggest, feeling torn between wanting to have fun and the responsibilities looming ahead.

“It’s not that I can’t handle being out all night, I can,” I reassure myself silently, “but that memory of Paul mocking my weight made me self-conscious. Fuck Paul! He doesn’t control you anymore!” my inner voice retorts.

“You know, yeah, Lana, I’ll go out with you tonight, and then you can spend the night here,” I say with newfound confidence, pushing aside my insecurities.

“Yayyy! Okay, I’ll let my parents know I’m staying at your house. If they ask, we just watched The Notebook,” Lana squeals with excitement.

I laugh at her enthusiasm. “You too, huh?”

“Oh hush, my parents don’t care if I’m out all night. They just care if I’m at the bar. They’re afraid I’ll turn out like my uncle and start day drinking,” she confides in a hushed tone.

We hang up, and I start getting ready. After curling the ends of my hair, I pull out a hot pink strapless dress that accentuates my curves. Then I slip on my black leather jacket and matching knee-high boots. “Oh yeah, I look badass,” I say to myself in the mirror with a grin.

I knock on Nana’s bedroom door and let her know I’m heading out. She nods understandingly and waves me goodbye, her eyes filled with a mixture of concern and affection.

I walk into the bar and look around the room, it is jammed-packed for a Wednesday night. But then I see a sign that says Ladies Night, Half-priced drinks till 10 p.m. Oh sweet! I exclaim to myself. I keep scanning the crowd looking for Lana as I continue walking inside. Finally, I see her in the far corner of the bar sitting with a couple of people I don’t recognize. I push my way through the crowd of people who have gathered around the bar, most have credit cards in their hands, and they are shouting at the poor bartenders. I would hate to be them tonight. I walk toward the table; Lana is already out of her chair and rushing over toward me. She wraps me in a hug and then introduces me to everyone. “Hey everyone, this is my good friend and co-worker, Anya” I give a polite smile and a small wave to everyone.

She lets me get in the booth first and then follows after me. I look around the table and Anya starts introducing them to me. “Okay this is Michaela”, she sitting on the

other side next to Lana. She is short like Lana, with curly red hair, and her freckles bring out her hazel eyes. “This is Peter and that’s his girlfriend, Bonnie”, they sit across from us and are both equally good-looking. Peter is tall, his dark brown hair is slicked back, he has deep blue eyes, and his muscles show that he works out. Bonnie has light brown skin, light brown eyes, straight black hair, and maybe 5’6”. They both do a slight nod up in the air as a gesture of acknowledgment. Lana continues going around the table, “Next to Bonnie is Olivia”, who for some reason is looking at me like I just climbed out of a dumpster. She’s gorgeous, I’ll give her that. With her full lips, long brown hair, slender body, and long legs. If she keeps staring at me like that, she won’t have a pretty face any longer. My inner voice warns, “And sitting right next to you is Liam”, he is the complete opposite and looks at me like I’m his next meal. He’s not bad to look at though, he’s tall too, let’s be honest everyone is tall compared to my 5’1” height. He’s wearing a tight t-shirt that defines his muscular body, he has a strong jawline that leads to his sculpted chin. When he smiles, a dimple peeks through his left cheek. I smile, ignoring the daggers coming from Olivia. Seriously, what is her problem?

“Nice to meet you all,” I say looking around the table Except you Olivia! I say to myself. Bonnie leans in, “So, how long have you two worked together?” she points between me and Lana. “Well, I’ve been working at Lonestar Mex for about 4 years now, and Lana came on board a few months after I did.

Olivia pursed her lips and jerked her head up, “How sad that you have to waitress for money, I could never” she said then flipped her hair over her shoulder. I sharply turned my head in her direction, shooting her a menacing glare. She gives me one back. I lean in toward Lana, “hey what is Olivia’s problem with me?”. Lana looks toward Olivia and then back at me. “I honestly have no clue” she replies. We both sit back up and I try my best to ignore Olivia.

After a while, I feel myself getting comfortable, despite Olivia’s dirty looks every now and then. Liam then leans in toward me, his breath warm against my ear, and his

hand resting lightly on my back. I instinctively tense at the sensation and subtly shift my body away from him. "Don't be afraid of me, sweetheart," he whispers, a mischievous grin playing on his lips. "I was just about to ask if you wanted to dance with me." I scoff, "I'm not your sweetheart, and no, I'm fine right where I am, thank you," I retort with a touch of disdain.

"I'll dance with you, babe," Olivia retorts, her tone dripping with superiority as she shoots me a condescending look. Liam rolls his eyes in exasperation. "Been there, done that," he interjects, his voice tinged with annoyance as he shoots Olivia a look of disgust. Olivia's expression shifts from one of smugness to a mix of surprise and indignation. Her eyebrows knit together, and her lips purse in a tight line as she processes Liam's response. A flicker of irritation flashes in her eyes before she regains her composure, attempting to mask her frustration with a forced smile. She clears her throat, feigning nonchalance as she replies, "Suit yourself, Liam. I was just offering." She turns away from him, glares at me then starts a conversation with Bonnie.

I can't take this anymore!

I turn to face Olivia, feeling the simmering frustration beneath the surface. "Got a problem with me?" I ask, my tone edged with irritation. Olivia's lips tighten, and she meets my gaze with defiance. "Nope! No problem, as long as you stay away from what's mine!" she smirks. "What does that even mean?" I retort, my frustration mounting. She narrows her eyes. "I mean, I saw pictures of you and Joe at the Rave!" "Pictures?" I think, my confusion growing. "What pictures?" I demand. She scoffs, pulling out her phone and scrolling through the Rave website and shows me. "Look, I have no idea why that photo's there or that it was even taken. But that night, I shut Joe down!" She scoffs again. "Yeah, right? You looked pretty pissed when he had his hand on your thigh."

"Listen up. I don't know you, and you don't know me, but let's set the record

straight!" I say, jabbing my finger towards her. "I don't owe you a GODDAMN thing, but I'll explain anyway! Joe tried to grope me under my dress, and I shut him down. I left him on the dance floor to go to the bathroom. When I returned, he was pissed because I said no! Then had the audacity to insinuate I was asking for it!" I pause, seething. "Just because you see one lousy photo doesn't mean you know what happened!" I take a breath. "Next time, get your damn facts straight before accusing people you don't even know!" I take a breath and then continue.

"And lastly! I wouldn't touch Joe with a ten-foot pole after that. So, if you want his toxic ass, be my guest! Just know what you're getting into before diving headfirst," I finish, sinking back into my seat.

The tension at the table dissipates, and Olivia retreats into her seat, her demeanor subdued after my outburst. Lana, ever the peacemaker, attempts to lighten the mood. "Okay, well, I need a drink after that," she says with a forced chuckle, shooting Olivia a pointed glance that speaks volumes: don't mess with my best friend. Thankfully, Olivia seems to have taken the hint, and the rest of the evening passes without further incident.

Glancing at my phone, I realize it's already past 1 AM, and exhaustion washes over me. I bid farewell to the table, expressing my need for sleep before my double shift the next day. Lana walks me out, offering an apology for Olivia's behavior. I wave off her concern, adopting a casual tone. "Eh, don't sweat it. I've dealt with my fair share of Olivias before. I know how to handle them, and she doesn't bother me," I reassure her.

Lana chuckles, expressing her surprise at Olivia's interest in Joe. I place a comforting hand on Lana's shoulder, offering reassurance. "Lana, it's not your fault. You did nothing wrong. If anyone should apologize, it's her. But I'm not holding my breath. I'm okay, really, and it's no big deal," I assure her with a smile.

"Now, I really do have to go. I barely got any sleep last night, and I don't want any accidents happening because I'm too tired," I say, giving Lana a quick hug before heading home and telling her I'll leave the spare key out.

A few days pass, and Lana and I find ourselves caught up in the whirlwind of work. The restaurant is teeming with patrons, bustling with the energy of Memorial Day weekend and the beginning of summer break. Locals and tourists alike flood the establishment, keeping us on our toes from morning till night. Life in a tourist area certainly keeps you on your toes, that's for sure.

Finally, we manage to snag a brief moment to eat and steal away for a quick smoke outside. In the hectic life of a server, there's no such thing as a proper break. You grab bites whenever you can between serving tables, and more often than not, your food ends up in the trash before you can finish it.

"I can't believe this is our last day before vacation," Lana gasps, catching her breath between drags of her cigarette.

"I know, right? It's like the universe decided to throw every local and tourist our way just before we leave," I quip, trying to lighten the mood.

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Lana chuckles, "Maybe it's because it knew we needed the money."

With a sigh, we finish our cigarettes in silence, the weight of exhaustion settling over us. I tap Lana on the knee, signaling it's time to head back inside. We both return to our shifts, pushing through the final stretch of the day.

As the night comes to a close, Lana and I make our way to our respective cars. "I can't wait for tomorrow," Lana exclaims, her excitement palpable.

I nod in agreement, mustering a smile despite my fatigue. Thankfully, I've already packed my suitcase in advance. "I'll meet you back at my house," I tell Lana as we part ways. We've decided it's best for her to stay the night so we can head to the bus station early the next morning for our journey to New York. Tomorrow can't come soon enough.

Chapter Six

Anya

I was buzzing with excitement as Lana and I geared up for our vacation. It feels like we've been waiting for this trip for ages, and finally, the day was here. With our bags packed and our spirits soaring, we headed to the bus station, the first stop on our journey to the cruise dock in New York City.

"Can you believe we're finally doing this?" Lana exclaimed, her eyes shining with excitement as we walked towards the bus station.

"I know, right? It feels like we've been waiting forever," I replied, my heart racing with anticipation. She giggles, "Time really flew by, didn't it?" Lana remarked, a grin spreading across her face. "I can't believe it's finally happening, especially considering we started planning this just 2 months ago!"

Stepping into the bustling bus station, I felt a surge of energy at the sight of so many travelers bustling about. Signs pointing us to different platforms added to the thrill as we weaved our way through the crowds, each step bringing us closer to our vacation. The air buzzed with excitement, and I couldn't help but feel a thrill of anticipation coursing through me as we found our bus. This was it—the beginning of our vacation, and I was ready to dive in headfirst.

On the bus, I eagerly took the window seat beside Lana, my heart racing with excitement as we hit the road towards our New York. "Oh my God, I'm so excited, Anya!" Lana exclaimed; her voice filled with anticipation as she squeezed my arm. "I know you've been on a cruise before, but this is my first vacation without my parents. Like, I feel like I'm finally an adult!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining with excitement.

I couldn't help but grin at Lana's enthusiasm. "I'm grateful you said yes," I replied. Her eagerness added an extra layer of excitement to our adventure, and I was thankful I was able to do this with her.

As the bus driver pulled out of the station, a flutter of excitement and anxiousness filled me up inside. While yes I've been on a cruise before, like Lana, I've never been on one without my family. So this is new for me as well, just gotta get past this nervousness. I glanced out the window, watching as the familiar sights of our small New Jersey town slowly faded into the distance. The excitement of the journey ahead mingled with a bittersweet feeling of leaving home behind, but I knew that thrilling adventures awaited us on the horizon. With a sense of exhilaration, I settled back in my seat, ready to embrace whatever the road had in store for us.

As we entered the city limits, Lana's eyes went wide with wonder. "Anya, look!" she exclaimed, leaning across me and pressing her face against the window. The towering skyscrapers came into view, their gleaming facades stretching toward the sky in a mesmerizing display of urban splendor.

"It's so beautiful!" Lana exclaimed, her voice filled with awe and excitement. I couldn't help but share in her enthusiasm as I gazed out at the impressive skyline, feeling a sense of exhilaration at being surrounded by the energy and vibrancy of the city. It was a breathtaking sight.

As we exited the Port Authority, the hustle and bustle of the city enveloped us, immediately assaulting our senses with a cacophony of noise and an array of smells. The sounds of honking horns, chattering pedestrians, and bustling traffic filled the air, creating a symphony of urban life. Meanwhile, the pungent aroma of street food mixed with exhaust fumes, creating a heady blend that was both intoxicating and overwhelming.

"Wow, talk about sensory overload!" Lana exclaimed, wrinkling her nose at the combination of smells.

"Yeah, it's definitely a lot to take in," I agreed, feeling both exhilarated and slightly overwhelmed by the bustling energy of the city..

Excitedly, I scanned the area and spotted the designated taxi stand. "Oh my God, Anya, I'm hailing a cab in the Big Apple! Can you believe it?" Lana exclaimed, her laughter bubbling with infectious joy as we made our way to the waiting taxi.

"I know, right? It's like something out of a movie!" I replied, my own excitement matching Lana's as we climbed into the cab.

Pulling up to the cruise terminal, I couldn't contain my excitement as I laid eyes on

the massive ships all lined up before us. "Holy shit! These ships are massive! I mean, I knew they were big but I hadn't realized just how big," Lana exclaimed, her head tilting back as she took in the sheer scale of the vessels stretching towards the sky.

"Isn't it amazing?" I breathed, my heart pounding with excitement as we stepped onto the gangway. With a flutter of excitement in my chest, I stepped aboard the ship, ready to set sail into the unknown and make memories that would last a lifetime.

As we enter into the grand foyer of the cruise ship, I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe wash over me as I took in the lavishness that surrounded us. The air buzzed with excitement, like the anticipation before a big concert or the thrill of stepping onto a bustling dance floor. Laughter and chatter filled the space, bouncing off the polished walls and mingling with the scent of saltwater and adventure. It was infectious, this vibrant energy that seemed to pulse through the ship, igniting a sense of excitement in everyone it touched. As I stood in the foyer, surrounded by the lively atmosphere, I couldn't help but feel a rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins, a thrill of anticipation for the adventures that awaited me on this journey.

"Wow, this place is incredible!" Lana exclaimed beside me, her eyes darting around the room in wonder.

"I know, right?" I replied, my voice filled with awe. "It's like stepping into a whole other world."

As we made our way further into the ship, I couldn't help but marvel at the variety of shops and cafes that lined the promenade. There was a boutique filled with designer clothing and accessories, a cozy cafe serving up freshly brewed coffee and pastries, and even a bustling marketplace where vendors sold everything from souvenirs to local crafts from our future destination.

"I could spend hours exploring all of this," Lana remarked, her eyes sparkling with

excitement as she glanced around the promenade.

"Me too," I agreed, my gaze lingering on a display of sparkling jewelry in one of the shop windows. "But I think we should head to our cabin first and drop off our bags."

Making our way through the ship, Lana and I eventually arrived at our cabin, which was conveniently located only a couple of floors below the main deck. As a surprise for Lana's birthday, I had upgraded our cabin so that we had a balcony to enjoy and watch the ocean as we departed. As we stepped inside, Lana's eyes widened in surprise and delight at the sight of our upgraded accommodations. "Oh my God, Anya, this is amazing!" she exclaimed, her excitement contagious as she took in the view.

"Surprise! I had it upgraded as a birthday gift to you." I replied, feeling a rush of satisfaction at her reaction.

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“You didn’t have to do that girl! The cruise was plenty enough” she says as she walks around the room. The cabin was snug but surprisingly well-equipped. Two twin beds were placed on opposite sides of the room, promising a haven of comfort after our adventures on the ship. Despite the temptation to collapse onto the inviting mattresses, the thrill of exploration kept us on our toes.

In one corner, a compact mini fridge stood ready, stocked with an array of chilled drinks and snacks. Lana's eyes sparkled with delight as she perused the selection, already planning our indulgences for the voyage ahead.

"Look at this, Anya! They've got everything!" she exclaimed, grabbing a soda with enthusiasm. I couldn't help but grin at her excitement.

Opposite the mini fridge, a small but functional bathroom nestled in the corner, complete with all the essentials for our comfort. Despite its compact size, it held everything we needed – a sink, a toilet, and a shower stall, all immaculately clean and ready for use. The cabin may have been modest in size, but it was cozy and thoughtfully equipped, providing a comfortable retreat among the excitement of our voyage. “So, what do you think?” I ask grinning from ear to ear.

"It's perfect," Lana said, her voice filled with gratitude as she gave me a warm hug. "Thank you, Anya."

With a smile, I returned her hug, feeling a sense of contentment settle over me as I looked around our cabin. This was going to be an unforgettable journey, and it's only just begun.

"Okay, let's go explore!" Lana exclaimed eagerly, her eyes bright with anticipation as she bounded towards the door. I nodded in agreement, feeling a surge of excitement course through me as we placed our bags on our respective beds. With a quick glance around the cabin to ensure we hadn't forgotten anything, we headed out the door, eager to see what else the ship had to offer.

As we wandered through the corridors, I couldn't help but marvel at the ship's luxurious amenities. We passed by a state-of-the-art fitness center, complete with rows of state-of-the-art exercise machines and panoramic views of the ocean stretching out beyond. A tranquil spa enticed us with promises of relaxation and rejuvenation, offering a range of indulgent treatments to soothe both body and soul. And nestled on the upper deck, we discovered a charming miniature golf course, its lush green fairways inviting us to indulge in a friendly round of putt-putt amidst the sea breeze. But perhaps the most enticing discovery of all was the ship's three pools. Two were located in the main area, bustling with activity as passengers lounged in the sun and splashed in the refreshing waters. The third pool, however, was tucked away in the adults-only section, offering a serene oasis of calm away from the hustle and bustle of the main decks.

"There's an adults-only section on this ship?" Lana exclaimed, her eyes widening with mischief as she glanced at me with a mischievous grin. I couldn't help but laugh at her excitement, nodding in confirmation. "Yep, looks like it," I replied, feeling a sense of anticipation bubbling within me at the thought of exploring this exclusive area.

"This ship really has everything," Lana remarked, her eyes wide with amazement as we passed by a row of elegant dining rooms. "Yeah, it's like a floating city," I agreed, my gaze drawn to the ornate chandelier that hung in the center of the ship's main atrium. It glittered and sparkled in the light, casting a warm glow over everything around it. "Look at that chandelier!" Lana exclaimed, her voice filled with awe as she gazed up at the magnificent fixture. "It's absolutely stunning."

"It really is," I agreed, feeling a sense of wonder wash over me as I took in the beauty of the ship's centerpiece.

Lana's eyes sparkled with excitement as she took in the sights and sounds around us. "I can't believe we're actually here," she exclaimed, her voice filled with wonder and awe. I smiled at her, sharing in her sense of amazement. "I know, right? It's going to be so much fun."

As we strolled through the ship, our curiosity piqued by the promise of the drink of the day, we found ourselves drawn to one of the lively bars onboard. The air was filled with the cheerful chatter of fellow passengers, and the sound of clinking glasses and laughter added to the festive atmosphere.

"Nana wasn't kidding about the drink of the day," I remarked with a grin, feeling a sense of excitement building within me as we approached the bar. "I can't wait to see what today's drink is."

"Oh, I know right?" Lana chimed in, her eyes shining with anticipation as we perused the menu. After a moment of deliberation, we placed our orders, eager to sample the signature concoction of the day.

With our drinks in hand, Lana and I found a prime spot near the railing, eager to take in the breathtaking scenery of the New York skyline one last time before our departure. The sun was beginning to dip below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the iconic landmarks that dotted the cityscape. As we sipped our drinks and marveled at the view, the horn of the ship suddenly blared, its powerful sound echoing across the water and signaling our imminent departure. With a surge of excitement, we joined the crowd of passengers who had gathered at the railings, waving enthusiastically at the people standing at the terminal below.

"Bye! See you in five days, New York!" Lana shouted eagerly, her voice carrying

across the water as we raised our glasses once more in a final toast to the city.

With a sense of excitement and anticipation coursing through us, we watched in awe as the ship gracefully pulled away from the terminal, gliding smoothly across the water. As the towering skyscrapers and twinkling lights of New York slowly faded into the distance, replaced by the vast expanse of the open sea, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement wash over me. Look out world, here we come!

Chapter Seven

Anya

After the excitement of our departure and the mandatory emergency drill, Lana and I headed back to our room to change into our swimsuits. "I wanna try the water slide," Lana exclaimed with excitement. "Oh, for sure!" I agreed enthusiastically, already picturing the thrill of sliding down the twisting chute. As I rummaged through my suitcase, I pulled out my favorite swimsuit – a flowery print pink bikini that always made me feel confident and beautiful. I loved how it accentuated all the right curves on my body, and it never failed to make me feel like a beach goddess. Slipping into the bikini, I glanced at myself in the mirror and couldn't help but smile. I felt ready for some fun in the sun and couldn't wait to hit the water slide.

"You ready?" I called out from behind the bathroom door, knowing Lana was changing in the room while I changed in the bathroom.

"Yep!" she replied cheerfully.

I stepped out of the bathroom and was greeted by Lana, who was wearing a vibrant neon green bikini top paired with neon pink bottoms. I couldn't help but chuckle at her bold choice of colors.

"Really?" I teased her, giving her a playful grin.

Lana shrugged nonchalantly, returning my teasing with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "What? I need to show up as hot as you," she quipped, her tone lighthearted and teasing.

"Oh, stop!" I said though a tinge of insecurity crept into my voice. "You know you're the one with the hot curves and big booty," I admitted, glancing at Lana's figure and then back at my reflection in the mirror. As I looked at myself, doubts nagged at the edges of my mind. My own curves felt inadequate compared to Lana's, and I couldn't help but feel self-conscious about my appearance. "I think I need to do more squats to catch up to you," I said, attempting to brush off my insecurities with a half-hearted joke.

Lana's laughter filled the room, but inside, I struggled to shake off the feeling of inadequacy. Despite her reassurances, I couldn't help but compare myself to her and feel like I fell short. It was a battle against my own self-doubt, one that I knew I needed to overcome.

With our swimsuits on and excitement bubbling within us, we were ready to hit the pool deck and make the most of our day at sea. Despite my lingering insecurities, I was determined not to let them dampen my spirits. This was supposed to be a fun-filled vacation, after all, and I wasn't about to let anything hold me back. Including myself. Linking arms with Lana, I plastered a bright smile on my face as we made our way out onto the deck. The sun was shining overhead, casting a warm glow over the sparkling blue waters of the pool. Laughter and chatter filled the air as fellow passengers lounged in the sun and splashed in the refreshing pool.

"I'm gonna get in line for the waterslide," I said to Lana, feeling a surge of excitement at the thought of the thrill awaiting me.

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"Okay, let me find some lounge chairs to save first," Lana replied, her eyes scanning the deck in search of the perfect spot to relax.

With a nod, I headed off towards the waterslide, eager to experience the rush of adrenaline as I zoomed down the twisting chute. As I joined the line of eager passengers, I couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation building within me.

Lana quickly joined me in line, her cheerful demeanor adding to the excitement bubbling within me. As we waited for our turn, we chatted animatedly, sharing stories and laughter as the line slowly snaked its way forward. Before I knew it, it was my turn to go down the waterslide. With a mix of nerves and exhilaration, I climbed into the starting position, readying myself for the thrilling ride ahead. As the attendant gave me the go-ahead, I pushed off and felt the rush of wind against my face as I zoomed down the twisting chute. The sensation was exhilarating, a whirlwind of adrenaline and excitement as I twisted and turned through the water. With a whoop of joy, I emerged at the bottom of the slide, my heart racing and a wide grin plastered across my face.

As Lana emerged from the waterslide with a whoop of excitement, I couldn't help but grin at her infectious energy. Her flushed face and sparkling eyes spoke volumes about the thrill of the ride. "That was incredible!" she exclaimed, her voice filled with exhilaration.

"I know, right?" I replied, mirroring her excitement. The rush of adrenaline still pulsed through my veins, and I was eager to experience it all over again.

"Do you wanna go again?" I asked excitedly, unable to contain my enthusiasm. The

thought of another exhilarating ride down the waterslide filled me with anticipation, and I hoped Lana felt the same. "Absolutely!" Lana exclaimed eagerly, her enthusiasm matching my own. With a shared grin, we headed back up the stairs to enjoy the thrill of the waterslide once more.

After three exhilarating rides down the twisting chute, our laughter echoing through the air, we finally emerged at the bottom, breathless but exhilarated. "You ready to go lounge by the pool and sunbathe?" I asked Lana, feeling a pleasant exhaustion settling over me. Lana nodded eagerly, her eyes shining with anticipation. "Definitely," she replied. "Let's go soak up some sun!"

With that, we made our way to the pool deck, eager to bask in the warmth of the sun and relax after our exciting escapades on the waterslide. As we found a pair of lounge chairs and settled in, I felt a sense of excitement wash over me once again. Despite my initial reservations, being here with Lana and surrounded by the beauty of the sea was exactly where I wanted to be. With each passing moment, I could feel my worries melting away, replaced by a sense of freedom and joy.

Just then we heard the entertainment coordinator's voice boom over the loudspeaker, the energy on the pool deck seemed to amplify. Excitement rippled through the crowd as he teased about the night's upcoming events.

"Alright party people! Are you ready for some fun?" he exclaimed, prompting cheers and applause from the passengers gathered around.

"That's what I like to hear! Now just a few announcements," he continued, his enthusiasm infectious.

"Where are all my single people at?" A roar of voices filled the air in response, and I couldn't help but chuckle at the lively atmosphere.

"Awesome! We have a booming nightclub on the main deck and we are giving you all a chance to find Looove! Or something else not appropriate for kids' ears," he joked, eliciting laughter from the crowd.

"Anyway, tonight we are having a singles event for all our single ladies and single men over the age of 18! You don't want to miss out on this! So, head on down to the nightclub tonight at 9 p.m., and who knows, love might be in the air tonight," he announced, his words met with cheers and excitement from the passengers.

As the entertainment coordinator wrapped up his announcements, I couldn't help but steal a glance at Lana. Her smile hinted at the excitement bubbling beneath the surface, mirroring my own nerves and anticipation.

"Do you want to go to the singles' event?" I asked, my voice betraying a mix of nervousness and curiosity. I reminded myself that I was here to have fun, let loose, and enjoy the adventure.

"Duh!" Lana exclaimed, her playful tone easing some of the tension building within me. But her teasing comment about finding guys to have fun with struck a nerve. I couldn't help but feel a pang of hesitation, a reminder of my past that had left me guarded and wary. I knew I had sworn off guys, the hurt was still fresh in my mind. But Lana's infectious enthusiasm and the promise of a night filled with possibilities made it hard to resist. With a deep breath, I pushed aside my reservations, reminding myself that tonight was about letting go, about embracing the moment and the chance for new connections. Plus, Lana would be with me, so I knew I would be okay. As I thought about the night ahead, I couldn't help but feel a glimmer of excitement mixed with a little bit of nerves. Whatever the night held in store, I was ready to embrace it, one step at a time.

Chapter Eight

Anya

Standing before the floor-length mirror, I tug at the hem of my dress, nerves fluttering like restless butterflies in my stomach. This dress—shorter than my usual attire—feels like a daring choice, a departure from my comfort zone. But even as I attempt to embrace this newfound freedom, anxiety still coils within me, refusing to let go.

Lana emerges from the bathroom, elegant teardrop earrings dangling from her ears. "Quit fussing with your dress," she chides, her voice carrying a note of exasperation. I roll my eyes, my fingers involuntarily returning to the fabric. "I think I need something longer," I blurt out, the words escaping before I can stop them.

Her eyes roll in response. "You look stunning, okay? Stop overthinking it. We're here to have fun, remember?" Lana's gaze flickers over her shoulder, a silent invitation to join her in embracing the night's potential.

I push away the familiar tug of self-doubt threatening to pull me under. Lana is right; tonight, is about letting loose, enjoying the moment. "Okay, let's do a final check," she suggests, gliding over to where I stand. As she assesses my silver satin halter dress, I can't help but fidget, adjusting it once more.

Lana swats my hand away with playful exasperation. "Enough with the obsessing. You look absolutely incredible," she insists, her words carrying a warmth that seeps into my doubts.

Returning the compliment, I offer a genuine smile. "You look stunning, Lana," I say, a hint of laughter coloring my voice. And she does—effortlessly chic in her cropped tube top and sleek leggings, her hair styled with a carefree elegance.

As we stand there, ready to embark on the night's adventure, I can feel the

apprehension melting away, replaced by a growing sense of anticipation. "Shall we?" I ask, my tone laced with newfound confidence, eager to see where the evening takes us.

Approaching the club on the cruise ship, my heart races with anticipation, the booming music flooding my senses with excitement. Lana's arm linked with mine provides a reassuring anchor as we stride through the open doors, ready to dive headfirst into the night.

Inside, the club explodes with a kaleidoscope of lights, casting a spell of electrifying energy over the bustling scene. The bar beckons from the back, a hub of activity with people already deep in conversation or eagerly ordering their first drinks of the evening.

To our left, the dance floor pulses with life, bathed in the flickering glow of multicolored lights and the hypnotic sway of a disco ball overhead. The DJ stand looms large against the wall, its decks alive with the promise of infectious beats and pulsating rhythms.

Booths line the walls, offering secluded corners for intimate moments or lively gatherings among friends. Bar tables dot the space, inviting us to linger and soak in the vibrant atmosphere or stake our claim to a prime spot for people-watching.

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As Lana and I take in the bustling scene, a surge of excitement courses through me, fueling my desire to lose myself in the rhythm of the night. With a shared grin, we dive into the throng of revelers, ready to make memories that will last a lifetime in this pulsating oasis of fun and freedom!

"O.M.G. this place is incredible!" Lana's exclamation mirrors my own excitement, her smile infectious as we weave through the pulsating crowd toward the bar. Matching her energy, I grin from ear to ear, the thrill of the night coursing through my veins.

As we place our orders, the booming voice of the MC cuts through the music, drawing our attention to the center of the dance floor. "Hey hey, party people! Welcome to single's night! Are you ready to have some fun?" The crowd erupts in cheers and screams, their enthusiasm echoing off the walls. I can't help but smile, feeling the infectious energy radiating from the MC.

"We have an awesome game for all you singles! Let's call it... an icebreaker!" The MC's announcement piques my curiosity, and I exchange a glance with Lana, excitement dancing in her eyes. "First, I need some volunteers! I need 6 girls and 5 guys." The MC's request hangs in the air, met with a momentary hush from the crowd.

"Don't be shy on me now!" the MC encourages, and Lana and I share a knowing shrug before impulsively stepping forward. "Why the hell not! It's not like we'll see any of them again anyway," I blurt out, my words fueled by a mixture of nerves and adrenaline. Lana nods in agreement as we join the other volunteers at the center of the dance floor.

The MC's grin widens, his mischievous demeanor adding to the excitement. "You've all heard of musical chairs, right?" he asks, eliciting a chorus of affirmative shouts from the crowd. "Well, this is musical chairs with a twist!" he announces, his devilish smirk igniting a sense of anticipation within me.

Lana and I exchanged a glance, our curiosity piqued as we listened to the MC explain the rules. "The rules are the same, except the men are the chairs, and all these beautiful ladies have to sit on a lap once the music ends. Then whoever is left without a lap picks one of these fine men to get to know each other." The MC's laughter fills the room, and my eyes widen in surprise as I survey the group of men before us.

Don't chicken out, Anya, you got this! I silently reassure myself, summoning the courage to embrace the unexpected twist. After all, tonight is about letting loose and having fun. Right? Yes it is, I can do this!

Jacob

Sitting on my bed, I'm engrossed in the pages of a dystopian novel, escaping into a world far removed from the hushed tones of my mom and stepdad's conversation. Their sporadic glances in my direction pique my curiosity, but I try to focus on the fictional realm in my hands.

Suddenly, a movement catches my eye, and I watch as my mom approaches me with a suggestion that instantly sets off alarm bells. "Jacob, honey, why don't you go down to the singles event in the nightclub tonight?" Her overly sweet tone sends a wave of suspicion washing over me.

"I'm not looking to find a girlfriend, mom," I reply, my voice tinged with skepticism as I attempt to deflect her suggestion and return to my book.

Her response only deepens my suspicion. "I'm not saying you go there looking for a

girlfriend, but maybe you can meet new friends," she says, her tone strained with forced cheerfulness.

"Why do you want me to go?" I press, my suspicion growing with each passing moment. The tension in the air is palpable, and I sense that there's more to her suggestion than meets the eye.

With a frustrated sigh, my mom exchanges a telling glance with my stepdad, and suddenly, it all clicks into place. I recoil in disgust at the realization, my mind struggling to erase the unwelcome image that now haunts my thoughts.

Without another word, I hastily make my escape, the need to distance myself from the uncomfortable situation is overwhelming. As I make my way to the nightclub, I try to erase the disturbing thoughts from my mind. I so did not need that image in my brain. I shudder and enter the nightclub.

Glancing around the relatively empty nightclub, I realize I might have arrived a bit early for the event. With a shrug, I take a moment to assess my outfit, relieved that I hadn't changed into my comfortable bedclothes just yet. My baby blue polo shirt and dark blue jeans suddenly seem like a decent choice, especially considering the casual vibe of the crowd.

Scanning the room once more, I notice that most people are dressed similarly—nothing too fancy or extravagant. It appears that my outfit fits right in with the laid-back atmosphere of the nightclub.

Walking further into the club, I notice a group of guys who appear to be around my age. One of them catches my eye—a brown-haired guy with glasses, slightly shorter than me, and his friend, a taller, leaner guy with darker skin.

The brown-haired guy nods in my direction, a knowing look in his eyes. "You got

thrown out too," he remarks, a hint of amusement in his voice. I can't help but chuckle at his observation. "Is it that obvious?" I reply with a polite smile.

He returns my smile, introducing himself as Ben, and gesturing to his friend. "And this is JC," he adds. I nod in acknowledgment, feeling a sense of camaraderie in this unexpected encounter. "I'm Jacob," I offer in return, extending a hand in greeting to each of them.

As we continue to people-watch, my attention occasionally drifting back to the lively scene unfolding around us, something catches the corner of my eye—a glint of something shiny near the entrance. Instinctively, I turn my head, and my pulse quickens with a surge of excitement.

At the entrance, bathed in the neon lights and pulsating energy of the club, stands a figure that immediately captures my attention. A rush of anticipation courses through me as I catch a glimpse of her—radiant and alluring, like a beacon amidst the crowd. Holy shit

My eyes glide over her body, taking in every detail—the tan, slender legs leading up to thighs that have just the right amount of thickness. Her silver dress hugs her curves in all the right places and her smile... it's like a spell, capable of enchanting any man within its reach. I'm in awe, completely captivated by her presence.

My body urges me to make a move, to stride over and introduce myself, but my mind throws up barriers, holding me back. "Whatcha staring at?" Ben's voice breaks through my trance, pulling me back to reality. I blink, trying to shake off my inner mind.

"Huh?" I mumble, attempting to play it cool despite my racing thoughts. Ben laughs, clearly amused by my distraction. "Who were you looking at?" he asks again, his curiosity piqued.

Before I can respond, the MC's voice booms through the room, cutting off any chance of a reply. The sudden interruption is a welcome distraction, giving me a moment to collect myself and regain my composure. As the MC goes over the night's event, I can't help but wonder if I'll have another chance encounter with the mysterious woman who had momentarily captured my attention.

As the MC ramps up the excitement with his lively explanation of the icebreaker game, a surge of energy pulses through me. The idea of jumping into the action feels invigorating, and I can't help but feel a twinge of excitement stirring within.

When he calls for volunteers, a spontaneous impulse overtakes me. As if sensing the same wave of excitement, JC gives us a subtle nudge forward, prompting us to take the plunge together. In unison, we echo the sentiment, "We only live once,". Feeling a rush of adrenaline, I add with a grin, "Yeah, and we probably won't see these people again anyway." We both laugh in unison and head toward the dance floor. As the MC explained the rules of the twisted musical chairs game, I began glancing around at the other volunteers, to see who showed up to participate.

Then, like a sudden burst of shock, I spot her—the mystery woman from the entrance—standing among the other participants. My heart races with a mix of excitement and anticipation. This game just got a whole lot more interesting.

Chapter Nine

Anya

As the men form a circle on the dance floor, anticipation and nerves grip me tightly. The idea of participating in this game sends a rush of excitement mixed with apprehension coursing through my veins.

As I stand there, surrounded by the rest of the volunteers, feeling the anticipation of the game, a sudden realization dawns on me. I've always been seen as the sweet, quiet church girl—the one who plays by the rules and stays within her comfort zone.

Yet, in this moment, a spark ignites within me. A voice inside whispers, not tonight you're not. It's a reminder that I have the power to rewrite the script, break free from the expectations of others, and embrace a new version of myself.

With a surge of confidence, I let go of my doubts and fears. Tonight, I embrace the wild and adventurous side of me that's been waiting to break free. As the game is about to begin, I take a deep breath and let go of all my insecurities.

The MC's voice snaps me out of my thoughts, jolting me back to the present moment. "Are you ready?" he asks, his words injecting a surge of adrenaline into my veins. With a nod of determination, I brace myself for the impending excitement.

Lana squeezes my arm in solidarity, and we begin to circle the group of men as soon as the music starts. My heart pounds with anticipation as we make our way around the circle, the beat of the music propelling us forward.

As the music plays on, I take in the diverse array of faces before me, each one holding its own story and potential connection. Then, as suddenly as it began, the music stops, and I hastily make my way to the nearest available lap.

I find myself seated on the lap of a dark-skinned man, his slender frame requiring effort to support my weight. He smiles warmly at me, and I return the gesture nervously, feeling a flutter of excitement mixed with apprehension.

Before I can say much, the game continues, leaving a young girl without a lap. She quickly grabs a guy, and we're left with a smaller group. The music starts again, and we resume our circuit around the remaining men.

Once more, the music stops, and I quickly choose a lap to sit on, this time finding myself in the embrace of a much thicker frame. I steal a glance at the man beneath me—short light brown hair, captivating blue eyes that seem to dance with the reflections of the disco ball. His strength is evident as he effortlessly holds me up, and his smile lights up his face in a way that sends a flutter through my stomach.

"Hello there," he greets me with a deep voice that sends shivers down my spine. "Hi," I reply shyly, feeling a sudden rush of butterflies in my stomach. Before we can exchange any further words, the music starts again, and the game continues, leaving us with a dwindling group of participants.

As luck would have it, I find myself seated in the same guy's lap for the second time in a row. "Fancy meeting you here again," he jokes with a sly smile, his teasing tone sending a flutter through my stomach. I let out a nervous giggle in response, feeling the heat rising to my cheeks. "So it would seem," I reply, trying to play it cool despite my racing heart.

He gives me a gentle squeeze, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me, before the music starts up again. I barely make it around the circle when, to my

dismay, the music stops once more, and I find myself in the same guy's lap for the third time in a row.

"I swear this isn't on purpose," I blurt out nervously, feeling a pang of embarrassment at the repetitive coincidence. He smiles teasingly, his playful demeanor only adding to my flustered state. "Uh huh, sure it's not," he teases, his tone laced with amusement.

Before I can protest any further, the MC interrupts with a surprising announcement. "Since we're down to 3 girls and 2 guys, we're gonna switch things up," he declares with a devious grin. My eyes widen in shock, and I exchange a bewildered glance with Lana.

"Gentlemen, you have been kneeling all this time and I am sure your knees could use a break, so for this round, we're having the guys lie down on the floor and the girls have to straddle them," the MC finishes, his words sending a flush of embarrassment creeping up my neck. I can't believe this is happening.

Before I can fully process the situation, the music starts up once again, and I find myself glancing nervously between the two men before me. One is the familiar guy I've been unintentionally seated on three times in a row, and the other is some hairy older guy from New Jersey, a prospect I find decidedly unappealing. As the music grinds to a halt, the inevitable happens—I'm straddling on top of the familiar guy once again. My dress rides up to my ass and I struggle to keep it covered. The realization floods me with embarrassment, and I can feel the heat radiating from my flushed cheeks. I can't believe this is actually happening. Oh please don't get a boner! As if detecting my anxiety, I feel his large firm hands reach up and gently pull my skirt down to where I'd rather it be. The subtle yet intentional gesture sets my cheeks on fire as I become flush.

Relief floods over me as the MC finally ends the game, bringing an end to my

awkward predicament. With a sheepish smile, I climb off the mystery guy's lap, grateful for his outstretched hand as he helps me up. I offer him a shy thank-you before glancing around the room.

My eyes land on Lana, who was the unfortunate girl left out of the game. Without hesitation, she grabs the mystery guy's hand and leads him off the dance floor, leaving me to stand there, still feeling the lingering heat of embarrassment on my cheeks.

The MC then calls out, "Looks like we have 2 girls left for the lucky guy!" Looking at the final guy, and doing my best to conceal my revulsion, I motion to the other girl, "You can have him!" My savagery draws "oooooooohs" and laughter from the crowd and MC. I don't care, I just need a break from the intensity of the moment, so I slip away to grab a drink, hoping it will help calm my racing thoughts. When I return, I find Lana and the mystery guy still deep in conversation.

Trying my best to keep my focus on Lana, I approach her, attempting to ignore the magnetic presence of the cute mystery man. However, he startles me when he addresses me directly.

"Well hey! What are you doing here?" he asks, his tone casual yet direct. I raise my eyebrows at his straightforwardness, caught off guard by his boldness.

"I'm here to talk to my best friend," I reply with a playful grin, trying to keep the mood light despite the unexpected interaction. "Why are you still here?" I add, matching his teasing tone.

He laughs in response, raising his hands in a gesture of innocence. "I was talking to your friend Lana here, since she was the one who picked me," he explains, his words tinged with amusement.

I can't help but smile and shake my head, knowing full well that he expected me to pick him. Despite my attempts to play it cool, there's something undeniably charming about his playful banter, and I find myself drawn to him despite my best efforts to resist. I am not here to find a man, I remind myself.

As Lana excuses herself to grab a drink, leaving me alone with my mystery guy, I can't help but feel a pang of nervousness. Towering over my petite 5-foot frame, his presence is even more imposing now that he's standing near me.

With a disarming smile, he says, "Hi, I'm Jacob," his voice smooth and confident. His charm is palpable, and I find myself momentarily at a loss for words.

Quickly regaining my composure, I extend my hand almost instinctively, "Hi, I'm Anya," I reply. A handshake? What is this a business meeting? Get a grip, Anya! Shaking away my lingering thoughts, I focus on Jacob's question. "So are you here with family?" he asks, his hand resting gently on the small of my back as he guides me toward one of the booths. I feel a faint flutter in my stomach at his touch, but I push aside any lingering nerves as I answer, "Uh, no, it's just me and Lana." Despite my attempt at casual conversation, I can't help but feel a sense of warmth at the way Jacob's presence seems to put me at ease. As Jacob settles down next to me, his arm casually draped over the back of the booth, I can't help but feel a sense of warmth at his presence.

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"What about you?" I ask, genuine curiosity coloring my tone as I turn towards him. His easy smile puts me at ease, and I find myself drawn to his relaxed demeanor. "I'm here with my family," he replies, his voice tinged with fondness. "We decided to take a cruise together for this year's family reunion."

His words spark a sense of nostalgia within me, and I find myself reminiscing about my past family vacations. Growing up my family took us on a cruise vacation and I remember my brother making friends and I wonder if this is how he felt when he first met them. Unfortunately, he doesn't talk to them anymore and I wonder if that is how it will be with us. Will we remain friends after the vacation is over? Will we stay friends or will we end up like my brother and fade away?

I shake away my thoughts and focus on Jacob's words as we continue to chat. The atmosphere between us feels light and effortless as if we've known each other for much longer than just a few moments.

Lana's arrival at the table interrupts our conversation, and I turn to greet her with a smile. "There you two are!" she exclaims, holding out a drink for me. "Here, I got a second one for you because I changed my mind on what I wanted," she explains with a grin. I can't help but laugh at Lana's indecisiveness. "So what, I just get your sloppy seconds?" I tease playfully, nudging her gently with my elbow. She playfully rolls her eyes, "As if you'd ever say no to a free drink," she teases, a smirk playing on her lips. I laugh, knowing Lana has a point. "Touché," I reply with a grin, raising my glass in mock surrender. "You got me there."

As the evening unfolds, Jacob's friends Ben and JC join our group, along with two new faces, Piper and Sam. Despite the growing crowd, our conversation flows

effortlessly as we share stories and laughter, each of us eager to learn more about one another.

Jacob's presence is magnetic, drawing me in with his easy charm and genuine personality. With each word he speaks, I find myself hanging on his every word, wanting to know more about him—his passions, his dreams, his quirks. There's something about the way he listens intently to each person's story, his eyes lighting up with genuine interest, that makes me feel comfortable and understood.

As the night wears on and our conversation flows effortlessly, it feels like time has flown by in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, the announcement from the MC jolts us back to reality—the nightclub is closing down for the night.

I instinctively reach for my phone at the same time Jacob does, and in the moment of confusion, our hands accidentally collide. His warm touch sends shivers down my spine, and I feel a rush of electricity course through me. It's a sensation I've never experienced before, a sudden jolt of connection that takes me by surprise.

We lock eyes, a silent understanding passing between us as we both realize the accidental touch. In that moment, everything else fades away, and all I can focus on is the warmth of his hand enveloping mine. It's a feeling unlike anything I've ever felt before, and for the first time in my life, I'm left speechless.

Lost in the moment, it's Lana's gentle nudge that snaps me back to reality, signaling that it's time to leave. With Jacob's hand still intertwined with mine, we both rise from our seats, oblivious to the fact that our hands are still connected.

As Lana casts a knowing glance at our joined hands, a flush of embarrassment washes over me, and I quickly pull my hand away, murmuring a hurried apology along with Jacob. Together, the seven of us make our way out of the nightclub, the cool air from the hallway is a welcome reprieve from the warmth of the moments we

shared inside.

Just as we're about to head towards the elevators, Jacob stops me with a gentle touch on my arm. His proximity sends a shiver down my spine, and I can feel his warm breath tickling my lips as he leans in close. "May we hang out again tomorrow night?"

A rush of excitement courses through me at the thought of spending more time with him, and I find myself nodding eagerly in response. "Yeah, I'd like that," I reply softly, my voice barely above a whisper. As we exchange one final lingering glance, anticipation swirls in the air, and I can't help but wonder what tomorrow night will bring.

Before I can fully process what's happening, Jacob leans down and presses a soft kiss to my cheek. His lips linger for a moment, leaving behind a tingling sensation that spreads warmth throughout my body.

"See you later, beautiful," he murmurs, his voice soft and gentle, before pulling away and heading towards a different elevator. Stunned and speechless, I stand there for a moment, my hand still lingering on my cheek where his lips had just touched. Lana's wide-eyed expression and beaming smile catch my attention, and her enthusiastic declaration sends a wave of warmth through me.

"Oh my god, Anya, he's totally crushing on you!" she exclaims, her excitement contagious.

Yeah right? No one wants damaged goods, my inner voice sneers, echoing the insecurities that have plagued me for so long. The thought of opening up to someone new feels daunting, especially when my past experiences have left me feeling broken and unworthy of love.

"Oh no, he couldn't possibly. He was just being nice," I murmur, dismissing Lana's excitement with a wave of self-doubt. It's hard to imagine that someone like Jacob could genuinely be interested in me, especially when my inner demons rear their ugly head reminding me of all my flaws and shortcomings.

As we make our way toward our cabin, I try to push aside the negative thoughts and focus on the present moment. But deep down, the fear of rejection and heartache looms large, making it hard to believe in the possibility of something real with Jacob. It's a constant battle between my inner demons and the flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, Lana could be right.

Chapter Ten

Anya

As I wake up to the bright morning sunlight filtering through the balcony window, I can't help but wince at its intensity. The pounding headache reminds me of my overindulgence from the previous night. Note to self: never mix drinks again. As I groggily shift in bed, my hand instinctively moves to my cheek, where the ghostly sensation of Jacob's kiss lingers.

As Lana emerges from the bathroom, her cheerful demeanor pierces through my thoughts, grounding me back to the present moment. "Oh good, you're awake," she chirps, her voice bright with energy.

I grumble in response, my head still throbbing from last night's festivities. "How are you not hungover?" I mutter, unable to fathom how she manages to look so fresh and lively.

Lana simply shrugs, her grin widening into a teasing smile. "I guess my body handles alcohol better than yours," she quips, her tone playful.

I shake my head in amusement, unable to argue with her logic. With a sigh, I make my way towards the bathroom, eager to wash away the remnants of the night and prepare for the day ahead.

Feeling rejuvenated after my shower, I step out of the bathroom and join Lana in the room. "So, what's on the agenda today?" I inquire, curious about our plans for the day.

Lana's eyes light up with excitement as she responds, "I think we should head to the pool and maybe give the waterslide another try."

A grin spreads across my face at the suggestion, remembering our previous attempts at conquering the waterslide. "Sounds like a plan," I say in agreement.

"Maybe we can invite the group to come with us," Lana suggests, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

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I pause, realizing the challenge of extending the invitation. "We don't even have a way to invite them. It's not like we exchanged phone numbers since we can't use our cell phones on the ship," I point out.

Lana's expression falls for a moment before she brightens up again. "Oh, shit, you're right. Well, who knows? Maybe we'll end up seeing them at the pool," she concludes optimistically.

With a shrug, I nod in agreement. "Yeah, let's keep an eye out for them," I say, trying to remain hopeful. We grab our pool bags and make our way to the pool. I need some relaxation and sun.

As we arrive at the pool, my eyes instinctively scan the area, searching for any sign of Jacob. I'm not sure why I expected him to be here, but a part of me was secretly hoping to run into him again. Our conversation last night left me intrigued, and I find myself eager to get to know him better.

I enjoyed the group dynamic we had last night, but amidst the lively chatter, it was difficult to have a one-on-one conversation with Jacob. Not that I'm complaining—I genuinely enjoyed the company of everyone—but there's something about Jacob that piques my interest in a way that's hard to ignore.

As I settle into a lounge chair by the pool, I try to push aside my thoughts and focus on enjoying the day. But a part of me can't shake the anticipation of seeing Jacob again. I mean we did plan on seeing each other again tonight so maybe we can continue getting to know each other tonight.

"Let's go on the waterslide again!" Lana's excitement is contagious as she yanks me off my lounge chair. I chuckle at her enthusiasm and eagerly follow her to the waterslide, ready for another round of thrills.

As we take turns descending down the twisting slide, the rush of cool water envelops me, sending shivers of excitement down my spine. Each curve and turn propels us forward, the sensation of speed and exhilaration filling me with a sense of freedom.

With each plunge into the refreshing pool below, I can't help but let out a whoop of joy, the laughter and excitement shared between Lana and me making the experience even more exhilarating. As we emerge from the water, breathless and grinning from ear to ear, I'm filled with a sense of pure happiness and gratitude.

These simple yet unforgettable moments of fun and laughter remind me of the importance of cherishing every moment and making the most of each opportunity for joy and adventure.

Jacob

I make my way to the breakfast bar, filling my plate with food while scanning the room in the hopes of spotting Anya. Last night's unexpected impulse to kiss her cheek lingers in my thoughts, a reckless act fueled by an inexplicable attraction to her. She intrigues me like no other girl has before.

As I carry my plate towards the tables, I catch sight of a familiar face, though not the one I was hoping for. Nonetheless, I find myself drawn to Ben and JC, who seem to have just settled down for breakfast.

"Oh geez," I greet them, announcing my presence. They both look up, surprised but pleased to see me. "They'll just let anyone in here won't they?" I say sarcastically, drawing eyerolls and playful "whatevers" from Ben and JC.

I take a seat with them, engaging in conversation about our plans for the day. Trying to conceal my true feelings, I casually inquire, "Have you seen the girls at all today?"

Ben grins knowingly, his response hinting at his awareness of my interest in Anya. "No, I haven't seen Anya or Lana today," he replies, and JC shakes his head in agreement. Despite the disappointment of not seeing Anya, I try to maintain a casual demeanor, though deep down, I can't shake the desire to see her again.

"Me and JC are going to the pool after breakfast, do you want to come with us?" Ben asks, breaking into my thoughts. I nod eagerly, unable to resist the prospect of a fun-filled day by the pool. "Yeah, that sounds fun," I reply, a glimmer of hope flickering in my mind. Who knows, maybe I'll see Anya there, I think to myself, a sense of anticipation building within me.

Later, once we are poolside, as JC and Ben engage in conversation beside me, my mind drifts elsewhere. I find myself aimlessly scanning the pool area, a glimmer of hope lingering in the back of my mind that I might catch a glimpse of Anya. But to my disappointment, she's nowhere to be seen.

Why am I so fixated on her? What is it about Anya that has me so intrigued? Sure, she's gorgeous, but there's something more than just her appearance that draws me to her. I just can't put my finger on it yet.

Ben nudges my arm, breaking me from my thoughts, and nods toward the waterslide. With a determined effort, I push away my thoughts about Anya. Right now, I'm here to enjoy the company of my newfound friends and soak up the sun. Even if I don't see Anya during the day, I remind myself, I'll have the chance to see her tonight. With that thought in mind, I set aside my worries and focus on having a good time.

"Have you been on the slide yet?" Ben asks as we approach the entrance of the slide. I shake my head. "No, my family and I were so wrapped up in getting to our cabins

and exploring the ship when we first got here that we didn't have time," I reply. "What about you?"

Ben grins. "Nope, I haven't either, but I told myself I would try it today, so here I am," he answers, his excitement evident in his tone. I return his grin, feeling a surge of anticipation.

We finally reach the top of the slide, and Ben eagerly volunteers to go first. I watch as he disappears down the twisting tube, his excited shouts echoing back up to me. Moments later, he emerges from the pool with a triumphant pose, arms raised high.

As soon as Ben exits the pool, it's my turn. Anticipation builds as I wait at the top, eager for the exhilarating rush of the slide. When the staff member signals it's my turn, I push off and feel the adrenaline surge as I plummet down the slide. The rush of water around me and the exhilarating speed leaves me laughing and yelling in excitement.

When I splash into the pool below, Ben greets me with enthusiastic praise for the ride. "Dude, that was freaking awesome!" he declares. I climb out of the pool, exhilarated and grinning from ear to ear. "Hell yeah it was! I'm going again," I reply, already itching for another go.

We continue taking turns racing down the slide, the thrill of the ride keeping us hooked until we realize it's already past 1 p.m. "I'm gonna head back to my cabin, change, and grab some lunch," I announce to Ben and JC as I gather my things. They nod in agreement, "sounds good man" Ben says as he starts packing up his belongings as well.

"Yeah, we should meet up again at the club tonight," JC suggests. I nod in agreement, already looking forward to another night of fun. With a wave to my friends, I make my way to the elevators, eager to rest and recharge before our evening adventures.

Chapter Eleven

Anya

I wake up to the sound of voices drifting in from the hallway outside our cabin. Glancing at the clock, I realize it's mid-afternoon. I must have needed that nap more than I realized. Lana is still fast asleep, so I quietly slip out of bed, careful not to wake her. After a quick visit to the bathroom, I decided to look around for a snack.

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Rummaging through the room, I come up empty-handed. I stand in the middle of the room with my hands on my hips. My stomach grumbles, yeah, yeah I know. Then I remember the ship has some inclusive food options on the lido deck. I grab a piece of paper and a pen and leave a note for Lana letting her know where I am.

I make my way to the elevators, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness. It's my first time out alone on the ship, and I'm not quite sure what to expect. But my stomach urges me to continue.

As I survey the dining room, my eyes dart from one tantalizing option to the next. Pizza, ice cream, tacos...wait, did someone just whisper "tacos" in my ear? My stomach certainly seems to think so, because it's doing the cha-cha in excitement. Ignoring the siren call of the ice cream and the pizza's cheesy allure, I follow my gut—quite literally—towards the source of that heavenly aroma. My nose knows best, and it's leading me straight to taco town. After all, who needs a compass when you have the scent of tacos to guide you?

I laugh at my inner monologue and grab the Mexican goodness that quite literally called to me. I sit and begin devouring my taco creation, fully embracing the flavor fiesta happening in my mouth. Just as I'm about to declare my love for tacos to the entire dining room, Piper, the only other woman besides Lana and me, of our newfound friend group, plops down across from me.

"Hey!" she greets, her smile infectious.

"Hey back atcha!" I reply, gesturing for her to join the taco party.

Piper apologizes for interrupting my taco time, but I wave off her concerns with a chip-filled hand. We dive into conversation, swapping stories about our day's adventures. Turns out, we practically crossed paths at the pool, but the universe decided to play hide-and-seek with our friendship.

"Isn't it wild how we missed each other?" I chuckle, shaking my head.

"That's it!" Piper jokingly slaps her hands on the table, "we need a secret handshake or something to find each other next time," her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Totally! I'll start practicing my secret handshake skills tonight," I joke, miming a mysterious handshake.

As we finish our meals and return our trays, Piper nudges me, "Are you hitting up the nightclub later?" she asks.

"Absolutely! Gotta see if Lana's up from her nap first, then it's party time," I confirm with a nod. We say goodbye and go our separate ways.

I head back to our cabin and find Lana sitting up in her bed, engrossed in a book. "Hey, I'm back," I announce as I enter.

"Hey, how was the food options up top on deck?" Lana asks, looking up.

"Oh my goodness, it was great! They have tacos here!" I exclaim.

"No way, shut up!" Lana responds, clearly excited.

"I saw Piper too!" I add eagerly.

"Really? That's awesome! Is she going tonight?" Lana inquires.

"Yeah, she is. We talked about it, and I filled her in on everything," I reply, recounting our conversation.

Excited and ready for the night ahead, Lana and I spend a few hours chatting and getting ready in our cabin. The anticipation of another night of fun with our new friends fills the air as we share stories and laughter.

As we finish our preparations, Lana gives me a mischievous grin. "Anya, you're going to turn heads in that outfit," she says, nodding approvingly at my ensemble. "And you, Lana, look absolutely stunning," I reply, admiring her elegant black dress that perfectly accentuates her figure.

With one final glance in the mirror, we head out of the cabin and make our way to the nightclub. The lively atmosphere of the ship envelops us as we walk through the corridors, the sounds of laughter and music growing louder with each step.

When we arrive at the club, we're greeted by the familiar sight of flashing lights and pulsing music. The energy is infectious, and we can't help but feel a surge of excitement as we step inside. Our friends are already there, gathered near the dance floor, and we quickly join them.

As we make our way toward our friends, Piper's familiar figure comes into view, her infectious grin signaling our arrival. I can't help but feel a flutter of excitement as she waves eagerly and pulls us into her embrace, her warmth instantly easing any lingering nerves. "Hey, long time no see," she teases. Lana and I exchange smiles before returning the greeting with a synchronized "Hey."

The group soon expands as Ben, JC, Sam, and Jacob join us, their laughter blending with the buzz of conversation around us. I engage in friendly banter with the first three, relishing in the familiarity of our interactions. But when my eyes meet Jacob's, everything else seems to fade into the background. His gaze is intense, unwavering,

and it sends a shiver down my spine.

Suddenly, it feels like we're the only two people in the room. His eyes hold mine, drawing me in with a magnetic pull that's both thrilling and unnerving. It's like he sees right through me, igniting a flurry of emotions within me.

I push aside my swirling thoughts and muster a cool smile. "Hey, Jacob," I greet him, trying to maintain a casual demeanor. His wide smile in response sends a flutter through my chest. "Hey!" he replies enthusiastically, closing the distance between us. "Would it be alright if I give you a hug?"

His question catches me off guard. Is it okay if he hugs me? His consideration surprises me, and I find myself nodding in agreement before I even fully process the question. As his arms envelop me, I'm engulfed in a warmth that feels both comforting and disconcerting.

For a moment, I'm tempted to linger in his embrace, to lose myself in the safety of his arms. But a voice of caution whispers in the back of my mind, reminding me of past experiences and the need to guard my heart. So, with a polite smile, I gently extricate myself from his embrace, creating a comfortable distance between us once more.

We squeeze into a booth, Lana beside me, and Piper, JC, and Sam on the other side. Jacob settles next to me, with Ben beside him. Conversation flows freely, laughter filling the air as we catch up. Despite the mixed feelings swirling within, being surrounded by friends brings a sense of comfort and belonging.

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Jacob's arm rests casually behind me, his touch sending a shiver of anticipation down my spine. With a slight tilt of his head, he leans in closer, his voice a warm whisper that feels like a secret shared between just the two of us. "Would you like something to drink?" he asks, his eyes locked on mine, making my face flush.

I try to catch my breath and I get a whiff of his cologne. The smell envelops me in a tantalizing embrace, its rich, woody scent mingling with a soft hint of vanilla, creating an intoxicating aroma that leaves me entranced.

It's not until he leans closer and puts his hand on my arm that I am brought out of it. He asked me something...shit what did he say?

"Sorry, what was that? I kind of spaced out for a moment," I manage to say, a nervous laugh escaping my lips as I try to play off the effect his closeness has on me. With a quick shake of my head, I attempt to regain my composure, hoping he doesn't notice the way my heart is still racing from his proximity. It's a struggle to maintain my cool, but I refuse to let him see just how much he affects me.

With a sultry smile playing on his lips, he leans in closer, his hand lingering on my arm. As his thumb gently glides across my skin, sending a pulse straight to my core. "I'm heading to grab a drink. Care to join me?" he repeats, his voice low and inviting, igniting a flicker of desire within me.

As if acting on autopilot, my hand moves of its own accord, reaching out to grasp his as he leads me toward the bar. We navigate through the pulsing crowd of the club, his arm wrapping securely around my waist, drawing me close to him. The proximity sends my heart into overdrive, each step feeling electric with anticipation. His touch

sets my skin ablaze, igniting a fire within me that I struggle to contain. Why does this man affect me so much?

Navigating through the bustling bar, Jacob's hand stays reassuringly planted at the small of my back, guiding me through the crowd. It's packed, and we're constantly bumping into others, but Jacob pulls me closer, protecting me from the chaos around us. With a gentle gesture, he positions me in front of him, silently signaling for me to order.

I shoot him a grateful smile before turning to the bartender, trying to focus on my drink order amidst the noise and commotion. Despite the crowd, I can feel the comforting warmth of Jacob's chest against my back, tempting me to lean into him. But I know I can't let myself get carried away. I've been down that road before, and I can't afford to fall into that trap again.

Resisting the urge to let my emotions take over, I remind myself of the importance of keeping my guard up, determined not to let his proximity cloud my judgment.

As we return to our table, the irresistible beat draws everyone onto the dance floor. Not feeling quite in the mood to join just yet, I opt for a seat. Jacob, seeming to share my sentiment, settles down beside me without hesitation.

I take a large gulp of my drink, momentarily forgetting how strong it is, but manage to cover my reaction with a casual smile. Liquid courage, I remind myself, needing the extra boost to keep my composure around Jacob without succumbing to the overwhelming attraction pulsing between us. Yes, Anya, alcohol will definitely keep you from doing that! I chuckle inwardly at my own sarcasm before taking another sip.

"You wanna dance?" I ask, the words slipping out before I can second-guess myself. Despite the nervous flutter in my stomach, I'm determined to seize the moment and enjoy the evening.

He nods and grabs my hand, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me, igniting a fire that burns hot beneath my skin. With a playful smile, he pulls me onto the dance floor, our bodies moving in sync with the rhythm of the music. With his hands on my hips, we sway together to the music. He lowers his head, bringing his mouth to my neck, I can feel the heat of his breath against my skin, his proximity sending my heart into overdrive. He brings his arm around my waist and I bring my hand up to his head. His other arm is gripping my hip. My heart is racing as his hand moves lower to my navel and then to the top of my leggings. Each touch sends electric shocks straight to my core.

Lost in the moment, I let myself surrender to the intoxicating allure of the music and the undeniable chemistry between us. With each step, each movement, I can feel the tension between us building, a simmering heat that threatens to consume us both.

As our bodies press closer together, I can't help but lose myself in the sensation of him against me, the heat of his body mingling with mine in a dizzying whirlwind of desire. In that moment, there's no one else in the world but us, no thoughts or worries, just the raw intensity of the connection pulsing between us.

And as the music continues, I find myself drawn irresistibly to him, my body moving of its own accord as I press closer, arching my back so my ass is grinding against his crotch. I feel him getting hard behind his jeans. I push harder to create more friction. He brings his hand up and slides his finger to caress the underside of my breast. I lean my head back, craving the intoxicating heat of his touch. My skin is so sensitive that just his mere touch makes my core pulse. My breathing is heavy and I'm so lost in his touch, this moment, I want more, I want—

“Okay party people! I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news but the nightclub is shutting down in 5 minutes!” I'm jolted from my arousal at the MC's voice booming through the dance floor and the grumbles of those around us. I realize where I am standing and where his hands are, I immediately create distance and walk over to

Lana. I mouth to her “lets go” and I grab my stuff. Jacob rushes over and touches my arm. My arousal still rushes through me and his touch sends another jolt between my legs. I have to get out of here now. I turn toward Jacob, “it was great to see you again, thanks for the dance” and I turn and leave with Lana trailing behind. Leaving Jacob with a look of shock and confusion plastered on his face. Ugh god! I’m such a bitch! But I can’t get involved with a stranger, even a stranger as good-looking and wonderful as Jacob.

Jacob

I stand at the entrance of the nightclub, stunned, watching as Anya disappears down the corridor without a backward glance. What just happened? I replay the events in my head, the heat of the dance still lingering in my memory. God, that dance was intense. Her body pressed against mine, her skin so soft and inviting. Every movement sent sparks flying between us, igniting a fire that threatened to consume us both.

When her hips ground against mine, I struggled to contain myself, to keep from fully hardening against her. I'm sure she felt it too, but she didn't pull away. In fact, she seemed just as lost in the moment as I was. It was the hottest dance I've ever experienced.

But now, as I stand here, uncertainty gnaws at me. Did I go too far? No, that couldn't be it. Anya was enjoying herself just as much as I was. Did I push her too far, though? The thought sends a chill down my spine. I never meant to make her uncomfortable. I just wanted to share that electric connection we had on the dance floor. I have to talk to her again, I have to make this right!

Chapter Twelve

Jacob

I wake up early the next morning, my mind still consumed by thoughts of Anya. I can't shake the feeling of urgency, the need to find her and clear the air between us. I don't want to wait until tonight—it's too long to endure this uncertainty. After a quick shower, I hastily get ready and head to breakfast with my family.

"Jacob, how was your night?" my mom asks, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"It was good," I reply, trying to sound nonchalant. "Hung out with some friends I met the first night."

My mom smiles knowingly, her expression filled with satisfaction. "See, I told you going to that singles event would do you some good."

I suppress a shudder, knowing the real reason she wanted me out of the room. But deep down, I can't deny that attending the singles event was indeed the best thing that ever happened to me. Now, I just need to find Anya again, before tonight, before the weight of uncertainty becomes too much to bear.

As we sit down at a table, my mind races a mile a minute, still consumed by thoughts of finding Anya. My sister Marissa's voice cuts through my thoughts, answering my mom's question from the food line.

"Tom and I had a wonderful time at the spa yesterday," Marissa says, her tone filled with contentment, "and then we had a relaxing afternoon at the pool. We were too tired to go anywhere else after that."

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"That's wonderful, dear," my mom replies with a smile, her attention momentarily diverted. But for me, the conversation is merely background noise, a distraction from the burning desire to track down Anya and resolve whatever tension lingers between us.

"What's the plan for today?" Marissa asks, her voice cutting through the morning chatter.

"We are going to the beach," my mom responds, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

"Oh, that's exciting! I love the beach!" My sister's enthusiasm is infectious.

My mom's smile widens, radiating joy. "As do I," she replies, her anticipation palpable.

As they discuss the day's activities, I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for my distracted demeanor. While the prospect of relaxing on the beach is exciting, my thoughts are consumed by the urgent need to find Anya.

As if the universe had heard my silent plea, Lana walks through the breakfast bar. My heart skips a beat as I scan the room, searching desperately for Anya, but she's nowhere to be found.

"Excuse me for a moment," I say to my family, barely able to contain my urgency, and quickly make my way toward Lana. With each step, my heart pounds louder in my chest, the need to find Anya overwhelming any other thought or sensation. "Hey, where's Anya?" I blurt out as I approach Lana, startling her.

"Geez, you scared the shit out of me," she exclaims, her hand flying to her chest before she breaks into laughter. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," I apologize quickly.

Lana waves off my apology with a dismissive gesture. "Oh, it's nothing, no big deal," she reassures me. But I can't shake the urgency of my question.

"Where is Anya?" I repeat, my voice betraying my concern.

"Oh, she's in the cabin, still asleep," Lana responds casually. "That girl does not handle hangovers well. When she's drunk, she's a boss bitch. If you didn't know she had been drinking, you would never guess by the way she holds herself," she rambles on.

I offer a polite laugh, but my worry for Anya weighs heavily on my mind. "Do you think I could see her?" I ask, hoping to resolve whatever tension exists between us.

Lana begins to respond, but we're interrupted by Marissa's arrival. "Hey, we're about to get ready to head out," she announces with a warm smile, extending her hand. "I'm Marissa, Jacob's sister."

Lana returns the smile and shakes Marissa's hand. "Hi, it's nice to meet you, and it's no problem," she replies graciously. Then, turning to me, she adds, "We have our own shore excursion to get to as well, but maybe we'll see you later?" With that, she heads back to her table, leaving me torn between my family's plans and my desire to find Anya.

I return my attention to Marissa, my voice tinged with urgency. "Can we hold off on going to the beach for a little bit? I really need to talk to someone. I think I made a mistake last night, and I need to make it right," I explain, hoping she'll understand the gravity of the situation.

Marissa listens attentively as I recount everything that happened between me and Anya last night. Her expression shifts from curiosity to concern as she absorbs the details of my story. "I've got your back, no worries," she reassures me with a comforting smile. "I'll just tell Mom that Tom and I want to have a little alone time, and that you still need to recuperate from last night's event. You and I will reunite with her later."

I grimace at the thought of Marissa and her husband, Tom, spending alone time together, but I quickly shake off the mental image and hug my sister tightly. "Thank you so much, you're the best!"

She chuckles in response. "I know," she teases before heading back to our mom. With a renewed sense of purpose, I turn and make my way back to Lana, determined to set things right with Anya.

Lana sees me approaching this time and instinctively holds out her hand with her cabin key. "She's gonna be pissed at me for giving you this without warning her first, but she'll get over it," she says with a mischievous grin.

I reach for the key eagerly, but Lana pulls it back toward her, her expression turning playful. "If you hurt her or make her cry, there's not a corner on God's green earth that you can hide in for me not to find you and hunt you down," she warns, her tone tinged with humor.

I chuckle and nod, playing along. "Understood," I reply, giving her a mock salute.

Lana finally hands me the key, but not without gesturing with her fingers that she'll be keeping an eye on me. As I turn to walk away, Lana blurts out, "It's room 1223," as if she could read my mind.

I laugh and give her a thumbs up before turning back around and heading towards

Anya's cabin, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness as I prepare to sort things out with her.

I step out of the elevator onto her floor, nerves tingling through me like electricity. Glancing at each door number as I walk down the hallway—1210, 1212, 1214—I finally arrive at 1223. Taking a deep breath, I pause, feeling the weight of uncertainty settling on my shoulders.

Contemplating whether to use the key card, I hesitate. I don't want to make things any worse than they already are. So, instead, I decide to knock. No answer. I try again, knocking a little harder, but still, there's no response.

Standing there, unsure of what to do next, I start to pace in front of her door, mumbling to myself in frustration. Just then, Lana appears down the hallway, her presence both reassuring and unexpected. "What happened?" she asks, concern etched in her features.

"I knocked, but there was no answer," I explain, feeling a twinge of guilt as I glance down at the key card in my hand. "I didn't want to freak her out."

Lana rolls her eyes in exasperation, snatching the key from my hand and expertly opening the door. Gesturing for me to go in first, she follows closely behind as I enter the room.

Inside, I hear Anya's voice coming from the bathroom. "Hey, I'm back!" Lana calls out cheerfully, then gestures for me to sit on the bed. "I'll be right out," Anya responds from behind the closed door.

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As I take in my surroundings, I'm struck by the luxuriousness of the room. "Damn, they have a balcony?" I mutter aloud, unable to hide my surprise.

Lana nods with a grin. "Anya upgraded us as a present for my birthday," she explains proudly, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Anya emerges from the bathroom, her voice trailing off as her eyes land on me. I'm frozen in place, not because of her surprise, but because she's standing before me in a pink string bikini. Her bottoms barely cover her ass, and the top accentuates the curves of her breasts. She's absolutely stunning.

For a moment, time seems to stand still as we both take each other in. The air crackles with tension, thick with unspoken desire. My heart races in my chest, and I struggle to find my voice amidst the overwhelming surge of attraction.

Anya's wide-eyed gaze meets mine, and I can see the flicker of uncertainty mingled with a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes. But in that moment, all I can think is how utterly captivating she looks, how every curve of her body seems to beckon to me with a silent promise of something more.

I clear my throat, trying to find the right words amidst the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside me. "I, umm... I... uhhh..." But before I can articulate anything coherent, Lana comes to my rescue.

"I saw him at breakfast, and he said he needed to speak with you, so I invited him up," Lana explains, her tone casual yet supportive.

Anya's gaze flickers between Lana and me, her expression shifting from surprise to acceptance. "Oh, umm... okay," she murmurs softly, her cheeks flushing slightly as she looks down at her bikini-clad form. With a quick retreat into the bathroom, she emerges moments later, now wearing a sheer wrap tied around her waist.

Without a word, she gestures toward the balcony, and I follow her lead, feeling a mix of anticipation and nervousness as we step outside.

Anya stands near the railing, her arms leaning on the top as she gazes out into the vast expanse of the ocean. Instinctively, my eyes drift to her legs, tracing the curve of her body up to her perfectly sculpted ass. No! I mentally scold myself, shaking off the thoughts.

I join her, standing beside her and leaning on the railing, keeping a respectful distance but unable to tear my gaze away from her. The salty breeze tousles her hair, and the warmth of the sun bathes her skin, casting her in a graceful glow.

For a moment, we stand in silence, the only sound the gentle lapping of waves against the shore. The tension between us is palpable, thick with unspoken words and unresolved emotions. But in this moment, with the ocean stretching out before us and the sun dancing on the horizon, everything else fades away, leaving only the two of us, suspended in time.

Anya straightens, her arms crossed as she regards me with curiosity. "What did you need to talk to me about?" she asks. I take a step closer, but she retreats, a silent agreement settling between us to maintain a cautious distance. My heart sinks at her reaction. "Okay," I concede, sinking into a chair opposite her as she settles into a lounge chair. "I wanted to apologize for last night," I begin, noticing the confusion in her expression. "What do you mean?" she asks, her tone genuine. "I feel like I might have crossed a line on the dance floor and made you uncomfortable afterward," I explain, searching her eyes for any hint of agreement or understanding.

Anya gives me a knowing look and lowers her head. "You have nothing to apologize for, Jacob," she says softly. "I enjoyed myself, and I like spending time with you. But I think I was the one who got carried away." She exhales, her shoulders slumping. "Jacob, there are things about me that you don't know, and I'm not ready to talk about them... with anyone."

I wait, expecting her to continue, but she remains silent, her gaze fixed on the ocean. "I understand," I assure her. "We don't have to talk about anything you're not comfortable with." Leaning forward, I gently grasp her hand, relieved when she doesn't pull away. "Anya, look at me," I urge, but she keeps her head down. I tenderly lift her chin with my finger, meeting her tear-filled eyes. "I'll never pressure you into anything you're not comfortable with, I promise", brushing a tear from her cheek. "Do you believe me?" I ask, watching as she closes her eyes, more tears slipping down her face. "Anya, please," I implore, cradling her face in my hands and stroking her cheek with my thumbs. She finally opens her eyes, meeting my gaze. "Do you believe me?" I repeat, holding her gaze until she nods silently. "Good girl," I whisper, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. Taking her hand, we head back inside. But as I close the balcony door behind us, I'm caught off guard by a sudden, sharp pain in my stomach.

Chapter Thirteen

Anya

In the midst of the chaos, I jolted upright, bewildered by the scene unfolding before me. Jacob staggered, clutching his stomach, collapsing onto my bed, while Lana assumed a defensive kickboxing stance, her gaze fixed on him like a predator eyeing its prey.

"What the hell, Lana?" Jacob groaned, confusion etched on his face as he struggled for breath.

Lana's glare could cut through steel as she demanded, "What did I tell you back at the breakfast bar?"

Jacob's brow furrowed in bewilderment. "What?"

"When we were at the breakfast bar," Lana reiterated through gritted teeth, her stance unwavering, "what did I say?"

Caught off guard, I watched the tense exchange, trying to piece together the puzzle. Then, realization dawned on Jacob.

"I didn't hurt her!" he protested.

"You made her cry!" Lana's accusation hung heavy in the air.

"It wasn't because of me!" Jacob defended himself.

"Actually, it was," I interjected, sensing the tension escalating. Jacob's expression shifted to one of fear as Lana prepared to strike again. Acting quickly, I intervened, extending my hand to halt Lana's impending blow.

"Hold it!" I commanded, turning to face Lana. "Yes, he made me cry, but not in the way you think."

Confusion flickered across Lana's face. "What do you mean?" she inquired.

With a heavy sigh, I spoke up, "Jacob was genuinely sweet, thoughtful, caring, and, above all, respectful of my feelings." I reached out, clasping Lana's hands firmly as I locked eyes with her. "You understand my past, what's hidden behind closed doors," I tapped my temple gently, "so you know just how much his respect and understanding meant to me."

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Lana nodded in understanding, her arms dropping to her sides as she absorbed my words. With a silent gesture, she indicated to Jacob that she was keeping a watchful eye on him.

I cleared my throat, breaking the moment. "Forgetting something?" I said, crossing my arms and giving Lana a playful, stern look, nodding towards Jacob. She let out a dramatic sigh, "Sorry, Jacob," she muttered with the attitude of a toddler.

"Thank you. Now go get ready," I instructed her, adopting a mock authoritative tone. "Yes, mother," she replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes as she exited the room.

Turning back to Jacob, I sat down beside him, rubbing his back gently. "Are you okay?" I asked, concern evident in my voice.

He grumbled in response, leaning into me until his weight forced me to fall back onto the bed. I couldn't help but burst into laughter. "Aww, poor baby," I teased, continuing to rub his back as I chuckled.

"I am a baby," he playfully admitted, looking up at me.

"What happened to the big, strong man, huh?" I teased him further, enjoying the playful banter.

"Okay, that's it," he declared, suddenly launching into a tickling attack.

I shrieked and laughed, squirming in a futile attempt to escape his tickling fingers. But soon, he pinned me down on the bed, ending up on top of me. My laughter faded,

and I found myself staring up at him, my hand resting on his chest, his face mere inches from mine.

My gaze dropped to his lips, and I instinctively bit my own. It was a new experience for me, one I hadn't encountered since Paul. Normally, I would have panicked with a man in such close proximity, but with Jacob, it felt different. With him, both my mind and body knew I was safe.

Jacob arms cage my face and he uses his hand to move my hair from my face. It wasn't until just now that I remembered I am still in my bikini that Lana made me buy. Which means I'm practically naked lying under him. That just increases my arousal and I can see he is attracted to me just as much as I am attracted to him. My breathing picks up the same time his does, the air between us heating up. I feel myself getting wet just from the way he is staring at me. He strokes my cheek then drags his thumb over my lips. His finger moves over my jawline and down the side my neck, he slowly moves his finger across my chest. This man is heating me up from just touching my skin, I can only imagine what it would feel like to kiss him and have his hand between my legs. Jacob continues to glide his finger down between my breast and I don't know if I can hold it any longer. I wanna taste him, I wanna feel him inside me. He lowers his head and his lips just barely touch mine.

“Okay, I'm rea – Oh shit! Fuck! I am sorry!” Lana screeches and covers her eyes. The sound of her voice forces us apart and Jacob jolts right up. Our breathing is still heavy. Lana hurries out of the room, Jacob and I look at one another and I burst out laughing. I guess that eases his tension because he starts laughing too. I stand up and to my surprise, I hug him. He wraps his arms around me and leans his chin on my head. I don't know why I love that, but I do. I look up at him and smile. “Thank you for finding me and talking to me,” I say and I turn around to head out the door. He grabs my wrist and pulls me toward him. “Yes?” I say with a flirty smile. He smiles back and kisses my temple. “I just wanted to walk out with you, oh, and do this” and he pats my ass. I squeal and playfully hit him in the chest. We laugh and he puts his

arm around me and we walk out the door.

As Jacob and I waited for the elevator, I noticed Lana was nowhere in sight, probably already downstairs. Jacob pressed the button, and as we waited, he inquired, "Where are you two off to?"

"The beach," I replied casually, to which he responded with gleeful surprise, "Seriously?"

I chuckled, confirming, "Yes, seriously."

"I'm heading to the beach too! Just need to change and grab my sister and her husband," he exclaimed excitedly. "We should go together," he suggested.

I hesitated for a moment, offering a polite smile. "Uhh..."

"Or not," he said calmly, sensing my reservation.

"It's not that, it's just..." I trailed off, struggling to find the right words.

He looked at me expectantly, encouraging me to continue. "Well, look at me. I can't meet your family looking like a trashy hooker," I admitted, pleadingly.

Jacob squeezed my hand reassuringly. "You don't look like a hooker, but I understand," he said sincerely.

"Thank you, but you can ride with me to the main deck," I suggested hopefully.

As the elevator doors opened, we stepped inside. Jacob bowed playfully and exclaimed, "As you wish, my queen."

"Oh my god, stop!" I laughed, playfully hitting him on the arm. Was this guy for real? Memories of Paul's sweetness flashed through my mind, but something told me Jacob was different. Still, I couldn't shake off my doubts.

The elevator stopped at the next floor, and a man entered. I gave him a flat smile and nod, then shifted aside. But his lingering gaze made me feel uneasy. Sensing my discomfort, Jacob moved me to his other side and wrapped his arm around me protectively, shielding me from the intrusive stare of the stranger.

"Yeah, he's definitely not Paul," I thought to myself, reflecting on how different Jacob was from my toxic past. Paul would have berated me for even accepting this bikini as a gift, let alone wearing it. He would've hurled insults, accusing me of being a whore, and threatened to treat me as such. The memory sent a shiver down my spine, but I pushed it aside, determined not to let it ruin the moment.

Feeling Jacob's arms around me, I was jolted back to reality. "You cold?" he asked, rubbing my arms gently.

Not wanting to delve into my painful past, I simply nodded. "Yeah," I lied, "a bit."

"Well, soon you'll be out in the sun and warming up," he reassured me with a smile.

Despite his comforting words, the echoes of Paul's cruel remarks still lingered in my mind, haunting me like a ghost. But as Jacob's warmth enveloped me, I found solace in his presence, a stark contrast to the toxicity I had endured before.

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"If you're gonna be dressing like a whore, then I'm gonna treat you like a whore," Paul's voice echoed in my head, a bitter reminder of the past I was trying so hard to escape.

But with Jacob by my side, I felt a glimmer of hope, a newfound sense of security that I hadn't felt in a long time. As I leaned into his embrace, I vowed to try and leave the darkness of my past behind and embrace the warmth of the present.

We reach the main deck and as soon as the doors open, Lana is there waiting. I turn toward Jacob, "thank you for riding me", my eyes go wide at the realization, "No, I meant riding with me!" He laughs and brings me into a hug, then leans his mouth to my ear and whispers "Don't worry baby, before this trip is over, I'll have you riding me." He says and then kisses and nips at the space between my neck and shoulder. Heat rushes to my face and between my legs, and I have to catch my breath. "See you later gorgeous" he winks and walks back into the elevator, leaving me horny and breathless.

Chapter Fourteen

Anya

Lana and I rendezvous at the exit, swiping our passes to signal to the crew that we are disembarking. The attendant reminds us that the ship is scheduled to depart at 7 pm and we must return by 6:30 pm or risk being left behind.

As we step off the cruise ship, Lana links her arm through mine, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Can you believe we're finally here, Anya? This vacation is going to

be amazing!" she exclaims, squeezing my arm gently.

I can't help but laugh at her infectious energy. "I know, right? I'm so glad we decided to do this together. It's just what we needed," I reply, feeling grateful to have Lana here with me.

We stroll along the bustling dock, taking in the sights and sounds of the tropical island. The warm breeze carries the scent of the ocean and exotic flowers, making me feel alive and free. I glance over at Lana, who is beaming with joy, and I can't help but smile too.

"We so needed this," Lana says, her eyes shining with anticipation as we head for the beach.

I nod in agreement, feeling a sense of adventure and possibility in the air. Little did I know that this vacation would change my life in ways I never could have imagined.

As we reach the beach, Lana and I kick off our sandals and let our feet sink into the soft sand. The sun is starting to dip lower in the sky, casting a warm golden hue over the water.

"Race you to the water!" Lana suddenly exclaims, taking off and running towards the waves, her laughter floating back to me in the breeze.

I can't help but laugh as I chase after her, the cool water rushing up to meet my toes. The salty spray mingles with our laughter as we splash around like carefree children, our worries and stresses from home melting away with each wave that crashes against us.

As we wade deeper into the ocean, Lana grabs my hand and pulls me further out until we are both floating on our backs, staring up at the sky painted with hues of pink and

orange. The moment feels magical, like time has slowed down just for us.

"Anya," Lana whispers softly, turning towards me. I sigh softly, my eyes closed, feeling the gentle rhythm of the waves surrounding us.

"Yeah," I murmur in response, soaking in the tranquility of the moment.

"I'm so glad we are doing this, thank you for taking me on this trip," she says, her voice filled with gratitude as she joins me in the water.

A smile spreads across my face as I reply, "Same here. I didn't realize how much I needed this trip until this very moment."

After leaving the water, we opt to bask in the sun for a while. Lounging under the warm rays feels like hours passing by. Eventually, I reach into my bag and retrieve my phone to check the time.

"Hey Lana, it's 1 PM," I announce, glancing at the screen. "We should head back for lunch and maybe shower to rinse off the sand. I don't want to risk being left behind."

She nods in agreement, a faint smile playing on her lips. "Good idea," Lana responds, her voice carrying a hint of enthusiasm.

After going through the entrance of the cruise ship, we scan our IDs again before heading to our room to freshen up. As I shower and change, my thoughts drift back to Jacob. Did he make it to the beach with his family? Will we meet up again tonight? There's an inexplicable pull, a curiosity that tugs at me, urging me to learn more, to experience more of him.

Jacob

The beach was a hive of activity, the golden sands dotted with colorful umbrellas and beach towels. The sun was slowly making its descent, casting a warm glow over the scene. I watched with a smile as my mom set up our spot near the water, Marissa and Tom helping out with the cooler and beach chairs.

"Isn't this just perfect, Jacob?" Mom said, her eyes twinkling with excitement as she spread out a beach towel. "I'm so glad we could all come here together."

I nodded in agreement, soaking in the joyful atmosphere around us. The sound of waves crashing against the shore filled my ears, and the salty breeze carried a sense of freedom and relaxation. Marissa and Tom were already setting off towards the water, their laughter echoing back to us.

"Race you two to the waves!" Marissa called out, her infectious energy lighting up the beach.

I chuckled and followed after them, feeling the cool water envelop my feet as I waded into the ocean. The laughter and chatter of families and friends surrounded us, creating a symphony of joy and excitement. I glanced back at my mom, who was smiling contentedly as she watched us play in the water.

As I splashed around with Marissa, my thoughts kept drifting back to Anya. I wondered if she made it to the beach, if she was enjoying her vacation as much as I was. The memory of her smile and laughter replayed in my mind, tugging at something deep within me that I couldn't quite explain.

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After some time in the water, we all made our way back to our spot on the beach, settling down on our towels to lay out in the sun. The warmth felt comforting against my skin, and the sound of seagulls overhead added to the tranquil atmosphere.

"Jacob, do you want to go for a walk along the shore?" Marissa asked, looking over at me with a knowing smile. I nodded, feeling a sense of longing and excitement building within me.

As we strolled along the water's edge, our footsteps leaving imprints in the damp sand, my mind going back to Anya. I wondered what she was doing at that moment, if she was thinking of me as I was of her.

"Hey, Jacob," Marissa interrupted my thoughts, her voice soft yet knowing. "Penny for your thoughts?"

I paused, unsure of how much to share with my sister. But the openness and trust between us urged me to confide in her. "You remember me telling you about this girl, Anya," I began, my voice betraying a hint of vulnerability. "How we met at the nightclub?". She nods, encouraging me to continue, "there's just something about her that draws me in, like I can't stop thinking about her."

Marissa's grin was full of knowingness, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "So, do you believe that she's someone you want to continue seeing?"

My heart races as I reply, "I'm not sure...maybe, I know what I want, but what if it's not what she wants? I don't want to risk losing her by moving too fast." My smile falters as doubt and uncertainty swirl in my mind. How do I express my feelings

without scaring her away?

Marissa listened intently to my words, a thoughtful expression on her face. She knew me better than anyone, understanding the depths of my emotions even when I struggled to articulate them myself. With a reassuring smile, she placed a comforting hand on my shoulder and said, "Jacob, love is never easy, but it's worth the risk. If this girl, Anya, makes you feel this way, if she fills your thoughts even when you're surrounded by family and fun at the beach, then she's someone special. And if she's the right one for you, things will fall into place in their own time."

Her words resonated within me, offering a sense of reassurance and hope. I nodded slowly, grateful for her wisdom and guidance. As we continued our walk along the shore, the setting sun casting a warm glow over us, I felt a newfound sense of clarity and determination. Anya was more than just a passing curiosity; she was a beacon of light in the midst of my uncertainty and confusion. I knew then that I had to see her again, to explore the connection that seemed to have sparked between us from that first moment in the nightclub. The thought of her smile and laughter filled me with a sense of longing and anticipation. As the sun dipped lower on the horizon, painting the sky in shades of pink and orange, I made a silent promise to myself to reach out to her, to take the risk and follow my heart.

Chapter Fifteen

Jacob

As I prepare for the evening, excitement courses through me at the thought of seeing Anya tonight. I change into a light blue polo and jeans, say goodbye to my mother, and let her know that I'll be out late so she doesn't have to wait up in the cabin for me.

I step into the nightclub and spot Lana and Patricia engaged in conversation. Scanning the crowd, I search for Anya but she's nowhere in sight. Suddenly, as if

guided by a spotlight from the heavens, there she is at the bar, holding two drinks and making her way toward Lana and our group of friends. Anya strides confidently through the crowd, her outfit catching the light and turning heads as she moves. The silver halter dress shirt she wears fits snugly, tracing the curves of her body and sparkling under the pulsing nightclub lights. Paired with sleek black leggings, her toned legs seem to go on for miles, drawing attention with every step. Completing the ensemble, her heels elevate her look, adding a hint of elegance and sophistication to her already striking appearance.

Anya's smile lights up her face as she spots me approaching, and I return the gesture, feeling a rush of warmth as I wrap her in a hug. As I hold her close, her scent envelops me, a delightful blend of sweet flowers and soothing lavender. Looking down at her, I can't help but grin. "Hey there, stranger," she greets me, her voice tinged with playful affection. Anya smiled up at me, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Fancy seeing you here," she teased, handing me one of the drinks she was holding. The music throbbed in the background as the lights danced over us, creating a kaleidoscope of colors around us.

Taking the drink, I raised an eyebrow playfully. "Are you trying to get me drunk already?" I joked. The atmosphere seemed charged with a sense of electricity whenever we were together, as if the world around us faded into the background.

Anya laughed, a melodious sound that made my heart skip a beat. "Maybe I just wanted an excuse to get closer to you," she said, her voice soft yet alluring. Her gaze met mine, and for a moment, it felt like time stood still as we got lost in each other's eyes.

As the night wore on, we found ourselves immersed in conversations that ranged from lighthearted banter to deeper, more intimate topics. Anya's presence was like a magnet, drawing me in with her wit and charm. Each moment spent with her felt like a glimpse into a world where everything was brighter, more vibrant. The music

seemed to fade into the background as we shared stories, our laughter ringing out amidst the pulsing beats.

Lost in the rhythm of the night, I found myself feeling a sense of connection with Anya that went beyond mere attraction. There was a comfort in her presence, a feeling of being understood without having to explain myself. It was as if we were dancing to a tune that only we could hear, moving together in perfect harmony.

As the night progressed, the crowd around us ebbed and flowed, but our focus remained solely on each other. Anya's eyes sparkled with a mixture of mischief and something deeper, an unspoken invitation that lingered between us. I felt a surge of boldness wash over me, fueled by the warmth of her smile and the electricity of our connection.

Anya

"Hey, you wanna get out of here?" I ask Jacob, feeling the need for a smoke break in the Ivory lounge. He nods in agreement, and I quickly locate Lana to let her know where we're headed. With a knowing look exchanged between us, she assures me she won't wait up and winks mischievously. As we make our way to the Ivory lounge, Jacob intertwines his fingers with mine and a jolt of energy rushes through me. I retrieve a cigarette and glance at Jacob. "You don't mind, do you?" He shakes his head, a smile playing on his lips. "Nope, my mom smokes, so I'm used to it," he replies casually.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of liberation wash over me. Jacob's presence beside me was comforting, his hand intertwined with mine sending a shiver of excitement down my spine. I lit my cigarette, taking a long drag and exhaling slowly, the wisps of smoke swirling around us in the dimly lit lounge.

Jacob watched me with an intensity that made my heart flutter, his gaze unwavering

as if trying to decipher the thoughts running through my mind. "You know, you have this way about you that's both mysterious and beautiful," he said, his voice low and husky. I felt a blush creep up my cheeks at his words, his compliment sending a rush of warmth through me.

I turned to him, meeting his gaze head-on. "And what way is that?" I asked, my tone playful yet tinged with curiosity. Jacob stepped closer, the scent of his cologne mingling with the smoke from my cigarette. "It's like you hold a universe of secrets behind those captivating eyes of yours," he murmured, his breath warm against my skin. I felt a shiver run down my spine at his proximity, a mix of desire and anticipation swirling in the air between us.

Leaning in closer, Jacob's fingers brushed a stray lock of hair away from my face, his touch sending a jolt of electricity through me. "I want to unravel those mysteries, to discover every part of you," he whispered, his words filled with a raw intensity that made my heart race.

In that moment, as our eyes locked and the world around us faded into the background, I knew that something irrevocable was happening between us. "I would really love to kiss you" he whispers in my ear and I see the desire in his eyes. Unable to resist the pull any longer, I put out my cigarette and closed the distance between us, my lips meeting his in a searing kiss that ignites a fire within me.

The taste of him was intoxicating, full of passion and hunger between us. Our kiss deepened, a mingling of desire and longing that seemed to transcend time and space. In that moment, nothing else mattered as we lost ourselves in each other, our hearts beating in sync to the intoxicating rhythm of our passion. Jacob's hands found their way to my waist, pulling me closer to him as if afraid to let go. I could feel the heat of his body against mine, sending shivers down my spine as our connection intensified with each passing second.

Breaking away from the kiss, we both gasped for air, our eyes locked in a silent conversation that spoke volumes. The weight of unspoken words hung in the air between us, bridging the gap that had existed since we first met. Jacob's gaze was filled with a mixture of passion and tenderness, a silent promise of all the things he felt but couldn't articulate.

With my hand in his, we gracefully rise from our seats in the lounge. His presence is magnetic, and I can't tear my gaze away from him. Suddenly, he pulls me under a nearby staircase, pressing me against the wall with his arms wrapped tightly around my waist. His lips meet mine in a fierce, passionate kiss, igniting a fire within me. His skilled hands roam over my body, cupping and squeezing my ass as we lose ourselves in each other's embrace. Every touch, every movement is like a symphony of desire and longing between us. Time seems to stand still as we melt into one another.

We quickly separate when we notice someone passing by, laughing as we hurriedly move to another spot. Every time we find a secluded area, our hands seem to gravitate towards each other. But just as things start to heat up, someone else always appears, prompting us to relocate once again. "Right now, I feel like Jack and Rose in the Titanic," I exclaim with a grin as we dash up to the Lido deck.

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"Let's give these giant circle lounge chairs a shot," Jacob suggests, his breath slightly labored from our playful escapade. I mischievously smirk at him, "Is that what they are called?" He takes my sass in stride and boldly states, "I'm pretty sure that's the scientific name for them." His quick wit takes me by surprise and I just lose it, laughing without a care in the world. I smile in agreement, eager to be close to him again. "The top umbrella will give us some privacy," I suggest, my heart racing with anticipation. He grabs my hand and leads us into the giant chair.

"Now where were we?" he says with a suggestive grin, pulling me closer to him.

"I think we were right about here" I say as I lean in and press my lips to his. I tease his lips with mine and he opens his mouth wider and his tongue twists with mine. We sit there hungrily tasting each other. I positioned myself on top of Jacob, using the umbrella-shaped back of the chair as a makeshift shield for privacy. His hands explored my body, first cupping and squeezing my breasts, then moving lower to my ass, and finally reaching between my legs. He reaches under my leggings waistband and panties. His fingers find my entrance. "You're so wet baby" he whispers as his fingers go deeper inside my core. He kisses the side of my neck and uses his finger to circle my clit. My body heating up from head to toe with each flick. My moans of pure pleasure are muffled as he presses his lips against mine, silencing me. His skilled fingers continue their movements and I am overwhelmed with intense desire and emotion.

"Ahem," a voice startles us, and a flashlight is shone in our faces. We both look up to see a staff member awkwardly addressing us. "You can't do that up here. We suggest you go to your cabin if you want to continue... umm... please head to your cabin, folks," he says, desperately trying not look us in the eye and waiting until we leave.

As we make it back to the nightclub, we can't help but let out a loud laugh. "Oh my god, we totally got caught by security," I say, trying to hold in my laughter. Jacob laughs along with me, then pulls me closer to him. "Yeah, but it was worth it," he smiles, kissing my temple and squeezing my waist. I look up at him and smile. But that smile falters as the realization hits. "Shit, what's today?" I ask Jacob. "It's the 25th, why?" Jacob responds. "Oh crap! I am the worst friend ever!" I exclaim, frantically searching for Lana. So stupid! I should've known getting involved with a guy would make me forget about my friends, I scold myself internally. Jacob looks down at me, searching my face for signs of distress. I break away from his gaze, but he catches up to me, concern etched on his features. "Anya, what's wrong?" he asks softly. I let out a sigh, feeling the weight of guilt pressing down on me. "I'm the worst friend in the world. Today is Lana's birthday, and I left her to be with you," I admit, frustration lacing my words.

I can see the pain in his eyes as my words sink in. "I didn't mean it that way," I rush to reassure him, reaching out to touch his arm gently. "I just mean that this trip was supposed to be about me and her, and to celebrate her birthday. Then on her actual birthday, I leave to fool around with a guy I barely know," I explain, hoping he understands.

He nods slowly, but I can't shake the feeling that he might not fully grasp what I'm trying to convey. "I'm sorry, I have to go," I say, preparing to leave. But before I can move, he reaches out and grabs my hand, turning me to face him. His touch is gentle, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand, while his other hand cups my face.

"Anya, I understand," he says, his gaze locked with mine. "Why don't we both try to find her, and then we can celebrate with everyone? The night is still young," he suggests, his voice filled with sincerity.

We search the nightclub, scanning the crowded room for any sign of Lana or our friends, but they're nowhere to be found. Panic starts to gnaw at the edges of my

mind, but Jacob's reassuring touch on my back grounds me. "Don't worry, we'll find them," he says, his voice steady and comforting.

We move on to the Ivory lounge, hoping to spot familiar faces, but it's just as empty. Frustration bubbles up inside me, and I run a hand through my hair, feeling helpless. "I'm gonna go look in the bathrooms, and then I'm gonna head to our cabin. Meet me there in like 20 minutes, okay?" I tell Jacob, my voice tinged with urgency.

He nods, pulling me into a tight hug. "Okay, don't worry. We'll find her. I'll see you in 20 minutes," he assures me, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead before we part ways.

Chapter Sixteen

Jacob

Heading back into the nightclub, I couldn't shake off the sting of Anya's words, though I knew she was speaking from a place of concern. My eyes dart around the dimly lit room, scanning the crowd for any sign of Lana. Finally, I spot Ben and JC and make my way over to them, urgency evident in my voice.

"Hey," I call out to Ben, hoping he might have some information. Ben's initial excitement dims as he notices the worry etched on my face. "Whoa, what's going on?" he asks, concern coloring his tone.

"Have you seen Lana?" I inquire, my heart pounding with apprehension. Ben's eyebrows shoot up in realization. "Oh, Lana went back to their cabin to change. Some drunk guy accidentally spilled his drink on her," he explains.

My mind races with thoughts of Anya and her distress. "Anya's really beating herself up over this. She feels like she abandoned Lana on her birthday," I confess, feeling a

pang of guilt for keeping Anya away so long.

Ben's eyes widen in realization. "Oh, damn, it's Lana's birthday? We should do something for her," he suggests, his excitement returning. "Let's grab a cake from the bakery before they close and surprise them with it." His idea sparks a sense of determination within me.

"Do you know their cabin number?" Ben inquires, and I wrack my brain to recall it. It's something 23, I remember the 23. Is it 1023? No that doesn't sound right. Ben waves his hand in my face pulling me out of my thoughts, "Do you know the room number?" he repeats. "Umm yeah, I think it's 1123," I respond, the number solidifying in my mind as we set off towards the bakery, eager to help Anya make Lana's birthday a memorable one.

We hurriedly grabbed the last small cake from the bakery and made our way towards the cabin. As we walked down the unfamiliar hallway, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. The doors looked different, and the artwork on the walls didn't match what I remembered. Before I could voice my concerns, Ben confidently knocked on the door labeled 1123.

To our surprise, a man who appeared to be in his 50s or 60s, dressed in a robe, opened the door and looked at us quizzically as he took in the cake. "Can I help you?" he asked, his expression a mix of confusion and mild annoyance. I quickly stepped forward, feeling a flush of embarrassment. "I'm so sorry, sir. It seems we got the wrong cabin number," I apologized, shooting a glance at Ben, who wore a similar expression of chagrin. "Did you forget the cabin number?" Ben inquired, his voice tinged with disbelief.

As I racked my brain trying to remember, Patricia emerged from her room down the hall, her expression a mixture of amusement and confusion. "Um, hey, boys," she greeted us, her eyes darting between us and the cake. "What are you all up to?" she

asked, her tone teasing.

Ben wasted no time in throwing me under the bus. "Einstein over here forgot which cabin Lana and Anya are in," he quipped, earning a chuckle from Patricia. "Oh my god, the girls have to hear this," she exclaimed, gesturing for us to follow her. I exchanged a sheepish look with Ben as we followed Patricia, hoping Lana and Anya would see the humor in our little mishap.

Patricia led us to the 12th floor, and I couldn't help but blurt out, "Oh, it was 1223!" before realizing I had spoken aloud. Ben shot me a sidelong glance, and Patricia and JC chuckled at my slip-up. As we stepped out of the elevator, I halted Patricia, needing to confirm something. "Did you know it was Lana's birthday?" I asked, feeling a twinge of concern. She laughed in response. "Not until Anya came in all frantic, thinking Lana was mad at her about it," she revealed. I winced, fearing the worst. "Is Lana angry at Anya?" I cautiously inquired. Patricia shook her head, dismissing my worries. "Oh God no! Lana was the one who encouraged Anya to go. She knew exactly what would happen," she reassured me, nudging me playfully.

We arrived at 1223, and everyone except Patricia stood before the door, hesitant. Patricia glanced at us, puzzled, until Ben spoke up. "Nope, I'm not making that mistake again" he says shaking his head "not until we're absolutely sure this is their cabin," he declared firmly. Patricia chuckled and shook her head in amusement, then took charge and knocked on the door. Lana opened it, and as soon as we recognized her, we all exclaimed "Surprise!" in unison.

"Oh my gosh, you boys really do know how to make a girl feel special!" Lana exclaimed, her eyes shining with delight. Anya poked her head out from behind Lana, her smile widening at the sight of us. "Hey, what took you so long? I said 20 minutes," she teased, waving for us all to come in. Patricia couldn't contain herself and blurted out that we were at 1123. I raise my hands in surrender, "Okay, see what had happened was..." I began, and the whole room burst into laughter.

As the room buzzes with conversations, my gaze keeps drifting back to Anya. Her infectious laughter and the way her eyes light up when she smiles draw me in. It's like her joy is contagious, spreading to everyone around her. With only two more nights left on this cruise, I find myself wanting to spend every moment with her, yet I also want to respect her time with Lana.

My thoughts are interrupted by JC's playful slap on my shoulder, breaking me out of my reverie. I glance out onto the balcony where Anya, Lana, and Sam are enjoying the view. God, she really is so beautiful. I think to myself before returning to converse with JC and Ben.

I'm engrossed in conversation when suddenly, Anya appears beside me, flashing me a wide smile as she settles onto my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Hey there, handsome! Buy me a drink?" she quips, her eyes sparkling with mischief. I chuckle at her boldness. "Sure thing, gorgeous. Let's go get you another drink," I reply, ready to indulge her request. But before we can move, Lana taps me on the shoulder, her laughter bubbling up.

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"You know, there are drinks in the fridge. No need to actually buy her one," Lana teases, her grin infectious as she settles onto Sam's lap.

I give a grateful nod and guide Anya toward the fridge stocked with beer and various types of liquor. Her arm loops through mine, and she leans into me, planting a soft kiss on my cheek.

"You're kind of amazing, you know that?" she murmurs, her words warm and affectionate.

I chuckle softly, feeling a rush of fondness for her. "Well, we've already established that," I tease gently, "but I'm curious—what makes you think so?"

Her gaze meets mine, and for a moment, there's a depth in her eyes that takes my breath away. "It's the way you make me feel," she begins, her tone soft yet earnest. "You've been nothing but understanding and supportive, even when I've been a mess. You've shown me kindness and patience, and it's made me realize how lucky I am to have met you, even if it's just for this short time."

Her words catch me off guard, and I feel a surge of emotion welling up inside me. "Anya," I start, my voice barely above a whisper, "you have no idea –

"Dude! They have a karaoke bar downstairs!" JC interrupts, his enthusiastic proclamation reverberates through the room, punctuated by the clinking of glasses and the hum of conversation. Lana's eyes light up with excitement as she seizes Anya's hand, her grin infectious. Anya, in turn, shoots me a mischievous glance before she's whisked away by Lana's eager pull.

I chuckle at the sudden energy that fills the room, the prospect of karaoke sparking everyone's enthusiasm. With a playful roll of my eyes, I let myself be pulled along by the momentum, following the group as we make our way downstairs, our laughter echoing through the corridors.

As we descend, the distant strains of music grow louder, mingling with the chatter of fellow cruisers. The anticipation builds with each step, fueled by the promise of lively performances and shared moments.

Arriving at the karaoke bar, we find ourselves greeted by the lively atmosphere, illuminated by the glow of neon lights and pulsing with the beat of the music. Anya's hand remains firmly clasped in mine, her presence a comforting anchor amidst the excitement of the crowd.

With drinks in hand and smiles on our faces, we dive headfirst into the festivities, ready to unleash our inner rockstars.

Lana, Patricia, and Anya huddle together, their heads bent over the book filled with a myriad of songs, their fingers tracing over the titles as they weigh their options. Meanwhile, JC, Sam, Ben, and I gather around another book, scanning through its pages in search of the perfect tune to belt out.

JC's eyes light up as he points emphatically at a particular song listed in the book. "This one!" he exclaims, his enthusiasm contagious as the rest of us exchange glances, a mixture of curiosity and amusement dancing in our eyes. With a collective shrug and a chorus of "Why not?" echoing through the group, we all nod in agreement, eager to embrace the spontaneity of the moment.

JC's excitement propels him out of our group as he rushes over to the DJ booth, eager to secure our song choice. Meanwhile, the girls deliberate and finally settle on their selection. Anya breaks away from the group and saunters over to where I'm standing,

her smile infectious as she approaches.

"You picked out a song already?" she inquires, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. "Yup, you?" I reply, returning her smile. She nods eagerly, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I can't wait to hear it," she teases, her playful tone eliciting a chuckle from me.

"I don't have a great voice, just so you know," I admit with a shrug, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious about singing in public. Anya waves off my concerns with a dismissive gesture. "Pssh, it's karaoke," she retorts, her confidence unwavering. "Hardly anyone has a singing voice while doing karaoke. It's all about having fun!" Her words ease my nerves, and I find myself smiling in agreement. With Anya by my side, I feel ready to embrace the lighthearted spirit of the evening.

Anya

As the effects of the alcohol start to take their toll, I find myself leaning against Jacob for support. There's a comforting solidity to his presence that grounds me amidst the swirling chaos of the karaoke bar. With a gentle touch, he guides me to a nearby chair, ensuring that I'm seated safely before he rejoins the rest of the guys on stage.

Before he leaves, Jacob leans in and plants a soft kiss on my lips, sending a flutter of warmth through me. It's a simple gesture, but it leaves me feeling giddy and lightheaded, my heart racing inexplicably. I try to make sense of my reaction as I watch him take his place among the others, but the alcohol clouds my thoughts, leaving me in a state of blissful confusion. Anya, you barely know him! My inner voice warns, but there's this undeniable feeling of security whenever he's around. It's only been three days! My inner voice persists. I shake my head, dismissing the doubts and choosing to stay in the moment. I'm here to enjoy myself, and I won't let my uncertainties spoil the fun.

The guys take their place on stage, and as the music starts, Jacob shoots me a wink. I can feel my cheeks flush as I return his smile. Suddenly, the familiar piano notes of "A Thousand Miles" by Vanessa Carlton fill the room, and Lana, Patricia, and I exchange excited glances. "Oh my god! Are they really about to sing that?" Lana exclaims. And indeed, the boys start bouncing back and forth in unison, belting out the lyrics. "Making my way downtown, walking fast, faces pass, and I'm homebound..." We can't help but burst into laughter as we pull out our phones to record the performance. "There's no way I'm missing this!" I exclaim, joining in the singing, along with Lana and Patricia. The whole crowd cheers as the guys finish the song, and their faces are lit up with joy and pride.

They all walk up to us, and JC's face is beaming above the rest. "Let me guess, you picked the song," Patricia says to JC, who nods excitedly. Jacob walks over, and I immediately run to hug him. "Oh my gosh, you guys were great! You really had the crowd going!" I exclaim. "I don't know if we can top that performance," I add. "Oh, you bet your sorry ass we can!" Lana challenges. We leave the guys and head for the stage, nerves radiating from me as I try to calm them down. Then, as the music of "Shake It Off" by Taylor Swift starts, the crowd begins to go wild again. They start singing and dancing, and even the guys are getting into it. We finish the song, and the crowd once again erupts into cheers.

As we step off the stage, the guys are all shimmying their chests, belting out "Shake, shake, shake it off." We can't help but burst into laughter. I turn to Lana, "Honestly, I'm glad I'm drunk because I wouldn't have done that sober." She nods enthusiastically, "Oh my god, me too!" Patricia shouts over the commotion, "Let's go bar hopping for Lana's birthday!" We all cheer like crazy, "I can't join you because my parents will kill me, but you guys have fun, and happy birthday Lana," Ben says, giving each of us a hug before heading back to his cabin. After bidding Ben farewell, JC chimes in, "Wait, how do we bar hop on a cruise?" We exchange confused glances, then burst into laughter as we head towards the nearest bar.

Chapter Seventeen

Anya

"Okay! OoOokayyy!" I exclaim, taking a deep breath and trying to steady my voice so I don't sound too drunk. "Birffday, birrrthdaayyy," I manage, clearing my throat and taking another breath. "Okay. Birth. Day. Girl," I repeat, saying each word slowly to avoid sounding as intoxicated as I know I am. Lana bursts into laughter with a high-pitched giggle, clearly even more intoxicated than I am, which is saying something. "I wanna go dance!" she drunkenly whines. Sam wraps his arm around her and announces that he's taking her back to the nightclub. Patricia and JC have disappeared somewhere, leaving just me and Jacob. Not that I mind, but I'm definitely not sober enough to handle anything, should something actually happen.

"You doing okay there, gorgeous?" Jacob asks, pulling me closer to him. I can't help but smile widely, though I'm not sure if it's the alcohol coursing through my veins or being this close to him that's setting my skin on fire. "Mmhmm, I am peachy keen, Jimmy Dean!" I blurt out, cringing internally at my drunken chatter. Oh my god, Anya, stop talking when you're drunk! I scold myself internally. Jacob chuckles at my drunken stupor, and we begin strolling around the main deck of the cruise.

"It's so pretty out here at night," I murmur, taking in the twinkling lights of the city skyline as the cruise ship glides through the dark waters. Jacob stands behind me, his arms enveloping me in a comforting embrace, the warmth of his body contrasting with the cool breeze blowing off the ocean.

"Yeah, it is," he replies softly, his breath warm against my skin. I feel a shiver run down my spine as his lips brush against the sensitive skin of my neck, sending tingles of excitement coursing through me. I tilt my head slightly, allowing him better access, savoring the sensation of his kisses.

Closing my eyes, I lose myself in the moment, relishing the closeness between us and the serene beauty of the night. The sound of the ocean waves lapping against the hull of the ship creates a soothing rhythm, lulling me into a state of peaceful contentment.

When Jacob turns me around to face him, a smile plays at the corners of my lips. Leaning up on my toes, I meet his gaze with a mixture of anticipation and desire, our lips coming together in a tender, lingering kiss. In that moment, with the stars overhead and the gentle sway of the ship beneath us, time seems to stand still, and all that exists is the connection between us.

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But as the passion between us escalates, a small voice in the back of my mind whispers a warning but I ignore it, I wanna feel him inside me. I feel a sudden wave of dizziness wash over me, fueled by the potent combination of alcohol and desire. Jacob's hands start to roam over my body, igniting a fire within me that threatens to consume all reason.

In that moment of urgency and need, I cling to him desperately. But through the haze of desire, I sense Jacob's hesitance, a subtle shift in his touch that speaks volumes. His kisses become softer, more restrained, and I detect a flicker of concern in his eyes.

Suddenly, he pulls away slightly, his gaze searching mine. I try to steady myself against his chest, my heart pounding with a mixture of desire and confusion.

"Anya... we can't do this," Jacob's voice is soft but filled with resolve as he gently puts some distance between us. His words hit me like a sudden gust of cold wind, leaving me feeling hurt and confused.

"What do you mean?" I manage to choke out, my voice tinged with disbelief. The ache in my chest grows with each passing second, a dull throb that I can't seem to shake off.

"Don't you want me?" The words escape my lips before I can stop them, desperation and vulnerability seeping into my tone. I search his eyes for any sign of reassurance, any glimmer of hope that he might change his mind.

"I want you, more than anything," he says as he pulls me closer, my hands

instinctively resting on his toned chest. His intense gaze reveals his desire for me. "Then take me," I whisper, leaning up towards him.

He chuckles softly against my lips before kissing me with passion. "Not like this, baby," he says as he breaks the kiss but keeps his hands on my body. I pout, "Why not?" He cups my face gently, "Because you're drunk."

"So what?" I plead.

He leans down again, "When I make love to you, I want every moment to be etched in your mind. Every kiss, every touch, every thrust. I want you to remember how my tongue feels on your skin and how deeply my cock fills you with pleasure so completely that no one else will satisfy you the same way. When you surrender to me, you'll be fully aware and in control of your senses." His words send shivers down my spine and heat up my entire body.

I am stunned by what he is saying, but at the same time, his words make me feel cherished and desired in a way I never thought possible. His concern for my well-being and his desire to make our lovemaking intimate and unforgettable is the sweetest thing I've ever heard.

"I thought you didn't want me," I whisper. He nods, "Anya, like I said, I do want you, with every fiber of my being, do I want you. But I also want you to be fully present," he says stroking his thumb against my cheek. "I want to know exactly what you're feeling, the way you feel when I'm inside you, and how you scream my name as you climax." His words melt away the last vestiges of my confusion, and I feel myself falling under his spell.

As he speaks, I notice the concern in his eyes, and it melts my heart. I realize that beneath his desire for intimacy, there is a deep respect for me, a man who wants to make sure I'm comfortable and happy.

"Okay, I understand" I say softly, taking a deep breath. Jacob smiles at me, a mixture of relief and happiness in his eyes. "I want the first time we have sex with each other to be something we both remember," he says, and I can see the resolve in his gaze.

We continue to sit there for a few moments, listening to the gentle lapping of the waves against the ship and the distant sounds of the city. Enjoying being in his arms. At last, I take another deep breath and say, "We should head back it's getting late."

Jacob nods, and we both disentangle ourselves from each other. He helps me down from his arms, and we walk back to the cabin together. We don't speak, but there's a sense of mutual understanding between us, a bond that has been strengthened by our honesty with each other. As we reach the cabin door, Jacob turns to me, his eyes soft with a mix of regret and fondness. "I had a great time with you Anya," he says, his voice sincere. "Me too," I reply, offering him a small smile. Despite the disappointment of the moment, I feel a sense of relief washing over me. We may not have ended up where I hoped, but at least we're on the same page now. With a nod, Jacob kisses me goodnight, and I watch him disappear down the hall before slipping into my cabin. As I settle into bed, I can't help but feel grateful for the honesty and understanding that has emerged between us, even in the face of disappointment.

Jacob

As I sit in my cabin, the events of the night replay in my mind like a broken record. Anya's laughter, her warmth beside me, the temptation that pulsed through my veins—each memory is etched into my consciousness with painful clarity.

I wanted her. God, I wanted her more than anything. But as she stood before me, her words slurred with the effects of alcohol, I couldn't bring myself to act on those desires. "Don't you want me?" her words ring in my mind.

Of course, I wanted her. That much was undeniable. But the alcohol had clouded her

judgment, dulled her inhibitions, and I couldn't bear the thought of taking advantage of her vulnerable state. So, I had held back, offered her a comforting embrace instead of giving in to the burning need that coursed through me.

Now, as I lie in bed, staring up at the ceiling, I can't shake the feeling of regret that gnaws at my insides. Did I do the right thing by resisting her advances? Should I have allowed myself to succumb to the intoxicating allure of her presence, consequences be damned?

But deep down, I know the answer. I acted out of respect for Anya, out of a desire to protect her, even from herself. True love isn't just about giving in to passion; it's about respecting boundaries, cherishing the person you care for above all else.

And so, as I drift off to sleep, I find solace in the knowledge that I did what I believed to be right, even if it meant sacrificing my own desires for the sake of her well-being.

Chapter Eighteen

Jacob

The following morning brings with it a sense of unease that lingers in the air. As I rise from bed and prepare for the day ahead, my thoughts remain fixated on the events of the previous night. Was Anya upset with me for pulling away? Did I ruin our budding connection by hesitating to act on my desires?

These questions swirl around in my mind like a whirlpool, threatening to consume me with doubt and uncertainty. But amidst the turmoil, a glimmer of hope emerges—the hope that perhaps Anya will understand my intentions, my desire to protect her from making choices she might regret.

As I make my way to breakfast, I steel myself for whatever interactions await me.

Will Anya avoid me, her disappointment palpable in the air? Or will she meet my gaze with understanding, acknowledging the complexities of our situation?

As I enter the dining area, I spot Anya sitting with Lana, a faint smile playing on her lips. Relief floods through me at the sight of her seemingly unaffected demeanor. Perhaps she doesn't harbor any ill feelings toward me after all.

Taking a seat beside her, I offer a tentative smile, unsure of how she'll respond. To my surprise, she returns the gesture, her eyes meeting mine with a warmth that sends a rush of reassurance coursing through me.

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As I take a seat beside her, she greets me with a warm smile. "Hey," she says cheerfully. "Well hello there, gorgeous," I reply, playfully nudging her shoulder. "You don't look hungover at all," I tease. Then I look at Lana, who looks like she is definitely feeling the effects of last night's indulgences. Lana looks at Anya with a sly smile, "It's because she's a hidden witch who possesses supernatural abilities when it comes to alcohol."

"Oh please, I just remembered to hydrate before bed and popped a Tylenol, unlike someone else here," Anya chimes in with a teasing tone. Lana shakes her head and giggles before attempting to return her attention to her breakfast, still feeling the effects of their wild night out.

As we continue our breakfast, Anya lifts her head, her eyes curious as she asks, "So what do you and your family have planned today?"

I take a moment to consider before responding, "We don't really have too much planned together today. Marissa and Tom are doing their own thing, my mom and stepdad are doing theirs. So I guess we are just all going to be trying to enjoy our last full day on the cruise."

Anya and Lana both nod, seemingly understanding. "What are you two going to do?" I ask, turning the question back to them.

They exchange glances before Lana shrugs, "I don't know, maybe hang around the pool. Take a nap. Walk the ship some more."

Anya chimes in, "Yeah, just soak in the last bit of relaxation before we have to head

back to reality."

I nod, feeling a sense of camaraderie with them as we all contemplate how to make the most of our final day on the cruise.

As we finish breakfast and we all go our separate ways, the weight of impending departure settles heavily on my shoulders. I can't shake the feeling of disappointment that this trip is ending so quickly. There's an ache in my chest at the thought of leaving without fully exploring what could be between Anya and me.

It's only been four days since we've met, but it feels like a lifetime. The connection we share is undeniable, and I find myself yearning for more. I want her in my life, not just as a friend, but something deeper, something more meaningful.

Yet, there's a nagging doubt in the back of my mind. Should I tell her about my plans to join the military? Would she even want to continue things with me knowing that I'll be leaving soon? It's a risk I know I have to take if I want to pursue something real with her.

But as I weigh the pros and cons, one thing remains clear: I want her in my life, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen. Whether it's just for the time we have left on this cruise or for a lifetime beyond it, I'm determined to see where this connection leads us.

Anya

As Lana and I walk down the corridor, the ship's gentle hum beneath our feet, I can't shake off the whirlwind of conflicting emotions swirling inside me. Last night with Jacob... it was a rollercoaster of emotions. Part of me wanted to let go, to feel that connection, that warmth he offered. But another part of me, the part that's been hurt before, the part that's still healing, held back.

Jacob's hesitation, his gentle refusal... it left me feeling a mix of relief and disappointment. Relief because maybe he's not like Paul or even Joe for that matter, maybe he won't hurt me. Disappointment because... well, I don't know what could have been had we'd slept together.

I want to believe in Jacob, I really do. He seems genuine, kind even. But after what I've been through, I can't help but be cautious. Trust doesn't come easy for me, not after everything I've been through.

So here I am, torn between the desire for something more with Jacob and the fear of getting hurt again. It's a constant battle, one that I'm still trying to navigate. And as much as I want to open up to him, to let myself feel, I can't ignore the nagging voice in the back of my mind, whispering reminders of past pain and betrayal.

For now, I'll take things one step at a time, treading carefully as I try to make sense of my feelings. And maybe, just maybe, Jacob will prove to be different, someone I can trust, someone who won't let me down. But until then, I'll keep my guard up, protecting my heart as best as I can while still holding onto a glimmer of hope for something more.

I wake up to the warm rays of sunlight streaming in through our balcony door. It takes me a moment to realize that I had even fallen asleep. I glance around the room, but Lana is nowhere to be found. I rub my eyes and yawn, trying to fully wake up. Maybe she went out for a bit. My throat feels dry, so I grab a bottle of water from the mini fridge and quickly finish it off, despite drinking one before bed last night. As I head out onto the balcony, I grab my phone from the nightstand, hoping to find some clue as to where Lana might have gone.

Lana steps into the room with Sam, Patricia, and JC trailing behind her, their voices carrying the residual buzz of the morning's activities. "Hey, you're up," she greets me with a warmth that belies the unease lingering in my chest.

"I didn't even realize I fell asleep," I admit, my voice a whisper against the backdrop of their chatter. "Where did you go, and why didn't you wake me?" The questions spill out before I can stop them, tinged with a hint of insecurity.

Lana offers a reassuring smile, her eyes soft with understanding. "You looked like you needed the sleep," she explains gently, "and I just went to grab something from the buffet and some coffee to wake myself up." Her words soothe some of the tension coiling within me, and I nod in silent gratitude.

Lana's smile gets smaller as she sees me quiet and she turns to our friends saying we'll meet them later tonight, they nod in understanding that Lana and I need a moment.

As our friends bid us farewell and leave the room, Lana joins me on the balcony, settling into a chair beside mine. Concern lines her features as she turns to me, her hand reaching out to touch mine. "Hey, what's going on?" she asks softly, her voice filled with genuine care.

I hesitate for a moment, unsure of how to put the whirlwind of emotions raging inside me into words. "I don't know," I confess, my gaze drifting out over the expanse of the ocean before us. "I'm feeling all sorts of things right now."

Lana nods, her expression encouraging me to continue. "Like, I've been having a great time with you and our friends on this cruise," I continue, "but... my life is still a mess. And then there's Jacob."

I pause, the name hanging in the air between us like an unspoken question. Lana waits patiently, her presence a steady anchor in the storm brewing within me. "What if he's not who I think he is?" I finally voice the fear that's been gnawing at the edges of my thoughts. "What if he's just like Joe, or worse, like Paul?"

Lana settles beside me, her presence a comforting presence amidst the tumult of my thoughts. Her hand begins to rub soothing circles on my back, a gesture that grounds me in the present moment. "It's only been four days, Anya," she reminds me gently, her voice a soft reassurance. "You can't possibly come to that conclusion in such a short amount of time."

Her words resonate within me, a reminder to temper my fears with patience and perspective. I take a moment to consider her question, allowing myself to recall the moments I've shared with Jacob since we first met on this cruise. "Plus, has he given you any indication that he might be like Joe or Paul?" Lana prompts, her gaze steady and supportive.

I close my eyes briefly, searching through the memories of our interactions for any hint of the darkness that haunted my past. But instead of echoes of pain, I find flashes of laughter, moments of genuine connection, and a warmth that I've longed for. "No," I admit, a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "He hasn't."

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Lana nods in understanding, her touch a steady anchor in the storm of doubt swirling within me. "Then maybe it's worth giving him the benefit of the doubt," she suggests gently, her voice laced with hope. "After all, sometimes the best things in life come when we least expect them."

Her words linger in the air, a beacon of light cutting through the darkness of my doubts. And as I lean into her comforting embrace, I find myself daring to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, there's room for a little bit of hope in my heart after all.

"Now that we've had our moment of seriousness, it's time for some fun at dinner," Lana declares, her tone light and playful.

Lana's light-hearted approach to the situation helps lift the weight of my worries, and I can't help but laugh at her playful demeanor. "Okay... wait, what do you mean dinner?" I ask, my mind still reeling from the realization of how long I've been asleep. I fumble for my phone, hastily checking the time, only to be met with disbelief at the hours that have slipped away.

"Holy crap! How long was I asleep?" I exclaim, my shock evident in my expression. Lana chuckles in response, her laughter a soothing balm to my frazzled nerves. "Anyways, we didn't go to breakfast till like 10:45, then we came back around almost noon," she explains. "I don't know how long you slept, but I came in and you were already out here on the balcony. If I had to guess, probably four hours."

"Four hours?" I repeat incredulously, my mind struggling to comprehend the passage of time. Lana's laughter only intensifies at my reaction. "Like I said, you looked like you needed it," she quips with a playful grin.

Shaking my head at my own exhaustion, I make my way back into the cabin to prepare for elegant night, as it's referred to on the cruise.

I search through my closet until I locate the red elegant dress I packed for the occasion. It's a stunning piece, with a vibrant shade of red that catches the eye immediately. The fabric is smooth and luxurious, draping elegantly over my figure. The dress features a form-fitting silhouette, hugging my curves in all the right places. The low neckline plunges daringly, drawing attention to my cleavage, while the short hemline adds a touch of flirtatiousness, reaching to my mid-thigh. Overall, it exudes confidence and allure, perfect for the evening ahead.

Lana steps out in a short white form-fitting halter dress. The dress is a pristine white, hugging every curve of Lana's body in a flattering way. The halter neck ties behind her neck, showcasing her toned shoulders and the dress ends mid-thigh, giving her legs a long and elegant look. "Girl! You look stunning!" I say as I take in her outfit. She gives a wide, knowing smile. "I know, right? But look at you! You are gorgeous, Anya!" she exclaims.

We adjust our dresses one last time and take a deep breath before we head out of our cabin. As we walk through the ship's corridors, I feel a mixture of excitement and nerves fluttering in my stomach. The elegant ambiance of the ship's dining area greets us as we enter, the soft glow of candlelight casting a warm glow over the room.

As we settle into our seats, I scan the menu, my eyes landing on the unfamiliar word "escargot." Curiosity piqued, I look to Lana, who grins mischievously. "You've never tried escargot before, have you?" Lana teases.

I shake my head, feeling a mixture of apprehension and intrigue. "No, I haven't. What's it like?" I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

Lana leans in, her eyes twinkling. "It's a delicacy. Some people love it, some people

hate it. But you won't know until you try," she says encouragingly.

Taking a deep breath, I decide to be adventurous and order the escargot along with my lobster and steak dinner. When the meal arrives, I tentatively look at the plate of escargot and pick up one of the small, spiral-shaped snails with my fork. Bracing myself, I take a bite, immediately greeted by a salty and slimy texture.

Surprised by the unfamiliar taste and texture, I try to mask my reaction with a forced smile. "Wow, this is...umm... interesting," I say, my voice slightly strained.

Lana laughs and bravely takes a bite of the escargot herself, but she can't conceal the grimace that forms on her face. "Oh god! I feel like I just swallowed a slug," she exclaims, her expression clearly showing her disgust.

I can't resist teasing her a bit. "Well, I mean technically, it's kind of like a slug," I jest, trying to lighten the mood.

She gags and quickly reaches for her wine, hoping to wash away the unpleasant taste lingering in her mouth.

I laugh along with her, relieved to have some solidarity in our shared distaste for the slimy snails. "Yeah, I think I'll stick to my steak and lobster," I declare, nudging the plate of salty snails away with a shudder.

The rest of the dinner passes in a blur of laughter and conversation, with Lana and I teasing each other about our escargot experience. As we finish our meal and head back to our cabin, I can't help but feel a sense of gratitude for our time here on the cruise.

Lana touches up her makeup, her reflection in the mirror displaying a determination to make the most of our final night on the cruise. "Are you planning on changing for

our last nightclub experience?" she asks, her voice tinged with excitement.

I consider her question for a moment before deciding, "Actually, I think I'm gonna stay in this outfit tonight, kind of like a celebration of our last hoorah on the cruise."

A grin spreads across Lana's face. "You know what, I agree! Let's go out with a bang!" she exclaims enthusiastically. I can't help but feel a surge of excitement at the prospect of one last memorable night.

I offer a gentle reminder, "But cool it on the alcohol, okay?" Lana nods in agreement, her expression more subdued but still determined to make the night unforgettable.

Chapter Nineteen

Jacob

After the elegant dinner with my family, I hurried back to my cabin to change and prepare for tonight. It's the last chance I have to talk to Anya, to share my feelings with her and open up about my military service. I hope it won't push her away. Getting to know her on this cruise has been incredible, and the thought of not seeing her again is daunting. She lives in NJ, and I'm in PA—it's not too far of a drive, and I believe we could make it work.

Checking myself in the mirror one last time, I take a deep breath before stepping out the door. Sam, Ben, and JC are waiting for me as I exit the elevator, and we walk together to the nightclub.

"Hey, man! You excited for tonight?" Ben asks, giving me a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"Yeah, it's kind of bittersweet, you know," I reply, feeling a mixture of excitement

and sadness.

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Ben nods in agreement. "Yeah, going back home will be great because I miss my friends, but at the same time, I'm gonna miss you guys too."

I jokingly place my hand over my heart. "Aw, I love you too, man!" I tease, pretending to wipe away a tear.

Ben chuckles and playfully shoves me. "Oh, shut up," he says with a grin. "You know what I meant."

We share a laugh, and I feel grateful for the bond we've formed during this cruise. "Yeah, dude, we get it," I reply, nudging him back. "I've had a blast spending time with you guys too."

We all wait by the entrance of the club for the girls to arrive, the sound of laughter echoing down the corridor. My heart nearly stops when I see Anya walking toward us. She looks stunning in her red dress, the color complementing her tanned skin and accentuating every curve. She's absolutely gorgeous, and I can't wait to talk to her.

As she draws near, her smile seems to brighten the entire hallway, and for a moment, everything else fades away except her. "Hey, you look handsome," she says, her eyes twinkling with sincerity. I feel a warmth spread through me at her compliment. "Thank you," I respond, unable to hide the admiration in my voice, "But you... you look drop dead gorgeous." Her smile widens at my words, and I can't help but feel a surge of pride knowing I've made her happy.

She links her arm with mine, her touch sending a shiver down my spine. "Shall we go in?" she asks, her gaze holding mine. My heart races at the closeness between us, and

I nod eagerly, unable to contain my excitement. "Absolutely," I reply, leading her into the club with a sense of anticipation bubbling inside me.

"You really do look stunning tonight," I whisper into her ear as we settle into a cozy booth. A blush rises to her cheeks as she responds with a grateful smile, "Thank you." Her happiness is contagious, and I can't help but revel in the sight of her radiant expression. With her beside me, I feel like the luckiest man alive.

I wrap my arm around her, drawing her closer as we engage in conversation with our friends. Time seems to slip away as we laugh and dance, but amidst the lively atmosphere, I find a moment to steal her away for a private conversation.

"Hey, can we talk in private?" I murmur, leaning in close to her.

Anya's concern is evident in her expression as she nods, "Is everything okay?"

I reassure her with a gentle smile, "Oh yes, everything is good. I just wanted some alone time with you." Her tension eases at my words, and she smiles in relief, "Oh... okay, good. You had me worried there for a minute."

We stroll hand in hand through the ship's corridors, soaking in the sights and sounds of our surroundings until we stumble upon a secluded bench. I gesture for Anya to take a seat, following suit beside her.

"So, you excited about going home?" she asks, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, I guess. I'm looking forward to being in my own room again, that's for sure. Sharing a room with my mom and stepdad has been weird," I admit with a chuckle.

Anya laughs in agreement, "Oh, I bet!"

I take Anya's hand, and she smiles at me, her eyes sparkling with warmth. "Anya, I really enjoyed spending time with you on this cruise. Meeting you was definitely the highlight of my vacation," I confess, sincerity lacing my words.

She playfully hits me on the arm, her cheeks flushing with color. "Oh my god, stop!" she protests, but I can tell my words have touched her.

"I'm not that special, there has to be something else that's better," she adds with a hint of insecurity, her gaze dropping momentarily.

"No, you were, you are, the best thing about this vacation," I say softly, lifting her chin with my hand so she is looking at me.

"Really? I find that hard to believe," she responds, a flicker of doubt still lingering in her eyes.

"Truly," I reassure her, smiling warmly. "And I don't want to leave this cruise without you being my girlfriend."

Anya

Say something! I internally scream to myself, feeling utterly tongue-tied. "Uhh..." Oh my God, you're just staring at him! For the love of God woman! Use words, WORDS! My inner voice shouts, berating me for my inability to speak.

I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure. "You... you want me to be your... your girlfriend?" I manage to stammer out, still finding it hard to form coherent sentences under the weight of his gaze.

He smiles warmly, his eyes twinkling with affection as he squeezes my hand. "Yes, Anya, will you please do me the honor of being my girlfriend?" he asks, his tone

sincere and earnest.

Who is this guy? And why does he make me feel so conflicted? My inner voice can't seem to make sense of the situation, unsure if I should trust my heart or my head.

Despite the rush of emotions and doubts swirling inside me, one thing is certain: I want to say yes. But can I really trust someone I've only known for a few days? My inner self reminds me that it's only been five days.

I try to push away the thoughts and focus on Jacob, who stands before me with fear in his eyes. He's been so kind and caring towards me, but I can't ignore the fact that I'm still working on myself.

Do I really want a boyfriend right now? But then again, he didn't pressure me into anything physical like other guys have in the past. My inner voice interrupts again, reminding me of how important that is. "Not helping," I scold myself. Great, now I'm having an argument with myself. Am I going crazy?

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"Anya," Jacob's voice brings me back to reality. "Huh?" I look at him, trying to hide the internal battle raging within me. "Will you be my girlfriend?" he asks again.

It's decision time, and I have to answer him. "Yes, Jacob, I'll be your girlfriend," I finally say, hoping that it's the right choice despite my conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Why did I say yes? I question myself as his arms wrap around me. The embrace feels warm and comforting, and as Jacob's lips meet mine, I try to reciprocate the happiness he's radiating. But underneath it all, there's a nagging feeling of uncertainty gnawing at me.

I can't deny that Jacob's happiness is infectious, and I want to share in it too. But deep down, there's a part of me that's nervous about what this new relationship might bring. Why couldn't I just say no and spare us both the potential heartache? But then again, maybe saying yes was the right thing to do. Perhaps this could be a positive change in my life, a chance for growth and happiness.

As Jacob holds me close, I push aside my doubts and try to focus on the present moment. Maybe, just maybe, this leap of faith will lead to something beautiful.

Jacob envelopes me in his embrace and we sit together, holding each other close. "I was afraid you might turn me down," he admits with a hint of worry in his tone. I smile softly and confess, "I was hesitant at first, but I couldn't bear to see the disappointment in your eyes if I said no." My words are sincere and filled with honesty. "I just couldn't resist that smile of yours."

Jacob lets out a warm laugh, his arms tightening around me. "I'm so glad you didn't say no. You've made me the happiest guy on this ship."

I lean back slightly to meet his gaze, feeling a surge of affection for him. "I'm happy too, Jacob. Let's make the most of our remaining time on this cruise."

With a nod and a tender smile, he leans in to kiss me once more, sealing our newfound commitment. As we stay there in each other's embrace, I can't help but feel a sense of hope and excitement for what lies ahead, even though it may be uncertain.

"Given your honesty with me, there's something I need to share," he says, his expression etched with concern and fear. Feeling the weight of his emotions, I inquire with my own sense of apprehension, "What's on your mind?"

"When I go back home, I'll be spending the remainder of my summer working then I'll be going into the Army. I start boot camp in September" he cautiously says. His words bring me back to Paul, Oh no! He did not say military! For a short moment I'm brought back to Paul walking in my place of work with a bouquet of flowers in his hand, wearing a military uniform. Then my mind fast forwards to Paul wearing the uniform, as he stands over me kicking me because I didn't have his dinner ready.

My breath quickens, and Jacob notices immediately. "Hey, are you okay?" he asks, concern evident in his voice. I struggle to calm my breathing, battling to push away the memories of my traumatic past. Jacob is not Paul, Jacob is not Paul, I repeat to myself like a mantra.

Suddenly, Jacob's arm is around me, and I startle, jumping up. "Anya! What's wrong?" he asks, his worry palpable. I can't handle it; I need to escape. Without a word, I bolt to Lana, leaving Jacob behind.

Lana's eyes widen at the sight of me. "What happened?" she asks, searching for

Jacob, who isn't there. "I need to go to the cabin," I choke out, tears threatening to spill over as I flee.

Jacob

What have I done? Why did I have to bring up the military? I shake off my thoughts and hurry after Anya, but Lana catches up to me before I even reach the nightclub, her expression stern.

"What did you do?" she asks, her tone sharp.

"I don't know, one minute we were fine, I asked her to be my girlfriend –"

"You asked her to be your girlfriend!?" she interrupts incredulously.

"Yes, and then I started telling her how I was going into the Army in the fall and –"

"You what?!" she exclaims, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "You told her you were in the military?" Her eyes bore into mine, a mix of shock and something I can't quite place.

"Yes, what's wrong –"

"You stupid, stupid man!" Lana exclaims, delivering two sharp slaps to my chest.

"Lana, stop interrupting, please just tell me what's going on!" I plead, feeling a wave of worry wash over me.

She rubs her face in frustration before responding. "It's not my story to tell, but all I can say is Anya has a past that involves the military," she explains, pacing back and forth and tapping her face with her index finger in agitation.

I reach out to hold Lana still. "Stop pacing, you're making me nervous," I say, my own nerves fraying at the edges.

She glares at me before her expression softens. "Look, technically it's not your fault. You don't know her past. But you did trigger it, so despite my better judgment – and I hope she doesn't end my relationship with her for what I'm about to say – you need to go talk to her," Lana advises solemnly.

"Where is she?" I ask urgently.

"She said she's going back to the cabin, but if I know Anya, after hearing 'military' she's gonna want a cigarette, and since she can't smoke on the balcony–"

I don't need her to finish the sentence; I know to look for her in the Ivory Lounge, the only room on the ship where passengers are allowed to smoke. I immediately start heading that way. Lana shouts after me, "Don't you dare hurt her and make me regret this." I wave in acknowledgment and pick up my pace.

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I reach the Ivory Lounge and scan the room, my eyes quickly landing on her in the back corner near a window. Tears are streaming down her face.

I rush over to her, but then I slow my pace. I don't want to startle her. As I approach, she doesn't look at me and continues to stare out the window. Even though it's dark outside, I know she saw my reflection in the window. I slowly take the seat next to her.

She sniffles, and my heart breaks at the sound of her crying, knowing that I'm the reason for her tears. "What do you want, Jacob?" she says with a cracked voice, wiping a tear from her face. She still doesn't look at me.

"Anya, please tell me what I did wrong. I can't fix it if you don't tell me," I plead, feeling the weight of her pain.

She scoffs, "There's nothing to fix, Jacob. I've changed my mind. I can't be your girlfriend," she snaps, then takes a hit from her cigarette.

I feel like I just heard my heart shatter into a million pieces. Can that actually happen? No, that's not a thing, but it sure feels like it. We can't end this cruise like this. "Anya, talk to me, please," I plead, desperation seeping into my voice. She snaps her head toward me, and I see her face, red and puffy from crying. "We have nothing to talk about!" she sharply says as she puts out her cigarette and starts to walk away.

I grab her hand, "Anya, wait, please," but she jerks her hand away just as fast. "DON'T!" she hisses, her eyes flashing with anger. I start to walk after her, but she holds her hand out, her voice sharp and commanding, "AND DON'T FUCKING

FOLLOW ME EITHER!"

She turns to walk out but is stopped by Lana, panting and out of breath.

As I watch Lana and Anya converse, a tumult of emotions churns within me. Guilt gnaws at my insides, knowing that my words have caused Anya such distress. I feel a deep ache in my chest, a sense of regret washing over me like a crashing wave. Why did I have to bring up the military? I curse myself for my thoughtlessness, for not considering how it might affect her.

Yet, amidst the guilt, there's also frustration and confusion. I don't understand why Anya reacted so strongly. Was it because of her past experiences? Or was there something else at play that I couldn't grasp? I feel a pang of helplessness, unsure of how to ease her pain or mend the rift between us.

But beneath it all, there's a glimmer of hope, a desperate longing to make things right. I can't bear the thought of ending the cruise on such a sour note, of leaving things unresolved between us. I want to fix this, to find a way to bridge the gap and salvage what remains of our connection.

As I observe Lana and Anya's interaction, my heart pounds in my chest with a mixture of apprehension and hope. Lana's composed demeanor and Anya's animated gestures create a stark contrast, leaving me on edge as I try to decipher their conversation. Each flicker of Lana's gaze toward me sends a surge of anxiety coursing through me, wondering what they're discussing and what Anya's reaction will be.

Is Lana trying to convince her to stay, or is she taking Anya's side? The uncertainty gnaws at me, amplifying my fear of the unknown. I watch intently as Anya shrugs and nods her head, a wave of relief washing over me at the sight of her tentative agreement.

As Lana and Anya approach, I steel myself for the conversation ahead, hoping desperately for a chance to make things right. The weight of my actions hangs heavy on my shoulders, but I'm determined to do whatever it takes to win back Anya's trust and salvage our connection.

As they stand before me, the weight of the unspoken hangs heavy in the air, casting a shadow over the awkward silence that envelops us. Lana's subtle nudge prompts Anya to break the silence with a frustrated sigh, her inner turmoil palpable in the tension of her body language.

"Anya, you need to tell him!" Lana's voice cuts through the stillness, gentle yet insistent, urging Anya to confront the truth that lingers between us. Anya raises her hands in a gesture of surrender, a mix of reluctance and resolve evident in her expression.

"Okay, okay, fine! You're right, okay!" Anya's words hang in the air, a tentative step towards unveiling the secrets that have kept us apart.

"Jacob, you should sit down," Anya says, her voice carrying a solemn weight. I quickly find the nearest chair and settle into it, my heart pounding with anticipation for what she's about to reveal. Anya exhales deeply, her gaze shifting briefly to Lana, who offers a supportive nod, silently urging her to proceed. Lana then gestures towards the door, indicating her intention to give us privacy for our conversation.

Anya's solemn demeanor sends a shiver down my spine as I brace myself for the truth she's about to disclose.

Chapter Twenty

Anya

As I gather my thoughts, I realize that Jacob will be the first person in a long time to whom I'll reveal the truth about Paul. Over the past two years, I've only confided in two people: Heather and Lana. Despite my efforts, others I've tried to trust with my story dismissed it as lies or exaggerations. The betrayal by those I considered friends and family left me guarded, reluctant to share my truth until I could be certain of acceptance and understanding.

Jacob sits before me, unaware of the weight of my past, the scars I carry hidden beneath a veneer of strength. Lana was right—I overreacted. Jacob didn't deserve my knee-jerk reaction; he couldn't be held responsible for a past he knew nothing about. With a deep breath, I steel myself to lay bare my vulnerabilities to him. It's a daunting prospect, but I owe it to myself—and perhaps to him—to let him in.

"Anya," Jacob's voice breaks through the heavy silence, drawing my attention back to him. His tone is gentle, inviting me to open up. With a resigned sigh, I gather my thoughts and begin, "First and foremost, I owe you an apology for my reaction earlier. It wasn't fair to you, and I'm sorry for pushing you away like that."

He nods, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. "Can I hold your hand?" he asks tentatively, his concern palpable. I can't help but smile faintly at his request, touched by his sensitivity. "Yes, I'd like that," I respond softly, intertwining my fingers with his. His touch brings a sense of comfort, easing the tension that had been building within me.

Despite my earlier behavior, Jacob's warmth envelops me, offering solace in the midst of my turmoil. It's a reminder that despite my past and my insecurities, I'm not alone in this moment.

"I'm not going anywhere, Anya. Whatever it is you have to say, I'm still here," Jacob reassures me, his words a lifeline in the midst of my emotional storm. His steadfast presence gives me the strength to proceed.

Taking a deep breath, I continue, "Two years ago, I was in a serious relationship with a man who I thought I was going to marry and raise a family with. In fact, we almost did." Jacob's hand tightens around mine, offering silent support as I delve into painful memories.

"When I met... when Paul and I met, we immediately became friends. We were part of a group, similar to what we found here on the cruise, and we did everything together," I explain, feeling the weight of those past moments pressing down on me. Jacob's attentive gaze and compassionate demeanor encourage me to press on.

"We liked each other, but he was in a relationship with someone at the time, so I never pursued anything more than friendship with him. Plus, he was 18 and I was 16 at the time, so my parents would not have approved of our relationship anyway," I explain, feeling the weight of those unspoken feelings from the past.

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“We went our separate ways shortly after that,” I continue, taking a breath to steady my shaky voice.

“How come?” Jacob asks, his genuine curiosity evident in his tone. His interest in my story brings a small smile to my face, a glimmer of warmth amid the vulnerability of the moment.

"Honestly, I don't know, our group kind of separated, and we all lost touch with each other," I answer, and Jacob nods in understanding.

"But the separation between me and Paul didn't last long when we ran into each other on my 17th birthday, right before I was about to start my senior year of high school," I continue, a hint of nostalgia creeping into my voice. "I was at the mall with a huge group of my friends who decided to do a small shopping spree for me as a birthday gift. That's when Paul ran into us as he came out of a store. He was so excited to see me that he picked me up and spun me around."

"Sounds like a happy time," Jacob adds, his voice filled with empathy as he listens to my story.

I let out a nervous laugh, “yeah, it was at that moment, and shortly after, we decided to date. My mom somehow convinced my dad to allow it despite Paul being 19 and me 17.” Jacob chuckles a little and then nods for me to continue.

“Things were great, Paul was so sweet and caring, we talked on the phone a lot.” I pause and take a breath, preparing myself to keep going. “A year into our relationship, he told me he was in the Marines. I was happy for him; both my dad and

grandpa are veterans, so it wasn't anything that would shock me." I say with a shrug, noticing Jacob's attentive expression as he listens carefully.

"But then my dad started getting suspicious about Paul, asking if I was sure he was in the Marines. I didn't see why Paul or anyone for that matter would lie about being in the military." Jacob raises his brows as if to ask how I didn't know about the term "stolen valor". I hold out my hand as a gesture that I know what he's thinking, "no, I was a naïve 17-year-old who didn't know anything about people pretending to be military," I say with a chuckle. Jacob lets out a small laugh along with me, then says, "well, it can be easy to miss if you're not looking for it."

I smile at his understanding, then continue, "Anyway, I started asking Paul the same questions my dad was asking me. At first, Paul would brush them off and say things like he'll tell me later or that he has it locked away somewhere, whenever I asked for physical proof." Jacob wipes a tear from my cheek, I didn't realize I began to cry. I breathe again and keep going.

"But as I asked more questions, things changed. Paul started yelling and screaming at me. We argued about where he was going at night. I began working while attending college, eventually switching to online classes because Paul got angry whenever anyone else talked to me." Jacob's gentle touch on the back of my hand offers comfort as I continue. "We never visited his house, and after my parents became suspicious, we stopped going to mine. So..." My body trembles, and Jacob moves closer, wrapping his arm around me. "It's okay, Anya. Take your time," he reassures me.

"So he would take me to motels after I got off work. I'd pick him up in my car from the mall, and then he would demand to drive," I explain. Jacob's curiosity prompts him to ask, "He took you to motels, not hotels?" I affirm with a nod, "Yeah, we didn't have a lot of money to afford hotels every day." Jacob's next question surprises me, "Well, at least he paid for them, right?" I let out a bitter laugh, "That's what I thought

too, until I noticed all my tip money would be gone after dropping him off home each night." Jacob's expression shifts to shock, but instead of judgment, he offers comfort by rubbing my back, silently encouraging me to continue sharing my story.

"I'd let it go each time because I didn't have any bills to pay for at the time, but then when my parents started to take away my phone and car because I refused to stop seeing Paul, I found myself needing my money more and more," I continued, my voice trembling with emotion.

"Did he not have a job?" Jacob asks, his brow furrowing with concern.

"I thought he did, but every paycheck and tip I received, he would end up taking. After a while, I did confront him and told him to stop taking my money," I explain. Then, I recount the next part with a shaky breath, "That's when things went from bad to worse. He... he... he would..." I struggle to compose myself as tears stream down my face. "He would yell, and then... then I would yell back," I say, my voice cracking with emotion. "When I yelled back for the first time, he backhanded me and told me to never talk to him that way again," I confess, burying my face in my hands and crying harder.

Jacob pulls me closer, holding me gently as he whispers soothing words. "Shh, it's okay, baby. I'm here," he assures me, rubbing my back and stroking my head until I finally calm down. "I'm sorry, this part is always the hardest to get through," I apologize, wiping my tears away.

"Anya, you never need to apologize for sharing how you feel," Jacob says tenderly, cupping my face in his hands before kissing my forehead.

His kind words and understanding give me the courage to continue. "I stayed with him for a year after that, thinking I could help him. I was in college for psychology, so I figured I'd practice with him and help him get better. But it never did. He would

berate me and tell me that no one else would love a slut like me," I recount, my voice trembling with the weight of the memories. "When he would hit me, it would only be in places no one ever saw because he made that mistake once and people kept asking questions. I wasn't allowed to be around him until my bruises and cuts healed after that," I explain, the pain of those memories still fresh in my mind.

"Then when it came to sex, I stopped wanting it from him because that was all we ever did when we would go to the motels. Anytime I told him no, he would get angry and hit me, then hold me down on the bed and force himself on me," I recount, the words heavy with the weight of my past trauma.

"I kept letting it go on until one day I had had enough. He took me to a motel that was run down and dirty. Apparently, I was a dirty whore, so I only deserved dirty motel rooms. His words, not mine," I clarify bitterly.

"It went as it always did, but this time he didn't care where he hit me. By the end of it, I had a black eye, my wrist was bruised from him holding me down, a bruise on my back from his elbows digging into me, and a deep bruise around my neck from when he choked me till I blacked out," I manage to say before breaking down in tears once more.

Jacob pulled me onto his lap and held me until I couldn't cry anymore. Then he cupped my face, his touch gentle and comforting. "Anya, I am so sorry that you had to go through that, and at such a young age. Thank you for sharing that with me," he said, his voice filled with genuine empathy. He pulled me into his chest, and I leaned my head on his shoulder, finding solace in his embrace.

"I'm sorry I freaked out on you," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "Just when I heard military, all those horrible memories came flooding back, and I got scared that I would be going through that again."

I felt Jacob tense up, and I pulled away from his chest to look at him, searching for his reaction. I noticed pain in his eyes, and my heart ached at the thought of causing him any distress. “Anya, I would never hurt you the way that he did. I understand why you reacted the way that you did, and—”

“I didn’t mean to insinuate that you were him, I—”

Jacob gently interrupted me, his touch soothing as he stroked my cheek. “I know. Let me finish, okay?” he said softly. I nodded, allowing him to continue.

“Like I said, I understand your reasons, and if you need me to provide you with any proof that I am not lying about who I am or me going into the military, I will do it for you in a heartbeat, no questions asked,” he reassured me, his words filled with sincerity and understanding.

As I lean back into his sturdy chest, my smile spreads across my face, a physical reflection of the warmth and contentment that fills me. I close my eyes, sinking deeper into his embrace, listening to the steady thump of his heart. The same heart that I had almost broken with my panicked words earlier. But now, as he wraps his arms around me, I feel safe and secure again. "Jacob?" I whisper, seeking reassurance.

"Yeah baby," he responds, his deep voice laced with affection.

"I'd like to be your girlfriend still if you still want me to be."

He tightens his arms around me in a gentle squeeze, his love for me evident in every touch. "More than anything," he replies, causing a surge of joy to fill my chest. I lean up and press my lips to his, the kiss quickly deepening as our longing for each other ignites.

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Before we know it, I am straddling him in the chair, our bodies pressed together in perfect harmony. His hands find their way under my dress, eagerly grasping at my hips and pulling me closer. I can feel the growing hardness beneath his pants, a delicious reminder of how much he desires me.

His kisses become more urgent, his hands travelling further up my thighs until they reach the damp fabric of my underwear. I can feel the heat and wetness between my legs, aching for his touch. He pauses for a moment, his eyes locked with mine, and I know that he can see the desire reflected in my own gaze. With a low growl, he pushes my underwear aside, his fingers sliding between my folds, causing me to gasp and arch into his touch.

“Mmm I can never get over how wet you get for me baby” he whispers in my ear. His hot breath against my neck sending a jolt straight to my core.

He knows exactly how to pleasure me, how to make me feel alive and desired. His fingers move inside me, stroking me in a rhythm that sends shivers down my spine. My breath hitches as I cling to his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as I feel his finger move in and out of my pussy. He expertly reaches my g-spot with one finger and rubs my clit with the other. Sending waves of pleasure throughout my whole body. “I need” I pant,

“what is it baby, tell me what you need?” Jacob seductively whispers between each thrust of his fingers. I want him so badly, need him to fill me and take me to heights I've never known.

"Please, Jacob, please," I beg, my voice breaking with the intensity of my desire.

“Tell me baby” he teases me, slowing his fingers inside me.

“I need you inside me Jacob” I pant, begging him to give me more.

“Right here in the lounge gorgeous?” he teases once more and my inside are screaming!

“YES JACOB! I need you to fuck me!” I blurt out in a loud moan, then quickly cover my mouth for fear of someone hearing and walking in on us.

He doesn't waste any time, quickly unzipping his pants and freeing his erection. I gasp, looking around the lounge and we are the only ones here. Lana must've returned back to our cabin when she saw us.

My heart catches in my throat as I see the thickness and length of him, a sight that fills me with both fear and excitement. I take a deep breath and position myself over him, my hands shaking as I guide him inside me. Feeling both exhilarated and nervous about getting caught but I push that fear away and focus on this moment with Jacob.

The sensation is unlike anything I've ever felt before - intense, raw, and overwhelming. He fills me up completely, stretching me in a way that both pleases and pains me. I cry out as he enters me, my hips rocking gently against his. I can feel his muscles tightening and relaxing with each thrust, his movements deep and deliberate.

I cling to him, my nails digging into his flesh as I try to control my rising pleasure. His eyes remain locked with mine, his expression a mix of desire and tenderness. I can see how much he wants me the same way that I need him, and I feel safe and cherished in his arms. He continues to thrust into me, our bodies moving in perfect synchrony.

As we move faster, our breaths become ragged, our bodies slick with sweat. The room echoes with the sounds of our bodies together - the creaking of the chair, the slap of flesh against flesh, and the gasps and moans of pleasure. We are lost in our own world, oblivious to everything else.

And then, just as I'm on the verge of losing myself in the ecstasy, with one final thrust, Jacob and I both scream,

“Anya!”

“Jacob!”

Our release echoing through the room. I can feel his warm juices fill me, completing me in a way I never thought possible. I collapse against him, my body trembling with the aftershocks of my own climax.

We sit there, panting heavily, our hearts pounding in sync. He pulls me close, nuzzling my neck as he whispers, "I told you that before this trip was over you'd be riding me" he teases. I can't help but laugh at his playful words, feeling the warmth of his breath against my skin. "I had no idea this trip would be so adventurous, Jacob," I admit, my voice still breathy from what we just did. But there's no denying the thrill that runs through me - the risk, the intensity of our connection, and the sheer passion that fills the air.

We linger in each other's arms, our bodies still entwined and buzzing with the remnants of our passion. As I trace the line of his jaw with my fingers, I can't help but wonder if this is how it was always supposed to be with someone.

In just five days, Jacob has managed to make me feel cherished and, dare I say it, loved. It's a feeling I haven't experienced in a long time, if ever. Though it's too early to predict what the future holds for us, I'm willing to take the leap and find out.

There's something about him that makes me believe this could be different, something worth exploring. So, despite my reservations and past experiences, I'm ready to see where this journey with Jacob takes me.

As Jacob helps me up, I can't help but chuckle at the sight of him cleaning himself up with a nearby napkin. He hands one to me, and I gratefully accept, wiping the remainder of my juices. "What?" he asks, his smile widening at my amusement.

"I can't believe we just did it in the Ivory Lounge," I exclaim with a grin. He pulls me towards him and plants a kiss on my lips, "I guess we wanted to leave with a bang!" he teases, and I playfully swat his arm. "You've ruined the moment," I say jokingly as we both chuckle and make our way back to my cabin.

Jacob keeps his arm wrapped around my waist as we approach my cabin door. "I don't know if I'll see you tomorrow before we leave, but here is my number. I want you to text me when you get home," he says, and I nod, feeling a mix of emotions at the impending farewell. But deep down, I know this isn't truly goodbye. He did ask me to be his girlfriend, after all.

He pulls me in close for one last kiss. "See you later, girlfriend?" he says with a playful wink. "Oh my god, stop!" I laugh, shaking my head as I playfully push him away. He chuckles, and I open my cabin door, watching as he walks backward. "See ya, Anya," he calls out, and I reply, "See ya, Jacob," as he disappears around the corner, heading towards the elevator.

I close the door behind me and lean against it, a wide smile spreading across my face. "Ahem," interrupts Lana, crossing her arms and giving me a knowing look. "Oh hey, I thought you were sleeping," I say, trying to play it cool as I head towards the bathroom.

"Oh no you don't," Lana says, grabbing my arm and pulling me towards the bed to

sit. "Details! I want details," she insists, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

I smirk, pretending innocence. "What details?" I tease. "I don't know what you're talking about," I say, continuing to tease her.

"Uh huh, yeah right. When I left you two, you were both sucking face. Out with it, woman!" Lana presses, not buying my act for a second.

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I laugh, unable to resist her persistence, and begin to recount every naughty detail that transpired between Jacob and me.

Lana sits there in shock and awe, then a huge grin spreads across her face. "You're welcome," she teases. I can only laugh in response. "Yes, you were right. Thank you for bringing me back to reality and telling me to take a chance with Jacob," I say playfully.

She straightens her back in victory and smiles, "Like I said, you're welcome," she chides once more. We both laugh, enjoying the light-hearted banter, and then begin to prepare for our departure from the ship in the morning. This vacation has been my best one yet! I think to myself and I can't wait to see what else the future holds.

PART TWO

Summer Love

Chapter Twenty-One

Jacob

In the two weeks following our cruise, Anya and I have been engaged in a constant stream of text messages and video calls, as if our phones have become an extension of ourselves. Despite the distance between us, we've managed to maintain a connection that feels as strong as ever. Yet, the reality of a long-distance relationship is proving to be more challenging than I initially anticipated.

Between my responsibilities as a tour guide at the Civil War Museum and Anya juggling two jobs, finding a window of time where we're both free has felt like trying to solve a complex puzzle. But finally, after what feels like a marathon of scheduling conflicts, we've managed to synchronize our calendars, and tomorrow—July 4th—is the day we've circled on our calendars with eager anticipation.

I can't help but indulge in a few cheesy daydreams about our upcoming reunion, picturing her radiant smile, the warmth of her embrace enveloping me, and the sense of homecoming that washes over us both.

Despite the challenges of distance and conflicting schedules, our connection remains steadfast, fueled by the mutual understanding that we're both committed to making this work. Tomorrow can't come soon enough—I'm ready to bridge the physical gap between us and immerse myself in the presence of the woman who has captured my heart.

The day of the reunion finally arrives and my nerves are on fire. As the clock strikes 4:30 in the morning, I awaken to the soft glow of dawn filtering through the curtains, illuminating the room with a gentle warmth. Despite the early hour, a surge of anticipation courses through me, propelling me out of bed and into action. Today is the day I've been eagerly awaiting—the day I'll finally be able to see Anya again.

After a nice hot cup of coffee, I move through my morning routine with urgency, the sound of the shower providing a soothing backdrop to my thoughts. As I dress and gather my belongings, I can't help but feel a sense of excitement bubbling within me. It's only been two weeks since the cruise, two weeks of constant texting and anticipation, and now the moment I've been waiting for is finally here.

Stepping out into the cool morning air, with my second cup of coffee in hand, I settle into the driver's seat, the engine humming to life beneath me. The streets are quiet as I pull out onto the road, the world still asleep in the pre-dawn hours. But inside, I'm

buzzing with energy, my mind filled with thoughts of Anya and the day ahead.

The drive to New Jersey stretches out before me, the miles disappearing beneath the wheels as I navigate the empty highways. With music blasting through the car speakers and each passing mile, my excitement grows.

I've been counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds, never once losing sight of the purpose of this day. I know that Anya and I share a bond that time and distance cannot weaken, but the mere thought of not being able to touch, smell, and taste her all day long is torturous. But as I sit in my car, the smell of Pennsylvania fading into the background, my thoughts wander to the magical moments we shared on our cruise.

Every waking moment of those five days on the ship felt like a dream. I remember our first meeting, and how I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Then on the last day of the cruise, the way she looked up at me, her eyes filled with unspoken longing and desire, as I thrust into her, bringing her to a mind-blowing climax. I laugh at the thought, we had sex in the Ivory Lounge as if the cameras weren't there and the glow of Anya's skin in the aftermath. She looked so beautiful in that moment, the way she looked at me, her eyes reflecting a vulnerability and trust that was overwhelming. It was in those moments that I knew I had found something special.

Finally, after three hours of driving, I arrive in New Jersey, the city awakening to the dawn of a new day. Pulling up outside Anya's apartment building, I can hardly contain my excitement, my heart racing with the knowledge that she's just moments away. Stepping out of the car, I make my way toward the entrance, a smile spreading across my face as I prepare to finally embrace the woman I love.

Anya

I wake up to the soft glow of dawn seeping through the curtains, illuminating my

room in a warm golden hue. Today is the 4th of July—the day Jacob is finally coming to visit. Excitement pulses through me at the thought of seeing him again, of feeling his arms around me and seeing his warm smile light up his face.

But as I lie there, a knot of uncertainty forms in the pit of my stomach. Despite the anticipation, doubts begin to creep into my mind. Two weeks have passed since the cruise, two weeks filled with constant texting and late-night conversations. Yet, amidst the excitement, there's a nagging feeling that maybe this is all moving too fast, that diving headfirst into a relationship with someone I barely know is reckless.

Jacob seems wonderful—kind, caring, and attentive. But despite our daily interactions, I can't shake the feeling that there's still so much I don't know about him. Dating long-distance is hard enough, but dating someone I barely know feels like a leap of faith into the unknown. What if Jacob isn't who he seems? What if there's a hidden side to him that I haven't seen yet?

Despite these doubts, I remind myself that Jacob hasn't given me any reason not to trust him. He's been nothing but supportive and understanding since we met, and I know he genuinely cares about me. Yet, the uncertainty lingers, a shadow hovering at the edge of my thoughts.

With a sigh, I push aside my doubts and force myself to focus on the present moment. Today is a day for celebration, for fireworks and barbecues and spending time with loved ones. Whatever reservations may linger in my mind, I know I owe it to myself to give Jacob a chance—to see where this newfound connection might lead. And so, with a determined resolve, I set aside my uncertainties and begin to prepare for the day ahead, hoping that maybe, just maybe, this time will be different.

As I slip on my Sunday best, a mixture of anticipation and anxiety washes over me. It's been a few weeks since I started going back to church, a decision born out of a desire to show everyone—myself included—that I'm healing, that the darkness of my

past with Paul hasn't consumed me.

But stepping back into that familiar place of worship also stirs up old fears. Church communities have a knack for prying into the personal lives of their members, and one misstep can quickly become the talk of the town. The thought of facing judgmental stares and hushed whispers weighs heavily on my mind, casting a shadow over what should be a joyous occasion.

Today feels particularly daunting, as I'll be introducing Jacob to my church family for the first time. It's been two long years since I last brought a man through those doors, and the memory of the scrutiny and gossip that followed still lingers like a ghost.

I can't help but wonder if I'm making a mistake, if history will repeat itself and I'll find myself once again the subject of scandalous rumors and harsh judgment. The thought is suffocating, threatening to drown out the fragile hope I've been nurturing in my heart.

But as I take a deep breath and straighten my shoulders, I remind myself that I am not the same person I was back then. I've grown stronger, more resilient. And while the fear may never fully disappear, I refuse to let it dictate my actions.

With a silent prayer for strength and courage, I steel myself for the challenges that lie ahead. Today is a test—a test of my faith, my resilience, and my ability to rise above the shadows of my past. And though the journey may be fraught with uncertainty, I cling to the belief that redemption and healing await on the other side.

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As I sit in the kitchen, savoring the last sips of my coffee and nibbling on breakfast, a sharp knock interrupts the quiet morning. Instinctively, I rise from the table, ready to answer the door, but my grandmother's outstretched hand halts me in my tracks.

"Ladies do not open the door to their gentleman callers," she declares with a mischievous glint in her eye. I roll mine in response. "Nana, this isn't the 1940s anymore. Women have become more independent," I retort, trying to reason with her.

With a playful glare, she corrects me, "I was born in the 1950s, thank you very much. I am not that old." Her smirk tells me she's enjoying this little banter. "Pops is in the garage, I am right here," I counter, hoping to sway her.

But she remains steadfast, gesturing for me to return to my seat. "Then he will wait, because you are worth waiting for," she insists, her words hitting home. She's right—I need to start asserting myself, not bending to every man's expectations.

I settle back into my chair, silently acknowledging the truth in her words. I am my own person, deserving of respect and consideration. If someone wants to spend time with me, they'll have to earn it. So, with newfound resolve, I wait patiently as Pops opens the door for Jacob.

As Pops swings the door open, he adopts a mischievous grin and quips, "Yes? May I help you?"

Jacob, standing on the doorstep with a hint of nervousness in his voice, responds, "Yes sir, I'm here for Anya."

Pops continues his playful banter, feigning ignorance, "Anya? Anya who?" His teasing goes unnoticed by Jacob, unfortunately.

I can't help but stifle a laugh at their exchange. Poor Jacob must be internally panicking, wondering if he's at the wrong address. But Pops's playful demeanor adds a light-hearted touch to the moment, making it impossible not to find humor in the situation.

Jacob nervously stammers, "Uh... umm... I don't know her last name."

Pops, still enjoying the teasing, responds with a smirk, "Well if you don't know her last name, then I can't help you, son."

I can see the anxiety on Jacob's face through the side window, and I realize I need to intervene. Not only are we running late, but poor Jacob must be on edge after his three-hour drive, thinking he might have the wrong address.

"Okay, Pops, that's enough," I say as I step around the door, revealing myself to Jacob. His face lights up with relief at the sight of me, and I can see the tension melt away.

"Hey! Sorry about that, come on in," I say, opening the door wider to welcome him. As he steps inside, I give him a polite hug, and he responds by wrapping his arms around me tightly, as if we've been separated for years instead of weeks. It's a level of affection I'm not used to, and I'm not quite sure how to react.

"How was your drive out here?" I ask as I grab my bag and sweater.

Jacob looks at my sweater and then back at me, a puzzled expression crossing his face. "It was good, quiet," he responds, then glances at the sweater again. "You do know it's July, right?" he teases.

"Yes!" I reply, matching his playful tone. "I also know that the church blasts the A/C, and it's freezing inside the sanctuary," I explain, giving him a playful glare.

"I guess we have a reason to sit extra close to each other then," he says, flashing a playful grin as we wave goodbye to my grandparents and head out the door.

I smile widely, a shocked grin spreading across my face, and playfully hit his chest. God, his chest! I'm immediately transported back to those moments when our hands were all over each other, and the muscles in his body flexed with each movement. The thought sends an electric jolt right down to my core! Shaking off my thoughts, I remember what I was about to say.

"There will be no groping or anything of that nature happening at church!" I declare, pretending to have a stern look on my face, like a mother scolding her child and reminding them to behave.

He chuckled as he guided me to his car, gallantly opening the passenger door for me. "I can drive, you know. We could take my car," I suggested, though I had already settled into the passenger seat. His expression shifted into one of playful incredulity. "And why would I have you do that?" he countered.

I grinned, enjoying the banter. "Because you just drove three hours!"

"Anya, I don't care if I drove for ten hours. It's my duty as your boyfriend, a very handsome one I might add, to help fulfill your passenger princess dreams," he teased, flashing me a mischievous grin.

I rolled my eyes with a smile. "Who says I want to be a passenger princess?"

He shot me a knowing look. "Please, Anya, you and I both know you want to be the passenger princess," he teased as we headed toward the church.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh huh," he replied, his smirk growing wider.

"I was just trying to be thoughtful, plus I am not a princess," I insisted, trying to keep things light.

He laughed, his eyes sparkling. "You know you're right! You are not a princess. You deserve to be treated like a queen. So, I am renaming it the queen passenger," he declared, teasingly.

I couldn't hold back my laughter. "Oh my god, that was corny," I said, shaking my head in amusement.

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He flashed me a grin and struck a pose, attempting to look cute. "Get used to the royal treatment from now on," he quipped, his tone playful.

I roll my eyes and shake my head playfully. "If you say so," I reply, trying to brush off his sweet words.

He chuckles at my response. "I do say so," he insists, taking my hand. "In all seriousness, Anya, you deserve nothing less."

I let out a nervous laugh, feeling the weight of his words. Never in my life have I experienced this level of consideration and care from a boyfriend. Not even during the times when Paul was actually kind toward me did he ever reach this level.

I roll my eyes again, "Okay, Jacob," I say sarcastically, but beneath the sarcasm lies a deeper insecurity. I feel like damaged goods, unworthy of someone like Jacob. He deserves someone without baggage, someone who will accept his appreciation and consideration without question. Me? No, because despite everything, I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop. It feels like this is too good to be true, and in my experience, when something feels that way, there's usually a reason.

As Jacob intertwines his fingers with mine, bringing me out of my thoughts, he flashes me a mischievous grin. "You know, Anya, if you keep rolling your eyes like that, they might just get stuck that way."

I chuckle, giving his hand a playful squeeze. "Oh, believe me, Jacob, if my eyes could speak, they'd be rolling all the way to the moon and back with your cheesy lines."

Jacob feigns offense, placing a hand over his heart in mock hurt. "Cheesy? Me? I'll have you know, I'm the king of charm."

I raise an eyebrow skeptically. "More like the court jester of charm, if you ask me."

Jacob chuckles, leaning in closer. "Well, lucky for you, I happen to appreciate a woman with a sharp wit."

Playing along, I raise an eyebrow and smirk. "Oh, how fortunate for me. I'll try not to let it inflate my ego too much."

His grin widens, and he squeezes my hand affectionately. "Don't worry, Anya. With me around, you'll always have someone to match your banter."

I smirk, enjoying the playful exchange. "Well, someone has to keep your head from floating away with all that charm, after all."

His eyes sparkle with mischief. "Ah, but I think you secretly enjoy a challenge. Keeps things interesting."

I laugh, giving him a playful shove. "Oh, please! I'm only tolerating it because you're cute when you're being stubborn."

Jacob's laughter fills the car, and he leans in closer, his voice dropping to a playful whisper. "Well, in that case, I'll just have to work harder to keep you entertained."

Feeling a blush creeping up my cheeks, I shoot back with a smirk. "Good luck with that, Mr. Smooth Talker. You'll need it."

He winks, his gaze lingering on mine. "Challenge accepted."

“Yeah we’ll see about that” I chide.

Jacob grins, the challenge evident in his eyes. "Oh, I'm counting on it. Prepare to be impressed, Anya."

I raise an eyebrow, a playful smirk tugging at my lips. "I'll believe it when I see it."

He chuckles, a hint of determination in his tone. "Just you wait. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

I lean back in my seat, feeling the anticipation building. "Well, I'll be waiting."

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Jacob playfully smiles. "Game on." He says as he turns into the church parking lot.

As we walk towards the church entrance, I try to shake off the uneasy feeling gnawing at my insides. Jacob's concern is evident, his touch comforting yet probing. "Hey, you okay?" he asks, his voice laced with genuine worry.

I force a smile, hoping to convince him and myself that everything is fine. "Yeah, just feeling a bit tired, I guess," I reply, inwardly cringing at the lie.

Jacob's expression tells me he's not fully convinced, but he doesn't press further. Instead, he holds the door open for me, a small act of kindness that doesn't go unnoticed. I offer him a grateful smile as we step inside.

The familiar faces of the church congregation greet us, their curious glances not escaping my notice. With a practiced facade, I plaster on a smile and exchange pleasantries, all the while acutely aware of Jacob's presence by my side.

His hand at the small of my back offers reassurance, but I flinch at the contact,

instinctively pulling away. It's not his fault; it's mine. I've grown accustomed to keeping people at arm's length, especially in environments like this where judgment feels palpable.

As we make our way to our seats, I steel myself for the inevitable small talk and scrutiny. It's a routine I've become all too familiar with, one that I've mastered in order to shield myself from prying eyes and intrusive questions. Today will be no different.

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Walking into the sanctuary, I immediately spot my parents, and my heart sinks. SHIT! I hadn't anticipated running into them today, especially not with Jacob in tow. Panic sets in as I mentally scramble to prepare myself for this unexpected encounter. I've only shared bits and pieces of my strained relationship with my parents with Jacob, so I know he's not fully equipped to handle this.

When my parents notice us and see Jacob and I holding hands, I instinctively let go, my nerves getting the better of me. Jacob shoots me a puzzled look, concern etched in his features as he asks if everything's okay. I can't find the words to respond, opting instead to nod silently and retreat to a seat in the back of the sanctuary.

But before I can escape further scrutiny, my dad approaches us, his expression serious. "Hey," he says quietly, and I offer a strained smile in return. When he tentatively suggests that we join my parents, I hesitate, feeling the weight of everyone's gaze on us.

"Umm..." I falter, searching for the right words amidst the awkward tension. Finally, I relent, not wanting to give the church gossip mill any fodder. "Sure," I manage to say, though my reluctance is evident.

My dad's gaze shifts between Jacob and me, silently urging me to make the introductions. My heart sinks as I fumble for the right words, the weight of the moment hanging heavy in the air. "Oh...uhhh...this is my friend Jacob," I manage to stammer out, the words feeling inadequate as they leave my lips.

I can sense the shock and hurt reflected in Jacob's eyes, his reaction piercing through me like a knife. Guilt gnaws at my insides, knowing that I've downplayed our

connection in front of my own parents. But Jacob remains composed, offering a polite nod as he shakes my dad's hand.

With a heavy silence settling over us, we follow my dad to the third row, the tension palpable. I steal a glance at Jacob, his expression unreadable, and a pang of regret washes over me. This was not how I wanted him to meet my family, and the weight of my decision weighs heavily on my conscience as we take our seats.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jacob

As we settle into our seats in the church, Anya's words echo in my mind like a broken record. My friend Jacob, she had introduced me, as if our connection meant nothing more than a casual acquaintance. Confusion swirls within me, mingling with a tinge of hurt and frustration.

I had thought our relationship was solid, built on the foundation of trust and understanding we had cultivated over the past few weeks. Yet, her actions in front of her parents contradicted everything we had shared. Was I just a temporary distraction to her? Or was there something deeper at play here?

Anya's sudden shift in demeanor doesn't escape my notice either. The vibrant, witty girl I had grown to know and care for seems to have retreated behind a mask of forced politeness and unease. It's like she's a different person the moment we stepped foot into this church, and I can't help but wonder what demons she's battling beneath the surface.

Her past with Paul, the blame unfairly placed upon her shoulders by those around her, flashes through my mind. I had hoped that coming with her today would offer some semblance of support, a chance to prove to these judgmental people that they were

wrong about her. But instead, I find myself grappling with a sense of disillusionment and uncertainty.

As the church service begins, I steal a sideways glance at Anya, her profile etched with tension and inner turmoil. I know that an awkward conversation awaits us on the journey back to her grandparents' house, and I can only hope that we can navigate through the complexities of her emotions together.

Throughout the church service, I can't shake the feeling of discomfort lingering in the air between Anya and me. The sermon drones on, but my mind is elsewhere, grappling with the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside me.

Anya's demeanor speaks volumes, her usual lively spirit muted by an invisible weight pressing down on her shoulders. I want to reach out, to offer her comfort and reassurance, but something holds me back. It's as if a barrier has formed between us, one that I can't quite breach.

I steal glances at her from time to time, searching for any sign of what's going on behind those guarded eyes. But she remains stoic, her facade unyielding, leaving me to wonder what secrets she's hiding beneath the surface.

As the service draws to a close, I feel a sense of relief wash over me. Yet, it's tinged with apprehension about the impending conversation awaiting us outside these walls. What happened back there? Why did she introduce me as just a friend?

Once we step out of the church and into the sunlight, I muster the courage to broach the subject. "Anya," I begin tentatively, "is everything okay?"

She hesitates, her gaze flickering away before returning to meet mine. "I'm sorry about back there," she murmurs, her voice tinged with regret. "I didn't mean to... to introduce you like that."

I nod, understanding flooding through me. "It's okay," I assure her, though the sting of disappointment still lingers. "But... why?"

Anya's shoulders slump, and she takes a deep breath before speaking. "It's complicated," she admits, her voice barely above a whisper. "I just... I didn't want to deal with the judgment and the questions, you know?" She looks around as if to make sure that no one is listening. "These people have a tendency to talk and make assumptions about things that they know nothing about?"

I listen to Anya's words, feeling a pang of sympathy and frustration. "I understand," I murmur softly, reaching out to gently hold her hand. "But introducing me as just a friend to your parents... it stung a little, you know?"

Anya lets out a weary sigh, her eyes reflecting a mixture of guilt and resignation. "I'm sorry," she says, her voice tinged with remorse. "To my parents, the whole thing with Paul is still a sore subject."

"Yeah, but that was two years ago," I interject, trying to offer some perspective.

She shrugs, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "I know, but to them, what I did... how I embarrassed them by staying with him... it's like they still haven't moved past it. And despite being 21, they still see me as a runaway."

"That's not fair to you," I respond, my voice firm with conviction. "You're not to blame for Paul's actions."

Anya's gaze meets mine, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I kind of am, though," she admits quietly. "Maybe not entirely, but I chose to stay."

"No, Anya, it's not your fault," I insist, my grip on her hand tightening. "Whatever they or anyone else says, it's not true. What Paul did to embarrass your parents and

the church is nothing compared to what he did to you."

She falls silent, staring out the window with a haunted expression. I can sense her pain, her struggle to reconcile with her past. As we arrive at her grandparents' house, I turn to her, gently guiding her to meet my gaze.

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"I want you to know that I'm here for you," I say earnestly, my voice soft but determined. "You're not alone in this. I care about you deeply, and I hate seeing you treated this way. You don't have to face it alone, Anya. Lean on me. I can be strong for the both of us."

A flicker of gratitude dances in her eyes, a silent acknowledgment of my support. "Thank you," she whispers, her voice choked with emotion.

As we head back to her grandparents' house, I know that our journey together is far from over. But with each step we take, I'm committed to standing by Anya's side, helping her navigate through the shadows of her past and guiding her towards a brighter future.

Anya steps out of the car in silence, her expression troubled as she heads indoors, leaving me trailing behind. "I'm gonna go change, I'll be right back," she murmurs, disappearing down the hall to her room. As I settle onto the couch, Anya's grandmother emerges from the hallway, her gaze shifting between me and Anya's closed door. "What happened, Jacob?" she inquires, taking a seat beside me.

"Her parents were there, along with a lot of other people who just stared at her," I explain, my voice heavy with concern. Anya's grandmother nods understandingly at my brief explanation. "I feel bad that people over at that church, and her parents for that matter, still treat her differently, despite all the progress she has made over the last two years," she comments, tapping my knee gently. "But the change in her in the last two weeks, however... I haven't seen her this happy since before Paul." Her words resonate deeply with me, and I offer a sympathetic nod in response.

She glances down the hallway before returning her gaze to me, tapping my knee again. "So just know that I am happy she has you in her life. Just give her time to heal. It's hard for her when she feels like everyone is scrutinizing her every move, but she will get past this."

"I just don't know what else I can do to help," I confess, feeling a sense of helplessness creeping in.

Her grandmother smiles warmly at me. "Jacob, you're already doing it. Just be there for her. Be her rock, someone she can count on and trust with her heart."

"I'm trying, but it seems like when I think I'm helping her and she's back to being happy, something happens, and then she's back to being depressed," I admit, frustration lacing my words.

"I know, sweetie," she responds softly, offering me a reassuring pat on the knee. "Like I said, just give her time and show her that she can trust you. Paul was always all talk; he would sweet-talk anyone till they were blue in the face, and we all believed him. But his actions very rarely matched his words. So my advice: show her, don't just tell her." With that, she rises from the couch and heads toward the kitchen, leaving me to ponder her words as I await Anya's return.

As Lana enters, her exuberant greeting catches me off guard. "Hey, Nana!" she calls out, shutting the door with a thud. Startled, she glances in my direction. "Oh, geez! Hey, Jacob! Didn't see you there!" she says, her hand instinctively covering her chest in a playful gesture.

"Hey, Lana!" I reply, rising from my seat to give her a quick side hug. She beams at me. "How was your drive here?" I chuckle, realizing Anya had asked me the same question earlier.

“Did I say something wrong?” Lana's expression turns puzzled.

“Nah, just déjà vu. Anya asked me the same thing earlier,” I explain.

She giggles, “Oops, my bad. Force of habit, I guess. So, where’s she?”

“In her room, changing. Tough time at church today,” I say, Lana’s concern evident. Before she can inquire further, I continue, “Parents were there, and the gossip started as soon as they saw us together.”

“Ugh, typical fucking assholes,” Lana mutters, her face contorted in disgust. Then, she shifts her gaze to me. “Is she alright?”

“Yeah, we talked in the car. She’s better now. Getting out of there helped,” I assure her.

“Good to hear,” Lana nods approvingly. Then, she leans in, a serious tone replacing her previous lightheartedness. “Hey, do me and her a favor, okay? Treat her like the strong woman she is. She may look fragile, but trust me, she’s tougher than she lets on.”

“Got it, thanks for the heads up,” I respond, grateful for Lana’s insight.

Anya emerges from her room, sporting a low-cut tank top and daisy duke shorts, her hair styled in a messy bun. There's a noticeable shift in her demeanor, a newfound energy in her movements. "Oh hey, Lana!" she exclaims, enveloping her in a tight hug.

"Hey, you ready to head out?" Lana asks, addressing both of us.

"Abso-fuckin-lutely!" Anya replies, her excitement palpable.

"Great! We're picking up my new boy toy first, then we can head out to lunch!" Lana announces, her grin stretching from ear to ear.

"Ooo, this is news," Anya chimes in, matching Lana's enthusiastic tone. She then turns to me, linking her arm in mine. I lean down to kiss her on the head before the three of us set out.

Lana insists on driving her SUV, winking mischievously at both Anya and me. We share a laugh at her playful insistence before climbing into the backseat. Anya snuggles up next to me, her smile lighting up the car.

"You know, I just realized something," I say, a mischievous twinkle in my eye.

Anya tilts her head, her curiosity piqued. "Oh, what's that?" she asks, her voice laced with anticipation.

Leaning in, I whisper into her ear, feeling her shiver at the touch of my breath on her skin. "We haven't kissed since I arrived," I tease, a smirk playing on my lips. With a gentle touch under her chin, I guide her face toward mine and then lean in to kiss her, the moment filled with both tenderness and passion. Anya responds with a soft moan, and for a moment, I'm lost in the sensation, but I quickly regain my composure and pull away, meeting her gaze.

Before we can continue, Lana's voice interrupts us. "Hey! Hey!" she shouts from the front seat, her eyes catching ours through the rearview mirror. "No having sex in my new car!" she teases, her tone light-hearted. "Only I can christen this baby!" she adds with a playful wink.

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Both Anya and me laugh and I raise up my hands “yes maam!”

“Eww! Don’t call me maam! I am only in my 20s!” Lana snides.

Anya and I bursts out laughing, “Duly noted, I’ll try to keep my hands to myself” I tease.

Anya has a playful shocked look on her face, “Fuck that!” she playfully says and pulls my arm toward her. Which lead to my hand resting on her mid-thigh. I give her a squeeze and I can see her getting riled up again.

I take it as a challenge, a dare to push further. With a slow and deliberate movement, my hand snakes up her thigh, feeling the heat radiating off of her skin. She bites down on her lip, desperately trying to stifle any sound that might reveal our illicit actions. My hand continues its journey upwards, ghosting over the fabric of her shorts before slipping underneath, tracing the damp outline of her underwear. A smirk plays across my lips as I feel just how wet she is for me. Her smile in response is both eager and nervous, her cheeks flushed with arousal and anticipation. Without hesitation, I dip my fingers into her folds, eliciting a sharp gasp from her as I begin to expertly rub and tease her sensitive flesh.

Surely my actions could never be misinterpreted now. Lana glances up and just shakes her head and smirks, then turns up the music in the car louder. Anya's body arches with every touch, her moans growing louder with each passing moment. The anticipation of discovery hangs heavy in the air, making every touch feel more taboo and exciting.

I focus on her pleased moans and her hips bucking against my hand, not wanting to let up anytime soon. I could feel her arousal building, her body reacting to my every touch. It was an intoxicating sensation, making me want more. I drag my fingers across her entrance, teasing her before dipping just one finger inside. Anya whimpers softly, her grip on my hand tightening as I slowly slide my finger in and out, the wetness of her desire echoing around us.

Despite the risk, Anya's desires were becoming too strong to ignore. She gripped my hand tighter, guiding it towards her aching core. I didn't hesitate, slipping a second finger inside her, stretching her open. Her breath hitched, her body trembling from the sensation.

As Lana continued to drive and enjoy the music trying to ignore what we were doing, Anya's climax built higher and higher. She was on the edge, ready to fall into a blissful oblivion. I knew I had to push her over. I increased the pace, curling my fingers inside her, and rubbing against her sensitive spot.

Anya's body shook uncontrollably, her stifled moans filling the space between us, she covered her mouth and silently screamed out her release. My hand was slick with her fluids, evidence of our shared passion. I kept rubbing her until the last shudder faded away, then slowly pulled my fingers out from inside her. With her chest heaving and her face flushed, Lana finally turned around to see the aftermath of our little encounter. Her eyes widened in shock, but her smile never left her face.

"Well, I guess the car is officially christened," she said, her tone more mischievous than ever before. "You two must have been doing something in the back there. Mind telling me what?"

Anya and I exchange a knowing glance and just shrug, a playful smirk dancing on our lips. Then, with a wide grin, Anya chimes in, "Just a little third base action," teasingly nudging me with her elbow.

Lana laughs at Anya's comment. "Okay, I can accept that," she says, her tone light-hearted. "But if anyone is gonna go to fourth base in this car, it's gonna be me," she adds with a playful snide. We all share a laugh at Lana's quip.

As Lana pulls into a driveway, a young man steps into the car and shares a passionate kiss with her. Anya and I exchange a glance, sharing a smile at the sight.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Anya

I clear my throat, breaking Lana and Caleb's moment, and Lana shoots us a wide smile along with a playful look. "Oops, sorry," she says, but her mischievous grin suggests otherwise. "Let's be honest, if I had to pretend that I didn't know exactly what you two were doing back there, you can endure my short make-out session with Caleb here." Caleb gives us an awkward smile and a wave. "Hey, I'm Caleb," he introduces himself.

Jacob and I wave back awkwardly, returning his greeting with a polite "Hey." Lana and Caleb then resume their affectionate display, prompting me to speak up. "Lana, I'm hungry!" I say loudly, hoping to get her attention. But she simply waves us off, engrossed in her own world of romance.

"If I don't get some lunch soon, it's not gonna be pretty!" I shout again, still ignored by Lana and Caleb. Then Jacob interjects with a humorous remark, "Okay Lana, I'm just gonna take out Anya to lunch, because unlike you, I would rather not spend my only day here with a girlfriend who is mad at me because someone else made her mad."

"Hey!" I playfully protest, giving Jacob a playful smack on his arm. Despite the teasing, I know he has a point. I do tend to get a bit testy when I'm hungry, and I don't

discriminate about who bears the brunt of it. I feel bad afterward, of course, but in the moment, well, let's just say I can be a bit of a handful.

Jacob takes my hand and guides us out of the car. Luckily, Caleb's place is near the boardwalk, so we decide to head there. The sun beats down on us, and the boardwalk is bustling with people, unsurprising for July 4th, especially with the promise of fireworks later in the evening. As we walk, I can't help but wonder where we'll catch the fireworks show, considering the crowded beach.

"Where do you want to eat?" Jacob asks as we step onto the boardwalk.

"Honestly, I'm not picky as long as it's greasy and hot!" I reply with a laugh.

"Alright, pizza it is," Jacob decides.

My stomach chimes in agreement, growling at the mere mention of pizza. New Jersey pizza has always been a favorite of mine, second only to New York's, and the thought of sinking my teeth into a slice ignites my appetite.

Following Jacob, we navigate through the sea of people, squeezing our way toward the nearest pizza joint on the boardwalk. It's a struggle to make progress amidst the throngs of holiday-goers, but the promise of cheesy goodness keeps us motivated. Today might not be the ideal time for a boardwalk lunch, especially during peak hours, but we're determined to satisfy our hunger regardless.

Suddenly, Jacob's voice cuts through the chatter with a blend of politeness and firmness, "Excuse me, pardon me!" His words ring out loudly enough to catch everyone's attention, and as if under a spell, the crowded pizza shop parts like the Red Sea. I can't help but feel a rush of warmth at the way he effortlessly commands attention, almost like a gentle force of nature.

Jacob places a reassuring hand on my back and guides me through the now-open pathway toward the counter. "You didn't have to do that, we would've made it to the front eventually," I remark, genuinely impressed by his assertiveness.

"Babe, you're hungry, and I just wanted you to get food as quickly as possible," he responds casually, as if it's the most natural thing in the world. Despite his nonchalant attitude, I can't shake the feeling of awe. How does a man like him find himself involved with someone like me? But for now, all I can focus on is the rumbling in my stomach, pushing aside any doubts or insecurities.

We step outside, our arms laden with steaming slices of pizza, scanning the bustling boardwalk for an empty bench. With all the tables inside occupied, we settle for a spot with a view of the beach.

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I dive into my slices of pepperoni and sausage pizza with gusto, devouring them so quickly that even I'm surprised. Jacob hands me a stack of napkins to combat the inevitable grease stains on my hands and arms. As I wipe them off, I realize there's still some residue on my face. Before I can react, Jacob calmly reaches over and wipes the corners of my lips with another napkin.

Caught off guard by his gesture, I instinctively wipe my mouth, even though there's nothing left to clean. Jacob chuckles softly and leans in to give me a tender kiss.

"Mmmm, I like kissing you," he murmurs with a smirk, planting another kiss on my lips.

I snicker playfully. "Yeah, well, that's only because I taste like pizza grease," I quip.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "I think I'll always want to be kissing you," he replies, his words making my cheeks flush with warmth.

"You sure have a way with words," I tease.

"I just go after what I want, sweetheart," he grins back.

I can't help but roll my eyes and shake my head. But then he leans in closer and I feel a jolt of electricity through my body. "If you keep rolling your eyes at me, I might have to take you behind one of these buildings and give you a spanking," he playfully threatens.

His words make my heart race, and normally the thought of anyone laying a hand on

me would send me running. But there's something about Jacob that tells me he wouldn't actually hurt me; it would be for his own pleasure, as well as my own. The thought sparks a warm sensation through my body, even though it's already sweltering outside.

I chuckle nervously, trying to mask the sudden heat rising to my cheeks. "You wish," I retort, my tone a mix of amusement and surprise.

Jacob flashes me a mischievous grin, his eyes dancing with playful delight. "Oh, I don't just wish, Anya," he says teasingly, his voice low and suggestive. "I have a feeling you might just enjoy it."

I raise an eyebrow incredulously, feeling a mixture of amusement and curiosity at his boldness. "Is that so?" I reply, unable to suppress a playful smirk. "And what makes you so sure?"

He leans in even closer, his breath warm against my ear as he whispers, "Because I know you, Anya. And I know exactly how to make you squirm."

A shiver runs down my spine at his words, a tantalizing thrill coursing through me. Despite the playful banter, there's an underlying intensity in his gaze that sends my heart racing. It's as if he's peeling back layers of my inhibitions, daring me to embrace the unexpected.

Before I can respond, Jacob leans back with a devilish grin, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "But for now, how about we finish our pizza and enjoy the rest of the day?" he suggests casually, as if our previous exchange had been nothing more than a lighthearted joke.

I laugh, feeling a mixture of relief and excitement at the return to lighter conversation. "Sounds like a plan," I agree, feeling grateful for the easy rapport we

share.

As we sit together on the boardwalk, basking in the warmth of the summer sun and the promise of a carefree day ahead, I can't help but wonder what other surprises Jacob has in store. And despite my initial reservations, I find myself eagerly looking forward to finding out.

As we finish our pizza, Lana and Caleb appear, both wearing satisfied smiles that suggest they've indulged in more than just a meal. I raise an eyebrow at Lana, who winks playfully in response, confirming my suspicion.

"Looks like someone's had a good time," I tease, unable to resist poking fun at Lana's adventurous antics.

She grins unabashedly, draping an arm around Caleb's shoulder. "Oh, you have no idea," she replies with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Caleb, a blush creeping up his cheeks, gives a sheepish grin and waves in greeting. "Hey there," he says, his voice slightly hoarse from their amorous activities.

Jacob chuckles, exchanging a knowing glance with me. "I hope you guys saved some energy for the fireworks later," he quips, his tone light and teasing.

Lana laughs, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Oh, don't you worry," she says, her tone dripping with innuendo. "We had plenty of fireworks of our own."

I roll my eyes, but can't help but smile at Lana's unabashed enthusiasm. "Well, I hope you saved some room for dessert," I say, gesturing toward the ice cream stand nearby. "Because I could really go for some ice cream right about now."

Jacob nods in agreement, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Ice cream sounds

perfect," he says, standing up and offering me a hand. "Shall we?"

I take his hand with a smile, feeling a sense of warmth and contentment wash over me. Despite the unexpected twists and turns of the day, being surrounded by friends—and the promise of sweet treats and fireworks—fills me with a sense of joy and anticipation for the rest of the day.

The afternoon unfolds seamlessly after Caleb's gracious invitation to cool off in his pool, a welcomed reprieve from the stifling July heat. With Jacob and Lana by my side, we eagerly accept the offer, relishing the chance to escape the oppressive temperatures. As we lounge by the water, laughter and chatter fill the air, washing away the tension from earlier in the day.

The cool sensation of the pool water soothes my skin, and I find myself relaxing into the moment, enjoying the camaraderie and carefree atmosphere. Despite the lingering unease from the morning's events, being surrounded by friends helps ease my worries, if only for a little while.

As the sun begins its descent, casting a warm glow across the sky, Caleb suggests that we stay to watch the fireworks from his backyard. With his brother's party in full swing, the air is filled with music and the aroma of grilled food, adding to the festive atmosphere. We gladly accept the invitation, eager to witness the dazzling display of lights that will soon illuminate the night sky.

As twilight settles and the first bursts of fireworks fill the air, we gather on the grassy lawn, our eyes fixed on the spectacle above. Each explosion paints the sky with vibrant colors, and I can't help but feel a sense of awe and wonder at the beauty unfolding before me. Surrounded by friends, immersed in the magic of the moment, I feel a fleeting sense of peace wash over me.

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Amidst the crackling of fireworks and the delighted exclamations of the crowd, I steal glances at Jacob, his face illuminated by the colorful display above. He glances back at me and then walks behind me wrapping me in his arms. Feeling the warmth of Jacob's chest against mine, I bask in the comfort of his presence amidst the cool night air.

As the final bursts of fireworks fade into the darkness, the crowd begins to disperse, each person drifting off to enjoy the rest of the evening in their own way. Some head off to grab more food, while others make their way back to the inviting waters of the pool.

Engaged in a casual conversation with someone from the party, I'm momentarily distracted until Caleb approaches Jacob, drawing his attention away. I catch snippets of their conversation, and it dawns on me that Lana must have mentioned Jacob's impending departure for boot camp in the fall. The reminder sends a pang of unease through me, but I push aside the apprehension that threatens to resurface.

I recall the moment Jacob shared his orders with me over a video call, the earnestness in his eyes reassuring me of the validity of his plans. He even went as far as emailing me the official documents, a gesture that spoke volumes of his commitment and honesty.

"That's so crazy that you're heading into the Army, I have a buddy here who's cousin is in the Marines," Caleb's voice drifts over to us, interrupting our conversation. The mention of the Marines always sends a shiver down my spine, triggering memories of Paul's incessant boasting about his supposed ties to the military. I'm relieved that Jacob is joining the Army instead, sparing me from the discomfort of hearing more

stories about the Marines.

"Ah, yeah, that's cool," Jacob replies politely, though I can sense a hint of tension in his voice. He wraps his arm around me, a silent gesture of reassurance. "You doing okay?" he asks, his concern evident in his eyes.

I offer him a small smile, grateful for his consideration. "Yeah, I'm good," I assure him, though the unease still lingers. "It's just hard hearing people talk about the military sometimes, but I'll get over it."

"We can leave if you want," Jacob suggests, his tone earnest. "I really don't care if I talk to this guy or not. I just didn't want to be rude."

I shake my head, reaching up to gently touch his cheek. "No, it's okay, really," I reassure him. "I'll be alright. If it gets to be too much, I can always find Lana or grab some more food."

Jacob rubs my back soothingly, his touch sending a comforting warmth through me. "Anya, I don't mind," he insists, sincerity shining in his eyes. "The last thing I want is for you to feel uncomfortable."

His words touch my heart, and I'm overwhelmed by his kindness and thoughtfulness.

"MARCUS!" Caleb shouts one more time and both Jacob and I roll our eyes and Caleb's incessantness to get his friend. "Hey, man don't worry about it" Jacob says to Caleb, "we're gonna be heading out soon anyway" he tells him.

"Oh nah man, just hang on, he's on his way" Caleb insists. We both roll our eyes again and shake our heads. "I'm gonna go grab a drink" I tell Jacob. He nods his head and kisses my temple. "Okay, I'll join you in a bit, just let me try to get out of this conversation" he replies. I let out a small laugh, "good luck". He playfully scoff

“yeah tell me about it”.

I take a sip of my drink and engage in some casual conversation with the people around me. But when I glance back to where Jacob was, my heart plummets. A surge of panic grips me, my breath quickening as my chest tightens. The sound of breaking glass echoes in the background, but I can't tear my eyes away from Jacob and the guy he's talking to.

My name is called out, but it's drowned out by the thunderous beat of my heart. No, no, no, please let him not be here, I silently beg, my mind racing with fear. I instinctively scan the rest of the crowd, my panic escalating with each passing second.

Lana steps in front of me, her voice cutting through the chaos. "Hey! Anya!" she shouts, urgency evident in her tone. I finally tear my gaze away from the crowd, my breaths coming in quick gasps. Lana guides me to the front of the house and gently seats me down.

As the panic tightens its grip around my chest, Lana instructs someone to fetch a paper bag. Seconds later, she hands it to me, her voice calm but firm. "Breathe into this, Anya," she says, her eyes reflecting concern. I obey, inhaling and exhaling into the paper bag, trying to steady my racing heart and regain control of my breathing, but it doesn't work.

All eyes are on me, and I feel exposed, vulnerable. The guy Jacob was talking to notices me, and a flicker of recognition crosses his face. Panic surges through me as he starts walking toward us. "No! NO! Don't let him come over here!" I cry out, my voice trembling with fear.

Jacob reacts swiftly, intervening before the guy can reach us. He rushes over to me, his eyes filled with concern and panic mirroring my own. "Anya! What's wrong?"

What happened?" he asks urgently.

"He can't be here! He can't be here!" I repeat frantically, the words tumbling out in a desperate mantra. My body begins to rock back and forth involuntarily, the panic threatening to overwhelm me.

Sensing my distress, Jacob pulls me onto his lap, holding me tightly as he tries to calm me down. "Shh, you're safe, shh, I got you, baby," he whispers soothingly, his voice a comforting anchor in the midst of my turmoil.

With a gesture to Lana, Jacob silently signals that it's time to leave. Tenderly, he carries me to the SUV, settling me back on his lap as he continues rubbing small circles on my back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jacob

As we pull up to Anya's grandparents' home, I gently carry her out of the car. She clings to me, her arms wrapped tightly around my neck and her face buried in my chest. Setting her down on the porch, I sit beside her along with Lana, exchanging a worried glance with her before turning our attention back to Anya.

Despite the steadier rhythm of her breathing during the ride, Anya still wears a fearful expression. Her complexion has turned pale, and I silently signal to Lana to fetch a bottle of water.

Lana returns with the water, and I hold it out to Anya, encouraging her to take a sip. She complies, albeit hesitantly, and I can see a slight improvement in her demeanor as she begins to drink. Turning to Lana, I mouth a silent 'thank you' before refocusing my attention on comforting Anya.

We sit in silence, the weight of the moment stretching time far beyond its usual measure. Lana's departure leaves just Anya and me, the quiet amplifying the tension in the air. Eventually, Anya breaks the stillness with a sigh, signaling her readiness to speak.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you and Lana,” she says softly.

“It's okay, I’m not going anywhere,” I assure her gently, wanting to provide comfort amidst her distress. “What happened? Why didn’t you want Marcus to come near you?” I inquire, curious to understand the source of her unease.

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Her breath is unsteady as she continues, each word laden with the weight of her past. “I didn’t realize he was the Marcus, that Caleb was talking about,” she confesses, her voice trembling.

I nod in understanding, giving her the space she needs to unravel her thoughts. “I know him,” she adds, her tone heavy with the weight of memories. “He’s Paul’s cousin,” she breathes, the name hanging heavily in the air. “When I saw him, I thought that maybe Paul was there and I panicked. I haven’t seen him in two years, and he hasn’t tried to find me, at least I don’t think he has.”

Her words linger, revealing the lingering scars of her past and the haunting fear that still grips her.

I envelop her in a comforting embrace, feeling the tension in her body slowly ease as she leans into me. With a gentle touch, I stroke her hair as she speaks, her voice laden with vulnerability.

“I know it’s irrational thinking he might be there, but when I saw Marcus’ face, it was like seeing Paul’s face. I got scared, and frankly, I’m more scared now that he’s seen me,” she confides, her words trembling with fear.

“It’s not irrational, Anya,” I assure her, my voice soft but resolute. “Paul put you through a very traumatic ordeal, and it’s natural to feel panicked in situations like these.”

I hold her closer, offering silent reassurance as she grapples with the lingering shadows of her past.

Anya's voice trembles with anxiety as she expresses her fears. "Yeah, I guess, but what if he finds me? What if I see him around now?" she asks, her eyes reflecting the haunting possibility.

"I would never let him hurt you," I assure her, my tone firm with resolve. But her next words reveal a deeper layer of concern.

"That's all well and good now, but you don't live here. What am I supposed to do when you're not here?" she voices her apprehension, her vulnerability echoing in the quiet of the night.

Her words strike a chord within me, stirring a sense of responsibility and determination. I take a moment to gather my thoughts, fully recognizing the weight of her worries.

"It's true that I can't always be here physically," I admit, my voice laced with concern. "But we can brainstorm together and come up with a plan. We can ask Lana or your grandparents to help too," I suggest, offering avenues for support. "You are a lot stronger than you think. You can get through this, and I am always a phone call away when you need someone to talk to."

She smiles but I can tell she isn't convinced, "thanks" she says softly then goes quiet.

I pull her closer, my heart aching to ease her fear. "I promise I'll always be here for you," I whisper into her ear, my voice soft and reassuring. "Let's not think about it tonight. Let's just focus on being together and enjoying our time here. We'll figure out a solution tomorrow."

I can see the uncertainty still lingering in her eyes, but she nods slightly, her trust in me shining through the darkness. We sit in silence for a few moments, holding each other tightly. The sound of her phone breaks our silence, and Anya looks down at her

screen. "It's Lana," she says, and I nod, giving her space to take the call.

As she speaks with Lana, I observe her demeanor, sensing a shift in her tone when she hangs up. Anya takes a moment to collect her thoughts before addressing me. "Listen, Jacob," she begins, her voice unsteady as she searches for the right words. "I appreciate everything you've been doing for me... I just need some time to process everything."

"I understand, Anya. I'm here if you need me," I reassure her, offering my support.

She manages a smile, her nerves palpable. "I'm sorry to say goodbye like this, but I just want to sleep."

"There's no need to apologize. We'll talk later," I assure her, cupping her face gently in my hands.

"Okay... will you text me when you get home?" she asks solemnly.

"Of course, baby," I respond softly, planting a tender kiss on her lips. Anya wraps her arms around me tightly, promising to call me in the morning before we part ways.

I give her one last hug and kiss before getting into my car, watching her until she's safely inside her grandparents' home.

JACOB: I hope you have a good night and I'm here if you need me!

ANYA: Okay, thanks. Goodnight Jacob, have a safe trip home!

ANYA

I'm lying in bed, feeling kinda bad about how I said goodbye to Jacob. He was so

sweet and all, but my head's just spinning right now, and I needed some space. So here I am, staring up at my ceiling, trying to calm down and get some shut-eye. But sleep's playing hard to get tonight. Guess I'll give Lana a call, I told her I'd get back to her after she rang while Jacob was still here.

"Hey, sorry about earlier, I wanted to give Jacob a proper goodbye," I say apologetically, hearing Lana's voice still groggy with sleep.

"Ooo, a proper goodbye, huh?" Lana teases.

I laugh at her attempt to lighten the mood. "Not like that," I reply, shaking my head.

"Sureee," she retorts in a playful tone.

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"Come on, stop," I say, chuckling.

We share a laugh, and then Lana's tone becomes more serious. "In all seriousness, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I guess," I respond, my voice tinged with uncertainty.

"What's wrong?" she probes.

"I just feel bad that the only night Jacob's here got ruined because of me," I admit, feeling guilty.

"Jacob will understand," Lana reassures me.

"Yeah, but it's not fair to him," I counter.

"Did he say that?" Lana asks.

"Well, no," I admit.

"Then you're good. Jacob seems like a great guy. Give him more credit than that," Lana advises.

"That's what I'm talking about. He's a good guy. He doesn't need to be held down by someone who can't even be at a party without having a meltdown," I lament.

"Anya, you went through something that will always be with you. Why don't you let

Jacob decide what he can or cannot handle?" Lana offers wisely.

"I guess you're right," I concede.

She laughs. "Bitch, I'm always right. Now go to bed and get some sleep! Tomorrow will be better."

"Okay, okay, fine," I agree.

"Goodnight, Lana," I say.

"Night, Anya. Talk to you later," Lana replies before we hang up.

The next morning, I wake up, still unsure about last night's mess. Marcus was there, and he definitely saw me. That thought alone spikes my anxiety. When I finally left that motel for good two years ago, he tried calling me the next day, like he always did when he came around. He'd leave me at a motel overnight, not giving a damn about how I got home the next day. All that mattered was if he got what he wanted. And on the nights he hit me, he'd always call or text the next day, saying he was sorry and didn't mean it. Just the same old bullshit excuses guys like him always use.

I never bothered to call him back or respond to his dozen messages. He'd leave angry voicemails, but eventually, they stopped, and I haven't seen or heard from him since that night. But seeing Marcus last night sets off alarm bells in my head. It worries me that he might try to track me down again. I've never tried to leave when I was with Paul, so I can't predict exactly what he'll do now that he knows I'm still in New Jersey. Paul's always been predictably unpredictable. The smallest things could set him off, and he'd take it out on me. I need to figure out what I'm going to do if or when I see him again. I can't rely on others to protect me forever. I need to handle this on my own somehow.

I head to the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee. Nana and Pops are out sailing with their friends today, so it's just me at home. After last night, I'm not really feeling comfortable going anywhere alone right now. As I sip my coffee, I glance down at my phone and notice a text from Jacob.

JACOB: Good morning beautiful! Just wanted to let you know that I've made it to PA safe and sound. I start work at 9 a.m., so that gives me about 4.5 hours to sleep here in the parking lot lol. Hope you have a great day today, and I'll call you later when I get off work.

He's seriously a great guy, like the complete opposite of Paul. Lana's advice about trusting my instincts with him totally makes sense. Jacob's always there, super patient and understanding, even with all the chaos in my life. But, man, I can't shake off this guilt about dragging him into my mess. Still, Lana's onto something—I gotta give him a chance to decide if he's cool with all this drama. I do have feelings for him, but part of me worries he'll bail, and honestly, I wouldn't blame him. At the end of the day, it's up to him, and I gotta respect that. It's the least I could do for him after everything I've put him through. Which is why I decide to text him back.

ANYA: Hey! Good morning! I'm glad you made it back safe. I'm sorry you had to sleep in your car before work but I really did love having you here yesterday. I hope work goes smoothly for you and I'll talk to you later!

A few minutes later...

JACOB: Hey beautiful, work is going good, we are on a lunch break at the moment. I enjoyed spending time with you yesterday too and don't worry about me sleeping in the car, I was just using my time management skills lol.

ANYA: lol

JACOB: How are you feeling?

ANYA: I'm doing a bit better, thank you for staying with me and I'm sorry I've brought all this drama in your life.

JACOB: Anya, you have nothing to apologize for, if I thought it was too much to handle I would've left earlier. Like I said last night, I'm here for you for whatever you need.

ANYA: Thank you! But I still feel bad and I would not blame you if you've changed your mind about all of this.

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JACOB: Babe, I'm not going anywhere!

ANYA: lol okay

JACOB: Face it babe, you're stuck with me??

ANYA: You're such a goof lol

JACOB: Yes, but I'm your goof, so that makes it okay??

JACOB: But I have to get going, break is over. I'll call you later!

ANYA: Okay talk to you later!

Talking with Jacob definitely made me feel better, I love that he knows how to make me laugh at the right moment. I decide right then that I will stop second guessing him and give him a chance. I can't deny that he does make me happy and makes me feel safe. And I can't wait till he comes out here again. Hopefully the next time it will be a better experience for him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Anya

A week later

"So he's coming back out today?" Lana asks with a smirk. I smile back, "Yep, and I

can't wait!" I say excitedly.

"What are you guys planning on doing?" she asks.

I shrug, "Not sure yet, we haven't really nailed down any plans. Probably just hit the beach and wing it from there," I reply.

"Sounds romantic," she says smiling from ear to ear and nudging me.

"Yeah, just a day for us," I add, "and he's staying overnight too," I smirk.

"Ooo la la," Lana teases.

"He's not sleeping in your room," Nana interjects with a soft but firm voice.

"Yeah, Nana, I've got the air mattress all set up in the spare bedroom. No worries, he won't be bunking in my room tonight," I assure her.

"He better not!" she states giving me a playful but serious look.

Then there's a knock at the door. I start to head over, but my Nana shoots me a playful, knowing look. I raise my hands in surrender, silently promising not to answer it. Instead, Lana jumps up and swings the door open. There stands Jacob, holding three bouquets of flowers: red roses for me, daisies for Nana (her favorite), and lilacs for Lana.

I stand there smiling, a fleeting thought of Paul doing something similar for my mom and me crosses my mind. But I quickly push it away. Jacob has proven time and again that he's nothing like Paul, and I need to stop comparing them. I glance over at Nana, silently asking for permission to go to Jacob. She smiles and nods, giving me the go-ahead.

I roll my eyes playfully, then greet Jacob with a hug. Afterward, I guide him to the spare room. "Just so you know," I say, raising my voice a bit so Nana can hear, "this is your domain for the night. No sneaking into my room, and I won't come barging in here." It's playful and sarcastic, and Jacob just laughs, giving Nana a nod to show he understands.

"You can change here or in the bathroom, whichever you prefer, and then we can head out. I just need to say bye to Lana," I suggest, but before I can leave the room, he pulls me in and kisses me. Initially gentle, the kiss quickly intensifies as if on instinct, and I find myself responding eagerly. I grip his shirt, drawing him closer, while he wraps his arms around my waist tightly, holding me close. Lost in the moment, I start to moan, only to abruptly remember the open door, bringing me back to reality with a laugh.

Jacob responds with a playful grumble, "I don't know if I can resist with you just a door away." I playfully hit his chest, admitting it's one of my favorite parts of him. Okay, maybe my second favorite. Or third. Well, it's definitely in the top five. Honestly, everything about this man is my favorite.

I nod, "Well, you better, or my grandparents might give me the boot if we don't keep it clean," I quip, knowing Nana is just outside the door. But then, I lean close and whisper in his ear, "Honestly, I'm not sure I can keep my hands off you either," before stepping back and leaving the room.

"I'd never kick you out!" Nana's voice comes from the hallway, making me jump. "Geez, Nana, you need a bell or something!" I joke. She playfully taps my cheek, "Oh, honey, I have no idea what you're talking about," she says, a mischievous glint in her eye, before heading off to her room.

I wave goodbye to Lana and quickly whip up some to-go cups of iced coffee for Jacob and me. Once I finish packing our breakfast into a cooler, Jacob strolls into the

kitchen. I pass him his cup of coffee, and we grab the cooler before heading out the door.

As we stroll along the beach, Jacob flashes me a mischievous grin. "So, Anya, what's the story behind this secret spot of yours? Trying to impress me with your insider knowledge?"

I chuckle, shaking my head. "Impress you? Please, I've got way better tricks up my sleeve than showing off a hidden beach."

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"Is that so?" he replies, eyebrows raised in playful challenge. "Well, I'm all ears. Show me what you've got, Anya."

I shoot him a sly smile. "Oh, you'll just have to wait and see. But fair warning, I play for keeps."

Jacob laughs, a genuine warmth in his eyes. "I wouldn't have it any other way. Besides, I'm all in when it comes to teaming up with you."

I feel a flutter in my chest at his words, but I quickly brush it off with a playful shove. "Careful there, Jacob. Don't let those smooth lines of yours get you into trouble."

He feigns innocence, placing a hand over his heart. "Trouble? Me? Never! Though I can't promise I won't be the one getting us into some fun mischief."

I roll my eyes, but I can't help but smile. Jacob's charm is infectious, and despite my reservations, I find myself enjoying his company more than I expected.

"Well, in that case," I say with a smirk, "let's see if you can keep up with this troublemaker."

"I have every intention of getting into trouble with you," he says, winking mischievously. I give him a playful shove and chuckle. "You're nothing but trouble," I tease back. We laugh and finish our breakfast then decide to take a walk.

As we stroll along the beach, the warm sand between our toes, Jacob flashes me a mischievous grin. "You know, Anya, I've been thinking."

"Oh, have you now?" I reply, raising an eyebrow. "And here I thought that was dangerous territory for you."

He chuckles, stepping closer. "Only dangerous if you can't handle a little excitement."

I playfully bump his shoulder. "Please, I practically invented excitement."

Jacob raises his hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright, you win. But can you handle a challenge?"

I give him a skeptical look. "Depends on the challenge."

"How about a race to the water?" he suggests, nodding towards the ocean.

I smirk. "You're on, but don't say I didn't warn you."

With that, we take off sprinting, laughter ringing out as we kick up sand behind us. As we reach the water's edge, Jacob grabs my hand and pulls me into the surf with him, sending waves crashing around us.

"Looks like I win," he says, a triumphant grin on his face.

I roll my eyes, but I can't help but laugh. "Cheater."

"Hey, all's fair in love and beach races," he replies, splashing me with water.

I retaliate with a splash of my own, and soon we're engaged in a full-blown water fight, both of us laughing and enjoying the moment.

Eventually, we both collapse onto the sand, breathless and soaked. Jacob reaches over and brushes a wet strand of hair from my face, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Well, that was certainly one way to cool off," he says with a grin.

I give him a playful shove. "You're lucky I'm a good sport."

He chuckles, leaning in closer. "Luck has nothing to do with it. I knew you'd be up for the challenge."

I raise an eyebrow, unable to hide my smile. "Is that so? Well, I guess you know me better than I thought."

"And I plan on getting to know you even better," he says, his voice low and flirtatious.

I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks, but I don't back down. "Oh, really? And what makes you think I'll let you?"

Jacob leans in even closer, his lips inches from mine. "Because I never back down from a challenge," he whispers.

And with that, he closes the distance between us, sealing his words with a kiss that leaves me breathless and wanting more.

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We pull back from the kiss, both of us catching our breath as we gaze at each other, the waves lapping at our feet.

"You know, Jacob," I say, breaking the silence, "you're not as bad as I thought."

He grins, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Gee, thanks, I think."

I roll my eyes playfully. "You know what I mean. I was expecting some cheesy pickup lines and over-the-top gestures, but you actually surprised me."

Jacob shrugs nonchalantly. "What can I say? I'm full of surprises."

I chuckle. "Well, consider me intrigued."

He reaches out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Good. Because I plan on keeping you guessing."

I raise an eyebrow, a smirk playing on my lips. "Is that a promise?"

He leans in close, his breath warm against my ear. "You bet it is," he whispers.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I can't help but lean into his touch. Despite my best efforts to keep my guard up, Jacob has a way of breaking through my defenses.

As we sit there on the beach, the sun beginning to dip below the horizon, I realize that maybe, just maybe, taking a chance on Jacob isn't such a bad idea after all.

As we basked in the warmth of the sun and splashed around in the refreshing waves, I couldn't help but feel a sense of joy bubbling up inside me. It had been a while since I felt this carefree, this genuinely happy. With Jacob by my side, it was as if the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders, and I was finally able to let go of the past and embrace the present moment.

Jacob and I were goofing around, having another one of our beach races, when he decided to up the ante. He challenged me to a dunking contest, but let's be real, I'm no match for his towering stature. So, he takes matters into his own hands and pulls me into an oncoming wave. I emerge from the water, pretending to be outraged but secretly loving every moment of it. "You jerk!" I tease, splashing him back. We both burst into laughter until his expression shifts, turning all serious and intense. Next thing I know, he's got his arms around my waist and playfully pushes me onto the wet sand. Amidst the giggles, his eyes lock onto mine with a look that sends shivers down my spine. And then, he leans in for a kiss, and I'm all too eager to meet him halfway.

As the sun begins to set, painting the sky with hues of orange and pink, we finally break away from our kiss, gasping for air. Our eyes meet, a mix of passion and temptation reflected in them.

Jacob grins, a devilish glint in his eyes. "So, Anya, seems like we've got some unfinished business."

I bite my lip, feeling a flush spread across my cheeks. "And what might that be?"

"Well, it looks like you're all wet, and I'm not talking about the ocean." He winks, his eyes never leaving mine.

I chuckle nervously, but a part of me is undeniably drawn to his flirtatious banter. "And what exactly do you have in mind?"

"How about we head back to your grandparent's house, and I prove to you just how much I can handle," he suggests.

I can't believe I'm considering it, but the way Jacob looks at me, I can't deny his charm. "Okay, deal," I say, a small smile playing on my lips.

As we make our way back, hand in hand, the sea breeze gently ruffling our hair, I can't help but feel a sense of excitement and anticipation. What is it about this man that has me so captivated? Is it his playful nature, his unpredictability, or the simple thrill of the unknown?

We arrive at my grandfather's house, the sun setting behind us, casting a warm glow across the yard. Jacob leads me up the steps and pushes open the door, ushering me inside. The house is draped in darkness, save for the flickering of a candle in the dining room. Jacob takes my hand and pulls me towards it.

"I was hoping we could have some privacy," he murmurs, his voice low and seductive. "Do you trust me?"

I swallow hard, my heart pounding in my chest. This is happening. I'm doing this, I'm really about to trust another man again. And for some reason, despite the fear and uncertainty, I find myself nodding.

Jacob leads me to the dining room, where the candle provides just enough light to guide us to the table. He pulls out a chair for me, his hand grazing mine as he does so. The intimacy of the gesture sends an electric current through me, and I can't help but feel more drawn to him than ever.

He takes a seat across from me, his eyes never leaving mine. "Are you ready?" he asks, his voice a whisper.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. "I don't know," I admit. "I'm nervous, what if my grandparents wake up?."

"We'll have to be extra quiet," he whispers, taking my hand and leading me to the spare room. We tiptoe into the bedroom, trying not to wake my grandparents in the next room. I notice that the air mattress I had set up earlier has been replaced with a bed. "Looks like your Nana knew we wouldn't follow her rules," he says playfully. Leaning in, he cups my face and brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, gently stroking my cheek. His eyes are filled with desire."

My heart races as I meet his gaze, my breath catching in my throat. I notice how close we are, our faces mere inches apart, the warmth of our bodies pressing against each other. I can feel his heart pounding against mine, and I can't help but wonder what comes next.

Jacob's gaze never leaves mine as he gently leans in, his lips almost touching mine. I can feel the heat of his breath on my face, and I can't help but close my eyes, savoring the moment. In that instant, I feel like I'm living in a dream, like anything is possible.

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Finally, his lips meet mine, and I'm overwhelmed with a mix of emotions - desire, fear, anticipation, and a sense of pure joy. His kiss is gentle yet passionate, and I find myself lost in it, my mind drifting away to a place where only we exist. I could feel his hands running through my hair, his fingers gently massaging my scalp, sending shivers down my spine. His lips move softly, tracing the contours of my face, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I can taste a hint of salt from the ocean on his lips, and it only adds to the intensity of the moment. My hands find their way to his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin and the rhythmic beat of his heart.

As our kiss deepens, I can feel the desire building within me, a longing that seems to stretch beyond our physical connection. It's as if we're sharing something more profound, something that has been building between us for years without either of us realizing it.

As we continue to kiss, we become more intimate, our hands exploring each other's bodies. I feel his fingers trail down my back, sending shivers up my spine. I can't help but let out a small moan as our lips cling to each other, our bodies tangled in a dance of passion and desire.

Jacob's breath hitches, and he pulls away slightly, looking into my eyes. "Anya, are you sure about this? We can stop if you want."

"No, Jacob," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. "I want this. I want to be with you."

His eyes light up with a mixture of relief and desire, and he pulls me closer once more, deepening the kiss. Our bodies press together, the heat between us intensifying.

I can feel his arousal against me, and I know that it's the same for him.

Jacob gently lifts me onto the bed, and I watch as he removes his shirt, revealing his chiseled chest and toned abs. The sight takes my breath away, and I can't help but feel a wave of desire wash over me.

I quickly follow suit, shedding my clothes until we're both laying there, naked and vulnerable in each other's presence. He reaches out, his fingers tracing the curve of my waist, his touch sending electric shivers through me. He pulls me close, his lips devouring mine in a kiss that leaves me breathless. His hands explore my body, his fingers tracing the lines of my flesh, his touch sending shivers throughout my entire being. I can feel his arousal pressing against me, and I know that he's just as desperate for this as I am.

He kisses his way down my neck, his tongue leaving a trail of fire in its wake. My heart races as his lips reach my chest, his tongue darting out to taste the salty sweat that has gathered there. I can't help but arch my back, offering him more access to my body. He smiles against my skin, and I feel his hands cupping my breasts, his fingers gently massaging my nipples. My breath hitches as he sucks one into his mouth, his tongue swirling around it, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. He moves to the other breast, treating it with the same care, and I can't help but moan his name.

Jacob continues his exploration, his hands gliding down my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. He kisses his way down my stomach, his lips leaving a trail of warmth as he goes. I can feel his breath against my skin, his hunger for me growing with each kiss. His hands reach my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as he pulls me closer to him. I can feel his arousal pressed against me, and I can't help but let out a small whimper of desire.

His mouth descends lower and lower, settling between my trembling legs. I feel his lips pressing kisses against my quivering thighs, inching closer and closer until his

tongue swirls around my sensitive core. He stops just inches from my aching entrance, the heat of his breath caressing my skin and igniting a fire within me. "Jacob," I plead, desperate for him to continue. His gaze meets mine without moving, his voice barely above a whisper as he asks, "Please what, baby?" The intensity of his words sends a jolt through my entire body, causing me to arch and gasp. "Please," I beg, my voice trembling with need, "don't stop."

His head dips down, his tongue darting out to lick the sensitive flesh of my folds before plunging inside me. I gasp and he quickly covers my mouth with his strong hand, muffling my cries as he continues to explore every inch of me with his skilled tongue. Suddenly, he finds my clit and sucks on it with fervent determination, sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body.

He plunges a finger inside of me as his mouth ravages my throbbing pussy. My body writhes and trembles under his touch, but he uses his other hand to forcefully keep me in place. He devours my slick folds with a wild hunger, his tongue flicking and sucking until I'm gasping for air.

I can feel the tension building within me, the passion that is now consuming us both. Jacob's fingers continue to explore, delving deeper inside me, and I can feel him curling them in a way that drives me wild. He adds another finger, stretching me to the point of no return. My cries are muffled by his hand, but they don't seem to matter. All I care about is the sensation of his fingers inside me and his tongue on my clit, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

As I feel the first wave of pleasure begin to wash over me, Jacob halts his movements, pulling his fingers out and bringing them to his mouth to taste my essence. I watch him, entranced, as he savors the taste of me. "Mmm," he moans, and I can tell he's enjoying every second of it. He looks up at me, his eyes dark with desire, and his lips curl into a smirk. "You taste incredible," he whispers, his voice low and seductive. "I could eat you all day."

I arch my back, unable to keep still under his gaze. "Please, Jacob," I beg, my voice husky with need. "I need you inside me. Now."

Jacob grins, his eyes filled with lust as he pulls away from me. He positions himself between my legs, his erection throbbing against my sensitive folds.

"Do you want this?" Jacob taunts, teasing my entrance with the tip of his shaft and coating it in my slick juices. "Yes, please, fuck me!" I beg, my voice strained with desire. "Don't make me wait any longer." My body trembles with anticipation as he enters me with a force that takes my breath away, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through every nerve ending in my body.

With every thrust, Jacob's piercing blue eyes bore into mine, his expression a mix of fierce desire and possessiveness. I wrap my legs around his waist, my fingers digging into the defined muscles of his back as he moves inside me. Our bodies move in perfect synchrony, our hips grinding against each other with a fervent rhythm that leaves me breathless.

Each time he enters me, it's like an explosion of pleasure coursing through my entire being, building upon each other until it's almost unbearable. I grasp onto him tightly, lost in the intense passion and animalistic nature of our coupling.

Suddenly, Jacob shifts his angle, hitting that spot deep within me that sends electric shocks of pleasure through my body. My cries of ecstasy are muffled by his mouth covering mine, but I can feel every tremor and contraction as my body responds to his every movement. The waves of pleasure keep crashing over me, building towards an earth-shattering climax that leaves me completely spent and satisfied.

As Jacob continues to move inside me, his thrusts becoming more forceful and rhythmic, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction and contentment wash over me. His eyes never leave mine, as if he's trying to capture every ounce of emotion and desire in

that moment. He continues to hit that spot in me, eliciting new waves of pleasure with each thrust. My body shakes with every movement, and I can feel the tension building.

Suddenly, Jacob pulls out just enough to increase the angle of penetration, hitting that spot even harder. I cry out his name, feeling the seismic clash of our bodies as we become one in the most intimate of ways. His rhythm intensifies, and I can tell he's close to climaxing.

Just as I start to feel like I can't take any more, Jacob slows his pace, pulling out completely. My body shudders, but I quickly realize why when I feel the warm, wet evidence of his release on my sensitive skin. My heart races as I take in the sight of him pleasuring himself, his eyes locked onto mine in a passionate, intense stare.

He moves to lie next to me, our sweaty bodies glistening in the dim light. I can't help but run my fingers through his hair, feeling a sense of contentment wash over me. We both lay there, catching our breath and relishing in the aftermath of our passion.

"Wow," I whisper, feeling the weight of the moment. "That was..."

"Unforgettable," Jacob finishes, his voice low and rough. "But trust me, baby, it's only the beginning."

With a gentle kiss, he pulls me closer, ensuring that both of our bodies are still entwined. We lay there, the sound of our heartbeats synchronizing in the air, and I can't help but feel a surge of love and admiration for the man lying next to me.

As the darkness of the night envelops us, I can't help but wonder what other unforgettable experiences await us. But for now, I'm content to lie here, basking in the warmth of Jacob's body and the aftermath of our intense passion.

Before we know it we fall into a deep, peaceful sleep, our bodies still entwined and our hearts still beating in sync.

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As the sun begins to rise, we wake up to the sound of birds chirping and the first rays of light peeking through the curtains.

Slowly, we disentangle ourselves from each other, our bodies stiff but satisfied. We get out of bed, and I can't help but glance at Jacob's erection, still standing proud and hard. I can't help but give him a mischievous look then I lick his tip with my tongue, savoring the taste of our mingled juices. He groans and pulls me close, his hands gripping my waist as he lifts me up, "First we shower baby" he says and carries me to the shower.

Under the streaming water, we wash each other's bodies, our hands exploring every inch of each other's skin. The heat between us is palpable, and we can't seem to get enough of each other. He lathers up his fingers and slides them inside me, curling them to hit that spot deep within me. I moan and arch my back, unable to resist the pleasure coursing through me.

As he continues to work me with his fingers, I reach down and wrap my hand around his throbbing erection, stroking him slowly. He groans and thrusts his hips forward, letting me know exactly how much he wants me. I lean down and kiss him passionately, our tongues intertwining as our bodies move in sync.

The water cascades down our bodies, washing away the evidence of our passionate night. As we stand under the stream, he pushes me against the shower wall, his erection throbbing between my legs.

"I need you now," he growls, his eyes dark with desire.

I moan and wrap my legs around his waist, guiding him inside me. He grunts as he enters me, his cock filling me completely. Our bodies move in perfect harmony, our hips grinding against each other in a feverish rhythm.

"Oh, Jacob," I whisper, my voice hoarse with need. "I need you to fuck me harder."

He obliges, pounding into me with a ferocity that sends shivers of pleasure coursing through my body. Our movements become more urgent, our moans becoming louder as we reach the brink of orgasm.

"I'm going to come so hard," I shout, my body tense with anticipation.

"Me too," Jacob growls, his voice rough with desire. "I'm going to fill you up with my cum."

As I feel that familiar sensation building deep within me, I tighten my muscles around him, knowing that he's about to release inside me. Our bodies convulse together, our screams mingling in the steamy shower as we reach the pinnacle of our pleasure.

As the waves of our orgasms crash over us, we cling to each other, our hearts pounding in rhythm with the shower water. When we finally catch our breath, we pull back and look at each other, our eyes filled with fulfillment and passion.

"That was incredible," I whisper, my voice still hoarse from our passionate encounter.

"It's only the beginning," Jacob promises again, his eyes dark with desire.

We continue to stand there, our bodies still entwined, the steamy water cascading down our skin as we bask in the afterglow of our intense passion. We know that whatever comes next, we will face it together, as one. And as we step out of the

shower, our skin still slick with water and our hearts still beating in sync, "I hope we didn't just wake my grandparents" I say with a nervous laugh.

Jacob plants a kiss on my head, comforting me with his words, "If we did, then we'll tackle it together."

As we dry off and change, he flashes me a reassuring smile, "Don't worry, we got this."

We step out of the bedroom, my heart racing as we make our way to the kitchen. I glance nervously around the quiet house, relieved that we seem to have dodged any early-morning encounters with my grandparents.

Then, as we're fixing ourselves some breakfast, the front door swings open, and in stroll Nana and Pops, greeting us like nothing's amiss.

"Morning, sweetie! Hey, Jacob! You guys sleep okay?" Nana asks cheerfully, clueless about our late-night escapade. "Morning! Yeah, I slept fine. How about you, Jacob?" I chime in, playing along.

Jacob nods, his smile unwavering, "Yep, slept like a baby. Thanks."

As Nana heads off to her room, I lean into Jacob, whispering my doubts about her obliviousness. "I don't know if she's playing dumb or if she really didn't notice I didn't sleep in my room last night," I murmur anxiously.

Jacob gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, "Let's just act natural. They'll probably figure it out eventually, but for now, let's roll with it."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Anya

After breakfast, Jacob heads out, and I start getting ready for work. Lana breezes in through the front door with her usual cheerful greeting for Nana. She's been stopping by more often lately, a change from when I was living with my parents. "Morning!" she chirps, flashing a smile at my grandmother.

"Hey Lana!" I respond, finishing off my coffee. "Just need to grab my bag, then we can hit the road," I tell her. Fridays mean carpooling for Lana and me; after work, we usually hit up the nightclubs near the beach, just a short 5-minute drive from my grandparents' place, and then she crashes here for the night.

I quickly grab my bag and apron, and then we're both out the door. She settles into the passenger seat, her wide grin and knowing look making me chuckle. "What?" I say, unable to suppress a smile at her expression.

"You're looking pretty pleased with yourself today," she remarks with a playful grin.

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"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, trying to keep a straight face.

"Oh, come on! It's written all over your face. You definitely had sex last night!" she insists with a knowing chuckle.

I chuckle back, "What happened last night and this morning in the shower, is classified information."

"Wait, you continued in the shower this morning too?" she gasps, her eyes widening with amusement.

I smirk, "I plead the fifth" I say putting one hand in the air. "Let's just say it was a good night."

As we continue to drive to the restaurant, Lana turns down the radio and gives me a wide grin, a knowing look gleaming in her eyes. "Anya, this is the first time in two years, girl! It's a big deal!"

I chuckle nervously, feeling a flush rise to my cheeks. "Lana, can we not talk about this right now? It's still kind of new and..."

She interrupts, her excitement palpable. "And it's exciting! I'm just happy to see you moving forward, you know?"

I offer a smile, "Thanks, Lana. But for now let's just focus on work, okay?"

Lana nods, but her grin doesn't falter. "Of course, but later, we're definitely having a

girls' night and you're spilling all the details!"

I sigh with a mix of amusement, "Deal." With that, we head into the restaurant, ready to start the day's work.

Lunch shift goes by smooth, but slow. Not many people came in to eat, probably because they are all at the beach. This has become normal lately, everyone just wants to head to the beach instead, which is understandable but it's hurting my pay and I need money to get my own place. Our manager was gracious enough to allow us extra time between the lunch shift and dinner shift.

We're sitting outside, chomping down on our food when Lana turns to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Okay girl, spill the tea!" she says, stuffing a burrito into her mouth.

I can't help but laugh as I recount every detail of last night and this morning with Jacob. "Girl, I'm over here fanning myself, and it's not just because of the summer heat!" Lana exclaims excitedly.

I join in her laughter, quipping, "Yeah, it was definitely steamy."

As we continue bantering and joking during our break, finishing up our food and tidying up, Lana's tone shifts to one of sincerity. "But in all seriousness, I'm glad you found someone who makes you happy. You deserve to be treated right," she says warmly.

I smile, but there's a hint of doubt in my response. "Yeah, I guess," I reply, chuckling softly. Deep down, part of me knows she's right, but another part struggles to believe it. After all, I made choices that kept me in a toxic situation with Paul. I allowed it to happen, and sometimes, I can't shake the feeling that I deserve the consequences.

We're in the thick of the dinner rush, with people streaming in from the summer heat. I've been double and triple sat so many times in the past three hours that it feels like a marathon. My feet are throbbing, and sweat is dripping down my forehead as I hustle from one end of the restaurant to the other, non-stop.

Lana is just as busy, and we've barely had a moment to acknowledge each other. Then, in walks Marcus, and I freeze in the alleyway. My heart starts racing again, and Lana almost spills the drinks she's carrying on her tray when she bumps into me.

"Anya! Whoa!" she exclaims, balancing her tray precariously. She notices the look on my face and follows my gaze to the entrance. "Okay, girl, it's okay," she says, trying to calm my nerves. "Let me drop off these drinks, and I'll be right back," she adds before hurrying off.

I'm left standing there, staring at the entrance, feeling a wave of anxiety wash over me.

I snap out of my trance when Lana pulls me into the kitchen. "Do you want me to take the table?" she asks, her voice laced with concern. I close my eyes, trying to calm my rapid heartbeat. Why is he here? Is he looking for me? Did Paul send him?

"Anya?!" Lana's voice jolts me back to reality as she waves a hand in front of my face.

"Huh? What?" I ask, shaken from my thoughts.

"Do you want me to take the table?" she repeats, her tone more urgent now.

"Wait, what do you mean?" I respond, panic creeping into my voice. "Is he sitting in my section?" I ask, my tone now tinged with fear.

Lana lets out a sigh and nods, “Yes, so I’ll ask again, do you want me to take the table?”

I glance over at her section, which is already packed. If I let her take the table, she'll be running back and forth, and I can't ask her to do that.

Shaking my head, I reply, “No, just have the host tell them that I’ll be a minute,” my voice trembling.

“Are you sure?” she asks with a concerned look.

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As Lana's worried gaze meets mine, I nod in response before slipping into the cooler. The rush of cold air envelopes me, providing a momentary respite from the whirlwind of emotions inside.

Inhaling deeply, I feel the frosty air calm my racing heart, yet my mind continues to race with doubts. Can I really face him? Can I handle whatever he might say? The fear of confrontation gnaws at me, but I refuse to succumb.

"No," I tell myself firmly. "You've got this. It's time to stop living in fear." Reminding myself that I'm safe here, surrounded by coworkers, I gather my courage.

With resolve building within me, I take a final deep breath and stride back to the table. Lana's supportive glance spurs me on as I approach, ready to confront whatever lies ahead.

"Good evening. My name is Anya, and I'll be your server tonight. What can I get ya'll to drink?" I manage to say, masking my nerves with a veneer of confidence.

"Anya?" Marcus's voice jolts me, and I force a smile. "I thought that was you! How the hell are you, girl?" he adds with a grin.

Keeping up my best customer service smile, I reply, "Hi! I'm doing well, what can I get you?" I keep the smile fixed in place, determined not to let him see my anxiety.

Marcus throws his hands up and laughs, "Right, right, you're busy. I'll just have a coke, darlin'." His wide smile doesn't ease my tension. I quickly jot down the rest of the tables' drink orders and hurry to the furthest computer, exhaling deeply.

Lana appears at my side, concern evident in her eyes. "You okay?" she asks.

I nod, hastily punching in the drink order. As much as I want to linger and talk to Lana, my priority is getting Marcus's order and getting him out of here as quickly as possible.

I return to the table with the drinks, feeling Marcus's intense gaze on me, his smile sending shivers down my spine. "So, Anya, what have you been up to these last two years?" he says, his tone dripping with something unsettling.

"Just been working and finishing my degree," I reply with a polite yet nervous smile, trying to maintain my composure.

He continues to stare at me, his grin unwavering. "Cool, cool. You ever get rid of that lemon of a car you had?" he jokes, and I shoot him a glare.

"You mean the one you crashed, and the mechanic couldn't fix properly because you're good for nothing..." I catch myself before saying too much, taking a deep breath to compose myself. Then, with a forced smile, I continue, "You know, it's in the past. So, to answer your question, yes, I got a new car." I offer another smile, hoping to steer the conversation away from uncomfortable territory. "Now, are you folks ready to order, or do you still need a few moments?" I inquire, eager to move on from the exchange.

As Marcus laughs and places his order, along with the rest of his group, I try to maintain my professional demeanor. But then, just as I'm about to walk away, he drops a bombshell.

"Paul says hi, by the way," he casually remarks, his mischievous smile sending a wave of panic through me.

I close my eyes briefly, reminding myself to stay calm. When I turn back to face him, I force myself to maintain a composed expression. "I'm sorry? What did you say?" I inquire, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

"I told Paul that I saw you a few weeks ago, and he said to tell you he says hi," Marcus replies, his smile growing even wider.

I glance around, checking if anyone is paying attention, before stepping closer and leaning in toward Marcus. "Well, you can tell Paul that he can go fuck himself, and I hope he burns in hell for all the shit he put me through," I hiss, the words dripping with venom.

Marcus's expression shifts from amusement to shock, but it quickly morphs back into a smile. "Oh, come on, mamacita, it wasn't all bad," he says, using the nickname that sends a shiver down my spine.

That name brings back memories I'd rather forget, memories of Paul, a time when I was trapped in a cycle of abuse. They gave me that nickname when Paul "accidentally" got me pregnant. But I know it was no accident. And thankfully, I lost the baby a few weeks later.

It might be shitty of me to say such things about a potential child, but I couldn't bear the thought of being tied to Paul forever through a child. No one believed me when I tried to speak out about the abuse, so I know they wouldn't have believed me if I had tried to keep him away, had the baby survived. So, I made the painful decision to let go of that part of my life and move on, determined to break free from his hold on me.

Standing tall, I address Marcus directly. "You know what, Marcus? All I can say to you is that I hope no woman in your life, whom you hold dear, ever goes through what Paul did to me." With those words hanging in the air, I pivot and stride away, keeping my head held high despite the tremors running through me.

Arriving at the safety of the computer, hidden behind a wall, I notice my hands shaking uncontrollably. I clench them tightly, willing the tremors to subside. Lana must have seen the panic on my face because she rushes over to me.

"What happened?" she asks, her concern evident in her voice. Shaking, I recount the entire conversation to her.

"That's it, fuck this job!" Lana exclaims, rolling up her sleeves in readiness. "I'm gonna fucking beat the living shit out of him!" Before she can storm off towards Marcus, I grab her arm firmly.

"No, Lana, he's not worth the trouble... trust me," I implore, trying to reason with her.

"Come on! I can take him!" Lana protests, her determination clear in her eyes.

I chuckle, shaking my head. "I'm sure you can, and I appreciate the gesture, but don't worry about Marcus. He's all talk, no bite," I assure her with a smirk.

Lana sighs, relenting. "Fine. But I get to beat up Paul then," she retorts, her defiance softened by a hint of humor.

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I laugh, shaking my head at her persistence. "I love you, girl, but he isn't worth it either. Let's just get this shift over and done with, then tonight we drink!" I suggest, eager to move past the confrontation and focus on something more positive.

As the shift progresses, I'm relieved to find that Marcus keeps to himself, refraining from any further mention of Paul. Surprisingly, he even leaves a very generous tip, a small silver lining to an otherwise tense encounter. I cautiously ask him not to mention seeing me, and he promises to keep quiet. However, given my history with people associated with Paul, I know better than to fully trust his word.

After the shift, Lana and I swiftly change out of our work clothes and head out to the club, eager to unwind after the stressful evening. I shoot a quick text to Jacob, letting him know I'm off work and that I'll catch up with him tomorrow since it'll be too late to call him when we return from the club. It's a relief to have the night ahead of us, free from the weight of work and the memories stirred up by Marcus' presence.

Lana hands me a drink and I down it in one go. "Damn girl, you really going for it" Lana says. I wipe my mouth and laugh, "I'm sorry but I really needed that".

"apparently!" she quips and then orders me another one. I sip this one and try to take it slow, otherwise I'll be a heaping mess far too early. I receive a text message and look down at my phone, Lana hands me a drink, and I eagerly down it in one go, feeling the burn as it slides down my throat. "Damn, girl, you're really going for it," Lana remarks with a chuckle.

I wipe my mouth and laugh in response. "I'm sorry, but I really needed that."

"Apparently!" Lana quips, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she orders me another drink. This time, I take it slow, sipping cautiously to avoid becoming a mess too quickly.

As I try to savor the drink, my phone buzzes with a new message. I glance down at the screen, curious to see who it's from.

JACOB: Hey beautiful, thanks for letting me know. I hope you and Lana have fun tonight. I can't wait to talk to you tomorrow!

I smile at the text and tuck my phone away, feeling grateful. Jacob has been a source of comfort and joy in my life, always making me feel cherished and valued. His presence alone brightens my day, and I can't help but feel lucky to have him.

Lana notices my smile and nudges me, her eyes twinkling with curiosity. "What did he say?" she asks, her voice barely audible over the pulsing music.

I laugh and raise my voice to be heard. "He just said he hopes we have fun and he'll talk to me tomorrow," I reply.

"Aww, girl, he loves you!" Lana shouts, clearly feeling the effects of the drinks.

I chuckle and shake my head. "Oh, stop! No, he doesn't," I protest, though a part of me secretly hopes she's right.

But Lana isn't convinced. She nudges me again, a mischievous grin on her face. "You love him too!" she teases.

I laugh, feeling the warmth of the alcohol spreading through me. "Oh my god, Lana, no! We like each other, sure! But I don't think it's love," I insist, though the thought lingers in the back of my mind, refusing to be dismissed entirely.

As the night wears on, guys attempt to flirt and buy me drinks, but I politely decline their advances. "Wow, you really are in love!" Lana remarks, her teasing tone laced with amusement.

I furrow my brow in confusion, still amused by Lana's antics. "What are you talking about?" I inquire, unsure of where she's going with this.

Lana smirks and gestures around us. "You've been turning down guys left and right!" she points out.

I roll my eyes and chuckle. "Why would I engage with other guys if I'm dating someone? I'm not here to interact with other men; I'm just here to have a good time with you," I explain.

Lana raises an eyebrow skeptically. "Uh-huh, okay," she teases. "Just admit it, girl, you're hooked," she adds with a playful grin.

As Lana's teasing words hang in the air, I can't help but wonder if she's onto something. Am I really head over heels for Jacob, or am I just liking the fact that he treats me right? It's like a little debate going on in my head while I watch the crowd swirl around us on the dance floor. Jacob's been amazing, no doubt about it. His kindness, his warmth—it's all like a breath of fresh air after dealing with some of the toxicity in the past. But does that mean I'm in love?

I take a moment to mull over our relationship, replaying our moments together in my mind. His comforting touch, his reassuring words—they've definitely helped ease some of the shit I've been through. But here's the thing: I've never really known what real love feels like. My past relationships have been pretty fucked up, leaving me with some serious scars. So maybe Jacob's just a really nice distraction, you know?

Lost in thought, I glance over at Lana, who's busting some moves without a care in

the world. For a second, I envy her carefree vibe. But then it hits me—regardless of whether what I feel for Jacob is the real deal or just a passing infatuation, he's brought some serious sunshine into my life. And for that, I'm beyond grateful.

So, with a shrug and a smile, I decide to stop overthinking it. Whatever label we slap on it, Jacob's presence makes me happy, plain and simple. And in a world full of craziness, that's more than enough for me.

As the night progresses, we continue to dance and enjoy our drinks. However, as the clock strikes 1 a.m., I begin to feel the weight of exhaustion settling in. Between the alcohol coursing through my system and the demands of a long day's work, my body is pleading for rest.

"Hey, I think it's time for us to call it a night," I mention to Lana, my voice betraying the weariness I feel.

Lana nods in agreement, understanding the need to call it a night. We head out to the parking lot, and Lana takes the driver's seat of my car. With a shared glance, we buckle up and hit the road, leaving the club behind us. The familiar route to my grandparents' home feels comforting, the streetlights casting a warm glow on the darkened streets. As Lana navigates the turns with ease, I lean back in the passenger seat, feeling the fatigue from the night settle over me. Finally, we arrive at the familiar driveway of my grandparents' house, and I thank Lana for driving as we step out of the car.

We step into the house, our movements quiet as we try not to disturb my sleeping grandparents. I glance at Lana and whisper, "You can sleep in my room or I can set you up in the spare room," offering her the choice.

She shoots me a playful look. "Yeah, I'm not about to crash in the same bed where you and Jacob cuddle up," she quips, though her voice is hushed.

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"Shh, Lana, my grandparents might hear you!" I caution, placing a finger to my lips. She covers her mouth and whispers an apology.

Leading her into my room, I offer her to share the bed with me, but she kindly declines, insisting she's fine sleeping on the floor. I grab some blankets for her, and we both settle down for the night. It's as if the moment my head hits the pillow, I'm enveloped in a deep slumber, the exhaustion of the day finally catching up with me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Anya

I'm gasping for air, my legs screaming with each step. The woods stretch on endlessly, a maze of trees and shadows. I can't afford to stop, not even for a moment. He's hot on my heels, closing in with each passing second.

My heart feels like it's about to burst out of my chest as I push myself to keep running. The morning air is chilly, and the dampness clings to my skin, making me shiver. I'm covered in scratches and bruises, the rough terrain taking its toll on my body.

I have to find safety, I have to escape! "ANYA!"

Damn it, he's closer than I realized. I push myself harder, willing my legs to move faster, but the panic threatens to overwhelm me. I can't see where I'm going, I don't even know if I'm heading towards civilization or deeper into the wilderness.

“How is he so close already?” The fear grips me tighter, squeezing the breath from my lungs. “ANYA!”

Oh god, I’m not going to make it out alive! I didn’t even get to tell Jacob that I love him! “ANYA!”

He's so close now, his voice booming through the forest. I need to find somewhere to hide, somewhere to wait until he's gone. “ANYA!!”

I spot a massive tree and duck behind it, silently thanking whatever powers that be for my petite frame. I hunker down, trying to make myself as small as possible. The sound of his heavy footsteps draws nearer, and I close my eyes, pressing my hand over my mouth to stifle my breath. I've seen enough horror movies to know that's how they catch you. “ANYA!” Oh god, he's right by the tree. Shit, shit, shit!!

“ANYA PARKER! I FOUND YOU! ANYA!”

I jolt upright in bed, my heart racing as if I've just sprinted a marathon. The room feels oppressively dark, shadows dancing ominously in the corners. Lana's voice breaks through the haze of fear, her hands gripping my shoulders with a desperate urgency.

“Anya, what's wrong? Are you okay?!”

I struggle to find my voice, my throat dry and constricted. “It was just a bad dream,” I manage to whisper, though the words taste bitter and false on my tongue.

Lana's eyes widen with concern, the worry etched deeply into her features. “You were screaming,” she says softly, her voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart.

I take a shaky breath, trying to steady my trembling limbs. "I know," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. "It was... him."

The memory floods back with chilling clarity, the nightmare playing out in my mind's eye once more. Paul's voice, laced with venomous rage, his footsteps closing in with every passing second until...

"ANYA PARKER I FOUND YOU!!"

I shudder at the memory, the terror of the dream still lingering like a stubborn ghost. Lana's grip on my shoulders tightens, her concern palpable in the dim light of the room.

"Anya, you're having nightmares again?" she asks, her voice tinged with urgency.

I nod weakly, feeling utterly helpless against the suffocating weight of my own fear. Closing my eyes, I try to push the memories aside, focusing instead on the comforting presence of Lana beside me. But deep down, I know that some nightmares never truly fade away.

The realization hits me like a wave crashing against the shore: this is the first time in two years that I've had a nightmare about Paul. For so long, I'd managed to convince myself that I was finally free from his torment, that his memory couldn't reach me anymore. But now, as I sit here trembling in the darkness, I can't deny the truth any longer.

Lana's concerned gaze lingers on me, her presence a reassuring anchor in the midst of my turmoil. She may not have been with me from the beginning but she has been by my side for a year and half now, offering unwavering support even when I couldn't find the strength to ask for it. And yet, despite all her efforts, the specter of Paul still haunts me, lurking in the shadows of my subconscious.

I take a deep breath, trying to push aside the memories that threaten to engulf me. This nightmare is just a temporary setback, I tell myself, a cruel trick of my mind dredging up the past when I least expect it. But deep down, I know that the scars left by Paul's abuse run far deeper than I'd care to admit.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks putting her hand on my back.

Lana's hand on my back offers a comforting reassurance, but I can't bring myself to delve into the nightmare that still haunts my thoughts.

"Nah, not really in the mood," I mutter, rising from the bed with a heavy sigh. "I'm gonna make some coffee. You want a cup?"

I head towards the kitchen, hoping Lana doesn't press further. The last thing I want is to discuss Paul or anything related to him. The nightmare is a stark reminder of the past I'm desperately trying to escape, especially with Marcus's recent revelation about seeing me.

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"Yeah, sure," Lana replies, trailing behind me. "Maybe you could talk to Jacob about it? He might help."

I shake my head, feeling irritation creeping in. "No, I doubt he's even awake yet or probably busy with work."

The thought of discussing my nightmares with Jacob only adds to my frustration. Right now, I just want to push everything aside and focus on getting through the day.

"Well I know he has a way of —"

"I SAID NO LANA!" I shout, my words echoing in the quiet kitchen. Instantly, guilt washes over me, and I take a deep breath as I pour my coffee. "I'm sorry, I just feel bad unleashing all this baggage on him. I can deal with this myself, okay?"

Lana bows her head, her voice softening as she speaks. "I'm sorry for pushing, I just wanted to help."

Her apology only deepens my sense of guilt. This is precisely why I've learned to keep my past to myself. People always want to help, but they can't fix what's broken inside me. I have to figure out how to deal with it on my own, without dragging others down with me. Today, I'll focus on getting through work, finishing college, and making a better life for myself. Tomorrow's Anya can worry about Paul and all the judgmental people. Right now, I just need to make today a good day.

I can't help but chuckle at my sudden switch to third-person narration. Today's gonna be alright.

buzz

JACOB: Good morning, I hope you have a great day beautiful!

ANYA: Good morning! Thank you!

JACOB: How did you sleep?

ANYA: I slept okay, we went to bed pretty late lol. How about you?

JACOB: I slept great, I was dreaming about this beautiful brown haired, brown eyed girl??

ANYA: *eye roll* such a smooth talker lol

JACOB: I never said it was about you lol

ANYA: oh well in that case never mind then lol I see how much you think about your girlfriend??

JACOB: lol I'm just joking babe, of course I was dreaming of you.

ANYA: Oh no, now I don't believe you

JACOB: Wait? Really? Anya I was just kidding

ANYA: Nope...

JACOB: ANYA! Seriously, I was just kidding!!!

ANYA: LOL!! I'm just messing with you.

JACOB: *sends a phew gif*

JACOB: I thought you were actually mad lol

ANYA: That would be a silly thing to be mad over lol

ANYA: Anyway, sorry to cut it short but I gotta go work now.

JACOB: Okay babe, talk to you later!

ANYA: Okay bye!

Work felt like a never-ending slog, and the lunch crowd was just as dull as yesterday, so my tips barely covered the gas for my car. I managed to plow through my classwork, realizing I'm just a couple of months away from finally snagging my degree. It's a thought that fills me with both relief and anticipation. Living with my grandparents has been a lifesaver in many ways, but lately, I've started to feel like a burden on them. However, the idea of going back to my parents' house is out of the question. Living there feels like being trapped in a cage, suffocating under their suffocating expectations. They claim they understand, but deep down, I know they don't—not really. After wrapping up my laptop, I mindlessly scroll through my social media feeds, not really paying attention to anything in particular. That's when a text message pops up:

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UNKNOWN NUMBER: Hey!

ANYA: Who's this?

But there's no response. With a shrug, I delete the message and tuck my phone back into my pocket. It must've been a wrong number, I figure.

I shake my head, dismissing the mysterious text as nothing more than a minor interruption in my day. With a sigh, I gather my belongings and prepare to head home.

As I make my way out of the campus building, the cool breeze offers a welcome respite from the stuffy classrooms. I pull out my phone, intending to check for any missed calls or messages. But before I can unlock the screen, another text message notification pops up.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Just wanted to say you looked really cute today.??

I feel a mix of surprise and apprehension wash over me. Who could be sending these messages? And how did they know what I looked like today? It's unsettling to think that someone might be watching me without my knowledge.

With a furrowed brow, I quickly type out a response:

ANYA: Umm... who is this?

I wait anxiously for a reply, my mind racing with questions. Who could be behind

these messages, and what do they want from me?

As I continue on my way home, a sense of unease settles over me like a dark cloud. The cool breeze that once offered solace now feels chilling against my skin, and the shadows of the evening seem to grow longer and more menacing with each passing moment.

The lack of response from the mysterious sender only adds to my growing sense of dread. Who could be watching me? And what do they want from me? The thought sends a shiver down my spine, and I quicken my pace, eager to escape the feeling of being watched.

As I reach my grandparents' house, I fumble with the keys, my hands trembling with apprehension. The darkness of the night seems to press in around me, suffocating and oppressive. With a sense of relief, I finally manage to unlock the door and step inside.

But as I close the door behind me, a sudden chill runs down my spine. Something feels off, as if the walls themselves are whispering secrets that I can't quite grasp. I glance around nervously, half-expecting to see someone lurking in the shadows.

With a shaky breath, I force myself to shake off the feeling of foreboding. It's just my imagination, I tell myself. There's nothing to be afraid of.

But deep down, a nagging voice tells me otherwise. Something tells me that this is only the beginning of a nightmare that I can't yet comprehend.

As I step into the house, a wave of silence greets me, leaving me unsure of my grandparents' whereabouts. "Nana? Pop? I'm home!" I call out into the quiet, setting my keys down on the entryway table. The lack of response sends a shiver down my spine, urging me to switch on lights as I make my way through the dimly lit house.

But as I illuminate the kitchen, my heart skips a beat at the sight before me. A bouquet of red roses sits ominously on the counter, casting a shadow over the room. I approach them cautiously, my mind racing with confusion. Could they be for Nana? But then I remember—Pops always gets her daisies.

A flicker of hope ignites within me as I entertain the possibility that the roses are from Jacob, delivered by Nana in a well-intentioned gesture. But as I reach for the card attached to the bouquet, my hopes are dashed with each word I read. The message sends a chill down my spine, the familiarity of my own name turning the innocent gesture into something sinister.

I swallow hard, my hands trembling as I read the message aloud to myself.

"Anya, you looked beautiful today in class. So focused on your laptop, you never noticed me. I can't wait to see you again."

My breath catches in my throat as I realize the implications of the message. Someone has been watching me, someone who knows where I live and is now reaching out to me in a way that feels deeply unsettling. Panic begins to rise within me, but I force myself to remain calm, my mind racing with questions and fears.

The sudden ring of my phone startles me, and I fumble in my pocket to retrieve it, my heart racing with fear. With a deep breath, I muster the courage to open my eyes and check the caller ID. Relief washes over me as I see Jacob's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey, Jacob," I answer, my voice trembling slightly.

"Hey, beautiful," he responds, his tone gentle. "Are you okay? You sound a bit out of breath."

"Yeah, I'm good," I reply, attempting to sound calm. "Just got home, and it's pretty dark out."

"Are you afraid of the dark?" he teases.

I manage a nervous laugh. "A little," I admit, though the truth is I'm feeling more than just a little uneasy. "You never know who might be lurking around."

"You need me there to protect you," he jokes, unaware of the unsettling reality behind my unease. But deep down, I know his presence would offer a sense of security I desperately need right now.

"So, what's up?" I say, trying to distract myself from the unsettling sight of the roses.

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"What are you doing this weekend?" Jacob asks, his voice filled with anticipation.

I pause for a moment, considering my response. "Ummm... I'm actually off this weekend for once. Why? You wanna come down here and hang?" I suggest, the idea of having him around offering a sense of comfort amidst the unease.

"Actually... I was thinking, what if you came out here for the weekend?" he proposes hopefully.

Before I can reply, a sudden knock at the door shatters the moment. Fear and anxiety grip me once more, freezing me in place. My feet seem glued to the floor, and all I can think about is finding a place to hide. The knock repeats, louder this time, sending a shiver down my spine. My breaths come out heavy as I shut my eyes tightly, my mind racing with apprehension. Then, amidst the chaos, a muffled voice calls out my name, causing my eyes to snap open in realization that Jacob is still on the phone.

"Anya, you still there?" Jacob's voice crackles through the phone. I bring it back to my ear and whisper, "Yeah."

"Why are you whispering?" he asks, his voice lowered to a whisper as well.

"There's a knock at my door, and I'm home alone," I confess quietly.

"Have you tried looking out the window to see who it is?" Jacob suggests.

"I'm too scared to," I admit, fear creeping into my voice.

Suddenly, another knock echoes through the house, louder this time. It's so forceful that even Jacob hears it through the phone. "ANYA, OPEN THE DAMN DOOR!" a muffled voice demands from behind the door.

"I'm gonna try to look through the window," I say shakily. "Don't hang up!"

"I won't," Jacob assures me.

With trembling hands, I slowly approach the corner window that overlooks the front porch. Cautiously, I kneel down and crawl to avoid casting a shadow that could be seen from outside. My breathing is slow and heavy as I lift the curtain aside, attempting to peek outside. With every effort, I try to steady my breathing even more, preparing myself for whatever I might see as I turn to look...

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jacob

I sit on the edge of my seat, the tension palpable as I listen intently to the sounds coming through the phone. Anya's rapid breathing sends a shiver down my spine, and I can't shake the feeling of dread that grips me like a vice.

My mind races with worry, thoughts swirling as I try to piece together what could be happening on the other end of the line. Is Anya in danger? Who could be knocking at her door with such urgency? The possibilities send a chill down my spine.

Could it be Marcus, the guy who set her into a full panic attack not long ago? Or worse, could it be Paul, the man she's mentioned before, the one who's caused her so much pain in the past? The mere thought of either of them near her fills me with a sense of unease.

As I strain to hear any indication of what's happening, a sense of helplessness washes over me. All I can do is stay on the line, offering whatever support I can from miles away. I wish I could be there with her, to offer some sense of comfort and protection.

But for now, all I can do is listen, my heart pounding in my chest as I wait anxiously for Anya to come back on the line and tell me she's okay.

The minutes feel like hours as I continue to hold the phone to my ear, every second ticking by agonizingly slow. I can't help but imagine the worst-case scenarios playing out on the other end of the line, each one more terrifying than the last.

Anya's breathing remains rapid, punctuated by the occasional sound of movement or muffled voices in the background. My heart clenches with every noise, my mind conjuring up vivid images of danger lurking just beyond her front door.

I fight the urge to interrupt, to demand answers and reassurance from Anya. But I know she needs me to stay calm, to be a steady presence in the midst of her fear and uncertainty.

With every passing moment, my worry grows, a knot of tension coiling tighter and tighter in the pit of my stomach. I silently pray for Anya's safety, willing her to find the courage to face whatever awaits her on the other side of that door.

And as I wait, my grip on the phone tightens, my own breaths coming in shallow gasps as I cling to the hope that Anya will soon return to the line, her voice a beacon of reassurance in the darkness.

A deafening scream pierces through the phone, followed by the unmistakable sound of crashing and shattering glass. My heart lurches in my chest, a surge of panic coursing through me. "Anya! Are you okay?" I blurt out, my voice frantic with worry. But there's no response, only eerie silence on the other end of the line.

"Anya! Answer me! What's going on?!" I shout desperately into the phone, my mind racing with fear and uncertainty. Still, there's no reply, only the deafening silence that hangs heavy in the air.

With trembling hands, I pull the phone away from my ear to glance at the screen, my heart sinking as I see that the call has abruptly ended. Panic grips me as I frantically try to call her back, each ring met with agonizing silence on the other end. My stomach churns with dread as I realize that Anya isn't answering, and I'm left with a gnawing sense of helplessness, fearing the worst.

My mom enters the room, her eyes wide with concern. "Jacob! Why are you shouting so late at night?" she asks, her voice filled with alarm.

"It's Anya," I reply, my voice trembling with fear. "I was on the phone with her, and she heard a knock at the door. She sounded so scared! Then I heard a scream, and the line went dead!" I stand up and pace around the room, the anxiety tightening its grip around my chest. "She has an abusive ex! What if he found her? What if she's hurt?"

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My mom steps forward, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Darling, first things first, I need you to breathe and try to calm down before you hyperventilate," she says gently, guiding me to the couch and urging me to sit down. "Second, have you tried calling her grandparents or her friend Lana?" she suggests calmly.

I shake my head, a sense of helplessness washing over me. "I don't have their numbers," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks, and I feel utterly powerless in the face of Anya's potential danger.

My mom's face reflects my growing anxiety as she considers our options. "Okay, Jacob, let's not panic," she says soothingly, guiding me back to the couch. "We need to approach this logically."

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself as I listen to her words. "But what do we do? Anya might be in trouble, and I don't know how to help her from here," I admit, feeling utterly helpless.

My mom places a comforting hand on my shoulder. "We'll figure this out, Jacob," she reassures me. "Do you know anyone else besides Lana or her grandparents, who might be able to check on her."

I shake my head no, feeling the frustration build inside me.

My mom's expression shifts as she considers our limited options. "We could try calling the local authorities near Anya's address," she suggests. "They might be able to do a wellness check or provide us with more information."

The idea settles uneasily in my mind, but I know it's our best shot at ensuring Anya's safety from a distance. With a sense of determination, I nod in agreement. "Let's do it," I say, reaching for my phone to make the call. As the line rings, my heart pounds with anticipation, hoping that we'll soon have some answers about Anya's well-being.

"Hello, this is the Lakefront County Police Department, how can I assist you?" a woman's voice answers on the other end of the line.

"Good evening, my name is Jacob Callahan. I was just on a phone call with my girlfriend when she heard a loud knock at her door. She sounded scared, and when she went to check who it was, there was a scream, and then the line went dead," I explain urgently.

"Have you tried calling her back?" the woman asks, her tone slightly impatient.

"Yes, but there was no answer!" I reply, feeling the frustration mounting.

"Alright, sir. Maybe she will call you back," she suggests nonchalantly, and I feel my frustration boiling over.

"I think she's in danger! Can't you send someone to check on her?" I plead desperately.

"Sir, it's the middle of the night, and it's a Friday. All of our officers are busy with emergencies happening all over the county. We won't be able to send someone to your girlfriend's house for a while. Your best bet is to either wait it out or you can drive there yourself," she responds sternly, her tone growing annoyed.

"I DON'T LIVE THERE! I LIVE FOUR HOURS AWAY!" I shout, my panic rising. My mom intervenes, grabbing the phone from me, gesturing for me to write down Anya's address, and then telling me to stay put.

After what feels like an eternity, my mom returns with my phone in hand. "They will be sending someone soon," she informs me, her voice filled with reassurance. As she heads back upstairs, she turns back to me, offering words of comfort. "Jacob, it will be alright. Why don't you try to sleep? I know it may be difficult in the state you are in right now, but we did what we could for now," she says gently before disappearing upstairs. Left alone with my thoughts, I try to find solace in her words, but the worry gnaws at me relentlessly.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Anya

"Shit!" I curse under my breath as I watch the blood trickle down my arm, the broken glass vase lying shattered on the floor. The dining room chair lies on its side, a casualty of my failed attempt to catch the falling vase. With a begrudging sigh, I open the door to the insistent knocking, my irritation mounting.

"What the fuck do you want?" I snap harshly as I glare at Caleb, Lana's companion from the Fourth of July festivities.

"Where is Lana?" he demands, his eyes darting past me into the house.

"She's not here! Not that it's any of your damn business! Now, why the fuck were you pounding on my door at this ungodly hour?" I retort angrily, my patience wearing thin.

"I need to find her, okay?" he snaps back, his frustration mirroring mine.

I scoff, "and I need to bandage my arm because you scared the living shit out of me pounding on my goddamn door and then having your ugly ass face pressed up against the goddamn window! Which caused me to fall back and knock over a glass vase and

cut up my arm!" I fire back, my voice laced with irritation.

"Look, I'm sorry I scared you, I just need to find her!" Caleb pleads, his desperation evident in his tone.

I glare at him, my lips pursed tightly. "After what you just put me through, I don't give a fuck—"

Before I can finish my sentence, the sound of multiple police cars pulling up outside interrupts us. My heart races as officers swarm toward us, their guns drawn. Caleb and I stand there, frozen in shock, with our hands raised. The movement causes the blood to drip down my arm, staining the floor.

One of the officers points his gun at Caleb. "Get down on the ground!" he commands, his voice authoritative and commanding.

Caleb, fear evident in his eyes, complies with the order. He glares at me accusingly. "You fucking bitch! You called the cops on me?!" he snarls.

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Before I can respond, another police officer approaches me, accompanied by a paramedic. It's only then that I realize the ambulance has arrived too.

"Miss, are you alright?" the paramedic asks softly, concern etched on his face.

I can only nod, unable to find my voice amidst the chaos and confusion. As the realization dawns on me, I'm left grappling with the understanding of how the police were called in the first place.

Shit! Jacob! I curse inwardly, but I remain rooted to the spot as another paramedic approaches, carrying a medical bag. She looks vaguely familiar, but I can't quite place her.

"Miss, I need to look at your arm," she says, her voice calm and professional. Without hesitation, I offer her my injured arm, and she begins to clean and bandage the cuts.

Once she's finished, I start to rise to my feet, but she gently stops me. "Do you want me to take a look at your head too?" she asks, her expression serious.

I give her a puzzled look. "My head?"

She nods, her gaze unwavering. "You have a nasty cut, and your cheek is a bit swollen too. No doubt it'll leave you with a black eye," she explains, her tone solemn. "We can take you to the hospital," she suggests, her concern evident.

I shake my head, dismissing the offer. "No, that's okay. I'm fine," I reply, trying to

sound more confident than I feel.

"Are you sure?" she presses, her brow furrowing with worry.

I nod, offering a faint smile. "Yeah, I just want to get this night over with," I assure her.

"Okay, well at least let me clean your head up," she suggests gently.

I nod in agreement, silently grateful for her care and understanding in the midst of the chaos.

As the paramedic guides me towards the ambulance, her words send a shockwave through my system. "Have we met before?" I blurt out, unable to contain the question that's been nagging at the back of my mind.

She gives me a polite smile, her eyes filled with a hint of recognition. "Yes, about three years ago," she replies softly, her smile unwavering. "Now, let's take a look at your head."

The realization hits me like a freight train, slamming into my gut with brutal force. She was one of the paramedics who responded on the night Paul had gone off the rails. The night he left me bleeding on the hotel floor. My heart clenches with the memory of that horrific night—the night Paul's arrest had felt like a glimmer of hope, only to be shattered when he walked free the next day, thanks to his powerful connections.

But now, here she is, standing before me once again, a reminder of that dark chapter in my past.

"He's not my boyfriend," I blurt out, the words tumbling out of my mouth in a rush of

panic. I can't shake the fear that she might be silently judging me, assuming I've stumbled into another abusive relationship.

But she just nods, her expression understanding, as she finishes cleaning the blood from my face. "You don't need to explain," she says politely, her tone reassuring.

"No, really," I insist, my words tripping over each other in my haste to clarify. "He's my best friend's friend... or well... acquaintance now... but he isn't—"

"OUCH!" I yelp, recoiling as the sting of the antiseptic wipes over the cut.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes, her voice laced with genuine remorse.

Just then, my grandparents pull into the driveway, and my stomach twists with apprehension. I can only imagine what they must be thinking.

Nana rushes out of the car, followed closely by Pops. "Any! What happened? Are you okay? Why are there police everywhere?" she bombards me with questions, her eyes wide with concern.

I glance toward the paramedic, and she nods, indicating she's finished. "You should really get checked out at the hospital, though," she insists.

"I'm okay, really, thank you, though," I assure her, offering a grateful smile.

As Nana bombards me with questions about what happened, I recount the night's events, her expression shifting between concern and exasperation. "Well, that sounds like quite the exhausting night," she sighs, before adding, "but how did you call the police?"

"Oh, shit!" I blurt out, immediately regretting the curse word as I shoot Nana an

apologetic look. I rush into the house, scanning the kitchen floor frantically for my phone. Guilt washes over me as I take in the mess I've left behind. Spotting my shattered phone under the table, my shoulders slump in defeat.

"Anya?" Pops calls out as he enters the house, his eyes flicking between me and the chaos around us. Despite the situation, he manages a smile. "The police would like a word with you," he says gently, and I nod in response, following him back outside.

After speaking with the officers and explaining the situation, they didn't charge Caleb with assault, but my grandparents insisted on charging him with trespassing and suing him for the injuries he inadvertently caused, as well as the medical bills. I tried to convince them it was unnecessary, but they were adamant. Reluctantly, I agreed, and we headed back into the house to clean up the mess.

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With my grandparents' help, we tidied up, and I grabbed my shattered phone before retreating to bed. Today had been exhausting, and I decided to put off getting a new phone until tomorrow, along with calling Jacob back. All I wanted now was to rest and put this chaotic night behind me.

Despite the chaos surrounding Caleb and my possible stalker, there was a nagging feeling in my gut that something was still off. My mind kept racing with questions and suspicions about who could be behind all of this. Part of me feared it was Paul, but I couldn't shake off the possibility that it could be someone else entirely. It didn't help that I had abruptly left him two years ago without any explanation, leaving him with a possessive and controlling personality. But could he really have turned into a stalker? The thought alone made my head throb even more.

As I stumbled out to the kitchen in the early hours of the morning, I couldn't believe how much of a mess my life had become once again. Why did all these things keep happening to me? And why did I always seem to cause trouble wherever I went? I grabbed a glass of water, hoping it would clear my mind, but instead it served as a reminder of how little sleep I had gotten.

In a moment of desperation, I reached for my grandfather's scotch, taking a swig in hopes that it would numb the pain and make me fall into a deep slumber. But as the burning liquid slid down my throat, I couldn't help but think that maybe not waking up would be a relief for everyone around me. They wouldn't have to deal with me and my problems anymore. Sure, they would mourn, but at least they wouldn't have to deal with the turmoil I caused since getting involved with Paul. Even though Caleb had nothing to do with Paul, his presence only added fuel to the fire.

Maybe if I disappeared, Paul would leave my family alone too. With that thought in mind, I closed my eyes and let the darkness consume me, both from the scotch and from my conflicted emotions.

I am jolted awake by Lana's sudden entrance through the door. As I open my eyes, a sharp pain shoots through my head from the bright sunlight streaming in through the window. My neck feels stiff from sleeping on the couch. I try to rub my eyes, but the intense brightness only makes it worse. I sit up as she rushes towards me with concern etched on her face. "Oh my god, Anya! Did Caleb do that?" she exclaims with worry evident in her high-pitched voice.

"Please don't be so loud," I say, wincing at the sound of her voice. She lets out a sigh when she sees the empty bottle of scotch and me lying on the couch. She reaches into her purse and hands me some Tylenol. "You didn't try to drink yourself into oblivion again, did you?" she asks with fear and concern in her tone. I wince again, not because of her voice but because she was the one who found me a year ago after my failed attempt to end my life with alcohol and pills. We had just become friends then, but she took care of me and has been by my side ever since. That was also the day I finally told her about Paul and what he did to me.

"I'm worried about you Anya", Lana's words hang heavy in the air, her concern a palpable presence that wraps around me like a comforting embrace. I feel the weight of her arm around my shoulders, a lifeline tethering me to reality amidst the chaos of my thoughts.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, my voice barely a whisper as tears blur my vision. The rawness of my emotions threatens to consume me, leaving me vulnerable and exposed.

Her words cut through the silence like a knife, their gravity sinking into my bones with each syllable. "You need help, Anya," she says softly, her voice tinged with

sadness. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."

The tears flow freely now, a torrent of emotion that I can no longer contain. "I know," I choke out between sobs, my heart heavy with the weight of my own self-destructive tendencies. "But last night... it brought back so many painful memories."

As I recount the events of the previous night, Lana listens intently, her expression a mix of sympathy and concern. The mystery of the texts and flowers only adds to the growing sense of unease that gnaws at my insides.

"Any, you need to tell the authorities," Lana insists, her voice tinged with urgency. "If you think it's Paul, you can't ignore it."

But the thought of confronting Paul fills me with dread, a paralyzing fear that leaves me trembling with uncertainty. "I don't know if it's him," I confess, my voice trembling with uncertainty. "And even if it is... I don't know if I have the strength to face him."

Lana's concern lingers in the air as we both sit in silence, the weight of her words hanging heavy between us. "Okay, well what did Jacob say?" she finally breaks the quietude, her question pulling me back to the present moment. My heart skips a beat as the realization hits me like a bolt of lightning. "Oh my god, I need to call him! I need to tell him I'm okay! He must be worried sick!" I exclaim, panic flooding my veins.

She hands me her phone without hesitation, and I quickly dial Jacob's number, my fingers trembling with a mixture of fear and anticipation. "Hello?" Jacob's voice drifts through the line, a comforting presence amidst the chaos of my emotions.

"Jacob?" I respond, my voice cracking with emotion as tears threaten to overwhelm me. The weight of my actions from the previous night crashes down on me, and I'm

filled with regret for causing him worry.

"Anya!?" His voice is a mixture of shock and relief, echoing the tumultuous whirlwind of emotions swirling within me.

"Jacob! I'm so sorry!" I blurt out, tears streaming down my cheeks in uncontrollable torrents.

"Baby, are you okay? What happened?" His concern is palpable, his words a lifeline in the midst of my turmoil. But the sound of his voice only intensifies my emotional breakdown, rendering me speechless as I cling to the phone in desperation.

"Anya, I'm here," he reassures me, his words a soothing balm to my shattered spirit. And then, like a beacon of hope in the darkness, I feel a familiar presence beside me, a warmth enveloping me in its embrace.

I look up through tear-streaked eyes to see Jacob standing before me, his expression a mixture of concern and unwavering support. Without a word, he gathers me into his arms, pulling me close as I bury my face against his chest, my tears flowing freely in his presence. In that moment, surrounded by his comforting embrace, I feel a glimmer of hope flicker to life within me, a reminder that even in the darkest of times, I am not alone.

After what seems like a long time, I wipe my face and look up at him, "How are you here?" I manage to utter, my voice barely a whisper as I search his eyes for answers.

He strokes my face tenderly, his touch sending shivers down my spine as he smiles softly. "I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't just sit and do nothing, so I left a note with my mom and told her I was coming out here," he explains, his sincerity evident in every word.

"But why?" I press, my heart pounding in my chest as I struggle to comprehend his unexpected arrival.

He kisses me gently, his lips warm against mine before resting his forehead against mine. "Because you needed me," he murmurs, his voice filled with unwavering determination. He pulls me close, his arms wrapping around me in a protective embrace. "I would do anything for you, Anya," he continues, his words resonating deep within my soul.

I shake my head in disbelief, unable to comprehend the depth of his feelings. "Why, though?" I ask, my voice tinged with disbelief and wonder.

He smiles at me, his eyes filled with a tenderness that takes my breath away. Cupping my face in his hands, he gazes into my eyes with unwavering sincerity. "Because, Anya, I'm in love with you," he confesses, his words hanging in the air like a promise of forever.

"What?!" I exclaim, my heart racing as his confession takes me by surprise.

"Anya, I was going out of my mind last night when I couldn't get a hold of you. I couldn't think of anything else but making sure you were safe and okay!" he explains, his voice filled with raw emotion. "I have never felt that way with anyone before. I knew then that I had fallen for you, and all I wanted to do was be here with you," he declares, his thumb gently wiping away a stray tear as he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

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As Jacob's arms encircle me, I feel a tumultuous whirlwind of emotions raging inside me. His words, so filled with warmth and sincerity, clash with the darkness that threatens to consume me. "You shouldn't love me," I protest weakly, attempting to distance myself from the intensity of his affection.

But he refuses to let me retreat, pulling me back into his embrace with a determined strength. "Well, that's too bad because I do," he asserts, his voice unwavering in its conviction.

"No!" I push against him, my heart heavy with the weight of my own self-doubt. "I'm a mess, Jacob. You deserve someone who won't bring drama into your life."

He stands with me, his touch gentle as he rubs my shoulders and arms. "Anya, I don't care what kind of drama you bring," he insists, his gaze filled with unwavering resolve. "Because it'll all be worth it just to have you with me."

"Jacob, no! You're too good of a person to be with a screw-up like me!" I protest, my voice trembling with the weight of my own insecurities.

"But you're not—" he begins, but I cut him off, my words tumbling out in a rush of anguish and despair.

"I wanted to die last night, Jacob," I confess, the words hanging heavy in the air between us.

He looks at me with compassion, his gaze filled with an understanding that both soothes and terrifies me. "I know," he murmurs softly.

Confusion clouds my thoughts as his revelation sinks in. "You know? How?" I demand, my mind reeling with the implications of his knowledge.

"Lana told me," he explains, his voice gentle but firm. "On her way out to work, she saw me in the driveway while I was on the phone with you before I came inside."

A surge of conflicting emotions washes over me at the realization that Lana had shared my darkest secret with Jacob. Part of me resents her for burdening him with my pain, while another part feels a strange sense of relief that the truth is finally out in the open. But above all, I am left grappling with a profound sense of disbelief that Jacob, with full knowledge of my brokenness, still chooses to stand by my side. Who in their right mind would want someone like me?

"Anya, I want to be with you and help you through your pain. Lean on me and give me all of it! Give me all of you! I'm not going anywhere, baby," Jacob declares, his words filled with unwavering determination.

But I scoff, emotions swirling within me like a tempest. "Jacob, you can't! You're leaving for the Army, remember!" I shout, the weight of impending separation pressing down on me.

His expression falls, and he approaches me with purpose. "I know, and I made that decision before I met you. But I believe we can make it work," he insists, his voice steady despite the uncertainty looming over us.

"No! No... we can't, Jacob," I protest through tears. "I, uh, I think you should go."

He shakes his head adamantly. "No, Anya. I'm not leaving you. I don't care if you try to push me away. You deserve love, Anya. You deserve to be shown real love every day—"

“YOU ARE LEAVING, JACOB!” I scream, my breath coming in ragged gasps as tears stream down my face. “YOU ARE GOING INTO THE ARMY AND LEAVING ME...” My voice cracks, my anguish pouring forth in waves. “I’m gonna be... I’m gonna be all alone,” I confess, the weight of my fear crashing down upon me.

Before I can collapse, he catches me, wrapping me in his comforting embrace. “You are not alone, baby. You still have your grandparents, Lana, and like I said, you’ll have me. I know I won’t be here physically, but I promise you I will write you every day while I’m gone, and I’ll call you whenever I am allowed.”

He lifts my head gently, his gaze filled with unwavering sincerity. “But I’m not leaving for another month, so why don’t we make the most of the time we do have together?”

I nod weakly, my heart heavy with uncertainty. “Just please promise me you won’t hurt me,” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the tumult of my emotions.

He smiles softly, his touch gentle as he brushes away my tears. “Baby, I can’t promise that, and you know that. But I can promise you that I will never hurt you the way that he has.”

With his words offering a glimmer of hope amid the darkness, I wipe my face and lean into him, finding solace in his embrace.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jacob

Sitting next to Anya, her pain hits me like a heavy weight in the chest. Each tear streaking down her face and every shiver that runs through her speaks volumes,

urging me to do whatever I can to ease her burden. But in the midst of our embrace, I can't shake this gnawing fear that's eating away at me.

Anya's words keep echoing in my head, reminding me of the hurdles we're facing. And yeah, she's right—I'm off to the Army soon, and the thought of being away from her just freaks me out. But no matter how uncertain things seem, I won't let her face it alone.

Watching her try to hold back her tears, it's like the air around us gets heavy with her sadness. All I wanna do is pull her close and shield her from all this pain. But I get it, some battles she's gotta fight on her own, and I'm just here to back her up.

As she leans into me, seeking some kinda comfort, this wave of determination washes over me. No matter what's comin' our way, I'm gonna be her rock, her anchor in the storm. Together, we'll tackle whatever life throws at us, drawing strength from each other every step of the way.

The more time I spend with her, the more I realize how much she means to me. She's not just some passing crush—she's like the missing piece of my puzzle, the one who makes me feel whole in a way I never thought possible. And yeah, even though things might get tough, as long as we stick together, we can handle anything.

With the sun starting to creep in, casting this warm glow around us, I make a silent promise to myself and to Anya. No matter where life takes us, I'm gonna have her back, through all the ups and downs, the good times and the bad. 'Cause with her, I've found not just love, but the strength to face whatever's comin' our way.

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She's fallen asleep in my arms and I pick her up and carry her to her room. As I lay Anya down in her bed and tuck her in, she stirs slightly, mumbling something so soft I almost miss it. "I love you too," she whispers, her words barely audible. I freeze for a moment, unsure if she meant to say it or if it slipped out in her sleep. But even so, those words hit me like a ton of bricks, filling me with a mix of joy and uncertainty.

I want to believe she meant it, but I know she's in a vulnerable state right now. The last thing I want to do is assume anything or pressure her into saying things she may not be ready to express. So instead, I brush a strand of hair from her face and place a gentle kiss on her forehead, whispering softly, "Sleep tight, Anya. I'll be right here." And with that, I quietly leave her room, my heart still racing with the weight of her words.

Anya's Nana breezes through the front door, greeting me with a warm hug. "Oh, good morning, Jacob!" she chirps, her smile as bright as the morning sun. "I didn't know you were coming over today?"

Returning her hug, I grin. "Hi, Mrs. Parker, yeah, I just wanted to check on Anya."

She playfully swats at my arm. "Nana, Jacob! Mrs. Parker sounds so formal!" she insists with a laugh.

I chuckle in response. "Okay, Nana it is. Well, um, I'm gonna head out to grab some breakfast for me and Anya. Would you mind keeping an eye on her while I'm gone? She's still sleeping in her room."

"Of course, dear! If she wakes up before you get back, I'll let her know where you

went,” she assures me with a smile.

“Thanks, Nana,” I say gratefully, feeling reassured by her presence.

A short while later, I stride into Anya’s grandparents’ house, a box of doughnuts and a tray of coffee cups in hand. Just as I start setting everything down on the table, Anya shuffles into the kitchen, looking groggy and rubbing her eyes. My heart clenches at the sight of the black eye forming on her face, a painful reminder of what happened last night. I wish I could have been there to protect her, to shield her from harm.

“What’s all this?” she asks, her voice a mix of excitement and weariness.

“Breakfast,” I reply, flashing her a wide grin.

Her face lights up with delight. “You brought me Dunkin’ Donuts?” she exclaims eagerly.

“And coffee!” I add, gesturing to the tray.

“Oh my god, you are the best boyfriend ever!” she exclaims, grabbing a cup of coffee and eagerly digging into the box of doughnuts.

“I’m aware,” I tease, unable to suppress a smile at her enthusiasm.

"Hey, so I was talking to my mom earlier, and she's invited you to stay with us for a few days. I know it might not be the best timing, but she's really eager to meet you," I say to Anya.

Anya's eyes widen in surprise, and a flicker of fear crosses her face. "I can't meet your mom looking like this!" she exclaims, her voice tinged with anxiety. "I look like

I've been through a boxing match! What will she think?"

I let out a laugh, trying to ease the tension. "Anya, she knows what happened. She's not going to judge you," I reassure her, noticing the apprehension in her expression. "I promise."

Taking a sip of her coffee, Anya nods slowly. "Okay," she replies, a hesitant smile playing on her lips.

"Wait, really?" I ask, feeling a surge of excitement. She nods in response. "Awesome! Can I help you pack?"

Anya's eyes widen in surprise. "Wait, are we talking about right now?" she asks nervously.

I nod enthusiastically. "Yeah, I remember you mentioning you were off this weekend."

Anya heads back to her room to pack, and I'm left sitting at the kitchen table with Nana. She looks at me with a warm smile, her eyes reflecting a sense of gratitude.

"I think it'll be good for her to get out for a bit," Nana says, her hand resting on top of mine. "Thank you for taking such care of my granddaughter."

"Of course," I reply sincerely. "She's someone special, and I do love her."

Nana's smile widens into a grin. "Oh, I am aware," she says, using the same words I had spoken to Anya earlier. "You wouldn't have spontaneously driven out the three hours out here if you didn't," she adds with a knowing look.

I chuckle, appreciating Nana's perceptiveness. Just then, Anya emerges from her

room, dragging a suitcase behind her.

"Umm, so I didn't know what we were gonna be doing, so I kind of just brought one of everything," Anya says sheepishly.

I stand up and walk over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I think you'll be fine. We'll be back on Monday morning, so there won't be much you'll need."

"Well, you can never be too prepared," she quips, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

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I grab her luggage and we make our way to my car. I open the passenger door for her, earning a playful jab from Anya. "Such a gentleman," she teases.

"Always for you, Anya," I reply with a smile. I'm excited about the drive to Pennsylvania with her, eager for her to meet my mom. I glance over at her as I settle into the driver's seat. Despite the rough night, she looks better than she did this morning.

"You ready?" I ask, turning to her. She smiles and nods, her enthusiasm contagious. "So ready," she exclaims before catching sight of herself in the mirror. Her expression falters as she touches her swollen cheek and black eye. "Oh god! Why didn't you tell me I looked this bad?" she says with a wince.

I chuckle as I start the car, "You look beautiful, Anya, black eye and all." She rolls her eyes but smiles nonetheless. As we drive, I steal glances at her from time to time, marveling at her resilience despite everything she's been through. Meeting my mom might be a little daunting, but I know Anya can handle it.

After a few hours on the road, we finally arrive at my mom's house. Anya's nerves are palpable as we approach the front door, but I give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "You've got this," I whisper.

Taking a deep breath, Anya nods, steeling herself for the meeting. As my mom opens the door and welcomes us inside, I can't help but feel a surge of pride for the woman by my side. Whatever lies ahead, I know we'll face it together.

Anya

As Jacob's mom welcomes me inside, I'm immediately enveloped in a sense of comfort. Their home exudes coziness, and the scent of freshly baked bread fills the air. "Anya, it's so great to finally meet you," she says warmly. "May I give you a hug?" I nod shyly, and she wraps her arms around me, emanating the comforting aroma of flour and vanilla. "How are you holding up, dear?" she asks as she guides me to the living room. "I'm doing alright, despite the bumps and bruises. I'm okay," I reply. "Well, I'm just glad you're safe now," she reassures me.

Then, I muster up the courage to ask a burning question. "I do have a question," I begin. "Of course, dear, what is it?" she says with a gentle smile. "Jacob told me that it was you who got the police to come to the house as quickly as they did," I say, and she nods, encouraging me to continue. "How did you do that?" I ask, genuinely curious.

With a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she replies, "Jacob gave me a challenge, and I tackled it like a pro. Of course, a little mama bear mentality never hurts either." She gives me a playful wink and pats my leg. I laugh and nod "No it doesn't" I pause "thank you" I say as I squeeze her hand.

She smiles and squeezes back "No thanks need, it was the right thing to do" she pats my leg again "Now, I need to finish baking some bread. Why don't you get some rest? I believe Jacob has set you up in the downstairs guest room," she suggests as she gets up.

"Would it be alright if I explore the farm a bit?" I inquire. She beams. "Absolutely, Anya. Feel free to make yourself at home. I'll have Jacob give you the grand tour." Her warm hospitality puts me at ease, and I thank her before stepping onto the porch.

The vast property stretches out before me, with lush green fields and neatly divided paddocks for the various farm animals. In the center stands a grand barn, a focal point amidst the pastoral landscape. I spot horses grazing in one paddock, while sheep

peacefully roam in another. Nearby, a bustling chicken coop houses dozens of hens, with a separate enclosure for the roosters.

Taking in the idyllic scene, I can't help but feel a sense of tranquility wash over me. The peacefulness of the farm is a welcome contrast to the chaos of recent events. Lost in my thoughts, I'm brought back to reality by Jacob's comforting touch on my back.

"You ready for the grand tour?" Jacob asks, his eyes twinkling with excitement.

I can't help but match his enthusiasm. "Absolutely!" I reply, anticipation bubbling within me.

He leads me toward the sheep enclosure, and as we approach, the sheep start to gather around us, their gentle bleats filling the air. I instinctively step back, startled by the sudden movement. Jacob chuckles and pulls me closer, wrapping his arm around my waist.

"Don't worry, they're just excited because they think I've got food," he explains, his voice soothing. I glance at him nervously but with a hint of excitement. "Do you want to feed them?" he offers.

I nod eagerly, a smile spreading across my face at the prospect of interacting with the friendly animals.

As we feed the sheep, I find myself drawn to their gentle presence. Turning to Jacob, I ask, "Can I touch them, or will they run away?"

He smiles reassuringly. "Oh no, they love the interaction. Go ahead," he encourages, gesturing toward the sheep.

With a mix of excitement and trepidation, I lean down and tentatively reach out to

stroke one of the sheep. As my hand makes contact with its wool, I'm surprised by the softness of it. The fibers yield beneath my touch, feeling like a cloud under my fingertips. I'm momentarily entranced by the sensation, marveling at the delicate texture of the sheep's fleece against my skin. It's a comforting feeling, one that momentarily transports me away from the worries of the world.

As we approach the chicken coop, Jacob grabs a bucket, and I can't help but tease him, "Are we collecting eggs?"

He grins mischievously, confirming my suspicions. "Yup!" His enthusiasm is infectious, and I can't help but feel a sense of excitement bubble up inside me. "This is so fun!" I exclaim as I follow him into the coop.

Inside, I spot several eggs nestled in various boxes and waste no time in gently collecting them and placing them in the bucket. However, my confidence wavers when I see a hen hovering protectively over her clutch.

I glance nervously at Jacob, unsure of what to do. "Go ahead, it's okay," he reassures me. Despite his encouragement, I hesitate, worried about getting pecked.

Jacob laughs at my apprehension and strides over to the hen, deftly pushing her aside to access the eggs beneath her. As he reaches for the last egg, the hen reacts defensively, nipping at his hand.

I watch with raised eyebrows, a silent 'I told you so' passing between us. Despite the brief scare, we manage to collect all the eggs without further incident, and I can't help but laugh at the unexpected adventure.

"Okay, it's starting to get late. Do you want to see the horses now, or do you want to save it for tomorrow?" Jacob asks, a playful glint in his eyes.

I teasingly glare at him and cross my arms, pretending to contemplate his question. After a few seconds, I playfully slap his arm. "Of course I want to see the horses!" I exclaim with a grin.

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He laughs and we head toward the stables, where the majestic animals await. I approach one of the stalls and find a beautiful black horse, its coat shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the windows. "Can I pet you?" I ask, addressing the horse directly.

"She's really good at it," Jacob chimes in mischievously, shooting me a wink.

I roll my eyes at his innuendo and laugh. Then, he hands me a carrot and gestures for me to offer it to the horse. I eagerly lift my hand, gripping the carrot, and begin to move it toward the horse's mouth. But before I can get too close, Jacob steps in behind me and gently lowers my hand.

"Not like that," he advises. "That's one way to accidentally get bit."

I'm taken aback by his sudden intervention. "Oh, sorry," I mumble, feeling embarrassed by my mistake.

"No need to apologize," he reassures me with a chuckle. "Just trying to help you keep your fingers."

He adjusts my hand, showing me the correct way to offer the carrot to the horse. As his warm hands guide mine, I can't help but feel a flutter in my stomach at the closeness between us. With his body wrapped around mine, I tentatively extend my hand toward the horse, grateful for Jacob's guidance and his protective presence.

The horse takes the carrot eagerly, munching away contentedly as I stroke its soft nose. "You are so beautiful, you know that?" I murmur, feeling a sense of peace wash

over me in the presence of such a magnificent creature.

"Yes, you are," I hear Jacob's voice behind me, but his words aren't directed at the horse. When I turn to look at him, I find him gazing at me with a tender expression, his eyes filled with warmth and admiration.

I feel the heat rise to my cheeks as I shyly glance away. "Oh, stop," I murmur, trying to conceal my growing blush.

But Jacob steps closer, enveloping me in a tight embrace. His lips find the sensitive skin of my neck, planting a gentle kiss there. "I'll never stop telling you how beautiful you are," he whispers, his breath warm against my skin.

My heart skips a beat at his words, filling me with a sense of joy and contentment unlike anything I've ever known.

In the quiet of the stable, nestled in Jacob's embrace, it dawns on me: I've fallen hard for him. It's a revelation that catches me off guard, but it feels undeniably right. Being with him is like finding that missing piece of the puzzle I didn't even realize was missing.

As his heart beats against mine and his arms envelop me, I feel a sense of contentment I've never experienced before. Jacob has been a constant source of love and support, showing me a depth of affection I've never known. And now, I can't imagine my life without him.

However, there's a nagging voice of doubt in the back of my mind. My past hasn't been easy, and the idea of opening up to someone and risking heartache again is daunting. Can I truly let Jacob in, flaws and all, and still be loved unconditionally?

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure. But when I look into his eyes and see nothing but love

and acceptance, it gives me hope. Perhaps I can take that leap of faith. With Jacob, I've found a sanctuary—a place where I can be authentically myself and still be cherished.

So yes, it's official: I've fallen deeply in love with Jacob, and I wouldn't change a thing about it.

“Jacob?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for bringing me here, I needed this more than I ever knew” I say and he holds me tighter. “I love that you are here with me” he says.

I turn and lean up, my lips seeking out his in a desperate embrace. He responds eagerly, pulling me in even tighter and wrapping his arms around my waist. I press myself against him, feeling the warmth of his body through our clothes. His hands roam over my back, sending shivers down my spine. I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss as we both lose ourselves in the moment. I can feel the hunger and passion building between us as our tongues dance together in a heated exchange. Suddenly, he lifts me up from my ass and pushes me against one of the walls, his firm body pressing against mine. I can feel his erection through his pants, rubbing against my entrance and driving me wild with desire. He continues to kiss me hungrily, his lips trailing down my neck and igniting a fire within me. His hands move down to my waist, pulling me closer to him, as I moan softly into his mouth. I feel him hardening even more against me, his desire plain for all to see. At that moment, I realize that I can't resist him any longer. I reach down and unzip his pants, freeing his erection from the confines of his clothing. It springs free, hard, and pulsing, its thickness making my heart race with anticipation.

"Jacob! Anya! Dinner's ready!" Jacob's mom's voice rings out from the porch.

"Fuck!" "Shit" we both mutter simultaneously under our breath. Jacob hastily adjusts his pants while I hastily straighten my shirt. After a moment's pause, we both burst into laughter. "We should probably find a more private place for this next time," I suggest between giggles.

Jacob grins mischievously. "Eh, I think the horses enjoyed the entertainment," he teases. I turn my head to see at least a half dozen horses poking their heads out of their stables looking at the two of us, their ears perked forward in clear interest at what has just transpired. We both let out a laugh as Jacob began wrapping his arm around me as we headed back to the house.

As we gather around the dinner table, Jacob's mom turns her attention to me. "How was the tour of the farm?" she inquires.

"It was really wonderful," I respond warmly. "Your property is absolutely stunning. I especially loved meeting the black horse; he's quite majestic," I add with a smile.

Jacob's mom beams with pride. "He's a gem, that one! Have you ever ridden a horse before?" she asks curiously.

I shake my head. "Not much, just a few times as a kid. There was this one birthday party at a horse farm, but that's about it," I explain.

She nods understandingly. "Well, maybe Jacob can take you out tomorrow for a ride," she suggests.

Suddenly, Jacob starts coughing, and I can't help but stifle a laugh inwardly, knowing exactly what he's thinking.

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“Jacob, are you okay?” his mom asks with concern.

He waves her off, taking a sip of water to soothe his throat. “Yeah, sorry, wrong pipe,” he manages to say before shooting me a knowing smirk.

His mom offers some advice. “Take smaller bites, dear,” she advises him, before turning back to me. “So, what do you think?” she prompts.

“I would love for Jacob to take me riding tomorrow,” I reply eagerly, trying my best to conceal my amusement at his reaction.

As we finish our meal and engage in casual conversation, Jacob's mom begins clearing the plates. “Oh, I can help if you'd like,” I offer, eager to contribute.

She squeezes my hand affectionately. “Thank you, dear, but you're a guest. Maybe next time,” she replies, her words filling me with warmth and a sense of belonging.

Suddenly, a cat emerges from seemingly nowhere and brushes against my leg. “Oh, um, hi there, kitty,” I say tentatively. Slowly, I reach down to pet it, glancing at Jacob's mom for approval. “Can I pet it?”.

She smiles reassuringly. “Well, that's up to her, but given her demeanor, she doesn't seem to mind,” she replies. Encouraged, I crouch down and begin stroking the cat's fur. “Wow, she's really friendly,” I remark, noticing the exchange of a meaningful glance between Jacob and his mom.

“What? Am I doing something wrong?” I ask, feeling a bit embarrassed. “I'm sorry, I

didn't grow up with cats."

Jacob shakes his head, his smile warm and genuine. "No, you're doing great. We're just surprised because you're the only girlfriend she's ever taken a liking to. None of my exes ever won her over, no matter how hard they tried," he explains.

I'm taken aback by his revelation, my eyes widening in disbelief. "Wait, really? She didn't like any of them?" I inquire.

Jacob shakes his head again, his expression tender. "Not a single one. But she seems to have taken quite a shine to you," he remarks, his words filling me with a sense of joy and acceptance. Knowing that this perceptive creature has chosen me out of all Jacob's past partners feels like a special kind of validation.

As I bid goodnight to Jacob and his family, I make my way to the spare bedroom. As I settle into bed, a wave of gratitude washes over me. Being here, surrounded by Jacob and his loved ones, is a welcome change from the familiar routines of home in New Jersey. The dynamic is different, but in a refreshing way.

This weekend feels like a brief escape from the troubles waiting for me back home. While I know I'll eventually have to confront those challenges, for now, I choose to relish in the peace and serenity of this moment. It's a chance to recharge and gather strength for whatever lies ahead.

As I drift off to sleep, I'm filled with a sense of optimism, hopeful that this time spent with Jacob and his family will provide me with the resilience I need to face the difficulties awaiting me back home.

Chapter Thirty

Jacob

As the sun streams through my window and the roosters herald the morning with their calls, I awaken with a sense of anticipation. Today feels different, special, because Anya is here. I'm eager to spend the day with her, to make her feel cherished and valued.

Ever since she opened up to me about her past with Paul and the struggles she endured for nearly two years, I've been determined to show her just how important she is. Despite the pain she's experienced and the doubts others may have planted in her mind, I want her to know that she is beautiful and deserving of love in every way imaginable.

Anya has brought a light into my life that I never knew was missing. She has the power to uplift those around her and make everything brighter. I want to show her that her presence has made my life and the lives of those around her infinitely better.

Today, I hope to show her that despite the hardships she's faced, there is hope for a brighter future. And most importantly, I want her to know that she's not alone in this journey. I've had my fair share of relationships in the past, but none have ever made me feel the way she does. She's truly one of a kind, and I'm grateful every day to have her in my life.

With that, I make my way downstairs, making sure not to disturb Anya. She could definitely use some more rest. As I enter the kitchen, I find Marissa chatting with Mom.

"Morning," I greet them, heading towards the kitchen island.

"Morning," they chime back in unison. I reach for a piece of bacon, but Mom playfully swats my hand away. "Jacob, you know the rules," she admonishes me with a smile.

I chuckle. "Yes, ma'am," I reply. Marissa joins in the laughter. "I tried that too and got swatted," she confesses.

Mom shakes her head with a grin. "We need to wait for Anya. If you two start snacking now, there won't be enough food left for breakfast."

Marissa and I exchange a glance, then raise our hands in surrender. "Fair point," I concede. Mom isn't finished though. "If you're looking for something to do, why not lend a hand to your stepdad with the morning chores instead of picking at the breakfast food?" she suggests.

Both Marissa and I head out towards the chicken coop, the morning sunlight casting a golden hue over the farm.

"How's Anya holding up?" Marissa asks, her tone filled with concern.

"As good as she can be, I guess," I reply, feeling a weight on my shoulders.

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Marissa nods understandingly. “Yeah, I get that. And how are you holding up?” she inquires, her gaze probing.

I furrow my brows in confusion. “What do you mean?” I ask, unsure of where she's going with this.

She offers me a sympathetic smile. “Anya has been through quite an ordeal, and you weren't there. If I know you like I do, you're probably beating yourself up for not being able to protect her.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she holds up a hand, silencing me. “From what Mom told me, Anya had a really rough night, and she was alone,” Marissa continues. I nod, feeling a knot form in my stomach. “She was alone, and you were miles away, feeling helpless. But Jacob, her getting hurt was not your fault. You did the only thing you could at the moment and called the authorities. It may have been a misunderstanding, but at the time, you didn't know that.”

I take in her words, feeling a mix of gratitude and guilt swirling inside me. “Yeah, but it gets me thinking, you know? Anya has a past, and I'll let her tell you if she wants, but all I can say is that she has been through a lot of rough times. When I leave for the Army, who's going to protect her? There are going to be times where I won't hear from her for days,” I admit, my voice tinged with worry.

Marissa stops and looks at me, her eyes full of conviction. “From what both you and Mom have told me, I believe Anya is strong. She would not be out here with you if she wasn't. You say that she has a hard past, but yet she is still here. She is strong, and there will be times where she forgets that about herself. But that's why she has

you. Because you are strong too. The universe, fate, or whatever you want to call it, would not have brought you two together if you both weren't strong enough to handle all that life throws at you," she says, her words ringing with truth.

With a newfound sense of reassurance, I nod, grateful for Marissa's wisdom. We resume our walk, the weight on my shoulders feeling a little lighter.

We return from feeding the animals, and I quickly hop in the shower. When I come back downstairs, Anya is sitting at the table, engaged in conversation with Mom and Marissa. Her smile lights up the room when she sees me, and I can't help but feel a surge of warmth.

"Good morning, beautiful," I greet her with a hug.

"Good morning," she replies, blushing slightly.

"Did you sleep okay?" I inquire, concerned for her well-being.

"Yeah, surprisingly it was the best sleep I've had in a while," she answers, pausing for a moment. "I think it's because it's so serene and peaceful here."

"Yeah, it's definitely a different scene compared to New Jersey, especially around this time of year when everyone flocks to the shore for vacation," I remark.

Anya laughs, nodding in agreement. "Oh, you have no idea how crazy it really gets!"

"Oh, I'm aware. I was there for the Fourth of July, remember?" I tease, recalling the chaos of the beach during the holiday.

Anya chuckles, her eyes glimmering with memories of beachside chaos. "Yeah, that's pretty much how it is every weekend at the beach. And since I live so close to it, the

roads are always packed, and the nightlife near the beach is even crazier.”

“I think that’s why I love it here,” she adds thoughtfully. “Here, it feels like the world stops, and you have time to enjoy the simple things of life. Like, don’t get me wrong, I will always be a beach girl, but it’s nice to enjoy some peace and quiet every now and then,” she concludes, her tone carrying a hint of nostalgia.

We all nod in agreement, savoring the quiet moment before diving into our breakfast and continuing our conversation, cherishing the simplicity of the morning.

After breakfast, we all chip in to tidy up. Despite my protests, Anya insists on tackling the dishes, saying it’s the least she could do for making breakfast. As she finishes the last dish, I sneak up behind her and plant a kiss on her cheek.

“So, are you ready to learn how to ride a horse?” I ask, excitement evident in my voice. Anya’s face lights up, and she nods eagerly.

“Absolutely!” she exclaims.

“Okay, as much as I absolutely love seeing you in your shorts—and believe me, I could ogle those beautiful, thick legs all day,” I say with a playful grin, glancing down at her attire, “you’ll need to wear loose fitting pants to avoid saddle chafing. Plus, it will help you keep your legs at the side to give you more control.”

Anya laughs. “Got it! Jeans it is then?”

“Yes, the thicker, the better,” I reply with a grin of my own.

Anya emerged a short while later, clad in blue jeans and a short-sleeve button-down shirt. The jeans fit her loosely, Anya following our recommendations to the letter. Their dark wash, almost navy hue, gave them a subtle sheen under the sunlight, while

the rugged denim material hinted at her readiness for outdoor activities.

Her short-sleeve button-down shirt, in a complementary light blue shade, offered a striking contrast against the dark jeans. Tailored to perfection, it hugged her figure in all the right places, emphasizing her curves and showcasing her smooth arms. Together, the ensemble exuded effortless charm and understated elegance, perfectly complementing Anya's natural beauty.

As she stepped out, she pulls her hair up in a low ponytail, there was a certain ease in her demeanor, a sense of belonging that seemed to blend seamlessly with the rustic charm of the countryside. She looked every bit like she belonged here, amidst the sprawling fields and rustic landscapes, embodying the spirit of adventure and outdoor living.

"Is this okay?" Anya asks, her voice tinged with uncertainty as she adjusts her attire.

I smile warmly and nod, unable to resist teasing her gently. "You look beautiful in anything, Anya," I reassure her, leaning in closer to whisper in her ear. "And you also look beautiful in nothing at all," I add playfully, watching as a faint blush colors her cheeks and she returns my smile coyly.

As we begin to make our way toward the stables, I notice her choice of footwear and pause. "Umm, do you happen to have high boots of some sort?" I inquire, realizing the importance of proper riding attire.

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Anya's playful demeanor resurfaces as she responds, "I have loads of boots back home in New Jersey, in the fall storage bins." Her playful tone brings a grin to my face, and I'm reminded once again of her quick wit and charming personality.

I laugh, "okay let me see if Marissa may have an extra pair of riding boots for you" and I walk back into the house.

A few moments later, I hand Anya the riding boots that my mom had tucked away, relics of past memories and moments. It's one of those instances where I'm grateful for my mom's sentimentality, preserving items that find new purpose. Anya eagerly takes the boots and slips them on, to both our surprise, they fit her perfectly, as if they were meant for her all along.

Finally arriving at the stables, Anya's eyes light up as she stands before the majestic black horse we encountered the night before. "Can I ride him?" she asks, her excitement palpable. I can't help but smile at her enthusiasm, but I gently shake my head. "No, he's not ideal for beginners; he tends to have a mind of his own," I explain. Her disappointment flickers briefly across her face, but she quickly recovers, understanding my reasoning.

Leading her over to a more seasoned horse, one known for its gentle nature and patience with novice riders, I assure her that this horse will be perfect for her first riding experience.

I secure the horse, ensuring he remains calm as Anya approaches. Handing her a brush, I explain, "Now we need to brush him first, that way he gets to know you, it keeps the area where the saddle will be clean so he is comfortable and nothing is

stuck there pushing into him, and besides, he loves being pampered." Demonstrating the proper technique, I watch as Anya quickly picks up the routine. Her soft voice and gentle touch as she talks to the horse are endearing, like watching a nurturing mother with her child.

After grooming the horse, I prepare him for the saddle. Once everything is in place, I help Anya onto the saddle, setting up the step stool for her. As she settles into the saddle, she looks remarkably comfortable, as though she's been riding horses her whole life. The smile on her face as she pets the horse fills me with so much joy. She looks up at me smiling from ear to ear and it is the most adorable sight to see.

After unlocking the lines holding the horse, I use the lead to guide him out to one of the paddocks. Taking it slow, I lead the horse in a gentle walk, letting Anya get used to the feeling of being in the saddle. She smiles and then asks, "Do you think I could do this without you leading?" I nod and detach the lead rope. Watching her take control, Anya starts walking the horse in circles, looking like she's having a blast.

"Hey, do you think I'm ready to go faster?" she eagerly asks. I chuckle at her enthusiasm. Normally, I'd hesitate, but with this horse, I nod. "Sure, we can give him a trot," I agree, explaining how to cue the horse and maintain control with the reins. As the horse picks up speed, I shout out instructions on how to steady her bouncing and how to properly post on a trot, explaining how its most comfortable for the horse. Anya laughs with each bounce, and after a few minutes, she wants to return to a walk. Over the next hour or so, I help her transition between a slow walk and a trot, until she's ready to call it a day.

Exhausted but exhilarated, we lead the horse back to the stables. I take off the saddle, and then I hand Anya a brush, letting her pamper the horse. Throughout it all, she's grinning from ear to ear. After putting the horse back in his stall, we head back to the house.

“Thanks for teaching me, I had such a blast, even though my butt and thighs are killing me,” Anya says with a chuckle.

Pulling her close, I offer, “I’ll give you a massage if you want.” I wink, and she playfully pushes me. We both laugh as we walk inside the house.

Chapter Thirty-One

Anya

After spending the afternoon riding a horse in the summer heat, I’m utterly exhausted. But it was worth every moment! Feeling the powerful movement of the horse beneath me and learning to control him was absolutely exhilarating. I tell Jacob that I need to shower and take a nap. My body feels sore from the ride, so the heat from the shower would be a welcome relief. Jacob mentions that it’s because my body isn’t used to horseback riding.

Once I finish my shower, I collapse into bed and sleep overtakes me effortlessly. When I wake up, it’s already nighttime. I wonder how long I’ve been asleep as I make my way out of the room. The house is quiet, and I head to the kitchen where I find the table set with lit candles and plates arranged neatly. Jacob is at the stove, focused on cooking.

Quietly, I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his back. Startled, he jolts, accidentally splattering sauce on my face. His eyes widen in panic as he hurriedly wipes my face with his sleeve. But I can’t help but burst into laughter, and his expression shifts from concern to relief as he sees me giggling.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” I manage to say between laughs.

He leans down and kisses my head, “No worries, I just got worried you got hurt,” he

says softly. I shake my head, "I'm okay," I reply, smiling up at him, then lean forward to catch a glimpse of the food he's preparing. "That smells good," I comment, then glance around. "Where is everyone?" I ask.

"They went out to eat, so I could make you dinner," he replies.

I smirk. "Mmm, not only is he good-looking and great with horses, but he can cook too?" I tease. He gives me a knowing look. "Oh, there is so much more that I am good at," he says, his voice dropping low, filled with desire.

I shoot him a sly smirk, my voice dripping with mischief. "Oh really?" I tease, but before I can say another word, he grabs me and pulls me in close. His breath tickles my ear as he whispers, "Just wait until I have you at my mercy. I'll make you see stars." The glint of desire in his eyes sends shivers down my spine.

He chuckles, putting a bit of space between us as he returns to the stove. "Ugh, you're such a tease!" I playfully retort. He laughs and resumes cooking. "The food is almost ready," he announces.

"I can't believe you did all this for me," I express, a sense of disbelief and awe washing over me. Jacob consistently shows me that he's unlike anyone I've ever known. It's not a complaint, just an adjustment to something so different from what I'm used to. It all feels surreal and unfamiliar.

He strides over, carrying the pot and setting it down on the table. "You've endured hardships and trauma no woman should have to bear," he begins, his voice filled with sincerity, "You're more than worthy of a small meal cooked by the man who adores you and longs for your happiness". I'm immediately overwhelmed; his words hit deep and fills my heart with joy. How did I get so lucky to have a man like this in my life, let alone love me?

We both sit down and eat, Jacob sharing stories from his childhood about growing up surrounded by animals. He recounts a particular incident when he was playing in a field, banging a bucket as if he were in a battle. Suddenly, a horse mistook the sound for a feeding call and charged towards him, accidentally trampling him. Miraculously, he emerged without a scratch. My eyes widen at the tale. "Oh my god! How did your mom react?" I ask in disbelief. "At first, she was furious with the horse," Jacob explains, "but then she scolded me for playing in the horse paddock with a food bucket. It wasn't the horse's fault, he was just responding to instinct".

"How old were you at the time?" I ask. Jacob pauses, then replies, "I think I was maybe 9 or 10." I shake my head, chuckling. "If you want to talk about stupid decisions we made as kids," I begin, "I was maybe 8 or 9, riding our bikes with my mom at the boardwalk. It was the first time I was on a two-wheeler, and there was this big hill." Jacob smiles knowingly, sensing where the story is headed. "Feeling confident and adventurous, I saw the hill and decided to go for it," I continue. "But the moment I started speeding down, I regretted it. At the end of the hill was a busy main road, and I was going so fast that I was afraid to hit the brakes, fearing I'd be thrown off. Plus, I wasn't wearing a helmet." I laugh as I recount the memory. "Miraculously, I veered across the road toward a parking lot and finally stopped, my whole body shaking." Jacob laughs. "Oh, I bet your mom wasn't too happy with you then," he remarks. I join in his laughter. "Oh, hell no! She was super pissed and started yelling. Then she pinched me so hard I bruised," I explain. "But she didn't mean it; she was just scared, and her emotions got the best of her".

We continue swapping stories throughout dinner, then Jacob takes our plates, washes them, and grabs a blanket. He takes my hand, and we walk outside. Then he leans in, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Do you trust me?" he asks. Nervously, I smile and reply, "Yes." Suddenly, he blindfolds me. "Wait, what are you doing?" I ask, feeling a mix of nervousness and excitement. "It's a surprise," he says with a grin.

"Where are we going?" I ask curiously as we walk. He just smiles and pulls me

closer, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. "You'll see," he replies. After a few minutes, we stop. "Okay, keep your eyes closed," he says. I nod, and he removes the blindfold. "Okay, open them," he says.

When I open my eyes, I'm faced with an open field and a clear night sky, with stars that completely surround us. As I stand there, enveloped in the vastness of the open field and the twinkling expanse of the night sky, a profound sense of wonder washes over me, like waves lapping at the shores of my consciousness. The stars above seem to pulse with a silent energy, each one a beacon of light in the darkness, inviting me to lose myself in their celestial dance. I feel a sense of awe and reverence, as if I am witnessing something sacred and ancient, something that transcends the boundaries of time and space.

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In this moment, I am acutely aware of my own smallness, a tiny speck in the grand tapestry of the cosmos. Yet, paradoxically, I also feel connected to something infinitely larger than myself, as if the very fabric of the universe is woven into the fabric of my being. It's a humbling realization, one that fills me with a sense of gratitude and humility.

The constellations above seem to come alive, their familiar shapes taking on new meaning and significance in the light of the moon. I find myself tracing the lines of Orion, the Hunter, and the Seven Sisters, each one a story written in the stars, a reminder of the myths and legends that have shaped our collective imagination for millennia.

But it's not just the constellations that captivate me. It's the spaces in between, the vast expanses of darkness punctuated by pinpricks of light, the gaseous clouds swirling and dancing in the cosmic ballet. I can't help but marvel at the sheer beauty and complexity of it all, feeling simultaneously insignificant and infinitely precious.

The air is cool and crisp, carrying with it the scent of earth and grass. A gentle breeze rustles the leaves of nearby trees, adding to the sense of magic and mystery that permeates the night. I close my eyes and let myself be carried away by the symphony of nature, the chirping of crickets, the hooting of owls, the distant call of a lone coyote.

In this moment, I am not just a spectator, but an active participant in the dance of the cosmos. I feel as if I am being drawn into the very heart of the universe, my soul reaching out to touch the stars. It's a feeling of pure, unadulterated bliss, a sense of being fully alive in the presence of something greater than myself. And as I stand

there, bathed in the light of a million stars, I know that I am exactly where I'm meant to be. "Oh my god, this is so beautiful and surreal!" I exclaim in admiration. "I feel like I'm standing inside a planetarium!" I exclaim.

As I spin in a full circle, completely engrossed in my surroundings, I feel a sense of pure exhilaration coursing through my veins. The night sky above me seems to stretch out endlessly, an infinite canvas painted with a million shimmering stars. I stop and look at Jacob, his silhouette illuminated by the soft glow of moonlight. Even in the stillness of the night, I can see the pride shining in his eyes.

"So I did good?" he asks earnestly, his voice filled with anticipation. I can't help but smile at his genuine concern for my happiness. "You did amazing!" I reply, my voice filled with admiration. In that moment, wrapped in his warm embrace, I feel a sense of gratitude wash over me.

Jacob lays out a blanket and we sit side by side, gazing up at the vast expanse of the night sky. The air is cool and refreshing, carrying with it the scent of grass and earth. I snuggle closer to him, resting my head against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

"Thank you for this," I whisper, my voice barely above a whisper. His arm tightens around me, pulling me closer to him, as if to reassure me that he'll always be there. As I straddle him, a playful smirk tugs at the corners of his lips. "Well, this position seems pleasantly familiar," he remarks, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Ignoring his teasing, I lean in to kiss him, my heart pounding with emotion.

Breaking the kiss, I find the courage to speak the words I've been holding inside. "I've fallen for you, Jacob," I confess, my voice soft but filled with sincerity. "You've made me feel so special, loved, and safe," I continue, my eyes locking with his, baring my soul in that vulnerable moment.

His touch is gentle as he cups my face, his gaze tender yet intense. Without a word, he lowers my head toward his, sealing our confession with a passionate kiss that speaks volumes of the love we share.

As our lips meet, a fire ignites within us, fueled by the passion and emotion that has grown between us. His hands roam over my back, his fingers tracing patterns on my skin, as his lips explore every inch of mine.

I can feel his heart pounding against my chest, matched by the rapid beat of my own. My hands explore the muscles of his back, feeling the tension slowly release as we continue to kiss. His tongue dances with mine, a perfect harmony in our embrace. It's as if we've been connected since the beginning of time, destined to find each other and share this moment.

I could feel his breath on my skin as his lips traced a path down my neck, his hands sliding up my sides, his fingers lightly, yet firmly, gripping my waist. His body pressed against mine, and I knew he was just as overwhelmed with emotion as I was. As our lips met once more, we were lost in the moment, time seemed to stand still as our tongues danced and mingled.

Jacob's hands moved with a gentle yet assertive touch, undoing the buttons of my shirt, each movement slow and deliberate. He carefully slid it off my shoulders and let it fall to the ground, leaving me exposed to his gaze. His eyes lingered on my skin, a mixture of desire and admiration. He traced his fingers down my chest, making my heart beat faster and my breath catch in my throat.

As our passion reaches a fever pitch, Jacob breaks the kiss, his eyes filled with love and desire. "I've felt this way about you from the moment I saw you, Anya," he whispers, his voice raw and filled with emotion. "I never thought I'd find someone who could make me feel this way, but you did."

He brings his hands to my face, his thumbs gently wiping away a tear that had escaped my eye. "My beautiful, amazing, one-of-a-kind Anya. I can't imagine my life without you."

His lips find mine once again, and the passion between us is undeniable. As our bodies tremble with desire, we lay down on the soft grass, the cool night air brushing across our skin. The stars above twinkle like diamonds, casting a romantic glow on our bodies.

Jacob releases my lips and slowly trails his hands down my body, his fingers tracing gentle patterns on my skin. I shiver in anticipation, my heart pounding in my chest. He whispers sweet nothings in my ear, his breath warm and passionate, sending shivers down my spine.

His hands reach my waist, and with a gentle motion, he lifts me up, cradling me in his strong arms. Jacob gently lays me down on the blanket, his eyes never leaving mine. As he leans in to kiss me once more, I run my fingers through his hair, feeling the silky strands slip through my fingers. He kisses me deeply, our tongues dancing together in an intimate ballet.

I can feel his erection pressed against my thigh, and a wave of desire courses through me. I reach down and unfasten his belt, then unbutton his pants, sliding them off his hips. As he steps out of them, I take in his naked body, and I'm taken aback by its perfection. Every muscle is defined, every line sculpted by the sun and the work he does with the horses. His skin is golden from days spent outdoors, and his eyes are filled with a desire that matches mine.

As I take him in, I realize that this moment is more than just about the physical connection between us. It's about the trust, the love, and the deep bond we've formed over the course of our relationship. It's about the way he makes me feel, safe and cherished, and the way I make him feel, alive and wanted.

With a confident smile, I reach out and take him in my hand, guiding him towards me. He doesn't resist, and instead, he moves closer, his body pressed against mine. As he enters me, I gasp slightly, the sensation both unique and familiar. He groans softly, his hands tightening on my waist as he begins to thrust, setting a rhythm that matches the beating of my own heart.

His lips find mine again, and our tongues dance together with a passion that is both all-consuming and exhilarating. The stars above seem to twinkle brighter, their light casting a romantic glow over our bodies.

As the night air cools around us, we continue our lovemaking, our connection growing stronger with each passing moment. Jacob's eyes never leave mine, and I can see the love and desire in them, matching the feelings within my own heart.

We continue to explore each other, our bodies moving in perfect harmony. The sensation of Jacob's erection inside me is both pleasurable and overwhelming, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. I can feel his heart pounding in sync with mine, our bodies locked together as one.

As we reach the peak of our passion, I feel Jacob's body tense, and then release, his body shuddering as he lets out a low groan. I feel him deep inside me, and a wave of warmth spreads through me, signaling that we've completed this intimate act.

We lay there for a moment, basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking. My heart is pounding, my breathing still heavy from the physical exertion. I can feel Jacob's chest rising and falling with each breath, the rhythm of our hearts synchronized.

He smiles softly, his eyes filled with love and tenderness. "I've never felt this way about anyone before, Anya," he whispers, his voice barely above a whisper. "You've changed me, made me see that there's so much more to life."

I smile back at him, feeling the same way he does. "And you've changed me too, Jacob. You've shown me that love is worth fighting for, that trust is the foundation of any relationship, and that even the simplest moments can be the most powerful. I'm grateful to have found you, and I can't imagine my life without you."

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As the night sky slowly fades to dawn, we lay in each other's arms, content and at peace. Our bodies are still connected, and as we listen to the birds chirping and the leaves rustling in the gentle breeze, we know that we've just experienced something truly special.

For the first time in a long while, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. With Jacob by my side, I know that anything is possible. We'll face whatever comes our way, hand in hand, and conquer it together.

And as the sun rises, illuminating our faces with its warm, golden light, I know that this is just the beginning of our journey.

Chapter Thirty-Two

???

My eyes burn with rage and primal desire as I watch her writhing body beneath her boyfriend's thrusts. She's supposed to be mine, but I can only stand and watch as he makes her moan with pleasure. The sight of Anya, naked and vulnerable, stirs a longing in me that I thought had died long ago. I crouch behind a tree, my fingers hastily undoing my pants as I whip out my aching cock. My mind screams at me to stop, to leave them be, but I can't resist the temptation any longer. As she reaches the peak of ecstasy, I explode with a primal grunt, my seed mingling with the dirt beneath me. But even as I put my spent cock away, my mind is consumed with thoughts of claiming what is rightfully mine.

From the shadows, I watch them—Anya and her boyfriend, Jacob she calls

him—lying together under the stars, their closeness igniting a fire of envy and rage within me. Anya's laughter drifts on the breeze, a melody that should have been mine to elicit. Jacob, with his arm wrapped around her, offers her a sense of security and comfort that I've longed to provide. They seem oblivious to my presence, lost in their own world of whispered secrets and shared dreams. But they cannot escape the truth: Anya belongs to me!

As I stand there, hidden from their view, I feel the weight of betrayal settle like a stone in my chest. How dare Jacob lay claim to her affections, to offer her the love and security that should rightfully be mine? She should be with me, she belongs with me, where I could hold her and be the one she turns to. But instead, she lies in his arms, her laughter mingling with his, her smile reserved for him alone.

With every passing moment, my grip tightens, my knuckles turning white with fury. I can't bear to see her with him. The jealousy burns hot within me, consuming all reason and rational thought. I know what I must do. I must reclaim what is rightfully mine, no matter the cost.

As I watch them, my resolve strengthens, fueled by a dark determination to win her back. She may be with him now, but she will soon realize that she belongs to me.

I will see you soon Anya!