



Matched with Her Runaway Groom

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Category: Romance

Description: A cruise should've been their honeymoon.

Rachelle Stewart has spent the last year working through her Breakup Bucket list, something her roommates helped her create to get over her ex-fiancé, Landon Higgins. The cruise she won is going to be the crowning achievement of her list, but she can't seem to get rid of Landon when he shows up as a passenger. Luck is on Landon's side when he finds out he'll get uninterrupted time with his ex-fiance. He ruined things a year ago and getting her back is a long shot. But seeing the changes in her gives him the sliver of hope that they might forgive and forget. As the truth is revealed, will she trust him after all they've gone through apart? Or will they leave the ship and go their separate ways?

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CHAPTER1

Rachelle

What was I thinking?

I stare at the poster on the wall of the paintball center lobby. It features a weekend warrior dressed in what looks like full paintball gear says, “Motivation is simple. Eliminate those who are not motivated.”

That’s my cue to leave.

“Where are you going?” Kenzie, one of my housemates, asks. She’s had a smile on her face since we left the house this morning.

“I’m just going to run around the block to Dunkin’ and get a coffee, maybe a few dozen donuts. You know, do my part for the cause.”

“Rachelle, we came here for you.”

This is true. Paintballing is an activity that I thought was fun in theory, back when Kenzie mentioned it six months ago. After my sister’s almost wedding, I invited a few people to move into my house so I wouldn’t be so lonely. We swapped relationship stories one night and started the Breakup Bucket List to help me get over my ex-fiancé. Kenzie, Tiffany, Evie, and Millie all contributed ideas for the list.

Sure, it’s been nearly a year since my ex-fiancé, the guy I’d been with for over six

years and who was my safe space for everything, broke up with me. So while many people thought I should be back out looking for a new guy a month later, it's taken me a lot longer to move on.

I turn to her. "Maybe we can just call it good. I mean, I walked into this place." Which from the look of everyone else in the waiting room, I'm not the target audience, seeing as how some guy lets out a shout every couple minutes, I assume to psych himself up for the battlefield.

Kenzie shakes her head. "Not a chance."

"How is this supposed to help me get over a breakup?" My voice is a touch whiny, but I'm hoping she'll get sick of it and let me leave.

"Because it's nice to go through and shoot things."

"I've shot plenty of things in the past year. Some plates, pieces of wood."

With a look of frustration, Kenzie pinches her nose and takes in a deep breath. "Shooting a nail gun into wood to create things is cool, Rachelle, but it doesn't elicit the right kind of adrenaline. And shooting the set of plates you got for your wedding in the backyard doesn't count. Work with me here. I'm trying to help you."

She leans over and motions toward the jumpsuit the teenager behind the desk gave me.

Resigned to my fate, I decide to put it on. I struggle to get the suit up and over my butt. Maybe I should've asked for a size bigger.

"Is it supposed to be this tight?" I ask, finally getting the fabric up around my shoulders. I might not be able to breathe by the time this excursion is over, but I

haven't quit anything else on the Breakup Bucket List. I might as well not start now.

"Yes, but then you can run and dodge easier. This is going to be so much fun," Kenzie says next to me, looking like she's a kid waiting for an amusement park ride.

I give her a fake smile and pull my hair back. Do I tuck it under my helmet so I don't get paint all over it? It's not hair washing day and I'll probably just pass out once we get back to the house.

"Are you ready for the cruise?" Kenzie asks. She's been gone on a work trip and this is the first time we've caught up in a couple weeks.

She ties her hair into a simple braid and then tries on the helmet. I take my hair out again and copy her.

I nod, my smile genuine for the first time since we arrived here. "Almost. I need to do some laundry, but I've got my request in for the days off."

"How did that go?" Kenzie bends over to tie the boots she's brought. I'm hoping tennis shoes will do the trick for me.

I sit down to rest for a minute, feeling the sweat in my armpits after getting dressed. What will I look like by the end of this?

"I'm still waiting to hear back. But even if I don't get the go ahead, I'm not coming in."

"For sure. You put a ton of effort into that company and your boss doesn't even appreciate you for it."

That's the truth. The guy is always trying to one-up me.

“Yeah, so do you. I can’t believe how much you do for your boss.”

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Kenzie nods, holding up the gun. “That’s the best part about this activity. I can pretend my opponents are anyone I want.”

I laugh at that. “That’s a good idea.” And then I remember what it is we’re doing and the excitement fades. “Tiffany said there’s going to be another giveaway at the Love, Austen company. You should enter. Maybe the magic of our house will help you win it.” My cousin, Tiffany, works as the social media manager for the matchmaking company and had a bunch of us sign up for the company’s app around the time of my sister’s almost wedding six months ago. I got a call from Meg, the owner of the company, three months ago that I’d won a cruise, and it couldn’t have come at a better time.

Kenzie nods. “I signed up before leaving Hillary’s runaway wedding, so I doubt I’ll win anything now. I still can’t believe she took off. Poor Roy. I wonder if he’d be up for me dating him.” She chuckles and I slug her in the arm.

“I thought you were avoiding the combination of men and dating,” I say, double-knotting my shoes. After a few seconds of thinking about my sister, I ask, “You haven’t heard from Hillary since?”

“No, I didn’t even get to see her the day of the wedding. Isn’t that crazy? I was her maid of honor and because I showed up a little late, she stopped talking to me.” Kenzie stands. “All right. That’s enough stalling. Let’s get out there.”

I close my eyes, a sinking feeling taking over. I almost had her distracted enough to leave.

But I have to channel my inner gladiator, or so another poster on the wall says. I'm not sure there's a gladiator in me, more like a sloth who would be okay eating and sleeping through this.

Back when we made the Breakup Bucket List, I'd been excited to do all the things to forget my ex-fiancé, Landon. Now I'm questioning why I'm still going through with this. I haven't seen or heard from the guy in nearly a year. After six years of talking multiple times a day, it's still hard to get used to the silence.

I pick up the mask the teenage boy gave me when we checked in.

"You look like you're ready to kill me," Kenzie says, taking a step back. Her eyebrows raise and she's got her hands out in front of her, as if I'm going to jump out and start punching her. Again, I'm not trying to channel Mulan here.

"I need to hype myself up for this, like that guy," I say, casually pointing to the growling guy in the corner who's now doing some kind of hop in the air. "Then again, I'd be fine to skip this and head out to get a shake. Preferably strawberry."

Kenzie shakes her head. "No way am I going to let you out of this. It's an activity to get aggression flowing."

"Aggression? You make me sound like a feral cat."

She laughs and I smile at the sound. It's funny to think how close I've gotten to my sister's best friend in the past few months. But each of my roommates have been lifelines as I've begun healing from the betrayal of being dumped a month before my wedding.

"It will be fun. And you only have a few more things to cross off before your cruise."

I breathe out, smiling at that thought. My parents have been on countless cruises and vacations in my lifetime, usually leaving me and Hillary with a nanny or family while they went.

Landon and I had talked about going on a cruise together once we were married. So naturally, going on one without him is the ultimate ending to the list, and will hopefully cause me to be a transformed butterfly, as my other housemate, Evie, likes to say.

“I can’t wait for that. It’s the final note to my favorite song.”

“And which Kelly Clarkson song would that be?” Kenzie asks, staring at me with a small grin.

“I’m a fan of other artists, but Kelly’s songs have a way of diving into my soul.”

“Okay, Shakespeare, enough stalling. Let’s go.”

I slip the mask on top of my head, not pulling it over my face just yet. My mind is lost in the opportunities that await me in just a few days on the cruise. I’ve folded and marked up the brochure I got several weeks ago, to the point I can barely read some of the words.

I’ll be getting a massage, heading out on a ziplining trip—one of my bucket list items—and whatever else strikes that I feel like trying. Maybe Tiffany, who is coming with me, will allow us to relax some too. Because I need this vacation to destress from my job.

Since getting married to Drew two months ago, I feel like she’s been in the black hole of marriage. I hardly see her since she moved out of the house and into a cute little place on the outskirts of the city. A girl’s week away is just what I need to finalize

my breakup list and move on with my life. Officially.

I've basically gone through the stages of grief at this point. I'm on the level of acceptance that a relationship might not be in the cards for me. Glancing at another man makes me feel like I'm supposed to take a test on a subject from back in high school when I haven't studied in a year. I'll probably come back from the trip still single.

Nothing wrong with that.

Kenzie walks out to the open area, a fenced section with several obstacles throughout. Instead of following, I pause at the door, hoping a longer delay will work in my favor to not actually shoot paintballs. If I cross the threshold, I've committed to this and I'm not there.

"What if we go do something more active outside of this field?" I ask, slightly hoping she'll go for it. "I'll even try rock-climbing."

"Really?" Kenzie turns to me. "You'd rather scale up fifty feet than play hide-and-seek with paintballs?"

I can only see her expressive eyes through the mask but that, plus her words, force a laugh out of me. "Okay, maybe not fifty feet. What about a nice lunch where we talk about our feelings?"

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“Ew, no,” she says, squinting against the bright sunlight as she looks back at me. “If you want to talk about feelings, go talk to Evie.”

Evie is one of my favorite people. She’s so sensitive and helped me get through Hillary’s wedding, since Tiffany was busy making goo-goo eyes at Drew the whole time. I met her at one of the breakfasts and she has this way of making me feel like I’m the most important person. She’s listened to hours of me trying to figure out what to do with my life, from my lame job to what my next hobby should be.

Okay, but seriously. I am ready to do just about anything to get out of this. I definitely don’t have the stamina to make it between each of those padded cones.

How do I sprain my ankle on purpose? I played volleyball in high school and rolled my ankle several times when coming down from a block. But there isn’t a whole lot I can use here to make it look like I got hurt by accident.

“You’ll be fine. Who knows? You might even like it,” Kenzie says, turning to survey the field.

“I doubt it.”

She lifts her gun up as if she’s ready to take on the world and heads out to where a group of paintballers wait. I pause a full minute before I join her, hoping that by some miracle I’ll be able to convince her with my stubbornness that we don’t need to be here.

I’ve grown up a lot since Landon disappeared, but I definitely don’t need to prove it

by shooting paintballs through the air. Or at people.

“Come on, Rachelle. He needs a count of the players.”

I drag my feet on my way out to meet them, and blow out a big deep breath. Kenzie doesn't even turn to look at me. Of course, she's ogling the guy in front of us. She'd check out the mascot of the Boston Breeze if she was close enough.

“All right team,” the young guy says, “let's go over some ground rules.” He starts talking, but all I can think about is a way out of this. When I finally tune back in, I've missed all the important information.

“We're going to have to add you ladies to this team, if that's all right with you?” The guy is pointing to us and I turn to see the other guys dressed for the playing field. The one who looks to be the leader glances at us, his eyes dismissing me as he gives me an up and down glance. But when he sees Kenzie's stance, he nods, giving her the smile I can only ever see as Joey from Friends. I half expect him to say, in a Jersey accent, “How you doin'?”

“Awesome,” the instructor says. “The team you're going against is already on the other side of the field. Have fun, guys, and make sure you keep your masks on at all times.”

“Are you ready for this?” Kenzie asks. I can see the excitement in her eyes.

“No, Kenzie,” I say. She either ignores me or doesn't hear as she falls in with the group making plans for how they're going to conquer the other team. I contemplate sneaking out to see if they have a snack bar or something I can do besides this.

“Rachelle,” Kenzie says, waving me over. “You'll be fine. If anything, you can help us by searching the playing field and warning us of anyone breaching the sides.”

Breaching the sides? This is more intense than I signed up for.

With a slow nod, I say, "I can do that."

They all put their hands into the middle getting ready to chant something and I remember my phone.

"I need a pic, Kenzie."

"Hurry up. They're going to start."

I dig the phone out of my cleavage and hand it to her. She scrunches her nose and says, "You're not going to wipe it off or anything?"

"You said we have to hurry. Just take it so I can post it later." I pose, even though my face isn't visible. "Hashtag BreakupBucketList," I say. It's all evidence that things are being crossed off my list. Tiffany created a Quickstagram account just for the list, and a crazy amount of people are following my journey. I'm not influencer status, but at least I can look back and see how far I've come in pictures.

After I tuck the phone away, I slide down behind one of the cones, wishing I could somehow rewind time and go back to non-negotiate this whole episode.

From somewhere a whistle blows and my adrenaline spikes to the point that I feel like I'm back in gym class in junior high and the P.E. teachers just declared we're running the mile. I hated those days.

"Rachelle, do you see anything?"

I poke my head out only to see a paintball flying in my direction. I'm not quite sure how it happens, but I manage to pull my head back in while the paintball sails past,

hitting another soft cone behind me.

“Nope,” I call out. I shift to the other side of a cone and see one of the other team members running up to a large square barricade. I turn back to Kenzie.

“There’s someone behind the square one.”

“Thanks. Take a couple of shots so I can move.” She holds up the paintball gun and points with her fingers to the trigger. “All you have to do is wiggle your first two fingers against the trigger to shoot several shots in a row.”

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I might as well try to help or Kenzie won't let me forget about it. I peek out just barely to see one of the opponents taking aim near Kenzie's cone. With one last blow of breath, I do my best to aim and fire, hitting the cone instead of the player. But seeing as how the paintball lands only a couple feet wide of him, I'd say it's a pretty good shot.

My confidence rises and I finally stand up, taking quick peeks around the corner of the obstacle. None of my teammates are near me and I figure I might as well make my way toward the flag on the other end of the field. I heard someone say that once the opposing team retrieves it, the game is done.

At this point, it's my only hope.

I rush to get to the other cone, breathing a sigh of relief as I arrive without being blasted with a paintball. I try to slow my breathing enough to listen. They're probably on the far side of the field. I make a break for the large rectangular obstacle where I saw someone hiding earlier.

"I'm out," I hear Kenzie say.

What? How in the world did she get out before I did? And when I look back three of my teammates are standing next to her on the sidelines. It's a good thing we're not playing for a prize because we are going home with nothing.

I turn to see what the sound is coming from behind me and I'm suddenly hurtling forward, tripping over my own foot. My nose cracks against the helmet as the protective equipment smacks into the ground.

And then three balls of paint smack me in the lower back.

Nothing like hitting a girl when she's down.

Then again, maybe this is a good thing. Then I don't have to worry about continuing this ridiculous charade. Because the rest of the teams seem to have been born and bred for this kind of thing, whereas I would rather be curled up reading a book than lying on this scratchy ground.

"Okay," someone says from behind me, "let's set it up again."

Oh no. No, no, no. This can't be happening to me right now. Kenzie comes over and I grab her upper arm.

"We lost, right?" I try not to laugh at the sound of that remark. People don't usually want to lose. Just another reason I'm not normal.

"Right, but it's best of three," Kenzie says.

"We didn't put a specific number of games on the list. I think one is plenty."

"Rachelle, you'll be fine. Suck it up, buttercup." Kenzie checks the paintballs in her gun and walks back to the starting line.

I follow her and try to find something to be grateful for about this day. It's a good thing Kenzie didn't add too many items to my BBL. Yep, definitely grateful the number of extreme sports is low.

My teammates rush to the first obstacle and just as I'm getting ready to convince my legs that they need to move for cover, a blue paint bullet splatters near my collarbone. Well, I guess that gets me out of one more game.

I walk over to the sideline and wait, watching as the two teams dart back-and-forth amongst the obstacles. Someone on the other team gets out, a petite woman who saunters over to stand a few feet away. She begins talking through her mask and I'm looking for escape routes. Dang, the place is sealed except for the one exit we came through earlier.

"Isn't this so fun? It's like the best way to bond with your co-workers ever."

"Yeah." It's all I can say.

"Are you here on an office bonding mission as well?" she asks, using her hands. I have to dodge out of the way a couple times because she keeps waving the gun. I may not know a whole lot about gun safety, but I have noticed that the trigger on a paintball gun is rather sensitive.

And the paintballs are painful. I rub the spot near my collarbone and shake my head.

"No, I'm just here with my friend."

"Oh, well, my team leader is likethehottest guy ever. And he is so fast and athletic. Such a turn on!"

I get flashes of high school all over again. "I take it there's no rule against dating coworkers at your company?" I say, casually. She shakes her head which reveals the long perfectly curled hair trailing down her back. Wisps of mine are tickling my neck, making it difficult to stop itching.

"No, it kind of helps that my dad is, like, the main boss over the Boston branch of our company and he's pretty lenient with that. I mean, he does want his daughter to get married at some point, right?" She pauses a moment and points. "Oh, look! There he is."

The guy is lean but as he holds his gun at his side, his arms are fairly well defined. I mean, if I was interested in guys and their muscles. As it stands now, I am only mildly warming up to the idea of ever talking to a guy again.

I'm intrigued by something I see in the man she pointed out. The movements seem oddly familiar and a part of me is hoping that the conclusions I'm making are incorrect. He shoots the last member of my team and a cheer rings out with the opposing squad. The woman who's been chatting next to me runs over to give him a monkey-like hug, the kind where all the limbs are grasping tightly around him.

Kenzie walks over, pulling her mask up, and gives me a small smile. "Too bad, Rachelle. Now you get your wish," she says. "That one guy is pretty phenomenal." I fall into line as the rest of my team walks toward the winners, congratulating each other.

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The guy pulls off his helmet and I'm pretty sure everything around me freezes. Those brown eyes and light brown hair cause my stomach to twist. My instincts were right about the mysterious figure. I pull off my helmet and aim for him, using my fingers to toggle the trigger.

Three orange paintballs hit him in the chest. His team starts yelling but I wait for him to glance up and see me before I turn around and walk out of there.

My brain is completely void of any words and I'm pretty sure my hands are shaking now. All I can think of is getting out of this suit and into my car. Kenzie runs up alongside me, the most surprised look I've ever seen on her face.

"Who? What? What was that?"

We make it into the small dressing/lobby area and I don't say anything, focusing on staying calm and taking off the binding suit.

"I can't believe you hit someone that close while his mask was off. Do you know him?"

"Oh yeah," I say, not even turning to look at her. "He's my ex-fiancé."

CHAPTER2

Landon

Stunned doesn't even describe what I'm feeling right now. I haven't seen Rachelle in

356 days, and looking at my watch, about 14 hours. I know it's ridiculous to know something that well, but she's the one I'd planned to spend the rest of my life with. Things just didn't turn out how they should've. And it's all my fault.

My brain doesn't focus on the conversation in the small room where we're undressing. I can hear the tone of Savannah's voice chattering up a storm near me, but my mind keeps playing the entire scene on loop.

That was not how I expected to see Rachelle again. She was never into anything extreme, but maybe I was too protective.

Believe me, I've planned out several scenarios, but being shot with a paintball gun at close range is not one of them.

I can still feel the sting of the paintballs hitting my chest, but at least I can finally breathe again. Not just from being hit but because of the shooter.

"Thanks for coming, guys. And thanks for defending me when, uh—"

"When the crazy lady shot you?" Ron asks, swiping at the sweat beading near his hairline.

"Yeah," I say. "I've got to head out, but I'll see you all tomorrow at the office. Drive safely."

Not the best wrap-up for a bunch of real estate agents at a team bonding event, but my brain can't concentrate at the moment.

I saw Rachelle. She was here. And she looks amazing. Ninety-five percent of me is grateful that she's not still moping about our breakup, but there's that five percent of ego that takes a hit.

But she deserves better than what I can give her.

I grab my keys and make my way out of the building.

“Landon, wait up!” I let out a soft groan. Savannah is the last person I want to talk to right now. “Do you think you can give me a ride home? My ride won’t make it until tonight, and I’d rather not be here all afternoon.”

I hesitate. I’m not in the best state to be driving someone home. My brain clicks into overdrive, searching for a valid reason to avoid company on the ride home. “I’m really sorry, Savannah. I promised my sister I’d fix something at her apartment and if I don’t get over there right now, my name is Mud.”

She blinks a few times. “Mud? Your name is Landon.” She smiles at me with bright white teeth.

The doors to the paint balling center open and out walk a few of the guys from the team. “You could ask Ron if he can give you a ride.” Without waiting for her to respond, I yell out, “Ron, can you give Savannah a ride home?”

The guy doesn’t smile often, but he’s ear to ear grinning at my suggestion. “Of course. I’m just parked over here.”

Savannah gives me a terrified look and says, “Okay, um, thanks.”

I’ve had my suspicions for a couple weeks, but this confirms Ron has a crush on her.

Savannah takes a few steps away and then stops to ask, “So, who was that girl?”

“What girl?” I say, unlocking my car.

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“Really, Landon? The one who shot you point-blank in the chest. Is she an ex-girlfriend or something?”

“Or something,” I say, waving to her as I slip inside my vehicle. I lock the doors and turn the key in the ignition. It’s then that I pause for a few seconds, reliving the entire scene over again. The games had been fun, and it was something different than a typical team outing, which our team needs to help the varying personalities mesh. But all I can think about is a woman with long brown hair raising her gun to shoot me.

I glance around the parking lot, wondering if Rachelle is still here. I don’t recognize any of the cars, but she could’ve bought a new one.

I’m on autopilot as I drive down the road and on my way to where I’ve been staying since I got back to Boston. My younger sister, Dani, had a spot open when her roommate transferred to another university out of state. It’s not much, but it works until I can figure out the next steps.

And now I’m not sure what to do with Rachelle. I’ve always hoped I’d be able to correct the mess of our past. Which I made. Now that I’ve seen her, and been shot by several paint balls, my hope isn’t as bright.

I walk in the door and am accosted with both the smell of pasta and the proximity of my sister.

“What are you doing home so late? I thought you were going to be here an hour ago.”

I glance over at the clock. There had been little traffic on the way home, but it took

me nearly ninety minutes to get back.

“There were some, uh, surprises at paint balling.”

Dani frowns, jutting her hip out and giving me the look our mother gives us when she waits to be answered.

“What surprises? You took your crazy team of agents paint balling. That’s a given.”

I have to laugh at that. My sister has never had a filter around me. And I shouldn’t agree with her, but we are an odd team overall.

Ron is a round guy with thinning hair, Angela is a mousy woman who I do not want to cross. Ever.

Then there are the Hempson twins and even after two months of being their team lead, I have a hard time telling them apart. Add in Savannah and we’re set for a reality television show. Not about the real estate we sell, but about everyday interactions.

“True, my team isn’t the most athletic, but we still won. Against Rachelle’s team.”

Dani freezes on her way back to the kitchen. She does quick spin in my direction and I flinch back, as though she’s going to high-kick me or something. She’s been trying out a kick-boxing class lately, so I never know if I’m going to be assaulted if I make her mad.

She walks within inches of me, her gaze bouncing back and forth between each of my eyes. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but I’ve got nothing to hide at the moment.

“You saw Rachelle. At paint balling?”

I shrug. "I know. I was so shocked I didn't even say anything."

"What did she do?" Dani's eyes are dancing, like she's truly enjoying this turn of events.

"She might have pelted me with a few paint balls while only a couple feet away."

"That's my girl!" Dani says, spinning and stalking into the kitchen.

"What do you mean? You're my sister. Aren't you supposed to be on my side?" I follow, leaning up against the countertop as I watch her stir the white sauce.

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes at me. "When it comes to Rachelle Stewart, I will always silently be cheering her on." I open my mouth to say something when she raises a finger. "No, don't tell me that's unfair. That girl is the most amazing thing that's ever happened to you and you just gave it all up, telling no one why. Not even me, your most favorite and best-looking sister. So while I will support you in every other aspect of your life, I'm not behind your breakup, at least not without a good reason."

I run a hand through my hair, trying to figure out which direction to go with this. "I realized how little I can give her."

"Since when did that bother you? You bought a ring and proposed. You had to have thought all that through." Dani's back to her assertive self and I sigh, not in the mood to continue this conversation. "Why were you so bugged I didn't come home earlier?"

Dani looks as though she's a wax sculpture, not moving except for her chest to take in brief spurts of air. "So, there's this guy who I think is stalking me."

"What do you mean? Is he creepy? Do I need to hunt him down?"

Dani laughs. “Whoa on the questions, man. No, it’s not that bad. It’s just, I’m having a hard time telling him I’m not in a place to be in a relationship. Clay and I broke up a few months ago and—”

“And that’s one guy I’m glad is gone from your life,” I say, cutting her off. I point in her direction as if that will strengthen my case.

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She gives me her death glare and continues. “The guy is overly nice, like, to where I think he would cry forever if I turned him down. But I also don’t want to see him everywhere I go.”

“Is this the reason you’ve started doing the kick-boxing classes?” Not that Dani isn’t athletic, she is naturally talented at most things, but she’s never been the gym rat type.

“I figured it would be a good way to protect myself more than stabbing an attacker with my keys or carrying pepper spray.”

“Anytime you need me, I’ll be there. Just let me know how I can help.”

“Thanks,” she says, pulling the saucepan off the burner and turning off the heat. “So, you’ve broken the ice with Rachelle. What are you going to do?”

I open the cupboard and grab a couple plates. “You won’t let that go, will you?” She just flicks water at me as she fills our cups with water.

I set the plates out on the table and walk back for the water and utensils. “I’m not sure yet. I mean, I was hoping to have a few more things figured out before I saw her for the first time.”

Dani plates the pasta and the sauce, handing me a plate and then doing the same for herself. She brings over a bowl of salad, placing it in the center of the table. The meal isn’t extravagant, but it’s better than I would’ve made on my own.

We sit down and get settled, and Dani passes a napkin to me from the bin at the edge of the table. “Thanks for dinner, Dani. Sorry, I know it’s my turn to cook.”

She shrugs, using tongs to get a bunch of salad to her plate. “I’m just grateful I don’t have to pay the full rent on this place for a few months. It’s not like my part-time job at the student center allows me to roll in the dolla’ bills.” She lifts her hands and rubs her thumb against her fingers.

“Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say that. How’s that college education going?” I laugh and dodge to the left as she throws her paper napkin. It goes a foot before it opens and covers my plate.

“I’ll be happy when this semester is over. Only another month and I’ll be a graduate.”

“And what then?”

Dani sighs. “I don’t know. I’m striking out on the job search. After dozens of applications and interviews, I’m still unemployed.”

“Give it some time. You’ll find something that will be right for you.”

She leans forward, giving me a look that signals an interrogation is coming. That’s the problem with being the only boy in the family.

“And you? Is real estate what you want to be doing for the rest of your life?”

I nod, grinning. “Yes. I didn’t think so at first, that I was just doing it to get away from Boston and my train-wreck of a life here. But it’s like a giant treasure hunt, and every client has a different treasure. And when you find something that works for them, it’s the ultimate high.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you found something that makes you happy.” We eat in silence for a few moments before Dani grins at me. “What’s the plan, Sir Screwup?”

I stuff a large forkful of pasta into my mouth, hoping it will give me enough time to figure out how to answer that question. She’s asking about Rachelle, like a hound to a blood trail.

I reflect on seeing Rachelle earlier, looking more beautiful than I remember, which is kind of amazing in itself. And the fact that she was paintballing is something I find extra intriguing.

Rachelle had never been into extreme anything. She is a good volleyball player, but that is about as far as it goes for her athletics. She is more of the relaxed type. But that was a year ago, when we’d actually been together and I hadn’t screwed up both our lives with self-doubt.

If there is a way to time travel, I’ll give everything I have to go back to that moment and change it all.

“Landon, stop stalling. Do you have a plan to get her back? Yes or no?”

“Yes.” Relief and doubt crash within me. “I mean, no. But I need one.” I take another bite of the pasta, trying to sort through the tangled web of feelings that creeps up whenever I think of Rachelle.

Dani leans forward, practically bouncing in her chair. “Yes, I love this. Okay, how can I help?”

I smile at her, shaking my head. “Wow, someone’s a little anxious here.”

“Please, she was one of my really good friends before you went and ruined

everything. I'll do whatever I can so you can get her back."

I nod, leaning back in my chair. "Okay, let me think it through and I'll let you know."

"You've got forty-eight hours before I do things my way."

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“Touché. How about seventy-two? I’ve got a huge load of work tomorrow with appointments and showings, but Thursday and Friday I’m just prepping for the coming week.”

“Get to it. Rachelle needs to be back in our life, yesterday.” She twirls her pasta around her fork and says, “Make a list of all her favorite things and start giving them to her.”

“I thought you were giving me time to come up with a plan. Let me take care of this and if I need backup, I’ll let you know.”

She sighs and says, “Okay, but you can’t just bulldoze through it like you do with work. You can’t even turn on the charm too high or you’ll cause her to tuck tail and run.”

I have to laugh at her examples. “So you’re telling me not to be myself.”

“Pretty much.”

“But isn’t that what worked the first time?”

“You’ve burned that bridge, buddy. You’re going to have to cross a completely different one now.”

If only it were that easy. As if going up to my ex-fiancée and saying I’m sorry will fix everything.

Too bad we can't just start over.

CHAPTER3

Rachelle

Today has been a doozy with a capital D.

Ike, my manager, got mad at me for not forcing my team to hit the call quota, even though our conversions for the products and services we promote are fifteen percent higher than other departments.

Then paintball.

And Landon.

I can't do much about Landon, but I need to get his handsome face out of my head. So I'm drowning my sorrows in one of those itty-bitty Ben & Jerry's ice cream tubs. It was the last one I'd hid behind the "healthier" version I've bought several times but don't hit the spot.

Yeah, not ideal, but some ice cream is better than none.

I'm listening to music and also job searching, something I do about every three or four months but never follow through on, ending up back at the call center day in and day out.

"What's wrong?" Evie asks, walking into the office at the front of the house.

"It's been a day."

“Looking for jobs again, huh?” Evie glances down at the ice cream and her expression softens. In true Evie fashion, she leans forward and wraps her arms around me.

“Thanks, girl. How are things for you?”

She gives me a small smile and says, “I’ve been on the job-search websites today, too.”

“Oh no! Things aren’t going well at work?”

“It’s a long story, but I’m kind of ready for something different. The chance to actually have something to do that stretches me. I feel like I can do data entry in my sleep.”

I cringe. “Yeah, that’s as bad as having a long list of phone numbers to call.”

“Do I hear the breakup playlist?” Kenzie asks, poking her head into the room.

I purse my lips and nod. “Maybe.”

Evie stands and leans over my shoulders to look at my screen. “You haven’t listened to it in weeks. What happened?”

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I open my mouth to come up with a response, but Kenzie is too quick.

“She saw her ex-fiancé at the paint balling place and shot him and then we left.” The words are out so fast, it takes my brain a minute to register them. And then the laughter starts and I can’t stop.

Evie looks like she’s just seen a dinosaur in real life. “You saw Landon while paint balling? This is the first time since you broke up, right?”

I nod, my mood sobering. Anger simmers and I lean into it. “Yeah. I was hoping he’d jumped off a bridge or something.”

“You don’t mean that. He proposed to you and everything.”

“That means absolutely nothing,” Kenzie says, walking over to the large bookshelf on the wall behind me and pulling out a giant-sized Hershey bar. Not the kind with almonds or the cookies and cream kind. Plain milk chocolate. I used to be surprised, but I’ve just learned she uses chocolate to work through her feelings.

“And even if men do propose, some just crawl back to you a few days later and say they’re sorry and they need the ring back. Oh, and by the way, can we break up?” The fire in Kenzie’s eyes is intense and I file this topic away to talk to her about later. It’s best to wait until the chocolate has soaked into her soul before bringing up past relationships.

I nod, ready to follow the tirade. “Men just don’t get it. Like, hey, I just spent six years of my life with you, thinking there would be a future. But you’re going to just

waltz in and out of my life whenever you please—”

“Landon was there.” Kenzie’s head is turned, talking to someone outside the door.

I don’t have to turn to know the gasp comes from Millie.

“Who’s Landon?” Millie asks from behind Kenzie.

“Her ex-fiancé.”

I can see Millie’s eyebrows raise out of my periphery. “Sorry, I forgot his name because we call him so many other things.”

There is an audible pause before the four of us break up laughing. Millie is the youngest of my three roommates, and sometimes I think we’re scarring her for life with our open discussions.

Kenzie calms down first and says, “We can all use a reminder of a few details. That hot, athletic man proposed to you at one time. Girl, why are you still single?”

I tip my head back, trying to slow my breathing. This is a loaded question because I never wanted to be single. So I spin the question to only partially answer it. “Hello? Kenzie, you helped me put paint balling on the Breakup Bucket List, which I’m fairly sure will never happen again. He’s the reason I have a list.”

Evie shakes her head. “I know, but you’ve never said why or what happened. Maybe it would help to talk it through?”

My gaze flits to Kenzie, who looks like she’s debating whether to stay so we can talk about feelings.

I've never worked through the details with anyone except Hillary and Tiffany. The only thing I told everyone was that Landon called the wedding off. Which is true, but it still slices through me after seeing him again today. He seems happy, which is the opposite of what my jaded mind has hoped for all this time.

And then the memory takes hold and I do a slow, up-down perusal of him from earlier today. I really shouldn't be appreciating that he's only gotten better looking and stronger in the twelve months we've been apart. He's never been into bodybuilding, but he's always been strong. The arms I appreciated before knowing he was Landon are toned and his upper body is leaner. And those milk chocolate eyes that understood me and saw through me so many times.

Nope. I'm not doing this now. Just because I see him for all of five seconds, that erases a year's worth of progress in getting over him? Not going to happen.

"We were a month away from our wedding and he avoided me for a few days, which was unlike him. We were the couple who talked a lot throughout the day and then spent the evenings together. I figured it was just him trying to get things done at work, because he'd been given a promotion at his grandfather's company. He asked to meet at our favorite little cafe for lunch. I showed up and a server we know handed me a letter in his handwriting."

Kenzie's eyes grow to the size of fifty-cent pieces. "No way! He broke up with you by letter? That's just as bad as through a text."

I nod. "Right?"

"What did it say?" Millie asks, looking like she might start crying.

"The letter? Just that he loved me, that he wasn't good enough for me and I needed to find someone better, someone I deserved. I'd been with the guy since high school.

We'd gone through everything together. I think if we could've talked about our relationship and worries, even taken a break for a bit and pushed back the wedding, I wouldn't have been so crushed."

Evie puts an arm around me. "I wish you'd shared this before. We could've helped more."

I shake my head. "No, I just didn't want anyone to look at him like he's an awful person. He isn't, at least I hope he hasn't changed that much."

"We should go on the Love, Austen app and find someone for you to date," Millie says with a wink. "Tiffany said they just had a couple walk-ins sign up to be matched within the last month who are pretty cute."

Evie shakes her head. "I don't know if Rachelle is at the 'blind-date' level of dating. We've tried a few of those and they—"

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“Were disasters,” I say, interrupting her. “I’m fine, Millie. I don’t need a guy, I just need a new... life.” I turn to stare at the screen with the tab on the list of job openings. “You can get paid for losing weight? How does that work?”

Kenzie shrugs. “If you become one of those coaches who messages all their friends about an awesome opportunity to lose weight, I’ll be forced to rescind our friendship.”

Her sober expression gets to me, and the room erupts in laughter. When I finally calm down, I take in a deep breath, grinning as I picture Kenzie packing up her stuff.

“I’m the worst at selling things to people I know. It’s a lot easier to call a random number with a script. So I think you’re good.” I’d experimented with refinishing furniture as a hobby a few months back and realized that the process lost me money, since I practically gave the furniture away to people.

“What’s coming up for everyone?” I ask, scrolling up a page on the job search website.

“Work.” It’s a general consensus.

“That’s it? You’re all giving me a hard time for not dating, but I haven’t seen many men coming to the door since you all moved in.” I give them all a grin to soften the tension that rises.

“Seeing how the only man who gives me the time of the day is the one person I loathe, it’s going to be a while for me,” Millie says, leaning against the door frame.

Kenzie nods. "I'm one bad date away from striking out the side."

"I don't get it," I finally say after a moment of silence.

"Well, to strike out the side means that the team has three outs, and to strike a batter out, you have to get three strikes. I've got eight strikes total, the last one being Tiffany's husband. I'm just glad there's no weird tension between us because of it."

The memory of when Kenzie first moved in pops into my mind. Instead of unpacking, she basically divulged every past relationship she'd ever had, or tried to have. Blind dates who made her pay for the entire dinner. One guy who took off, leaving her at the other end of Boston after they'd gone to a concert together.

The best one is how an older lady tried to set her up with Tiffany's husband, Drew, before he knew Tiffany. I haven't laughed that hard since she told it. But now I'm curious about her anger toward a guy breaking up after proposing. Maybe she hasn't shared that one yet?

There's a knock on the door and Tiffany opens the door, walking in with a wide smile.

"Are you having a house meeting?" She glances around at the group and they all shrug.

"We were listening to how paint balling went."

Tiffany slips past Kenzie and Millie, taking a seat on the small rocking chair in the corner. "How'd it go?"

Kenzie and Evie motion that they need to get back to whatever they're doing, and Millie follows, taking a piece of chocolate Kenzie hands her.

“Just about how I thought it would go. I lack the natural talent for shooting people.” I think back on seeing Landon and how easy it was to pelt him with paintballs. At least some of my frustration eased up. “Okay, I take that back. I do well when I’m angry.”

“That could be said about anything you do,” Tiffany says with a grin. My cousin has always been the relaxed one, but I’ve never seen her quite as happy as she’s been since getting married to Drew.

“I might’ve shot Landon.”

Tiffany leans forward, putting on her “give me the gossip” face. “Are you serious? What happened? Tell me everything.”

I sum it up in about three minutes and Tiffany is nearly bouncing in her seat. “I can’t believe you shot him. How do you feel now? I know you’ve been focused on the BBL for the past couple months. Any residual feelings?”

My brain is saying no while my heart is calling me on my lie. So I compromise with my answer. “I saw him for all of thirty seconds, Tiff. It’s kind of hard to get a romantic reading when you’re blasting orange paintballs at someone.”

“This just keeps getting better and better. I’d heard he went to Chicago for a bit, but he must be home now, at least to visit.”

I frown. “I doubt he’s visiting. The woman on his team was talking about him being the team leader. I’m not sure what business, but I doubt he’d haul everyone up to paintball in Boston when they’ve got to have spots in Chicago.” My mind whirs with her words and I say, “How did you hear about Chicago?”

Tiffany takes a moment to lick her lips, which means she’s coming up with some kind of excuse. “I saw Dani a few weeks back.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“To be honest, I forgot. With work and getting settled in our place, it’s been a busy couple months.” Tiffany gives me an apologetic look and I have to remember that my life doesn’t revolve around the Higgins family. Nor am I trying to be a spy.

I begin an internal war with myself over whether I should ask if any more details were shared.

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“Are you ready for the cruise?” Tiffany asks, probably to change the subject. Millie stands from her chair and exits the room, looking bored. If I weren’t going on a cruise in a few days, I’d feel the same.

“You’re still coming, right?”

“A tropical vacation and the opportunity to get a free massage? Yes, please!”

I raise my eyebrows. “You do realize you’re going to be away from Drew for like a whole week, without cell service, right?”

Her expression droops. “Yes, I get that. It will be a fun trip with just the two of us to catch up. But there’s still time to squeeze in a date or two, see if you can replace me before we go.”

With a deep sigh, I shake my head again. “Not a chance. You can tell Meg I’m super grateful to have won the contest for the Love, Austen cruise, and maybe I’ll use my match profile to date when we get back. I just need to get away from my job and lay out on a beach for a few hours.”

“You mean crisp up like a tomato,” Tiffany jokes.

“You look like a bronze goddess after leaving the beach. Someone has to peel and blister with a few quick sunbeams to the skin.”

Kenzie chuckles as she walks past the room. “Well, not all of us can learn how to operate power tools from YouTube videos and make,” she points to the small table

next to the desk, “tables for fairies.”

“Fairies, Kenz?” Tiffany says, laughing. “I’d say garden gnomes would be fine eating their snacks there. Maybe even Hobbits for elevensies or something.”

My stomach hurts from the amount of laughing we’ve done this afternoon, but I’m grateful for it. Life gets a little too serious for me and I need this release to remind myself life is worth living, even if it doesn’t look like I thought it would.

“Obviously, I only made one thing before I put all the tools away and needed a new hobby. All the cutting was more anxiety inducing than anything else. I panicked every time, thinking I would screw it up and have to buy more wood. Do you know what it’s like to buy wood at a hardware store?”

“Expensive?” Kenzie says.

I nod. “That too. But when you don’t know what the dimensions look like on paper, it’s kind of a wild goose chase around the store. The workers are always around when you know exactly what you need, but when you are lost, it’s like traveling to Mordor.”

Tiffany cracks up. Kenzie raises an eyebrow, looking lost. “Is this more of the Duke of the Rings type stuff?”

Tiffany and I laugh louder. “Lord of the Rings, Kenz.”

She shakes her head, walking away. I can hear her mumbling, “I just don’t get it.”

“That means we need to have a watch party,” I call out. “We’ll plan one for when we get back. Put it on your ‘cultured bucket list’,” I say, joking.

Kenzie disappears upstairs and Tiffany keeps grinning.

“Okay, so cruise is in two days. What do we need to do between now and then?”

“Laundry. Actually, I need to buy some detergent on my way home from work tomorrow.” I pull out a sticky note and write down detergent, along with deodorant.

“Sounds good. I’ll have to be there a bit early because Love, Austen is sponsoring a portion of the activities on the boat. We’re doing a big giveaway if people sign up or refer people to the app.”

I try to hold back a smile. “Tiff, aren’t most people going with their significant others on a cruise?”

“Sure, it might not be the best pool of applicants, but it’s outside the box. And I’ve heard of a girl’s trip with a bunch of women going on a cruise together.”

I can tell she’s scrambling, because it’s her idea.

“Well, I hope it goes well. I’ll just meet you at the boat then.”

Tiffany nods and stands up. “Perfect. Can I steal a bottle of sunscreen? We haven’t gotten them yet and since it’s March, not many of the stores have them in stock.”

“Tiffany, did you even go to the store to look?”

She glances left then right before focusing on me. “No. The grocery store by the apartment is one elephant short of a zoo. I only go there if we desperately need something.”

“Well, there are dozens of stores in the Boston area. Be a good wife and feed your

husband something other than breakfast food.”

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Tiffany scowls at me. “Drew says he likes breakfast food.”

“Take it from me. A person can only handle the same food for a few weeks before it will be forever blacklisted in his or her brain.”

“That’s why this vacation is a good idea. Then we’ll both get a break from eggs and toast.”

“I like the idea of us sipping drinks with umbrellas on a beach somewhere.” It’s like the ultimate happy spot in my crappy week.

Tiffany nods. “Sounds like a plan. But in the meantime, you’re going to need to ration out the number of Kelly Clarkson songs you listen to, okay?”

“What can I say? Kelly Clarkson has some stellar music you can just scream or cry along with,” I say, turning back to the computer screen.

“Yeah, but she’s like straight barbeque sauce when you can balance it out with other songs, like ranch.”

I shake my head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“It did in my head.” She grins and walks toward the door. “Okay, I’ve got to get to the store, I guess. Maybe my husband won’t die from eating too much cereal while I’m gone.”

I turn up the radio even louder, blasting one of my favorites, Breakaway by Kelly.

It might not take away the fresh wave of pain from seeing Landon earlier today, but it will help me focus until I make it to paradise.

CHAPTER4

Landon

This is the first time I've been in my office all week. It's only Wednesday, but with paint balling the day before and all the client appointments I've met, I feel like I've been constantly running.

Maybe I've been avoiding my thoughts too. There's so much to unpack with Rachelle. From her response at seeing me yesterday, I'll probably have to climb Mt. Everest for her to see how sorry I am and take me back.

And I do want that. More than I realized.

Having Rachelle in my life was an adventure, not because we traveled the world together, but because I knew I could take on anything with her by my side. She helped me through all the ups and downs after losing my dad and came over late to hang out after I got off work. Those were long days, but I had to help my mom pay the bills. Feeding five kids and keeping the heat on is a lot of work. And while my mom still works with my grandfather's company, it doesn't cover all the expenses of three daughters still at home and their extracurricular activities.

There's a knock at my office door and I glance up with my real estate smile, trying to place the man standing there. His face is familiar, but speeding through my memories, I still can't place him.

From the clear glass of my office, I see Clara Turner, the office secretary, running toward my door. "I'm sorry, Landon. This is Roman Hamilton, owner of the

company. I was on a call or I would've gotten here sooner."

"No worries, Clara. Thanks."

"It's good to meet you, sir," I say, standing from my desk and making my way toward him. "What brings you to Boston?"

The owner of the Hamilton Group, who lives in London, or somewhere in Europe, is here in my office. I'm only a team lead who's been in Boston for the past two months. Is he looking for the Boston branch manager? My brain scrambles for anything I might've done to get into trouble.

I wave him in and shake his hand. The man has a firm grip, to where I'm wondering if there will be any feeling left in my fingers again. I motion toward a seat in front of my desk, but I'm still reeling that he's here. At least he doesn't look like he's ready to yell at me for anything, like when I worked with my grandfather.

"I've come to Boston to get ready for the company's cruise." His deep British accent verifies his identity, at least for me anyway. There's a large scar on the side of his face, but everything else about him is very put together. I'd guess his suits are more than I've made in the past year as an agent with this company.

"That's great," I say, pulling some papers together and tapping them into order on the desk. "You don't have cruises closer to the company's headquarters?" I clamp my mouth shut, wishing I could fish those words out of the air and swallow them.

Roman smiles and nods. "We've already done another excursion for the European team. But my wife thought it would be a good idea to treat the employees here in the states with a cruise."

There's nothing left to organize on my desk. I try to keep eye contact while guessing

where the chair is and end up missing the edge, falling onto my butt before I can catch myself. Pens and pencils land on my head.

Smooth, Landon. Real smooth.

Roman is up within a second and around the desk. He reaches out a hand to me, ignoring my embarrassment. “How are you finding life here at the Hamilton Group? I know you transferred up here several weeks ago from the Chicago office.”

“It’s great, I love it.” I casually sit down on my chair, making sure I’m firmly on the seat. Pens and pencils cover the desk and I pick them up, trying not to picture the downfall of the S.S. Landon.

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“Tell me about yourself.” Roman’s eyes bore into me and I have to swallow some of the panic creeping up. I mean, I’m good at my job, but I still don’t know why he’s here.

“Yeah, um, I started with Hamilton Group almost a year ago. Paul Raider, a friend from high school, reached out and trained me. Then I applied for the opening here. I’m from Boston originally and wanted to be closer to my mom and sisters. To be honest, I’m still surprised I got the promotion.”

Scout’s honor there. I hadn’t expected to get it with the little experience I had, but everything Gordon Summers, my direct boss and the one who hired me, said was that I had the potential and needed to live up to it.

“I’ve been hearing some great things about you here,” Roman says, crossing his ankle over his knee. This guy is a billionaire and he’s acting like sitting in one of the stiff board chairs isn’t a big deal.

“Oh, really?” I say, glancing up to make sure he isn’t trying to bait me into anything.

He nods. “Gordon says you’ve done an amazing job in the past eight weeks. Your team’s numbers are the highest in the branch over the past month.”

His words are a relief. At least I’m not in trouble. Trying to keep my mind focused and my expression calm is a lot harder than I thought, but I don’t want to portray that I’m inwardly freaking out about talking to the CEO. It’s a good thing I didn’t cause trouble as a teenager because I would’ve cracked under pressure in the principal’s office.

“Relax, Landon. I’m a human too. I know it’s hard having the owner drop by unannounced, but I figured it would give you time to get ready.” Is he reading my thoughts?

“Ready for what?” My mind is blank. Like a chalk board where I’m supposed to have the answers but they’ve been erased.

Roman leans forward. “I would love to have you join us on the company cruise, you and a significant other. Wife or girlfriend, perhaps?”

Alarm bells are going off in my mind and I’m pretty sure a fire has started in one corner. All my brain cells are working to contain it. I’m sure I look like my brain shorted out, which it definitely has.

“Cruise, sir? You want me to go on the company cruise?”

“Yes, I think it will be good to have you meet some of the upper managers from the other branches. It will be like a meeting of the minds, if you will. Are you game?”

I nod robotically. “Sure, um, when is it? And for how long?” I tap on my keyboard, hoping my computer screen will wake up so I can check my schedule.

“We set sail Friday. You’ll come back the following Thursday.”

“Fr-Friday as in, the day after tomorrow?” I say. The screen is lit up and I see the multiple colors of my calendar staring me in the face. Next week is slammed with appointments.

“I know it’s short notice, but I think it would be a great intro into what we do in this company, and help you understand how to continue leading like you’ve been doing. And this is the best time to pass a few things off to your team. I hear you went paint

balling yesterday. Way to be innovative with team bonding activities.”

I blink several times, unsure if I’m in some kind of time warp already. Praise for my ideas isn’t something I’m used to. My previous experience working for my grandfather’s company was very rigid, and if I strayed from any of the systems they used, I was usually disciplined for it.

Those thoughts bring up my time with Rachelle. If only I could fix my relationship with her or go back and not screw things up.

Then again, I probably wouldn’t be where I am now. I’d still be sweating at the machine shop my grandfather still owns, trying to complete the orders in time.

“Thank you, sir,” I say, swallowing hard. “I’m not sure how effective paint balling was to actually bond us together, though.”

Roman nods and smiles. “Sometimes what we try doesn’t always work, and that’s okay. It’s about the journey and using past experience to better ourselves in the future.”

I smile, hoping my blank slate of a mind can at least remember that piece of advice.

“So what do you say? Are you in?” Roman leans forward, and I’m trying to compile a list of things to get done before Friday. There’s no way to turn him down. Going on a cruise with all the managers is like learning from the masters. And I can use a vacation.

“Yeah, for sure. I’ll start getting my schedule rearranged to be there.”

Roman stands and turns toward the door. Before he exits, he says, “And is there a lady who can accompany you?”

My mind goes straight to the mental image of Rachelle, her face taut as she pulls the trigger on the paintball gun.

“No, I’ve been staying with my sister since I got back to town.”

“Bring her along. We love rewarding the support system of our people.”

“Okay, I’ll call her and see if she’s up for it.” At dinner the night before, she’d said something about school, but my mind had written over it with thoughts of Rachelle.

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Roman taps my desk with his hand a couple of times. “Outstanding. Isabella will be excited to meet you.”

“Isabella?” Please tell me she’s not another daughter I’ll have to watch out for. I already ducked into the bathroom this morning when I saw Savannah walk into the office earlier. Then again, Roman looks like he’s only six or seven years older than me.

“My wife. She’s the design portion of our company. She’s out running some last-minute errands before we set sail. The woman never sits still, but I love her for it.”

My chest constricts like someone punched me in the stomach. Yep, just beating myself up for about the ten thousandth time. But breaking up with the love of my life was the ultimate sacrifice. The only problem is I don’t think she sees it that way.

“I can’t wait.” I’m not sure what for just yet, as there are about a hundred obstacles sitting before me and the ship.

I’ve never been on a cruise, and the first time was supposed to be for my honeymoon a year ago. Here’s to hoping I can make it through the trip without getting stuck down memory lane on what could’ve been my life.

CHAPTER5

Rachelle

Thirty-seven hours and seventeen minutes.

That's all that's standing between me and my first ever cruise experience.

I have to keep telling myself that throughout the day, since it's like everyone and everything knows I'm excited about the break and needs my help.

Just an hour ago, I had to work on getting the internet working again for the entire floor. Yeah, I'm not a tech genius, but that whole "shut it down and restart" needs to be taught more often to the younger generations.

I've gone around to each of the people in my department, making sure they have everything they need for the next week. Taking an extra day off before the cruise was pure inspiration because I'm going to need it.

Working at a call center was never my dream, but it's been consistent pay and I've slogged my way up. The best part of being promoted is not having to call phone number after phone number, hoping for people to stay on the line long enough to listen to our scripted spiel.

"Marsha, how are you doing?" I peek my head around the small cubicle wall. "I know you had a hard time with that call earlier. Do you want to go through what happened?"

The woman who's only a few years younger than me looks up through her glasses and gives the most nervous smile I've ever seen, even from her. She'd called a man who must not have been taken off our lists after a previous call, because she'd endured a string of obscenities.

"I'd rather not relive that moment, thank you."

"Understandable. You did a great job of staying professional." Six months ago, I might've done the same. But the more and more I get pushed, it's like I have to

respond. Cue the memory of hitting Landon with the paint balls.

“Okay, well, I’ll be gone for a few days, so if you need help from anyone, talk to John, okay?”

She nods and turns back to her screen. “Thanks, Rachelle.”

It’s small, but it’s something from her. I’m still trying to figure out why of all the jobs in the world, Marsha would accept one where she constantly has to talk to people outside her comfort zone. But she’s made a lot of progress since she first started a couple months ago. I guess that’s something I can learn from too. Stretch myself like I’ve been doing with the Breakup Bucket List.

“Rachelle, can you meet me in my office for a minute?” my manager, Ike, says from the doorway of what we called the bullpen.

This is not good.

My track record with Ike is short-lived, but not great. They promoted me to the team lead position nine months ago, even though he’s worked with the company for longer. Then when our boss, Eliza, left to have a baby, the higher up bosses put him as the new manager. I’ve been walking on a thin piece of paper for weeks around him, wondering when it would rip out from under me.

I give him a tight smile and walk in that direction. I’m not sure if I’m stomping more than usual trying to get my frustration out, but my ankle twists and I hear a popping sound.

My first thought is that my ankle is going to be broken and I won’t be able to go on the trip because it will require surgery. Or worse, I’d have to hobble around the decks with crutches. My luck would ruin my first cruise. Why didn’t this happen the other

day at paint ball to help my cause?

I turn my upper body around and see that it's only my heel, laying like a traitor on the ground. It's giving up, not ready to battle Ike on any more issues.

I lean down and pick it up, cursing at it in my mind before hobbling to his office, one heel and one arched shoe at a time.

Ike sees the piece in my hand and says, "A little rough on your shoes, aren't you?"

All I can do is channel my best clown-faced smile and sit down in the awkward lip-shaped chair. Yes, my butt is now sitting on the very edge of a pair of lips. But it's either sit or look like I'm Quasimodo as I bend to the side with one heel on and one heel off. Diddle, Diddle Dumpling my son, John.

It's official. I'm losing it.

"What do you need, Ike?" I say, hoping to move this along. There is so much still to do at home with laundry and packing that I don't want to be here all night.

He settles onto the corner of his desk, a glint in his eye and so relaxed that it alerts me something is wrong. Usually he berates me for coddling people like Marsha or for not getting the required number of calls in from our team. Then I have to combat that by quoting the true statistics: that my team might not have the calling volume of other departments, but we've definitely pulled in more revenue than the rest.

"When do you leave for your cruise, Rachelle?"

I scrunch my nose, trying not to have an outburst this close to my vacation time. "Friday morning. I didn't realize you knew it was a cruise."

His devilish smile makes my skin crawl. "Wanda and I have been on a few dates. She filled me in on what your vacation request was for."

I frown, unable to keep the fake smile going any longer. "Why does it matter where I go?"

"Well, it doesn't anymore. Consider yourself unemployed."

My heart beats out of my chest for a few seconds before I can regain some composure.

“Excuse me? What do you mean?”

“You’ve booked yourself for more paid time off than you have, which means you no longer need to come into work here.”

I raise an eyebrow, a bubble of laughter rising in my throat. “You’re firing me because I’m taking too much time off? Isn’t this a little premeditated? Like, you should wait until I actually come back to do this, you know, to make sure I actually stay that length of time?”

I’m standing now, my arms folded across my middle and I stare him in the eyes, standing up on my one heel.

He backs off the desk and works his way around to the other side. “It’s just a formality then, Rachelle. Thank you for your service here, but you can collect your things and go.”

I shake my head. “I think I’ll go pay a visit to Lisa in HR. I’m sure she’s got something to say about this.”

Ike scrambles to shut the door before I can get it open. “No, no need for that.”

I stare at him, noting the crooked nose and the smell of fish on his breath. Breathing out of my mouth is the only way to keep me from gagging.

One more look at him and something inside me breaks free. “You know what, I’m good. I quit. I’m sure whoever you have lined up for my position will be ready for it. Tell him or her good luck with Marsha. She’s going to need a gentle hand to get—”

“Wanda will take over and she’ll be able to handle Marsha.” Ike tips his head back an inch, trying to adjust the height difference between us.

I'm not sure where it's coming from, but something simmers in my stomach. This man who's been trying to torture my life for the past year has now gone too far.

"You think your girlfriend can handle this department better than I do?" I pause, giving him a moment to answer. When he sputters, I continue. "I understand this company is all about numbers, but there are some things more important than those, like, and that's the people you have working for you. Have you noticed the turnover rate since they appointed you manager? It's skyrocketed. Just know, you're driving away people who can make this business successful while also helping the companies we represent. Hopefully, you don't learn that too late."

He removes his hand from the doorknob and slinks back against the wall. I open the door, feeling the high of finally expressing my feelings to one person I've needed to for months.

I wish my exit was a little more gallant as I hobble into the hallway.

It doesn't take long to gather up my things from my small office/cubicle, evidence of how I never really felt settled. As scary as it is to not have a job, at least I have roommates who will help me pay the rent until I find another job.

Let's just hope that doesn't take too long.

CHAPTER 6

Rachelle

I stand at the bus stop, holding onto a paper box filled with the contents of my desk. At least I didn't go all out on decorations for my cubicle or I'd be needing a truck.

I push away my anger and debate going to the grocery store while I'm out to buy

laundry detergent. And as the box gets a bit heavier, I pull the pictures and certificates I want to keep out of the box and tuck them into the extra large bag I brought today. The rest of it goes into a street trash can.

I'm sure that can be translated into some sign in my life, but I'm still too heated to think about it symbolically.

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Grocery store it is.

The bus comes and I settle into a seat near the middle. After letting out a deep sigh, I relax. Well, as much as someone whose life seems to be spinning out of control can.

My phone rings, a song I've programmed for my mom's number. It's been easy to put off talking to her for a few weeks, but I know if I don't answer now, I'm going to regret the wrath of Tina Stewart. Hillary not being around to take half the lectures has made Mama Tina's temper flare a lot more.

"Hey, Mom."

"Where are you? Why does it sound like a jet engine next to you?"

"I'm on the bus, Mom."

The sound of "ick" is distant before my mother speaks again. "Why haven't you called me back?"

"I've been busy. There's a lot going on at the house and then at work." Which I no longer have to worry about. Small victory. "Is there something you're calling about?"

I glance up as the bus makes a stop. I note where we are on the map and focus on the next stop, so I don't miss it.

"I just saw the picture you posted of yourself on Quickstagram yesterday. Rachelle LaRue Stewart, why do you post pictures of yourself like this?"

I frown, reaching up to push the button for the next stop. “Like what, Mom?”

“In skin-tight clothing for everyone to see.”

“Are you talking about the paintball suit?” It is about the only place I post anything anymore, each picture showing me at one of the activities on the Breakup Bucket List. There are a surprising number of people who want to follow along in the woes of a heartbroken woman.

“I don’t know what a paintball suit looks like. It’s black with some patches of purple.”

“That’s part of the challenge I’m doing, Mom. And since when do you check Quickstagram for anything? I thought social media was beneath you.” It’s a slight jab, but she’s testing my patience.

“Sandra Bishop showed it to me this morning.”

My stomach sinks as I step off the bus just a few feet away from the entrance to the grocery store. Of course, my mother’s best friend is the first to notice things like what I’m posting.

“Well, I went paint balling with my roommate yesterday, hence the post.”

“I know you haven’t been around for a while, but I can send my nutritionist over to come up with a plan for you. She’s the best in the business. I’ve lost five pounds since we started working together a month ago.”

The last thing I want is to take part in another diet. “I don’t have time for that right now. I’m actually heading into the grocery store to get a few things. Can we talk later?”

“Remember that carbs are the enemy, Rachelle. You need to stay away from—”

I hang up the phone. Not my proudest moment, but a diet and body image are not the things I want to be talking about right before I set sail on a cruise.

Frustration surges. I know I’m not a size zero anymore, but I’ve gotten more comfortable with my body over the past few months. It’s more squishy than it was before, but my stomach issues are almost non-existent, which I count as a huge victory.

Before walking into the grocery store, I turn and head for a clothing store just another block away. I haven’t purchased anything that isn’t business casual or sweats since my almost-wedding, and I figure now is the best time to get a new bathing suit. The only person I’ll be seeing after the cruise is Tiffany, so there’s no need for me to worry about whatever it is my mother thinks is awful about bodies.

My confidence wanes as I try on several options. None of them look good. It’s probably not the best idea to continue pulling the size I used to be.

“Can I help you?” a saleswoman asks. Usually I just brush them off and continue, but all the frustration inside me causes the tears to surge.

“Yes. Any help you can give me would be great.”

She pulls a flexible tape measure from around her neck and says, “I can help measure you to get the right fit.”

I’m a little scared of that thought, as I’ve steered clear of those since moving out of my parents’ house. But it’s either go swimming with a pair of shorts and a t-shirt or hope the threadbare one in my bottom dresser drawer will stretch over my backside and not split open. I nod and she goes to work. After getting all the measurements,

she hands me a little card with them, which I tuck into my purse.

“For future purchases.” She smiles at me and says, “Are you looking for outfits? Swimsuits? Underwear?”

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“Let’s just start with swimsuits. And probably a new bra.” The ones I’ve been wearing for the past several months have me nearly spilling out of them.

Over an hour later, I walk out of the store with a swimsuit I actually feel good about wearing. The top covers my upper body and down to my lower stomach where it meets the high-waisted floral bottoms. With two bras and a few pieces of nicer underwear to replace my period panties, I’m feeling a little more excited to go. And my mother’s comments have lost some of their sting.

I rush into the grocery store, ready to get the stuff I need and head back home. That’s when I can grovel and groan about my lack of a job. Maybe checking for jobs yesterday was a good thing. Now I just need to apply for some.

I’ve got the large bag containing the swimsuit and underwear dangling from my arm at the elbow, and I pick up the large bottle of detergent. This day calls for ice cream and since I’ve eaten all the good kind in my freezer, I need to restock.

My stomach growls, and I realize I haven’t eaten since breakfast. I stop near the frozen dinners and grab one of them, knowing I’ll be too tired to cook anything once I get home.

“Rachelle?” a masculine voice asks. I’m rarely recognized in public, which is my whole intention, but I’m frozen, trying to figure out if I want to respond or not. Now is not the time to chit chat.

I turn around to find Landon holding a small basket with only a loaf of what looks to be garlic bread inside. In his hand is a large frozen pizza.

I open my mouth to speak, but there are no words.

“You look amazing, Rachelle,” he says, his words almost breathless. But it’s the words that don’t quite sink in.

“Do you shop here often?” If so, I’m going to have to either come at the oddest hours, or find a new grocery store.

“Only when it’s my turn to cook.”

This grocery store is too far away from his family’s home, which means he lives with someone.

I nod, readjusting the detergent under my elbow and walk past him. I’m on a roll with ditching people tonight. It’s full of cowardice, but to be honest, it’s mostly self-preservation. I can’t fall back into the cycle where I can hardly get out of bed in the morning. I just need to keep moving, to not let seeing him affect me.

Except I turn slightly to see if he’s watching and as I take another step forward, the large paper bag with my unmentionables catches on the bottom of a handle of the doors in the frozen section.

A loud rip peals through the air and everything works in slow motion. The bag is torn all the way to the bottom and out falls just about everything I purchased.

Landon hurries over and bends down, but I wave him off. “I’ve got it.” My cheeks are on fire. I’m pretty sure they’re the same hue as a pair of dark red panties I swipe from the floor. He totally sees them.

I bend over, picking up everything with one hand and doing my best to stand up with the detergent in the other. My armpit is trapping the now ripped paper bag, and I limp

over to the cash register on my one heel. Of all the humiliation I could've endured today, seeing Landon is the last thing I needed to add to the list.

"Rachelle, at least let me help you," Landon says, hurrying to step in front of me. I see his gaze go from the unmentionables to the detergent and he reaches out to get the bottle from me. I fight him like a toddler for a few seconds before giving up and letting him carry it.

I walk toward one of the self-checkouts and open a plastic bag, stuffing the bras and underwear inside one.

Landon scans the detergent and the frozen alfredo. I use my elbow to push him aside, but he doesn't budge.

"I can get it."

"It's not a big deal." He slides the garlic bread and the frozen pizza along the scanner. Before I can react, he whips out his credit card and inserts it into the card reader.

"Landon, I could've gotten the detergent." I know I should be grateful, but I'm still having a hard time knowing the guy who left me a few weeks before our wedding is still a good guy. Hollywood has told a different story in all the movies I've watched this year, that most of them are villains who've got their eye on someone else. Then again, he could live with someone.

I swallow back the sting of that thought, but then my mouth opens and speaks. "Getting ready for a date?"

Landon scrunches his nose. "Ew, no. I'm not dating Dani."

As much as I don't want to laugh, the thought of him making dinner for his sister is a

lot easier to digest. And she's still one of my favorite people, lost in the wreckage of my relationship with Landon.

I grab the detergent and my plastic bags of clothing, depositing the paper bag in the trash can just outside the store.

"Do you need a ride home?" Landon asks. The thought is tempting, as I wouldn't have to catch two buses home. But that would mean sitting two feet away from him for nearly twenty minutes.

Swallowing a bit of my pride for the sake of my aching feet, I nod.

He bought a new car, a sleek one that still has the new car scent. But it's when I catch a whiff of his cologne that I'm scooting closer to the door so I don't give him any ideas that I like it. Or that I've missed it. Which I have.

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“New car?” Yes, I’m only able to speak in two-word sentences right now.

He nods, maneuvering the car out of the parking lot. “Yeah, I needed one. The other was falling apart. I drive a lot more around the city for work, which has its pluses. I still hate looking for parking, though.”

Which is why I usually leave my car at home when I have to travel throughout Boston.

“Where do I need to go?”

I give him the directions and his eyes go wide. I can’t look at him, because he’s connecting the dots.

“You bought the house we looked at?”

Releasing a long breath of air, I nod. “It was in my price range, so I figured I’d go for it.”

He asks me questions here and there, but I’m not in the mood to be chatty with him. There is still so much between us, and I’m embarrassed that he saw the new underwear I’ll be donning on the cruise.

And then the guilt seeps in. Not enough to make me care, but more like regret. A cruise was something we’d decided to venture on together. But he ruined that by breaking up with me.

He parks in my driveway and gets out, hurrying around to my side. It's irritating that he's being so nice when I want to be angry at him until the end of time.

"Thanks," I say, grabbing all my things from the back seat. "Well, uh, thanks for the ride, and good luck."

I turn and make a beeline for the door, hoping it isn't locked so I don't have to juggle all my things in front of him just to get the key out.

Kenzie opens the door and almost bumps into me. "Oh, hey! Sorry. I didn't see you there."

Her eyes flick up and she sees Landon, who's still standing next to the driver's side door instead of in his seat and pulling out. A Cheshire cat grin is not what I want to see right now. I walk inside and pull her with me, slamming the door before dropping my bags on the ground. I probably would've dropped the detergent too, but I didn't feel like cleaning up the sticky liquid.

"Okay, I think I'm missing something," Kenzie says, pointing between me and the door, which I assume is to indicate Landon. "Did you just get a ride home from your ex?"

Blowing out a slow breath, I nod.

"So, you're getting back together?" Kenzie dances from foot to foot while quietly clapping her hands together as she waits for my response.

I shake my head, harder than I thought. "Not a chance. He was at the grocery store at the same time and offered to take me home."

I kick off the shoes that have now made indentations along the tops of my feet and

savor the softness of the floor mat. It's not soft at all, but anything is better than teetering around the world.

"Well, I don't blame you for taking advantage of the ride. And looking at the view inside the car must've been worth it." Kenzie waggles her eyes and if my arms weren't full, I'd slug her.

I shake my head, taking the detergent into the laundry room. My basket of dirty clothes is piled high and I start a load, shoving in as much as the tub will hold.

Seeing Landon twice in two days has me all out of sorts. But the chances of that happening again are slim. At least for my fragile heart, I hope so.

CHAPTER 7

Landon

As much as I love my work and dedicate a lot of thought to it, I can't focus. Seeing Rachelle so independent makes me grateful she's as strong as she is. But taking her to the house we'd looked at buying for after our wedding has my emotions all twisted together.

Now I'm heading on a cruise for a week, something I was too chicken to tell her about when she was in my car. She must've gone through a lot that day, because the state of her shoes and then the ripping of her bag made me want to reach out and hold her close. Tell her it would be okay.

And the dark red color of underwear keeps creeping into my mind.

But I can't do that. Hillary's words still echo in my mind, and I don't want to jeopardize Rachelle's happiness.

Clara's voice brings me back to the present, swaying on the train with my bag at my feet, while trying to finalize all the updated appointments before I lose service.

“Okay, I've switched the clients to Ron's calendar.”

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“Thank you, Clara. If you wouldn’t mind calling those last two clients and rescheduling their appointment or seeing if one of my team can handle it while I’m gone, that would be great.”

All the tasks on my mental list have been checked off. So why do I feel like I’ll be coming back to a disaster?

I’ve been able to switch over fifteen of my appointments to my team. I just hope they take care of the clients, and go above and beyond to find the ideal place for them. Sure, I can be a control freak, but I know how important a real estate agent can be in the lives of the client.

Not the kind where I’m invited for holidays and birthdays, but having an enjoyable experience when house or apartment hunting sets the tone for the future of those people living there.

My mom’s experience searching for a new house was rough after my father died. We came together as a family of six and decided that downsizing the house was the best idea. But trying to get an agent to even care about what my mom wanted rather than trying to sell only properties they’d listed in order to get the other half of the commission only irked me more.

It was probably that experience which spurred me on when a friend reached out to me about becoming an agent, right around the time I broke up with Rachelle.

A sound on the other end reminds me I’m still on the phone.

“That should be fine, Landon. I know Angela is free for some of those you’ve got scheduled. I’ll ask her to take them over.”

I say nothing for a few moments, knowing Angela might not be the best bet for taking care of people. She’s a newer agent and messed up the paperwork on the last house she sold, which was a nightmare to fix. But then again, she’d be better than handing them over to Savannah.

I need to step back and just hope for the best. Maybe I’m smothering my team a bit too much and they need room to work.

Me being on a cruise ship out on the ocean might be the best time to give them their wings. And I won’t have cell service to constantly check in, so there’s that.

“Sounds great. Thank you. Let me know if I can do anything for you when I get back.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Clara says, and I can picture the smile on her face. I’ve had an inkling she has a crush on me for a couple weeks now, and I hope she doesn’t ask to go out for drinks or something. I’m not the best at carefully shutting people down. Because the only girl who has my heart is the one I keep running into, the one I’ll probably have to do something crazy to win back.

But I’m not losing hope, at least not yet. The two times we’ve run into each other, I haven’t been prepared, but this cruise is the perfect time to formulate a plan and set it in motion once I make it back.

Dani had a few things to turn into her teachers at school this morning and I just came from the office, but I’m hoping she makes it in time. Then again, the train is still four stops away from where the boat will depart and I’m sweating a bit that I might miss it.

How would that look to the owner of the company after Roman personally invited me?

The security lines aren't as bad as I expect, but once I'm up on deck, it's a mess of people.

My phone rings and I glance down to see Dani's name. "Hey, are you on the boat?"

"Are you kidding me? I've been here for at least an hour now. The meeting with my professors went pretty well. I just told them I have to be your emotional support human on this trip and they gave me an extension on some things."

I close my eyes. "Please tell me you didn't explain the complete story of my breakup with Rachelle."

"Oh, I did. I obviously left out how long ago it was, but the professors were very sympathetic to the cause. And I might have to work for your company or something if this is one of the perks. What happened to you? Get hung up on divvying out the assignments?"

I groan. She knows me too well.

"Where is our room? I just got here."

Dani clears her throat and says, "Ah yes, it's kind of hard to find, so maybe I'll come find you first."

The double sound of her words tells me she's right behind me.

"How did you find it so easily, then?" I tease, allowing her to take my laptop bag.

“Because, unlike you, I know how to ask for directions. And your British boss was the one who stood at the gate with a sign for Hamilton Group employees. Such a nice guy. They apparently paid extra so we don’t have to wait to check-in like everyone else. Why did you bring this?” She lifts the bag up to eye level, her eyes narrowed at me.

“This is technically a work trip, so I might as well have it with me in case I need to take notes or make a chart.”

She shakes her head. “There will be no service the entire way. Unless you’re planning on writing a novel in Microsoft Word, I suggest you take this time to relax. When was the last time you took a vacation?”

I don’t say anything for a bit, trying to picture the last getaway I was on. It was to a beach house my mom rented as a fun summer family gathering nearly two years ago.

“The beach house.”

Dani’s jaw drops open. “Are you kidding me? You need to get a life, buddy.”

I glance over the deck and then continue moving toward where I hope my room is.

“Why do you look all jumpy?” she asks, taking my upper arm and turning me slightly to the right as we walk toward the rooms and past the pool deck.

With a quick breath out, I try to settle the emotions inside me. “Because my first cruise was supposed to be with Rachelle.”

There is a split second of sympathy on her face and then all the weaknesses shore up and she shakes her head.

“Well, that’s your own fault, right?”

“Yes,” I say, with more of an edge to it. “I fully understand that I screwed things up. Can you ease up a bit?”

She raises her hands in surrender. “All right. But you’ve seen her randomly twice this week and if you don’t do something soon, you’re going to screw it up again. The minute we dock back in Boston, I’ll be the burr in your saddle.”

I laugh, easing the tension in my body. “Dani, have you ever actually ridden a horse?”

“No, but I make sure to have lovely little phrases prepared to annoy you. I’m pulling the Younger Sister card on this trip.”

“Just remember who your favorite brother is,” I say as I wait for her to open up the room.

“You mean my only brother?” she pushes the door open so I can walk inside the cabin. It’s small, but there’s a view of the ocean, so I think I’ll be okay. Not like a claustrophobic feeling, which might have happened if we were in an inside room. With four sisters, I’ve had several nightmares about the possibilities if we’d been on the Titanic. And no, I don’t think the scene where they’re on the front of the ship is romantic.

“I’ve got the bed to the right. Looks like there are a ton of activities on this ship for us.”

I set my bag down in the small compartment near the door and walk over to where she’s holding up an itinerary with the name of the company on the top.

“Well, at least we don’t have to do much until dinner. Why don’t you show me all the exploring you’ve done since you got here?”

“I can do that.” She goes to step into the hallway but stops, turning around. “I almost forgot. There’s a big giveaway from a company called Love, Austen. If you sign up for the app, you can win another trip to anywhere in the US and it includes a shopping spree.”

“What is Love, Austen?” I ask, only half-listening.

She walks back over to the small nightstand and picks up a brochure. I take it from her, noting a daisy on the front with the words Love, Austen Matchmaker.

I shake my head. “Nope, not a chance. I’m not signing up for an app to get other girls. There’s only one I want.”

Dani grins. “As much as I love to hear that, I need another vacation. Sign up so I have another chance to win.” It’s not so much a request as a demand.

I blink at her several times. “You need another vacation when you’re just starting this one?”

Her expression turns sheepish. “True, but a girl can never have too many clothes.” She pulls my phone out of my pocket and opens the camera to scan the QR code, pulling up the app.

“How do they know to put you in for the trip if you register there?”

“From the promo code, duh,” Dani says, pointing to the words on the brochure. “And I wanted to let you know that I’ve got ideas of how to get Rachelle back once we get home.”

I’m not sure whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. “Please tell me there’s no falling from the sky action, or even eating things that no human should be eating.”

We used to watch the television show *Fear Factor* growing up and Dani had talked about trying out some things they’d shown the contestants doing on there. Eating buffalo intestines? No thanks.

“I don’t have that on there, but it might be the ultimate test of how sorry you are,” she says, holding out her hands to the side.

Shaking my head, I open the door and stalk down the hallway. “Not going to happen, Dani. Let’s just enjoy this trip and we’ll talk about Rachelle when we get back.”

A woman walks across the ship from where we come out onto the deck. Have I been thinking so much about her that she's here? I can only see her from the back, but she's got the figure and hair color of Rachelle.

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“Rachelle?” I say out loud, and Dani only glances up for a moment before focusing back on my phone.

The woman turns and I see she’s definitely not my Rachelle.

Okay, she’s not my Rachelle. Not yet anyway. I can only hope I’ll be able to make up for her pain over the past year. I’m just not sure where to start.

“What are you doing?” I ask, glancing back at Dani.

“I’m filling in the information for you, since I know you won’t do it.” She’s tapping away and I lean back against the wall, staring out into the horizon.

Guilt takes over. I shouldn’t be here without Rachelle. “I’m going to go get my bags,” I say, and it’s the first time Dani has acknowledged me in several minutes.

She grabs my arm and pulls me to a stop. “I’m not leaving, which means you don’t get to leave either.”

“Dani, she’ll never forgive me for going on a cruise without her. That was supposed to be our thing.”

She raises her eyebrows and says, “What if she’s already gone on one without you? Don’t jeopardize your job right now and then tell her you had to go for work. To be honest, I don’t think she’ll care.”

“What do you mean?”

With a shrug, Dani says, “I’m just saying it’s a long shot to get her back, bro. But if she, by chance, takes you back, I doubt whether you’ve gone on a cruise without her is going to be the deal-breaker.”

Dani has a point, but I don’t like it. Am I just cutting off all the chances I have to be with Rachelle again?

“Fine, I’ll stay, but I probably won’t be happy about it.”

With a shrug, Dani says, “Okay. I’ll be happy for the both of us because this trip is going to be epic.”

I doubt that.

CHAPTER8

Rachelle

Tiffany and I sit on a lounge chair for what seems like forever by the time we’re notified our room is ready. I needed the quick nap after staying up late doing laundry and packing, and Tiffany didn’t put up a fight, which is odd for her. The nap isn’t long, but it’s something.

“You look like you’ve been hit by a bus, Tiff.” She looks tired and while I’m feeling worn out, it’s like someone drained all the energy from her.

Tiffany gives me a small smile and says, “That’s just what a girl wants to hear when she’s been so gracious to accept your invitation for a cruise.”

I laugh and grab a bag from Tiffany as we make our way toward the cabins. “Well, I’m just going to point out that you were practically bouncing off the walls when I

invited you.”

Tiffany shrugs. “Who am I to give up a beach vacation?”

“Will Drew survive without you?”

“Of course he will. A large pipe burst in one of the apartment buildings, so he’ll be draining water for at least half of our trip and then fixing and replacing everything for the rest.” Tiffany takes a deep breath and says, “I don’t know if I’ll survive without him, though.”

I reach out and grab her shoulder, turning her to face me. “Hey, are you okay? It’s been forever since I’ve seen you cry.”

“It’s just, we haven’t been married very long and I love the guy.” She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. “Sorry, this will be the last of my tears and pining for my husband. This trip is all about Rachelle Stewart conquering the past and heading toward a bright new future.”

I give her a small smile and nod. “I like the sound of that. Because I got fired yesterday. Well, technically, I quit right after Ike mentioned he was firing me. So preemptive quitting.”

Tiffany drapes her arms around me, pulling me in for a hug. “I’m sorry, Rachelle. Then again, it might be the final push to getting you where you want to be career-wise.”

“And where is that?” I ask, pulling back so I can see her face.

“Somewhere that uses your amazing talents rather than smothering them.”

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I narrow my eyes at her. “How long have you felt this way?”

She shakes her head. “Girl, probably since you started talking about Evil Ike.”

“And you’re just now telling me this?” Being coddled isn’t something I want, and now I question what other mistakes I’ve made that people haven’t clued me into.

“Rachelle, sometimes we have to figure out things on our own. Would you have stood up to Ike six months ago if I’d said something?”

I chew on that for a moment and shake my head. “Probably not.”

“See, this bucket list has been the best thing for you.”

I give her a half-smile. “How do you know it’s the bucket list that’s working?”

“Well, it might not be the list entirely that’s making you more assertive, but you’re making some serious progress. All the incredible things you’ve done have to help in some way.”

I turn to her and say, “Well, there’s no way I’ll be going paint balling again.”

“Not even if you get to shoot Landon with a hundred paint balls?” Tiffany is teasing, but the idea makes me wonder.

Seeing him twice in the past few days has been in my head ever since he dropped me off at my house. I don’t want to admit to myself that I miss him, that all the work I’ve

done to get him out of my heart seems to have been rewound like an old mixed cassette tape.

“I don’t know. Let’s go enjoy this blissful vacation before we have to remember about the real world.” Then again, the bed in our cabin looks inviting. Is it bad that I want to nap again on my first cruise ever?

Tiffany laughs. “I don’t know about you, but beaches are in the real world.”

“You know what I mean.”

I haven’t given myself much time to dwell on what I would do as a career since I left the call center Wednesday. Instead of applying for positions, like I should’ve done, my bright idea was to try out my skills in demolition for what used to be the pantry. It helped me get out a few emotions of frustration about seeing Landon yet again.

My poor roommates. Hopefully they’ll survive with the mess for a week or two.

We put our things away and head out onto the deck.

“Do you see the size of those pools?” Tiffany says. “And those water slides. We’re definitely planning some time for those.”

From the looks of it, the top of the slide is higher than I’d like, but I’m trying everything at least once while aboard.

“Is that a racetrack?” I ask, walking over to see several small go-karts parked on the track.

“There’s also an indoor movie theater, a skydiving simulator, and a spa,” someone says to my right. It’s a woman who looks to be a few years older than Tiffany and

me. She laughs and says, “Sorry to interrupt. You just looked so excited.”

“It all sounds amazing,” Tiffany says. “And if you’re going to try out everything, Rachelle, this is going to be the best vacation ever.”

“I hope you enjoy it.” The woman walks away and links arms with a larger man. She rests her head against his shoulder and guilt seeps into my stomach. I should’ve been here with Landon. That could’ve been my life.

We walk along the deck and take in the sights. Everything seems like a dream, and as the ship leaves port, I stare back to shore as though Landon will magically appear, giving me those puppy-dog eyes, and I feel even worse.

As it gets closer to dinner, we head back to our rooms to get changed.

“I’m so excited to do all the things,” Tiffany says. “Whatever good luck you have to win this cruise, I’m here for it!”

I laugh, trying to focus enough to put mascara on. I haven’t bothered the last month, but it’s kind of nice getting all dressed up again.

“Isn’t it crazy that our parents have been on countless cruises and this is our first time?” I say, applying even strokes to my lashes.

“Technically this isn’t my first time, but the last cruise I went on I had food poisoning from one of the fish entrees. Remind me not to eat those tonight or any night.”

“No problem there. Then I won’t have to smell your stinky breath.” I’m laughing until something hits me in the shoulder. I glance down to see it’s a shoe.

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“You’re throwing shoes now?” I say, picking it up and tossing it onto Tiffany’s bed.

“Yeah, might as well since I don’t have anything better to throw. Okay, let’s talk about the top things we want to do while on this ship.”

“The track looked like fun,” I say, brushing on some eye shadow.

“I like it. Let’s do it. What about the waterslides?”

“Aren’t those for kids?” I ask, standing back to look at myself in the mirror. I’m wearing a silky red top with a black pair of pants and a small heel. And I’m hoping she won’t notice that I’m trying to get out of slides since my stomach is in a vice every time I think about them.

Tiffany sits down on her bed. “Did you see any kids when we got on the ship? I’m pretty sure they’re for the adults. And is that what you’re wearing for dinner?”

“Yes,” I say, hesitating. I give myself a quick glance in the mirror and look back at her, wondering where I went wrong.

She walks over and goes through the clothes I’ve hung up in the small armoire. “Girl, you look like you’re here on business.”

I sit down on the edge of my bed and frown. “I don’t own anything other than what I’ve been wearing to work and the paint and remodeling clothes/sweats. It’s called I now have love handles.”

“What are you talking about? You look so good now that you’re not on a crazy diet every minute of the day.” She waves her hands in the air. “That came out wrong. You didn’t look bad before, but now you shine.”

It’s similar to what Landon said before, and I’m trying to decide if they’re saying it to make me feel better or if it’s the truth.

“My mom disagrees. She thinks I shouldn’t be posting on social media in a paint balling suit when I ‘look like this.’”

“Rachelle, you don’t have to look like a model to be beautiful. Forget what your mom says and let’s have fun on this trip. I’ve got my love handles and I’ll be your wingwoman. Maybe we can find someone amazing for you.”

“On a cruise?”

Tiffany grins. “It could happen.”

I take a second to think about that. Of course, then thoughts about Landon crop up. I need to stop thinking about him and move on. Tiffany’s words run in a loop in my mind. I’ve never been one for a fling, but maybe that will help me get Landon out of my system at last.

“Let’s do it. We’re never going to see any of the people from this trip again.”

Tiffany nods, grinning. “Who cares what we look like, as long as we love every minute? Ready?”

“Yes. I’m starving.” I grab the only clutch I brought and open the door.

“I can already smell something with garlic.” Her smile drops and she looks like she’s

about to pass out.

“Are you all right?” I ask, trying to figure out what changed. We’re only two steps from our door. “I thought you loved garlic.”

“I do. I just, I don’t know what’s wrong. It’s like my stomach isn’t liking the waves of the sea.”

I frown. “You said on your last cruise you were sick. Do you think it was from getting seasick?”

“I don’t—” She doesn’t finish her sentence before heading into the bathroom. I hear retching in the toilet.

“Go ahead without me. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.” Tiffany’s voice is barely above a whisper.

Terror strikes through me. “You want me to go to dinner by myself?” I’ve done a lot of things over the past year, but I still get scared to do some things on my own. This is the same terror as sitting alone at the middle school lunch tables.

“I just need to clean myself up a bit. I’ll be right behind you.”

My stomach wills me to take each step down the hall and toward the dining room. I should’ve stopped to eat lunch today.

“Hello, what’s your name, please?”

“Rachelle Stewart—”

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“Ah, yes. Rachel Stafford, right here on the list. I just sat the rest of your party. Right this way.” The man turns and starts weaving in and out of the tables, some of them filled with people and others with only a couple of guests.

I try to catch up to him to explain that’s not my name, when he gestures to an empty seat at a table of people.

“Here you are, miss,” he says, holding the chair out for me. I blow out a breath and sit down, allowing him to scoot me in. I don’t have it in me to argue.

It’s not until I glance up that I pause. Familiar chocolate brown eyes meet mine and I’m pretty sure time has frozen, for the second time this week.

“Rachelle? What are you doing here?” Landon says, looking just as surprised as I feel.

“Is that the only thing you know how to say these days?” I say, scooting back. I need to find another table. Did someone rig this? Am I on one of those hidden camera things? Because I’m not laughing right now.

What are the chances Landon would be on the same cruise ship I am and that the host sat me at this table? Obviously, he mistook me for someone else.

“It seems you know Landon,” a woman next to me says, a faint French accent tracing her words. Turning, I recognize the woman from the deck. Sitting next to her is the man she linked arms with. “Are you with the Hamilton Group?”

I shake my head, willing back tears. Of course, I can't enjoy a trip without thoughts of him or seeing his face everywhere I go.

Wait, is it because I've been thinking about him since paint balling and the underwear incident that I practically willed him on the boat? Oh, karma, please be kind.

"No, I, uh, won this trip."

"But what are the odds you see someone you know on board?" She smiles at me and I relax a bit. "I'm Isabella Hamilton and this is Roman, my husband. What's your name?"

The waiter walks up with another woman trailing him. "I apologize, miss. I believe I've seated you with the wrong table. This is Rachel Stafford." He turns, motioning to the woman.

I stand, my cheeks flaming with embarrassment. "Where should I go?" At least this will give me a break to process the fact that Landon is on the ship.

"Excuse me, sir," Isabella says, her hand in the air to get his attention. "I believe we have room at our other table. Why don't you have Rachel sit there? We'll keep—" she gestures to me, waiting for an answer.

"Rachelle Stewart."

Isabella smiles and turns back to the man. "We'll keep Rachelle here so she won't be alone."

Why did she have to point that out and in front of Landon?

The waiter nods and helps the real Rachel to her seat.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t need to take up one of your spots.”

Isabella shakes her head. “Please stay.”

I give her a small smile and turn my gaze to the small menu in front of me. “Wait, did you say Isabelle or Isabella?”

“Isabell-a,” she says with a smile.

I nod. “Sorry, there was a woman named Isabelle at my sister’s wedding a few months ago but I never met her. The world can be small sometimes so I thought I’d ask.”

She shakes her head. “I haven’t been to any weddings in the States for a year or two. Not since Roman’s friend Evan married a wedding planner named Sadie.”

Another familiar voice calls out, and I’m hoping it’s Tiffany. But when I turn, I see Dani making her way toward the table.

“I see my party,” she says, calling back to the host, who’s trying to follow her.

She smiles as she nods to the people at the table. “Sorry, I’m Landon’s sister.”

“The one who obviously forgot her watch on this trip,” Landon says, chuckling. Oh, how I’ve missed that sound.

Nope. Not going to do this here. I need a steel will to make it through this trip. Maybe it’s not too late to jump ship and swim back to shore. Who am I kidding? I do a great doggy paddle, but I’d never survive that far.

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Dani glances around the table and stops when she sees me. “Rachelle?” In three long strides, she’s at my side and pulls me in for a hug. “How are you?”

“I’m hanging in there,” I say, trying not to divulge too much. I don’t need a waterworks show with dinner tonight.

“It’s so good to see you.”

She makes her way back over to Landon and I have to keep my smile to myself as I watch her basically punch him in the side. Another reason I’ve missed the Higgins family. They’re for real and don’t hide behind pretenses.

“You too, Dani.”

My words don’t quite convey just how much I’ve missed her. She’s always been more of a sister than my own.

“Good evening,” the server says, coming to interrupt. At least it gives me some time to think about what to do in this situation. I pull my phone out of my clutch to text Tiffany, but there are no bars on the screen. I can’t even ask her to cause some sort of disturbance or anything. Maybe she’ll be here in time to see the train wreck in action.

The server turns to the opposite side of the table and Isabella reaches over, touching my forearm lightly. “Are you all right? You look like you just ate a raw onion.”

I laugh softly and shake my head. “Uh, just surprised by this whole evening.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to order? Someone told me to get everything and give it a try.”

She winks at me and I smile back. The menu is blurry as I try to force back the few tears clouding my vision.

I am strong. I’ve gone through a lot in the past year and I can make it through one meal with my ex.

One meal and then avoid him the rest of the trip. At least that’s my new plan.

CHAPTER9

Landon

Yeah, I can’t stop staring at the woman across from me. I try to glance away every few seconds, hoping I don’t look too stalkerish. But the fact that she’s here makes me happy Dani convinced/forced me to stay on the ship.

Every time I glance up, I see her and her different expressions. Isabella says something to make her smile and I wish I could do that. Any eye contact she makes with me is the equivalent of dart throwing.

Her comment about what I said when she sat down was a little biting, but at least it wasn’t a handful of paint balls aimed for my stomach.

What in the world is she doing here? Maybe the universe sent her as a way for me to make up for being a total idiot. I just need the opportune time to ask her forgiveness, preferably when we’re alone. The last thing I need is Roman thinking I’m not cut out for whatever he’s planning for me.

Then again, if it means I can have her back, I'm willing to risk my ego for her to understand I messed up. But it means telling her the whole reason behind leaving the first time, and I'm afraid it might break her.

Then again, she seems so much more confident, like she's taking on the world. Even though I thought I loved her before, this new self-assured Rachelle is causing the finale kind of firework zings to shoot through my body.

"Did you know she was going to be here?" Dani whispers out the side of her mouth as the server takes the orders from the other side of the table. Isabella is chatting with Rachelle and I'm caught again by the brightness of her smile. Yep, this is torture and I deserve it.

I shake my head. "No. I think it was a mix-up with the host."

"That got her on the boat? Please don't tell me you think she's dating a server who works for the cruise."

I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. What was I thinking when I thought bringing my sister on a business cruise was a good idea? Obviously, I didn't want to be alone, but now that Rachelle is here, by herself, I'm wondering if Dani will be a help or block in telling Rachelle I'm sorry.

Why is Rachelle here by herself?

"No, Dani, I meant sitting at our table." I reach over and take a sip of lemonade, needing a moment to collect my thoughts.

"Well, get through this dinner and we'll have an all-night planning session on how to get her back."

I glance over at her, laughing a bit. “Dani, you are one of a kind. Maybe we need to find you a guy on this trip.”

“I’m good. I’m just here for the food.”

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The server brings a couple baskets of bread and lays them on the table. Dani grabs a slice and takes a big bite, grinning at me.

I turn my attention back to Rachelle, wishing I could hear what she's talking about with Isabella. Roman chats with my boss, Gordon, and I cringe when I see the server coming our way, Savannah trailing him.

Dropping my head to the table, this night can't get any worse.

"Oh, this is perfect! I can't believe I get to sit by Landon!" she screeches. When I peek up for a second, I see Rachelle's eyes on me, her expression oddly cool. Do I even have a chance with her?

"Savannah," I say through clenched teeth, "I thought you were supposed to be taking over a couple of my appointments this week." Clara gave her at least three of my new client meetings, which is probably too many for her to handle anyway.

She leans over and touches her hand to my upper arm, squeezing a bit. "Oh, my mother had an emergency with a fundraiser she's hosting next week and couldn't come. So, I asked Ron to take over those appointments and all the others I had for the week."

She's beaming at me and the only thing I can say is, "How did you get Ron to agree to that?"

He's the one on my team who's the hardest to get through to in any capacity. Then again, I remember his grin as I suggested he take her home from paintball.

“Like it’s hard?” she says, and leans over to kiss her father on the cheek. “Hi Daddy.”

“Hi bunny. I didn’t think you’d make it in time.”

“Detonation. That’s what it takes.”

Dani snorts at my side, and I see a flicker of amusement on Rachelle’s face. Maybe she hasn’t changed that much.

“You mean, determination, Vannah.” Her dad’s cheeks are slightly pink. I could get used to seeing him this uncomfortable. It’s good to know something rattles him since he seems like a viper when it comes to real estate. In a good way, like he sneaks in and helps couples know exactly what they want. Yeah, I need to work on that comparison a bit more.

Pretty much I want to be like him when I grow up.

Our orders come a few minutes later, and I’m grateful because I’ve only had darts thrown at me from Rachelle while trying to fend off Savannah as she constantly hugs my arm.

“Well, if this isn’t awkward,” Dani says under her breath.

“I didn’t cause it,” I say, the frustration boiling over.

Dani is mid-sip of her Coke at this point and ends up spraying it everywhere. All eyes around the table turn to us.

“Sorry, everyone,” Dani says, taking a napkin and wiping at the spots on the vase that is the centerpiece for the evening. “I’m not very good at holding in my laughter.”

Everyone deadpans. Like an entire table trying to figure out what might've been so funny to spray sticky liquid beverage all over.

"Sorry, uh," I say, trying to get an excuse to come to mind. "She's just thinking of something dumb I did."

I can't help but look at Rachelle when I say this and she's staring right back at me. If only I knew what she's thinking.

"Well, that makes you human, right?" Roman says, chuckling.

We go back to our meals and then dessert, which makes me wonder why I didn't bring more sweat pant combos in my luggage. I can't turn down the sugary treats and my waistband won't hold out forever.

Rachelle wipes off around her mouth and stands up. "Well, thank you for allowing me to be here for this meal. I hope you have a great vacation. I need to check on my cousin."

Did she bring Tiffany? At least I know she's not all alone, which could be good and bad for me in trying to win her back. Tiffany might be persuaded to join my side. And she's the only cousin of Rachelle I've met.

"Rachelle, it was so nice to meet you. I would love for you to join us anytime." Isabella nods to her and Roman gives a wave.

Rachelle hesitates, and I catch a half-glance in my direction, as if she doesn't want me to know what her plans are. "That would be great. I'll have to look for you tomorrow."

"Sleep well." Isabella grins at her and Rachelle leaves, taking yet another piece of my

heart with her.

“I need to use the ladies’ room,” Savannah announces and takes off, allowing me some breathing room. Finally. Why couldn’t she have done that sooner?

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With that, Isabella leans over the table and says, “How long were the two of you together?”

Roman’s eyes widen. “You dated her?”

“Oh, it gets better,” Dani says, sticking a forkful of cake into her mouth. I’m half-tempted to reach over and cover her mouth with my hand like we used to do as kids when tattling on each other. She finally swallows and says, “They were engaged.”

Isabella nods, as if that doesn’t surprise her. “What happened?”

I open my mouth to give a simple explanation, but Dani barrels on like the snowplows through the streets of Boston with only a few inches of snow.

“He ruined it. Broke it off and then left town for Chicago.”

“I didn’t mean to—I mean, it’s a lot more complicated than that, but yes, I did screw up royally.”

Isabella stands, giving a small nod to Roman, who then stands as well.

“Well then, you’ve been given a second chance. We believe in those, right, dear?” she says, giving Roman a small smile.

He grins and nods. “Oh, how we do.”

Isabella takes a few steps around the table, her eyes locked with mine. “Make the

most of it, Landon. She seems like an amazing woman, and I doubt you'll get another chance."

The two of them leave arm in arm. With the rest of the eyes around the table staring at me, I stand.

I need air.

My world is spinning out of my control and if I don't put some order to it soon, I might dig myself a deeper grave.

CHAPTER 10

Rachelle

"Tiffany, are you all right?" I say, knocking softly on the bathroom door.

"I'll live. How was dinner?" she says, cracking the door. Mascara trails down her cheeks and everything else is puffy.

Too many thoughts race through my mind. "Let's talk about you first. Did you catch a bug or something?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure. I was fine until I smelled that garlic. I just hope I won't have an aversion to it now." With a flush of the toilet, she stands up and hobbles out of the bathroom, dropping onto the bed with a thump.

"That would be rough. I had that happen with Pop-Tarts a while back. I can't even look at them anymore."

Tiffany laughs. "Sadly, that's how Drew and I both look at those easy meals from a

box. I might've made a few too many since we got married."

I kick off my heels and lay back on the bed, staring at the white ceiling above.

"How was dinner? I take it you survived," Tiffany says, her pale white face trying to muster a smile.

Blowing out a breath, I try to figure out how to respond to that. Where do I start with all that happened?

"Landon was at dinner."

Tiffany's head snaps in my direction despite being sick. "Landon. Your ex, Landon. He's here on the ship?"

I nod, focusing on the ceiling again. "Yes, but don't get too excited. There is another woman falling all over him. I should've known he would already have someone. What a tool."

"The jerk. What did he do?"

"She was practically laying on him. She reminded me of a cat. I can picture her rubbing her face on his arm and purring."

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Tiffany gives me a lopsided grin before saying, “You love cats. Too bad you’re allergic.”

I pout. “I know. It’s not the best analogy I’ve ever come up with. Dani was there. I miss her.”

“Me too. That girl is hilarious.”

“She spit out her drink all over the table.” I find a small section of thread from the comforter on my bed and twist it around my finger. “Anyway, the server mistakenly sat me at Landon’s company’s table. So I met his boss, Roman, and his wife, Isabella. She’s so nice.”

“Isabella? Not—”

“No, she’s French, so it’s not the one from Hillary’s wedding.”

“Of all the cruises in all the world—”

“Just because he’s here, nothing is changing between us.” I pause for a moment, remembering the woman who’d been all over Landon. “And you know what? I think the woman who sat by him at dinner was at paint balling. She was talking about him a ton.”

“I remember you saying something about that.” She adjusts herself to face me. “Rachelle, you’re amazing and smart, you have a fun sense of humor and if Landon can’t see that, then you’re better off not being with him.”

I nod, even though I don't feel it completely. "Are you sure that's how you really feel? Because I sense you're still hoping we'll get back together."

Tiffany gives me a sheepish smile. "To be honest, it's hard not seeing the two of you together. The guy drove you home from the grocery store. But if he's changed that much, then even I need to move on from that fantasy."

I sigh and nod. "Do you need me to get you anything? I can go buy a Sprite or something to settle your stomach."

"Actually, that would be great. I'm going to just lay here for few more minutes. Or just go to bed now. Maybe if I get some sleep tonight, I'll be able to get over this bug faster and we can do something fun tomorrow."

"Like the go-karts." I grin at her. If I choose the activities, maybe I'll be able to avoid the slides on this trip.

"You're feeling the need for speed, huh?" Tiffany chuckles. "We could always hang out with Landon's company."

I pause a moment near the door, giving her suggestion more thought than I should. "That's a no from me."

Tiffany closes her eyes. "Okay, well, I'll be here. Go scope out the nightlife on the boat so we know what to expect tomorrow."

I nod and head out into the hallway, freezing with my hand on the doorknob when I see who's unlocking the cabin door next to ours.

Landon.

CHAPTER 11

Landon

“Rachelle, did something happen? Are you all right?” I ask. My heart beats at least double the speed as when I walked down the hall moments ago. I didn’t expect to see her again this soon, or this close to my room.

Her mouth opens and closes a few times before she points to my door and says, “You’re staying here?”

I check the number next to the cabin door to make sure I didn’t go to the wrong spot. “Um, yep. This is me. And Dani.”

Nothing like adding more awkwardness to what’s already transpired over the past hour.

She says nothing, as if she’s still processing this.

“Are you staying there?” I ask, hoping to keep the conversation going so she doesn’t flee.

With robotic movements, she nods and turns her head to the door. “Yes.” And then, as if by a snap of the fingers, she talks quickly. “I, uh, I’m going to get a soda for Tiffany. She’s not feeling well and I figure it might be nice to check out what’s going on outside.”

I can’t help but smile. The woman standing in front of me is a lot like the woman I was going to marry a year ago. But from everything I saw at dinner, she’s also changed, matured. Gained more confidence in herself.

It's little things like that which shove tiny daggers into my heart. I was an enabler. I'm probably still an enabler. Maybe I should stay away from her. Let her get closer to the future she deserves instead of one I kept misdirecting her to.

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That's what happens when you don't see someone for a year after seeing them every day for the six years before.

"Landon!" a screechy voice calls and I jam my key into the lock and twist it.

"Sorry, I'll see you around the ship."

I slip into the room just as footsteps approach. Once the door is closed, I sink down next to it. This is not my finest moment. How do I keep ruining things with Rachelle? She probably thinks I'm a coward.

Ducking inside my room isn't ruining anything. It's saving her from the showy hug I'd have to figure out how to wriggle out of anyway.

I saw her veiled attempts to look disinterested when Savannah had her hands all over me at dinner, but I didn't need to relive that in the hallway with no one else as a buffer.

I listen as I hear the conversation play outside.

"Oh, hey. I didn't catch your name at dinner. You are the one who sat at our table, right?" Savannah asks.

"Uh, yeah. I'm Rachelle."

"Are you new to the company? I haven't heard my father talk about a Rachelle before."

There's a moment's pause and then Rachelle says, "No, I actually won this trip from some giveaway I entered. The server—"

"That's so great," Savannah says, interrupting her. "Hopefully we'll be seeing more of each other. I was hoping to drag Landon out for a romantic stroll on deck. I thought he was down this hall, and it looked like he was before I saw you. You don't know where he's staying, do you?"

There is nothing, no sound except for my accelerated heart rate as I wonder what Rachelle will do. I can only hope she'll steer Savannah away. Far, far away. If only it could be in another galaxy.

A knock on the door tells me she gave me up.

"Landon. Come walk with me, will you? It's such a nice night out."

Do I pretend to not be here? Do I feign being sick?

Another knock. "Landon, are you in there?"

Seconds tick by and I breathe a sigh of relief once her footsteps move away from the door. The only problem now is why Rachelle directed her to me. Maybe she thinks I'm dating Savannah?

I'll have to be better about my interactions with my boss's daughter and maybe even have a heart-to-heart about not being ready for a relationship. With her.

But even then, I don't think it's going to be as easy to get Rachelle back as I'd hoped. I might need to call in Dani as a planner just to have a chance with her.

CHAPTER12

Landon

Ifinally emerge from the room a bit later, knowing I need to face up to the problems in my life, even if I didn't create them all, i.e. Savannah.

After knocking several times on Rachelle's door, I turn toward the deck, thinking I might find her there. She said something about checking out what the nightlife was like.

I sigh, running both hands through my hair as I walk through the hall and out into the night. I've put off a haircut for too long as it is. That needs to go on my schedule once I get back.

Lights brighten the deck and music plays, with couples swaying back and forth, the crescent moon an amazing backdrop.

Rachelle is nowhere in sight. She deserves so many explanations from me and I need to start that process. Whether she'll believe me is something I can't think about too much.

After proposing to Rachelle, I'd begun planning the honeymoon, doing so as secretly as possible. We'd never been on a cruise before, and I saved up right after buying the ring. Well, after helping my mother out with many of the expenses around the house. I just didn't picture my first cruise not having Rachelle by my side at all times.

Nostalgia hits hard when life doesn't turn out how you want it to.

I wander around for several minutes, looking for the familiar brown hair and figure I'm ready to spill all my secrets to. But she isn't here.

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“There you are,” Savannah says, slipping her arm through mine. “I was wondering if you’d gotten sick or something. My daddy had to go lay down for a bit. He said he needed some peace, so I figured I’d come try to find something to do. Any ideas?” She lifts her hand up to run it through my hair and I take a big step back.

“I, uh,” I get out, rubbing the back of my neck with my free hand. “I’m looking for someone, actually.”

“Your sister?” Savannah asks.

No, but that could work as a diversion. “Yes. Have you seen her?”

“She’s over there by the railing. I’ll go get us some drinks and meet you over there?”

All I can manage is a small smile. I don’t want to hurt her, but I also don’t want Rachelle to get the wrong idea about our relationship.

I nudge Dani with my elbow when I make it next to her. “What are you doing over here?”

“Just enjoying a beautiful view and taking a moment to breathe in the fresh air without the constant rush of assignments and papers. What about you? Where have you been? I thought you just went to grab your nice camera from the room.”

I had said that’s what I was doing when I left the group at dinner. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“You must really be out of it if you forgot the one thing you went to get, buddy,” Dani says, glancing back over the water.

“What are you thinking about?” Dani is at least sixty-percent jokes and twenty-five percent sarcasm. This somber five percent doesn’t show up very often around me.

“My life. And how much I want to stab you for breaking up with Rachelle.” She pokes her pointer finger into my chest and jabs a couple times.

I nod and take a step back out of reach, rubbing at the spot with my hand. “We’ve been over this. I thought you were going to give me a break.”

“Sisters usually have wonderful insight into relationships, Landon,” an accented voice says next to me. I turn to find Isabella and Roman leaning against the railing. “Why don’t you tell us what happened?”

I raise an eyebrow, not sure I want to splay my heart out in front of the big head boss. And Dani’s already given them the watered-down version. The true story doesn’t paint me in the best light, and I’m not ready for Rachelle to find out from someone else. But I can give them a few details.

“Rachelle and I started dating in high school. She came into my life just after our father,” I say, pointing between me and Dani, “passed away. We went to colleges close to each other and then I proposed after graduation. We were set to get married last year, and, um—” I trail off, not sure how to put it all together.

Isabella raises her eyebrows, waiting for me to continue.

“There were some objections to us getting married.” I blow out a deep breath, relieved to have gotten that much out.

I feel a slap on the shoulder and turn to see Dani's eyebrows cinched and her lips in a tight line. "Who objected?"

"It really doesn't matter. The damage is done now, and I need to move on from the past." I lean back onto the railing, talking myself into cooling the anger simmering in my stomach.

"Yeah, with Rachelle. You've done everything you can to take care of Mom and the family after Dad died, but every time something in your life is a little hard, you hide. I don't get it, Landon."

It's probably good she didn't see me in the room dodging Savannah just a few minutes ago.

"There will always be objections to the things we want to do or what we want," Roman says. This is the most he's spoken to me since that day in my office, and it's kind of surprising. Isabella is the one who directs a lot of their relationship, from what I've seen. "Isabella had a few tricks up her sleeve to get me out of my comfort zone. And while I was furious with her at first, I'm forever grateful that she's by my side. I could've lost her, and neither I nor the company would be where it is today."

"Don't give up on her," Isabella says, patting my hand with hers. "And if there's anything we can do to help, consider it done. We always love a good happy ending."

I give them a grateful nod, not sure how to keep all the emotions back. Life hasn't always handed me the easiest set of cards, and I've had to fight through a lot to keep everyone afloat. But having the two of them, practically strangers, standing before me and saying that they're willing to help, well, it can make a grown man cry. Or tear up at least.

And as much of a pain as she can be, Dani is right here, cheering me on in her own

way.

I have support. Now I need a plan that can't fail.

CHAPTER13

Rachelle

I'm on my second walk around the ship. Yeah, I'm basically working off my frustration for Landon by getting in my steps. Where's my smart watch so I can get my once-a-month health report?

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Why the frustration? Because my body still reacts to him like no time has passed, like an unwilling soldier disobeying a commanding officer. So I'm giving myself a pep talk.

"He's moved on. He's dating the young Barbie look-alike, which means I need to stay the course and finish what I started."The BBL.

I want to hate Savannah, but she seems like she's just trying to go after what she wants in life, and I can't blame her for that. But what about Landon? Did he duck into his room because he feels bad about parading his relationship around in front of me?

Back to mumbling to myself. "Focus on the future. What do you want to be when you grow up?" A lady passes me just as I say that, confused as to whom I'm having a conversation with. So I lift my hand to my ear as though I'm listening to someone through a Bluetooth mic. It does the trick.

My phone dings and an unfamiliar app symbol sits at the top of my screen. Whatever happened to no service on the cruise unless I upgraded? I drag my thumb down from the top and see it's the Love, Austen app.

"You have new matches." My thumb hovers over the box and then I tap it. Might as well give myself some hope that I'm not totally undateable.

The spinning wheel of death greets me and the matches won't load because, as I guessed, there is no service again. Not unless I have the money to pay and I've got to save everything until I get another job. Well, except for the few souvenirs I might find.

I tuck the phone into my pocket and walk for a few more minutes. The sky is beautiful, causing me to stop and lean against the railing to take it all in. There are several shades of dark blue, the stars splattered across the canvas as if someone dipped a brush into white paint and flicked it.

“Okay, Rachelle,” I say to myself, keeping my voice lower so I don’t get any more weird looks, “I know you said the cruise would be the final achievement to finish the Breakup Bucket List, but because of unforeseen circumstances, we’re going to have to amend that.”

I pause, contemplating this decision. There’s no one else to witness it, but this needs to be the last piece to getting over Landon.

“You’ll go on a date with the highest match when you get home. A real date, where you actually try and don’t just go through the motions.”

Tiffany set me up on two dates and Evie volunteered a friend from work. They were all nice guys, but pushing me to date at the time didn’t help. Now I need to do it on my own, to heal my heart and tell myself I’ll be fine even if Landon has moved on.

My brain hangs onto the way Landon snuck off when he saw Savannah. It pulls up all the memories of our breakup. Disappearance, silence, simple explanations when a complex one was needed.

Maybe breaking up had really been for the best.

After checking out the few parties and grabbing a soda for Tiffany, I head back to the room. I’m exhausted after the emotional waves from the day and figure an early night will help me be refreshed for the morning.

Tiffany snores as though she’s a lumberjack sawing logs and I’m doing everything I

can to keep from thinking Landon is a wall away in the room next door. It could've been us on this cruise together.

But I can't go back down that train of thought. I've been able to get over him for the most part, I've just got to continue on the track that leads away from him. And I've got a new goal.

By the time morning hits, I feel like I slept a total of three hours, chopped up into segments. Maybe spa day would be better than racing today.

Tiffany is up before me, which is a surprise.

"Let's go grab some breakfast," I say knocking on the door to the bathroom. I'm hoping I don't have to go by myself this time. And that Tiffany is feeling better, or else I'm flying solo for longer than an hour.

"Coming," she says and I can hear her toothbrush whirring. I sit on the bed trying to be patient as my stomach rumbles with hunger. That's what I get for not having an appetite when seeing my ex the night before.

Tiffany comes out in a sundress. "OK, I'm ready. Do you mind if we swim? I think my stomach can handle the water." I can see the ties of her swimsuit peeking through her sundress straps.

I roll my eyes and say, "You're making sure I'm not getting out of it, aren't you?"

She grins as she slips her feet into her flip flops in the corner. "Ding, ding, ding. We've got a winner."

I grab the pillow from the bed and chuck it at her. With her head down, she doesn't have time to react and it nearly knocks her over.

“Wow! I can’t believe you just did that. Are you swimming or not?” Tiffany says, her hand on her hip.

“Sure, let me just change really fast.” I open my luggage and pull out the swimsuit option I purchased the night I ran into Landon at the store. I might as well give this one a try. After a few tugs to make sure everything is in place, I walk out, waiting for Tiffany to look up.

She turns and her jaw drops open. She lets out a little squeal. “Girl! That swimsuit is gorgeous. You are rocking it.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, the self-doubt creeping in.

“Are you kidding?” she says, walking closer. “The top is amazing, especially since you now have the boobs to fill it out.” She beams at me. “I love the floral print too. You should’ve told me you were buying it so we could’ve gotten matching ones.”

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I laugh a little, relief washing over me. Tiffany is the one person who gives me her real opinion, but always in a constructive way. And the fact that she loves my swimsuit eases my nerves enough to step outside the room. “It was a splurge buy, right after quitting my job and the phone call from my mother. It was mixed in with the panties Landon saw in the frozen foods aisle.”

“Of course that happened. We have talent, you and I, for the embarrassing.” She pauses and walks over to stand next to me, resting a hand on my shoulder. “I know it’s hard, but your mom isn’t the only one with an opinion. How do you feel in this suit?” She gestures up and down my body with her hands, waiting for an answer.

After an extra moment of hesitation, I turn to the mirror and stare. “I really like it. And you’re right, I finally have a few assets to make it work.”

“Then go out there with all the confidence in the world because you look amazing.” Tiffany wraps her arms around me, and I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, going over the many things I’m grateful for on this trip. Having Tiffany act as a pseudo-therapist is helping my mood shift for the better.

I throw on a sundress and we walk out the door.

“How are you feeling today? Any better?”

She nods. “Yeah, I bought some Dramamine at the store here on the ship early this morning and I think it’s working its magic.” So that’s why she got up so early. I didn’t even hear her leave. Then again, I probably fell asleep by the time she woke up.

I adjust the sundress before we get to the breakfast room and we eat quickly. It's surprising that I'm actually kind of excited to go swimming today. It's been a while since I've had the chance and water somehow calms all the crazy thoughts in my head. Except for waterslides of death.

Tiffany points to an open couple of chairs next to the pool and we set down our things before she leads me to the line for one of the slides. "Are you ready for this?"

I glance up, seeing how many flights we have to climb to get to the top. It drains all the excitement I have about swimming. "We can just swim in the pool."

"Yeah, but we should try out the slides, don't you think? They aren't that high." Tiffany gives me an exaggerated wink and I groan.

We start walking up the stairs and a pit forms in my stomach.

Don't look down, don't look down. We're just gonna jump right into being out of the comfort zone, aren't we?

I said I'd give everything a try on this trip, and I'm now regretting that. But at least Tiffany is here by my side. She's always been a safe place, but then again so was Landon at one point. The thought makes me glance around, trying to be aware of where he is so I can ogle/avoid him.

I know, it sounds ridiculous.

We make a slow climb to the top, Tiffany basically gripping my hand with an iron fist and pulling me upward.

A memory pops up of the last hike I've ever been on. Landon, Dani, and I, along with a few of Dani's friends went on a hike to a waterfall. The views were amazing but I

made the mistake of looking over the edge and fainted. It was a good thing Landon was there to keep me from falling into the ravine, or else I might not be here today.

And yet I have that same feeling I might faint from the height of this metal contraption.

“You made it to the top,” Tiffany says, braiding her hair away as we wait in line. When she finishes, she claps her hands together and I’m tacking on the best smile I’ve got, even when my insides are all jumbled together.

I watch as a guy heads down the slide, all calm, as if he’s not ready to die on this thing. Okay, death is extreme, but my stomach doesn’t think so at the moment.

It’s a tube, which could be good or bad for me depending on how twisty it is going down.

“Do you wanna go first or you want me to?” Tiffany asks.

I don’t think too long about it because I know the longer my mind goes, the less chance I have of actually going down.

“I guess I’ll go first,” I say, stepping over and positioning myself in the tube. The lifeguard gives the signal to go and I pause for a half second before Tiffany pushes me from behind. A scream escapes my lungs, echoing through the tube.

This is like an out of body experience where I am hurtling downward and then the tube opens up so I can see the sky. The feeling that I’m sliding out past the edge of the boat causes me to scream louder, and my arm stretches with a will of its own, as if I can stop myself from flipping over the side of the boat. Instead of stopping, the momentum twists me around.

Not only am I hurtling down in a plastic tube over the side of a large cruise ship and possibly falling into the ocean, but now I'm doing it backwards.

I try to turn my head to see what's happening behind me but end up getting a large mouthful of water. And then it's as though the slide gushes more water, picking up even more speed and making it so my stomach is practically in my throat.

If I live through this, I'm never doing this again. I finally feel the slide leveling off but I can't see it because I squeezed my eyes shut. And then my body is still.

I lay back, my nose the only thing above water as I try to compose myself. Why do people think that's fun?

I hear words through the water but they're distorted. Of course, when I pop my eyes open, guess who is standing above me?

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Yep, the Greek god known as my former fiancé.

Can't a girl catch a break?

CHAPTER14

Landon

It's not my finest moment, but when I overheard Tiffany and Rachelle talking about the waterslides as they left their cabin this morning, I convinced Dani to switch our plans. Not that she needs much encouragement because she's ready to make shirts that say "Team Lachelle" on them. That was the nickname my younger sisters gave us, kind of like the celebrity relationships of Brangelina. Back when they were together.

We make it to the pool but I don't see them anywhere.

"You're sure they were coming here?" Dani asks, casually walking around the pool.

"Yeah," I say.

Dani shrugs. "Well, we might as well have fun while we're here. Let's go to that slide first."

We race to the top and find no line. The water takes me through the slide, twisting and turning until it shoots me out at the bottom.

The high-pitched scream coming down the slide next to me sounds a lot like Rachelle's, except she's not a fan of water slides, especially the kind that last longer than three seconds to make it to the bottom.

We'd gone to a water park just after we started dating in high school and she avoided all of the larger slides, taking care of my younger sisters in the smaller kiddie areas.

So, for her to actually go down a slide that caused the adrenaline to course through me, is a big deal.

I stand next to the end of the slide for a moment, letting my gaze slide from her closed eyelids down to her pink lips. When her eyes open and I see the brilliant blue of them, it takes a minute for my brain to work again.

She sits up, her hair trailing down her back, and I have to check myself because seeing her in a bathing suit like that makes me regret everything that's happened over the past year. Okay, every time I've run into her in the past week, I've felt like that, but she's not running away from me at the moment. I'll take that as a good sign.

"Did you need something?" she asks, brushing her hands down her hair and squeezing out the water.

"I was just trying to make sure you're all right."

"Of course," she says, standing and getting out of the slide tunnel. "That was exhilarating. Probably one of the best things I've done in a while." There's a small wobble in her voice. I'm trying to decide if she's lying for my benefit when another splash of water comes down.

Tiffany stands up and says, "Landon, it's been a while. No business meetings today?"

At least Rachelle talks about me a little. But is that a good thing or a bad thing? I'm hoping it's not bad. Since when did I become the over analyzer of everything?

"Where is Dani?" Tiffany asks and I turn to point toward the stairs.

"She's heading for the next slide." Then I get an idea that will help me solve whether Rachelle is being brave for me. "Would you ladies like to join us?" I give Rachelle a smile and turn with pleading eyes to Tiffany. She used to be a good sport about things and I can only hope she'll take pity on me and work her magic.

"Of course," Tiffany says. She winds her arm through Rachelle's and directs her toward the stairs.

"Are you sure you wanna do this?" Rachelle asks and I can see a small sliver of terror in her eyes.

"Why not? We're trying everything here, right?" Tiffany says.

"So much fun," Rachelle says, her lips puckered like she just ate a lemon. Her laugh is off. "What about lunch though? Shouldn't we be heading to eat?" She pulls away from Tiffany's arm a bit, as if she's about to head down the five stairs we've climbed.

Tiffany taps her arm. "We just had breakfast."

"Oh yeah. Right."

The two of them walk up the stairs and I follow, doing my best to not watch Rachelle's backside as we climb. It's not like we're together or anything and I've got to keep my thoughts in check before I do something stupid, like kiss her too early. Which I would willingly do at any point on this trip.

But laying the groundwork to make it seem like I'm just a good friend again is brutal. I want to break the barrier and take her hand in mine, or even pick her up and carry her to a part of the boat that's actually quiet so we can talk. Or kiss. I'm in favor of the kissing.

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Although I'm wondering more and more about what I should do about us. Dani fell asleep before we talked more about these ideas she has, but I need to come up with something that won't scare her away.

We climb several flights of stairs and by the time we get to the top, my legs feel like gelatin. I probably need to get back to the gym more consistently after this trip. With all the appointments and adjusting to life back in Boston, I haven't had the time.

Once I make it to the top of the slide, I take inventory of where everyone is. Tiffany is hugging Dani and the two of them are talking animatedly. Rachelle is clenching and unclenching her fists just behind them, almost dancing from foot to foot.

At least the weather isn't cold right now, which tips me off that she's freaking out.

I reach forward to lightly touch her arm, but am not prepared for the reaction. In one swoop, Rachelle turns with a clenched fist and punches it forward, reminding me of that old timey game where the two figures are fighting until the head pops up to announce the winner. Rock 'em, Sock 'em, I think it is.

The hard part is that I'm the one with the neck being lengthened and pain shooting through my jaw. My teeth feel like I've just bit down on aluminum foil and I now get it when people say they see stars after they've been punched.

"I'm so sorry," Rachelle says somewhere close to me. "I didn't mean to do that. I promise, no matter how mad I am at you, I never intended to hurt you physically."

I stand upright again, rubbing at the spot on my jaw. The pain eases back and my

eyesight returns to normal. “You’re that mad, huh?”

Her eyes darken at my smile and I raise my hands.

“Rightly so. I was an idiot, Rachelle. I never should’ve left you, let alone the way I did.”

It’s at that moment when I realize Tiffany and Dani are watching the entire exchange. All of us are semi-shivering on the platform of the slide on a cruise ship. Yeah, there’s no way I would’ve planned this for my apology.

I turn my focus back to Rachelle, taking a deep breath in the hopes she’ll respond at some point. Her expression is hard to read, which is saying something as she’s always been an open book, at least to me.

“Thank you,” she says slowly, “I’m glad you admit you’re an idiot.”

I hear the sounds of Tiffany and Dani’s twittering next to us and try to focus on the woman I love. The one I’ve always loved.

“Well, it’s the truth.”

“Are you guys filming a Hallmark movie, or are you going to ride the slide?” a guy says from behind me.

“Come on, man,” Dani says, gesturing between Rachelle and me. “These two have needed this talk for a very long time.”

“Does it look like I care?” he says, and I turn to see he’s a few inches taller than me. I doubt I’d come out with all my teeth if a fight broke out.

But Dani doesn't even back down. "Do you have a heart, sir?"

A slight flicker of a smile crosses his face before he schools his expression to one of indifference. I just hope she doesn't get sucked into his orbit. Dani's been attracted to all the wrong men for her entire life.

"I'll go down," Tiffany says, looking like she's not in the mood to watch a fight, which is unlike her. She disappears once she's given the go ahead and Dani gets into position after her.

"Are you all right?" Rachelle asks, her gaze traveling to my jaw.

I move it back and forth and although it's stiff, it's nothing compared to what Rachelle's been through. The inner scars I created. The delivery might've been wrong on several levels, but the changes I see in her probably wouldn't have happened if we'd still gotten married. And now I'm hoping it's been enough time that we can move toward the future together.

"I'll be fine. Are you okay?" I dip my head to make eye contact with her.

She gives me a half-smile and nods. "I have to admit, I've thought about hitting you more times than I can count over the past year. Even though it was unintentional, it felt good."

I laugh louder than I have in months. "Well, I'll take any aggression you need to get out. I deserve it." I rub my jaw and then say, "Where did you learn to fight?"

Her eyes widen and she says, "I, um, have been trying out some different hobbies over the past year. Kick boxing was one of them."

"Oh, so I need to be worried about you kicking me, too?" I take a step back,

pretending to be hurt.

“Dude,” the guy behind me says, “girls don’t want a guy who’s a wuss.”

I turn and give the guy a glare, wishing he would just butt out of this conversation. I mean, I’ve made significant progress here. She’s hit me with paintballs and now her fist. If I’d known she just needed a little boxing practice, I would’ve come to her sooner.

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“Some are good just being alive at the moment,” Rachelle says, glancing between the two of us. With that, she turns around and heads down the slide.

“Thanks for that, man,” I say, adding in a healthy layer of sarcasm. We’d been on a roll and I have a feeling we aren’t going to the moment back once I’m at the bottom of the slide.

Instead of the guy getting the hint, a large palm slaps down on my shoulder, sending pain vibrations coursing through me.

“No problem, dude. Sometimes we just need a little shove to man up.”

Even though I’m not a fan of him butting into our conversation, the guy has a point. And I won’t leave this ship without doing everything I can to get Rachelle back. But even with the glimpse of the old Rachelle, will she ever completely trust me again?

CHAPTER15

Rachelle

That is the last slide I’ll be going down in a while.

Okay, let’s be real. I’m scarred. There will be no more slides in my lifetime.

The adrenaline from accidentally hitting Landon faded about a third of the way down. Then it turned to sheer terror.

Seeing the bottom of the slide go down a steep incline is not what my stomach was built for.

“Where are you going?” Tiffany asks as I stumble out of the end of the slide toward the stack of towels.

“To relax on a chair.”

“Are you sure?” Dani says, frowning. “We were going to the last slide. I think it’s the biggest on the ship. We can wait for you if you need to catch your breath.”

I shake my head, wiping at the water running down my face. “I’m good for today. I’d rather not end up in the room for the rest of the trip. Or the makeshift hospital wing.” Even on my frustration walk the night before I hadn’t seen a clinic or anything, but on a boat this size, there has to be something to help with emergencies.

“I’m actually ready for a break as well,” Tiffany says, surprising me. “I must not be completely over what I ate. Go ahead, Dani. We’ll catch up with you soon.”

The water at the end of the slide surges and there is Landon, walking out in some bright orange board shorts, which match the slightly tanned skin above the waistband. I didn’t have a chance to take him in like this at the top of the slide since my hand was and is still throbbing.

My attention is again focused on his jaw, but this time attraction surges as I replay how relaxed he was about being hit. I hope he doesn’t have a bruise. Then I’ll have to stare at it whenever we see each other on deck. But it could be a good thing. I didn’t learn how to hit or fight until a few months ago and Kenzie would be proud.

I glance away before the sight of the water running down his chest and abs draws me in. He’s always looked amazing to me, but I think he’s worked to get rid of anything

that wiggles. Probably for Savannah.

I groan, remembering that I'm ogling some other woman's boyfriend. I'm no homewrecker.

He glances up, his eyes searching and I turn, ready to bolt to a chair out of sight. Instead, I end up hitting the side of my head on a metal pole holding up a section of the deck above me and fall to the ground.

It takes several seconds for the world to stop spinning.

"Are you all right?" Tiffany asks, turning my head as she examines the spot.

"No, but I'll survive." I brush her hands away. "Don't do that. You'll draw attention."

"Landon already saw you smack into the pole. No worries there."

"Rachelle, are you all right?" he asks, coming to my side. Why do I feel like he's constantly asking me how I am? A mental recap of the underwear incident and my unhinged shooting of him in the chest replay across my brain.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to figure out the best way out of here. Where are my ruby slippers when I need to escape real life?

I try to nod, but a pain surges over my eyebrows. "I'll be fine." I give a gentle push around the growing bump on the side of my head. At least it won't be a huge bruise on my forehead by tomorrow.

Just leave me to die from humiliation.

He takes my hand and the familiar strength in them causes the ripples of attraction to

flow through me. With a slight tug, he's pulled me to a standing position, leaving only a couple inches between us.

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And there's the electric current from when we dated. It's like a magnet drawing me into him. I need to fight it, but I don't want to.

"Do you need me to get you something? Ibuprofen or a drink?" His gaze is so earnest, I debate whether to allow him that much.

I smile, letting my gaze drift to his lips. "I should be—"

"Landon! I've been looking everywhere for you," a high-pitched voice calls, reminding me a little of that woman Chandler dated on Friends. What was her name again? Janice?

I turn to find Savannah running toward him, her hair and makeup done like she's ready for an awards show, only in a bikini instead of a formal gown.

When she jumps into his arms, I turn around, willing my insides to not react at all. Tiffany grabs my hand and tugs me past the pole and toward a couple of chairs.

"He's not dating her," Tiffany says, adjusting her sunglasses as she glances toward the sun.

I roll over on my chair to look at her. "What do you mean? Did you not see the way they fit together?" I pause, realizing how that sounds. "I mean, if I cared at all what he's doing with his life now."

Tiffany gives me a knowing smile. "Rachelle, if they're together, I'll buy you ice cream for the next six months. There's no way."

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Then I won’t have to worry about getting a sugar fix.

I let out a groan and lay back on my beach chair. There is too much comparison between me and Savannah happening in my brain, and I need to stop it.

“I’m just saying you can tell he’s uncomfortable around her because of how stiff he is.” She pauses a moment and I know she’s studying the scene before us. “See, he put her down nicely and then took a step back.”

“Well, if he’s not with her, why doesn’t he tell her that?” I growl, closing my eyes. I take a deep breath and hold it for a few seconds before blowing it out. A little more relaxed, I’m hoping to scrub out the memory of Landon’s hands around Savannah’s back.

But he’s not mine to claim, and I don’t want to. I shouldn’t even be jealous. But there’s no way around that right now.

It’s like telling myself I no longer eat cookies. Impossible.

* * *

After changing and grabbing lunch in the buffet section, we head out to the go-karts. No matter what I do, I can’t get the image of Landon catching Savannah out of my brain. I’d seen that brief glimmer of the way we used to be at the top of the slide, and now I have to put that out of my mind forever. He’s moved on and so should I.

Savannah doesn’t seem like his type, but then again, I’m not his wife either. People change in a few months, let alone a year, so maybe I don’t know him like I thought.

“Hello, ladies. Are you here to race?” A guy in a shirt one size too small says from behind the counter. It takes some work, but I’m able to keep from laughing, turning

around to cover up my smirk when he glances down at his paperwork. He's the epitome of what my sister would call a beefcake. I bet the size of his legs are toothpicks compared to his veiny arms. Yuck.

"Okay, come through here and watch this short instructional video. We'll get the papers signed after." He motions us through to a small room where several folding chairs are set up.

We're seated in front of a small screen on the opposite wall, and the lights dim. For a few seconds, it's pitch black and my eyes take time to adjust. Then the screen comes on, a blinding sun making my eyes water a bit.

"Oh, I was hoping we'd run into you at some point, Rachelle," a female voice says from behind me.

I turn to see Isabella and Roman sitting in the plastic chairs behind us.

"It's good to see you again," I say, giving her a soft smile. It seems I can't get away from Landon or the people who remind me of him.

"Are you excited about driving the go-karts? I can't wait," she says, elbowing her husband.

I nod and gesture next to me and say, "This is Tiffany, my cousin. Tiffany, this is Roman and Isabella. I met them at dinner last night."

"Oh, when I bailed? Oh, it's so nice to meet you. Thanks for taking care of my cousin. What brings you two here?"

Roman smiles at Isabella and says, "We're here for our company retreat. Rachelle knows one of our employees. Landon Higgins."

The delight on Tiffany's face is legendary. "Yes, we definitely know him. I have to say I'm glad you all came on this cruise. Maybe the two of them will finally work things out."

I lean over and pinch Tiffany on the thigh. She jumps and glares before it turns into a grin.

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“Legally you have to listen to the video,” Mr. Beefcake says, and I turn around, grateful for the darkness and the distraction to block the embarrassment now surging through me. I never get into trouble unless Tiffany is around.

When the video ends, Isabella and Roman walk out to sign their papers and I grab Tiffany’s arm and hold her in place for a moment. “What was that?”

“What?”

“The comment about Landon and I getting back together.”

She shrugs. “It could happen. To be honest, you need someone in your life who isn’t full of estrogen. And we definitely need to do a wardrobe shopping spree when we dock.”

I glance down at my jeans and t-shirt. “What do you mean? I didn’t want to ruin any of my other clothes while racing. What if I blow a tire and end up rolling on the track?”

Tiffany hesitates, looking at me like I’ve just crossed a line. Or several.

“All of that went into picking out jeans and a t-shirt? Do you go through that mental process every time you get ready?”

“Only when I know I don’t have other options.” And when my ex is on board a cruise ship with me.

Tiffany nods. “Okay, but you’re probably the safest driver here. Just don’t roll. I can’t imagine telling your mother what happened.”

That thought brings something sour to my tongue and I shake it off. What would Tina Stewart say if she could see me right now?

She’d criticize my clothes and that I’ve gained weight since the wedding was called off. But to be honest, I’ve felt a bit more confident about how I look, except for when Landon is around. He loved me for so long at one size and now I’m not that anymore.

That’s kind of a mood killer. Ugh. Is there a thought destroyer someone can plant in my brain? Maybe one of those shock therapy collar things would work for me.

Yep, and there goes the image of him holding Savannah as she jumps into his arms, playing across my mind for the hundredth time since it happened two hours ago.

I grab Tiffany’s arm and scribble our names on the lines we need to sign before charging out into the line for the go-karts.

“Where’s the fire?” she asks, rubbing her wrist once I let go.

I chuckle. “No fire. Just a girl who needs to burn through some adrenaline.”

“Hey, sounds good.” She waits a moment and then leans over to ask in a whisper, “Are you irritated because I’m hoping Lachelle will get back together?”

I shake my head and turn away from her, not in the mood to continue this line of conversation. “It’s not on the Breakup Bucket List, but I could use some speed.”

Tiffany grins. “Yes, that’s what I love to hear. Too bad I don’t have that on record to remind you in a few hours that you’re an adventuring vixen.”

I raise an eyebrow and laugh. “Since when do you talk like that? What’s your new obsession since you gave up true crime podcasts?”

“Fantasy novels. I’ve been getting into the urban fantasy ones where it’s like witches and vampires and stuff but now instead of the eighteenth century.”

I nod, all of it making sense. “Of course, that’s totally relatable.”

She nods, her expression sober. “Well, I get a lot more sleep now that I’m not worried about who’s going to kill me. Drew calls that a win.”

I laugh, but there’s a prick at my heart. Landon and I always had a relationship similar to Tiffany and Drew’s.

Why did Landon leave? Was I just so unlovable that he couldn’t imagine his life with me even though we’d been through a lot of the crap that tears couples up?

Sure, I’ve waited over a year without a good explanation, mostly because he disappeared to Chicago. But a cruise ship is the best place to corner him to get the real details. Find myself some closure. Because that’s what the BBL was created for in the first place.

I take a helmet from Mr. Beefcake himself and walk out onto the track to get into the go-kart. I thought they’d be a little closer to mini racecars and try not to be disappointed. But if they can’t actually go fast enough to blow my hair back, I’ll need to find another activity to get out my frustration. Too bad there isn’t an axe-throwing center on board.

With all the buckles securely fastened (I checked three times to be safe), I’m ready to roll.

Mr. Beefcake gets out one of those checkered flags and waves it in front of us. I'm four cars back, behind Tiffany, Roman and Isabella.

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It takes some maneuvering but I finally edge around Tiffany and give the cart some gas to catch up to the other two. My feet might have the gas pedal to the floorboards, but I pass Roman with ease. He must be along for the ride, but it seems like Isabella is out to take on the course just like me.

A curve approaches and the car tucks into the ground a bit more as I swerve around it. A little back and forth and I'm finally free of Isabella, ramping up the speed by a whole two miles per hour as I take off down the track.

There is something so freeing about this moment, allowing me to get out some of my aggression while in a controlled environment. Just like the waterslides, the go-kart track loops off the side of the ship, but it's guarded with a higher section of fence, which helps ease my worries that I won't somehow be thrown overboard.

I slow down some, enjoying the moment. It's been a long time since I've felt settled in anything. While my life is pretty much a wreck right now with so many uncertainties, I'm amazed I can still find a moment of peace. And it doesn't come because of anything I've done or people I've talked to. It's because I've taken risks to stretch myself.

Maybe having this time on the cruise to refresh will do me good. It's a great idea until I see Landon waiting in the wings as I whip around another curve. It's like my head is trying to tell me to be careful, but my heart never got the memo.

The half-smile he's wearing as he stares out at the ocean leaves everything inside me fluttering. I like to picture dragonflies instead of bees. Bees hurt people, and while Landon hurt me, I get the impression it wasn't entirely on purpose. Like he was

trying to shield me from something. But what?

I drive around another loop, revving the engine as hard as it'll go, when Isabella creeps forward again.

We're smiling like two kids who've been given the keys to their daddy's car.

By the time we make it back to the checkpoint, we're neck and neck. There is nothing I can do to make the car go faster; the pedal is already pressed against the bottom of the car. We both pass the line at what looks to be the same moment and slow down a few feet later.

As I come to a stop, I lean my head back, enjoying the adrenaline rush pulsing through me. My chest heaves up and down in an attempt to gain air.

"That was a pretty good race," Isabella says, stepping out of the car. She's got her helmet in her hand and the other is working to tuck the small wisps of hair flying to the sides. The woman is a polished gem, but it's nice to see her hair is unruly, just like mine.

I unbuckle and take off my helmet, brushing away the static cling of hair covering my eyes.

"Definitely."

"I didn't think you'd be into driving, but you surprised me."

I purse my lips, trying to figure out what she means by that. "What impression do I give you?"

It's the first time I've ever asked someone's opinion of me. My mother always gives

me her thoughts even when I don't want to hear them, and strangely, I'm curious to see what this woman says.

"First impressions don't always stick, but from dinner last night, I was going to say you're a mild-mannered, quiet woman."

I laugh at that, because it's what I've been taught to be growing up. "And now?"

"I think there's an adventurer inside you just waiting to break free."

We walk over to the sidewalk and meet with Tiffany and Roman. "How was the drive, Love?" Roman says, kissing Isabella on the cheek.

"Exhilarating." Isabella grins at me and reaches over to squeeze my hand. "We'll have to meet up to do something else on this trip."

The two of them walk away hand-in-hand, and I sigh, unable to keep the longing from crashing against me like waves. I know every relationship has its ups and downs, but there has to be a way to get past those and end up like them.

"You were a speed demon out there," Tiffany says, thrusting out her hip to hip check me.

I grin. "As in I maxed out the car at five miles per hour? It was good. I needed that drive. I might even go again."

I make it around the small building where they must store a lot of the gear and nearly bump into Landon, who's holding onto his helmet in one hand.

"Did you have fun?" he asks, and I nearly trip over a helmet Tiffany just set down for the manager.

A strong hand grips my bicep and keeps me from propelling backward. I glance up and give Landon a grateful smile. “Thanks for that.” I bite my lip as I try to think about what to say to him. “It was, uh, really good.”

He gives me a partial smile, the one he used to give when he was thinking long and hard about something. Why would driving be something to concentrate on?

“No woman attached to you today. How’d you manage to get away?” I ask, unable to keep in the jab about Savannah.

Landon’s eyebrows pinch together for a minute and he says, “You mean Savannah? Oh, I don’t know where she is. We’re not together. Um, what are you up to for the rest of the day?” He runs a hand through his hair and I can now see he’s flustered.

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It's almost mind-boggling. We'd been so close and comfortable with each other before, we fit like a perfect pair of gloves. But seeing him in an awkward light almost makes things easier. At least I'm not the only one stumbling.

"I'm not sure yet. We'll probably hang out for a bit and get dinner. I heard there's a movie or maybe a musical." Why am I revealing all this? I don't need him to follow me. He obviously has a girl, he's just feeling bad flaunting her in front of me. One I can't compete with in a myriad of ways.

"Are you driving or not, buddy?" Mr. Beefcake says, and Landon and I turn to look at him. The man is staring at Landon, his hand reaching out to point at the helmet in Landon's hand.

"Uh, yeah. I'm driving." I watch as he gives me a quick smile and waves.

I take one step and then another, making progress to leave Landon on the track. Tiffany is already a ways in front of me and I need to catch up. But why do I want to just stand here and wait until he gets done?

He's got a girlfriend. I need to remember that before my defenses slip too far to make it back to solid ground.

CHAPTER16

Landon

I'm half-way to the car when I finally get up the guts to implement stage one of my

“Get Rachelle Back Plan.” It’s not really a plan, because everything I think of isn’t enough to show her how much she means to me, but I need to start somewhere or the trip will pass before I do anything.

“Do you want to do something tonight, Ra—” I stop, my voice strangled as I see the large gym-rat-looking guy right behind me.

“Probably not, dude. I’ve already got plans.” He looks as though I’ve lost my mind and points to the straps on the car. “Sit in and make sure you have everything buckled.”

I search behind him for Rachelle, but she’s already past the building and outside the large gate that surrounds the go-kart track.

Why can’t I make this work?

There are moments when I feel she’s getting closer to me and others when she’s a mile away, trying to keep her distance.

The drive around the track is uneventful. Since Dani ditched me to get a manicure, I figured I’d do something until my next meeting with Roman and the group. But my thoughts are on Rachelle for most of the drive and I’m constantly speeding up and slowing down.

After a short meeting with the group and killing a couple hours walking around the boat, I head back to my room hoping I’ll catch Rachelle coming or going from her room. I’m not embarrassed to say that I wait for longer than I should’ve in the hallway hoping to catch sight of her.

What are the chances we’d be assigned rooms right next door to each other? Let me backup. What are the odds we’d be on the same cruise together, almost a year to the

day we were supposed to get married?

What an idiot I've been. But I can't discount that the time apart has been good for the both of us. Sure, my breakup delivery was awful, but I would've loved to get back together after some time off.

Hillary is probably still laughing about the whole thing right now.

Anger surges at the thought of Rachelle's younger sister. She ruined everything with just a few words. Well, I'm the one who destroyed my relationship with Rachelle, but Hillary planted the seeds of self-doubt.

I lay on the bed, falling asleep as I try to plan how to ask Rachelle out again. It's like we're back in high school and I'm nervous she's going to reject me. Rightly so, but it still hurts the ego.

"Hey, are you sick?" I open my eyes to see Dani hovering over me.

"No, why?" I rub my hands over my face and sit up, trying to get my bearings under me.

Dani sits on the opposite bed and chuckles. "I haven't seen you nap since you were a teenager. You're usually so keyed up that I feel guilty for sitting around watching shows and stuff."

"You? Feel guilty? That's something I never thought I'd hear from you." I flinch back as a pillow sails my way.

"Obviously not guilty enough to do anything about it."

"What time is it?" I glance around the room, forgetting there isn't really a clock.

Almost like a casino where I get sucked into the games and lose all track of time. At least this way I haven't lost my wallet.

“Almost dinner. How was your day?”

I thumb through my thoughts, recovering all the ground I passed on the way to the room. “It was all right. It would've been better had you been hanging out with me.”

“So, you saw Rachelle?”

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“Am I that easy to read?” I ask, falling back onto the pillow of my bed.

“Like a book. What happened?”

“I almost asked her to hang out tonight.”

Dani leans her elbows on her knees and looks at me with a death glare. “Wait, start from the beginning. I need to know the whole scenario to judge whether you’ve royally screwed up on this one.”

I tell her about Rachelle leaving the go-karts and we chat about what to do that evening.

Dani nods. “Okay, this is all okay so far. No need to summon Dani Damage Control.”

Her expression is stony and I can’t help but laugh long and loud at the fact she’s just given herself that title.

“You laugh now, but I’m going to have to pull her out on this trip. Whether it’s to hit you or to comfort Rachelle.”

“Wow, again doubted by my own sister.” I should probably be bitter about it, but Dani is the most loyal person I know. At least she’s helping me plan out how to get Rachelle back.

She shrugs. “You’ve got this one last chance. Don’t blow it, all right?”

I nod. Standing, I walk over to the microscopic bathroom and splash some water on my face. I still have wrinkle lines from where the pillowcase bunched up along my cheek, but other than that, I feel a lot more rested than I have in a while. I'm sure the lack of cell phone usage helps with that.

"What should I wear to dinner tonight, oh woman dresser person?"

"Really? You've been able to dress yourself for over two decades and now you need my help?" She lifts an eyebrow, her expression suspicious.

I breathe out a long sigh and nod, going down on my knees and clapping my hands together in a pleading pose. "I want it noted that I'm here on my knees begging for your help because I want to get Rachelle back. Might as well help that along with my appearance, right?"

"Landon Higgins, are you saying that women only go after you for your looks? Because I'm here to tell you you're wrong."

I frown. Dani constantly battling me every which way about Rachelle is harder than I thought it would be.

She takes a step forward and rests a hand on my shoulder. "Women go after you because you're a nice guy, and while you messed up with Rachelle, I still love you. But I do think a little sprucing up of the clothing will help. Your shirt looks like you wadded it up into a ball and tossed it to the bottom of your laundry pile."

I glance down and confirm she's correct. "Okay, so do I wear the polo shirt or a button up?"

Dani opens the small closet and tugs at the shirts I've brought. At least I didn't just leave them stuffed into the suitcase I brought.

“How about this one? It’s casual but still looks sharp.” She’s holding up a navy blue polo shirt, one that I actually find comfortable thanks to the material it’s made of.

“Sounds good. What pants?”

“Stick with the khakis. They’re a little rumpled but you’ll be sitting for most of the time we’re at dinner so no one will notice.” She taps her finger to her lips and then says, “If she’s at dinner, you’ll need to sit next to her. Talk about what you both did today and then ask her out to a movie or the musical. Since she already mentioned it, chances are higher she won’t turn you down.”

“That’s comforting,” I say, groaning.

“And if Tiffany is with her, I can do some recon work for you as well. I have a feeling she wants to see you two back together as much as I do.”

She puts a fist out in front of her and I glance between it and her face. “What’s that for?”

“I feel like this moment deserves a team cheer of sorts.”

“Okay,” I say, trying to keep back a full laugh. With my fist next to hers, I wait for the cue.

She grins and says, “We’ll bring back your celebrity couple name for good luck. To Lachelle on three. One, two, three! To Lachelle!”

I follow suit and shake my head. It’s still a toss up whether bringing Dani was a good idea or not. But at least we’ve got a plan.

* * *

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Fifteen minutes later the two of us walk down to the banquet room. My gaze does a quick scan of the room, a stab of disappointment hits me in the chest to find Rachelle isn't seated anywhere inside.

Dinner is one succession of rollercoasters. There's always the hope building in me that someone coming through the door is Rachelle, that she'll be heading to our table and I'll get to stare at her, in a non-creepy way, for the duration of dinner. But amidst the chatter for the meal and talk about business here and there, she never comes.

Instead I'm tortured by Savannah at my side, eating off my plate and placing her hand on my knee. I have to be careful, since her dad is watching like a hawk, but I'm able wriggle out of her grip for some of dinner.

"We'll meet for about forty-five minutes in one of the rooms just down from here." It's the first conversation I've registered from Roman, or anyone, all evening.

Meeting? I almost forgot this trip is about work instead of chasing after the woman I let go of too soon. Hopefully it doesn't take too long because I'm going to have to hunt through the ship to find Rachelle.

We finish up dinner and head in the direction of the conference room as an arm loops through mine. I glance over to see a shorter person than the one I would love to see.

"Hey Savannah," I say, giving her a tight smile.

"I swear you've been avoiding me all day. I looked for you all over the ship and even asked a few people. What have you been doing?"

“Napping.” At least it was the partial truth.

Her eyes blink several times. “Napping? You’re on a beautiful cruise heading for a tropical destination and you nap?”

I have to hold back a chuckle bubbling up in my throat because I get the impression she’ll hit me if I make fun of her.

“I think everything is just hitting all at once.” We follow the rest of the group and I say, “Are you ready for this meeting?”

Savannah flicks her hand in the air and says, “I’m not worried about it. You’re my boss. I’ll just listen to anything we need to know when you tell me. Or we can slip away and do something else.” Her eyebrows raise and lower a few times and she puckers her lips. It takes a few seconds to realize she’s leaning in to actually kiss me.

I glance away, swallowing hard. She’s staking her claim and I need to tell her my heart belongs to someone else already.

“Savannah, I appreciate your trust in me but I think it might be best—”

My words trail off as we walk past the buffet room, and I catch a glimpse of brown hair. I stop and peek back through the door, confirming it’s Rachelle. Why is she eating in there? I hope it’s not to avoid me.

“Who are you looking at?” Savannah asks, causing me to jump. I forgot about her for those few blissful seconds.

“Um, just, uh...” How do I explain this to her?

“Oh, that woman from the other night. Are you guys a thing?” She takes a step back,

looking at me in disgust.

“I, we, um—” Why is this hard? She’s directly asking me. “We have history.”

“Are you coming, Higgins?” Roman asks from the hallway.

I nod, grateful for the brief intervention. I’m sure I’ll have to answer the question at some point, but at least now I have a few minutes of space. Getting Savannah to leave me alone without her crying wolf to her dad is just another added task I didn’t think I’d have to deal with on this trip. But if I can get things straightened out with Rachelle, facing Gordon will be easy.

I jog the few steps to the door. Once I sink down into my chair, I breathe out a sigh. I’ve never been so grateful for a meeting in my life. If only it were some alone time with Rachelle, I’d be in heaven.

CHAPTER17

Rachelle

I’m a big chicken. There, I said it.

I can tell Tiffany thinks the same thing as we load up our plates at the buffet. I didn’t think I could face Landon again today, which is why I convinced Tiffany to eat at the buffet instead of where I sat with Landon and his company the other night. He already comforted me on the slide and then I held onto a hope that he would ask me to do something tonight.

Maybe it’s my fault but avoidance is all I can do to keep from going crazy right now. And I obviously read the wrong signs, because I just caught a glimpse of him passing in the hall with Savannah on his arm.

I take a seat at one of the open tables and start cutting the slice of ham I requested. Tiffany takes a seat across from me with a plate of bread and crackers.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick again?” I swipe the ham through a section of mashed potatoes.

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“I’m not sure what’s wrong. I feel fine in the morning and then want to throw up around four in the afternoon.”

I try to go through the scenarios. “Could you be pregnant?” I ask, throwing it out there. Not like I’m well-versed in any of that.

Tiffany shakes her head quickly and then lifts her hand to support it. “No. I only get sick in the afternoon and at night. That’s the opposite of morning sickness, right? There’s no way I’d be pregnant right now. Drew and I decided we were going to wait a year or two before we expand our family.”

I shrug, giving her a small smile. “I’m not the one to be talking about this with. I have absolutely no experience.”

“True. But I don’t think it’s that. There’s just got to be something on this boat that’s making me nauseous. Like a strange smell or something?”

“I haven’t smelled anything strange. It might be worth finding a test to see.” On one hand, I’d be over the moon for Tiffany to have a little one growing inside her. On the other, I wish I’d invited Kenzie to help with the collision of events that keeps leading me toward Landon. She’d be a voice of reason. For all I know from our conversations, Tiffany is very much still team Lachelle.

“I’ll do that later. Now, what are we going to do about you and a certain someone on this boat?”

I frown, confirming my previous thought. “Tiff, I’m trying to enjoy this vacation

because once I get back to real life, I'm going to wish I were on this ship. When the responsibilities creep up once we're in Boston. You know, like pay the bills and eat."

"I'm glad you put eating as a responsibility. It's an important one."

I watch Tiffany as she glances around the room, eating the buttered bread and drumming her fingers along the table with her free hand.

Our mothers might be twins, but there is a definite difference when examining at our upbringing. My mother was strict about appearances, mostly weight and style of clothing, whereas Tiffany had her father as a cushion, calming down all the negative energy my aunt radiates.

There was a time I counted calories down to the thinnest slice of a pea, mostly urged on by my mom. That was at one of my lowest points, right after my almost wedding. Buying my own place was the first step in helping me get past some of that.

"Why do you say that?" I finally ask, dwelling on her last comment.

Tiffany turns to face me, her smile softening a bit. "Because sometimes I worried you'd keel over from lack of nutrition."

"I've never been anorexic, Tiffany." Defenses are standing at attention, ready for a fight.

"Are you sure?" she says, her eyes softening.

"You know my mother. There was always a juice cleanse or a strict diet on the menu." Thinking back, I can't remember a time when I didn't have something pre-portioned and ready to eat, not since I was around eight or nine. It's probably why moving into my own place had been a quick succession of stomach aches as I'd

walked out of the grocery store looking like a nine-year-old who'd spent the entire budget on junk food.

Tiffany nods. "I get it. My mom would always mention a diet or a fitness challenge we should do but my brother and I would just laugh it off. And my father always nixed it if she tried to push it."

I can picture Tiffany and her brother doing just that, and wonder why I've always needed to please people. Probably because it was the only time I received approval from my parents. But having a voice is more important for my own sake, something I'm quickly learning.

I need to remember that the next time I speak with my mom.

"How is my aunt doing, anyway?" Tiffany asks.

"I don't know. I hung up on her the night I quit my job."

Tiffany's eyes widen to the size of the orange slices that are the only color on her plate. "Really?"

I nod. "She called saying I shouldn't be posting pictures of myself in a paint balling suit in my state."

"What does that mean? Are we in eighteenth century England?"

I keep my eyes on my plate, feeling shame wash over me as I say, "Meaning I've gained weight."

"To behealthy," Tiffany says with emphasis on healthy. "You've always been beautiful, Rachelle, but this version of you is amazing. And how much you've been

able to figure out what you like and who you want to be, that's the most important part of all."

I take a bite of the ham and chew for a moment, processing.

Tiffany claps softly. "Atta girl, Rachelle. I've been waiting for you to tell her off for years."

Waving my hands in the air, I shake my head. "I didn't tell her off but I wasn't going to stay on the line to have her berate me the day before I went on vacation. Maybe I'll wait a few more weeks before talking to her after the cruise. I just don't need the stress of wondering what her phone call is going to entail every time I pick up the phone. Either anger that I'm not living the life she wants or talk about my eating habits."

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Tiffany gives my body one more glance up and down and smiles. “Honestly, Rachelle. You’re gorgeous. I mean, sometimes your hair looks like you tumbled into a cave for days when you wake up, but you look healthy. Happy. But I wonder if you could be happier.”

“Nope. We’re going to ban Landon from any discussions for the rest of the trip, okay? I don’t need to believe he could really care about me and then have him leave again. I already have a history of that with him and my sister.”

“Your sister’s crazy. I can’t believe she ditched out on her wedding.” She wrinkles her nose.

“Hillary has always done what she wants. I guess I need to learn a thing or two from her.”

Tiffany’s eyebrows nearly disappear into her hairline at that. “Does this have something to do with the go-karts earlier today? You looked like you’d had something click after we got off, until Landon appeared.”

“Just another reason to avoid him. If I don’t look genuinely happy in his presence, it’s never going to work out between us.”

Tiffany leans back in her chair and closes her eyes for a moment. “That’s not what I meant, Rachelle. I think you’re nervous that it will end the same, and that’s not a bad thing.”

“Says the woman in a happy and committed relationship.”

With a sigh, Tiffany leans forward and places her hand atop mine. “I promise I’ll just hang back and I won’t mention him anymore, unless I actually see him. Deal?”

I nod, smiling at that. I’ve come this far to get over the guy. A few more days won’t break me.

At least I hope.

CHAPTER18

Landon

Our meeting ends at the fifty-two minute mark. Yes, I’ve been squirming like a student when a teacher keeps talking after the bell rings to go home. And I’ve marked every minute after forty-five as the longest four hundred and twenty seconds of my life.

Once we’re dismissed, I’m the first one out the door, heading for the area where the live entertainment is located.

“It’s about time you got here. What happened?” Dani asks, stepping closer to fix my collar. I must’ve been rubbing my neck too much to not scream out loud from being stuck longer than I wanted.

“I just escaped an instructional meeting not held by Roman, who I want to learn from most.” I point to the door with a large sign outside announcing The Music Man playing. It’s a fun one, but my brain is channeled into finding Rachelle first. “You think I’m going to sit for three hours at a musical?”

She nods and tugs me toward the door. “I think you need to find Rachelle and fast. I heard Savannah telling someone she’s on deck waiting for you to return from the

meeting. So, at least it will be a hiding spot?”

I shake my head. “I can’t believe I have to hide from a woman on a cruise ship. I always thought I’d be with a woman I wanted to be here with.”

“Well, you kind of are, in a way, but it’s a tangled mess.” She pauses before continuing. “Are you sure you’re not ready to divulge why you broke up with Rachelle in the first place?”

“Musical sounds great. Why don’t we head in now so we can get a spot?”

“This isn’t Broadway, Landon. Obviously, we won’t be fighting for a spot in line.” We make it near the door and there are dozens of people milling about and what looks to be a longer line up against one wall.

“Are you sure about that?” I say. I point to the crowd and laugh.

She gives me a playful slap on the shoulder and says, “You do know I’ll listen when you’re ready to tell me, right?” Dani gives me the most somber expression I’ve seen from her in a while.

I nod, swallowing hard. “Thanks, sis. Soon.”

I just hope I’ll know how to tell Rachelle when the time comes.

CHAPTER 19

Rachelle

“You should go do something,” Tiffany says, sitting on the bed. “I’m so sorry. I’ll sleep and hopefully be ready to go for tomorrow when we dock.”

I sigh, feeling guilty that I'm irritated with Tiffany. She's always been so fun and full of life that she was the natural choice to take on this cruise. "I think I heard something about a doctor on board the ship. Do you want me to take you there?"

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Tiffany shakes her head. “No, if I take a nap and still don’t feel well, I’ll go down there myself.”

“I hope it’s not something serious,” I say, grabbing the comforter and pulling it over her shoulders.

“You always know how to take care of a girl. Why don’t you go take care of yourself now? Do something not on the Breakup list.”

It’s been so long since I’ve done something not related to the bucket list, that I’m kind of lost as to what to do. I pick up the small book listing all the events on the ship, flipping through to find something I feel like doing. Alone. Because no matter what I do, I end up doing things by myself. And as much as I want to hope Kenzie, Evie, and Millie will live in my home forever, they’ll find guys suited for them and leave me. I’ll be the old lady with the cats. Except I’m allergic, so maybe I’ll have dogs or bunnies or something.

I’m sure I’ll have plenty of time to figure that out during the sad, lonely years.

“Would you be bugged if I go to a movie? I think they’ve got a new one out that I’ve been wanting to see.”

“Knock yourself out,” Tiffany says, covering her face with the pillow.

Instead of working to get all dolled up, I pull on a pair of jogger sweats. Comfort and buttery softness are only the beginning of the love I feel for them. Also, the elastic waistband is amazing. I pull on a t-shirt and then a hoodie.

“How do I look?” I ask Tiffany, more as a joke than anything.

“You look comfy. I should probably change into something like that so I can sleep better.”

“What can I bring you?”

“Drew.”

I chuckle. “Sorry, unless he’s developed some superhero-like flying capabilities, we’re a bit far for him to catch up with us.”

“I know.” She sits up long enough to look me in the eye. “Rachelle, go have fun tonight.”

I scoff, knowing that watching a movie is more like my old self than the person I’ve been trying to become through the Breakup Bucket List, but sometimes I need that safe place. Like a recharging station. I’m not trying to completely change myself, just strengthen the sections that are weaker.

The walk to the theater isn’t long, down a couple flights of stairs. The movie theater room connects to what sounds like the musical, since I can hear it from the hallway. I like those, but I’m not in the mood for singing and dancing just now.

Inside the theater is a small concession stand and I grab a popcorn and a lemonade. Another perk to this place is I don’t have to pay anything extra. That definitely helps my wallet when it comes time to head home and face reality.

I take a seat in the exact middle seat of all the rows, a quirk I’ve always had. I enjoy being able to glance at the screen and know things are right on.

The lights dim a minute or two later, with only about six or eight other people in the theater. Of course, they're all couples.

I slide down in the seat, wondering how I'd made it to this point in my life. As long as I'm finished wallowing by the time the movie is over, I'll count it as a win.

What am I going to do about a job when I get back? And will I be okay if Landon marries someone else?

This is probably why I've never been to a movie by myself.

Light enters the room as a door opens at the back, but I can't see a face because of the silhouette.

There is shuffling but I stare at the movie in front of me, trying to push away the emotions and sadness overtaking me.

I must've mixed up the movie times because this isn't the one I thought would be playing. As the main character graces the screen, I recognize it from commercials I've seen over the past several months. I love Sandra Bullock and have been hoping she'd make another movie, but a second-chance romance isn't sitting well. Maybe I should grab my tablet and read on deck. That might save me from an eruption of emotions ready to pour out of me.

Footsteps behind me start up again and a movement out of the corner of my eyes causes me to turn. The movie is dark until a bright light shines out on a football field. The reflection and light reveal Landon walking toward me. I glance behind him, sure Savannah will be there.

He takes the seat next to me, grinning like he's just won a major award.

“What are you doing here? And how did you know it was me?” I whisper loudly.

“Dani and I went to watch the musical next door, and I couldn’t handle it. I figured I’d come see what was playing in the theater and then spotted you. I always look in the middle of the theater, just in case you’re in your usual spot. Where’s Tiffany?”

It takes my brain a few moments to register his question as it’s still caught up in the fact he looks for me. I guess having a specific spot isn’t as weird as I thought.

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“Sick again,” I say, chewing on a few kernels of popcorn, hoping to give me something to focus on for a few moments. The smell of his cologne wafts over me and it’s putting my inner soldiers guarding the wall I so carefully built to sleep. I stare at his hand on his thigh, silently willing him to toss it over my shoulder like we’re on a first date as teenagers.

Be strong. Don’t give in.

It’s as good of a pep talk as I can give myself right now.

“What movie are we watching?” Landon asks, his lips dipping low, so close to my ear that my whole body moves with a shiver.

“Um, I can’t remember the name.” I will myself not to look at him, to keep watching the characters on-screen. But it’s weird sitting this close to him after so long. It’s almost like things could easily go back to the way they were.

Except I’m not doing that. There’s a no-return policy on the receipt I gave myself after we broke up.

A part of the movie hits that’s really funny and the other couples laugh. But of course, my laugh comes out all stilted and weird.

“Do you remember that time we—”

“Yes,” I say, cutting him off. I remember just about everything from our time together, and I don’t care to relive it right now. Any memory he calls up will only

weaken my defenses more than they already are.

Landon settles in and is quiet. I let myself feel bad at my curtness for all of a couple minutes before my mind replays the heartbreak I went through for months after he left me.

As a sort of peace offering, I tilt the popcorn container toward him and he gives me a small smile before taking a handful. There are no cliché moments of getting our hands trapped in the bucket, but our fingers brush several times.

I want to say I felt nothing, that the locks around my heart can't be opened, but that's a lie. There are zings and bursts of excitement and basically I'm back to middle school getting all mushy about a couple of touches. It's a full-on Jane Austen novel here.

By the time the lights come on, I'm a tense mess. I'm sure my jaw will be sore tomorrow from clenching it so much.

"Do you want to walk around the deck with me?" Landon asks, and the vulnerability on his face makes it hard to say no.

"Sure."

We ascend the stairs and walk out onto the deck, the sun well past the horizon. There's a light breeze blowing the small wisps of hair into my face. I reach up to pull them back behind my ear when I see the sleeve of my sweatshirt. I glance down, seeing the joggers and I probably have a neon sign across my forehead that says #MenStayAway.

This is not how I pictured any of my interactions to go with Landon. I'm supposed to be dolled up and looking irresistible, not like I've been moping for the past year. I did

look good in my new swimsuit at the pool, but a walk around the deck deserves an outfit that doesn't have comfort in the title.

"You know, I think I'll turn in. I'm tired and we're supposed to dock tomorrow. Good night."

"Are you sure?"

I nod, giving him a small smile before turning and fleeing to my room. I might've jogged and then sprinted to the finish line, in case he planned to follow.

"Hey," Tiffany says once I make it into the room. I jump, not expecting her to be awake. She's sitting up on the bed, looking as pale as a sheet.

"Are you okay?"

She gives me a quick nod and then swallows, blinking back tears. "So, I took your advice and visited the doctor."

"What did he say?" My eyes widen and I step toward her.

Her hands are shaking in her lap, like she's inwardly freaking out. "Well, before they could do any tests on me, he gave me a cup and told me to go into the bathroom. Apparently I'm pregnant."

I glance down at her hands, expecting her to reveal a pregnancy test. "Really? No viruses or bacteria?"

"Just the kind that will arrive in about thirty-four weeks. The doctor says I'm six weeks along." She bursts out crying while holding up a stick with two pink lines.

I'm not sure how to comfort her. Tiffany isn't usually the one to cry; that's my part in our relationship.

"It'll be okay, Tiff. You and Drew are going to be great parents. You wanted to start your family soon, right?"

She glances up and tries to wipe under her nose with a small wad of tissue. I stand and head to the bathroom to grab some more. When I return, Tiffany is more under control than before.

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“Thanks, Rachelle. I’m so sorry.”

“For what? I think it’s amazing that you’re going to have a baby!” I grin, thinking of what a baby with Tiffany and Drew’s genes would be like. Probably a looker, no matter if the baby is a boy or a girl. “I’ll dote on your little one and get all the annoying toys and bags of sugar. Then I’ll leave when he or she is hyper.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Tiffany lets out a small laugh. “I’m sorry for ruining your trip, for not having the energy to do all the things. And that I’m crying right now. I don’t know why I’m crying. Having a baby is so exciting, although terrifying.”

My eyes cloud over with tears, and I lean forward, pulling her into a hug.

“Tiff, you haven’t ruined my trip. If anything, it’s a good excuse to come back and check on you so I can avoid all the weird stuff.” The irritation I felt is gone. Tiffany in top shape would’ve been relentless at hopping from activity to activity. This is a better situation to let me decompress from seeing Landon as often as I have.

Tiffany pauses and looks at me. “What weird stuff are we talking about?”

“Landon just sat next to me in the movie theater and then asked to take a walk along the deck.”

“And did you?” She’s leaning forward, fully invested in my answer.

I sigh. “I was going to and then realized I’m in sweats.”

“So, it’s not like he’s never seen you in sweats before.”

I groan. “You’ve only been married a few months. Have you already forgotten about the dress code of when you like someone?”

“Wait, are you saying you have feelings for him?” Her eyes widen and her nose flares.

“Residual feelings. But that means nothing.”

“Rachelle, the dress code is for when you’re first dating. You two have a lot of water under the bridge already, so I think sweats would be okay for a night out.”

“When he’s wearing a nice polo and khakis? It’s like the ultimate frump-girl style next to him.”

Tiffany leans forward and places her hands on my shoulders. “Rachelle. You. Are. Okay. Did he say what he wanted to talk about?”

I shake my head, shame flooding me that maybe he was finally willing to talk about why he left me not quite at the altar. The answers I actually want but I let my meddling brain take control.

She throws back the blanket and takes my upper arm in her hand, pulling me along to the door. “I think you need to find that out.”

“What? What are you talking about?” I try to wriggle out of her grip, but I’m surprised at the woman’s grip.

“I’m banning you from this room until you have an answer. Or at least talk to him.”

My eyes flash at her, and my teeth bite down hard. “I invited you, by the way. You can’t just kick me out of the room.”

“One way or the other, Rachele, you need the closure only he can give you.” She shuts the door and I hear the deadbolt lock in place. “I’ll write that on the bottom of the bucket list. After zip lining, it will be the last thing you need to get.”

I bang on the door a few times with my fists and even give it a few kicks.

“Are you waging war against the door?” Landon asks, leaning against his own door.

I never thought I was a jumpy person, but it’s like Landon has learned some kind of magic trick to make it so he can appear without me hearing him.

“More like trying to get to my traitorous cousin. What are you doing? Already done with your walk on deck?”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to do that for too long by myself.” He moves one leg in front of the other, a casual smile causing my stomach to swing up and over the bar of the swing set.

I fold my arms over my chest. “And what about Savannah?”

“Savannah? Why would I want to go walking with her?” His disbelief eases the knot in my stomach a smidge. Not enough to release the whole thing, but at least it’s something.

I purse my lips and give him a little headshake. “Because she’s been all over you since you got on this boat. Aren’t you two dating?”

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Landon tilts his head back and lets out a long laugh. “Definitely not.”

“She talked about you at paintball like you’re a piece of candy. And were you not mentally present at dinner the other night? She was hanging all over you.” I raise an eyebrow, hoping to keep up a steel fortress but secretly wishing he’ll deny it.

“Rachelle, Savannah is on my team at work. Her father is my direct boss. I have to be nice to her or else work will be hell—I mean, not good.”

I take a step back, leaning against my door. There’s a small sound from the other side and I give the wood a good kick to signal to my betrayal of a cousin that I know she’s trying to listen in. A small squeal confirms it.

I walk toward the deck and Landon falls into step next to me. There is so much in this moment and I’m not sure if I’m strong enough to resist whatever will happen, either way. But if I can figure out what went wrong between us, there might still be hope for my future.

No more house of a thousand bunnies.

It isn’t until we get near the railing of the deck that I see Landon has changed into sweats as well. Did he follow me back to the cabin and change?

“Tiffany’s pregnant,” I blurt out. The moment the words are out, I slap my hand over my mouth, knowing I shouldn’t have revealed her secrets to him. I should be talking about my own issues but this is easier.

“Really? That’s great. Is she doing okay?” Landon has one hand stuffed into the pocket of his sweats and he looks so casual and adorable.

Must resist the urge to hug him.

I shrug, figuring I might as well go along with the conversation and ask forgiveness from Tiffany later. “I think so. Part of me thinks she’s missing her husband. She burst out crying and I’m just hoping it’s the hormones. I mean, we have several days left on this trip. There’s no way she’s going home unless she learns to row a boat.”

Landon chuckles and I glance up at him, the moonlight casting a shadow on his face. I still know just about every curve and mark on his face, but this is what I’ve missed most. His ability to laugh and smile during just about anything.

And then my memory reminds me he is the villain, the enemy in my dreams and the fire that’s helped me get through a lot of things in the past year. The one who probably couldn’t have broken up with me face-to-face because it would hurt too much.

“Why did you break up with me?” Again, my mouth is taking over my life, but this time I’m not disappointed. I need to know what happened.

He leans against the railing. When he turns his face to me, I see a mixture of emotions, but none of them are clear. “Rachelle, to be honest, I’ve come up with a million scenarios for how this talk would happen. Ultimately, I’m an idiot. I should’ve faced you before running off.” He turns his face out to the dark ocean and shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have left in the first place. You’re too good for me. I didn’t deserve you. I just kept hoping I’d somehow get that feeling like I measured up, but every time I thought about it, I realized I could never give you the life you deserve.”

Anger burns in my chest. “That’s it? Your feelings got in the way?”

Landon stands, turning his body to face me. “No, yes, I mean—” He pauses as he runs a hand along his neck. “You’re amazing. And I just didn’t measure up to the Stewarts.”

It’s like a fire has broken loose in my chest. “You mean my parents? You were worried about my parents?”

“In a way—”

“We talked about everything, Landon. I told you every secret, every fear I ever had, and you were worried about the impression my parents had of you? I don’t answer to them anymore, and frankly, I’m a little ticked that you would give up the life we planned because of what they think. They hate their own life and have to micromanage everyone else’s.” As the words ring through the air, I realize how true that is.

My mother has always wanted to be thin and trendy, so she projected it onto me, did everything to make it so. The constant diets and barrage of insults when I would even look at something with over two grams of sugar makes more sense now.

“There’s more to it than that, Rachelle. I promise, I never meant to hurt you, and I don’t want to hurt you now.”

I nod. “Good. Then thank you for the clarification. I hope you enjoy your trip and can figure out what you’re looking for when we dock back in Boston.”

I turn on my heel, making a beeline for anywhere but near him. I can’t let him see me cry, not when I’ve already shed enough tears to fill the ocean because of him. What a jerk.

CHAPTER20

Landon

I didn't think it was possible to screw things up worse, but that conversation proves I haven't practiced enough of what I need to say to Rachelle.

"What's wrong, Landon? You look as though you lost your best mate." Roman walks up and slaps me on the shoulder, taking a place next to me.

"I just thought I'd hold up this railing for a bit," I say, trying to keep thoughts of Rachelle from causing the emotions to surge. "Where's Isabella?"

"She needed some time to read a book. Something about how I kept interrupting her during the best part and I should come find something to do out here."

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We both laugh, and I think of Isabella compared to Rachelle. I could see Rachelle doing the same thing to me at some point. I can only wish to have that opportunity someday. But my hope is a dim ember right now.

“It’s probably a good idea to steer clear when she wants something,” I say.

Roman chuckles and nods his head. “That’s true. But sometimes having a mind of her own is a good thing. She got me out of my head when I was terrified of leaving my comfort zone. And she showed me I could keep living even though I was going through PTSD episodes daily.”

He points to the scar running from his chin up to his eye. “It’s not easy, but the comfort zone isn’t for stretching yourself. How about you?”

“How about me what?” I ask.

“Have you figured out what will help you get to where you want to be?”

I rest both arms on the railing and lean down so my chin is sitting on my hands. “A year ago, I knew. I knew that it would be hard but I hoped the time would heal things. Now I’m here, going through all these emotions and feeling like I’ve made no progress in that time.”

“Maybe you didn’t have the right goal in the first place. What have you accomplished this year?”

“I became a real estate agent and have made—”

“Not accomplished in your career,” Roman says, shaking his head. “What are some of the achievements you’ve made on yourself and your character? What changed since you broke up with Rachelle?”

I do a quick mental recap of the year, noting almost nothing different within myself. I’ve thrown everything I have into learning about real estate and turning my life around with finances. I know I don’t have to eat ramen and mac and cheese several nights a week in order to send money to help my mother with the house and the younger kids.

But sadly, I’ve hidden from just about everything personal this past year, hoping it would all just work itself out and then invite my brain back onto the team. If only it were that easy.

My mind goes back to when everything changed. If only I’d known that at the time, though.

Hillary approached me while Rachelle and I were taste-testing cakes and entrees at the lodge where the wedding would take place.

“You’re not good enough for her, Landon. You’ve catered to her, made it so she doesn’t have to make a decision that’s too hard. She’s weak because of you. She needs to grow on her own, without your help. If you marry her now, she’ll resent you, just like my parents resent each other.”

The conversation had gone on longer, but I can’t remember much more than that. Her words had thrown me for a loop, as she was the only one who didn’t care that I was from a middle-class family instead of the upper crust the Stewarts mingle with.

Roman’s question hits hard, but at least I can do something about it now. “It’s hard to admit, but I’ve been off-course on what I need to get done. I don’t know if I’m good

enough for her. How do you figure that out?"

"Just keep trying to show her you still care. Sometimes we don't actually deserve the ones we love, but all we can do is work everyday to show them how amazing they are. And a few gifts here and there of things she loves to do might help sweeten things." He winks at me and I nod.

"Sorry, I promise I'll be focused on the next meeting."

Roman shakes his head. "I've called it off. I think sometimes these conferences are better when my employees have some time to relax and reset. Use that time to show Rachelle you still care about her. From everything I've seen, she won't worry about whether or not you fit into the mold you think you're supposed to be. Give her some credit. Women are a bit more forgiving than we think sometimes."

Roman slaps me on the back again and turns to walk to where one of the other managers is standing with his wife.

I need to be better, need to show Rachelle that I still love her. And even if I'm not enough yet, there's still potential there. I can't imagine my life with anyone else. I just hope she'll feel the same when this vacation ends.

CHAPTER 21

Rachelle

I look like a raccoon. Not a cute one that I've seen in videos being nearly human in their actions. No, this is ten, no, a hundred times worse.

My brain didn't allow me to sleep the night before and my appearance proves it. Large bags under my eyes are only a small thing next to the rat's nest of hair on top

of my head. Those women who wake up looking like they've just stepped out of a hair commercial either have some magic potion to keep things in place while they sleep, or they get up earlier than the rest of the world to make sure they look like a million bucks.

They're the reason I've spent too much on makeup. The spiels about a two- or three-step process suck me in every time. If someone could sell a fifteen-step process, that might work for me.

"Wow, Rachelle. Are you all right?" Tiffany seems more peppy this morning, and I already want to stab her in the eye with my eyeliner.

"Do you want to make it home to your husband?" I almost growl.

Tiffany raises her hands in surrender and nods. "Yes, yes, I do."

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I take in a deep breath and let it out. “Sorry, how are you doing this morning?”

“So much better. The doctor talked about having crackers by the bed when I wake up to help get my stomach settled.” She smiles. “So far, so good.”

I don’t have to move too much, pretty much arching my back an inch or two like I do when I’m stretching, to see a small package of saltines. “You eat those before you get up? Those are tasteless.”

“Well, I don’t care what they taste like as long as the nausea stays away. What’s the plan today?” She sits on her bed, probably waiting for the mirror.

“Today is zip lining day. Will you still be able to go?” That is the one piece of information my brain didn’t have an anxiety war with last night, but now it’s doing double-time.

Tiffany gives me a sad smile. “Do you mind if I cheer you on from the ground?”

I nod, doing my best to look happy. “Sure, that should be fine.” I won’t die of fright at the height from the platform or whatever we’d be launching off of and the ground, but whatever.

I pull the mental snark back a few notches, realizing that I don’t really want to zip line either, and if I felt like she does, I’d do the same. With my makeup bag on my arm, I step out of the small bathroom and head toward the closet.

“You know, if you don’t want to, you don’t have to finish out the Breakup Bucket

List.”

I freeze mid-stride and wait a few seconds to let the words loop in my mind. “I thought you were the biggest proponent of it. Why the change of heart?”

Tiffany turns around by her bed, changing into her swimsuit. A pair of jean shorts and a t-shirt are spread out on the bed. “Well, we were all a little crazy when your sister ditched her fiancé. I think the goal was to put a little of everything and anything to help you get over Landon and move on with your life. You’ve already come a long way, Rachelle.”

“Have I? Because being on this cruise doesn’t make me feel like I have.” I walk over and slump down on the bed, wishing I had a crystal ball or something to direct me on my course in life. But then again, I can’t just rely on that.

If there is one thing I’ve learned over the past year, it’s that I’ve been able to do things I didn’t think I could do. Zip lining is the next level on that scale. It would just be nice if all these character building activities didn’t involve heights.

“I’m sure seeing Landon hasn’t been the easiest, but I think he’s got good intentions.”

“Good intentions?” I raise my eyebrows in disbelief and shake my head. “No way. We’re not sticking up for him right now. He basically admitted he was a coward and backed out of marrying me because he didn’t meet the express approval from my parents.”

Tiffany frowns. “Really? He never seemed to care that much about what they thought. Why then?”

Her words cause my mind to go on a hunt through the memories. Landon was always polite to my parents, but he never sucked up to them, like everyone else did in their

social circles.

“That’s all he told me. I’m not sure it’s the complete story, but if it’s not, then he’s just adding to the strikes against him by lying.”

Tiffany stands and walks over to me, wrapping her arms around me. “Do the zip line and take your mind off things. I’ll make sure I’m there cheering for you and we’ll have a great day on land. We can worry about boys later.”

“You make me sound like I’m in middle school again with a crush on Bobby Thompson.”

“I guess crushes don’t change a whole lot, even with age,” Tiffany says, chuckling.

We dock on the island of CocoCay in the Bahamas, and after at least an hour drive on a bus, I stand on the edge of a platform for my ziplining adventure. If only my entire nervous system would relax because... heights.

Tiffany did her best to talk to me on the way here, probably to help my nerves, but I’ve had tunnel vision and haven’t paid attention to anything or anyone. I’d love to hang out on the beautiful beach instead, but I’ve got to cross this one off the Breakup Bucket List.

I’m strapped in with a helmet on my head. My legs are shaking as I wait for the attendant to send off the woman in front of me on her zip lining journey.

“I can do this. I can do hard things. The cord is completely safe and won’t somehow malfunction, causing me to plummet to my death.” The words are a jumble, but I’ve got to steer myself in a better direction or mental paralysis will set in.

I’m five steps from the edge of the platform and I don’t know if I can do it.

I'm about to step forward when someone says something in Spanish and the attendant raises his hand for me to stop.

“We just need to check something quickly.” His words are like a sounding horn to my nervous system.

Abort! Abort!

I glance down and see the straps around my middle and legs. I could easily take them off and slip down the ladder.

Ah! The ladder.

It was hard enough climbing the thing without measuring the height difference to the ground with my eyes, let alone going back down past others climbing up.

“Breathe, Rachelle.”

I turn to see Landon standing on a platform about ten feet from the one I’m on.

“I’m pretty sure that’s never helped anyone in the history of the world,” I say, gritting my teeth. Why is he here again? And why can’t I do one thing without him being in the vicinity? “Are you stalking me now?”

“You can do this.” Instead of irritation, I see his grin as he motions toward the cable. I clench my fists so hard I think I’ve given myself minor cuts from my fingernails.

At this point, I’m stuck. I can’t climb down the ladder, and the idea of heading onto a piece of cable while sailing through the air and at a hundred miles an hour is not sitting well.

What if the pause is because there’s something wrong with the whole contraption?

Boston woman sails to her death on a zip line.

That’s what the newspapers would say. Or one of those online news outlets. Someone would probably even include it in those random compilations of the worst deaths.

“Are you ready?” the man says, staring at me.

I shouldn't turn, but I do, looking at Landon for a signal that it's okay for me to quit, to turn around and just call it a day. That's the knee-jerk reaction from my life before. Disappointment sets in that I've resorted to my fallback when I've been able to do so much without Landon.

“We'll go down together,” Landon says, stepping forward so his attendant can connect him to the cable.

Why is he still a safe spot for me? Then again, the old Landon would've held me tight and told me I didn't need to do it. There is something so heartwarming and wonderful about him not babying me right now.

My stomach is a jumbled mess and I take tippy toe steps toward the edge of the platform, doing my best to focus on the horizon instead of what's below or not below my feet. The line of trees is beautiful and the sun is shining brightly, giving me a sliver of warmth I need.

I'm hooked up to the cable and all I can hear is Landon counting down next to me. He gets to two and my momentum shifts forward too fast, causing me to lose my grip of the platform. And then I'm hurtling through the air.

For several seconds I can't breathe and my stomach is in my throat.

And then I hear Landon's war whoop behind me. I can't help but smile and relax just a smidge. The cables disappear into the middle of some trees and the views are spectacular, minus when I see how close I am to the ground.

“Come on, Rachelle. Let it out. Scream if you need to.”

“I already did that,” I call behind me. I hesitate a moment and then let out another scream, the sound of it scratching the back of my throat. And when I finish, it’s strangely cathartic.

“You’re doing amazing,” Landon says, the biggest grin on his face sending my insides into a twist on the gymnastics vault. “Just a day ago you didn’t want to go down the big slide.”

“This isn’t that much of a difference,” I say, my stomach now bobbing up and down like a seesaw. “But I’m doing it.”

His smile is big and warm, allowing a few seconds of calm in the tidal wave of emotions pushing through me. He’s the one person I’ve always wanted by my side during things like this, but now I’m conflicted.

We keep gliding down the cable, Landon going a tad faster than me. By the time I see the ground and the final platform, I know the end is near.

Guides stand there, helping to slow me down and get my feet on the platform. They take off the belt and harness in under a minute and head off to the next person coming down the line.

“You did it!” Tiffany yells, running up to me. “You did it with no help.”

“That’s just the kind of compliment I need, Tiff. I don’t feel like a kindergartener learning to tie their shoes.”

“You learned to do that in kindergarten? I think it took me until second grade before I got all the bunny ears and loops right.” She grins at me, and I turn toward the cable. I just did that.

A movement to the right causes me to turn. Landon descends his platform and runs up the one I'm standing on.

In one swift move, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me up, spinning us in a small circle. I can smell his deodorant and feel the slight stubble of whiskers on my neck.

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It's like the end of every romance movie, except something isn't sitting well. I don't know if it's the anxiety I've been feeling since I arrived at the zip line place this morning or if that small half a bagel I stuffed down my throat earlier is finally coming back up.

He's still got me held tightly, and even though the circling motion stops, bile rises in my throat, a sign that the next few seconds are crucial.

I push away from his chest and do my best to take a step back, but the eruption of all disgusting things comes from my throat and projectile hits him all over the chest.

I try to turn, try to cover up my mouth with my hands, but that only makes it worse.

People jump back and when the lava has stopped pouring from me, we look like we've been wading in a sewer. Smells like it too.

There is a long pause and it's like no one knows what to do now.

And something in my brain snaps. I dart off the platform, running into the grove of trees, hoping to hide for the rest of the day. Maybe I'll just live here. I'm sure I can pull out some of those skills I learned back in the Girl Scouts. For the one month I was an active member.

I can't believe I barfed all over my ex-fiancé.

Not ideal. Not in the same universe of being ideal.

I might need to become a hermit after this cruise. Even starting now, because I'll never be able to face him again.

CHAPTER 22

Landon

Well, that didn't go as planned.

Seeing Rachelle do something that usually terrifies her is unlike any other feeling I've ever had. I kind of get it when my mom says she's more proud of our accomplishments than anything she's done.

Rachelle zip lining is like a dream I wasn't sure would ever come true.

And then the doubts start pouring in.

Would she have been able to do that if we'd gotten married when we were supposed to? Chances are high she might not have.

When she looked over at me with those beautiful blue eyes, the same look she's given me countless times in our history together, I was ready to give in. I was ready to allow her a free pass, just like I'd done with so many things before.

Rachelle's mother isn't the most accommodating woman, and with all she's put Rachelle through, I didn't want Rachelle to feel like she's forced to do everything all the time. But maybe what Hillary said before was true, that I made Rachelle too dependent on me.

But here I am, covered in her vomit and trying to get my brain jump started again.

“I don’t have much, but here’s a tissue to wipe your face,” Tiffany says, pulling a small package of tissues from her purse. Her nose scrunches with the smell and I see her take an extra step away from me.

“Getting ready for your motherly duties, I see,” I say, and then clamp my mouth shut.

Tiffany’s eyes flash at me. “She told you.”

I nod, using the tissue to wipe at whatever is on my face. “She blurted it out last night when we were talking on deck.”

“Well, she probably did it to get back at me for kicking her out. What did you end up telling her?” Tiffany’s look is intense, and I feel like I’m in a courtroom being interrogated.

“That it was better we weren’t together.”

“Do you actually believe that?” Tiffany cuts some of the distance between us and I think she missed her calling as a police detective.

I shake my head, and finally force out in a whisper, “No.”

If anything, the more time I’m spending around Rachelle, even if for only a few brief minutes at a time, I’m finding out I’m actually more intrigued and in love with her than I was a year ago.

“Then do better. The girl is trying to get over you, but she’s waffling. I don’t think you’ll have a better chance than now to win her back. And if you screw it up again, there won’t be another do-over.”

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“You and Dani sound like you’re reading from the same relationship books,” I say. I have to breathe through my mouth or my gag reflex is going to add to the stench.

“Well, someone’s got to come up with something since you and Rachelle can’t get on the same page.”

I shake my head, irritated. “I’m trying to, all right? She looks like she’s about to open up and then, a moment later, she shuts back down. I’m just trying to get her to not clam up for long enough to talk about the possibilities of us getting back together.”

Tiffany nods. “That’s a start. I’ll see if I can help on my end.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Tiffany. I really appreciate it.”

She turns and takes dainty steps down the platform and heads in the direction where Rachelle disappeared.

“Actually,” I say, hurrying to catch up with her. “Let me find her. I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“That’s better,” Tiffany says, grinning at me. “Tell her I’ll be over by the souvenir shop looking for some new apparel for her.”

It doesn’t take long for me to find Rachelle, sitting down with her back against a tree.

“Are you okay?”

She doesn't flinch, doesn't even acknowledge that she's heard me. I walk over and stand in front of her, but she's got this dazed look, as if her body is here but her soul is somewhere else.

Squatting down, I reach out to touch her and hesitate, because everywhere I look, she's covered with... digested stuff.

A quick giggle sounds and then her face splits to a crazed smile, her chest heaving as more laughter escapes.

"Are you all right? Rachelle?" Her smile and laughter are making me want to do the same thing, but I'm a little confused what is causing it.

"Well, let me just go hang out with the sharks in the ocean because that was the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened in my life." She points to the large wet spot covering my shirt. "Look at that. You've been attacked by my awesomeness."

Hearing her joke about it isn't a typical Rachelle trait, but I'll take it.

"Okay, I think calling your vomit awesomeness is taking it a bit too far. What if we go grab some new clothes at the souvenir shop? Tiffany said she was picking some out and to head there once I found you."

Rachelle's smile drops and lets her forehead hang to her hands. "Yeah, she's probably got the whole new wardrobe lined up."

I hold out my hand to help her up and after a moment of awkward indecision, she places her warm, soft palm in mine. This strange connection is like a time warp and I blink several times to make sure I'm not going through déjà vu as I help her up.

She jerks her hand away as soon as she's steady and I can already feel the lack of

warmth where her hand was.

We walk several steps in silence, making it to the clearing where the platforms are.

And then it's like all eyes are on us, noses upturned. Me, I'm turning into a mouth-breather, at least until I can get a shower.

"Sorry, about the, um, you know." She points to my shirt and then turns forward.

"It's all good. At least you didn't throw up on the zip line. What if you'd thrown up on someone walking below?"

She rolls her lips in and her eyes widen. "True. I guess you're the optimal target."

"I told you to hit me if you wanted. I guess I never pictured you'd find a way to not use your fists."

We both laugh and then continue in an easy silence.

"I'm sorry—"

"I'm sorry about last night," I say, able to finish my sentence even though we'd started speaking at the same time.

She shakes her head and shrugs. "If it's the truth, then it's good to finally know what it is, right? I mean, that way we can both move on with our lives."

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“Is that what you want?” I almost whisper, hoping she won’t confirm it.

“There are a lot of things I still don’t know or that I’m learning about myself, Landon. And although it was really hard when you left like you did, a lot of good came out of it.”

My heart wants to break at her words while pulling her to me, infusing as much of the sorrow into her as I can so she’ll believe me when I say our relationship wasn’t an easy thing to walk away from.

“You’re a strong woman, Rachelle. Don’t forget it.”

She gives me a wistful look, but I don’t get a full read because someone is shouting her name.

Tiffany waves to us from a small stand. “I found this sundress for you, Rachelle. I also found a package of severely overpriced wipes you can take a sponge bath with.” She hands over the wipe package and a bright yellow sundress before taking a giant step back. “No offense, but baby isn’t fond of how you smell at the moment.”

Rachelle gives a half-hearted laugh. “You’re just going to blame everything on your baby now?”

“Maybe.”

“Nothing in that pile for me?” I tease and Tiffany turns to me, as if she’d forgotten I’m here at all.

“Not yet, but I think I saw a shirt that would work. You might have to suffer through with your shorts though. Or go dunk yourself in the ocean to get rid of the yeast smell.” She puts her hand to her nose, pinching.

“It’s not that bad,” I say, nearly gagging as the laugh causes me to breathe in through my nose. This is not going well.

Tiffany’s idea to wash off in the ocean isn’t half-bad. It’s better than going back on deck and missing more time with Rachelle.

“Why don’t we do a quick rinse off in the ocean and then you can use the wipes if you need them?” I ask Rachelle. I add in a quick shoulder shrug, hoping that will make my suggestion not sound so much like a command.

Rachelle nods. “I think that will be for the best. Ten wipes is not going to cut it on its own.” She’s trying to keep her face neutral, but the corners of her mouth turn up and I can’t help but smile.

“Where’s Dani?” Rachelle asks as we wade in.

“She said she’d meet me here when she took one of the later buses. She was out late last night and needed more sleep.”

Tiffany startles me when she says, “I miss that girl.” She’s wading close to us but stops when the water hits her knees. I can see what looks like a bright orange flower shirt tucked between her hip and her arm. She’s quick. I wish she’d just take a walk for a bit. This is the most alone-ish time I’ve had with Rachelle all trip.

“Who?” I ask.

“Your sister. She’s the best.”

I laugh and say, “She has her moments.”

Rachelle and I dunk ourselves in the water a few times and come out. It takes everything in me to look away as she’s carefully braiding her long brown hair.

I take off my t-shirt and start putting on the flowered one Tiffany hands me when I notice Rachelle standing a few feet away. The best word to describe her reaction is ogling, and as much as I want to gloat in this moment, I figure I might as well not make things more awkward. She’s ready to take off at any sign of trouble, and I’m going to do everything I can to keep her around. Like, rule follower and not awkward guy here.

Rachelle’s eyes go wide, her gaze still trailing down my chest and abs. I wish I could read her thoughts.

She takes the dress Tiffany hands her and ducks into the grove of palm trees. After another minute or so, she walks out, looking like sunshine and happiness. I open my mouth to say that exact thing, but she speaks before I can get anything out.

“Okay, well, thanks for helping me on the zip line. Sorry I puked on you. Have a nice life.”

And within moments, she’s gone, dragging Tiffany behind her.

CHAPTER 23

Rachelle

To be honest, this trip can’t get any more humiliating. So far, I’ve:

1. Punched Landon in the face at the top of the slide.

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2. Walked into a pole to avoid him seeing me (which then only made him see me more).

3. Puked all over him after getting off the zip line.

The one bright spot is that I can cross zip line off the bucket list. Yep, the list that we made to get rid of any thought of Landon possible. And yet here every one of my embarrassing moments has happened when he was close.

And then he caught me checking him out when he was buttoning his shirt. At least drool wasn't coming out the side of my mouth. I reach up to swipe on either side of my jaw to make sure. Nope, it's the one shred of pride I have left.

"What's the hurry?" Tiffany asks, stopping to look at cart displaying trinkets and toys.

"Um, I could die of embarrassment right now. Can't we look at this later?" We need to get as far away from Landon as humanly possible and then I'll just have to do one of those reconstruction surgeries where they can change what your face looks like. It sounds painful, but it has to be better than the guy who had it done in the second Sherlock Holmes movie. The ones with Robert Downey Jr. I'm a fan of anesthesia.

Tiffany turns to me and smiles. "You'll be fine. You don't need to run away from him. The guy is like a dog you can't get rid of. I think he's trying to get in your good graces."

"Well, it turns out my stomach had other ideas. Even if he thought about it, a) I'm

still livid about why he broke up with me and b) no one wants to be thrown up on.”

“It’s worth letting him talk to you about.”

I raise my eyebrows and glower at her. “What are you talking about? He told me why he broke up with me. Now I just need to survive this trip and get home.”

Tiffany shakes her head. “I get the idea he’s holding something back. And when you saw him coming out of the water, you can’t tell me you didn’t think about kissing him.”

“Kissing who?” Landon says from behind me and I jump a mile. From the grin on his face, I know he knows who we’re talking about.

“Tiffany’s dog. She, uh, got a new one before we left.” The lie is weak, and I’m sure he’ll pick up on it.

Landon looks confused. “I didn’t know you were a dog lover,” he says to Tiffany and turns to me. “And you’ve taken to kissing dogs?”

I nod, trying to keep my expression somber. “Nope. That’s no longer an issue.”

He tilts his head to the side a bit, trying to read my expression. Hopefully, I’m a rock wall in this situation.

“What are your plans for today?” Landon finishes buttoning the bright orange floral shirt Tiffany grabbed for him. I might not see them now, but there are some more defined abdominals I didn’t get the chance to witness the day we were swimming. I was a little busy hitting him in the face.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Well, I need to be avoiding my ex entirely. Because he's sent me a Trojan horse that is hard to resist.

"Hey guys! I'm glad I found you. Tiffany!" Dani squeals and Tiffany matches the pitch before they collide into a hug. "It's good to see you again, girl."

"I know. It's nice not to hide our conversations since we hated your brother's guts for the past year." Tiffany scrunches her face as she looks over at Landon.

Dani tips her head back to laugh but Landon says, "Hated? As in past tense?" The hope in his eyes is almost too much, and I have to look away.

Sure, he still has too many redeeming qualities, but my trust still isn't completely back.

"Well, you might've just moved up to the dislike button by taking the brunt of Rachelle's internal juices."

Dani looks around at the group in confusion and the rest of us laugh. Landon's other t-shirt is hanging from his back pocket and Dani finally notices the shirt.

"You definitely didn't wear that when you left the room this morning." She points to the shirt he's wearing. The color looks good against his tan skin.

"How do you know? You were practically sawing logs. I think you have some serious talent to be a lumberjack." Landon flinches as Dani moves forward and hits him with her open hand on the shoulder.

"I've been a little congested. I only snore when I'm getting a cold." She snuffles and Landon smiles in return.

A familiar ache hits me in the chest. I've missed these two. Way more than I want to admit. I mean, I've managed through the past year, but there is something about the simple sibling bond between them.

Hillary and I bonded over hiding during my parents' arguments and the Lizzie McGuire movie, but we had different tastes in just about everything else. Which is probably why I still hold on to the hope that she'll call me at some point, saying she misses me. Or that she needs me to help her with something.

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Short of a dead body, I'd jump at the chance to rescue her. But is that because I want her to be closer to me? Or because I'd love to have a relationship similar to Landon and Dani?

"What are we all doing? We should go to the pool or on the helium balloon ride. I don't think I've ever done one of those!" Dani says, turning to look around at the three of us.

I raise my hand. "I think I'll pass on that last one. I've hit my limit of heights today and would rather not have to buy yet another set of clothes."

We all laugh and Tiffany says, "I'll go on the balloon ride with you, Dani."

"You'll go in a balloon, but not the zip line?" I ask, wondering if Landon being on the opposite platform when I finally got hooked up to the zip line was planned as well.

"I'm thinking the balloon is safer," Tiffany says, avoiding eye contact.

"Perfect. Landon?" Dani asks.

"I think I'll stick around down here. You two have fun."

I can tell he's hanging around to make me feel better, but this is something I've worked to change over the past year. I don't need to lean on him for everything, no matter how much I want to.

“You can go with them. I bet you’ll love it.” I say it quietly, wishing I could erase the tenderness my voice conveys from the word love.

He shakes his head. “No, there are some food places I want to check out. Are you up for walking with me?”

Dani and Tiffany make a swift exit. Let the conspiring begin.

“Be careful, Tiffany!” Great, now I sound like a mother scolding her daughter.

Landon sticks his hands into his pants pockets and we stroll along the beach. At one point, I get a large pile of sand sinking into my shoe. I stop and take off the sneakers and socks, squishing my toes in the sand. This is heaven.

“Is there anything you want to look at while we’re here?” he asks, gesturing to the carts along the boardwalk.

I sigh. “I should be all right. I think I’ll wait until the end of the trip to spend money. My job and I didn’t leave for this trip on the best of terms, and I’ll be looking for a new one soon.”

That’s a reality, but I don’t want to seem desperate.

“What happened?” I catch the way Landon’s arms show the defined qualities of his muscles and have to nearly slap myself in the face to look away. Since when am I attracted to muscles? Even though I don’t want to admit it, I think I’m more into the guy behind the muscles. At least he’s no Mr. Beefcake.

“I was sick of my manager and told him I quit.”

He reaches out to touch my arm. The skin where his fingers rest feels like it’s been

touched with a live wire. “Were you still at the call center?”

I nod, breathing out as I think back to all the crap I’d gone through at that job. I’d taken it as a freshman in college because it worked around my class schedule. And then I just never left. Until now.

“Yes. Ike got promoted to the manager position a few months ago and wanted to reward his new girlfriend to my position. I told them I quit instead.”

“Are you okay with it?” Landon releases my arm and even though the sun is beating down on us, I shiver a moment, like his hand was keeping my body temperature normal.

“Yeah, I am, actually. I know I was there forever,” I say, pausing as he nods, “but I think that’s another notch on my list I can add to growing up. Quitting a job I hate.”

“You were always so good to the people there. I remember you telling me that your department was the highest grossing section.”

I sigh. “Obviously numbers don’t always make that much of a difference because they still promoted Ike over me.”

“Take it from me. Businesses aren’t always good at going for what they need to, but what they want to. The ones who try to help their employees overall are the most successful, I think. It’s the difference between working for my grandpa and working for the Hamilton Group.”

“What about you? I thought you wanted to go into architecture. Why real estate?”

Landon is quiet for a moment. “I didn’t have the inspiration I needed over the past year. But a guy from college took me under his wing and trained me to be an agent.

I'm just lucky I'm with this company. Roman and Isabella really care about us."

"Is Roman around a lot? At your office, I mean."

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Landon shakes his head. “No, well, I’ve only been back in Boston for about two months. The first time I met Roman was a couple of days ago when he asked me to come on this cruise.”

I chew on that for a minute. Landon has always been good at working with people, but to catch the eye of the CEO after just a few months is incredible. “Do you love it? Selling homes?”

He smiles and nods. “I didn’t think I liked sales after all the fundraisers to pay for sports back in the day, but once I was trained and had a better understanding of what to do, it’s a lot easier. And watching people move in and get settled is a highlight. Like I’m able to help them find space they can call home.”

My heart flutters and I glance away, staring at my feet as we walk through the sand.

“So what do you think is next for you?”

Thoughts race through my head. I’m not sure where to start.

“Well, I haven’t found anything I really love. I started refinishing old furniture a few months ago, but trying to find the pieces at an affordable price and then adding in the materials for the transformation got to be too much for my budget. I’ve been trying to do some woodworking. But it’s been a total trial-and-error process.”

“That’s really cool. What are you hoping to build? And where do you build it? Is there a shop nearby your house?”

I give a small laugh, surprised at all his questions. “No, there was a shed already out back when I bought the place. Everything is tucked away in there.”

“Did you end up knocking out that one short wall we talked about when we walked through it?” he asks.

“Yeah, and then I put in new flooring because I couldn’t find any that matched. I’ve redone most of the first floor over the past few months.”

“That’s amazing. I guess you could always be a designer. Styling is what Isabella does. Or is it staging?” He pauses to think about it. “I think it’s both. I haven’t really dealt with that department yet.”

“She stages homes?” I ask, curious. I’ve heard of that before but I always wondered if it’s worth the trouble.

He nods. “Yeah, I think she started with a company in London and then helped Roman do a staging project right around the time they started dating. With the amount of real estate his company does in Europe, I’m sure she has plenty of work.”

“But how does that work? She just puts everything in the house and then takes it out when it sells?”

“Yeah, they help give a vision of what the space can look like. The market right now is crazy enough that we don’t have time to even clear the place out before the apartment is rented or the house is sold.” He takes a step closer to me and bumps me with his elbow. “I think you’d be great at the design part. Helping a builder pick out the features. You’ve always had an eye for color schemes and what flows together.”

I raise my eyebrows, trying to keep my smirk under wraps. “Did you just say ‘flow’?” Coming from Landon, it sounds like he’s trying to be trendy.

He blushes and nods. “Isabella said it at a meeting the other night. She gives us tips about how to get people to make an offer faster.”

“Like the cookies in the oven thing?” We’re walking along a small boardwalk toward several restaurants and I love the weathered look of it.

“Yeah, kinda. That’s one idea, but she’s—”

“On your left!” comes a yell behind us.

A bike cruises past. Landon moves close to me to allow the biker to pass, but I don’t realize I’m close to the edge of the boardwalk, and my arms do that slow motion flail through the air, since there’s nothing to grab onto.

Before I get too far, my body stops in mid-air and I see Landon’s hands, one on my arm and the other, reaching out to grab my waist.

He pulls me close, allowing my feet to touch the ground again. I’m out of danger and should move away from him, but I can’t seem to do that. The smell of him, the bobbing of his Adam’s apple and his lips this close are all clouding my senses.

“That was a close one,” he says, his chest heaving and his words breathless.

“Thanks,” I say, equally soft. I’m pretty sure my insides are hot enough to burn a marshmallow over a campfire. Then again, my stomach is hopping like popcorn kernels introduced to heat. So basically a lot of warmth happening all up in here.

A few more seconds and my brain finally sends out the alarm to step away. But instead of listening, I stay there, allowing my mind to feel every point where our bodies meet. His hand on my hip, my arm around his back.

I breathe in, holding onto the smell of the cologne I'd sprayed on my pillowcase so many times over the course of our relationship.

His eyes search mine and I'm not sure what he finds, but he leans forward. I go up on tiptoe and our lips touch, soft at first. I swear there is a daytime fireworks show going on around us because everything is buzzing.

Our kisses are soft, tentative at first, before I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. His lips break away from mine, trailing down to my chin. He kisses all along my jaw but it's the kiss on my neck right below my ear that makes me giggle.

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He pulls away, his smile bright, as if he just won the lottery or something. “Still ticklish, huh?”

I tilt my head to the side, embarrassment burning my cheeks. “Yes, yes I am.” It’s not even like that’s a normal spot to be ticklish, but it’s my curse, I guess.

Landon reaches forward and takes my hand in his, intertwining our fingers together. My brain is only half-heartedly objecting to this amount of touching, probably knowing it won’t be heard over the thunder of my heartbeat.

“Was there somewhere you wanted to eat?” I ask, realizing after I say it, I’m practically inviting myself to lunch with him. But there are so many feelings swirling, like it’s the first of everything all in one day.

“Any of these places look good. How’s your stomach feeling?” He gives me a small grin and I glance away.

“I won’t be repeating the process from earlier, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Let’s eat at that taco place. My treat.” He squeezes my hand a couple times.

I shake my head. “I can pay. Just because I quit my job doesn’t mean I’m destitute.”

“I know, but it’s something I can do.” We walk into a restaurant and he scoots in my chair. Why does he have to be so good?

“You know where I live, but where are you staying?” I adjust the silverware on the

napkin next to me, hoping to keep my attention there rather than on his handsome face. I might not stop smiling if I stare at him all day.

“With Dani. She’s got a little apartment by her school, but I’m thinking she’s going to need something different after she graduates. It’s a shoebox, and there was a shooting just down the street last week.”

I frown, surprised by his revelation. “You’re a real estate agent who doesn’t have his own place?”

He raises his hands and says, “I know. It sounds crazy. But I haven’t had time to look for anything I love.”

Everything inside me freezes. “Are you still thinking of a fixer-upper?” It was something we’d wanted to do together, since those were the houses in our price range at the time, just like the home I bought.

“I don’t know. I mean, I think I’ll be in Boston for a while. My original boss in Chicago helped me learn a lot and then I applied for a transfer when a team manager position opened up in Boston.”

He hadn’t just left me, he’d left everything he’d known. And for Landon to leave his mother without help, aside from his sisters, is a big deal. It means whatever scared him away had him running for another state.

The server walks up and takes our order. The good thing about Latino food is I usually stick to the same thing no matter where I go. I’m able to avoid at least one of the awkward moments with Landon by responding quickly.

“So what made you decide to come on a cruise?” Landon asks, fiddling with the ring he wears on his middle finger.

I lean onto the table and hear a mental rebuke in my mother's voice to not slouch at the table. "I actually won it."

"That's way cool. What did you have to do to win?"

"Sign up for a matchmaking app."

"No way. They had a sign-up when we got on the boat. Was it Love, Austen or something like that?"

I nod and smile. "I signed up because Tiffany is the social media manager for the company and she needed more testers. That was back when Hillary fled her own wedding."

Landon's face freezes and his gaze locks on me. "What?"

"Hillary was going to get married at the same place that, uh, we, um, you know. The lodge. She set it for six months after we were supposed to, um, anyway. She literally left him at the altar." A long silence descends over us, and I can tell with a quick glance that this information is new and it's eating him up.

Landon's jaw tightens and looks like he's ready to hurt something.

I'm not sure whether there was something between him and my sister, so I keep talking. "She ran off with some guy who said he was buying an island. I haven't heard from her since."

"What an idiot."

That wasn't the response I expect. "Are you talking about Hillary? I thought you got along with her when we dated." At least I can talk about one part of our relationship

without stumbling over the words.

“I’m just saying she’s good at wrecking things. She rarely cares what or who is in her wake.”

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Even though I feel the same way, a prickle of my defenses rise and I say, “I don’t think that’s fair to her. She makes mistakes, but don’t we all?”

He glances down, his fingers twisting a spoon back and forth. “Yes, I’ve definitely made my share of mistakes. And I hope at one point you’ll be able to forgive me.”

His pointed look makes me squirm in my seat. “I’ve forgiven you to a degree, Landon. But getting that full measure of trust back isn’t as easy to fix.”

“Understandable.” The server brings a basket of chips and queso, a much needed interruption.

As we eat the appetizer and then our meal, I turn over in my head what Landon’s connection was to my sister other than the few times we had family gatherings.

But that’s in the past. Or is it?

Here I am, sitting with him for a meal, us chatting a lot like we used to. And we just shared a mind-blowing kiss. Maybe it’s because I haven’t kissed anyone else or just because it’s been a while, but it was one for the books.

Is it possible to completely forgive someone whose actions affected my life severely for the past year? He’s expressed his regrets several times, but I haven’t figured out if it’s just words yet or not.

I need to keep going, enjoying this time. My mind gets in the way too often. If anything, this can be a fun few days before we head back to real life. I can give

Landon a chance. I just hope my heart can take it if things don't turn out how I want them to.

CHAPTER 24

Rachelle

"I don't think I've seen you smile this much since, well, since you and Landon were engaged. Did something happen last night?" Tiffany asks.

We're sitting side by side on the bus on our way to tour a bunch of waterfalls. Landon's boss asked for the employees to sit toward the front so they could go over something for a meeting. He was sad he couldn't sit by me, but then he doesn't have to meet later. And I can relax instead of over-analyze every slight movement. Yeah, I'm that girl.

"We enjoyed our time walking along the beach," I say, trying to keep my smile under wraps. But it's hard to do when I could barely sleep last night. All the good dreams came to me, and I'm holding on tight to the memory of them. Maybe my luck is changing and I can actually have a happily ever after.

"He kissed you, didn't he?" Tiffany says, her voice drawing several eyes in our direction. Landon's are among that group and I can see him grinning before he sends me a wink.

"Keep your voice down," I say, sending Tiffany the glare of death.

She bounces up and down in her seat and squeals. "I love it." She turns to Dani, who's sitting across the aisle from us. "We're the best matchmakers ever."

"For sure. Because watching the two of them try to get things to work on their own is

like fitting a square peg into a round hole.”

I frown. “That’s actually impossible.”

“Not with enough determination. I mean, detonation.” Dani grins and I laugh at the remark from the first dinner on the cruise ship.

“I think you need to come live in our house when you graduate. We’ve got room.” There’s an extra room upstairs and I would love to add Dani to the mix of roommates. She and Kenzie together would be like their own traveling comedy troupe.

Dani nods. “I’ll hold you to that. As long as no one has slob as their best character trait.”

“I’m like a level one slob,” Tiffany says, giggling, “but I don’t live there anymore. So you should be in the clear.”

The bus goes through some twists and turns before stopping in what looks like a makeshift parking lot.

The driver stands and turns toward us. “We get off here. You’ll head to a shed with all the equipment needed for this tour. Helmets must be worn at all times, especially when going down the waterfalls.”

“Going down the waterfalls?” I whisper the words, glancing between Dani and Tiffany as the thought sinks in. I reflect on every movie scene where the characters are about to go over the large falls crashing into the water several hundred feet below.

Dani gives me a pained smile and nods. “I’m sure they won’t be huge waterfalls. At least I hope not.”

We file off the bus and Landon waits by the door, wrapping his arm around me as soon as I step off the bus.

“How was your meeting?” I ask, turning my head against his chest to see his face.

“It was good. More words of wisdom than actual business practices, but I guess I can still use those, right?”

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We follow the crowd and get geared up. The trail is beautiful, sporting greenery and breathtaking views.

We walk through large sections of rock and I'm amazed by the shapes of the rock formations. Water drips down and up ahead there's a bright blue pool of water with a waterfall flowing into it. The width of the falls is about five feet, which eases some knots in my stomach about sliding down one.

Because like an optimist, I told myself I would try anything on this trip. So far, I've held up my end of the bargain, even giving Landon a chance, which is saying a lot.

The tour guide continues forward, leading into several other sections. "All right, on this one, you'll be able to go up top and slide down."

I glance at the waterfall. The distance isn't too far from the ground, which I'm grateful for. Because I won't be a chicken and back out.

"Are you up for it?" Landon asks, his soft tone pulling on so many memories.

"I'm doing it. I'm not the girl you used to know." I smile and take the few steps toward the small rock stairs that leads upward. My brain thinks over my words as I go, finally seeing some changes in myself.

I stood up to Ike and have been able to try things out to decide if they're right for me before declining a second trip, i.e. the third waterslide. And it would've been easy to give up on the zip line or even being in Landon's presence again. I've been able to do it.

It's like I'm breathing good and deep for the first time in a long time.

Once at the top, I wait for the others in line to go first. After a few deep breathing exercises, I sit down where the guide directs and slide the ten feet of rock surface until I drop into the icy water below.

Landon grins and pulls me in for a hug, which gets the last remaining parts of his t-shirt wet. "That was awesome!"

"Are you not going to try it?" I ask, taking a step back. The adrenaline is pouring through me, and I glance at the slide once more. "I think I'll go again."

"I'll try it out," he says, waving for me to go in front of him.

I'm proud to say that in the time we spend at the waterfalls, I lost count of the number of times I slid down. Add that to my bucket list.

We finish and head back to the ship around late afternoon.

"You were on fire today, Rachelle," Tiffany says, leaning forward to talk to me around Landon. She's sitting on the opposite seat with Dani and I'm next to Landon, hand in hand. "Let's just say the BBL definitely worked its charm."

Dani laughs, glancing down at our intertwined hands. "Definitely not how we thought it would, but I love it."

Landon frowns and glances over at me. "What's the BBL?"

Dani sits forward, interest piqued. "Isn't it a breakup bucket list?"

My stomach drops. "How'd you know that?"

Tiffany gives me a pained smile and says, “I might’ve involved her in the making of it. And talked to her occasionally. I couldn’t just cut her off.”

Dani gives a smile to match Tiffany’s and I nod. Tiffany’s expression is waiting for me to explode, but Dani wasn’t the one who’d hurt me. It had just been too much to continue our friendship when I was irritated with her brother. “What did you add to it, Dani?”

“My idea was the zip line. And the kick-boxing class.”

Landon’s gaze bounces among the three of us. “You made a breakup list of activities?” His jaw tightens and I sit back, trying to get a better view of him.

“Yeah, my roommates and, apparently, Dani, wanted me to get out of my rut, so we came up with a list of activities to help me get over you.”

I see the sadness cloud his eyes and he tries to give me a comforting smile, but it doesn’t have the same effect it usually does.

A few tense seconds pass and Tiffany and Dani begin a discussion of their own. I pull my hand away from Landon’s hoping to get a better idea of what’s going on in his head right now.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, leaning to where I can see his eyes. There are tears there, ready to spill over the edge. He blinks, allowing one of them to escape before he wipes it away.

He reaches over and covers my hand with both of his. “I’m so sorry, Rachelle. I didn’t mean to hurt you when I left. I just feel bad that you had to create a bucket list of things to get over me.”

“I don’t know, Landon. I think having those adventures and doing things outside my comfort zone have been good for me. It helped me not use you as a crutch for everything that made me scared.”

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He nods and lifts an arm to wrap around my shoulders. “Thanks for giving me another chance to fix things.”

This is the feeling I’ve hoped for, the need to get everything back to normal. But now I know how far I can stretch myself. And hopefully he won’t be pulling me along for the rest of our relationship.

CHAPTER25

Landon

This day hasn’t been what I expected, but I’ve been able to secure time with Rachelle, and that’s the main goal right now.

I’m soaking up every detail she’s offering, hoping to remember them for a critical moment in the near future. I also hope she’ll let me in further, that we can patch up the problems in our past, even if it’s slower than I want it to be.

I’m lying on my bed in the cabin. Dani stayed out longer again, and I’m sure I’ll have to find her at some point. I’m just hoping she’s not chasing a guy with all the secrecy.

My mind goes back to the conversations from earlier.

Rachelle signed up for a dating app. It doesn’t sound like she did it willingly. I mean, Tiffany is a very persuasive gal. But then she also created a Breakup Bucket List?

But what did I expect she would do or feel when I left? I let that question course

through me. It's probably miniscule to the pain I've given her.

I'm just glad Rachelle could finally go on a cruise. And that I could be here as well.

I can't sleep and decide to head out and sit on deck. I've had a fantasy book I've been trying to read for the past year. Tonight might be the night for me to make some progress on it, at least enough to get the guilt and regret flooding my mind to take a nap.

I take a seat on one of the lounge chairs away from the pool and turn it toward the ocean. With a few white lights strung overhead, there's something calming about the scene.

My mind replays our kiss the day before on the boardwalk, and the way Rachelle responded to it, like she'd been hoping a kiss would happen.

I crack open the paperback book and try to focus on the words. Instead, my thoughts are with a woman I've never stopped loving. But will she ever be able to truly trust me again? It's all I can hope for.

CHAPTER 26

Rachelle

The newest urban fantasy from my favorite author is on my tablet and I'm determined to read a good chunk of it, if not the whole thing tonight. I've almost forgotten about it with all the highs and lows over the past few days.

With Tiffany already snoring in her bed, I decide to head out to the deck. The breeze is light, making it just barely cooler than earlier today.

I scan the deck in search of the perfect spot to read, one where I can glance up and see the vast expanse of the waves. About halfway into my sweep, I see a familiar jacket around the side of a pool chair.

My stomach does a fancy flip like gymnasts on the uneven bars, and I hesitate, debating if I should go to him. We've made some progress over the past two days, aside from him talking crap on my sister.

I know it sounds crazy, to pause and wonder if this is all reality, but I guess I've conditioned myself to be cautious around him.

"I can do this." I say the words out loud, as if that will help my body and brain to finally work in cohesive union. Friend, boyfriend, fiancé or husband. There's no rush to put labels on whatever we are yet. And maybe we'll discover that off the boat, we're not really working. Closure is what I need.

I can do this.

I walk over and point to a chair that's turned toward the pool but still close to him.

"Is this seat taken?" I ask, giving him a small smile.

His face lights up and he nods. And then, in a quick move, he's up and pushing the chair to sit right next to his. I'm talking there is no room between his arm platform and mine and I'm okay with it.

"What are you reading?" he asks, glancing over at my tablet.

"Um, it's about a witch and how she falls in love with a shifter." My cheeks are getting hot. Why are my cheeks hot?

Landon tries to hold back a smile as he nods. “Okay, I’m sure there are hurdles for that relationship.”

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I chuckle and ask, “What about you?”

“I’m reading a fantasy. It’s book five in a series I started a long time ago. I—” He stops mid-sentence because I reach out and pull the book toward me. And I’m now enjoying the sparks of energy still pulsing through my fingers after we touch.

“Isn’t this the series you started reading while we were, uh, whatever?” Why can’t I stop being so awkward about our relationship?

He nods. “I haven’t been able to read much in the past few months. There’s a lot to learn about the housing market and I’ve kind of thrown myself into learning it all.”

I sit back and give him a small smile, my brain replaying him curled up next to me for several nights in a row, reading the books from the series. He’d never been into books as much as he was when reading this series. Sometimes people just have to find their genre.

“Better late than never to enjoy a good book.” I give him a quick smile and lean back, opening my tablet and starting at the beginning of the book. It takes me a few minutes to get into the story and remember what happened in the last one I read, probably six to eight months ago.

Then it all comes back, the characters and the dire situation they’re in. I use my forefinger and thumb to squish my bottom lip together as I read about the witch heading into the vampire coven.

The sky darkens completely and I turn to see Landon watching me.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m just thinking about how happy I am that you’re here.”

“Really?” I want to agree and say I feel the same way, but I hold back instead. I can’t show him all my cards because there’s a little seed of doubt he could just leave again. And where would I be if he does?

I’m stronger than the last time, more sure of what I want, but my heart is a fickle thing. I just can’t afford to be sad for another year if things don’t work out.

No pressure. I need to remember there’s no pressure here. It’s not like we’re instantly going back to being engaged. We’re just enjoying a vacation together. Yeah, that’s doable.

He nods and lays his head back on the lounge chair. “Yeah, it’s helped me kind of take a break from work. I’ve needed it.”

“So what’s the plan then? Is Boston a waypoint to get somewhere else?” He hasn’t bought a house or found a place of his own, which causes me to worry that it will be easy for him to leave again.

There are several moments of silence, and I wonder if he even hears me. Then his head swivels in my direction.

“I’m not exactly sure about that. Roman invited me on the cruise because he’s heard good things about my work. But I don’t know what that means overall, to be honest. My immediate boss has been with the company since the Boston branch opened in the US two years ago.”

“Is he close to retiring?” I’m trying to picture the man who was at dinner the first

night on the boat. He's probably late forties, so not that old.

"I don't think so. It's all up in the air."

I chuckle a bit. "Well, if you're going to have a conference somewhere, this is the place to do it."

He nods and gives me a half-smile, sending my heart into overdrive. "Have you fully recovered from the zip line yesterday?"

My cheeks burn as I think back to what happened after I got off the zip line. But that led to our second first kiss, so maybe it wasn't all bad? "Yes. I've already crossed it off my list."

"That's good," he says, but his tone is strangled. "Any other height daring adventures still on your list?"

"Not that I can think of. I'll have to check it once I get back to the room."

"When did you make it?"

I fake a cough, trying to decide how to answer that. "Make the list?"

He nods. Why can't he just drop it? I can see how much it pains him to talk about. But then, maybe it's a little payback for what I went through.

"Oh, after Hillary's almost wedding. Tiffany reunited with Drew and then I invited my now roommates to move in. It was hard walking around an empty house all the time. Everyone was home that first weekend and Tiffany suggested we think of some ideas to get over you."

“So the paint balling?”

I nod, trying to keep my smile in check for that one. “On the list.” I wait a beat and say, “Sorry again about hitting you in the chest.”

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He shakes his head. “It’s totally fine. I definitely deserved it.”

My mind goes back to the events of the day. I’m glad Dani was part of helping with the BBL, even though Tiffany didn’t tell me about the two of them talking. Dani has always been there to comfort me, except when I pushed her away after breaking up with Landon.

I need to divert the conversation to something else, because he looks like his puppy ran away. I was there the last time that happened in high school and it’s hard to get him out of that funk.

The one distraction I haven’t planned on shows up next to Landon.

“Landon, you’re alive. I was beginning to think you’d been eaten by sharks back on the island or something.” Savannah practically sits in his lap, draping her arms over his shoulders.

He gently pushes her back and stands. “Is there something you need?”

I have to glance back at my tablet to avoid sending lasers at the back of her head. At least Landon didn’t let her hang all over him like before.

“Yeah, Roman was looking for you. I think he’s down by the theater.”

He turns to me. “I’ll see you later?”

I nod, turning back to the book. But my brain can’t focus because Savannah scoots

back and settles into the chair Landon just vacated.

“What are you reading, Michelle?”

“It’s Rachelle,” I say, taking a deep breath to calm the jealousy raging inside. “And I’m reading The Curse of the Vampire’s Tomb.”

Her eyebrows nearly hit her hairline. “I don’t think I’ve read that one before. I usually stick to the regular romance stuff.”

I nod as politely as possible and turn back to the story. But I only absorb three words before another question pops up.

“So what’s the news about you and Landon? You seem to hang out a lot.”

Whatisthe news about us? “We are good friends.”

We were going to get married.

She gasps and I turn to see her staring at me. “It took a bit to place your voice and your face, but you’re the one who shot him at paintballing, right? I can’t believe I didn’t connect the two before.”

“That was me.”

“You must’ve dated then. There is so much tension between the two of you. Were you together for a long time?”

I frown. “Why does it matter?”

She leans over. Her eyes narrow and her smile goes a bit tight. “Because I’ve had my

eye on the guy since he came from Chicago. I like to know who my competition is.”

I click off the tablet and stand. “Yeah, we dated. And even though there was a lot that happened, I still have feelings for him.”

“Good to know,” she says, sitting back.

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’m going to get an adrenaline rush.”

I stomp away, doing the best I can to get away from the woman. And if she’s going after him, I’m going to give it my best shot to keep him. But first I need to drive.

CHAPTER 27

Rachelle

I make it to the racetrack just as the lights go out. A sign on the fence surrounding the area says the track closes at seven. I don’t have my phone on me so I’m not sure what time it is, but I’m guessing it’s close.

Mr. Beefcake comes out, turning to lock the gate.

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“Is there a chance I can ride?” This isn’t something I’d usually ask, but Savannah has me all keyed up.

He turns around and gives me a small smile. “Sorry, I’ve already cleaned up for the night.” Tucking his keys into his pocket, he walks by me, but I reach out and touch his arm, hoping I can convince him.

“There’s no way to do it?”

With a shake of the head, he says, “It takes a while to get everything back online. We have a few other options that are easier though. There’s a skydiving simulator. I can help you with that.”

“Skydiving simulator?” Why is my voice all squeaky at the end?

He nods. “Yeah, skydiving, but inside a tube? You wouldn’t have to jump out of a plane or anything.”

I suck in a deep breath, trying to decide if it’s a good idea. “And what if I’m scared of heights?”

“We’ve had a ton of people go through who’ve been scared at first. But it’s a controlled environment and I’ll be there the whole time.” He reaches out his hand and says, “I’m Brad.”

I take it, my arm shaking a bit at the thought of skydiving, even if it’s just in a wind tunnel.

“Rachelle. Let’s do it.”

We walk to the other end of the ship, and I’m surprised I haven’t been down this way at all. My cabin is in the middle of the ship and most of the activities we’ve done have been on the one end.

We walk into a section with a clear glass window and I can see someone already in there.

“That’s the simulator, huh?” Not my brightest moment.

“Yep. Here, what’s your size? I’ll get out a jumpsuit.”

I hesitate. I’ve always been a small, but thinking back to the paint balling attire that almost felt painted on, I figure I should give myself some grace. “I’m a medium or large, depending on the fit.”

There’s no judgment in his eyes, just like Landon hasn’t looked at me with disgust because of my change in size.

“Sit and watch this video while I get suited up and grab yours.” He’s gone for all of a minute, long enough for me to weigh whether or not I want to go through with this.

The instructional video is about as dry as the go-kart one was, but at least I have a better idea of how to do things once I get into the tunnel.

I pull the suit on and adjust my ponytail down low so I can fit the helmet on my head.

Brad waits for me to finish up and starts with the instructions. “Okay, we’re going to head into the chute. You’re going to fold your arms across your chest and then just lean in through the door to get started, just like in the video. Got it?”

“Y-yeah. Got it.”

I shake out my hands as I follow him toward the tube. The other rider steps out with a smile that takes up her entire face. If I come out looking like that, it'll be a miracle. At this point, I'm just hoping to keep everything from going crazy in my body.

“Okay, I'll stabilize you and then you'll push your hips forward and kind of arch your back. That will help you get more comfortable in the air flow.”

I swallow, doing everything I can to stop from mentally freaking out.

“Now's your chance. Fold your arms and lean forward.”

It's a weird sensation to have half my body in regular air and the other with a semi-weightless feeling.

The air moves me upward and I can feel Brad pull on the harness attached to the jumpsuit, keeping me from sailing too far up, or at least that's what it feels like.

He presses down on my hips slightly, and I can feel the difference in how my body handles the air pressure. He lightly tips my head back, allowing even more control.

With one finger pointed up, probably to ask if I'm ready because I can't hear a thing in here, I take a moment and then nod.

I'm sailing up into the tube, but it feels like I've just jumped from a plane. My screams can probably be heard around the ship. We stay there for a bit and then come back down, Brad guiding me through the entire experience.

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And in a surprise turn of events, I actually like it. It's scary and I'm sure I'll have an ulcer by the end, but there's a magic to it that's freeing.

The passage of time isn't something I register while in there, but soon enough Brad pulls me down and then almost has to shove me out of the tube.

I slump over on a bench, my chest rising and falling in rapid spurts. But it's the exact rush and distraction I'd been hoping for.

"What did you think?" Brad asks, sitting on the end of the bench, with at least a body length of a person in between us.

"Just what I needed, thanks," I say, holding my helmet and goggles in my hands. "Are you trained on all the attractions on the ship?"

He nods. "Yeah, this is my usual spot, but the go-kart manager is over in the sick wing so I got reassigned for a few days."

"Well, I'm just happy I didn't throw up on you. Thank you for helping me get through it."

Brad smiles. "No problem. Let me know if you want to do it again."

I thank him again after taking off the suit and head out onto the deck. The wind is blowing slightly more than before, and I can't help but grin.

I just survived a skydiving simulator.

Chances of me getting to where I can dive out of a plane are slim, but at least there's some improvement in my height paralysis.

Now I just need to find Landon. Hopefully, we can finish our earlier conversation without interruptions.

CHAPTER 28

Landon

Roman is nowhere to be found on the ship. When I finally make it back to the deck where Rachelle and I had been talking, Savannah is sitting in my chair and Rachelle's is empty.

"I never found Roman. Are you sure he needed me?"

She twists her hair around a finger and tries to give me a flirty glare. "I'm pretty sure, yeah."

"Where's Rachelle?"

"Why? Are you thinking of getting back together with her?" Her eyes darken and her mouth tightens into a line.

I frown, not in the mood for this kind of conversation after the diversion she just pulled. "Yeah, I am."

Her smile drops and she stands, walking close to me. "She said something about getting out some adrenaline. But who needs her? We can make our own fun, Landon. Just you and me." It takes a few seconds to realize she's getting close enough to kiss me.

I stumble back and blink a few times, hoping that will at least restart my brain.

“I’ve got to go, Savannah.” It’s all I can get out before I hurry away. I don’t need a second attempt at a kiss coming from her.

I walk to just about every part of the ship trying to find Rachelle. I start with the go-karts and move on to anything that’s open. When I see her in the skydiving section, I almost didn’t believe it was her. But she turns to the side enough before putting her helmet on for me to confirm it.

I chuckle a moment. It’s possible Savannah drove her to need to do something like this.

The guy from the go-karts is the one helping her get into the tunnel and he works to get her comfortable. A slight stab of jealousy hits my chest.

It’s not because the instructor has his hands all over her, which I know is to keep her from freaking out. It’s the fact that she did this on her own.

She doesn’t need me.

The thought sinks in deep, and I feel like I’ve just fallen into the water, sinking lower even though I’m trying to paddle to the surface.

The first thing that comes to mind is our breakup achieved its purpose of helping her make up her own mind and to build her confidence.

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My whole life I've been needed. I'm the only boy in my family, and was always tasked to help my father with certain projects. When he died, I took on the role of keeping the family together and working to help my mother in any capacity possible, until I could drive and work at a job.

And now, I have the strangest feeling, like I don't know what my purpose is anymore. The woman I love no longer needs me to help her through the struggles of life. Will she still love me despite that?

Rachelle gets out of the chute and I debate whether I should go in and congratulate her or just leave.

I need the time to think, to process all I've gone through in the past few minutes. Maybe a good night's sleep will help me figure out where to go with my life.

CHAPTER29

Rachelle

I'm on cloud nine walking back to the deck where Landon and I had been "reading" earlier. But he's not back. At least Savannah is gone.

I wait for over an hour and then head back to the room.

"Tiffany," I say, whispering loudly.

"What?" she asks in a growl.

“I just went on the skydiving simulator.”

She rolls over, her eyes trying to open, but the sliver of light from the bathroom is causing her to blink rapidly. “Really? Did you go with Landon?”

My heart beats quicker and a sliver of guilt trickles in. Should I have waited for him? I was so keyed up around Savannah that I needed some way to let it out. Would that have been a good experience for the two of us to do together? I’ll have to ask him tomorrow.

“No, but it was awesome. Go back to sleep.”

I don’t sleep well. I’m tossing and turning, having dreams that I’m actually skydiving. It’s official. Real skydiving will never be on my bucket list.

There’s no sign of Dani or Landon at breakfast.

“Maybe they’re at a meeting or something,” Tiffany says, grabbing a few more pieces of melon from the bowl.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” I’ve got a dollop of cottage cheese on my plate and am waiting for a waffle to cook.

“What do you want to do today?”

Today is another day aboard the ship as we travel to the last island. “How about we start with a mani and pedi?” I ask. Getting dolled up and feeling relaxed is the what I need this morning. And I might as well take advantage of the added package that came with winning the cruise.

“What about Dani? Do we want to look for her? I doubt she’d have to be at the

meeting.” Tiffany’s words now make me doubt Landon’s whereabouts.

“Let’s eat and see.”

* * *

Dani steps out of her cabin door as we come down the hall.

“Hey girl!” Tiffany says. “Want to go to the spa with us?”

“Yes! I’ve been dying to go. I think I’m going to change the color of my toenails from the light blue to a bright orange.”

The two of them walk down the hall and I point to the door. “Is Landon still in there?”

Dani turns and shakes her head. “No, I think he left early this morning. I don’t know if he had a meeting to get to or something.”

My disappointment dives deeper, but I do my best to shake it off. Things had been going so well yesterday. Maybe Roman is requiring more meetings now that we’re traveling instead of stopping at port? That has to be the logical conclusion.

It takes a few minutes, but Dani directs us to the spa. Isabella is sitting in a chair in the lobby, flipping through a design magazine.

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“Oh, I like that whole look,” I say, pointing to one of the pictures in the magazine as I sit down next to her.

Isabella turns to me with a brilliant smile. “You do? I put it together.”

I blink several times and scan down the page until I see the credits underneath the picture. “Space designed by Isabella Hamilton for the Royal House.”

I raise my eyebrows and say, “You designed this for the Royal Family? Like, in England?”

She shrugs. “I’ve done a lot of design in the past few years. I actually started out on my own with Roman before we started dating. He needed a stager and I told him I could do it, even though I was working for someone else. I’ve got an entire team now who helps us stage all the various apartments and homes Roman’s company builds, as well as another group who decides on the features of the new construction.”

“I thought you were in real estate,” Tiffany pipes up. I turn to glance at her, surprised she knows that much about the woman sitting in front of us. “What? I might’ve read a few things about the Hamilton company before.”

Isabella smiles and nods. “Yes, there are different divisions within the company. It started out solely as a real estate company but then expanded when Roman took the business over from his father. He’s always been into developing, but it’s nice to have the branches all work together. I’m the head of the designers for each of the projects. So it’s kind of a family business.” Isabella pauses and looks at Tiffany closer. “Are you feeling seasick, dear?”

Tiffany gives her a tight smile. “Something like that. Do you mind if I run back to the room and grab something?”

“That’s probably a good idea.” Isabella looks at me and says, “Rachelle, Dani, and I will wait here.”

“Thank you,” she mouths to me as I look up at her from my chair.

“So, how has the trip been for you?” Isabella asks as she flips another couple of pages.

“Fantastic. I mean, I’ve been able to accomplish things I only had nightmares about before.” Which still ended up taking over most of my sleep the night before.

Dani and Isabella laugh and I join in.

“Rachelle has definitely impressed me with her adventurous side on this trip,” Dani says, quietly clapping her hands.

“Isabella told me there was an adventurer trying to break free.” I lean closer and drop my voice when I say, “I went on the skydiving simulator last night.”

Dani stands and dances around, screaming as though I just told her Olivia Rodrigo is on the ship.

I turn to Isabella and shake my head. “Sorry about her. Heights aren’t my favorite thing, but I feel like they’re more manageable.”

“That’s something to celebrate for sure. I’ve never done any skydiving before.” She smiles and watches as Dani finally calms down enough to sit.

“And what’s your story, Dani Higgins? Did you leave some guy pining for you back on the mainland?” Isabella leans forward, looking invested.

Dani sighs and leans back, slouching on the couch. “Nope. No men here. I’m a senior in college and guys are not on my radar at the moment.”

“Really? Didn’t I see you snogging a man downstairs last night?” Isabella teases.

I’ve never in my life seen Dani embarrassed by anything and yet she’s almost as red as Isabella’s lipstick.

“What happens on the boat, stays on the boat, right?” She gives a courtesy smile.

“Dani, tell us what happened. We can’t just have a piece of the story,” I say, staring at her until she breaks. “You’ve conspired against me plenty over the past few days.”

“For you, not against you,” Dani says, laughing.

Tiffany returns and glances among the three of us, trying to put together what she missed without asking.

“Dani’s about to tell us who she’s been snogging.” Isabella says, leaning forward and staring at Dani.

Tiffany gasps and sits down on the couch. “Yes, do tell. Us married women need something to get twitterpated about.”

“Touché,” Isabella grins.

Dani rolls her eyes. “It’s not even like that. He’s the guy who was telling us off on the slide that first day. His name is Cameron and he’s a nice guy.”

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“Didn’t he have muscles?” Tiffany asks. “Was he Mr. Beefcake?”

I shake my head. “No, Mr. Beefcake is Brad.”

“Excuse me? Did you just call someone Beefcake?” Isabella asks, her expression scrunched with confusion.

The other three of us burst out laughing. “Yes, um, that’s what we call the gym rats with huge arms and toothpick legs,” Dani says.

Isabella’s gaze goes far away for a moment and then she nods, smiling. “Okay, I can picture it now. I think I’ve seen someone like that a few times on the ship.”

“Are you ladies ready for your treatments?” a spa tech asks.

We all nod and follow her into the room to change. We’re given fluffy white robes and I’m already in heaven.

I got on the ship thinking this was the final moment for my Breakup Bucket List, but it’s the middle of a new side of me. Sure, there are a few more tweaks to make, but I’m liking this version of myself.

A woman leads me out to a line of chairs set up for manicures. The other three are already sitting there, and someone is rubbing a greenish cream all over their faces.

I lean back and allow the gal in front of me to do the same, sticking my feet in the warm water and relaxing. This is about the only thing I’ve missed from the regimen

my mother always set for us before a party.

“How are things going with Landon?” Isabella asks.

“Good, I think. I mean, it’s still early to know if anything is going to work out long term.” I pause a moment and decide to share the small bit of worry blooming in my chest. “It surprised me he didn’t stop by my room or tell me what his plans were for the day.”

But only jealous girlfriends should worry about that. I’m not that right now.

“That does seem strange. From everything I’ve learned about Landon, he’s a go for it kind of guy,” Isabella says, her eyes closed and leaning back in the chair.

My stomach twists into a small knot, the worry tugging it a bit tighter. “That’s why it’s strange. He’s always been there, well, minus when he broke my heart.”

Isabella nods. “And from everything I’ve pieced together, he’s torn up about that. Causing you any pain, I mean.”

I smile, grateful it’s coming from someone else and not just my own conscience. If things do work out between Landon and me after this trip, I’m sure I’ll get enough lectures from my mother about it. But I need to have a lengthy conversation with her about my life in general.

“He’s a good guy, even if I want to strangle him sometimes.” Like now, when I can’t find him to even talk.

“I second that,” Dani says from the other side of Isabella.

Isabella turns to her. “Being the sister of the man she loves,” she says, pointing back

at me, “do you have any insight into what’s going on in that head of his?”

“He’s been set on trying to get you back the entire trip, so I would say he’s probably just busy doing something and he’ll appear soon enough.”

My heart soars at the first part, but the second one rings a little too close to home. His hiding when Savannah was looking for him in the hall (although now I’d help him if given the chance), and then not showing up when he’d asked to meet me at our favorite café, instructing the server to give me the breakup note after he left. That part still hurts.

I just hope he’s not hiding from me forever.

Because there’s no going back. I still love him.

CHAPTER 30

Landon

I haven’t been able to turn off my brain for over twelve hours. The doubts, the weaknesses, the inadequacies. I’ve dug them all up and laid them bare for me to go over several times.

I’m lucky my family is stuck with me because I’m far from perfect.

I sit, waiting for my fourth movie in the past twelve hours. My shirt is covered in popcorn kernels and a few spills of Dr. Pepper, which was fine to get me through movie number three, but now I have a stomachache.

At least this one is an action film. Glancing at my watch, I can’t believe it’s almost noon.

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“Hey, I haven’t seen you in a while,” Roman says from behind me. He walks over and takes one look at me before sitting down. “What happened?”

“Oh, you know. Just wanted to see some movies.”

“Have you been here for more than one?”

I wince, shifting in my seat. I’m just now realizing that my lower legs are numb from sitting for one movie this morning already. “Maybe.”

“Did something happen with Rachelle?”

“Yes, I mean no. She’s amazing. I’m an idiot.”

Roman turns a bit and sits in silence, waiting for me to expound on that, I guess.

“There are so many things I regret, like even listening to her sister about our relationship and then botching the breakup by leaving a note.”

Roman cringes next to me. “A note?”

I sigh. “Yes, believe me, I’ve replayed that a million and a half times wishing I could go back and do things differently. But we’re here, together, on a cruise.”

“Okay? Is that significant?”

Thank goodness for Roman’s patience because I’m struggling to get this all out.

“I was planning to take her on her first cruise for our honeymoon.”

Roman nods. “Okay, got it. So you two being here together is pretty important. And there are mutual feelings happening?” He moves his hands back and forth to emphasize the question and I have to hold in a laugh. The CEO of the Hamilton Group is not a small man, but he almost looks like he’s entertaining a child.

“Yeah, I think so. We kissed on the first island. Then we went on the tour together and enjoyed the day.”

“I’m sensing a but in there.”

I blow out a breath before relating the part about Savannah calling me away and then searching to find Rachelle at the skydiving simulator.

“So Rachelle is afraid of heights and she went on that deathtrap simulator,” he says, not looking too excited about it. “Explain to me why you’re here instead of looking for her?”

“Because she doesn’t need me. I’m not her safe place anymore. I mean, what qualities do I have to keep her around?” I hear the self-pity, but I need a few more minutes before I can work myself out of it.

Roman’s hand slaps against my shoulder and I do my best to not react to the sting of it. “Landon Higgins, do you think I would’ve asked you on this cruise if I didn’t think you have the potential to one day become a partner of this firm? Well, I might not have thought all that the day I invited you, but everything I’ve learned about you in our meetings and from your sister and ex-fiancé, I think you’d both be lucky to have each other.”

I shake my head. “I’m not so sure. I mean, Rachelle has all the makings of an

amazing, influential woman. She can do anything, build a business from something she loves or travel the world to influence change. Sometimes I wonder if I'm still just the kid whose dad died and is trying to keep everyone together while it tears me apart." I pause, getting control of the emotions surging in my throat. "I'm sorry, you probably didn't want to hear about my personal problems this morning."

Roman chuckles, and it echoes around the theater. "Landon, you'd be surprised that listening to people about non-work things, within reason of course, can actually help someone be a better employee. They trust more and know that you care." He lifts his hand to his head and points. "Something to remember when you're running your own branch of the Hamilton Group."

I blow out a deep breath, trying to picture myself in that role. "I'm not sure I'd be able to handle that much pressure."

"Not to discount your abilities, because I promise, I believe in you, but there is power in having a strong woman at your side. There are days in this business where you'll feel like everything is falling apart and holding in the frustration only gets you so far. Having someone who's willing to work through the hard times with you is someone to keep. Remember that."

The doors open and several people walk in as the next movie cues up.

Rachelle is someone who could probably shoulder some of that burden now.

But would she want to? And how can I show her how much she means to me without scaring her away?

"Thanks, Roman. That really means a lot."

Roman nods and claps his hands, facing the movie screen. "I can't wait for this

movie.”

“Where’s Isabella?” I ask.

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“At the spa, I think.” I need to get a handle on my own emotions before I can charge in to tell her I still love her. But time is running out with the trip almost over. Maybe my own trip in the simulator will help jog things into place in my mind.

CHAPTER 31

Rachelle

No amount of searching helps me find Landon. I know it's a big ship, but he shouldn't be able to hide this well. And is he avoiding me?

Tiffany and I attend the regular dinner with the Hamilton Group people and I keep waiting for Landon to walk through the door, his bright smile easing all the worries built throughout the day.

Still nothing.

I knock on his door, and even put Tiffany and Dani on watch to alert me if they hear from him. Maybe I should see if he's gone to help cook the food in the kitchens. Yeah, he burned Top Ramen once, so I doubt that. But how did he develop this talent for disappearing? He's always been the worst hide-and-seek player.

I struggle to sleep that night, having to talk myself out of walking to the cabin next to us and pounding on the door until he comes out.

The next morning, my eyes struggle to open from the exhaustion of worrying about him. I know I kind of wished he'd jump off a bridge earlier, but please don't let him

fall into the ocean.

“Let’s go on land. Maybe he’ll show up there.” Tiffany gives me a hopeful look, but I’m still a ball of nerves.

I’ve gone over every interaction we had right before he left to go meet Roman the other night, but I can only think of the fun conversation. Nothing to cause him to stay away.

Please don’t tell me I scared him off again.

I dress and head off the ship with the other two, not feeling like doing much of anything. This, this is why it was easier to keep going without worrying about him. But the happiness I have with him is something else.

“Where are we going?” I ask, finally tuning into the present. If he wants to find me, he will. I’m not going to waste the rest of this trip pining for him.

“Blackbeard’s Castle.”

“What?” I ask, turning toward the large building in front of us. “Is it a museum?” That’s not going to help me keep my train of thought moving forward.

Tiffany glances down at a paper she must’ve retrieved from the ship. “I’m not sure. Maybe? There’s a tour or something we can go through.”

Great. Where is my adrenaline rush now? I’d almost rather be in the skydiving simulator again.

We walk into the building and pay for our overpriced tickets, waiting in a room with a movie playing that has several stories about Blackbeard. I tune them out.

“Are ye ready for yer tour?” a voice asks from the back of the room. I stand, willing my feet to move forward enough to follow after Tiffany.

A hand grasps my arm and then nails dig in. “Ouch, what’s wrong?”

I glance up and instead of a shooter, which is the impression I got from Tiffany’s panicked arm grab, there stands my sister, Hillary.

“Sugar,” Hillary says, her eyes wide. “Why don’t the rest of the party head down that way and we’ll get your guide all set up.”

“What happened to your accent?” an older man asks as he walks by her.

She gives him a small smile. “Life, sir. Sometimes you’ve just got to be real with it.”

Her gaze turns to me and I’m conflicted, my emotions ranging from high to low. The last time I saw her, she was about to get married and now I find her on an island leading out tours and talking like a wannabe pirate.

“What are you doing here?” I get out, and Hillary motions to someone outside the door before stepping inside and closing it.

“Trying to pick up the pieces of my life. It’s good to see you too, sis,” Hillary says. I’m surprised she says it without the snark I’m so used to.

“A note or something would’ve been nice so I knew you were alive,” I say, the last couple words choking on a sob.

She nods and walks forward, giving me a half-hug, the Stewart signature. “I’m sorry. I figured that I’ve screwed up my life enough and didn’t want to mess up yours anymore.”

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I swipe at a tear and replay those words again. “What do you mean ‘anymore’? Did you do something before?”

Hillary sits down, dropping her head to her hands. “I’m sorry, Rachelle. It might be better if you just go.”

I shake my head and walk over to sit next to her. Tiffany and Dani have moved over to the wall, trying to pretend they’re not here, but I’m grateful they are. Moral support and all.

“No, I want answers.”

Hillary gives me a pleading look, like she wants me to drop the questioning. But I can’t. I’m sick of people thinking I’m not strong enough to handle them.

“I told Landon he should break up with you.”

That is not the bombshell I was expecting.

“You did what? And Landon listened to you?” I’m struggling to keep my emotions in check so I’m not screaming next to her. Landon was surprised when I told him about Hillary’s almost wedding.

“Were you two a thing?” My mind hopes she denies it, because that would be the icing on the cake for me right now.

Hillary shakes her head. “No, absolutely not. Why would you think that?” She’s got

her nose upturned as if that's the worst idea in the world.

"Well, you told him to break up with me. I didn't know if it was for your sake or not."

Hillary shakes her head, looking sorry about something. "Rachelle, I told him that he needed to break up with you, to give you space because he was coddling you too much. He'd taken all the hard things away and you never learned how to cope without him. To be honest, he's a good guy, but I didn't want you to resent him later, like how Mom resents Dad."

It's like lightbulbs are flashing everywhere in my brain, highlighting memories that focus on the truth of her words.

My mom is a lot like me, although I'd like to think I'm less jaded than she is.

"So you told him that and he immediately believed you and broke it off?"

Hillary shakes her head. "No, I told him that back when you were cake testing at the lodge. He didn't break up with you for another month."

I frown, trying to breathe in as much air as possible. It's like I've been repeatedly punched in the gut.

"So my sister and my fiancé worked together to break up the wedding? That's just great." I stand, ready to get out of this small space.

"Rachelle, I promise I did it because I care. Our family has a strange way of doing things, but I only wanted you to be happy."

I lift my hands out to the side and realize they're shaking. "You only wanted me to be

happy? You couldn't have told me all this for the six months I couldn't get out of bed without effort? It was torture helping you with wedding details and then you just leave. I don't know what to say, Hillary. Why couldn't you have come to me, told me this yourself instead of telling Landon?"

"I didn't think you'd listen to me." Her words are soft, and I see the genuineness in her eyes.

She's probably right. I doubt I'd have listened at the time.

"Is your life really so bad now?" Hillary asks. "I mean, you're here, on a cruise. You've got friends to support you," she says, pointing to Tiffany and Dani. "And you look amazing, like you've figured a few things out along the way."

I nod, sinking back down into the chair next to her. With an arm around her shoulders, I let out a long breath. We sit like that for several minutes, my brain processing everything she's explained.

"To be honest, it probably wasn't the best way to do it, but I'm glad you did. I've been able to do things I never thought I would, and on my own. I don't need to be single forever. Landon and I are on the same cruise and we've been working on things. I still love him, but it's been good to have the time to grow as ourselves. But now, knowing all this, I don't know if that trust can be regained."

Hillary shakes her head. "Rachelle, did you go on this cruise together?"

"No."

"And you've talked? Kissed even?" She raises an eyebrow and waits.

"Everything but the full truth about our breakup. At least I know that now." I

swallow, trying to piece together everything I've learned before with my sister's revelations. "And we've kissed."

Hillary reaches over and squeezes my hand with hers. "If he didn't throw me under the bus as the culprit, I'd say he's still the man you've always loved. When I first talked to him, he didn't believe me and was worried about what would happen to you if you broke up. I doubt he's changed so much in the past year that you won't trust him again."

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I lean over and rest my head atop hers, letting the tears slide down my face freely. Her words match up. He was irritated at lunch the other day, saying how my sister destroys everything around her. I'm guessing he meant Hillary's suggestion about breaking up.

"I haven't seen him in a whole day. I'm worried he's running again."

"Well, when you catch him, tell him how you feel. If he runs after knowing all that, then it isn't meant to be." Hillary wraps an arm around my shoulders. "That's all I wanted for you, sis. To be happy no matter your situation."

"When are you coming home, Hill?" I ask, pulling her a bit closer.

"Sometime. I've just got to work out the last few things in my life before I face Mom and Dad."

I nod, understanding the worry there. "I'll be there to help you, you know."

It's in that moment I feel more like real sisters than in the last twenty-six years of my life.

"Go enjoy the rest of your cruise. And tell Landon I say hi."

We both laugh a little before a long embrace.

Once we're out of the room, I turn to Tiffany and Dani. "If it's all right, I think I'm going to search for Landon. I'm a little worried he fell off the ship or something."

“We can come with you,” Tiffany says, taking a few steps in my direction.

“No, it’s all right. Enjoy the castle.”

I hurry outside, wishing I could reach him by cell phone.

I check most of the venues, looking for him or anyone from his company. It takes a bit, but I find Roman and Isabella in line for a chair lift that boasts the sights of the whole island.

“Have you seen Landon?” I ask, glancing between the two of them.

“I saw him around noon in the movie theater,” Roman says.

“On the ship?” When he nods, I yell thank you behind me as I run toward the dock.

Once onboard, I search the movie theater and all the other theaters close to it. I go down to the billiard room and over to the skydiving simulator. He’s nowhere.

I finally knock on his door, holding my breath that he’ll answer.

The lock turns and my heart leaps in my chest, until I see his face. It’s all swollen and red.

“Hey Rachelle,” he says, giving me a small smile.

“Where have you been? I’ve been searching for you everywhere since last night.”

He scrubs a hand across his face, looking as though he hasn’t slept in days. “I’ve been doing some thinking and just needed some time.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Well, are you done?”

He frowns, looking confused. “You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“I have a good idea. I just saw Hillary.”

His eyes go wide and his mouth opens and closes several times with no sound coming out. “You saw Hillary?”

“She told me the whole story, how she didn’t want me to resent you like my mom does to my dad.”

“Really?” That flicker of hope is back in his eyes, giving me the courage to continue.

“Yeah. I don’t know why you’ve been hiding from me, but you should know that I love you. I don’t think I ever stopped. But there was the element of learning to love myself during our time apart that I needed and am grateful for. To be able to do the things I’ve done, I’ve had to grow a spine and stop being the scared Rachelle I’ve been my whole life. I’m excited about the future. But I would love that future to include you.”

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Landon smiles, wiping under his nose with the back of his hand as he sniffles. “I’m sorry about all of it, Rachelle. I love you too, I just have a hard time thinking you’ll even need me around now.”

I frown, surprised by that. “What do you mean? I did say I love you, right? That usually means you want to be around someone.”

Have I gone into some strange time warp?

He opens the door and goes to sit on the bed. The covers are rumpled compared to Dani’s, which are neatly tucked in.

“The thing is, most of my life, I’ve been needed by people. You needed me to help you through things your mom forced you to do. My mom needs me to help her with the house and the family. But everyone is growing up, moving on. And it’s hard to find my place.” The last of his words come out strangled, and his Adam’s apple bobs a few times, a signal that he’s fighting his emotions.

I walk over and sit next to him, holding his hand gently. “What are you talking about? You are charismatic and help people feel at ease when they’re having a rough time. You’ve obviously been able to do a lot with the Hamilton Group because they invited you here after only working for them less than a year. And you’ve supported me throughout this cruise. It would’ve been easy to slip into our old roles but you didn’t. You let me be the newer version of myself, the one who can take risks and work through problems instead of hoping someone will rescue me.”

Landon turns and smiles, his eyes tearing up. “I saw you in the skydiving simulator.

You were nervous but you still did it. I figured if you can do that alone, you probably don't need me around anymore. That's when my brain started working overtime."

I lean over and bump his shoulder with mine. "Come on, Landon. I might not need to lean on you as much, but at least we can be equal partners. Then you don't feel like you're dragging me around to do things or bored with your life because I just want to stay home where nothing bad can happen."

"That's true," he says with a laugh. Then he settles in and looks over at me, his eyes vulnerable. "Are you ready to try us again?"

"Absolutely." I lean over, pressing my lips to his. He reciprocates and we're lost in the moment, kissing each other over and over.

The door hits against the wall and we jump back. I feel like a teenager again, getting caught kissing in the back of Landon's old car.

"Well, at least we found them," Dani says. She's grinning and I match her smile, unable to stop.

"So, what did we decide?" Tiffany takes a seat on Dani's bed and glances back and forth between us. All she needs is popcorn and she's ready for a show.

"We're going for it," I say. I don't know if I'll ever stop smiling.

CHAPTER 32

Rachelle

Leaving the ship with my best friend and now boyfriend is a unreal experience. All we've gone through in the past seven years has led us to this.

We spend a week together before he has to leave for a trip to Chicago, as requested by Roman.

Once we got back into the service area, my phone pinged with about a hundred different notifications. One of them was from the Love, Austen app. I click on it and am pulled to a matching page that shows a few profiles and the percentage match.

Tiffany has shown me this before in the hopes that I'd move on and find someone.

The top picture isn't the same as the last time I looked at it. That picture has been moved down to the third position, still with a seventy-five percent match.

But the one who is in the top spot is a clear picture of Landon with me grinning next to him. Matched with My Runaway Groom.

Now I can keep my promise to myself to date the top match.

I smile as I walk into my parents' home, thinking of how different my life looks now. Of course, it's not perfect, since I'm still looking for a job, but it's mine.

"Rachelle, what a surprise to see you here," my mom says, grabbing her purse and keys. "You should've called. I'm late for a meeting with the Boston Ladies Society."

"I just need a minute, Mom. Landon and I got back together," I say, smiling wide. Her face drops and she looks like she's ready to go to war.

"I thought you were done with him when he broke your heart." She adjusts the purse strap over her shoulder and her keys jingle.

I bob my head from side to side a couple times and then say, "Sometimes couples just need some time apart to grow. Then they're stronger when they get back together."

She shakes her head. “I still don’t think you should be with him. Look at how you were when he left. Aren’t you worried about that happening again?”

“I can’t worry about the future, Mom. I’ve got to take advantage of what’s happening today. The reason I came to talk to you is that I need you to stop making comments about my body.”

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She frowns. “What are you talking about? I don’t do that. And even if I did, it’s only to help you, Rachelle.”

“I don’t need to be a size zero to be loved. I’m healthy, happy, and moving on with my life. But if you can’t stop throwing insults like you did with the Quickstagram photo of me, we’re going to have to take some time apart.”

“Time apart?”

“This new part of my life is filled with positivity and potential. And while you’ll always be my mom, I need you to understand that this is the person I want to be. I’m free. The diets, the cleanses, obsessing over a half a pound, I don’t need to do it.”

My mother looks at me, stunned. “Everything I did was to help you. So you wouldn’t be bullied at school or be disgusted in your body.”

“I’m sure that was your initial intention, but just know I don’t need that anymore. I need a mom who’s going to support me and build me up, rather than tear me down.”

She tilts her chin up and nods. “I’m late for that meeting.”

With a few quick steps, she’s out the door and I’m left in a house, that while it looks polished and nice, has so many of its own secrets hiding in the walls.

I blow out a breath. As disappointing as it is to not have a magical transformation in our relationship, I finally stood up for what I feel, and that’s all I can do.

* * *

I get home from their house and find a single white rose with a note underneath it. This is the fifth one I've gotten, on the fifth day since Landon left.

I walk into the house but it's surprisingly quiet for the late afternoon.

"Kenzie? Evie? Millie?"

I sit down in the office chair and open the letter, smelling the rose with it. I don't know who Landon roped into delivering this every day, but I'll have to thank them later.

Dear Rachelle,

It's been a while since I've seen you, dozens of hours and minutes. I'm counting them all, by the way.

I'm forever grateful for our second chance, that we can be together and live the life we've always dreamed.

You're amazing and strong, and I hope to be like you when I grow up.

I have a surprise for you. Look outside.

I pause reading and stand up to glance out the window. A long, white limo drives up and parks in the street.

Emotions swirl through me and I walk to the door, opening it slowly, as if acting too quickly would take away the magic.

The back door of the limo opens and Landon steps out, dressed in a tuxedo.

“Whoa. What’s going on?” I ask, giving him a glance up and down. He looks good.

“There were a lot of options for me to choose from on this but I figured showing up in a paintball suit wouldn’t be the best idea.”

I walk to the edge of the porch and then down the steps, pausing about four or five feet away from him. “Not unless you came with a paintball gun for me.” I laugh, but Landon only gives a half-hearted laugh, the sign that he’s nervous.

“Rachelle LaRue Stewart,” he says, walking up closer and getting down on one knee. “We’ve been through a lot in the past year. I promise to be there for you but also give you space to fly. And know that I’ve never stopped loving you, always holding onto the hope that we’d get back together.”

I giggle a bit and press my hand to my mouth. “Landon?”

“Hmmm?”

“Just ask.”

“Will you marry me?” His voice cracks on the last word and emotion consumes me. After all we’ve been through, this proposal is even better than the last.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

I haul him up and wrap my arms around him. His lips graze mine before I reach up and drag him closer, enjoying the sparks flying between us. He pulls me up so my legs wrap around his waist and we get lost in kisses until the honk of a horn driving by tugs us apart.

He shifts back and looks back and forth between my eyes before he says, “This might be a stretch but are you okay with getting married today?”

“Today?” Thoughts buzz and I nod. “Yeah, I think I have a dress I could wear to the courthouse.”

“Um, well, I had a different location in mind.”

CHAPTER33

Landon

I’ve been trying to keep a secret from Rachelle for the past five days and this is killing me. What she thinks is a work trip is actually me preparing everything for the wedding.

Roman and Isabella have been with me every step of the way, and there’s no way I could pull this off without them.

I’ve had to share every one of Rachelle’s social media profiles along with any other

information I have about her for Isabella and her wedding planner friend, Sadie, to go to work. Luckily, Rachelle never changed her wedding Pinterest board. Hopefully she's still into those elements.

"So, we're on a private jet to some unknown destination. What do you have in store for us?" Rachelle asks, as she tries to pry details out of me for the eleven hundredth time.

I shift in my seat. "I had some help getting things together. I figured that waiting to plan out a whole wedding again wouldn't be ideal. And so I figured we'd elope."

Rachelle raises her eyebrows. "Elope?" The way she says it, I'm suddenly panicking that this was all a terrible idea.

"Yeah, that's usually what happens when you get married without big plans, right?" I try to smile, but I'm sure it looks more like I'm watching a crash in rush hour traffic.

She nods. "I get that. I just needed it to sit for a minute. Let's get married."

"Passengers, prepare for landing."

I lean over Rachelle and push up the window shade, blinding both of us with the brightness.

She glances down and her mouth drops open. "You brought me to an island to get married?" It's not until she turns and grins that I actually breathe. She wraps her arms around my neck and I'm pretty sure I never want her to let go.

Yes, it was risky planning the wedding without her, but I hope it pays off. And that there's no worrying on her end about me missing the ceremony this time. Because I'm going to be there.

I nod, hoping everyone will be in place once we arrive. A car takes us on a drive from the airplane hangar and she's oohing and aahing about things we pass. I'm a bucket of nerves next to her.

"Are you okay that I did this? I know I've tried to protect you in the past and that wasn't my intention—"

Rachelle puts her fingers over my mouth to stop me from talking. "Landon, this is the most romantic thing you've ever done for me. Thank you."

I breathe out a quick breath. If I can get through this without screwing up, I'll be the happiest man in the world.

"There's Blackbeard's Castle," she says, pointing to the large building we pass. "Did you tell Hillary we were coming?"

There's hope in her eyes and I'm grateful Rachelle is forgiving and willing to have her sister by her side.

"Just relax and enjoy the journey," I say with my fingers twisted together. It's better than pulling at my hair the whole time.

"Did you by chance bring something else for me to wear?" Rachelle asks, looking between my tuxedo and her sweater and jeans.

"Yes," I say, hoping she'll like the dress Isabella and Sadie ordered for her.

The car stops at a smaller building and I get out and open the door for her.

"This is your stop for now. I just need to find someone to marry us, and we'll be all set." Not the complete truth, but I don't want her thinking I'm just abandoning her on

an island.

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She frowns. “You leave me again and I’m not taking you back.”

I raise both arms to help emphasize my words. “I promise I will be there. The people inside will help you.”

She gets out of the car and I watch her all the way until the road turns. In less than two hours, I’ll be marrying the woman of my dreams. I just need to get rid of the nerves until I can see her again. This is my last shot and I’m not going to mess it up again.

CHAPTER34

Rachelle

I’m standing on a remote island in front of a building that looks like all the other buildings surrounding it.

Whatever this is, Landon went to a lot of work to prepare it. The idea of not having to wait to re-plan the wedding is definitely a perk, though.

I walk inside to find a bridal shop. The sound of a blow-dryer has me turning to see a salon on the other side of the building.

“Rachelle,” Isabella says, walking forward and embracing me. “It’s so good to see you again. How are you?”

I smile. “Really good. A little confused as to the whole plan, but if I’m married by the

end of the day, I won't care."

Isabella laughs and waves for me to follow her. "Okay, so I can at least give you a few details. These ladies over here are going to do your hair and makeup, but why don't we try on one of these gowns over here first?"

My heart beats in my chest as I look at the beautiful fabrics all lined up on the rack. With the changes in my body, will I be able to find one that will work right off the rack?

"Do you have the right size? I mean, if Landon planned this from our last wedding, then I doubt any of those will fit." Stress floods my body, and there's a moment of regret that I didn't stick to a diet. I never had to worry before about having something altered. But then I remember all the good things about this shape, and hope for the best.

Isabella takes my hand. "Don't worry, Rachelle. We've put a lot of planning into this. Why don't you try on this first one?" She pulls a dress off the rack and hands it to a woman. I almost have to jog to keep up with her as she heads toward the dressing room.

I pause a moment, feeling a pang of regret that none of my family and friends will be here. But maybe that's a good thing. Landon and I can get married and move on with life. I hope he's booked a photographer though, because this wedding is something we're going to celebrate for years to come. As long as the dress fits, that is.

I slip the dress on and my jaw feels like those cartoons when their jaw hits the ground. It fits me like every curve has been measured. The top bodice is covered in small white gems, the sweetheart neckline holding in all the important bits.

The bodice meets the tulle skirt, which flows to the ground and I have to bend a bit to

see the small rosebuds sewn into the fabric.

“Come out when you’ve got it on,” Isabella says through the curtain. “There’s a full-length mirror so you can look at every inch.”

Taking one more breath, I walk out, nearly bursting into tears when I see Tiffany standing there. She’s got a tissue out and it looks like she’s already been crying, which makes me tear up.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, walking over to hug her.

“You look beautiful. I’m so happy for you.” She gives me a quick hug and then sniffles. “I should probably step back so I don’t ruin the dress.”

“Landon didn’t tell me you were coming.” At least I haven’t gotten my makeup done, because the mascara would be running right now.

Tiffany grins. “He wanted it to be a surprise. So, what do you think?” She gestures to the length of the dress.

I walk over to the mirror, standing up on the pedestal, and see the length of the train as it spreads out behind me. Now I get why they named that one bridal show Say Yes to the Dress. Because I want to scream it from the rooftops.

The dress is perfect and I’m finally getting married.

“I love it. Everything about it. But how did they know?” I lower my voice to make sure not everyone can hear me, but it’s too late.

“We have ways of working our magic,” Isabella says. “I want to introduce you to Sadie Gibson-Pearson. Her husband and mine are really good friends from university.

And Sadie is the wedding planner to the stars. When I told her your story, she was dying to help plan it.”

“It’s so nice to meet you, Rachelle. Congratulations.” Sadie shakes my hand and grins into the mirror. “Will this dress work?”

I nod, climbing down the couple stairs carefully, my cheeks already hurting from smiling so much. “We have a dress. What’s next?”

* * *

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Ninety minutes later, I'm in the dress with a full face of makeup and my hair pinned up in curls with a few pieces trailing down my back.

Tiffany walks next to me while Sadie and Isabella follow behind, holding up my train to avoid getting it dirty.

"Where are we going?" I ask, the excitement of the surprise surging.

"Up there," Tiffany says, pointing to a chairlift up to a large hill.

I lean over, just a little worried at this point. "I know I've come a long ways on my fear of heights, but please tell me we're not getting married while jumping out of a plane or anything."

Tiffany laughs and shakes her head. "No, definitely no jumping out of planes or off a cliff."

The lift operators have to stop the whole lift in order to get me with my dress and Tiffany onto it. Isabella and Sadie sit on the one just behind us.

My stomach does a couple of flips at the height below, but at least I'm not shaking like I used to.

Once we get to the top, it's another fiasco to get me and the yards of cloth off the chairlift without snagging or tearing any part of it. And then we walk a bit and I see it open up. A large field lays before me and a small setup of white chairs and even an arch is set up.

“Hey sis,” Dani says, wiping away a tear. She hands me a large bouquet of flowers, and I’m doing my best not to cry as well.

“Hey sis,” I say back, grateful for this moment with her.

“What about a hug for your real sis?” Hillary asks, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around me. The two of them, along with Tiffany, are dressed in pale pink dresses, the kind that they can actually wear after this day. Or that’s what I’ve heard most brides say anyway.

“I think we’re ready to start. Bridesmaids, lead out.” Sadie has produced a small clipboard from somewhere and is furiously checking things off.

Kenzie, Evie, and Millie wave as they head down the aisle first, with Dani, Tiffany, and Hillary following close behind.

I glance out at the group, realizing my own parents aren’t there.

“Do you mind if I escort you to the front, Rachelle?” Drew asks, holding out his arm to me. He’s about the closest I have to a brother and I slip my arm through his, stepping slowly along with the music someone is playing on a keyboard up front.

“Thank you, Drew.”

“Sometimes family isn’t always blood. Thank you for taking care of Tiffany on the trip.”

I grin, still moving forward. “How do you feel about becoming a dad?”

“I’m over the moon. Isn’t it amazing to look back and see where we were six months ago, or even a year ago? The changes have been for the better.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I hope I never forget Landon’s face as he looks up at me coming down the aisle. He’s been crying and it’s all I can do to not run over and hug him.

Fifteen minutes later, the vows have been said, the lengthy kiss shared and we’re finally man and wife.

It’s been a rocky road to get here, but I needed every single roadblock and detour. Because it was all worth it.

Epilogue

Rachelle

9 months later

Everything is ready for Tiffany’s baby shower. Take two.

Ellie Jo Evans decided to make her debut into the world the morning of the last shower a month ago. And she’s the perfect blend of spice and sweet. At five pounds, she was small but fierce, only staying in the NICU for one night for monitoring.

And as the honorary aunt, I’ve already done my part to spoil her with nearly everything I see from the store.

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We're set up in the backyard of the house we're now the landlords for. Landon and I moved into an apartment Landon's boss, Gordon, secured for us while we were on our honeymoon, which was a relief for me. One less thing to worry about with everything changing.

Yes, I'm married to a real estate agent and we're renting, but we haven't quite figured out where we want to be yet. With the housing market going crazy, I'll be okay to wait a little longer before we buy.

I'm taking some online design classes and we started a house we can flip a couple months ago. With Drew's help, we've been able to get the bottom floor torn out and re-sheet rocked. And I can't wait to start painting the rooms to give it life.

The guests arrive, bearing presents for our island themed shower. We've got tiki torches, Hawaiian floral print, and every other island type decoration I could find at the store. Because what's better than finding out you're pregnant on a cruise ship? Celebrating it after.

There are a ton of people from Tiffany's time at Love, Austen. Her boss, Meg, brings in a large diaper cake and several small outfits. She'll be set with a car seat and stroller and enough toys to last until Ellie is a teenager.

And Hillary came back. We might not be as close as Landon and Dani when it comes to sibling relationships, but we've got our own connection. She moved into my room in what she coined as the Spice House, and Dani moved upstairs. With the amount of personalities there now, the name fits.

A while later, I'm in the kitchen ready to refill the appetizers and the water, when a couple arms wrap around my waist and pull me in for a hug.

"Hey, I thought you were in a meeting this morning." I turn around, giving Landon a small peck on the lips.

He nods, kissing me again. "I was. I thought I'd come help you clean everything up when you're done."

"What did Roman talk to you about?" Landon had gotten a call a few days ago that Roman wanted to meet while he was in town. We've spent the past several days going over the possibilities of what it could mean.

"You're allowed to say no."

I frown, wondering why he would lead with that. "To what?"

"He's asked us to live in London for a year. He wants me to be a trainer and go to the different divisions to help them be more cohesive and work together."

"London, for a year?" I've gone through excitement, terror, and a little sadness within the past few seconds. Living abroad means I won't get to be near the support system I've built over the past two years. And Ellie Jo will grow like a weed.

But it does mean we get to do some of the things Landon and I wrote on our joint bucket list. Landon calls it the Together Forever Bucket List. I have to laugh every time he says that. The Breakup Bucket List is still a touchy subject.

He nods. "Then we'll come back and settle here, if that's what you want. Roman wants me to train the branches in the states as well and then we could open up a branch of our own somewhere."

“A year in London. A girl could get used to living in Europe.” I wink and lean forward to kiss him again. I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of it.

“I told Roman about the house we’re working on. We have a couple months to get it finished and then we’ll travel there. He’ll get everything arranged for our housing. In between, we’ll be filling out all the paperwork to get there. Are you okay with that?”

Finishing the house would be one less thing to worry about. “Would you be working all the time? Like, meetings every day?”

“There will be some travel involved, but you can go with me everywhere. And I think the trainings would be only a couple days a week.”

I smile, thinking of riding trains and experiencing the cultures. “So we’ll get to cross off a few things on our list?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I’m all in.” He leans forward and kisses me more deeply, pulling me to him.

A couple years ago, this was all a dream. But this reality is better than I ever could’ve imagined.

* * *