



Mr. July

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: Charm. Old money. A six-pack. Loves dogs. He'd be the perfect guy—if I wasn't suing him. Mr. Hot-shot lawyer has no idea I'm the girl he swore he'd have his day in court with. I lied. Gave him a fake name. I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when we'd meet again in small claims. But the kiss we shared under the stars was explosive. Fueled by months of pent-up anger. Maybe he had figured out who I was, after all, the girl who fell for Mr. July. She thinks she's playing me. Newsflash: I'm playing her. I know exactly who Ms. Lawsuit is. But I wasn't expecting her long tanned legs, sunkissed hair, and innocent eyes to distract me from annihilating her. Maybe it's time to change this game around. After all my mama always said make love instead of war.

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One

Late October

“Put your hands on your hips. Flex your pecs.”

Snap. Snap. Snap.

A low growl worked its way from my throat.

The photographer lifted the camera away from his face, “Is there something wrong?”

“What makes you think that?” I snarled, fisting my hands.

“Charlie! Do something. I can’t work with that.” The photographer waved his hand in my direction making a disgusted face before turning on his heel. I lifted my T-shirt from the ground, pulling it back over my head.

“Stop being an ass. This is for charity.”

“You couldn’t find someone else?”

She shrugged. “I tried. But one of my models has the flu. I’ve worked extremely hard to get Carlos to be the photographer for this calendar. He’s doing it for free. Today is the last day he can shoot before he flies off to LA to cover the premiere of Lexi Pine’s new movie.”

“Whatever. I’m out. I’m sorry, Charlie. I left over five-hundred emails, dozens of voice messages, and a stack of litigation papers to work through—all for some dude in skinny jeans to tell me to ‘flex my pecs.’ I’m out.”

She smiled, placing a hand on my forearm. “I know you work hard. Which is why I thought a day at the beach would be relaxing.”

“The water is barely fifty degrees. It’s the end of October and my balls are so cold—they’ve shrunk up somewhere I can’t even find.”

“TMI, baby bro. Besides, we have to shoot now to get the calendar out for January.”

“Baby? By two minutes.” Ignoring my sister, I scrolled through my work phone. I was buried. A day at the beach was a luxury I couldn’t afford. I might be only twenty-six, but quickly proved myself invaluable to the hedge fund firm that I work for. I’m one of the best attorneys at the office despite others having decades more tenure. They call me the “golden boy.” Not only because in summer my skin tans easily, turning to gold, but because every deal I’ve worked on has returned 3x the capital back to the firm.

“I’m sorry, Chars.”

“You can’t leave. Please...”

I snapped my fingers. “I have the perfect solution! Get Carlos to be the model and you can be the photographer.”

She turned, staring at his sorry form in his skinny ass jeans. “Carlos, won’t sell calendars.”

“And I will?”

“A million,” she grinned devilishly. “But not with that scowl on your face. And those board shorts go down to your knees. It’s not sexy enough.” She pursed her lips. I practically heard her mind work.

“There’s nothing wrong with my surf shorts.” Her arms crossed. “No. Hell no!”

A shudder rolled through me as she perused the men’s swimwear on the metal rack set up nearby. The hangers moved quickly until she reached a black pair of spandex looking boxer briefs. She paused, took them off the hanger holding them out.

“I love ya’ sis. But I’m not modeling my junk for the world to see.”

“The world? It’s only a calendar for a small charity. Trust me, people will buy it to make themselves feel good before tossing it in a closet.”

I frowned, preoccupied. My attention was no longer on her or the spandex ball asphyxiator she wanted me to wear. My work phone was blowing up. I had real shit to do. Like make money. I turned my back on her, walking away. I dialed the office pressing my cell to my ear while in my other hand was the fob key to my new Tesla. I was pressing the remote start button to get the heat going when the key was ripped from my hands.

“Charlie!” I charged. But my sister was fast. She dodged left then right.

“I need you.”

She gave me her best pouty look. The one that melted my father’s heart, rewarding her with an Audi convertible at sixteen while I got a beat-up Explorer. “That shit doesn’t work on me. I’m your twin.”

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So, she tried something else, giving me her best lost little girl look. The one she wore the day I found her crying on the playground in fourth grade after her frenemy Olivia declared her a loser because she had a boy's name. The ultrasound tech had told my parents they were expecting twin boys. My mother had everything monogrammed with our predetermined names. She wasn't going to change it after Charlie came out with lady parts. Something that occasionally gets to Char.

“Aw, shit.”

“It's for the dolphins, Chase. They need us.”

Mid eye-roll, she flashed me a picture of dolphins in captivity. “We need to end this, Chase. With the money from the calendars, we can save one. Maybe two. Every dolphin our charity buys back from these horrible resorts or aquariums—gets released off the coast of Florida. No one will pay to ride them in the Bahamas. Momma dolphins won't be ripped from their calves and pods can be free like they were meant to be....” she broke off practically in tears.

“Hell.”

I'm a sucker for animals and she knew it. Always have been. If I weren't such a workaholic living in a fancy high-rise, I'd have dogs. Big ones. The fluffy kind that shed, get hair everywhere, and piss off the country-club type women who eye me while dreaming of golden-haired babies.

This was a bad idea.

I also knew it was better to just give Charlie what she wanted than to endure her tactics to get me to comply. My twin isn't above playing dirty, like giving out my new cell number to exes on social media—encouraging them to “reach out.” Or text her sorority sister from college Riley, whom I found terribly annoying—that I was DTF and giving her the code to my building. That happened after I was two hours late to our birthday party one year because I was closing my first contract for the firm. Char was livid after inviting half of ‘upper southern society’ and blowing a hefty sum of her trust fund to hold the party at a country club outside of Charlotte.

“Chase... if you don't cooperate, I'll have to cancel the calendar.” She batted her eyes, giving me the pouty lip.

I took the bathing suit from her fingers and strode back to the photo shoot area.

“Thirty minutes. Tops. You owe me big time for this.” I shot a stern look at her over one shoulder.

“I knew I could count on you. The poor, captive dolphins can, too.” Defeated, I shrugged. “Carlos! He's in!” Charlie waved both her arms above her head. She was so excited—she resembled someone stranded on a deserted island, using their arms to wave an SOS to a plane in the sky. I quickly answered a few emails, then tucked my phone away.

Carlos narrowed his eyes at me. “Fine. I'm sorry, okay? Let's get this done.” Despite the wind picking up, I grabbed the hem of my shirt.

“At least we won't need to spray tan you.”

“Spray what? No. I'm not losing my man-card over this.” Resigning myself to the fact that yes—I'm really about to be a calendar guy I parted the curtain to the changing tent. “I better still be able to father kids after wearing this...”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“I have a big package.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I’d strip down right here to show you, but you are my twin and that’s kind of gross.”

“Trust me. I’ve heard plenty about your ‘package’ over the years from friends.

“What? As if I’d ever hook up with any of the girls in your sorority.”

“Natasha?”

“What?”

“She said—”

I shuddered. “Never happened. Despite her best attempts.” With that I stepped inside the tent and dropped my board shorts. Natasha was whack. Stalked me throughout college and I thought I was finally free of that money-hungry viper when I heard some footballer knocked her up. All of Char’s friends are gold diggers. Or man hunting cougars in training, taking tips from their middle-aged mothers. Sometimes, I think it’d be nice to find someone but I’m in a relationship with my career right now. Finding a woman can come later. I have plenty of time.

“I look like a tool.” In the cheap full-length mirror set up in the tent, I caught sight the tight spandex hugging my “assets.” My skin still had that summertime glow. It was a gift. Summer is my time. Turning away, I pull back the curtain and stared out into the ocean reading the waves. They were high, perfect for getting on my old board and forgetting everything but riding the next one.

The ocean is in my blood. Charlie and I, we didn't have the best home life, but we had each other and the beach house our parents rented every summer. I'd do anything for my twin and she damn well knows it.

Sure, on the outside, we appeared to have it all. Summer house, check. Flashy cars, check. Parents who spent an enormous amount of money at the country club, check. But after the parties, endless buffets, and nights under the stars—were the fights when the car rolled to a stop past the gates. Mom was almost always drunk, wobbled in her heels picking fights that escalated into broken vases crashing against the walls.

I got my looks from my father. Dad was a lover. Too nice. Too rich. Too handsome. He had a soft spot in his heart not only for Charlie and Mom, but for every woman who looked his way. Women wanted him—it didn't matter he already had a wife and kids.

But mom didn't sign a prenup. Dad loved his money... so that's how it went. When Charlie and I got older we'd get carted off to the shore house for summer with our Nana. When she died... we stopped going altogether. Dad sold the shore house. Shortly after, he and mom finally parted ways. He's on wife number three now, while my mother is on her third boob job.

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Looking out at the waves and smelling the tang of salt, for a moment I wished we could just go back. When was the last time I was genuinely happy? I know it was here. It was summer and maybe July? That's it—July 4th weekend. Charlie and I must've been about eight. Dad had just bought a smaller power boat and was teaching me all about it. We watched the fireworks from offshore. Mom and Dad were happy. They even kissed. Charlie and I got sick from eating too many gummy bears and drinking Dr. Pepper.

“Chase?” Charlie touched my arm. Her eyes were soft—hesitant.

“I miss it here. Before Mom and Dad's marriage turned sour. Remember the summer we snuck out to go to Grant's bonfire party?”

“You bet,” she laughs, “You caught me kissing Mike Reynolds by the dunes and went ballistic.”

“You were fourteen!”

“So. He wasn't my first kiss. I bet you beat me by a year on that.”

“Actually, I was eleven.”

“Slut!” She smacks my bicep. “Who was she?”

“Your best friend, Emily.”

“She never told me!”

“Why do you think she kept asking you for sleepovers? To watch Vampire Diaries?” Her wheels turned, thinking back to summers from long ago... the ones that slip through your fingers leaving you desperately wanting the magic back.

“That sneaky bitch!”

I grinned. “What can I say? I always was irresistible.”

“Hey, Mr. Irresistible. We’re losing good light. Storm clouds are rolling in.” Carlos checked his equipment while keeping one eye on the sky. I moved outside the beach tent serving as my changing room. “This is the last favor I’m doing for you for a while, Char...”

Rip.

I winced. This wasn’t good. When I walked the seam tore up to my crotch. “Um, sis? We have a problem.”

Carlos’ eyes almost popped out of his head.

Charlie’s face turned red. “I didn’t need to see all that...”

She blindly picked another bathing suit off the rack and threw it at me. Cupping my package, I waddled back into the tent afraid the back seam would also split. In a flash I took off the ripped suit and pulled on the new one. It was tight, but not cut-the-circulation-to-your-junk tight.

“Forget Mr. Irresistible. You’re going to be Mr. July,” Carlos started snapping away. Only then did I look down feeling like a clown. I was wearing dark blue spandex shorts with stars n’ stripes on it. Just great. I’d never wear anything so cheesy or tight.

“Only men in body building competitions wear shit like this!”

“Wait! He still has his shirt on!”

My hands lifted to my tank. Instead of taking it off, I tore it down the middle.

Click. Click. Click.

“Fuck this.” My eyes said. But my body... it said come look at me and save some friggin’ dolphins.

“And that’s a wrap.”

As soon as Carlos lowered his lens, my scowl reappeared. I rushed into the tent to get dressed.

“Well, that’s it then.”

“Hmmm...” I was preoccupied with the work emails that held my attention as well as the dozen texts from the girl I met on my Tonight dating app. Her name was Darla and she said she was a dancer. I deleted her texts, ready to reply to some emails instead as images of Darla wearing pointer shoes doing splits filled my head. You will not be like Dad. I chanted over and over internally.

“I’m flying back to New York tomorrow morning. It was good seeing you.”

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Shit. Her voice was laced with hurt. I closed my email.

“Are you up for a trip down memory lane?”

“Can I drive?”

“Never. But I’ll be buying the slushies.”

“I want mine with Absolut.”

“Sure,” I winked.

“I’m dying for a watermelon vodka slushie. They remind me of summer.”

“Why did you decide to shoot your calendar here? In the Outer Banks when New York has the Hamptons.”

“It’s not the same. I just wanted it to be here. You know?”

“I do.”

“Can I help you pack up?”

“No, we have interns that will take care of the tent and props.”

“In a non-profit?”

“We had two hundred applications. I know you think my job is all fluff baby bro, but C&C International is a brand. We are one of the premiere charitable foundations in New York. Trust me, I have stiff competition.”

I paused, mid-stride catching her by the forearm as we reached the edge of the sand by the cars. “I am proud of you, Char. Immensely proud. Did you think I belittled your career?”

She shrugged. “I’m not the hot-shot hedge fund attorney...”

“Well, everyone can’t be me,” I smirked. Just then my cell dinged with a string of more texts. It was Darla again. This time she sent pictures of herself posing with one leg held high over her head while wearing a thong and nothing else. I groaned. Why is it so hard, being good? Biting my lip, I forced myself to think of cold water. Very cold ocean water. Maybe I’ll go for a swim.

“Cocky much?” She smacked my arm.

“Maybe a tad.”

“Who is that?” She moved fast trying to grab my phone as my thumb hovered over delete. Bye, darling Darla.

“Nobody.”

“Really? Well, Ms. Nobody appears quite flexible.”

“And crazy.”

“Yeah, I could’ve told you any girl on a “Tonight” app would be crazy.

I shrug. “Crazy is nothing I can’t handle. I just don’t do repeats.”

“I can’t believe my brother is such a slut. What’s turned you off of relationships?”

“Besides Mom and Dad?”

“They were hardly the model couple, I’m not letting their screwed-up marriage keep me from wanting my own someday.”

I sigh, “Why are women such romantics?”

“Why are men such pigs?”

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“We aren’t pigs. In fact, I’m quite civilized.”

“It was her... what was her name? That girl you chased through prep school? ...Amelia Grantham?” My face twisted into a scowl. Even now years later, the memories of teenage angst and heartache she caused left a bitter memory.

“Ah! It was her, wasn’t it?” Char started tapping furiously away on her phone. “I just friend requested her, added her to my Linked-in and Insta.”

“Thanks for reminding me why we don’t see each other more often.” The sound of her perfectly painted fingernails feverishly tapping on the screen of her phone lasted for minutes. When it stopped, she smirked waving her phone in my face.

“I’m driving!”

“She’s fat. Divorced and living on Broke-As-Fuck Island.”

“Guess her great romance with Brett Barrington III wasn’t such a ride into the sunset, eh?”

“See? Can you stop being such a man-whore now and get a decent girlfriend?”

“Maybe. But so far I haven’t found any keepers in the dating pool.”

“Then go fish in a different pond.”

My eyes snapped to hers. Sometimes I think Char is the smart one. Not that I’d ever

tell her that. Maybe I have been a bit lonely. My work phone and laptop— hardly the best friend or lover. After a stressful week in the office, I had thought nothing of a quick hookup or two using the dating app as a way to relieve stress. And for a while it was fun, until the allure of it wore off when I realized I was cheapening myself with nothing but dirty, quick lays.

With that food for thought, I turned down memory lane. Literally. It was just like I remembered. The same crooked stop sign was at the main intersection. The same blue house sat on the corner lot.

“Do you ever wish you could go back in time and be a kid again?” Char asked as I pulled down old, familiar roads in the beach community that once upon a time was a second home.

“Not really.”

“Ugh, do you have any sensitivity at all?”

“Umm, I did just strip down to save dolphins...”

“Stop the car!” Char slapped the dash excitedly as her eyes got wide.

There it was. The clapboard cottage by the sea where we had some of the best and worst times with a “For Sale” sign stuck in the ground out front.

“Let’s call the realtor. I need to see it.”

I turned off the car and rolled down my window. While Char was excited with cheeks full of roses and eyes remembering romantic summer nights, this trip back in time left me feeling like a bad hangover.

“Come on!”

“You go ahead,” I waved her on. Instead, she opened my door.

“The best way to get over the past is to face it.”

“Now she’s a therapist?”

“I’m your twin. What I say trumps a therapist. Now come!” She yanked my arm. Reluctantly, I got out of the car, following her down the flagstone path to the wrap around porch. “These views are amazing!”

My balled fists were in the pocket of my work pants. “Yeah. It’s easy to get lost in dreams and what if’s out here.” My eyes scanned the dunes, covered with waving sea grass to the ocean sitting behind it like glass. “Sometimes I thought if I searched the waves, the sea would reflect back the answers to all my questions.”

“Me too,” she sighed, laying her head on my arm. I couldn’t help but notice the trickle of tears streaming down her face. Her light green eyes were soft and hazy. “I miss it here. I wish we could have a do over for all those summer nights we lost hiding under the covers of our bunk beds while Mom and Dad lost their shit.”

I frowned. Char wore such a front—I had no idea she was still scarred by the past. In that moment, I wanted to be her hero. Her protector. After all she might’ve been older, but I was much bigger and tougher. I pulled out my cell and phoned the agent, telling her I was a cash buyer and wanted the property immediately.

She came to a screeching stop at the curb ten minutes later. “Mr. Carmichael.”

“Just Chase.”

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“And Mrs. Carmichael?”

“His twin, Charlie,” my sister snorted, shaking the agent’s hand. I didn’t much care for the agent’s blonde blowout, fake D’s, and faker tan. Or the way she sized me up.

“Let me show you around—”

“I’m quite familiar with the layout,” I had cut her off, striding inside.

“Oh? You’ve been here before?” Her eyes were on my ass as she spoke.

“Yeah. I had a hot summer hook up who rented here one year.”

“Oh...” She clutched the chunky necklace at her throat. I threw her a wink just to fuck with her.

“I’ll take it. Fifty-grand less. Cash. Close in a week.”

“But... the view....”

“It needs work. A lot of work. An updated kitchen and fresh paint. Don’t think I missed the dry rot around the window casings. Who knows what condition the roof’s in? On second thought 100k under asking. Firm.”

“Let me see what I can do.” She walked away pressing her cell to her ear.

“Are you insane?” Char hissed.

“What? I can afford it.”

“Just how much does a hedge fund attorney make?”

“A lot. Especially since Nana left enough money to pay for college through law school. I didn’t use mine on high rents in Manhattan or summer’s in the Hamptons like somebody I know. Besides this place is a moneymaker. I could get 20k a week on Airbnb.”

“A moneymaker or a babymaker? Check out this hot tub. This wasn’t here before.”

I grinned. “Welcome home, Char.”

“Seriously?”

“I won’t even charge you for your stay.”

“But you live three hours away...”

I winced. The drive is a bitch, but the view is worth it. I shrugged. “It’s an investment. I can always flip it or rent it out. Besides, now that I’m partner, I can work remotely, set my own hours... I could drive out on Thursday nights to avoid traffic and return Mondays... we could spend holidays here?”

She threw her arms around me. “Despite all your faults, you are going to make one hell of a Prince Charming someday.”

“Gee, thanks Char. And here I thought I was one already.”

“Well, where’s your princess then?”

“Right here.” I grabbed her into a headlock, giving her a kiss on the top of her head.

Two

DECEMBER

I was dirty. Filthy. Covered in sweat but felt totally satisfied. “Take that you bitch!” I stood back to survey my work. My room was complete. I placed my hammer down. On the long wall of the master bedroom was wall-to-wall shiplap paneling I had cut, measured, and installed myself. One wall down, many more to go.

I never knew working with my hands would be so satisfying. I hadn’t clicked into the dating app in months. I worked my ass off in the office then drove out here every Friday, not leaving until early Monday morning, often going straight back to work. This beach house became my mistress. I loved her when she was ugly and broken. Cherished her back to health. Made her shine. Made her beautiful and whole again. It felt good. Damn, good.

I shuffled down to the kitchen to grab a beer. I never knew winter here was just as beautiful as summer. But the snow never lasts long. The salt dissolving it quickly. I sighed at the doorbell. Another huge box was left on my porch. I had given Charlie a set budget to furnish the rooms. I wanted a beachy theme but not overly feminine since it was going to be a rental. A moneymaker. But Char... she just never listens. I placed my beer down and brought in the box before it was covered in snow and ice.

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All the other houses on the block were vacant. No holiday lights twinkled from trees. No neighbor's waved as I checked my mail. I was the only one left, riding out the holidays on the deserted beach and winter waves alone.

I put my Air Pods in, rocking out to Halsey and The Weekend while cutting beadboard and shiplap. The tracks may be a bit dated now but back in my glory days I worked mad moves on the dance floor. I was a guy who danced and loved it. I wasn't shy to roll my hips to the beat while the other guys hung back feeling awkward while hiding behind their beers.

Outside the air had a damp chill. It was colder than a penguin's balls. Rain had turned to clinging shards of ice on the windows while I was sweating my assets off. I used adhesive glue with an air nail gun to set the shiplap in place. I whipped my shirt over my head and kept my home improvement dance party going until something made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I wasn't alone.

Ripping my ear buds out, I spun ready to face my intruder—liquid nail gun at the ready.

“We should just do another calendar. Make it a home improvement theme.”

“I like it. Shirtless, sweaty men with tools...”

Carlos and my sister were up to no good again. Their eyes traveled low then high seconds before Carlos lifted that damn camera.

Click. Click. Click.

Here we go again.

“What’s going on?” I put my tools down, reaching on the floor for my discarded shirt. Scowling, I put it on while flipping Carlos the bird.

“Merry Christmas, little brother. I was able to snag Carlos to photograph your house for rentals. You’ll sell out every month. He’s a true artist.”

“Yeah he will,” Carlos, murmured, with a grin. His eyes were on me not the house.

A smirk played across my lips. “I don’t go that way, bro.”

“That’s okay. I still have you on my wall.”

“TMI, Carlos. Thanks for offering to snap my house but as you can see the place isn’t ready.”

“That’s why I’m here. Some of the furniture I ordered already arrived. More is on the way. Chop-chop, baby bro.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “I’ll leave it to you to unbox all the furniture you had delivered.” I shook my head, “Never give your sister your American Express digits,” I muttered under my breath as I left the room.

“Hey!” I had spun around when a wet paint brush hit me square in the back.

“You want to start shit, Char?”

“No!” She squeaked, as I sauntered forward after slowly twirling the boar bristle

brush in a quart of transitional gray paint.

“You chose it! I bet it’ll look great on you!”

“EEEEKKKK!” She fled, dropping her Gucci bag and interior design books. Carlos started capturing it all on his camera. Char lost of course. By the time I was done with her, she was covered head-to-toe.

“That’s payback for.... I don’t know. Maybe... everything?!”

“Ugh! Chase! We’re not kids anymore!” She yelled before locking herself in my newly renovated bathroom. I ordered a handmade walnut tub, settling it in front of the window that overlooked the dunes and beach. The shower was a nice sea glass colored mosaic tile with three different shower heads, a teak bench, and a wall of glass around it all.

After Charlie cleaned herself up, she and Carlos left me alone while they got busy staging furniture. I finished cutting and installing shiplap along the walls of the guest rooms and hallway. Char and Carlos never bothered me; I had a bad feeling I wouldn’t recognize my house when I went back downstairs. My cell pinged from its place on a stool:

Hunter:Bro, it’s naughty Elf Night. We haven’t gone since 2018. Don’t be a chump. Come out tonight.

I sighed, raking a hand through the sawdust in my hair. I was tempted, I won’t lie. Hunter was the best wingman I’d ever had. The two of us out on the town together were unstoppable. He ghosted me when he met a girl at the shore two years ago. When it came down to it, he couldn’t pull the commitment card. She dumped him cold.

Me:My sister is in town.

Hunter:Freckles? She'd make one hot elf.

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Me: Want a broken nose for Christmas? You have a pet nickname for my sister?

Hunter: Dude. She's hot. Just saying'.

Me: My sister is a no-fly zone.

Hunter: Too bad. I'd like to fly that plane.

Me: You're dead.

Hunter: No, you are. Haven't seen you in months. Where you been anyway?"

Me: At my shore house.

Hunter: Seriously?

Me: Yep. Drained a sizeable amount from my savings but it's worth it.

Hunter: This summer... we will clean up at the beach bar just like the good old days. The ladies won't know what hit them. The two of us are unstoppable.

Me: I'm renting it out. Money over love.

Hunter: Who said anything about love? It's all about the "ing" ... love-ing.

Me: You didn't put a ring on it, and she walked. Aren't you over it yet?

Hunter: At least I stepped up to the plate. I at least swung for the pitch. She wasn't the right fit, but I had my innings.

Me: Whatever, bro. I hate baseball.

Hunter: Tell Freckles I'll see her this summer. Tell her we can relive 2010...

Growling, I put my phone down. "CHAR!!!!!!" I stomped down the stairs feeling my neck get hot. Char and Hunter? Hunter? My man where of a best wingman slash best friend had something with my twin, under my nose and I didn't have a clue about it?

"What?" She spun around. "You don't like it?" Her chin quivered. I bit my tongue about Hunter. I'd get to the bottom of that later.

"I'm impressed."

Char turned and smiled. While I was upstairs, she staged the entire living room, arranging a rug and the furniture. Above the fireplace was a canvas of two kids playing on the beach. A lump formed in my throat. "Is that... us?"

"It sure is."

"It's perfect, Char."

"I know. I was going through my old scrapbooking box and found the actual photograph. Nana took it. It's from 2003. I'll even bet it's from the spot you see from the kitchen window. I took the picture to an artist in SOHO and they painted it in watercolors."

"Brat." A lump formed in my throat. Char was a real pain in the ass, but she had a heart as big as the ocean itself.

“Bully.”

I shake my head, pulling her in close. “You know what? Mom and Dad sucked, yet the two of us turned out pretty damn good.”

“We did. Didn’t we?” She murmured. “Now all we need is a tree and some lights with tons of fresh garland.”

“That shit is going to get all over my floors.”

“So? It’s Christmas.”

“Yeah. It is. Might as well have Carlos do his thing before you turn my cottage into a winter wonderland.”

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“Just stay out of the way.”

“What? You don’t want me shirtless on the bed with a rose in my mouth?”

“Oooh. A Valentine’s themed calendar...”

“Never gonna happen. I’m going out to grab some food. I’ll bring something back.”

“Good, because my stomach is making more noise than thunder during a summer rainstorm,” she responded in her singsong voice tinged with a bit of the southern accent New York had dimmed. Something shifted inside me. Buying this place was right. For the first time in a long time the sunshine that was locked deep inside my twin was starting to shine again. And these past few years I was too busy making it to even notice it had dimmed.

“What are you in the mood for? Everything’s mostly closed this time of year. There is an incredible Thai place about thirty minutes away worth the drive.”

“Spicy. Bring me something hot. It’s cold and windy.”

“I’ll make a fire before I leave.”

I felt guilty for painting her when I saw her ruined designer clothing. I carefully picked them up deciding to try and salvage them. Then I left Char and Carlos to it. She meant well and is a total pain in the ass, but I’m damn lucky she surprised me. I was going to just let Christmas go by with stacks of work contracts and a good bottle of wine.

Humming ‘Here comes Santa Claus,’ under my breath, I pulled over at a boutique shop to find a present for Char since her gift had knocked me for six. Truthfully, I never felt lonely without a girlfriend because I always had my sister. Other women were just for sex, while Char filled all the love and companionship I needed.

I was gone a few hours and by the time I got back Carlos had finished and Char had paid for his private car back to civilization. We ate the Thai while watching a cheesy movie on Netflix. Over a smooth glass of red we reminisced the best and worst times we had in this very house. I raised my glass. “To making new memories and forgetting the bad.”

“To finding our one true summer love,” she smiled into the fire wistfully. I didn’t raise my glass to that one, instead I put it down to throw a new log onto the flames. “That reminds me... Hunter wanted me to meet him at some dive bar for Naughty Elf night.”

“Let’s go!” She drained the rest of her wine.

“There’s a dress requirement for women. It’s tradition. They won’t let you in unless you go as a naughty elf.”

Her nose wrinkled. “That’s so misogynistic.”

“It’s a contest. The twenty-dollar cover charge is put into a stocking. The last time I went the girl who won ended up taking home 5k.”

“I can be naughty.”

I picked up my wine glass swirling it in my hand. “Funny, that’s what Hunter said.” I slowly raised it to my lips, pretending to be chill while gauging her reaction.

It didn't disappoint.

The tiny nerves under my spine felt like a nest of nettles as her cheeks flushed and the pulse in her slim neck quickens. I've seen all these signs before. Usually, when I lean in to kiss the woman of my choosing. Seeing the tell on Char when she thinks of Hunter had me seeing red—not the fat jolly kind. There was no hiding my annoyance when the muscle of my left jaw ticked.

“It was just a few stolen kisses on a hot summer night a lifetime ago.”

“That's it?”

“... in the sand.... Our clothes stayed on.”

I put my wineglass down and picked up the fob keys to my Tesla from the basket made of sea grass Char had placed on the coffee table. “He's dead.” I growled. “We're going to elf night just so I can kick his ass. Ten years or twenty he broke bro code.”

Char rolled her eyes. “Calm down.”

Instead, my nostrils flared. “Hunter is a ho.”

“A hot one, though.”

“I can't handle it Char. You're my twin. The ying to my yang. I won't see you be played.”

“Oh relax. I wasn't played. He was. I kissed Matt after.”

“How did I miss all this?”

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“Easily. You were off making summer conquests of your own. Are we seriously going out? Because I’m in the mood for a little festivity.”

I checked the Tudor Tourneau watch on my wrist that I had treated myself to when I made partner. It set me back \$4k. I wear it as a reminder that hard work has rewards. “It’s a long drive to the dive bar outside the city.”

“So? We’ll crash at your apartment then come back for Christmas Day.”

I texted Hunter back.

Me:We’ll be there, bitch.

Hunter:We?

Me:Me and my twin. I have a face to wreck... yours.

Hunter:Bring it, bro. You’ve lost all your edge. I’ll be under the mistletoe waiting to see Char.

Me:Dead, bro. Dead.

Char and I locked up. She spent the entire drive back to the city fixing her hair and makeup. I almost swerved off the road when she pulled out a curling iron and plugged it in.

“You’re going to burn all this smooth as butter leather!” With my left hand on the

wheel, I made a wild grab for her beauty tool, almost singing my palm in the process.
“Shit, that’s hot!”

“Because it’s a damn curling iron, you fool. Calm down.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from cursing at her. I loved my sister but spending hours in her company reminded me why I stayed single.

“Take the next exit.”

“Why?”

“To get my naughty elf outfit. Why else?”

“This better not take long,” I grumbled. I did what she asked and waited in the car while she shopped in some fancy women’s clothing boutique that I never knew existed.

“All set?” I had asked when she came back out thirty minutes later.

“You betcha,” she grinned. She wore her warm winter coat, so I had no idea the shitshow I was in for when she’d take it off at Hank’s Bar and Grill fifty minutes later.

When I pulled into the lot behind Hank’s I got a bad feeling. The place was jammed. I knew the inside of the wooden shack like bar was going to feel like a muggy summer night on the bayou. I peeled my sweater off and went inside wearing a tight, white undershirt and my work jeans. Char decided to check her coat. I texted Hunter letting him know we had arrived as I found a spot by the bar. When I looked up, my eyes widened larger than a kid’s on Christmas morning.

Char was wearing a red velvet teddy dress thing with faux fur white trim paired with red stilettos.

I closed my eyes as she approached.

“I need a mind eraser because I wish I never saw that shit. Damn it, Char. What the hell are you wearing? No brother should ever have to witness his sister in something like that.”

“It’s just a slip dress. Relax. The transitional gray paint ruined my new Jimmy Choo’s. Tonight’s pot will be enough for two new pairs.”

“How about I buy you ten if you put your coat back on?”

Char turned as Hunter put an arm around her waist. A mind eraser showed up next to my hand. I downed it in one swallow, my hand wrapped around the lowball glass so tight I half expected it to shatter. Hunter’s eyes were all over Char. If his hands followed, I’d have to break them.

“Dance with me Freckles.” He had Char’s hand. They disappeared before I could even respond. My mood grew darker the merrier everyone else’s became. I ordered an iced-cold draft. The frothy foam slid down the back of my throat and cooled me down. Just when I felt like an ass for feeling like the Grinch—some fucktard grinded into his girl so hard his elbow hit my beer sloshing it down my shirt.

“Idiot,” I growled, scowling. He was younger than me, completely oblivious to his fuckery. The girl he was making out with brushed up against me. I was pinned between the bar and them. Her perfume was so strong, I turned my head. This scene was old. I used to revel in shit like this. But now my fixer upper and work were my life, not drunken nights kissing strangers. Putting what was left of my beer down, I put out two palms nudging the dude out of my way. He lifted his head, annoyed I

interrupted. “You spilled my beer.”

“And?”

My cheeks flushed. I wasn't about to get into a bar fight and make the papers. Instead, I killed him with one glare before winding through the crowd on my way to the men's room. “Fuck, this,” I hissed, eyeing Hunter and Char. He had her wrapped up in his arms with his face pressed against her neck. The tip of my shoe kicked the bathroom door open. I dabbed at my shirt with paper towels, but it barely helped.

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I was cornered as soon as I walked out. “Sorry about your beer.” She pressed up against me, her palm on the wet spot on my chest.

Her touch made my pec constrict. Even my muscles were trying to get away. Her dress was cut so low in the front, the only thing missing from view were the two bull’s eyes.

“Not interested.”

“I find that impossible to believe.”

“Not a smidge.” My jaw got tight. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

She shrugged. “Nice watch.... Nice everything,” she eyed me up and down.

“Not for you honey.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, but the action only made her eyes stick to my popped veins and thick forearms. I rolled my eyes, I was jacked, always tan and very secure in who I was. Even in my T-shirt and jeans, I carried myself well. The flashy watch at my wrist probably was a bad idea. But I never took it off. I haven’t been out in the scene for months but apparently, I still draw women like sugar and honey—do bees.

She pouted. Her kissed off lipstick a stained memory on her lips, her hair was messed up from a man’s hands combing through it. It made me miss having that. Being the one to do it to a woman. She must’ve misread my thoughts and leaned closer.

“Get away from my girl,” the drunken prep-tard warned, coming at me. I caught his fist in my open palm, brought it down and twisted it behind him. He yelped in pain like the little bitch he was. The girl in question gasped, pupils dilating. I smirked, knowing who she was hot for and it wasn’t the rich bitch boy she came with.

“I don’t go for girls who show everyone their religion. That shit should be saved for their own man’s eyes.” With that I let him go, looked down my nose at the wannabe housewife hooker and walked off, feeling her wanting eyes burn a hole in my back. I found my way to Char and Hunter, no longer dancing, they were holed up in a corner, drinks in hand. He was whispering shit into her ear that had her giggling back at him. My eyes narrowed. I’d seen him run that play a million times, never thought I’d witness it being done on Char.

“He’s got crabs.”

“What?” Char’s bright eyes and smiling face, turned to me.

“Caught them at the shore in 2019. Fact.” Hunter was pissed. Face scowling, eyes all dark thunder. “Bro, I warned you. Don’t use your dick moves on my sister.”

“We’re just having fun, relax.” Char put a hand on my forearm. Her nose scrunched when she smelled beer and that girl’s desperation. “What happened to you?”

“Gold-digger and her preppy boy toy. Ready to bounce?”

Just then Hank took the mic from the stage announcing every girl who entered the contest needed to get up there. Char handed Hunter her drink squealing as she rushed away.

“Guess we’re staying.”

“Don’t talk to me. Don’t even look at me,” I warned.

“She’s cute. Fun. Guess I needed that.”

“Go look somewhere else.”

“...I want to ask her out.”

“She lives in New York.”

“I have a lot of frequent flyer miles.”

“I bet you do,” I growled, finally facing him. “No.”

“You’re not her father.”

“I’m worse. I’m her twin, been with her since conception. Can’t get tighter than that. Turn your eyes somewhere else, bro. Not on my sister.”

He blew out a breath, stared at me hard. Shit. Was he about to fight me for her? After a few seconds of our stare down he backed off and left to buy another round.

My eyes narrowed to slits at Char on the stage. But lucky for me, Ms. Gold-digger was really hamming it up. She leaned over, wiggled her rack. Then shimmed her hips, lifting one side of her already non-existent hemline higher.

Men groaned and cheered. She showed them their money’s worth and ten minutes later declared the victor.

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“Wade!” She screamed, jumping up and down, while batting false eyelashes. Her boobs bounced like two braless basketballs. Prep boy was proud showing off his prize. I shook my head, having a slut on your arm was never a prize. The guy was too much of a dumb shit to realize that. But maybe someday he would.

The rest of the night was awkward after I cock-blocked Char and Hunter. Each of them fidgeted nervously. It was clear I was the third wheel wrecking their good time.

We left after midnight, marveling at the falling snow. “It never snows like this here!” Char spread her arms wide, spinning herself in circles. She threw her head back, sticking her tongue out like a kid. Hunter stared hungrily at her, so I shoved him. Maybe a bit harder than I meant to. Before I knew what was happening, we were both down in the snow, wrestling like teenagers.

“You know what?” Hunter rolled away, slapping the snow off his jeans. “This is the most fun I’ve had in weeks.”

“Because you’re a loser?” I stood, also brushing the snow off.

“No. Because it’s like old times. Can’t wait for summer at the Outer Banks again.”

“Me, too.” Char answered dreamily.

It did feel kind of good. Like the warm spot in my heart turned on after being switched off. I still had my back up about Hunter trying to seduce my sister. We used an app to hire a car to take us back to the city. I hated to leave my Tesla here overnight, but I had a few drinks, plus there was the snow.

I promised Hunter, I'd be in touch after Christmas to hang out more. We said our goodbyes and headed separate ways. The following morning, Char and I drove back to the shore house for Christmas. We rediscovered our childhood playing board games and Nintendo. I was actually a bit sad when Christmas morning came because she was leaving the next day.

"What's this?" I asked as she handed me a wrapped gift. "You already gave me the painting and a professional photo shoot."

She grinned. "Open it."

I tore the paper unable to stop the groan from escaping. "At least I'm not on the cover."

"Don't you want to flip through it and see what month you are?"

"Not really." I put the calendar down to get her gifts.

"Turn it over."

There I was. Not on the front but on the entire back cover. I put the calendar facedown back in the box eager to give her my gifts.

"Your first gift I couldn't wrap. It's here. One free week of your choosing."

"Just one?"

"Hey, I need to make back some money here."

"I'm just kidding. Thanks! I can't wait!"

“You better book fast. Carlos emailed this morning. The pictures he took came out so good I’m putting the cottage up this week on OBXrentals.com.”

“I’ll take something in September.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, you deserve to make a killing, Chase. I mean it. Sorry for all my man whore comments. You really are a catch.”

“You are too, Char. Why are you alone for the holidays? I mean I know why I am. This place and work are my mistresses.”

“There was someone. But then it just slipped away.”

“He was a fool then. No one should ever let you slip away.”

She shrugged. “Anyway. This has been one of my best Christmases yet.”

“Same.”

We watched old Christmas movies on Netflix the rest of the day, feasted on leftovers while making to-do lists for the new year—which was Char’s idea of course.

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I drove her to the airport and waved until she disappeared. With her gone, the cottage felt lonely for the first time. My eyes fell to her gift. The one I didn't glance at. "Dolphins," I muttered.

I opened the cabinet above the fridge, chucking the entire box inside. What I should have done was burn it.

Three

Worst Christmas ever...

Wade:I can't make it to see you. Sorry.

My brows furrowed as I read his text. Gran had worked hard making a nice Christmas dinner. I splurged on my gift for him, a soft angora sweater from a clothing store I doubted I'd ever shop in even after I land a decent job.

Me:What? Is everything okay? I have your present.

Wade:I'm not sure how to tell you this... but I think we should break up.

My head tipped back as if I'd been slapped. Instead of texting him back, I hit call. But it went straight to voicemail.Coward.

Hands shaking, trying not to cry, my eyes focused on the cold, gray Christmas day. The one I was supposed to be spending with my boyfriend of almost two years.

Me: This is really crappy of you. On Christmas? Not even in person? Can you at least respect me enough to call, so we can talk?

Silence.

Tears welled up now, threatening to spill. I counted to five, took deep breaths. The smell of Gran's turkey and stuffing wafted in the air from under the closed door. For some reason this made the tears slip and fall. I mean I knew things with Wade weren't right for some time, but dumping me on Christmas? Via text? Shameless. How am I going to face him on campus after the holidays? We were inseparable. Our tiny community college barely had nine hundred students living in the two dorms. This was going to be worse than high school. Especially since that viper Sierra has had her eyes on Wade since Sophomore year. She was always flirting with him. Giving him bedroom eyes with her falsies. He'd turn red in the face while telling me I was his only girl. The sick feeling in my gut, said something else.

Last fall, when I was away visiting Gran, pics of the two of them were all over Instagram the night of the harvest party. Wade swore nothing happened between them while Sierra's smirked at me ever since.

I needed air.

"Ryan? Can you help set the table?" Gran called from the kitchen. She knew no one else would get off their butts to help. They were too busy toasting my stepsister and her new fiancé.

"I'll be back in five. Just need to run out..."

I didn't want Gran or anyone to see me crestfallen and completely gobsmacked. Not yet. Sighing, I pushed my feet into my winter boots, put on my thick puffer coat, some gloves and went outside. I didn't want my family to see me cry. Especially my

stepsister, Kendall. She was on fiancé number three in three years and showed up last night with a rock so heavy she'd sink into the Atlantic if she wore it in.

Through my tears, the string lights blurred. The smoke of burning Yuletide logs filled the crisp winter air. I'd never been a romantic but being dumped on the holidays felt like a double punch. I fished my phone out from deep within my pocket opening Instagram.

What a mistake.

#Merry Christmas #NaughtiestElfContestWinner, he had typed under a pic of him and Sierra with their lips fused together while under the mistletoe.

"I knew it!" Wade was supposed to be in Charleston with his fancy and fine family. Not cheating on me with the campus she-devil.

The pain of it cut through me sharper than the winter wind. Right there in the midst of twinkling lights, surrounded by homes with curling chimney smoke, I made a Christmas wish. More like a vow that next year would be different. By this time next year at exactly... I checked my watch... 2:03—I'd be over Wade and in Nags Head at the research program. Well on my way to rescuing captive dolphins. Pods of them.

It's my passion.

But there's only two spots available for the coveted Environmental Science Marine Program Research Unit in Nags Head. Only candidates with stellar grades and personal references from their professors are considered.

Wade and I were supposed to work on our applications over break after spending so many nights planning our future. Dreaming about living on research vessels—saving the oceans one by one.

Sierra.

My short nails dug into my palm. She's everything that made me feel... well less. I'm tall with an athletic build, medium brown hair, and toffee-colored eyes.

When I met my best friend Kell, she clucked her tongue with a hand cocked on her hip informing me I had as much style sense as her great Uncle Herbert who grew up on a cotton farm.

I didn't have the means or the desire for designer dresses and handbags. I'm an ocean girl. Give me the sand and salt in my hair, the sun on my face and a pair of decent flip flops and I'm good. The girls on campus went apocalyptic when Wade and I became a thing. He was the golden boy on campus. Not athletic but cultured. Dressed well. Came from money. Big money and went for the girl from Jersey in Skechers and faded jeans.

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What a stupid fool I'd been. We were mismatched. Truthfully, my main attraction to Wade was that we shared the same passion about our career path. Turns out Sierra does, too. Maybe I was drawn to his quiet stability. I've pretty much been a loner. My mother was quick to move on with a new husband making a new family, leaving me feeling like an outsider in their new home.

My father, well he was a traveling medical device salesman. His family was the road and whomever he met at a hotel bar. I spent my summers with him in Jersey. We lived out of cheap motels and his company car. As a kid, I felt like he genuinely wanted to spend summers with me and that was the only way he could. Looking back, it's clear that having a kid in tow during his business meetings increased his sales numbers. I was the summer bump in his pay. My only one constant was always Gran. I could always pick up a phone and rely on her words of advice. Speaking of Gran, I headed back to the torture of Christmas with my mother's new family which included my new stepsister and her perfect body and "perfect life." Mom kept comparing me to her and it stung. Gran was there with a soft smile and encouraging roll of her eyes. I won't miss Mom's new family with my smirking stepsister who always thought having a boy's name was so tragic.

I liked my name.

It suits me. I'm definitely not a southern belle looking to cash-in on my looks as a ticket to a house and a Range Rover Sport. Something which makes me stand out at our small satellite campus filled with all the Real Housewife wannabees. I was born and raised in Jersey. We only drove south when Mom decided a southern gent would be her next mark on the path to finding Mr. Right, instead of a trail of Mr. Right nows. We landed in Nashville for a while but ended up in North Carolina after she

met her new hubby in an online chatroom.

Mom has more in common with Sierra and Kendall than me. They are more intent on finding a man then finding themselves. Wade and I used to make fun of women like them. I thought Wade shared my disdain of them too. What did he do? He fell for one. Because although Wade has a real passion for the ocean, he's backed by old family money. Wade Harrington V comes with more than just a desire to save the planet. He comes with the generational wealth to do it. I never wanted him for any of that. I simply wanted him for his easy grin, laid back attitude and great cuddles. He was the best at spooning.

Sighing, I pushed back all the memories of my ex. He wasn't good or charming after all. Maybe just maybe, Wade had more of the rich boy in him than I thought. Maybe he really was a cheating bastard just like I had suspected but never wanted to face.

Stuffing my hands back into the deep pockets of my puffer coat, I turned making my way back to the house filled with too much fa-la-la. At least Gran's there.

"You were gone a while." She smiled from her wing chair in front of the burning logs.

"I had a lot on my mind." I crossed the floor to warm my hands by the fire. "Where is everyone?"

"They left. I told them I burned the turkey." I walked over to the oven turning on the oven light. Inside sat the turkey. Golden, crisp, and brown. "I had enough of them. I was getting a headache. They went to Derek's club for a late brunch. Don't let Kendall get to you. She's fake as that ring she's flashing. It isn't real. It's a knock-off. Cubic Zirconia if you ask me, but she's too stupid to realize. I've had enough of them all fawning over it. I want to hear about you."

I eyed the wet bar by the tree. “Care to split a bottle of Cabernet?”

She grinned. “I might look old, but I feel so young.”

“And thank God for that. Wade dumped me.”

She lifted her brows. “Figured as much.”

“For a fake blonde who wears 4-inch heels and 2-inch skirts to class.”

“Not surprised.”

“Anyway, I feel so lost. I had my future mapped out and poof.” I snapped my fingers.

“So? Stop making maps.”

I sighed, handing her a glass. “How did you get to be so smart?”

“By living. Chart a new course, Ryan. One with just you on it. Maybe you’ll be surprised by who else shows up on the same one.”

“I’m not looking for another boyfriend. I’m not a coward but facing him and her back on campus will be brutal. She’s going to put the fact that she’s on his arm in my face.”

“I always thought you could do better than that satellite campus anyway. Wade’s a loser.”

I shrugged. “He partied a little too much his senior year of high school. He had an early acceptance into Ole’ Miss but messed up by taking it for granted. He blew off his classes. When Ole’ Miss saw his senior year grades they withdrew his acceptance

and he ended up at Brexton.”

“Ah, the big fish was swimming in the small pond.”

“I guess.”

“You weren’t meant for a small pond, my dear. You are destined for greater things.”

“I’m working on it. Wade and I were supposed to apply for the coveted research program affiliated with Duke. They only consider upperclassman in Nags Head. I was hoping to get in for next year.”

Gran set down her glass of wine. “Go. Apply over break. Why wait? Transfer now. Even if you don’t get in, you’ll be by the water where other research programs are. Apply to Duke. Today. Maybe something will open up for the spring semester.”

“That’s a month away?”

“So? Ryan, you have to go for it. With everything in life. Don’t wait for chances to come to you. Make your own.”

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She was right. She always was. “What about finances? I can’t afford Duke. Not even the satellite campus that’s why I applied to Brexton. The only way for me to get into Duke is through the research program.”

She nodded to the tree. “You haven’t opened your present yet. The one from me.”

My eyes moved to the tree where an envelope with my name on it sat on a branch. “Gran?” I gently plucked it from the prickly pine needled branches. Inside was a personal note in her crisp script with a check for ten thousand dollars.

“It’s not much. I found some money stuffed into an old shoe box in the basement after I sold the house. Your grandfather had squirreled it away without a word to me.”

“No, Gran. I can’t...”

She waved me off. “What am I going to do with it? Go on a singles cruise? I want you to use it well. To get to the place you always should have been. Your mother won’t ask her new husband for college money and your father is useless. Pops would want you to have it.”

I stared at the check. This might be enough to pay for housing and food for almost a year if I found a place with other roommates. I could live on peanut butter and jelly. My classes well, student loans and scholarships might do the trick.

“Oh... there’s one more gift.” She moved from her seat to give me the last unopened gift from under the tree. My head was still spinning from her check when I opened a box with a sailor’s cap that read “Captain.” On a necklace was a small silver key. A

picture of my grandfather's Mako fishing boat was tucked underneath. They had both moved to the Outer Banks from Jersey when Pops retired. It's a shame he didn't get to enjoy as many years as he deserved doing nothing but fishing.

"GRAN?!" Tears threatened at what this could mean.

"He'd turn over in his grave if I just sold it. I kept it garaged. I had a nice young man restore it and put a new engine on. The Mako and a new life is yours, Ryan. Go chase after it! I'm moving to Durham. Found a nice fifty-five plus condo community. I'll miss the shore but it's too much for me now."

I gently fingered the key to his beloved boat, put the cap on my head, and launched myself at her. "Best Christmas ever! It's just too much!"

"Well, it's time for me to let go. He's been gone five years."

"I'll cherish his boat."

"I know you will."

"I can't believe you did all this for me."

"There's nothing I cherish more than you, Ryan. Remember that. You have nothing ahead of you except open waters. Make a big wave."

"Okay!" I laugh. "Enough already with the symbolic phrases. I get what you're saying."

"Good. Let's finish our wine and watch Lifetime Christmas movies."

"There's nothing I'd rather do and no one else I'd rather spend Christmas night with."

And that was the truth. Forget Wade and his average bedroom moves. Truthfully, he snuggled better than he put them on me anyway. A decent pillow and a B.O.B. might be an upgrade. Next year will be my year. I just know it. No more rich, good looking jerks on my horizon. Thanks to Gran, I have all I'll ever need—family and hope.

Four

“Look at them. It’s so obvious she daggered you.” Ignoring Kendra’s comment, I murmured something incoherent while continuing to pick at my salad. A hundred pairs of eyes were on me as Wade strolled to the hot buffet line with his new girl. I yawned, pretending to be bored. Everyone said college would be different from high school. Well, it wasn’t when you went to a small satellite campus. Everyone knows everyone’s business.

Disgusted with how juvenile this whole scene was I picked up my tray. “I need to finish my essay. It’s due by the end of the week. See you all later.” I found my puffer coat and hat by the door, hastily putting them on. The early February air was chilly but nothing like the winters in Jersey.

“Look at her. She can’t handle seeing the two of them, so she runs.” My face heated as I overheard comments. I’d been holding my head so high the center of my back between my shoulder blades ached. Gran was right. I am above this. Better than this. College shouldn’t be a repeat of high school. It’s not my problem if the people here want to stay stuck. During times like this I missed my best friend Kell something fierce. She was a junior when I was a freshman. She took me under her wing when I tried out for the volleyball team in a last-ditch effort to make friends because unless you were either rich or Greek, you were a persona non grata here. I was a decent player in high school and made the small team. Kell is a teacher in Charlotte now dating some banker. Speaking of Kells I reached for my phone. She was Face Timing.

“Kells? Thank God. I need to get out of here. The drama is just too much.”

“Did you finish your application for the research program?”

“Not yet. I just need to finish the essay.”

“Drop everything and do it. Get out of Brexton. Not just because of Wade but because you never should have been there.”

“I wouldn’t have met you...”

“True. Listen, I have some news... I-I’m engaged.”

“What?! No. No way! I haven’t even met him.”

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“I know it’s fast,” her voice lowered to a whisper. “I-I am kind of pregnant.”

“Um Kells. There is no kind of. You are or you aren’t.”

“It was a total accident. I swear. I’d never trap Evan. I love him and it’s still new.”

“I’ll say.”

“I need a maid of honor. We want to tie the knot this summer.”

“You know I’ll do anything for you.”

“That’s what I want to hear. Because Ryan, I want a bachelorette party. If I can’t drink, I want everyone else to get their freak on. I know you don’t party but girl, party for me. Lord knows you need to after how Wade did you dirty. Nothing crazy just a few close friends for a quick getaway.”

I bit my lip. I’m not great at this sort of thing and I definitely don’t have the money to do much. Since Kell was my rock, I couldn’t let her down. “Text me the list of what dates work and who you want there.”

“Only a handful of my closest friends. I’ll ask Hannah to help you out if you need it.”

I swallowed hard. I hated Hannah. She was Kell’s friend from high school and saw my friendship with Kell as a threat. “No problem.”

“Love ya’ Ryan.”

“Love ya’ too, Kells. Congratulations on the baby and the man.”

“Thanks. I really am happy. So is he.”

“He better be or I’ll seriously kick his ass.”

We ended the call and I took a deep breath. The new year seemed to roll in with a tide of change for everyone. “Hey Ryan, tough break about Wade.” The girl’s eyes were full of fake sympathy. I didn’t even know her. Not really. Ugh. Small college campuses sucked.

I left campus on foot for the one coffee shop within walking distance. I just needed air. Needed to breathe and get off the campus where everyone seems to know my business. I found a table in the back and got busy opening my Mac Book. Two hours later, my finger hovered over the send button. It was all there. My hopes and dreams waiting for their chance. I pressed send. There it was done.

My stomach grumbled. It was almost four and I had barely eaten lunch. As I gathered up my things the door to the café opened. A couple laughed as the guy waltzed his girl inside. Their backs were to me. Their soft little love laughs made customers grin. Snow clung to the sleeves of their coats and hats. The girl giggled as she reached up, taking the beanie off the guy’s head. I gasped. It was them. The new “it” couple. When Wade and I were together we never achieved that status. He never wore a beanie. Then again, I never dressed like a raging slut in the dead of winter. She had boots with thigh high tights on. He unzipped her coat, letting the three inches of bare thigh peek out. “Cold here?” He murmured against her lips as he puts his palms on her bare skin. She yelped, “Wade! Your hands are freezing!”

He never touched me like that. But then again, I’d never let him stroke the inside of my bare thigh in public. Snorting, I ignored the pain in my chest. Not because I was still in love with him. Because I missed him. In a way he was my best friend. My one

constant. And then he just ripped himself away from me, replacing me with...her.

Sierra spotted me first. Her eyes narrowed right before her lashes start batting so hard, I waited for them to start falling off. “Ryan! Where have you been? Every time we see you... you just well, run off!” Her voice was thick, sugary syrup. Full of fakeness.

Wade’s eyes cut away from mine. His cheeks, stained red. Prick. What kind of man blushes? A guilty as fuck one, no doubt.

“I’ve been busy...,” hooking my bag over my shoulder, I steeled my spine.

“We’ve been busy, too!” She practically jumped up and down as her eyes went wide in faked innocence right before she dropped the bomb. “We have some news! Wade and I... we... we got accepted into Duke’s research program! Waddie and I will be saving the planet next year! So, your pretty little heart won’t have to break any more at the sight of us.”

Now my face was redder than his. Marching right up to them I put a finger in his face. “How could you?! They’re still accepting applications. There’s days until the deadline!”

“Well, now, relax Ryan. It’s not Wade’s fault they already found the most qualified candidate and accepted him. I mean, why wait?”

“Most qualified, my ass! I’m the one who helped you pass botany and organic chem 200. You couldn’t... you’d never get in without me!” Then I looked down at her. “Aren’t you a liberal arts major? You don’t even have the qualifications to apply.”

Sienna slowly clapped her hands. “For someone so smart, you are so dumb!” She hooked her arm through Wade’s as she winked. “Why did you think he dated you for

so long while so in lust with me? He told me all about how he had to picture me in his head while he was with you. I switched majors last year. I'm in. You're not."

I shook my head. She's evil. Vicious. "Wade?" Tears blurred my vision. Could this be true? He swallowed hard, finally meeting my eyes. "I'm sorry, Ry. I just—we just happened."

"Excuse me? You just happened to stick your body parts in her? That just doesn't happen, Wade."

I shoved past them, blindly entering the swirling snow. The sting of betrayal ripped through me with the winter wind. I was played. Horribly. And that she-devil and my ex just stole my dream. I called Kell, choking back tears as I told her everything. "I still don't understand how Sierra got the second spot."

"Easy, Ry. He paid for it. He comes from old money, right? His daddy is probably a Duke alum and probably donated some ridiculous sum of money to the marine bio program. Pay for play. That's how shit like this works. It doesn't matter who deserves the spots. There will be no spots if there's no money for the program. He bought his way in, Ryan. Hers, too. I'm sorry."

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“This world sucks. I’ll never get a fair shot.”

“Don’t stop now. Cheaters never prosper and all that. Look, we both know Sierra is meaner than a wet panther while Wade is a total cad.” When Kell gets mad her full southern comes out.

“He just blew my dream right out of the water, seconds after I sent in my application.”

“He could be full of shit.”

“He was guilty as fuck. I saw it all over his face.”

“Don’t give up. You can’t let that trollop win.”

I shrugged. “She already did. I’ve got to walk back in the snow. I’ll call you later.”

I was frozen by the time I made it back to the dorm. Conversations stopped, followed by hurried whispers. News traveled fast over social media and the word was already out that Sienna had stolen another thing that belonged to me. What was it with that girl? Instead of stealing other people’s dreams she should have found her own. I refrained from commenting on Wade’s Insta post when I went to delete him and found myself looking through them instead. I almost yacked at his Tik Tok video. It was them in swimwear and snorkels announcing that they got in. In two taps, I deleted Wade from my social media world. He can have his fake life with his fake girl. It’s not like she’s going to be able to keep his grades afloat. “Good luck keeping your head above water,” I muttered, plugging in my laptop while watching the

swirling snow outside.

My phone chimed with an incoming email.

From:

To:

SUBJECT: RESEARCH PROGRAM

Dear Ryan Hildale,

Thank you for your submission for the Marine Research Program. Qualified candidates will be contacted shortly for further information on the review process.

Dr. Erin Winnfield

Duke University Director of Marine Sciences

I chucked my phone on the bed. I was tempted to reply, “Why bother when it’s fixed.” I didn’t want to eighty-six any chance of getting in after Wade flunks out. I took a hot shower instead, put on a comfy old pair of yoga pants then scrolled through Netflix. “Rough day?” My roommate, Gretchen asked as she walked in.

“The worst.”

“I come bearing gifts.” She pulled out two tubs of Halo Strawberry ice cream.

“I guess I can work out another day.”

“Riverdale?” She asked.

“I was thinking Outer Banks...”

“Yes! Anything summer and I’m in.” The outside world still swirled in shades of gray. As we watched the show, ideas starting churning. I’m a fighter not a quitter. Wade and his skank might’ve cheated me, but I could still find a way. Chart a new course just as Gran suggested. I started googling marine science programs in the Outer Banks. Duke wasn’t the only game in town. I began my search while watching OBX finding a few promising leads. My cell dinged with a text from Hannah.

H:She wants her bachelorette before she starts showing.

Me:I’m on it.

H:What’s your idea?

I looked up to the screen. A beach house in OBX. Off season it shouldn’t break my bank. We could do a spa theme, watch 365DNI and 50 Shades. Drink cheap wine and well, Kell can have sparkling grape juice.

M:House in OBX.

H:Genius. Book it.

Sighing, I typed in the URL for beach rental in the Outer Banks. There was a ton of options. All still thousands a week even in the dead of winter. I kept scrolling, changing my search filters. My eyes were immediately drawn to the third picture. It was of a hot tub on a deck with waving seagrass and dunes behind it. I clicked on the listing. The beach house went for a nightly rate of \$699. That’s steep for me, but if we divided it amongst the group—totally doable. After clicking through the rest of the photos, I was convinced this was the house for us. It’s cute. Classy. Decorated with the finest beach theme and the shiplap. I loved shiplap. I’d shiplap my dull dorm

room if I could. Sighing, I dreamed of spending a weekend out in that house, tucked in one of those cozy bedrooms under the snow white, fluffy goose down comforters that the listing boasted as having for winter guests. I'd be far from Wade and his new slut. Away from the whispers and pitying looks.

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Without hesitating I click on the “contact owner” and filled out the required information, including my personal email address. Feeling satisfied, I closed the lid to my laptop and snuggle down in my cozy cotton blend comforter and drifted off to the scenes of the beach and boats from the OBX show. Forget, Wade. I’m moving onto bigger and better things without him. I have some money and Gramp’s boat. Life’s good. Even if winter was cold and lonely.

Five

“Beat that, calendar boy.” I lifted the bar so Hunter could slide out from underneath.

“I knew I’d regret telling you about that.”

“How is your sister, anyway?”

My face reddened and not from the round of sets Hunter and I were doing. “Remind me to kick your ass later.”

“It was only a few stolen kisses.”

“Which time?” My jaw tightened as I lifted the weighted bar, exhaling as I quickly raised my arms before lowering them.

“She was a hot elf. Should’ve won.”

“If I had known, best friend or not, I would’ve whooped your ass, bro.”

“She tasted like cotton candy after a summer rain....”

“That’s it.” Jerking the bar up, I racked it, slid down and went after him. Some of the other lifters got pissed. I simply told the truth. “He made out with my sister and lied to me about it.”

Ping.

My cell interrupted the beating I was about to give Hunter.

My eyes shifted from him, egging me on with a grin to my cell lying next to my water bottle. It could be work. It wasn’t. It was an alert from the rental app. I clicked open the app, reading the message.

From:

To: homeowner1278

SUBJECT: Weekend rental?

Hi,

My name is Ryan, and I am interested in renting your beach home for a long weekend for my pregnant girlfriend to relax and enjoy a getaway. I am looking for a Friday-Sunday stay, leaving Monday morning. By chance is President’s Day weekend available?

Ryan

I replied immediately. A guy with a pregnant girlfriend sounded like perfect renters. There would be no raging parties or spilled beer to ruin my perfect beach bungalow.

My sister bought all cream-colored chairs and couches and I had smacked my head. Sure, it was beachy and beautiful but not so much renter friendly colors.

From: homeowner12678

To:

SUBJECT: Weekend rental?

Hi Ryan,

My home is available for those dates. Since it is off season, you'll see in the calendar the rate is \$699 a night. As stated in the listing, there is a no-smoking, no pet policy. I hope your girlfriend has an enjoyable stay. If you need anything while there, don't hesitate to reach out. There will be a lock box with a key left on the porch. Four hours prior to your arrival after I've received payment in full, I will send you the code.

Enjoy your stay,

C.C.

A reply hit my inbox within minutes. Boom. I had my first booking. In no time my investment would make me money and more importantly the house was a memory my sister and I would always share. Satisfied at how easy it was, I put my phone down to go looking for Hunter. He was by the Nautilus equipment chatting up a blonde. I shook my head. He was leaning in, grinning, offering her pointers on how to get a better workout.

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I threw my towel around my neck. I could get even with him without bloodying his nose. I cleared my throat, throwing an arm around him. “Who’s your new friend, babe?” I winked. He stiffened, trying to get out from under my arm, my bicep squeezed him closer. The blonde sized me up, cheeks turning red. “We’re going out for drinks after. Want to join us?” I asked her in my best high-pitched voice.

“I’m going to kill you,” Hunter hissed, when she politely refused walking away with Hunter’s eyes glued to her spandex ass. “Stop blocking me. I haven’t been laid in months.”

“So? Me neither.”

“Not by choice. What’s wrong with you? I used to be the one telling you to slow down.”

I shrugged. “Not feeling anyone. The last girl I met on the app freaked me out. She contacted me that she was late. I always used protection. It scared the shit out of me. Women know I have a good job and family money as soon as they Google me. For two days I thought I was trapped. I’d never get rid of a baby that’s mine. Even if I only slept with the mother a handful of times. Ever since that close call, I threw myself harder into work. Then the shore house.”

“Damn. I had no idea. You could’ve called.”

“You had your own problems. Do you miss her?” I didn’t mention that I had seen his ex out on a date when I had gone out with a group of coworkers last week.

“I miss being with someone. I feel like a jerk, but I couldn’t get a ring. I loved her just not passionately. If it’s for life. I want that. You know?”

I nodded. “The only thing I’m passionately crazy about is the fixer upper I bought. Speaking of, I just popped my first rental.”

“You worried it’ll be a party house?”

“Nope. It’s to a couple who are expecting. They’ll probably make a fire, enjoy the view, and sleep in. She can’t even drink. I’ll bet she won’t let him either.”

“Nice. Well, save a few weekends for us. Maybe what we each need is to relive a little former glory... Mr. July.”

I cursed under my breath.

“She texted me the photo.” He opened his phone, waving it in my face. “Leverage. We’re going out tonight or I blast this to all our old Frat buddies.”

I lunged for him. “You’re dead this time.” But he held it high, hurdling over a giant yoga ball.

“Face it, Carmichael. You’re my number one wingman again.”

“Fine. But you’re still my little bitch.” I put him in a headlock, using my fist to give him a nuggie on the top of his head.

“The two of you are so cute!” The blonde squeaked, walking out.

“We’re not together! I’m straight!” Hunter yelled, but she was already gone.

Six

My growling stomach woke me up. “Went out to Ted’s.” Gretchen had written on the dry erase board behind our dorm room door. I checked my phone; it was after eleven. Ugh, I hated it when I fell asleep in the early evening, I wake up out of sorts. I heated up some hot water in our small microwave and made myself a cup of instant mac & cheese while debating whether or not to meet Gretchen at Ted’s, the bar and grill on campus but my heart wasn’t in it. My heart wasn’t being here in Brookhaven. It was south, where the sea was. Pacing the small room, I came up with a plan. Follow your heart. But how? When every way seems to be blocked. I thought of what Gran had said. I’m the only one who can change my destiny. I’ll be damned if I lose my dream without a fight. Biting my lip, I sat at my desk, opening my email I hit reply and began composing...

From:

To:

SUBJECT: RESEARCH PROGRAM

Dear Dr. Winnfield,

Thank you for looking over my application. The Marine Research program at Nags Head has been my dream since I was sixteen.

I’ve worked tirelessly for years, everything leading up to the moment I applied. This might be very unconventional and could hurt my slim chances of being accepted considering how competitive the positions are, but I am compelled to write to you, nonetheless.

It has come to my attention that Wade Harrington V and Sierra Davis both from my

University, have already been accepted even though the deadline to apply hasn't expired. This was disheartening to hear. Especially since, Wade's essay was mostly written off of my research. I didn't mind at the time. I was just sharing. But now looking back, I was too trusting. To be frank, Wade's grades are mostly due to my intervention. He never cheated per se but was heavily coached. I thought I was helping. I thought he was just as passionate about the program as I was. I was naïve.

He used me as a steppingstone to further his own ambitions.

It has also come to my attention that the heavy political and financial influence of Wade's family on the University might also have contributed to such an early decision by the board.

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It's a shame when in today's day and age hard work still takes a second seat to outright nepotism. If by any chance you have any regular openings in the student body for this spring semester, I'd be willing to transfer immediately. If either Sierra or Wade's positions fall through, please keep me in mind.

Sincerely,

Ryan Hill

I hit send, then firmly closed the lid on my laptop. There. I felt better already. Even if nothing comes of it. They'll know I know. I picked up my phone texting Gran. She wasn't the best at text but could figure out the basics.

Me:I applied, even though Wade's daddy bought his way in for him and his new girlfriend. I was so angry I wrote the head researcher to complain.

Gran:That's my Ryan. Don't let anyone hold you back.

Me: It probably ruined any outside chance, but I feel better. How's my boat?

Gran: Waiting for you at a marina outside Nags Head.

Me:It might be waiting a while.

Gran:I've been bored. I took a job.

Me:Congrats! I'm excited for you!

Gran:It's boring. I'm a PA in Durham for a temp agency. But it keeps my days full. Let me know as soon as you hear back from Duke. Maybe Pops will pull strings for you from above.

Me:If he can. He will. Night!

Gran: Night darling. You deserve the world. Don't sell yourself short next time. Wait for real love.

Just when I was about to put my phone down and start up Netflix again, I got a new text from Hannah.

Hannah:Just bought 50 plastic dick straws online. I got dick everything, napkins, towels, plates. Ordered a case of wine for us and bottles of sparkling cider forKells. What am I missing?

Me:A real dick?

Hannah:Male stripper. On it.

I smacked my head.

Me:It was a joke. I can't afford a stripper.

Hannah:Heard you haven't been seeing a real dick. It'll do you good.

Stunned, I stared at her response. She was such a bitch. But the last thing I wanted to do was start drama for Kells. I'd just ignore her.

Me:How about some dick balloons instead?

Hannah:My credit card is maxed out. You bring them.

“Sure, it is,” I snorted. But I texted her back.

Me:Fine. The place is booked. I have a confirmation. We are all set for Friday-Monday, President’s Day Weekend.

Hannah:See you there.

I didn’t respond back. There was only three bedrooms. Kell deserved the Master. I’d sleep on the couch before sharing one with Hannah. She’d probably do something evil to me in my sleep, calling it a prank. I gritted my teeth; I love the beach but spending a weekend with Hannah was going to require a lot of wine and aspirin.

Seven

Cursing, I shuffled through the stacks of papers on my desk. I had less than five minutes until the Monday morning partner meeting. I was expected to give my assessment of the Management Capital deal. But the contract with my neatly hand typed notes and carefully highlighted clauses was missing. My newest PA, Lauren, was supposed to have my master copy on top of a dozen presentation copies. Gritting my teeth, I hit the red button on my desk phone, immediately connecting me with her line.

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“Chase,” she panted as if she’d just run a 5k.

“Where’s the presentation?” My voice was curt, clipped. I felt her gaze on me through my glass office wall, but I refused to meet it.

“I-I...”

“Lauren?” Her name was a bullet firing from my mouth.

“I spilled the coffee I brought you on it. I blotted everything...”

“And this was?”

“An hour ago.”

“You didn’t think to tell me? Clear out your desk. I’ll contact your temp agency. Your services are no longer required.”

“Please—” I hung up on her plea. I didn’t have time for it. Instead, I went to my inbox where I had emailed her everything, opened the file and hit print. I’d make the copies myself. My notes, however, were gone. From now on, I’d have to screen shot copies of my own notes. Lauren was my second PA this year. It’s become a running joke in the office that I can’t keep one long. Hence, the need to use a temp agency. I stormed past her desk on my way to the copy room where the industrial printing was collating and stapling my copies. “Chase! Please!”

I felt her hand on my forearm. Looking down at her five brightly painted nails, I

growled. “It’s Mr. Carmichael. Please remove your hand from my arm.” I took my copies striding out past her tear-streaked face.

Ten minutes late, I strode into the boardroom. As I sank down into my seat, I whiffed the scent of her perfume on my pressed white shirt. “Carmichael,” the CEO addressed me.

“Sorry, I’m late. I had to let my PA go.”

“Another one?” This time the CFO snorted, lifting his brows. There were a few ways I could play this. I was the newest senior level guy, beating out coworkers with more tenure. More than confident, I deserved it, while knowing there were others who had it out for me. I gave a wolfish grin, “You know how it is. Have to be careful in the workplace. It’s not my fault they all get crushes. Highly inappropriate, and I would never do anything to risk the firm’s reputation.”

They ate it up. Grinned like motherfuckers. “I envy you Carmichael. What I wouldn’t give to be in my prime again.” Fincham, one of the other senior partners, laughed. He was in his fifties, overweight with thinning hair.

Ignoring his comment, I passed out the presentations, the paper still warm from the copy machine. I cleared my throat, rolled up my sleeves and got to work like a boss.

At the end of my workday, I took the elevator down to the parking garage stopping short at the sight of Lauren loitering by my car. I waited to approach until more people came down. I didn’t know what she was up to, but I wouldn’t be cornered without witnesses. I called out to her while still twenty feet away.

“Mr. Carmichael. I’m so sorry. Please give me another chance.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, I can’t. If you had just told me immediately, and re-did the

presentations, I would have had time to re-do my notes. By panicking you showed me you can't be trusted. And I don't expect PA's to fetch me coffee."

"I thought I'd save you a trip. I was just trying to be helpful." I bite my tongue. Sure, she was, like the time, I had asked her to take some files down the hall. She pretended to trip, intentionally dropping everything, just so she could get on her knees, raising her backside overly high, probably hoping I'd enjoy the view. If I was Hunter, I would've had her naked on day two. But I wasn't Hunter. I was a new partner and determined to act like one.

"I should've fired you weeks ago." I muttered under my breath.

"I really need work. Please just give me one more chance?" She licked her pouty lips. She was a looker. Even if her makeup was a bit strong. Her breasts were round and full, hips just wide enough to be curvy while her frame was still slender. My dick didn't even twitch. Maybe Hunter was right. Maybe something was wrong with me. My libido was missing in action. "You want me, don't you? Is that it? I tempt you so much you had to fire me?"

"I'll call the agency. I'm sure you'll find work. Excuse, me." I clicked the unlock button on my Tesla, hoping she wouldn't try to climb in. Hours later, while looking over contracts in bed, I took a break to check my social media. I had one new follower on Instagram. Lauren Newell. I also had a new private message. It was her, in the same red shoes she had worn to work and nothing else. I whistled. She was a looker. My cock finally stirred. I deleted her message blocked her, then changed all my social media account's privacy settings. I leaned back against the headboard. I really needed to get laid. I logged into the dating app... clicking through a few profiles. Settling on one, I clicked in, asking her for drinks on Wednesday. I didn't waste time, just asked her to read my bio and where to meet.

She responded in less than an hour. Grinning, as we exchanged flirty messages, then

pictures...I forgot all about my former PA's body as I checked out pictures of my date's bare legs from mid-thigh down. She was also in bed doing work... we already had a lot in common. Then I emailed the temp agency, requesting a new PA. Since PA's have been revolving doors in my office, I decided to make a list of traits I was looking for: responsible, seasoned, punctual, preferably married. Wait no, I should scratch that out. An unhappily married PA might harass me. Satisfied with my short list I hit send.

Eight

My eyes narrowed as I scanned the documents on my desk, "And there it is. You mothers." Hidden under a sub clause of a sub clause were two sentences that would screw my firm over if they signed. It stated if the fund doesn't perform at a twenty-percent yield—the money managing firm would get a pay back of original funds.

Fuck no.

That's not how this worked.

I reached for my highlighter, grasping air.

It was gone.

I opened my drawers. None.

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I felt a slight headache coming on. Although I knew I did the right thing by firing my last three PA's. But now I'm stuck with her... she gives as good as she gets. Doesn't kiss my ass or arrange my pens and highlighters by color. I kind of miss my color-coded highlighter arrangement.

Sighing, I pressed the intercom button for Bunny. She was in her mid-sixties. A widower with all her kids grown. A few even had grandkids. So far, she was the best, but also the worst PA.

"Mr. Carmichael?"

"Honey Bun," I drawled. "I need some new highlighters. Stat."

"You're having a highlighting emergency?"

"SOS. Bun. Bun."

My lips curved. I love teasing the shit out of her. Because she never took it.

"I'm busy."

"Busy, working for me."

I raised my eyes, meeting hers through the glass walls of my office.

"I can see your eyeroll from here, honey bun."

She scowled, tore her eyes away from her computer and stood. "I'll check the supply closet."

My neck ached, so I got up to stretch. I noticed I was out of binder clips, so I decided to follow Bun down the hall.

She was on the tippy toes of her practical beige flats, trying in vain to reach the box of highlighters on a shelf just out of her grasp.

I sauntered forward, reaching over her, trapping her small body between me and the shelves. "I'll get them."

She turned, flustered. Her cheeks, bright red. "You scared me. You rascal."

I arch a brow. "Did I?"

She swatted my arm. "Stop flirting with me."

"Please. I'm just helping the elderly." I tweaked her nose.

She shook her head. "Someday, some woman is going to come along...knock you for six and take you down a peg."

"Not likely."

She pushed me out of the way. "Stop flashing those eyes at me," she grumbled under her breath walking out.

"Hey bun?! I'd like an iced Sweet Tea from the café with a grilled steak salad."

"I'm your PA not your delivery girl. Besides, what man eats a salad for lunch?"

“The kind who has a six-pack.”

“And is on a calendar...”

“What?” I spun around, narrowing my eyes. Ten feet behind me was Brett Diersky. My work nemesis. He’s older than me but I got the jump on him career-wise, and he can’t stand it.

“You heard me...Mr. July.”

He opened up a calendar, flipping the pages before turning it around. By now, heads popped up from cubicles and more people than normal lingered by the instant coffee machine.

Silence followed. I think half the office was shocked I actually did it. Me, the squeaky clean—no flirting with anyone under thirty—up and coming golden boy posing in skintight shorts for the world to see.

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Charlie promised me it'd be a local New York calendar. How the heck did it end up here?

“Gimme that,” I walk forward, ripping it from his hands.

“What’s wrong Carmichael? Your tighty stars n’ stripes get you in a wad? I bought ten more when I was in New York on business last week. I looked up your sister. Didn’t she tell you?”

A cruel, ‘I don’t give a shit smile’ broke out on my face. I sauntered forward. “Ten? Why so you can tack me up on your wall and beat to me at night? I knew I was your dream man, Diersky.”

His face turned purple. “Fuck you.”

I spun on my heel, this time letting the tips of my shoes touch his. “Still pissed I got the promotion? Face it, Brett. I’m smarter than you, work harder than you and—I broke off, pointing to my calendar pic, “way better looking than you. Stay away from Charlie,” I hissed. “Or I’ll settle this after hours with my fist.”

I winked at the college intern hovering by the kitchenette. “Here you go, sweetheart.” I pressed the calendar in her hand, strode back into my office and sat back down to mark the contract. It takes a lot to piss me off to the point of violence but Diersky was there. What the heck was he doing calling my sister? My head has been so buried in contracts; I didn’t see him gunning so hard for me.

I picked up my phone, dialing Char. I just needed to know why she’d think it’d be a

good idea to sell the biggest douche in my company calendars with me in them when she knows how serious I take my career.

“Chase? You never call in the middle of a work day.”

“Hello to you too, sis.”

“Uh-oh. I know that tone in your voice.”

“Diersky?”

“Oh, him? Yeah, he’s a loser with a capital L.”

“I could’ve told you that if you had called me, Char. Why does he have my calendar?”

She sighed. “He phoned my office; told me he was a co-worker of yours. I looked him up on your company website... so I knew he was legit. Anyway, he practically begged me to get into the Gala at The Hall. He saw on the social media promos I was the chair. So, I did him a favor and got him in. We sold out of all the calendars at the event that night. He must’ve seen them and saw you.”

“Fuck me.”

“No, but dozens of women probably want to....”

“Thanks to you.”

“Come on. It was for charity.”

“How much did you raise to save the dolphins?”

“100k.”

“What?”

“The calendars were such a hit we mass produced more after January.... And well they get twenty dollars apiece.”

I smacked my forehead. “I’m never doing a favor for you again.”

“What? Is being a sex symbol hard for you?”

“There’s so much more to me than my tan and six pack...”

“Like what? Besides, your colossal ego, little bro.”

“Little?”

“I am two minutes older so technically, yes.”

“Smart ass. Stay away from Diersky if he goes back to New York.”

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“Got it. How’s the beach house?”

“I just booked my first weekend rental to a couple expecting.”

“That’s perfect because I was showing Carlos the listing and well...,”

“Stop right there.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. Char has that tell in her slightly elevated voice. I knew what came next and was helpless to defend myself against it.

“It’s really quite exquisite. A real find and Carlos pitched it to Southern Living... they are doing a whole summer spread on most wanted beach homes.”

“Fuck, Char. Again?”

“Not you—you can keep your clothes on. He just wants to shoot the house. I know you’ll make the cover and just think of all the bookings you’ll get after being featured.”

“I’ll think about it,” I replied.

“...ugh... well... I already said yes for you.”

I closed my eyes feeling a headache come on. “Who needs a wife with a sister like you?” I hung up, opening my eyes to the spreadsheets I was working on. I pressed the button for Bunny’s direct line. “Bun, bun. I need a water and three Advil.”

“Not your nurse.”

“Bun, please. I’m dying.”

“Man baby.”

“You’re fired, Bun.”

Her response was a snort and the dial tone. Two minutes later she came in with an ice-cold water and three white pills.

“You’re a lifesaver, Bun. Hold all my calls.”

She rolled her eyes, shutting my door with a soft click. After taking the pills, I got back to the spreadsheets.

The rest of it was straight forward. After I amended it, I sent it to the partners to sign.

A soft tap at my door had me looking up. “Come in,” I smiled softly as Bunny tip toed in. “I finished all the work you gave me. I’m taking the rest of the afternoon off. It’s bridge night at my house and I need to make my special spinach and artichoke dip.”

“Good for you Bun. You’ve got more of a social life than I do. Did I tell you I’m a real card shark? By chance do you play for money?”

She waved a hand. “You and a bunch of old ladies playing cards. We’ll need a defibrillator. Especially when they see the new calendar I’m going to put up in my kitchen. Diersky had spares.”

I grinned. “I know you checked out my abs.”

“Oh you,” she waved her hand. “I have cataracts. Can’t see further than five inches

from my face.”

“Bullshit, Buns. You saw.”

“You all act like children. Don’t worry about Diersky. The women in the office call him ‘douchebag Diersky.’”

“Douchebag Diersky,” I muttered under my breath. “Fitting.”

“He wined and dined Beth in accounting for two months then dumped her flat. She caught him out on Valentine’s Day with Annabelle from HR.”

“He gets around the office... stupid. One wrong lay and a woman can ruin your career. I’d never sleep where I work if you know what I mean.”

“I do. Smart. Rich. Talented and one heck of a six-pack. If only I was forty years younger...”

“I knew you looked.” I winked.

“Why are you single?”

I shrugged. “Too busy climbing the corporate ladder.”

“Pathetic excuse.”

“I’m in no rush.”

My cell dinged with a text, distracting me. Bun left muttering under her breath about this generation of men being metrosexual babies. I’m hardly that. I can’t help it if I inherited my father’s southern charm when I choose to turn it on. Truthfully, teasing a sixty-year-old woman is the highlight of my stressful corporate day. I thought bringing home the bacon with the shiny gold plaque on my office door would make me happy. I’ve been looking to capture the same feelings I had ever since those beach days when Char and I were kids. Before we grew up too fast. Before we truly knew what shithheads our parents were. I picked up my cell. I’d been blowing Hunter off, spending all my time at the shore. He wanted me to meet him for Happy Hour at the new martini bar. My eyes cut to the bank of windows to my left. Part of me wanted to crash Bunny’s card game just for fun. The old woman brought out the best in me at the office. Probably because I don’t have to worry about her trying to land me or dream of me and a Range Rover with a car seat strapped in the back. I texted Hunter back that it’s on. This weekend is the first in many that I won’t be at my shore house. The place has grown on me. Becoming such a labor of love. I’m in love with my house. There I said it. Every newly painted wall was done by me. Every shiplapped surface took hours of precise measurement. I’d be nervous about letting strangers stay in my baby, but Ryan’s emails were professional. I mean who would lie about having a relaxing weekend for his pregnant girlfriend. Everything would be fine. I was sure

of it.

Nine

I really needed to get laid. It was raining dicks. Dicks were even in my hair. I had watched, laughing hysterically as Kells took a bat to the dickpinata. When she got a good whack in, gummy dicks went flying. “Mmm,” she shoved a handful in her mouth. “Never tasted better.”

Club music was blasting from the wireless speakers connected to Hannah’s phone. Jenna, Rachel, and Ciara were dancing to the beat. In their hands were dick-shaped plastic glasses. Inside were the margaritas I had blended. Hannah was the only snob drinking red wine.

“I’m having so much fun! This place is perfect! It’s exactly what I wanted.” I put an arm around my friend.

“I’m so glad.” Everyone was drunk but the two of us. I decided to lay off just so Kells would have one coherent friend to commiserate with.

“Are you okay? Don’t bullshit, me.”

“I am. I really am. But it would be easier if Wade and Sierra weren’t constantly making out everywhere.”

“Where’s Soph?”

“She’s coming later.” Truthfully, our other friend was bringing the stripper. She found him on Craigslist. He was going to charge for gas and tolls, so she offered to drive him out tonight and back in the morning. I had no idea where he was going to sleep, but judging by how buzzed the ladies were, if he was hot as a stripper should

be, he'll probably bill per cuddle-hour.

"It's so windy out! Crazy!"

The branches from the Crepe Myrtle trees outside scratched the window. I took the empties to the kitchen frowning. I had turned on all outside flood lights. The waves were enormous swells. Rain was turning to freezing rain. The small icy pellets hit the windowpane.

"You made it!" Kell screeched from the other room. Sighing in relief, Soph came in, her hair wet and windswept. Hannah turned off the lights, and the beat changed. Even I hooted as the hottie with oiled up pecs strode in. He was built. Shorter than Wade but made like a body builder. I'd never seen so much muscle in my life. Hannah fanned herself as he invited her to feel his flexed bicep.

"I'm the bride!" Kells waved her arms. He gyrated over, rested his body weight on the back of the couch and grinded his spandex-covered package inches from her body. Hannah, grinded up on him from behind. It was hot. So hot, my face flushed. Just then the lights flickered. Soph tripped as everything went pitch dark, colliding into Hannah, who fell onto the stripper who fell onto Kells.

"Kells!" I screamed, worried about the baby. I tapped the flashlight function on my phone. They were piled on top of one another. Hannah's red wine was all over the white couch. Everyone laughed hysterically, but all I could think of was the nice man who rented me his house.

I raced to the kitchen, opened bottled water, grabbing towels. "What are you doing?" Hannah finally moved from her spot still on top the stripper.

"Your wine. It's going to stain."

“So? It’s a rental. This shit probably happens all the time. You need to take that stick out of your ass. It’s no wonder Wade dumped you. You’re so uptight. Have some fun.”

“Hannah...” Kells warned.

“I’m gong to look for candles and flashlights.” I left before anyone could see me cry. Hannah was such a bitch. It was hard to believe her and Kell were such good friends. I opened drawers and cabinets, not finding anything. There was a cabinet above the fridge, but I couldn’t reach. Moving a barstool from the kitchen island, I climbed on. “Bingo.” Inside was a lighter for a grill, one flashlight and a... Christmas present? Half-torn paper was still on a box. I took it out hoping to find candles, instead I found...him.He looked determined. His shirt was half ripped off, exposing tan pecs. His abs made my mouth water. But it wasn’t his body. It was that face. That I don’t give two fucks confidence that reached out through the picture, grabbing me. I held the box in my hands, there were at least a dozen copies. Biting my lip, I took one before placing the box back inside.

I tucked the calendar under my arm, going back to the other room. “I found a lighter and a flashlight. There’s scented candles in the master bathroom.”

“I’ll make a fire,” hot stripper offered.

“I think you already did.” I grinned, hiding how hurt I was by Hannah. This was Kell’s weekend. I’d swallow my pride for her. I rushed upstairs, hiding the calendar in my bag. I’d spend time with him later. After retrieving the candles, I went back downstairs. Kells was trying to clean the couch with a stain stick she found by the laundry. A fire was catching in the hearth.

“I’m Colby,” hot stripper man smirked as he handed me the lighter for the candles.

“Well, Colby. Keep dancing. Your rate isn’t cheap.” He grinned as I took over cleaning the couch for Kells. “Go. It’s your weekend.”

“Sorry about Hannah. She’s always been threatened by our friendship.”

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“She’s right. I’m studious and bore myself.” I poured myself a fresh drink, downing it then waved dollar bills at Colby. He sashed over. His index finger ran down the side of my face between my breastbone, stopping at my navel. I shivered. Wade never had any moves like that. It was seductive. Sexy. I thought of my calendar man’s brooding eyes and kept drinking. I had become all work and no play. I found a dick gummy inside the fold in the couch. Popped in it my mouth. I sang alone to the Ed Sheeran song as Colby slow grinded with Kells. My cell dinged from my back pocket. It was an alert from Airbnb.

To:

From: homeowner1278

SUBJECT: Power Out?

Ryan,

I hope you are enjoying a relaxing stay. I just received an alert from the power company that there’s an outage. Expected reinstatement is five to six hours. If you wish to depart early, I will refund you a day. Please let me know if there is any storm damage to my property. I’m sorry I didn’t think to prepare for something like this.

C.C.

From:

To: homeowner1278

SUBJECT: Power Outage?

Hi,

We are having an amazing time. Everything is fine.... You left more than I expected to find.

Ryan

Feeling very buzzed I hit send. I didn't have the guts to mention the couch. I did my best and when it dries, I'll arrange the throw blanket over it and hope for the best.

"Twister time! New rules! Every round you lose, you strip!" Hannah held the game in her hands. "Colby can stay with his thong on."

"I'm out."

"Not surprised." She snorted.

"I love board games but having my friend's hoo-ha's in my face isn't my idea of a good time."

"You wouldn't know a good time if it hit you in the face." She hooted.

"Oh yea?" I put my drink down, stripped to my underwear, and headed to the kitchen.

"Hot tub water is still hot. I'm getting in."

Laughter and splashing followed. We all got in as the freezing rain stopped. In no time wet bras went flying off the deck. Underwear too. I leaned my head back, giving zero fucks I was naked in a hot tub with my pregnant best friend and a stripper. Finding the situation completely hilarious, I started laughing. Uncontrollably.

“Is she okay?” Colby asked.

“...if Wade could see me now. He’d never believe it.”

“Feels good to take that stick out of your ass. Doesn’t it?”

“Shut the fuck up, Hannah. You’re a bitch and everyone knows it.” My eyes snapped to hers. Everyone was surprised I had stuck up for myself. To her credit she shrugged it off.

“Probably a one off. You’ll be back to your boring self by morning.”

“Probably,” I agreed with a thin smile. I closed my eyes, the sound of the pounding surf brought me back to my happy place. I tuned everything else out. Ten minutes later the water was cooling; the sound of moans had me snapping my eyes open. Kells had gotten out. So had everyone else except Colby and Hannah. They were full on making out. She was straddling him in the water. I slipped out, naked and unnoticed. There was an outdoor waterproof towel holder, I opened helping myself to two. Jenna and Ciara were snoring from their makeshift bed on the floor. The two of them had taken blankets and pillows to sleep by the fire. Rachel was passed out on the half-wet couch. I checked on them all, tucking extra blankets over them before climbing the stairs to check on Kells. I knocked softly on the master bedroom door. “Kells? You warm enough?”

“Oh yeah, baby. Evan... I miss you so much...,” I peeked in. Kells was under the covers Facetiming her man and from the looks of things they were trying something new.

Chuckling, I shut the door before entering the room I was supposed to be sharing with Rachel and Soph. I moved their bags from the bed, opened my bag in search of my night clothes. With the power out, there was no hope for a hot shower. My hands

found the calendar. By candlelight I turned the pages. Mr. December was ok. January was cute. February was striking... I flipped each month until I found him. He was Mr. July. Just like I was earlier, I found myself trapped by his gaze.

Sighing, my finger traced the hard lines of his face, ran across his lower lip, circled his nipples before making a beeline for his crotch. My nipples peaked as I touched him there. I wondered if he was a man who was the entire package. Looks, brains and blessed with a good-sized cock. Doubtful, men like that don't end up on cheap calendars. I was just about to put him down when groans and sloshing water came from below. My room was above the back deck. Sneaking over to the slatted windows, I peeked out. Hannah was riding Colby in the moonlight. Up and down. Then he grabbed a fistful of her hair, jerked her back and switched things up. He bent her over the side of the hot tub while he entered from behind her. It was hot. Erotic. And in that instant I knew Wade did right by breaking things off. I'd never had sex that hot. We were missionary or slow mornings. He never bent me over and took. And I never felt... taken. I shivered, dropped the slat, my eyes moving to the goody bags Kells had given out early in the day after our pedicure appointments. Inside was a sleek vibrator. Fully charged. I'd never used one before. But if there was ever a time...

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I went over took it out, pressed the power button. It hummed in my hand like a powerful engine. My eyes fell on Mr. July. I slipped under the covers, propped him up next to me and dared myself to lower my hand.

The sounds from outside were hot. He was hot. I was burning up. My hand slipped. I almost came off the bed at the sensation. I didn't want Kells to hear but then again, she was probably busy doing something similar. I experimented, found a rhythm and setting I liked. Soon, I was flying high. Under the cocky gaze of Mr. July, I came hard. It went on and on, like the pounding waves. Gasping, my back arched up. The vibrator fell out of my hand, hitting the hardwood floor with a thud before rolling. I was too out of breath with quite the afterglow to go fishing for it. I passed out hard and had the best sleep of my life.

A totally different type of moaning was the sound of morning. All of us were hungover. The power had come back on sometime late in the night. Kells made a full pot of coffee, fried bacon, and eggs. She was adamant that we needed a full stomach of hot food to soak up the alcohol.

Everyone sat around the kitchen. Colby was noticeably absent. When Hannah went to use the restroom, Soph let it slip that he called an Uber in the dead of night and split. Guess he'd rather pay the fare than face Hannah the morning after.

"I need a hot shower. I have hot tub hair." Finishing my coffee, I winced at the mess we made of the once impeccable cottage.

After a much-needed shower, I picked up my phone to charge it. My heart pounded. There was a notification of a new email from Dr. Winnfield. It's been weeks since I

had written to her.

To:

FROM:

SUBJECT: RESEARCH PROGRAM

Ryan Hill,

I appreciate your candor. I needed some time to look into the situation. Please call my office at your earliest convenience.

(718) 608- 5643 ext. 302

Erin Winnfield

I tapped the number from her email. It was after nine in the morning on a Monday. I needed answers. Closure. Hope.

“Dr. Winnfield’s office.”

“Hi. This is Ryan Hill. Dr. Winnfield is expecting my call.” I was placed on a brief hold.

“Ryan Hill?”

“This is her.”

“Oh. I’m sorry I was expecting...”

“For me to be male? I get that a lot.”

After a brief pause, she continued. “I looked into the situation and I’ll admit I was overly impressed with your application. But my hands are tied. The decision was peculiar this year, but a fate accomplished. I’m afraid.”

“Well, I appreciate you being honest and having the decency to get back to me. And here we thought in 2021 women were finally breaking free of the good old boy’s network.”

Her voice lowered an octave. “I might have something that interests you. But I’ll need to meet you in person for an interview.”

“I’m interested. Just working for you in any capacity will be worth gold on my transcripts.”

“You’re in Brookhaven?”

“Today, I’m in the Outer Banks outside of Kill’s Head.”

“Can you be here for one o’clock?”

Kill’s Head was only ten minutes north of here. “I sure can.”

“Perfect. I look forward to meeting you in person.” Stunned, I stared at the phone in my hand. I snapped out of it a few minutes later and started rummaging through my bag. I didn’t pack anything suitable enough for an interview. But my jeans were clean and almost new, and I did pack a nice J Crew sweater. I borrowed Kell’s hair dryer. I told the girls in detail over a third and fourth cup of coffee the details of how Wade did me dirty with the Duke program. They all excitedly helped me prepare. Soph did my makeup light and professional. Jenna made me borrow her Alex and Ani bracelet

for luck. Rachel dabbed my wrists with a light fruity perfume. I was so touched by everyone's genuine heartfelt wish to help me in so many ways. It almost brought me to tears. Ciara had a portable printer in her car. She hooked it up to my laptop and we printed my application essay and my research. Hannah didn't offer anything, but she wasn't bitchy either.

“Sorry to cut out like this...”

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“Stop. It was the best weekend. Just spending time with my girlfriends.” Kells hugged me hard as I stood by the door. I turned to the rest of the girls. “We need to clean up. Because of the power outage the owner extended our stay until 2p.m. Please Venmo me your share...”

“Don’t worry. We’ll clean up,” Soph assured me. I put my bags in my car, turned the engine on and let it warm up for a few minutes. My boots sunk in the sand as I took a path behind the house to the beach. It was windy, cold and the swells from the low-pressure system, offshore were still high. It was wild and beautiful. The sea grass behind the dunes rustled and danced. This was peace. This was heaven. I vowed to come back here someday.

I turned back to the house, no one was downstairs, they probably all went up to take showers. The backdoor was unlocked. I let myself in, I had plenty of time to make my appointment. I poured the last bit of coffee into my cup that was left on the counter before taking the ones from the sink and loading them into the dishwasher.

I cleared the table, looked around one last time my eyes widening as I saw my pink bra dangling from a tree branch out the window. I grabbed a broom from the closet, using it to wrestle the branches for my bra. Snagging it, I sighed in relief. I moved through the living area, wincing at the back of the couch. I’d have to contact the owner and hope for the best. Candles and the flashlight were littered on the coffee table. No one else knew where they belonged. I scooped them up, went back to the kitchen and moved the stool. “There.” I tucked them all back up in the cupboard above the fridge. My fingers brushing the mysterious Christmas box. I don’t know why I did it. It was purely impulsive. My hand reached in lifted a few calendars. I hugged them to my chest. The clock on the mantle told me I really needed to leave.

Cuddling my calendars, I got into my car, flipping the first calendar in the pile. There was my man on the back cover. Mr. July. So hot. Hannah was a bitch, but she was right about one thing—I did need a real love life. Maybe after I figure out my next move, I'd work on that.

I flipped the visor back up. After checking my appearance, I grabbed my papers and cell. Dr. Winnfield's office was right at the marina. A huge white vessel with Duke's emblem painted on the side gently rocked in the water.

The air smelled of faint diesel fuel and the ocean. Sea gulls hung suspended in the air; wings spread letting the breeze do the work for them. My cheeks were red from the wind, a few locks of my hair clung to the side of my face as I entered the building.

"Hi, I'm Ryan Hill. Dr. Winnfield's expecting me."

"Yes. I see you on her list of appointments." The receptionist smiled politely. She led me to a small sitting area where I waited.

"Ryan?" I looked up from the papers in my hand. I liked Dr. Winnfield immediately. She was dressed casually in skinny jeans and a DUKE sweatshirt. Her water boots came up to her knees. Her hair was in a ponytail.

"Sorry. I was out taking air samples earlier."

"Are you kidding?" I grinned. "I wish I could've been with you."

When she smiled the fine lines of her face stood out. You could tell she spent her days out under the sun. She was young but seasoned. She reminded me a bit of Captain Sandy from that reality show about yachting. "Well, you are here now. I'm a straight shooter, Ryan. You made some serious allegations, which took some time to look into. However, the final decision of selecting next year's candidates was left to

the department head at Chapel Hill.”

“Let me guess. That person belongs to the same country club as Wade Harrington V’s family.”

She grimaced. “If Mr. Wade Harrington V does not or cannot perform up to my standards, he and Sierra will both get cut. I have the say on who stays in my program.”

“Great. But how does any of this help me?”

Dr. Winnfield sat back in her seat assessing me. “Like I said. I decide once students are in the program if they stay or go. Lucky for you I had to cut someone from this spring. Leaving a slot. You’ve missed a few weeks, but it’s yours if you can manage housing. My admin will work the rest out with the admissions office as far as transferring your credits from Brookhaven and handling tuition.”

My mouth fell open.

“There’s nothing I can’t stand more than good-old-fashioned nepotism. If you work hard which I can see you have, then you deserve a shot. What do you say Ryan?”

“I’m in. Even if it means sleeping in my car. When do I start?”

She hands my papers back to me. “Two days.”

Heart pounding, I shook her hand. When I walked back outside. My whole world changed. Just like that, I was on a different road. Changing lanes. The tides of change had come for me and I couldn’t wait to dive right in.

I called Gran immediately.

“Ryan darling!”

“Gran! I did it! I busted Wade for his shenanigans and guess what? Dr. Winnfield gave me a spot this term. She had a vacancy.”

“Congratulations, honey! But what does that mean? Wade and the she-devil will be with you next fall?”

I shrugged. “Guess so. But I have the jump on them. Besides, who knows what could happen between now and then?”

“That’s my girl. Charting a new course.”

“I just need to find housing and get Pop’s boat!”

“Bunny! No personal calls at work. I have a deadline.” The man’s voice took me by surprise. It was rich, deep, and smooth. Sexy. The sound of it like hands running down the bass clef on a piano.

“Who is that?”

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“Excuse me Mr. Carmichael. I won’t be a moment...”

“Gran?”

“Sorry. I just started a new job. My boss is one of those difficult—anyway something crawled up his butt the past hour and made a home there!”

“I heard that, Bunny!”

“You let him call you Bunny?” I was stunned. Floored. Gran only let Pops call her by her given name. I can’t believe whoever owned that sexy voice on the line does the same. Or maybe I can see why Gran loves it.

“I-I need to go, darling. We’ll talk soon!” Gran quickly ended the call.

I was dazed as I drove back to campus. My mind was so busy thinking of my impending future that thoughts of the weekend barely slipped through. Until I was unpacking my bag later that night. With one last look at my sexy calendar guy, I slipped him in my desk drawer and got busy looking at classifieds.

Ten

“...the house was a mess. I’m sorry Mr. Carmichael my usual cleaning fee is \$250 like we discussed, but it’s so bad I’ll need to charge you double. Maybe triple. You’re lucky it’s off season and I don’t have five houses to clean a day.”

My fingertips tapped on my desk. With the phone pressed to one ear, I breathed in

and out slowly, processing my house cleaner's words. The lawyer in me stayed calm. Cool. My questions short and clipped.

"Can you expand on your assessment, please?"

"They left wet towels outside. Empty wine bottles everywhere. Spilled sticky daiquiri like drinks on your new white quartz counters that probably stained them even though you say it's sealed. I'll need a special stone cleaner with a Mr. Clean sponge and spend forty minutes just on that. The beds are a mess... and there's... her voice lowered to a whisper, "Sex toys. Sex toys everywhere. And used condoms on the deck." I felt her blush as she said the words to me over the phone.

"Are you still there?"

"I'm in the driveway."

"Thank you, for calling. Don't touch a thing. I'm leaving work to see this for myself."

"Am I fired?"

"No, Doreen. You have my apologies for walking into that. I'll be in touch."

I sat back in my desk chair; jaw clenched. My beach house has been defiled. I did a google search for Ryan Hill, finding nothing. Did this person use a fake name? My nostrils were flaring now, I logged into my app, finding the reservation. There was a 3% damage fee. Doreen came recommended from the real estate attorney I used to close on the shore house. I didn't take more money yet. Not before I laid my own eyes on whatever debauchery and havoc was done to my home. After all, I am an attorney. I know exactly how to use the law to make my enemies pay.

I logged into my desktop, opened my outlook calendar, and changed my status for the rest of the day from “in” to “out.”

“I’m leaving for the rest of the day,” I muttered to Bunny as I moved past her desk.

She turned, “Who pissed in your Cheerios?”

My fists clenched. “I’m not exactly sure. But you can bet on Texas I’m going to find out,” I growled. Bunny’s hand went to the pearl choker necklace around her throat. She’s never seen me angry. What Bun Bun and I had going on was a good thing. I shot her a wink over my shoulder as I pressed the button for the elevator. “Look, I’m sorry if I was a bit of a jerk today. I’m about to go all crazy Kraken on someone’s ass. Wanna come along for a ride?”

She pursed her lips, her hot pink nails clicking away on her keyboard. “Someone has to stay behind for Diersky watch. I caught him acting suspicious outside your office door yesterday morning.”

“What?”

Her eyes never left the screen in front of her as she spoke. “Sure did.”

“Order me a camera. One of those that sits on a shelf or something. Expense it.”

“Seriously?”

“You bet, Bun.”

“You want me to shop for a spy camera?”

“Office security. One can never be too safe.” My wheels started turning. Cameras. I

should invest for the shore house. “Actually Bun, order me some of those doorbell camera things.... Outdoor wireless cameras... the works.” I opened my wallet, walked back over, and dropped my Amex on her desk.

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“You trust me with your credit card?”

“More than my sister. I just finished paying off the 30k furniture bill she charged without telling me.”

“What do you need all those cameras for?”

“Getting ideas Bun?” I winked at her again as the elevator dinged.

“I’m reporting you to HR. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“Please. Admit it. I’m the most fun you’ve had in years. I’ll be over for Bridge on Friday.” I stepped in the elevator as Bun started clicking away again at her keys, this time muttering about my generation’s obsession with cameras and recording ourselves.

I stopped by Starbucks, ordered myself a Venti double black. If the house was as bad as Doreen said it was, I’d have no choice but to keep the 3% damage fee. A few hours later, I was rolling in the drive. I let out a long breath. The house was fucking gorgeous. A sparkling gem. I raked a hand through my hair, steeling myself for what I was about to walk into.

I inserted my key into the lock, letting the door swing open wide. At first, I thought Doreen was exaggerating. The main room wasn’t spotless but hardly a mess. Sure, ash and splinters of wood were by the fireplace. I expected that. The kitchen however was much worse. The trash was full. The sticky syrup on the back counter was raspberry colored and I knew it would be a bitch getting out of my natural white

stone. I opened the screen door to the back patio. The cover was left off the hot tub, wasting energy and electricity. A pair of silk panties fluttered in the breeze when I lifted the cover of the hot tub off the deck. I found two more pairs in the bushes. The tip of my polished shoes almost touched the evidence of what went on here.

There's no way I'd make Doreen touch that.

Even with gloves on.

With a sigh, I walked back inside and upstairs. The master bedroom was tidy. The lines and towels were dirty, so what? The next room didn't look bad either. It smelled faintly of orange blossoms and vanilla. I bent down to pick up a towel coming face to face with a vibrator that was under the bed. Next to it was a pink silk thong. I lived in a frat house; this was nothing. Nothing I haven't seen or done myself. However, my shore house is not a fraternity house, and Ryan Hill lied his ass off.

I went downstairs contemplating how to play this. I sat down on the couch, removing the throw blanket uncovering a handful of dick gummies. I pressed a hand to my forehead before getting back up. My eyes then noticed the pink stain on the top back of the couch. "Son of a bitch." I knew a white couch was a bad idea. Char said it wasn't returnable since she bought it at a sample sale. It still cost 2k though. Moving fast to the mudroom where I kept the cleaning supplies, I swung the door open, coming face to face with two dozen blown up dick balloons. I punched them out of the way so I could reach the cleaning supplies. On top of the washing machine was a bag someone had left behind. I peeked inside.

"What the fuck?"

Neon green dick rings, with tiny vibrating heads. Dick lollipops. Massage cream that when rubbed in heats to a tingle. Edible body cream. Handcuffs. Maybe I'd be horny if I weren't so pissed.

By the time I applied a stain stick to the back of the couch and started working on my kitchen counter, my left eye twitched. The nerve in my cheek wouldn't stop ticking. I did the best I could with both before calling a commercial grade cleaning company. The kind you call after a fire or flood. Who knew what kind of orgy went down? Some strangers got their freak on, maybe in every room of my house. Forget rentals. I was one and done. From now on, it was reserved for me. I'd take on more at work if I had to. My yearly bonus was coming up anyway. I sat down on the front stoop knowing there was only one thing to do.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

Ryan,

Consider this email notice of my intention to invoke the lease clause for property damage. I'm in the mind to sue you for mental anguish and trauma from your lies. Clearly, you didn't have a relaxing weekend for your pregnant girlfriend. My housecleaner refuses to touch the evidence you left behind of what really went on. As you know, the security/damage fees for my property is three thousand dollars. I'm collecting.

C.C.

I worked from my car until the industrial cleaning crew left. After inspecting every inch of my house, I almost felt better. Until I opened the fridge and saw what was left of a cut up dick cake. Cursing, I slammed the door, reached for the cabinet above the fridge for my stash of red that I kept there. The fifty-dollar bottle of cabernet was my go-to after a long day of sanding floors or painting.

“Motherfucker.”

It was gone. I made a mental note to add that to the tab Ryan Hill owed me.

Eleven

My high was short lived. After arriving back on campus, I spent the rest of the day searching classifieds. Even on the offseason, there were no places I could ever afford close to the research facility. If it were warmer, I could make do living on Pop’s boat at the marina. I found one that had a shower facility and free Wi-Fi. On a whim, I logged into the rental app I used for the weekend. It was a long shot, but I thought just maybe there’d be something. I scrolled listings, until I found one that might work. It was an older home, on the bayside. Un-winterized. No heating. It did have a fireplace. Two bedrooms and one full bath. A dock.... I started dreaming about bringing the boat. Making fires. Having my own slice of heaven. It was a thousand dollars a month off season and was available until May. I’d drain my savings—with little options left, I booked it. I’d get about a three-thousand-dollar housing refund for leaving so early this semester. After a refund on my food plan—it’d be a wash. I was about to close my laptop when my bleary eyes could barely focus, noticing I had a new notification from the booking app.

I scanned his message, twice. Surely there was a mistake. I perked right up. No longer bone-tired. I had cleaned the sink and ran the dishes myself. The girls had promised they would tidy up before leaving. I didn’t want to upset Kells but the homeowner threatening to charge my debit card three thousand dollars was no laughing matter. I texted Soph.

Me:Hey. Did you guys clean the shore house before leaving? The owner just sent me a nasty email.

Soph:Kells had an OBGYN appointment so we left after lunch. Hannah said she’d do

it.

“Well, that explains a lot,” I muttered. We didn’t do any damage. Did we? “Shit. The couch. I meant to tell him about the wine.” Biting my lip, I decided to respond. We had clean fun. Well except for Hannah.

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Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:09 am

To: homeowner1278

From:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

Hi,

I am terribly sorry for any mix-up. I had a business meeting and had to leave early this morning. My friends assured me they would handle the trash and dirty linens. I made sure to run the dishwasher myself. When the power went out Saturday night my friend tripped and spilled wine on the back of the couch. We cleaned it as best we could, and I truly apologize for forgetting to mention it. A baking soda/bleach/steam clean might do the trick.

As for suing me, perhaps you shouldn't rent out your home to guests if you can't handle a little fun.

Sorry again,

Ryan

P.S. Would you please consider not taking such a large fee? I could really use the money.

Twelve

After a hot shower and three Tylenols, the headache I had all day finally subsided. Apparently work blew up after I left the office.

The partners were fighting with the partners at a competing venture firm over the latest contract for the sale of one of the financial funds. The contract was a bitch to decipher. Everyone was demanding changes. I called my honeybun on the way home, asked her to print two copies of the deal and have a courier service pick them up from her to deliver to my condo. Instead, I came home to a neatly sealed box on my doorstep with the paperwork tidily tucked inside. A homemade lemon cake sat on a separate box on top, decorated with a new pack of highlighters with a note from Bunny herself. “The six-pack might not like it, but the rest of your stomach will.”

Damn, Bunny was a keeper.

I devoured half of it, chased it with milk and got to work. Three hours later, my bed was littered with highlighted papers with scribbled notes in the margins. I was about to take a break when my cell dinged. It was a message from the rental app. My jaw clenched instinctively.

Cursing I stuck the highlighter between my teeth, opening it up scanning the response. “Un-fucking believable. No, you can’t have your money back, you nymphomaniac liar.”

Ryan Hill was probably some rich frat boy from Duke. Pregnant girlfriend my ass. Maybe he was bi with all the dicks I found in my home? Who the hell knows? I didn’t care, I just did not want that crap to go down in my dream home. Hell, I had dragged all the bedding and sheets to the beach, made a bonfire and watched that shit burn. I was never using them again, washing it a hundred times wouldn’t matter.

I hit respond.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

You mean the bottle of red that was my personal favorite? Taken from my kitchen cabinet? That was the one your “friend” spilled. No. No refunds. I was perfectly fine renting out my home to a nice couple who were expecting. Instead, I found gummy dicks in my couch, dildos under beds, and panty sets outside. Oh yeah, a bunch of dick balloons in my laundry room with sex toys.

I’m scarred for life. Shell shocked. I suggest you don’t misrepresent yourself again. I am contacting the rental app, petitioning them to have you permanently banned from screwing over another homeowner.

C.C.

A response hit my inbox almost immediately.

To: homeowner1278

FROM:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

I never misrepresented myself. My girlfriend is expecting. We had a small group of women for a bachelorette. Sorry if sex toys or sex is a trigger for you. My friends were supposed to clean up. They forgot the trash and to put the linens in the laundry room. If they had, they would have removed the sex items we forgot. Feel free to keep them. (Unless they make you feel uncomfortable.)

P.S. Gummy dicks taste better than the real thing. Don't judge.

Ryan

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P.S.S. Can I please have my fee back if the stain on the couch comes out?

I jumped out of the bed, two hands raking through my head. Was this person high? Was I triggered? Did Ryan Hill think I was some old cat lady renting out my house for the hell of it? I never disclosed my name, just my initials out of safety. Didn't want some person Googling me and finding out I had deep pockets. Someone could "slip on the deck" and sue me for damages. "Triggered," I snorted. I snatched up my phone typing back.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

Triggered? The only thing that triggers me are liars. No, you can't have jack-shit back. I burned the linens. They cost a few grand. Serena and Lily 500-thread count sheets with real down duvets. Made a nice bonfire. Kept me toasty while ServiceMaster cleaned the shitshow you left behind. Did I mention my white, natural stone counters were stained pink from daiquiri juice? I had to call a stone and granite store. They sent out a worker with a stone-sanding machine. They had to grind the stone, sand it and re-seal it.

No backsies. Goodbye. Good riddance.

P.S. How would you know that gummy's taste better. Aren't you a dude? Sorry if my question on your "sexuality" triggers you.

To: homeowner1278

FROM:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

You must be joking? Why would any sane person put such high-end items in a rental? I know you are lying about the counters. I made the margaritas, and I didn't spill. My trigger are liars too. I think you are just keeping my deposit to make money off me. I'll see you in small claims court if you don't release my funds within 48hours. Consider this your notice. Please provide me with copies of your invoice from ServiceMaster, the stone worker, and the Serena and Lily receipts. Since you claim all the damages justify stealing my money.

Ryan

P.S.

I'm a woman and very comfortable with my sexuality.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

Small claims court? I'll see you there, honey. I'm an attorney. Clearly, you are overly comfortable in your sexuality. I've seen the evidence. Do it. File your small claims.

P.S.

You knew what you were doing in your initial inquiry. Misrepresented the situation. Intentionally. I'm going to have your butt in court. (Don't get any kinky ideas. It's rhetorical hyperbole a.k.a fancy-ass lawyer term.)

FROM:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

You're an attorney? Well, that explains the huge stick up your obnoxious behind. Can't wait to roast your cocky rear end in court. (Don't get any ideas.) I'm not into paddle play despite what was in the goodie bags. Lighten up, we were just five girls and a stripper having a bit of fun. Sounds like you wouldn't know how to do that without a "How to Have Fun" book for dummies with page-by-page illustrations.

I read her last email, threw my phone on the bed, paced around my room while daydreaming about all the ways I could "trigger" her. "She has some fucking nerve!" It takes a hell of a lot to get me worked up. Pissed and angry, somewhat horny, if I were being honest—I couldn't work. Couldn't sleep. With nothing else to do, and unable to yell at the person of my frustrations, I grabbed my workout clothes. It was almost midnight, but I went out into a light rain and ran a good five miles. Sweaty and out of breath, I checked my phone when I got back. Nothing. I let her have the last word for now, because in the morning. I was going to personally call the attorney for the rental app and threaten all sorts of litigation against them if they don't bar Ryan Hill from ever renting on their site again. I'd pull the 'triggered sex card' if I had to.

Just as I was drifting off to sleep my cell pinged.

FROM:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

No response hot shot?

From: homeowner1278

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Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:09 am

To:

SUBJECT: Cleaning Fee/Damage

Sorry, I was busy pulling that stick out of my ass. You might be sorry I did.

I fell asleep grinning like a motherfucker. Visions of me in court, airing all my grievances while a faceless Ryan Hill sat mute played in my head. Then that dream morphed into another one. I was at my shore house with a woman I knew, however her face was blurry. She smelled like vanilla and oranges. Her breasts were full and round, the moonlight caressed her curves. I had her handcuffed to the wooden fencing behind the hot tub. The ocean roared behind me as I took a fluffy paddle and whacked her behind.

“More!” she cried.

I whacked her again until her skin turned light pink. She bit her lip, and I popped a dick gummy bear in. “Soon it won’t be candy in your mouth,” I growled before biting the back of her neck while nudging against her.

I woke up sweaty and horny as hell. Ryan Hill was really fucking with my head. Both of them. I was so hard, I hissed through my teeth. The only remedy a very cold shower. I didn’t know who this Ryan Hill was, but I was on a mission to find out. I couldn’t let this go. Not until I fucked with her head the way she did mine.

Thirteen

It was a new day. The sun was out. I felt great. I felt like I was on a warpath. Mr. Hot-shot Homeowner really got under my skin. I didn't act like myself. Said things when I'd normally bite my tongue. If I've learned anything these past few months between Wade, the research program, and Mr. Weekend rental it was to speak up. Say my peace. Refuse to be silenced. I know he's shaking me down for money. He's also probably lying about being an attorney. If he thinks he's going to take a damage fee, I want the proof. The invoices. Which of course he doesn't have. But I didn't have time to craft another email to him. I was days away from leaving this small campus behind and needed to get over to the administrative offices to sort it all out.

“What's up?”

I turned from my open suitcase on the bed. “Oh, hey. I have some news.”

“Oh?” Gretchen arched a brow.

“Yup. You are getting a single for the rest of the semester. I've been offered a spot in Duke's research program. Effective immediately.”

She sucked in a breath. “How did you pull that off?”

I shrugged. “Luck and a prayer.”

“That must've been one heck of a Hail Mary.”

I grinned. “Tell me about it. I only have a few days to pack my things, find a place to crash and transfer all my credits.”

“I'm happy for you,” she smiled softly. “You deserve it. To hell with Wade and his sex-bot. You got the jump on them.”

“Sex bot?”

Her face turned red. “Yeah, um, I guess they were really loud Saturday night. There was a party at Wade’s frat—everyone heard.”

“He’s not that great. She must’ve been acting. Truthfully, I had a better time with the sex toys at Kell’s bachelorette than I did in two years with him.”

“Ryan! You dirty girl. Good for you though.”

“Was I that boring?”

“Responsible. Definitely responsible,” she nodded.

“Well, when you’re living on loans and scholarships, you kind of have to be.”

“True. Wade’s going to shit a brick when he hears.”

“Wait. Wait until I’m packed and gone before you let the cat out of the bag.”

“My lips are sealed,” she made a motion with her hand across her mouth. “Gotta run, I have a study date!”

Smiling, I finished packing, zipped up my suitcase and was about to empty my desk when I noticed a new notification on my phone from the rental app.

I bit my lip so hard, I tasted blood. “Son of a bitch!” I was being cancelled. Literally. My rights to rent or use the app to rent was “revoked” pending an internal investigation. “Investigation my ass!” This had Mr. Hot-Shot Homeowner’s fingerprints all over it. I was sure of it.

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I clicked the link to file an appeal. Two could play at this game. He wanted to cancel me? Fine! I'd cancel him. If I can't be renter, he can't rent out. An eye for an eye and all that!

I spent a good forty-five minutes cultivating an exceptionally fine email, explaining how Mr. C.C. was harassing me, borderline being sexually inappropriate with his misogynistic tone using screenshots of last night's messages and pasting them in.

"There!" I clicked send, feeling satisfied. It felt good to try to get even, but it still didn't solve my issue of finding a place to live. I did a quick Google search for a realtor and sent them an email explaining who I was and what my situation is using Kell, Dr. Winnfield, and Gran as references.

Within an hour a realtor had sent me three listings. None of which I could remotely afford—except one. A one-bedroom third floor apartment above an animal shelter. The housing came with strings. The tenant must be willing to check on the animals twice during the night for reduced rent and rights to the dock. Blowing out a huge breath, I sent in an application with a 50% deposit. I love animals. All kinds. Knowing me, I'd end up with more than one in the upstairs apartment. And with that dock.... I can put Pop's boat in and collect my own water samples. Fish. Paddle board. Live the good life. It came together in my head. It was such a sweet deal I knew I had to get it. I found the number to the animal shelter online and called.

"Shorehaven Animal Rescue."

"Hi. My name is Ryan Hill. I just filled out an application about the apartment upstairs..."

“This is Steve, I run the place. It’s a nonprofit. I own the building. My wife and I are expecting so we need more space. You good with animals?”

“I am.” I smiled wide. “I’ve just accepted a spot at Duke’s Marine Research program. They had an opening. It’s hard to find affordable housing at the shore though.”

“That it is. Let me look over your application. The realtor just forwarded it to me.”

“Great! Call me with any questions or if you’d like to meet me in person first.”

“Will do. Talk soon.”

I sighed. There was nothing left to do but wait. I had settled everything earlier this morning with the admissions office. My credits were transferring. Tuition and board would be direct deposited back into my checking account. I was packed with nowhere to go. I was squatting on a campus with nothing left for me. I wrote Gretchen a goodbye note, wheeled my suitcase out then came back for the rest of my stuff. I’d crash at Gran’s new house outside of Raleigh. She won’t mind one bit. I’ll surprise her. After all, I owe Gran so much. Her Christmas gifts meant so much, but her wisdom was priceless.

Fourteen

I sat rubbing my temples, eyes downcast. My hands itched to wipe everything off my desk, pick up my chair and smash it against the glass windows. Of course, I didn’t. Instead, I pressed the red button that instantly connected me with Bunny.

“I need two Advil, a 24oz iced-cold Red Bull and the name and number of the head attorney for the OBX rental app.”

“Fetch your own medicine. I’m busy.”

“Please. I’m dying Bun-Bun.”

“That’s what you say every day.”

“I’m serious this time.”

“I forgot to tell you. A reporter from KAB called. Another from the Raleigh Register. They all want the scoop on Mr. July. The city’s very own bachelor attorney philanthropist.”

“Fuck me,” I groaned, head pain throbbing increasing. “Please, have mercy on me, Bun. S.O.S.”

“Well, I did tell them you were a very busy man.”

“You answered questions?”

“Just a few...”

“Bun,” I growled, the litigator in me rising. I interned with a divorce attorney practice in college. They were ruthless fuckers. It wasn’t the best match for me, but I learned how to be cunning and slick in a court of law.

“I need names.”

She rattled off the information of the two reporters.

“I need answers to the questions they asked. Verbatim.”

I jotted down what she had told them, growling low as she spoke.

“... well, you are single. Married to your job and you do only eat salads... they wanted to know your workout routine.”

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“I don’t have one,” I snapped. Well besides, hammering shingles on a roof, refinishing floors and soon, mulching the gardens. Who knew owning a fixer upper was such a good workout?

“Am... am I fired?”

“That depends,” I growled again. A deeper one this time, low in my throat. “If you make me another lemon cake. Sugar and gluten free this time.” I raised my eyes, meeting hers through my glass office wall. She rolled hers.

“Fine.”

“And no more talking to reporters.”

“Noted.”

I hung up to a new notification from the rental app. Just when I thought my day couldn’t get worse. After I scanned the message, I sat up so fast, my chair rolled backwards crashing into the wall. My blood pressure was so high I expected my exploding head to pop off.

I was suspended from renting out my shore house. Ryan Hill had filed a countercomplaint alleging harassment and misconduct on my part. Her deposit was being held in the company’s escrow account pending an internal review of the both of us.

She just fucked me good and hard. All those summer renters bringing good income to

pay off the house just went out the window.

Fists curled, I paced in front of twenty feet of glass. Looking out on the city below, I felt my jaw tic. She riled me. My blood was hot fire coursing through my veins. I wondered what she looked like. How old she was... What her least favorite food was so I could tie her up and force feed it down her throat.

My account was paused, not inactivated. I opened up the app, resuming our email chain conversation from the day before.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: GAME ON

This is war. You don't know who you are messing with. I'm coming for you.

Game on sweetheart.

After I hit send. I shuffled the contracts I was reviewing in my briefcase, followed by my laptop and texted Hunter to meet me at the gym. I had some major testosterone flooding through me, and I needed to sweat it out. If I couldn't do it with a woman, the gym would suffice.

"Damn, bro that was a personal best." Hunter racked the weight as I took a towel and wiped my forehead. "Who is she? The last time I saw that fired-up look on your face was when you saw Elena Fields at the freshman bonfire party."

I swigged some water, following with a smirk on my lips. "And I got her too."

“So, who is she?”

My brows furrowed. “An annoying gnat.” I quickly gave Hunter the rundown on Ryan Hill, how she played me, leaving my shore house littered with sex toys then got me suspended from the rental app.

“Did you keep any of the stuff?”

I shook my head, water bottle in hand pointing a finger at him. “and that’s why I keep you the hell away from Charlie.”

He rested his hands against his heart. “She’s it for me bro. My dream gal. If you let me have a shot at Char, I’d give up all my dirty ways.”

“Yeah, right,” I snorted. “How about never on that one?”

“Well, like your granny always said. Make lemonade out of lemons. I say we make some friggin’ spiked lemonade. You, me, and all the summer shore ladies. Forget renting it out bro. Use it. You spent all winter down there, you deserve to reap the fruits of your labor and all that.”

“It’s setting me back big time.”

“So? You’re a trust fund baby, remember?”

“That money was for my future wife and kids.”

He tapped his index finger against his skull “How else are you going to find your future wife and have those kids? What if she’s at the shore bro and passes you by because you rented out your house and never met?”

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All of a sudden, I was out of breath. Having visions of the blurry mystery girl from my dream in some other dude's arms while I sat on my porch alone petting a fat tabby cat.

"Hell. Fine. One summer. One summer while I sort this mess out."

Hunter's fist pumped, "It's going to be epic. Just like old times."

"Old times? Keep your lips and hands off my sister."

"Fine. She'll just have to put hers on me." I chucked my towel at him, picking up sixty-five-pound dumbbells for bicep curls. I did three sets of twenty per arm, a hundred pushups in between sets. I sweated out my anger, my frustration and need to know just what in the hell I'm going to do with the wayward renter who's causing a shitstorm of trouble for me.

"Is it him?"

"It is."

From behind me came high-pitched excited feminine whispers. I turned my head mid curl. From over my shoulder, I took in the two blondes wearing tight spandex with full make up on their faces. They weren't here to workout. They were here to hunt.

"Um, hi." One of them shifted on her feet.

"Not interested," I muttered, turning back to the mirror while I counted my reps.

“I am.” Hunter schmoozed forward, grinning while he flexed his own biceps making them giggle. Rolling my eyes, I racked the dumbbells before picking up the heavy gym ropes on the floor to do a shoulder workout.

“He is Mr. July, right?”

“He’s shy. What about me, check out these pecs. You think I could make a calendar?”

“Ooh, definitely.” More giggling followed.

A small tap on my shoulder in between sets was met with a scowl. Unfortunately, it still didn’t deter blondie number one. “Would you take a selfie with me?”

I blew out a breath. I hated being a dick to a woman. That wasn’t me. But if I could press rewind, I would’ve told Char and Carlos to pound sand. “Sure. But as you can see, I’m sweaty.”

“Oh, I don’t mind a little sweat,” she murmured eyeing my pecs through the soaked fabric of my workout shirt.

“Can you... do you mind taking it off?”

“The last time someone asked me to do that I ended up in a calendar.” I gave her a tight smile.

“Please?”

I pointed to the sign of gym rules posted above the mirror. “Can’t break the rules.”

She cozied up next to me, plastered her hand across my pec and snapped her selfie.

“Any chance you could sign my calendar if I bring it here tomorrow?”

“Um, what?”

“KZRG FM was giving them out at the station. They bought a bulk custom order.”

Both nerves around my eyes began twitching. “I’m going to kill Char,” I muttered to Hunter.

He laughed, put his arms around both ladies and walked them out. I took out my cell, feeling all the adrenalin I thought I had worked off coming back full force.

“Hey, baby bro!” She answered my call in her sing-song voice.

“I’m at the gym Char, taking selfies with my fans and they want to know if I can sign the calendars the local radio station just bought. In bulk.”

“I couldn’t refuse. They placed an order so big, the printing costs were minimal. We raised enough to rescue Kiki,”

“Kiki?”

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“A captive dolphin at a hotel resort in Barbados. She’s free thanks to your killer smile and abs.”

“Good for Kiki,” I grumbled, still pissed at the ambush. “You could’ve warned me, Char.”

“I did try calling you, but you never returned by voicemail.”

“Yeah,” I ran a hand through my hair. “I’ve been busy.”

“With lucrative contracts?”

“Not quite. I had my first rental.”

“I’m sure they loved it!”

“So much they trashed the place,” I snorted.

“What?”

“I was conned, by Ryan Hill. Instead of a weekend getaway for his pregnant girlfriend, Ryan who is a she by the way—threw a raging bachelorette.”

“A bachelorette. Sounds tame.”

“I found dick gummies everywhere. I’m traumatized.”

“Please. I’ve been to a lot of bachelorettes. It’s nothing but drunk girls and plastic dicks. Or gummy ones. Tame.”

“They spilled my favorite bottle of red on the white sofa.”

“Charge them.”

“I did. She filed a complaint against me. After I filed one against her. It’s a mess. The app froze all future rentals while they investigate.”

“So? Go to a different app or use the realtor.”

“Maybe. Maybe I’ll just take a break for a while and use it myself.”

“I took the week of the 4th off...”

“Is that a hint? Hunter wants to relive our glory days....”

“Might not be a bad idea. You’ve earned a summer off after climbing that corporate ladder.”

“If I don’t fall off. Diersky is trying to take me down.”

“Diersky? Please. He’s nothing but an empty suit.”

“Just warn me next time you sell bulk calendars to a local business. My new PA is already fielding calls from reporters.”

“My baby bro is famous.”

“Hardly. I just made partner. I don’t want Diersky to make me a joke.”

“Spin. You know how to do it. It was just a photoshoot for a charitable organization. Big deal.”

“I was selling sex appeal and you know it.”

“I’ll save you a spot in next year’s calendar.”

“Don’t you dare, Char. It was a one-time thing.”

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“That’s my line. Who are you talking to?” I held the phone away as Hunter strolled back.

“No one.”

“I’m no one?” Char shrieked.

“Is that my future wifie? Let me talk to her.” He motioned for my phone.

“I’ll talk to you later, Char.” While one hand pressed the phone to my ear, I swatted Hunter away with my free one.

“Is he seeing anyone?” Char asked.

“Yeah, my left fist.”

He came at me and we crashed to the gym floor rolling like two idiots as we fought for possession of my phone. It was juvenile as hell but for a few minutes I totally forgot about Ryan Hill.

Fifteen

“You must be Ryan.”

I liked Steve immediately. He was about ten years older than me, sandy-haired, with a surfer’s lean body and kind eyes. The rescue center was full of sounds. Paws scratching against crate doors, cats hissing at the dogs joyous barking that someone

new was here. Maybe someone who would finally take them home. A few injured birds even chirped from cages hung in the window.

“Wow.”

“Is it too much?” He winced.

“No. I just, my heart already hurts for these cuties. There’s so many...,” I trailed off walking down the aisle of crates and cages.

“Some got left behind from summer. Who knows how? None are microchipped. Others were born strays. Our local vet takes care of them free of charge and we’ve had enough donations to cover vaccines and medicine.”

I wrung my hands as I locked eyes with a pudgy Corgi. “That’s Daisy. She’s seven and gets a reoccurring eye infection. Her owners surrendered her after saying the eye drops were too expensive to keep up with.”

I gasped, reaching my fingers through the metal crate to scratch her ear. “She loves walks on the beach, hot dogs, and a good nap.”

“Who doesn’t?” I smiled.

After giving me a brief tour of the facility, Steve opened the backdoor. There was a mid-size yard littered with dog toys and a trampled garden. “My wife tried. They loved her pansies.”

I stifled a giggle at the trampled flowers as he led me up a long set of deck like stairs. “You have a private entrance. It’s not much,” he shrugged apologetically, “but it’s clean. Well, minus the dog hair. I used to keep some of the dogs up here at night. We bought new furniture for our new place. You’re welcome to use anything you see.”

The leather couch was worn but still inviting. A lobster pot doubled as a coffee table. My eyes were drawn to the view. Water views from every window, and the dock across the street.

“I’ll take it. Immediately.”

“You sure?”

“On one condition,” my lips turned up. “That I can walk Daisy whenever she needs one.”

He smiled with his eyes. “Done! Daisy has a few friends that love walks to. Roscoe, especially. He’s a young lab/retriever mix. But he’s more of a runner than a walker.”

“I need to trailer my boat, but I hope to have it in the water by next weekend.”

“Not a problem. Help yourself to the paddleboard and kayak out back.”

Steve printed the paperwork from the realtor. I signed everything, wrote a few checks and he handed me the keys. I had hope on my side and my Jeep was packed with my things. I moved in that night. I slept on the couch, ordered a new bed and mattress online. I woke up to the fresh ocean breeze blowing back the curtain. I grabbed my cell to check the time, noticing I had a new notification from the rental app that I never saw yesterday. I sat up, awake now.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: GAME ON

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:09 am

This is war. You don't know who you are messing with. I'm coming for you.

Game on sweetheart.

My fingers typed fast:

To: homeowner1278

From:

SUBJECT: GAME ON

I find it hard to believe you are the actual owner. Your lack of maturity tells me you cannot possibly be an attorney or the homeowner. You're probably his son or deranged step-son. Do yourself a favor and seek professional help.

P.S.

Thank you for giving me another email to use in court. I look forward to receiving my deposit back in full since you never provided me receipts.

"There." Satisfied, I got dressed and went downstairs. "Morning, Daisy!" I opened her crate, gave her a tiny biscuit while clipping a leash on her collar. "Steve! I'm taking Daisy to the beach!"

He waved us away with a grin as he was filling out adoption paperwork for a kitten. "Something smells good!" Daisy yipped happily as I led her to a café where the

smells of baking bread and percolating coffee was too much to resist. I ordered a medium roast coffee heavy on the cream and sugar with a buttered bagel, sharing it with my new friend as we walked along the beach. Joggers were out, some people were doing yoga as they watched the waves. Everyone was friendly, summer was almost here. I could taste it. Even the early morning rays from the sun felt summerish with its warmth stretching out across the sky.

Daisy wagged her tail, sniffed shells, barked at the birds. My heart warmed. I felt sad when I had to walk her back to her crate after a taste of freedom. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back.”

After gathering my things, I decided not to drive to the docks where Dr. Winnfield was. I chose to ride the bike I had brought to college but rarely used. My thighs burned after a few miles, but it felt good to be outside.

“Ryan! Glad to see you sorted everything out timely. You’ll be in the lab today dissecting. A deceased Humpback washed up north of Rodanthe. There’s evidence of shark bites but we are taking tissue samples from every organ before determining cause of death.” I nodded as she led me into a locker room, showing me where the lab coats, gloves and eyewear were.

In no time, I forgot everything. Wade. Hot-shot guy. Daisy’s sad eyes. I lost myself in science and needing to find the evidence of just what happened to an apparent young, healthy whale.

Sixteen

End of May...

I turned my head to the side, feeling the crack of bones in my neck. I repeated the motion, feeling the other side crack. The email from the clerk at the small claims

court hit my inbox ten minutes ago. A court date was still pending. I scanned the customary documents, unimpressed until I opened the character witness list. Bunny Dempsey was at the top of the list. My best woman—my PA was testifying in a case against me for the plaintiff? Was Bunny a narc? An undercover granny planted by Diersky and helping Ryan Hill? Nah. This wasn't a Sherlock Holmes episode. Listed under her name was the associated relationship with the plaintiff: grandmother.

“Well, well. The plot thickens.” I smirked, looking forward to going another round with Ms. Hill. “Now I know where she gets it from. She's a firecracker just like her granny.”

I was still listed as C.C. since the rental was set up in an LLC, not my legal name. Chances were Bunny and Ms. Hill had no clue their nemesis is me. A soft tap at my door had me looking up. It was Bunny. I clicked out of my email, straightened my tie, and asked her to come in.

She was nervous, timid. So, unlike my Bun-bun. “Can I help you with something?”

“You okay honey bun?”

She shook her head. “It's my granddaughter. I was hoping you could give me some legal advice.”

I perked up. “I'll do my best. I'm a hedge fund attorney though. Not much for criminal mischief,” I winked.

“It's nothing like that. Just a business matter. She filed against a landlord in small claims for her deposit money back. He blacklisted her from being able to rent on a housing app. It's a real mess.”

“Did she deserve having her money frozen?”

“I-I don’t know. My girl is a straight A student, always has been. She’s very responsible. Even volunteers at an animal shelter—is always helping others... I find it hard to believe the things this man is accusing her of.”

I hid my “bullshit,” behind a cough, images of gummy bear dicks and pink panties flashed in my head. Poor Bunny was suckered. Deceived by Ryan Hill just like I was. I felt sorry for her, thinking her granddaughter was some sort of do-gooder.

“Do you have any advice? Apparently, this man is ruthless, wanting to make an example out of her.”

I sure did.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:09 am

She handed me a neat stack of papers. I barely glanced at them, already knowing what they said. It was a summary of the case she filed in small claims. I knew it by heart. Line by line. That's what a good lawyer does. Memorizes his opponent's advance so they can counterattack. "I'll take a look over the weekend."

She smiled her thanks. Guilt made my cheeks flush with red. "Any weekend plans?"

"Just my bridge game tonight."

I smiled. "What did you make?"

"It's a Polynesian theme. I have ribs in the slow cooker. An upside-down pineapple cake and I'm going to pair it with Spanish rum coladas."

"What time?"

It was a running joke between us that I always invited myself but never showed.

I left the office right at five. Took a fast shower, shaved, put on my favorite pair of dark jeans, pairing it with a skintight white Henley. My expensive watch at my wrist, I looked like a model. But not one of those woke, pussy ones afraid to be a man. I was jacked, dressed, and looked every inch a boardroom billionaire. I picked up my keys, wallet, and cell then made the short drive to Hunter's penthouse. If I was a trust fund baby—he was times three. I pulled over to the curb, texting him to come down. I didn't feel like going up.

He opened the passenger door ten minutes later. I lifted a brow. "Primp much?" He

wore dark jeans like me, but instead of a thin T-Shirt, he wore a baby pink Vineyard Vines shirt with the sleeves rolled and his neck open.

“The ladies love pink. Especially on a muscular bad ass like myself.” Instead of turning left at the intersection toward the strip of bars and restaurants, I pressed the gas then changed lanes, entering the merge for the expressway.

“Dude? You kidnapping me? The bars and ladies are back that way.”

“We’re making a pit stop first.”

“Oh yeah? Where?”

“My P.A.’s house.”

“The hot one who sexted you?” He grinned.

“She’s a firecracker all right. You’ll like her.”

“Ah, how sweet of you to try to set me up like this. But I already found the woman of my dreams, but she has a real pain in the ass brother. It’s a deal breaker for me.”

“Good.” I took the next exit, shortly after pulling down the drive of a fifty-five plus community built around a man-made lake and golf course. I told the security guard my name.

“You’re not on the list.”

“I’m Bunny’s new bridge partner. She’ll kill me if I’m late. You know how she is...” I flashed a smile.

“That shit doesn’t work on me. I’m a senior. I know a stunt when I see one.”

Grinning, I called Bun-Bun by pressing a button on my steering wheel, turning up the volume so the guard could hear her through my car speakers.

“Bun-bun. I’m here. But the security guard won’t let me in. I’m hurt. You did invite me...?”

“Don’t mess with an old lady, Carmichael. You always go out Tomcatting with that friend of yours on Friday nights. I read all about Mr. July sightings in the local gossip rags the next day.”

Hunter cleared his throat. “Tomcatting? Well, I beg your pardon.” He laid on his southern accent extra thick.

Bunny gasped. “Let them in!”

The car’s engine purred as we rolled through the gates, rounded the curve, and pulled up to a neat two-story home. Five cars were already parked out front. I reached for the bottle of wine, leis, and grass skirts I had put in the back seat.

“It’s Polynesian night. It wouldn’t be polite to crash empty handed,” I informed Hunter as he looked at my offerings.

Bunny met us at the door, the color in her cheeks not from makeup. “Good Lord, the two of you are going to trip Betty’s pacemaker.”

I grinned. “Hunter here knows CPR.” She ushered us in, Hunter took the lead, laying on his charm, complimenting her home. He even tucked her hand into his arm, escorting her to her own party.

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She led us to a sunroom in the back. An oversized fan hung from the center of the dormered ceiling, a table was set to the side buffet style, decorated with orchids. I presented Bunny with my gifts. Her eyes glowed with pleasure as introductions were made. Hunter and I had arrived just in time for dinner. The ladies insisted on serving us and wouldn't hear otherwise. Bunny came around with her first pitcher of pineapple rum coladas. Hunter declared they were so good he wanted the whole pitcher. When she made him one, he accused her of trying to "peer pressure" him into staying for the card game.

She replied after we had shown up, they decided to scratch bridge for strip poker. We all had hearty laughs. I was having such a good time—I had almost forgot this was a recon mission.

"We're out of ice."

"Here, let me." I took the bucket from Barbara's hands and went to find Bunny's kitchen. My feet slowed as I approached the fridge. I placed the bucket on the counter, lifting a hand to the picture smack in the top center of the door. A Duke magnet held it firm.

She was... something else.

A golden goddess. It seemed as if the sun shone right through her or maybe her wholesomeness radiated the light. As if it shined from her, not the sun. Surely this couldn't be Ryan. Maybe this was a niece or a different granddaughter. My finger traced the curve of her cheek. I wanted to feel like she did in this photo. Even if it was only for a second. She was carefree. Smiling from her soul. Small freckles dotted

her sun-kissed skin. Her lips had a natural pout. She was lean, but with muscles not from denying herself meals. There wasn't anything fake about her. I was tempted to pluck the photo and stuff it into my back pocket. I snapped a picture of it instead. I could now stare at Ms. Ryan Hill whenever I wanted, and she—none the wiser. Smirking, I opened the freezer to fill the ice bucket.

“Chase? You get lost?” Bunny scurried in.

“No ma'am. I'm almost done.”

She gently touched my forearm. “Thank you for surprising us tonight. You've given them so much more than a card game ever could. Betty lost her husband a few months back. I haven't seen her smile or laugh in ages. And Claire's cancer just came back. Hunter flirting with her has taken her mind off things.”

“Well, maybe I'll make this a weekly thing before Hunter and I go out... tomcatting. By the way, nice calendar.” I winked.

“I needed something to write all my doctor appointments on.” She rattled off from behind me.

“That makes perfect sense.”

Hunter and I ended up staying past ten. As we played cards, the ladies entertained us with stories of days gone by. The men they loved and lost. Everyone's story was different, unique in its own way as lives always are. Betty told us of a fling she had at Woodstock when she was seventeen. She had actually been there. Claire told of a soldier she loved who was lost in Vietnam, but she kept his letters still. Bunny opened up about her late husband, saying she just knew from the start he was her destiny. Then they started talking about kids and grandkids giving me the perfect opportunity. “How many do you have Bun?”

“Two children, two grandsons and one granddaughter. I like her the best, but I’ll never admit it to a soul outside this room.”

“What about you two? Any women claim a piece of your heart?”

“I never kiss and tell,” Hunter replied smoothly. I shot him a hard look, letting him know I haven’t forgotten about his lips on Char’s.

“Well, there is someone,” I teased. “But she says I’m too young for her.”

“Oh you,” Bunny swatted my arm.

“I had a nice time. Thank you very much.” I helped Bunny clean up. After a round of goodbyes, the ladies walked us out,

“Where to?” I asked Hunter, figuring he’d say Roxy the club on Cicada and 8th.

“Home. I’m beat. I have a date with the gym in the morning. It’s almost June. I need to be in my best beach shape for the shore.”

“I’ll join you.”

“I enjoyed myself tonight. More than I have in a longtime. I know you think I’m just your dickhead, clown best friend... with a better body and more money—but tonight made me wish for things. A life like those ladies had. Full of joys and sorrows but in the middle packed with love. Family. Kids. A home. My ex just wasn’t the one. We missed that thing... that spark that turns into the flame of a lifetime.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “I’ve felt that for the past year or so. I buried myself into work, then the shore house. With those two things eating my time, I didn’t have any nights like this one, staring me in the face that time is going by.”

“This summer, bro. Let’s make a pact, right here, right now. We’ll lockdown our dream ladies by fall. For real. No more ‘tomcatting’ around.”

“Delete your dating apps,” I challenged.

He took out his phone, swiped then tapped a few times. “Done.”

I lifted my shoulders. “I deleted mine a few weeks ago. My last hookup made me feel...empty the next day.”

“Seven a.m. gym then juice.” He tapped the roof of my car as I pulled out. I hated the stupid green organic juices he made me chug after our monster workouts. But after eating three helpings of Bunny’s pineapple soy BBQ ribs, my abs would need the detox.

After I got home, I took a shower, relaxing in my lounge pants. Phone in hand, I got into bed and stared at my pirated picture.

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I hadn't heard from her since I received official notice from the small claims court. The lawyer in me knew it was wise to not communicate further. I missed our bickering. Now that I had a face to match her words. My blood heated in an entirely different way. I itched to get under Bunny's little do-gooder's skin. I couldn't help myself. The court just granted her a date of July 10. It was the perfect excuse to make contact. I opened up my app.... Screw it if she uses it for court. We're never going to get there. I'll settle an hour beforehand, giving her back her entire deposit if the app unfreezes my rental listing.

This was for me now. I'm playing chess, owning the board and when it's time I'll take the queen. I did warn her she had no idea who she was messing with. Somehow, sparring with her became more intriguing then clubbing with Hunter or reviewing contracts. I missed the banter, the way she got under my skin, making me hot under the collar. My life had become... safe. Vanilla. I couldn't help myself.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: GAME ON

I am most definitely an attorney. I'd send you my license number, but you'd probably stalk me, and I already have enough women doing that. You'd lose your mind over how good looking and successful I am. And since I know you have a sex fetish or candy penis fetish, my picture would definitely send you off the edge. And since this is fact, as stated by the evidence I gathered in my home which was witnessed by my housekeeper and documented with pictures, my using this language in an email to

you cannot be construed as sexually harassing.

P.S.

Candy dick fetish. There I said it again. Just because I can.

Seventeen

Mid-June

I quickly swept the balls of dog and cat hair that had collected in corners on my floor. I straightened the pillows on the couch that came with the rental. A soft breeze blew in, bringing the fresh smell of ocean. The summer crowd slowly trickled in during May but now in mid-June they were here to stay until fall. Gran took the day off to drive down and visit me at the shore. I hadn't seen her since Christmas. I was nervous, hoping seeing Pop's boat floating gracefully at the dock wouldn't be too much for her.

My cell dinged with a new email. My brow furrowed as I read it. It was from the small claims court, the date was set for July 10th. Truthfully, I had pushed Mr. Hot-shot Homeowner to the back of my mind. My days have been so full. So full of days on the ocean, analyzing data, writing reports, and making hypothesis. After a five-mile bike ride back to my apartment, instead of showering right away, I often took out the dogs from their crates for long walks. I didn't have to, I wanted to.

Sometimes, I'd paddleboard in the quiet of dawn before I bike to the research facility. In the early evening, as the sun turned the sky shades of pink, I took Pop's boat out on the bay, drop anchor, and just bask in the glory of it all—my new life that I never dreamed possible on Christmas Day. I made my own Christmas wish come true. I had the power within me the whole time. It was a lesson I'll never forget. My skin was golden. Freckles were emerging. My hair was getting bleached by the sun. I didn't

care. Muscles appeared that I never had before. I was living and breathing the ocean life and loving every second of it. I was coming into my own in ways I never had before.

“Ryan? You up there?”

“Gran!” I flung the screen door open, waving her up. My heart squeezed in my chest as we hugged. She smelled like gardenias and talcum powder, just as she always had. Gran was home. Her love was the one constant all my life.

“Look at you! I hardly recognized my darling granddaughter! So fit... so healthy!” Her eyes shone as she took in my bare feet, tan, and longer hair that the sun had turned a lighter color.

I grinned. “The ocean works miracles. I feel like a different person on the inside, too.”

“I’ve never been prouder. You took control over your life. Captained your own ship.”

“Well, I did have the best cheerleader in my corner. You look different too.” There was a sparkle in Gran’s eye. Color in her face that I hadn’t seen since before Pops got sick.

She waved her hand. “My job keeps me fit as a fiddle.”

I remembered that husky voice I had overheard that one time. “Your boss treats you well?”

“He’s a devil that one. But we’ll talk about him later. Show me around.”

“There’s not much to see.”

“You have a lovely view.” I made a grand gesture to the galley kitchen where instead of a wall there was a half-one with stools.

“Nice calendar.”

My face heated as she spied it.

“Oh, it was here from the previous tenant.”

“It’s not July yet dear, it’s almost the end of June.”

“But July was so much better,” I half came clean.

“Well, it’s much hotter that’s for sure.”

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“Come meet Daisy and the rest of the animals. Any chance you are looking for a cat?”

“I work too much.”

“Do you need the money, Gran?” Concern furrowed my brow. I knew Pop’s medical bills must’ve made quite a dent. Maybe I should give Gran back her money...if I ever get my own money back from Mr. Esquire.

She waved me off. “The work keeps my mind sharp. I enjoy it.”

“I’d love to visit you at work next time I visit. Maybe at the end of summer?”

“That would be lovely. Oh, that reminds me, my boss is having a company BBQ for the 4th. Family is invited and well, since you’re my family dear, I’d be delighted if you came.”

“I can’t Gran. I need to stay here to take care of the animals.”

“It’s here. At a beach house. I forgot the address, but I can always text it to you. He planned a nice time for the 4th on the beach for the fireworks.” She was so hopeful. So excited. She had a weird gleam in her eye I mistook for nerves at attending a function without anyone.

“Okay. I’m sure it’ll be fun. You can stay with me. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Oh, he’s putting half the company up.”

“I thought you said he was a devil?”

“Oh, he is a tricky one. All smiles and good humor and then bam, before you know it—you’re baking him cakes and color coding his files. He tricks you with charm.”

“It almost sounds like you have a crush on him,” I snorted.

“I’m not the only one,” she muttered under her breath. I raised my eyebrows, looking away. “Oh, Ryan.” She spotted the boat across the road, dancing gracefully in the water. The palm of her hand rested on the glass as she gazed out.

“Want to go for a quick ride on the water?”

“No. No,” her eyes misted. “Some memories I keep tucked away; afraid new ones will tarnish the edges. I still see him at the stern, hands turning on the motor.”

I stood behind her, “I do, too.”

“Oh dear, I’ve made a mess of this,” she opened her purse, using a tissue to dab her eyes.

“Nonsense. I just hope someday, I’ll find a love like you and Pops had. A good, honest man who will love me until the day he dies.” She took my hand in hers, giving it a firm squeeze.

“I want that for you too. More than you know. And I think you might find him sooner than you think.”

“Doubtful. The only men in my life are Roscoe the lab mix and Ken, the fifty-year-old captain on the research vessel.”

Gran loved Daisy. She even got a good laugh when Roscoe tangled his leash around her legs. We walked along the docks. Ate at a pub. A sleek SUV with tinted windows pulled up outside the Rescue Center at five. I was hopeful someone was here to adopt until I saw the driver emerge in a crisp black suit. “Ms. Dempsey?”

“That would be my ride.”

“You hired a car to bring you here and back? Gran that’s hundreds of dollars?”

“I didn’t. My boss did.”

“What? Why?”

She shrugged. “He likes me. Was concerned for my safety when I told him I was planning on taking the day off to visit you. It is a two plus hour drive each way...”

“Just who is this boss of yours? Christian Grey?”

“No honey. He makes him look like minced meat.”

“Ugh, I hate him already. I bet he’s bossy, moody, only drinks eight-dollar coffees and has a stick up his butt just like most attorneys. He probably looks down his nose at people, has a hissy if he doesn’t get his way—” I paused, realizing I was projecting my own image of C.C. Esquire on Gran’s boss.

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“You’ll find out soon enough. See you on the 4th! Wear something pretty and please paint your nails.”

“I won’t smell like fish or wear something covered in dog hair, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Well, it is a hoity-toity firm. But you do me proud just be being you, honey.”

“Thanks, Gran.”

For some reason I felt unsettled after she left. I went down to the shelter. Daisy was tired from her earlier walk. But Roscoe barked as soon as he saw me. I took him out, put his life vest on and grabbed a beer from Steve’s fridge.

As the sun set, I raised the bottle high, “To you Pops!” Roscoe lifted his head from his perch on the bow. The dog loved the water as much as I did. Sometimes, Dr. Winnfield even lets me bring him to class and out on shorter expeditions. I took the boat out through a narrow channel, under a bridge. I knew I was asking for it, coasting past the area where the house was that I had rented. Sometimes I bike past or on calm nights like tonight, take the boat offshore. I don’t know what I would do if I actually ever saw Mr. Hotshot at his house. But a part of me is dying to catch a glimpse of my foe.

“Who is that?” The words were a sigh carried in the air. He was... jacked. Not slim but not bulky... but the perfect in-between. In a pair of trunks, he had his board under one arm as he scanned the waves from the shore. I swore his gaze went right through me, but from this distance there was no way he could make out a single feature on my

face. I wished I had my binoculars, though. It was too far to make out his features, but I could tell a lot from his stance. He was confident, strong, his posture was relaxed but I sensed he could dive under the curl of a wave in a second's notice. His bronzed skin was defined by the fading rays of sun. But there was no way he was C.C. That man would not be out catching waves during the weekday, he was probably somewhere in a city skyscraper, barking orders at some poor paralegal while plotting ways to torment me.

I turned the boat around and headed back to the other side of the peninsula, away from the million-dollar homes and even more expensive yachts to where the working class like me resided.

Eighteen

July 4th Weekend

"I need a flashlight!" Hunter called from the basement. The string lights I had hung from the roof, combined with the hot tub and Char's hairdryer which I was convinced was supercharged, blew a fuse. Add new wiring to the list of things on my to-do list.

"Hang on a sec!"

I opened the cabinet above the fridge, the flashlight was there, but the box of calendars Char had given me for Christmas had vanished. I shook my head. "She stole the calendars." I grinned, fingers itching to send her another email. Of course, it was just to "document" for the case that she had stolen a Christmas gift from my sister. No need to mention exactly what it was. She knew and so did I. I gave Hunter the flashlight before standing out on my back deck to gauge the waves. My board was in the sand ready to go. I wondered if she skimmed the pages, glanced at July? I opened up my app baiting her was becoming a necessity.

From: homeowner1278

To:

SUBJECT: Missing Items

Dear Miss Hill,

I am missing a very rare, sentimental Christmas gift. It was still wrapped and in the cupboard above my fridge. Let this email be official notice that in small claims court I will be petitioning for this gift to be returned to me. Add thief to the list of things you are in addition to being a liar.

Yours truly.

C.C. Esquire

I was tempted to write gorgeously infuriating. However, she doesn't need to know that since I saw her face, I've been rereading our communications, constantly checking the app, and pining for a new message from her.

I had set my trap. Now all I had to do was wait for her to walk into it.

Nineteen

"Gran? You never texted the address?"

"Ryan?! I can't hear you... you're breaking up!"

As if I would've been able to hear her over the crashing waves, people talking in the background coupled with... a steel drum band?

“I need the address!”

“My friend, Hunter drove me. I don’t know the address. Look for the string lights. Red, white, and blue!”

I started to grow irritated. Gran was always on top of things... this didn’t make sense.

“Have you been drinking?”

“What?”

“Ugh! Just turn on your location services.”

“Here, I’m handing my phone over to someone who can help.” I pressed a hand to my damp forehead, listening as she walked in the sand, the sound of a party gradually fading...

“Hello?”

Sexy, masculine, flirty how did he manage all of that in one word?

“Hi, I’m Bunny’s granddaughter... I need the address of the party.”

“There’s no parking for blocks. Best bet is to walk the beach.”

“Just share the location service with me, okay?”

“Bossy. That’s hot.”

I rolled my eyes. “Who are you?”

“Hunter.”

“How old are you?”

“How old are you, darling?” His southern accent was thick.

“You’ll find out soon enough. How do you know my Gran?”

“I’m her boss’s BFF. Hey by any chance are you that hot chick from the picture Bunny has on her fridge?”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I had an image in my head of some rich, preppy player thinking he was all that. “No. I’m one of the ugly grandkids.”

“Sorry, about that darling.” The call ended abruptly. But seconds later I had Gran’s location.

“Come on girl, we have a party to crash!” Daisy trotted happily into my Jeep. Twenty minutes later, I pulled over. Trying to find parking was futile. I ended up halfway on someone’s lawn praying no one would tow me. Daisy was in her harness, leash wrapped around my wrist. I hoped the fireworks wouldn’t make her freak out. I tied a flag bandana around her neck the words, “Adopt me” visible. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Dammit. I suck at this rescue shit. I’m going to cry like a baby when someone falls in love with you the way I have.” I was off kilter, running late to the 4th of July BBQ and after that strange call not in the least looking forward to it.

The latest message from C.C. Esquire also had thrown me off.

Give Mr. July back?

Never.

The hot pin-up guy had become my make-believe boyfriend. He was the one I fantasized about late at night or when my hormones went into overdrive. He was the first thing that went on my wall in my new apartment.

I'd just have to deny it. There was nothing else to say. What kind of a Christmas gift was a male review calendar anyway? It was probably a gag gift, from one of those Christmas exchange games. He was over exaggerating the sentimental value. I was sure of it.

I didn't respond.

I couldn't. I was guilty as hell. But putting a lie in writing didn't sit well. I'd just ignore it and him. Our court date was in six days anyway. I'd meet him face to face soon enough. That in itself was enough to make me feel ill.

Finally making my way past the waving beach grass with their roots firm beneath the dunes, I reached open sand. Small bonfires and beach blankets were scattered about. I mumbled a bunch of "excuse me's" before making it to the wet part of the sand. The waves rolled in on their soft sighs of thunder. The sky was indigo. A dark purple fading to black. Stars scattered like white diamonds. It was a night for magic and romance. Or maybe I was still humming from using my toy while thinking of my Mr. July. Either way, the air was charged with something I couldn't quite define.

Kids waved sparklers while their parents looked on. Gran said I wouldn't be able to miss her boss's house since he had hung red, white, and blue string lights from his roof. She also said his fire would be the biggest since he paid for some fancy permit.

"You made it!" Gran got up from her lawn chair, pulling me in for a quick hug. Just then the first rocket shot up to the sky, exploding in a burst of color. Daisy started barking and charged forward catching me off guard. Gran's chair fell over. Daisy dashed around beach blankets and beer bottles. As I watched, my heart exploded like falling stars.

I took off, jumping over smaller fires, hurdling over chairs following the sounds of her excited barks. She was after something or someone. I got a brief glimpse of her

bushy tail right before it disappeared behind an old plankboard bathhouse. A set of broad shoulders emerged from the shadows.

“Looking for something?”

I turned, out of breath but he stole what was left of it completely away. Another firework exploded, lighting up the sky behind him. I gasped as it illuminated his face. He was more tan than his picture, making his eyes stand out. Barefoot in a pair of chino shorts paired with a white T-shirt he was perfection. He reached out, brushing an errant strand of hair that stuck to my sweaty cheek aside. His brief touch felt like a thunderbolt.

“Daisy.”

“Hi, Daisy.”

I pushed the rest of my hair off my face, feeling my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth. I reached for the dog and he placed her in my arms.

“Let me get you some water.”

“No, please. I’m fine.”

“Your friend looks like he could use some.”

“It’s a she.”

“Ah, I have a bad habit of assuming sexes.”

What was left of my brain short circuited. My calendar guy just said the word sex in a

sentence. As I held Daisy in my arms, I felt her ribs heaving as she panted. Even with the ocean breeze, it was a hot summer night. “Yes, to eh, water. She is panting hard.”

He led me up a back deck, where red, white, and blue string lights hung over a hot tub.

A remarkably familiar hot tub.

I sucked in a breath, feeling like a nervous cat on a hot tin roof. He slid open the backdoor. I followed him into the kitchen. The same kitchen where months ago I had sung offbeat while mixing margaritas.

The key fob to Gran’s car sat in a basket, the familiar Lily Pulitzer key chain I had given her last Christmas caught my eye.

He noticed me staring. “Safety first. My guests started drinking early.”

I cleared my throat, dying to get out of this house. Especially since I had just noticed the black orb security camera in the corner of the kitchen. Mr. Hot-shot Homeowner wasn’t taking any chances.

A smile tipped my lips up, as I imagined him in horn-rimmed glasses hovering over a laptop, feverishly checking the camera feeds from his beach rental.

Fourth of July week on OBX—a house like this could easily get twenty thousand. Mr. July placed a bowl on the floor. I set Daisy down feeling awkward.

“So, Daisy. Are you just here for the holiday weekend?”

“Actually, I live on the other side of the inlet. By the bakery.”

He perked up hearing this.

“Why haven’t I seen you before?” He smiled not only with that sexy mouth but with his eyes as he perused me.

I blushed, eyes falling to my coral painted toes. I was in a pair of old denim cutoffs with a white cotton, eyelet tank top. My limbs were almost as dark as his from spending so much time on the ocean. My hair almost sun-bleached from medium brown to caramel. I wore no makeup. I had no one to impress. It was just Gran’s co-workers who she told me were all old, overweight married men. I’d kill Gran later.

“I work a lot,” I finally answered.

“So do I.”

“I should probably come clean and tell you who I am.” He crossed his arms, kicking one bare foot back on the bottom counter. His eyebrow lifted. While my eyes were drawn to his muscular arms.

“I think you might be my grandmother’s boss.”

“Bunny is your grandma?” He deadpanned.

“Sure is.”

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“Hot damn, I’m going to either give her a raise or fire her for not setting us up.”

This time my small blush became a sunburn. He was totally checking me out, without makeup, old jeans, tank and all. “I—we should get back. Or we’ll miss the show.”

“I have a confession of my own. Don’t you want to hear it? Your grandmother is the best PA I’ve ever had. But don’t tell her I said that. She’s impertinent enough as it is. Always gives it right back.”

“I’m glad. I haven’t seen her this happy in years.”

The lie between us hovered on my lips, seconds away from falling. I moved to pick-up Daisy, but he scooped her up before I could. He cuddled her under his right arm, pressing her gently against his side. Then he draped his left arm around my shoulder as we walked outside.

He was warm, smelled like pine and soap. My nipples peaked in my bra. I bit my lip. It didn’t feel to right to pull away even though we had just technically met. Was he... could he be C.C.? Red-faced, I couldn’t look at him, even though I felt his eyes on me.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. All this time he’s been here miles apart from where I sleep. I have him pinned up in my kitchen, a spare hidden under my bed. I’ve touched myself so many times, while dreaming of his smirking, smug face and chiseled body. He’s my grandma’s boss and possibly my nemesis? Our court date days away? Every pre-conceived notion I had of him blurred. My head was still spinning that Gran’s boss could be Mr. Hotshot Homeowner and my Mr. July all wrapped up in six plus

feet of pure Adonis-like perfection.

“This is us over here. Everyone! This is Bunny’s granddaughter Daisy and her friend,” he stopped quirked a brow.

“Kismet.” I dumbly answered, ignoring Gran’s sharp look. My mind instantly recalling the word for what was taking place.

Everyone said polite hello’s while two pairs of sharp eyes noticed his arm still around me. Gran’s and a striking woman. She eyed me up and down in a similar way he had.

“I’m Chase, by the way. He leaned down whispering with lips that almost touched my ear.

Goosebumps broke out across my skin, my nipples were still erect, and I hoped in the dark no one would notice, yet I knew his eyes missed nothing. He led me to a prime spot in front of the fire, sat down, tugging me with him. Daisy happily sat in his lap, licked his fingers, then rolled onto her back, eyes pleading for a belly rub. Even the canine wanted his hands on her.

I tried to relax, pretended to focus on the fireworks. It was an excuse not to talk. My heart beat fast, so fast, I knew he could sense I felt like a deer waiting to flee the predator. He finally leaned over again, “I don’t bite. Well, never wanted to before.” I turned my face to his, it was so close his pupils dilated as his eyes fell to my lips. I licked them on instinct, hearing his groan as the fireworks exploded around us in a grand finale. “Breakfast tomorrow?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’d ask you to dinner, But I don’t want to wait that long.”

“I’m seeing someone.” The lie fell fast. I needed to put a roadblock between us. He went right through it.

“Yeah, you are. Me.”

“Cocky much?” But I already knew that answer from all of our email exchanges.

“Don’t you have house guests?”

“I do. You could stay over. We’ll be perfectly chaperoned.”

“You’re kidding.”

He smiled. All golden skin and eyes. Damn, he was so sexy. My body was already gone for him months ago, but his easy going smiles nearly stole my heart.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. His brows furrowed. My confession was soft but serious. Telling him the two words that I meant from my heart for things he didn’t know I was responsible for yet. I feared he’d fire Gran if I told him. I looked over my shoulder at her. She was glowing, laughing in a way I hadn’t heard in years, like before Pops died.

“I better go spend time with Gran.”

“Am I going to have to fight Bunny for you?”

“She’d win.” I grinned back at him.

“Well then maybe I’ll just win her over first.”

“Something tells me you already have.” I got up, brushing sand from my thighs, the

action drawing his eyes to them. His jaw clenched as he forced himself to look away. I motioned for Daisy to come, but she wouldn't leave his arms. Can't say I blamed her. "Traitor," I whispered. His husky laugh followed me as I crossed the sand finding a spot behind the fire next to Gran. I looked across the flames, his eyes watched me like he was staking a claim. I quickly looked away.

"Nice of you to join your granny, Daisy."

My face flamed again. "I was stunned. Just blurted out the dog's name. You didn't tell him I have his calendar pinned up in my kitchen?" I hissed.

“Not one word.”

“I can’t believe you! Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why would I, when watching the two of you is much more fun.” Her eyes were a bit glassy. Her color high.

“Are you drunk?” I had never seen Gran like this.

“Maybe. These boys make me forget my age. They made me some cold fruity drink. It was hot. I kept getting refills. He is an Adonis. And sweet, funny... all the things Wade never was.”

I hung my head, picking at the ends of the beach blanket I sat on. “It’ll never happen. Can never happen.”

“And why is that? He hasn’t taken his eyes off you.” My back was to him, but I still felt his stare.

“Not here.”

Gran looked around. “Then where?”

“I can’t trust you. You might be on the side of my enemy and you’ve been drinking.”

Gran rolled her eyes. “As if I’d choose anyone over my gal. I was the first one to hold you.”

I looked over both my shoulders before leaning in. “It was his house. I stayed here that weekend in February. I felt so stupid when he invited me in just now.”

“Oh dear.” Gran pursed her lips, clutched for her pearls she had left at home while pondering what I just said. She waved a hand in the air. “These things have a way of working themselves out.”

“Doubtful. How can I face him in court?”

“Now, my Ryan has never shied away from the truth or an honest fight. Do you still think he wronged you?”

“Maybe we wronged each other.”

“Then right it. A kiss wouldn’t hurt either.”

I slapped her on the shin. “Where’s this Hunter guy? And I’m getting you bottled water.”

“Oh, he’s around here somewhere. Probably flirting with the paralegals.”

“Hi. I’m Charlie. Chase’s older twin sister.” I turned, finding the stunning girl from earlier. She wasted no time sitting down next to me wanting to know just about everything about my life... down to my blood type. I was hesitant to tell her much, but she was so nice, joyous, with a warm smile and warmer eyes. Someone got Gran the bottle of water she needed. I found myself opening up as she shared story after story about Chase. Each funnier than the last.

Hours went by. Someone passed me a glass of wine. Then another. The party slowly packed up and moved back to the house. “I should go.”

“The night’s still early,” Chase came up behind me. “Did my sister scare you off?”

“Hardly. She’s wonderful.”

“She is.” His eyes smiled as he found his twins’ across the sand. She was helping clean up. “Stay,” he tugged my hand. “Just for a little while?”

I was tempted. Oh, so tempted. But what was the point starting something I knew we couldn’t finish. He was so charming, but I knew his other side. The ruthless one. I shivered knowing he’d pursue me with the same ruthlessness that he went after me as his renter.

“Kismet seems tired.”

“She can stay, too.”

“She gets nervous in new places.”

“She doesn’t look nervous to me. You, however, seem a bit on edge.”

My breath hitched. He was so close. He could kiss me if he wanted. But he didn’t. “Come on. A lot of people overindulged tonight. I’ll walk you to your car.”

“Such a gentleman.”

“Well, you are Bunny’s favorite.”

I said my goodbyes after a quick hug from Gran. It was weird she was staying, while I was going, but my cramped rental above the rescue could not compare to staying here. Gran would be much more comfortable. “Come for breakfast. I’ll make you chocolate crepes.”

“I can’t, Gran. I have to leave with the 5a.m. tide. But I’ll be back around noon. We could meet in town?”

Chase hovered close by listening to my exchange with Gran. After as we walked along the sandy street toward my car he asked. “Where are you going so early in the morning?”

“Out on my boat. If I catch the tide, it won’t tax the engine as much. There’s a feeding ground three miles offshore I’ve been tracking. I’m studying to be a marine biologist at Duke. I’m in the research program.”

“Are you going alone?” I nodded. Even in the dark, the only light came from fireflies and the occasional lamppost. I noticed the set of his jaw. “What’s the name of the marina?”

“I have a private dock.”

“I need your cell.”

“No.” My chin came up.

“It’s not safe boating by yourself.”

“You’re not my keeper.”

“Not yet,” he breathed so low I almost missed it.

“Look. We just met. I’m not even sure if I like you.”

“Oh, you like me.”

I rolled my eyes. “You like yourself.”

“I like you better.”

“You don’t even know me!” I threw my hands up in the air.

“Wrong. I know you are a girl who smells like fresh summer rain, looks like heaven, and probably feels the same. You’re unassuming. Fresh. Athletic by the muscle tone in your legs and arms. Craves adventure, love animals and,” he trailed off, tapping my nose. “Has the most gorgeous assortment of freckles I’ve ever seen. I wonder if you have any more...” his eyes lowered to my chest until my skin disappeared under the fabric of my tank.

“Maybe I do,” I whispered.

“I know what my dreams will be about tonight. What will yours be?”

I couldn’t answer. How could I? When my dreams have been of him this whole time. I shrugged nonchalantly, “Tide charts and navigational instruments. Plankton levels

and ocean temperatures.”

“How can a man compete with that? You’re different. It’s refreshing.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. He walked so close to my side; our arms brushed. I half expected him to try to hold my hand, but he didn’t. His eyes went to the sky, to my face then back all over again. Soon we approached my car. “This is me.”

I picked up Daisy after unlocking the car, placing her on the passenger seat. She yapped twice while staring at Chase. His arm shot out past me to scratch her ears. The move penned me between him and the seat. His forearm grazed against my breasts unintentionally but sent sparks to my hardened nipples just the same.

I bit my lip, barely holding on. I wanted to kiss him. Wanted nothing more than to feel his lips crushing mine. I wanted to sit in his lap like Daisy had. I shook my head. I was jealous of the rescue dog.

When he pulled back, I climbed in. He shut my door. I unrolled the window.

“Good night, Daisy.”

The dog thumped her tail.

“Night.” I breathed pulling out. Daisy whined as we drove away, her little face hung outside the window, staring backward. I had a feeling Chase stole more than one heart that night. I just hoped he wouldn’t break both.

Twenty

I took the long way back, taking an old beach path from the road. I walked along the surf. Picked up a few shells, watched them skip across the water after I threw them out of my hand.

I couldn't believe it was her. In the flesh. I had wondered what she'd be like. I had to fist my hands in my pocket to keep them from tracing down the curve of her cheek. Just as they had to the picture Bunny kept of her on her fridge.

She was more than I ever imagined. A breath of fresh air. Her face didn't have one speck of foundation or powder. Her body was bare of any fancy creams, yet her skin still glowed.

I groaned, not remembering the last time I wanted a woman so much. Craved to taste her skin, discover all her secrets, and get lost in passion, then waking up just to get lost again.

It was almost midnight when I got back to the beach house. A few people were in the hot tub, Bunny was at the kitchen table playing poker with Hunter and Charlie.

"Deal me in," I sat down across from Bunny. Her hands shook as she shuffled the deck. "What are we playing for?"

"Surely, not money." Bunny joked.

"How about secrets?"

Her face colored. But so, did Charlie's. Hunter shifted his weight, then his eyes. This was going to be fun. "My house. My rules. We are playing secret strip poker. Instead of clothes coming off, a truth will be peeled back."

Bunny folded her hand. "You know, don't you?"

"I'll admit. I never expected my PA to be on the plaintiff's witness list. I did some digging. Her picture on your fridge was a big clue."

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "She's sweet. Strong, but still sweet. Maybe I'll forgive her for a kiss."

"A kiss is never just a kiss." Bunny met my level stare.

"I probably won't stop at just one..."

"What on Earth is going on?"

I grinned, "Daisy isn't Daisy. She's Ryan Hill, my first and last tenant. Who also just might be the girl of my dreams. Why do you think I threw this 4th of July bash insisting you invite your granddaughter?"

"You... rogue. You absolute devil!" Bunny stammered.

"Oh my," Charlie's face flamed recalling just what Ryan and her friends had left behind.

"Tell us her side of the story." Hunter yawned, stretching his arms. "I won't take sides until I hear it. But if she's anything close to Bun, I'm on hers."

I shook my head. Bunny had somehow become like a grandmother to both me and Hunter ever since we crashed her bridge night last month. It didn't feel strange at all to have her spend the weekend with us. She already slipped in, somehow becoming family. Hunter had even stopped by her house on his own a few times to fix a leaky sink, bring her sweet tea when she felt a tickle in her throat last week and he even offered to drive her here.

As she shuffled the deck Bunny started telling us Ryan's side. Starting with Wade and Sienna, Kell's frenemy Hannah and how she stiffed Ryan her share of the rental fee, promising to clean up before they left.... To the last-minute interview here, forcing Ryan to leave early. Then how she needed housing after my complaint. Lost it, only to find a one bedroom above an animal shelter. "Daisy's the dog."

"Yeah, I figured, I just might keep her, too."

"That's some story," Hunter smirked.

"You haven't even read our emails yet." I got up, retrieved my laptop, and set it on the counter. Charlie sat at a barstool as Bunny and Hunter stood on either side of her. They read line by line, engrossed in our exchanges as if it was the stuff of a gossip column.

"A beach wedding. Here. Can't you just see it?" Char turned to Bunny.

"I'll make the cake," she replied.

"We haven't even gone on a date yet. She hates me."

"Hate's a strong word," Hunter mused. "Passion. She definitely has passion for you. Maybe you should just plead the case, give her the deposit back and go from there."

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“Nah, that would be too easy. I’m going to woo the shit out of her. Make her fall for me hard so when the truth hits on who I am.... It’ll be too late.”

“Um, have you considered she already knows? She was here tonight.”

“So? I’ll tell her it’s a rental. Hunter’s rental.” I turned to Bunny. “Did you tell her anything about me?”

“Nothing much.”

“Hey, at least she’s not one of those crazy calendar girls leaving panties on your windshield wipers.”

“Actually, about that... I’m not the only one who has a Mr. July up on her kitchen wall.” Bunny spilled. Ryan has me pinned up in her kitchen?

“At least now I know where the missing calendars went. I had a box above the fridge that disappeared after her weekend rental.”

“She’s going to kill me.”

I winked at Bunny. “I always knew you had a soft spot for me.”

“Too soft.”

“What do we do now?”

“Nothing Char. Leave her to me.”

“Your court date is next week. That’s not much time.”

“Please, you haven’t seen me pursue a woman.”

“No. But I’ve seen you just about pursue everything else you’ve ever wanted. You never lose. You always get what you want.”

“That I do,” I winked. “Truthfully, Bun-bun your granddaughter caught me cold by just that one picture you have on your fridge.”

“She texted me that one. I printed it out at work. Someone in the research program took it of her last month. They were out on an expedition. I’ve never seen her happier.”

“Just wait. I’ll bet I can make her blissfully happy... maybe even ever after and all that.”

Bunny shook her head. “You and that ego of yours. I hope my Ryan knocks you down a peg.”

“She already did. I’m going to bed. I have to be up before five to catch the tide and my girl.”

Twenty-One

“Do you think he knows? He definitely knows,” I sighed. Daisy snuggled next to me, blinking her eyes, tucked out after the night’s adventures. “Sorry, am I keeping you up?” She yawned, then rolled over, four stubby paws in the air. “I mean he must know. There’s no other explanation for the way he looked at me. He was...

interested. Very interested. Let's face it...I'm no calendar girl." Although, lately, when I looked in the mirror, I did look very sexy compared to how I looked before.

Sleep would be hard to come by tonight. My mind raced with thoughts of kismet. Pops was probably laughing his butt off at the situation I found myself in. I'd grill Gran at lunch. She'd know if Chase owned or rented the house. But in my gut, I already knew the answer.

Sometime late in the night I finally drifted off to his wicked smirk, tanned pecs, and husky voice. "Told you it was 'game on'," he said.

My alarm went off sooner than I was ready for. Even Daisy didn't want to get up. My eyes were blurry, half open as I quickly put on workout shorts with a tank, slipped into sandals, and twisted my hair into a sloppy bun.

"Time to go out, sweetie." I rubbed Daisy's belly until she finally agreed to get off my bed. I clipped her leash on her collar, hands also reaching for my backpack by the door. It was barely dawn. The sky still clung to the fading colors of night. A few stars struggled to remain behind.

"Morning, love."

He was talking to the dog, right? So why were his eyes trained on me... She scurried right over to him, already begging to be pet.

I gasped, hand over my racing heart at Chase lounging against the side door of the building holding two cups of what I hoped was coffee.

"Here." He handed me a cup. "Extra cream with sugar. Gran told me."

“Thanks. What are you doing here?”

“You know why, I’m here.”

I frowned over the rim of the coffee as I took a small sip.

“It was instant for me. Like being hit with lightning.”

“Look, I don’t have time to date anyone right now, nor am I interested in a guy like you.”

This seemed to amuse him. His chin lifted, his teeth sharp and white like a shark as he came closer.

“I’m in love with her.” He pointed to Daisy. “I’m fairly sure it’s mutual. A guy tends to pick up on these kinds of things. I couldn’t take the chance someone else saw her last night and would make a move before I could.”

“What do you say, Kismet? Want to come live happily ever after with me?” He crouched down on one knee, offering her a doggie biscuit. “But Kismet doesn’t seem to fit... how about.... Lady?”

By this time, my heart pounded as if he had giving chase. Was I had? Outed? He knew, right? My eyes darted left then right.

“How did you find us?”

“Google. I searched the name of the shelter from the bandana Kismet wore last night.”

“I need to feed the animals breakfast and take them out.”

“I’ll help.”

“Why?” I arched a brow.

“I missed my girl,” he bent low, scratching Daisy’s head.

My fingers shook as I punched in the access code. I felt him behind me, one thick forearm rested above my head. I was caged between him in the door. He was toying with me. A predator teasing his prey before he went in for the kill. “I hate lawyers.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” I grumbled, finally pushing the door open escaping him. I picked up a food bowl, getting angrier and angrier by the second. He was so overbearing. Smug. Sure, of himself. He just showed up after last night inserting himself in my life. My business? And thinks he’s going to take Daisy? The thought of him ripping Daisy from me started to sting more then when Sierra took Wade.

“No.”

“No?” He lifted his brows, crossing his arms the thick golden muscle popping out.

“No. You can’t adopt... D—. The dog. Kismet.”

“Why not. She needs love, right?”

“She has plenty right here. Besides, I’m not sure you’d be a good match. She needs someone utterly devoted.”

“I can be utterly devoted.”

I snorted. “No.”

“Yes.”

We tugged over her leash.

“What’s the matter? Not used to the word?”

“You’re a spitfire.”

Ignoring him, I put Daisy in her crate. After I filled her water bowl, I went to the cabinet for her medicated eyedrops gently administering two per eye. “There you go, pretty girl. I’ll be back later.”

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I went to Roscoe next, fed him, put his life jacket harness with a leash on and handed him to Chase. “Be helpful and walk him while I take care of the rest of the animals.”

After making quick work of the morning chores, I grabbed my backpack, locked up, finding Chase throwing a tennis ball while Roscoe eagerly showed off.

Putting two fingers between my lips, I gave a sharp whistle. Roscoe came running.

“Nice trick.”

“I have a few.”

“I bet you do.”

The sun was rising, and the tide had already started going out, ignoring him I changed directions. “Stop following me.” Exasperated, I threw my hands in the air as Roscoe jumped onto the boat. Chase followed me across the street. My hands made quick work of untying the lines. When I turned around Chase was lounging in a seat on my boat, Roscoe beside him.

“I didn’t give you permission to board.”

He shrugged. “So? Sue me.”

“You are infuriating. How do I get rid of you?”

“You can’t.”

“If you don’t behave, you’re going overboard. Are you renting the house for the weekend?” I just blurted it out.

“What? I can’t hear you?” He exaggerated his hand motion to his ear, using the excuse of the running motor to evade my question. Fine. Two could play at this. If he wanted to pretend, he’s not my hottie nemesis then I could pretend not to be the renter who is suing him.

He grinned over the rim of his coffee while watching my every move. I took us out past the flats to the deeper side of the bay where I linked up to a buoy to stop from us going adrift.

“It’s too deep to drop anchor,” I explained.

“I’m not worried.” He laid back against the side rail with his hands behind his head looking every inch the golden calendar guy I knew he was.

I got busy, opening my laptop, connected it to the sonar screen installed on the boat and began looking for anything underneath us. While that was running, I opened the box I kept onboard that held my water and air sample equipment.

When I turned around, the vial almost dropped from my hands. Chase had taken off his shirt and was sunning himself. My mouth watered. My eyes widened. He looked just as good in person as he did hanging up on my kitchen wall. His six-pack rippled under his golden-bronzed skin. His shades were on, but I knew he watched me.

I quickly bent over the side of the boat, giving him a view of the back of my toned, tanned hamstrings. I felt the bottom of my mesh workout shorts rise as I lowered myself further to drop the vials into the water. I heard his groan and smirked.

Since moving down to the shore my body had changed. I was fit but now I was tan

and even more toned than before. I pretended to feel hot so I fanned my face with my hand, schooling my expression in an effort to hide my game. My fingers lifted the edge of my tank. I yanked it over my head. My full B' cups were round and high in my coral bikini halter top. I had abs too. Maybe not a six-pack but definitely a four.

He sat up so fast the boat rocked. "Put your shirt back on!"

"Excuse me?" I furrowed my brow.

"You don't know the fire you are playing with."

"What? You took your shirt off first. It's hot. This is how I work. Deal with it."

He growled coming closer. The back of my thighs hit the fiberglass side of the boat. "Dinner tonight. You and me. Six o'clock." He towered over me, the words a command—a promise that spoke as much as his eyes did as he ripped his shades off, devouring every inch of my exposed skin.

Seconds passed as we stood studying one another. We were on the precipice and we both knew it. He brought a hand up as if to touch me. His head dipped; hesitated. Then he was gone, diving clear off the side of the boat. The air rippled past me with energy as he moved. My heart pounded. He was seconds away from touching me, kissing the heck out of me. I was sure of it. And I knew I wouldn't want him to stop.

I spun, watching as his head finally surfaced. His powerful arms cut through the swells. I was in danger of losing more than just the court case. I needed a plan, a way to play the player so to speak. I was in way over my head with this one. He made Wade seem like a toddler eating crayons. I knew I couldn't handle a man like Chase. I was... well me. And according to what Gran had told me about her boss, he was ruthless at schooling people in the boardroom. Once she told me he had buzzed her during a meeting, whispered in her ear to shred a contract into confetti and bring it

right back into the meeting. When she complied, he threw it up in the air and told the opposite firm that's what he thought of their demands. A new contract was made and executed and the partners had thrown him a champagne party after.

He was cunning, smart, charming, and funny. A lethal combination. He stopped short of being a dick but got his point across in many ways. I sighed, pushed the blowing strands of my hair back from my face and tried to stop the thoughts I was having.

He hoisted himself up over the side of the boat, salt water dripped off his body. I didn't even try hiding my interest. My hand itched to reach out and trace his pecs. My lips burned to feel his on them. I was almost done collecting all my data. Before I did something stupid, like jump him right there I whisked my shorts off diving right off the same side of the boat he had just climbed up.

But the swells were strong as the wind increased. I broke the surface only for water to crash over me. The waves kept breaking over my head. I swallowed what air I could before disappearing under the swells. My legs kicked as I desperately tried to surface again. I felt a strong pair of arms around me as I surfaced a second time.

“Chase?”

“I’ve got you. A wave crashed right over you as you came up.”

“I know. I was fine.”

“I don’t doubt it.” His strong thighs pressed against mine as he treaded water. His strong arms wrapped around my lower back. “I’m not playing games.” He stared intently at me.

“Aren’t you?”

“Maybe a few,” he admitted hoarsely. This time, there was no hesitation as his mouth descended. His top lip grabbed my bottom one. He kissed my lips first, got acquainted with them, before his tongue sought more. The waves picked up. One crashed right over us. He dragged me under the surface. His lips and mouth never leaving mine.

We both needed air but kept stealing each other’s. It was madness. But in that one moment, under the sea, it was just the two of us. No one and nothing could interfere—could touch what had sparked between us. I didn’t hate him, and he didn’t hate me. It was lust. Pure lust and wonder that we had found each other and already had known one another. Our kiss and hands spoke much more than either of us would admit.

We finally broke the surface, chest’s heaving, lungs burning. But nothing burned hotter than whatever was brewing between us. Together, we swam back to the side of

the boat, rested our arms on the top of the fiberglass side.

I turned to him. “I’m not... I don’t date a lot,” I stammered, trying to convey that I wasn’t a girl on the scene. Someone who used a dating app and dolled herself up.

He brought his thumb to my lip. “I know.” His eyes were serious as he looked at my upturned face.

“This can’t hurt my Gran. If we crash and burn, don’t take it out on her.”

Now his hand cupped the side of my face. “Oh, we’re definitely going to crash and burn. You can count on that.” His voice was rough sugar as his hands moved to my waist. Even while treading water he hoisted me up as if I weighed nothing to deposit me inside the boat.

I felt a playful swat on my behind as I climbed in. “You know what that’s for... there’s more coming.”

“I’m still suing you.”

His lips curved as he hoisted himself into my boat, forearms and biceps popping. “I still have your money.”

“You could give it back?”

“Maybe I will. Five hundred if you tell me which bra was yours... another eight for which bed you slept in and—two grand for confessing you want me. Want me so bad, you couldn’t sleep last night.”

“That’s extortion.”

“So? Sue me?” His cocky smirk was all Mr. Hotshot. My answer was two of my palms against his chest, pushing him back overboard. My heart rate was high again. He pushed every single one of my buttons. Every. Single. One. I tingled all over. Maybe I was having a heart attack. The kind that grabs ahold of you when you fall for someone so hard you wonder if you’ll ever get back up. He treaded water. Eyes still all over me. “I’m going to break you. And when I’m done, you’re going to tell me everything.”

“Really?” I crossed my arms. But that action only made my breasts lift even higher. He swallowed hard; my eyes watched the Adam’s apple at his throat work. I apparently affected him just as much as he did me. My palms sweated. “We need to get back in. The swells are picking up.” Roscoe barked nervously at Chase still in the water.

I handed him a towel as he climbed aboard. The boat rocked and swayed. I unhooked the line from the buoy before starting the engine. The wind picked up a few knots. I started the engine, steering us home.

My teeth started to chatter. Then warmth hit my back, wrapped around me like a hug as Chase stood front pressed to my back. His strong arms came around me. His chin rested on the top of my head. I was cocooned in his arms. But he was a gentleman and never touched the places where my body screamed. It had been too long for me and even when I was touched my nerves never sang like this for it.

When we reached the mouth of the small inlet, I throttled down the engine. Chase still stood behind me. As I pulled into the cove and prepared to dock, his hot lips found the top of my shoulder. “Tonight, beautiful.”

Then he was gone, grabbed his stuff and left before I had even fully docked. I took my time gathering my things, trying to clear my head. He had left as suddenly as he had appeared. Nerves and doubt started creeping back in. This was no longer about

my need to be right, or to win. Somehow the months of bickering correspondence faded into nothing. The only thing I wanted to win now—was him.

Twenty-Two

“What? It’s not like I stole you. I rescued you.” Daisy cocked her head as she sat at my feet. Her brown eyes bore into mine as if she was willing her doggy brain to teleport some piece of vital knowledge.

“Baby blue polo or baby pink?” I grinned, holding both shirts up to my chest in the mirror. She whined.

“Fine. I’ll go with blue.”

She whined some more, pawing at my ankle. “I know you miss her, but you’ll grow to love me.” I knelt to scratch her belly as she rolled to her back. “You were all over me last night, what changed?”

I had forced myself to leave Ryan before we had even docked. It was that or take her and the dog.

I wanted them both.

It was crazy.

Irrational.

I hadn't wanted a woman in months, being a slave to my shore house. Then bam. First spark was seeing her face pinned on a fridge. The second was meeting her last night and what made the fire spread was knowing she was the girl on the other side of the screen.

The one who made my blood boil. Made me toss and turn, swear in frustration, and fantasize about all the dirty things I wanted to do to her.

Now I had a face to match the name. A warm-blooded woman who made me itch to kiss her lips until they swelled. Fasten my hands in her hair. Caress her curves. Make her head spin. Maybe she was right when she said "kismet" last night.

All this time, I felt restless, gave up my playboy ways, searching for something when I didn't know what it was. The house helped eat away at the feeling I was missing something. I didn't know the thing I was missing was her. I don't even know her and yet it feels like I do. "Fuck, I'm making my own head spin." I grinned, giving Daisy one last scratch. "I'll be back in time to cuddle with you tonight, okay?"

"Looking dapper, bro." Heads turned as I walked out back, Daisy at my heels. Hunter, Char, and Bunny were finishing off their dinner. "Where are you taking her?" Hunter asked while his eyes were on Char's lips.

“On a romantic sunset picnic for two.”

“She’ll like that.”

I smiled at Bunny. “I feel like I already have a good read on our girl. Do you mind watching Daisy? Don’t sneak her any treats either. Daisy is going to start working out with me.”

“What happened this morning between the two of you?”

I feigned innocence as I turned my gaze to my PA. “What do you mean?”

“She was out of it at lunch. Kept staring at the waves, muttering incoherent responses and whenever your name came up her cheeks stained the color of a cherry tomato.”

“What did she say about me?”

“Bruh, you’re gone. Completely hooked on her line.” Hunter made a fishing motion with one arm while a reeling motion with his other.

“So?” I pumped Bunny.

“Nope. I’m not selling her out to you, you rascal. If you break her heart, I’ll quit and work for the enemy. Diersky.”

“Anyone but him, Bun-bun,” I groaned. “Oh, by the way, she figured out who I am.”

“Oh?” Everyone perked up at this news.

“Yep. She still insisted on seeing me in court and I said I’d give her all her money back for a kiss and tell type of thing...”

Bunny gasped, turned red and fanned her face. “Lawd, have mercy.”

“I wanted her to admit everything to me.”

“Admit or submit.” Hunter snorted.

I shrugged. “I don’t want to scandalize Bunny. Both would be nice though.”

“She’s a good girl; dated a real loser for way too long. She’s not... very...experienced with men like you.”

“Men like me? You’re wounding me Bun. And here I thought you were sweet on me.”

“You best have her home by eleven.”

“A curfew?”

“I’ll put full fat milk in your coffee and tell you it’s a new soy.”

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“Bun... you’re killing me. I have nothing but honorable intentions toward your granddaughter.”

“Honorable my ass.” Hunter coughed into his fist.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you trying to play footsies with my twin under the table.” I spoke without even breaking eye contact with Bunny.

“She started it.”

“That was my foot.” Bunny chimed in.

“I always wanted a sugar mama,” Hunter smiled.

“With your trust fund?” Charlie shook her head.

“I’ll be your sugar daddy any day of the week.”

“How about baby daddy?”

“Hell, no.” I waved my arms in the air forming an imaginary X.

“I have good genes. I’d be an excellent choice.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can the three of you look after Daisy while I’m on my date and Bunny—make sure Hunter doesn’t seduce my twin.”

“We don’t need a babysitter, bro.”

“No more repeats of the summer of 2010.”

“Bring her by later. I didn’t get a chance to meet her last night.”

“Where were you anyway?”

“I met some girls from UNC... we went for a night swim.”

“Naked?” Charlie snorted.

“Jealous?”

My twin’s cheeks heated. After my date with Ryan, I was seriously going to kick Hunter’s ass. He flirts with Char but never does more than talk a good game.

“I might bring her by. We’ll see how late it is. Oh, and Bunny—I’ve decided to work remotely for the next few weeks. You can Fed- Ex anything I might need here.”

“You’re sending me home on Monday but staying behind?”

“That about sums it up.”

“My poor Ryan has no idea what she’s in for.”

“If she takes after you at all, I’m sure she’ll handle me just fine.” I gathered a blanket, a candle, a good bottle of wine and headed to my car. I had ordered a nice spread to go from the best restaurant here. Thirty minutes later I was parking at her place.

I jogged up the back steps, knocked twice at her door, a bouquet of white peonies in

hand.

The door swung open. Ryan didn't look like she was dressed for a date, but my heart picked up speed just the same. Her hair was in a low ponytail. Her eyes red and a bit swollen.

"What's wrong?" I placed the flowers on the railing.

"You took her."

My shoulders dropped. "I can't help it. I fell in love. It was like that." I snapped my fingers while giving a soft smile. "I'll treat her like a queen. Hunter even took her out on his surfboard. She loved it. Char brushed her for about an hour and your gran well, she keeps sneaking her treats."

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She perked up a bit. “I didn’t think you were serious. Adopting a dog isn’t a whim. It’s for life.”

“I know what commitment is.”

She nodded and I swore she was trying to blink back tears. “I-I’m sorry. I just don’t think this is a good idea. I’m not feeling up to a date.”

“Chicken?” I challenged with one brow raised. “Because the ryanhill99 I know would never back down.”

“Did you bring a check?”

“Did you email the court to drop your suit?”

Her chin lifted. “I did nothing wrong.”

“I have all the evidence.” I leaned in closer, my breath moved a few hairs above her ear as I spoke into it. “Photographic evidence as well as all the party favors for court. Are you sure you still want Bunny there to defend you?”

I straightened. Her eyes were glassy. Her nipples peaked beneath her shirt. Cheeks flushed. “You smell good,” she muttered reluctantly.

“You taste even better.” My mouth latched onto hers before I could stop myself. I nipped her lips, speaking in between kisses. “You have been driving me crazy for months. Do you know how many nights I fantasized about sending you glitter

bombs? Tying you up while force feeding you gummy dicks until you felt sick and begged me to stop? Having my day with you in court? Once I had a face to match the name—my fantasies became a bit more wicked.” I walked her backward, kissing her as I did.

Her hands were on my shoulders, moved down my biceps before stroking back up my arms. Her touch was light but felt so good. My head lifted and I froze. There in her tiny apartment, tacked on a wall was one of my calendars. My face was...defaced. She had taken a black marker and drew devil horns above my head, given me a black beard and nipple rings?

“I was a bit angry about Daisy.”

“Did it make you feel better?”

“For about ten minutes.”

My lips twitched. “Well, don’t worry baby. You don’t need a calendar when you have me right here.” I took her hand, resting it across my chest, knowing she could feel how hard my heart was beating for her.

“This is madness. Insanity. I hated you for months....”

“And yet you want me?” She nodded biting her lip. “I don’t hate you, but I do want to punish you. We’ll get to that after date number five.”

“Thirteen.” She countered.

My brow lifted. “I can’t last that long.”

“Oh? You have stamina issues Mr. Esquire?”

I took a step back, turning her around with my hands. “Go get changed for our date before I decide to show you right here and now that stamina isn’t an issue for me.” I expected her to issue a quick retort. She fled to her room instead. I knew we both wouldn’t last past date three. This thing between us was burning hotter than ever, fueled by our previous communications. I wanted her so bad. Wanted to taste every inch of her skin. Feel her body moving under me. But most of all, I wanted her sleepy eyes on Sunday mornings as we hit snooze. I wanted her last thought at night before she drifted off to sleep. I wanted her in the passenger seat of my Tesla, singing old eighties tunes with my sunroof open. I wanted her in my kitchen, naked under one of my old sports jerseys while we sipped coffee and watched the waves. Hunter was right. I was caught. Hook. Line. And sinker.

Twenty-Three

“Favorite movie?” He asked, while plopping a fig into my mouth. I moaned. It was crunchy while sweet. He was seducing me one dish at a time with his heartfelt questions, needing to know everything about me while insisting on hand feeding me. It was a turn on like I’d never had before. A seduction of the senses. His slow, deliberate foreplay was making me want to be the aggressor, yank his head to mine demanding he have his wicked way with me.

I gave him an answer instead. “The Notebook. I watched it with Gran last Christmas.”

“After your old boyfriend broke up with you?”

I lifted my wine, took a tiny sip, “Gran is off her rocker. How much did she tell you?”

He smirked. “My charm works wonders. Granny sold you out. Anyway. I’m glad he dumped you...” The spot between my legs was feeling needy and tingly and he made things worse by taking the pad of his index finger and running it across my lower lip.

It was only our first official date but felt like we were already together. The only thing missing was sealing the deal. “What’s your one childhood memory that sticks out more than the rest?”

I sat back, eyes managing to get a glimpse of a shooting star. “The summer I turned ten and I thought my father still gave a crap about me. He got a big bonus check, took me to Hershey park as a treat. We went on every rollercoaster and he let me eat chocolate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I was sick for two days after, but it was worth it.”

Chase grinned. “My father never hit or yelled at us. He was a lover. Too much of one.” I winced, hoping Chase didn’t follow in his footsteps. Insecurity came out of its hiding spot. “I’m nothing like him. I haven’t dated since before I bought the beach house. No one was worth my time.”

“After Wade, I just lost myself in the research program. As I should anyway.”

“How are you liking it so far?”

“I am loving it.” I grinned.

“Bunny told me the story of how he bought his way in.”

I shrugged. “God still found a way for me.”

“You found your own way,” he answered, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I probably had some help from above.”

“She misses your Pops.”

“He was the best.”

“You have his boat?” I nodded, trying not to cry. “Hey, I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

I lowered my glass of wine, feeling bold. “Then make me feel something else.” I responded huskily. The sun had set an hour ago. Light from the candles he brought flickered between us.

He sucked in a breath. We sat facing each other on the beach blanket. He rose to his knees, cupped my face as he gazed deeply into my eyes for seconds.

It was a silent promise that this was happening. My eyes fluttered shut at the first feel

of his lips on mine. A groan ripped out of my throat, was lost under the crashing of the waves as his tongue danced with mine.

I fell on my back, he leaned over me resting his weight on an elbow. My hands wrapped around him. I sighed, lifting my hips as his mouth moved to the side of my neck. We kissed under the stars to the rhythm of the waves. He didn't touch me where I burned. Didn't let his hips fall to press against the place I was on fire for him. He still maintained utter control as we lost ourselves in soft sighs, whispered words, and passionate kisses.

"I feel like I'm fifteen again losing my head over a girl under the waving sea grass on the dunes." He rolled away, tucking one arm behind his head. I curled up against his side feeling a bit cold. My head rested against his chest as he wrapped his free arm around me.

"What was her name?"

"Amelia. But she never made my head spin the way you do."

"Are you going back to the city tomorrow?"

"Why? Already missing me?"

"You? Hardly. Daisy definitely."

"Liar. You'll miss me more."

"She snores. But is as warm as a small electric heater."

"You sleep with her?"

“Sometimes. She’ll cry at night unless you let her in your bed.”

“Maybe you should stay over and show me how it’s done. There’s plenty of room.”

I was tempted but wasn’t sure if he was teasing or serious. “You’ll figure it out.”

“I’ve never doubted my skills in bed. I’ll start with a cuddle, maybe a slow massage if her joints hurt...”

“Stop!” I giggled, smacking his stomach, only to feel his hard abs tighten under my hand.

“We better go. A man only has so much self-control and it is only our second date.”

“Second?”

He rolled to his side facing me, giving me two quick hard kisses. “Yep. The first was this morning.”

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“That doesn’t count.”

“Does, too. We spent time together, shared food. That fits the definition of a date. Plus, you kissed me.”

“What? You kissed me!”

“Semantics... it happened.”

“You are so cocky!”

“And here I was hoping you’d think I was charming and fun.”

“You’re those things, too.”

“Admit it. I’m your perfect man.”

I evaded his teasing remark... “How did you end up in a calendar anyway?”

“Now that’s a story...”

We packed up our things. He insisted on carrying it all, while still somehow managing to keep a hand free to hold mine. Our fingers interlaced as we walked up the beach path back to his car. “... and then the bathing suit ripped. She handed me the American flag one. I was a bit angry; it was cold, and I had a million emails to get to. But I can never stay mad at Charlie for long. After the photo shoot, I took her on a drive down memory lane. Ended up at the beach house. There was a ‘for sale’ sign

out front. And the rest is history.”

I paused, looked up at his handsome face wanting to burn every hard line into memory. “No. It’s not history, it’s only just beginning.” I stood up on my toes to reach his mouth. “I am deeply sorry about what happened. Please don’t take your listing off because of what Hannah did.”

He shrugged. “Suddenly I don’t want to share it anymore. It’s become home... and I’m not leaving tomorrow. Everyone else is though. It’ll just be me and Daisy... and you.”

I was in big trouble. It took me a month to sleep with Wade and here I was barely 24hours in to knowing Chase in the flesh and I was ready to give him all of me. “Daisy might be a bit confused. She might need help adjusting. I should probably stop by and check in on her.”

“It’s still early. Come back to the house?”

I nodded, knowing we wouldn’t be alone. “We can’t keep dancing around what happened.”

He paused, “It was months ago. I’m over it.”

“Are you?”

“Mostly.” He smiled as we continued walking.

“I am very sorry about your couch.”

His body tensed; his left fist clenched. “The only thing I want to know but dread the answer to—was if you hooked up in my house?”

“No. That was someone else with the stripper.”

He blew out a breath. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

I nodded. The drive back to the house was silent but heavy with the desire that was running like a current. The house was lit but silent. We took the path around back. He tugged me forward, our hands interlocked as we joined his sister and Gran around the beach fire. Chairs were set up not far from the burning logs. Someone had set up a pair of wooden poles deep in the sand where a strand of solar string lights twinkled as they looped between.

“How was your date?” Gran got straight to it.

“I’m not sure. It’s not over yet.” I replied smoothly, earning a wink from Chase as he sank into an Adirondack chair pulling me onto his lap.

“You’re acting as if we’re already a couple.” I hissed, trying to free myself from the arms locked around my waist. More people joined the circle by the fire. All staring. I knew without asking most were his co-workers. They were all sizing me up, assessing if I was worthy.

Someone passed me a can of sparkling wine. Conversation and laughter flowed easily. Chase never loosened his hold on me once, not even when Daisy yipped as she trotted across the sand, launching herself in my lap. But she didn’t gaze at me and beg to be pet. Her eyes were on my man. Well technically more her man than mine. For now.

The conversation petered out as a man walked across the sand. The strap to his guitar was around one of his broad shoulders. He was as tall as Chase but dark haired where Chase’s was all gold. He was tan. Fit. But I only had eyes for the man whose arms I was in while every other female turned theirs on the man with the guitar probably

sensing Chase already claimed two females.

He sat down in the sand, started strumming a few chords. I gasped in surprise at his strong, baritone voice belted out better than Harry Styles did his own tune. “Watermelon sugar high.” The man’s gaze lifted to Charlie as he sang. Once he caught her eyes the two of them never broke their gaze. Chase swore under his breath, women sighed at the romance of the moment. Charlie was in love. I knew it. Saw it, Sensed it. She didn’t hide her emotions.

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“I warned him, and he just won’t let it go.”

“Why are you so upset?” I whispered. Stroking my fingers up and down his forearm, trying to comfort him.

“Hunter plays girls’ hearts like the strings on his guitar. Char’s among them.”

“By the way he’s looking at her I don’t think it’s a game.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Hunter’s my best friend and Char’s my twin. It’s a recipe for disaster. Whose side will I be on when it blows up?” But we both knew he’d always pick his twin.

“Come with me.” I stood, reaching out for his hand.

“Where are we going?”

“On a moonlit walk.”

Daisy followed at our heels as I led Chase away from Hunter and his adoring fans. We walked slowly. Our bare feet made tracks in the wet sand. “Sometimes you need to let people figure things out for themselves. Even if they end up getting hurt. Maybe just maybe—they’ll decide the high was worth the pain. Or better yet maybe they’ll find something worth holding onto. Move out of their way. Because the thing I’ve learned is you can’t control what other people decide they want for themselves. It will happen, no matter how much you will it not to.”

He blew out a breath. “Smart and beautiful. You know what? I think it was kismet. You. Me. The house. Bunny. Somewhere. Somehow... some force in the universe started a thread, sewing all of it together.”

“I-I wasn’t even looking for someone like you. Didn’t even dream of a summer romance. I’ve been so focused on my studies, the shelter... just enjoying getting to know myself. Does that sound incredibly strange? I didn’t even know myself.”

“Not at all. That’s what renovating the house did for me. Who knew I’d enjoy roofing? Sanding floors and gardening?”

“Stop,” I giggled. “You garden?”

He wiggled his brows. “My hands are good at all sorts of things.”

I cleared my throat. How the heck was I going to last against him? The pull to be with him was as strong as the outgoing tide. “Don’t stand in the way of their kismet. Maybe a thread was strung for them too.”

“Hunter and Char?” He grunted. “More like my nightmare scenario.”

“Why? What else are you so afraid of?”

He shrugged. “That they’ll love each other more than me? That I’ll get left behind?” It was a vulnerable confession. One I wasn’t expecting.

“If that happens be happy for them. New love won’t replace the old. It’ll just mean more. Besides, you’ll have Daisy and maybe a new girlfriend. Addition by subtraction.”

“Maybe? I’d say probably, definitely.” We kissed until we forced ourselves to stop.

“But I’m still going to kick his ass if he hurts her.”

“I won’t stop you if that happens. But until then, behave.”

“Fine. I’m a sucker for you. Do you know that?”

“I never thought I’d fall under the spell of Mr. Hot-shot homeowner.”

“Is that what you called me?”

“That among other things in my head.”

“Tell me more.”

“Never.”

“Fine. I’ll kiss and tickle all your secrets out of you!”

I shrieked as he found my tickle spot just under my ribs. I took off sprinting through the surf. Daisy barked as she galloped after me, Chase not far behind. He picked me up by the waist and swung me around. Somehow Daisy got between our legs, in an effort to avoid stepping on her Chase lost his balance. The two of us tumbled into the surf, him landing on top of me.

‘Well, I’m not one to let an opportunity go to waste, darlin’.’ He drawled.

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“We’ve kissed more today than I did my last boyfriend in a month.”

His jaw worked. “I don’t ever want to hear about you belonging to another man. You got that?”

He swallowed my response with his mouth. The waves broke behind us, frothy surf covering our torso and legs. Neither of us cared until the whistles of other people on the beach brought us back to Earth.

“Damn girl. I forget the world when I kiss you.” He helped me up. We were both soaked. My clothes clung tight to my body, something his eyes didn’t miss. Unlike him, I couldn’t just whip my shirt off. He had no problem doing that, roping the wet fabric behind his neck like a towel. He whistled the same song Hunter had played as we walked hand-in-hand back to the bonfire.

“Whoa. What happened to the two of you? A little midnight swim?” Hunter baited. All Chase’s company smirked. My face heated. All we did was kiss. He didn’t even try for second base or press his hips into mine. And I was more than interested in feeling his package.

“Daisy chased a tennis ball into the surf. The tide was going out. We both jumped in to save her.”

“Liar,” he breathed, tucking me into his side. “Come on. You can borrow something dry before I take you home.”

No one mentioned that the dog was bone dry as I followed Chase into the house.

“That was awkward. They all think we went skinny dipping.”

“We will. Eventually.” He flashed me that cocky smile as he led me into the laundry room. He opened the dryer, handing me a soft gray DUKE T-shirt. It was still warm as he placed it in my hands. The threads thinner and worn as if he had it a long time.

“It’s my favorite.”

Next, he handed me a pair of basketball shorts but at least it had an elastic waist and drawstring. I went into the downstairs bathroom to change. The laundry smelled of him mixed with a familiar detergent. It was warm on my skin. I hadn’t worn any mascara so there was no makeup streaking down my face. But my skin glowed. He made me glow and we hadn’t even gone far yet. I turned off the light, balled my wet clothes and went into the kitchen.

“Ryan?”

“Hey Gran.”

“Is he... being nice to you?”

“He’s been a perfect gentleman.”

“He better.” She looked worried as she rinsed her wine glass in the sink.

“Is this weird for you?”

“No.” Her eyes twinkled. “If I were forty years younger... he’d be just my cup of tea. Better for you though than me. I had my run. A good one too. I’m off to bed. I figure I’d take Daisy with me.”

“You’re going back to Raleigh tomorrow.”

She nods. “But I have a feeling I’ll be back soon.”

“Or I could come visit you?”

“I’d love that. You’ll have to come surprise Chase at the office.”

I bit my lip. “I don’t know. That seems a bit aggressive to just show up at his work.”

“Nonsense. You’d be visiting your granny. Think about it.”

“Okay.”

“Ready?” I turned my head. Chase stood in the doorway, arms crossed as he took me in wearing his things,

“She could’ve borrowed some clothes from me.” Charlie ducked under his arm.

“Maybe I wanted her to wear mine.” The heat in his gaze had Gran blushing. Gran handed me a bag for my clothes, and we hugged goodbyes.

It was after midnight, but as Chase drove us through the streets, groups of people were out. The bars would be open until two. It was the holiday weekend, and no one wanted it to end it seemed. Music spilled out into the night from cars, parties, and beach bars.

I didn’t want the night to end but I knew it had to. Chase pulled over and parked outside the shelter and walked me up the back steps. “I’m not going to kiss you good night because it’ll lead to a kiss good morning.” The pads of his fingers skimmed my cheek. “Goodnight beautiful.”

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“Goodnight.” I bit the inside of my cheek as he jogged down the stairs. My apartment seemed empty. Something it had never felt before. Daisy was gone. He was gone. After the crowds at the beach and his full house, life on this side of the inlet felt so lonely. I took a long shower, put his clothes back on. But I tossed and turned unable to sleep. I found myself inside the shelter, perusing cages. An orange Tabby, meowed, pushing herself against the metal trying to reach my fingers. Ginger was new. Sweet. Her owner had passed away and the heirs didn’t want a cat. Just the money. I took her out, cradling her to my chest. Roscoe whined. I caved and took him too. He hogs the bed, sometimes has gas, but I needed comfort tonight. Somehow, we all settled in. Roscoe at my feet and the cat next to me. I stared at the ceiling remembering his kiss in the ocean, how for a second, he let himself sink down on me. My breasts ached. My body thrummed with need. Between my legs the honey was warm and waiting for him. Sighing, I picked up my phone, opening the rental app.

From:

To: homeowner1278

SUBJECT: Info

Pink. Light pink silk. And I slept in the room overlooking the hot tub.

He answered almost immediately.

From: homeowner12678

To:

SUBJECT: Info

Babe. You're killing me. I'm here right now. Imagining you in it. I gave my sister the master. We've technically slept in the same bed.

P.S.

I kept your panties for court. You know. Evidence and all that.

My face heated. He had my thongs. Groaning, I rolled out of bed. Ginger growled and hissed as the mattress shook her awake. "Ugh cats. You think you rule us humans."

I took a cold shower. Very cold, using the icy spray to cool all my jets. I thought about taking care of business but decided waiting for Chase would be worth all the sweet torment. I knew Mr. July would set off a firework show the likes of which my body had never seen. I turned up the AC and crawled under the covers carefully as to not piss off the cat. If I couldn't sleep wrapped in Chase's arms. The company of a grumpy tabby and an oversized lab was better than being alone with no one at all.

Twenty-Four

It took me a minute to wake up. Roscoe did some weird doggie moan as he rolled, stretching his paws in the air. Ginger blinked, looked offended as my movements jostled her. It was almost ten. I never slept that late. I put my hair in a ponytail, slipped into my sandals and took them both outside. Roscoe did his business while I cuddled the cat.

"Hey."

Steve was inside, looking at the paperwork on the counter. "Are you okay? Daisy

went to a good guy. I did his background check in ten minutes. Your grandmother was on his list of contacts. I thought you'd be fine then I noticed the two empty crates this morning."

"I got used to her. Loved her. But yeah, I'm fine. I couldn't offer her a permanent home right now being an undergrad."

"Here. Your new boyfriend dropped this by. He didn't want to wake you. Imagine my surprise when I realized he was the guy who adopted Daisy yesterday."

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"Huh, weird." Steve, smiled.

A bouquet of beautiful blue hydrangeas in a glass sat on a counter next to a card and... my favorite coffee in a to-go cup from the café around the block. Inside the card was three-thousand dollars in cash.

Faster than a check. I'm sorry, too. But I don't regret how you lit my mind on fire before my body. The flowers are from my garden. I planted them myself. Call me later: 919-208-1550

Chase

I heated up my coffee in the microwave Steve had in his office. "Your professor put in papers for Roscoe."

"Did she? She joked about it enough. What am I going to do, with all my favorites leaving me?"

"New ones will come. We'll be full in September just like we are every year."

I shook my head. “Poor cuties.”

“Go. Get out of here. I’ve got everything covered.” I took my coffee down to the dock, sat on Pop’s boat, dangling my legs over the side. I scrolled through my email until I found the one from the small claims clerk, quickly writing a message that I was withdrawing my suit and that we settled out of court.

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I knew it was my money, but it felt weird, like I was taking his. I sent him a text.

Me: Thank you for the flowers and coffee. You're spoiling me. I withdrew my suit this morning. I guess, we'll never know who would've won in court.

Chase: Me of course.

I rolled my eyes.

Me: Still Mr. Cocky Hot-Shot Homeowner.

Chase: What are you doing later?

Me: Taking my new boyfriend out on a date.

Chase: Who might that be?

Me: My calendar guy.

Chase: Good thing you stole spares after you defaced his handsomeness.

Me: You have no idea what I did with those spares... they've seen me naked.

Chase: Babe. I'm dying here.

Me: I'll pick you up at six.

Chase: I'll pick you up.

Me: My date. My rules. Don't be so misogynistic. I'm taking you out.

Chase: A woman in control... I like it.

I spent my day finishing up a thesis I was working on, texted Dr. Winnfield about Roscoe then planned my date. Dinner was so cliché. He already took me on a beach picnic.... Movies we couldn't talk. The sun wouldn't set until 8:30. Paddle boarding. I'd take him paddle boarding. Steve had a spare. I texted Chase:

Me: Wear workout clothes.

Chase: ???

Me: Just do it. Stop needing to be in control all the time.

Chase: I lost all control the second our worlds first collided.

I put my tankini on with a pair of work out shorts over the bottoms. It didn't take long to attach my paddleboard on the roof rack of my Jeep. I lifted up the one Steve left out back next to it. Packed a cooler with water bottles and sunscreen, made sure my car was neat and tidy before pulling out. My hair was in a French braid, but a few strands never stayed put. I was tan, proud of my toned arms and legs and when I stepped out of my Jeep, Hunter did a double take before whistling. "Legs. I'm calling you legs. Pretty boy is inside trying to figure out which workout tee makes his muscles look better for you."

I stepped up to the porch. "I thought you were leaving today."

"Houseguests and laundry start smelling after three days," Chase called out. "He

wouldn't leave."

"Why would I when all the hot girls are still here?" Hunter tipped back his long neck bottled beer to his lips.

"Who took my gran home?"

"Patrice from accounting."

Chase opened the screen door coming out. "Sorry, I was filling Daisy's water bowl since trust fund baby over here will probably forget. Paddle boarding?"

I nodded.

"Bro, she's a dream girl. Lock that up."

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Chase rolled his eyes. “I thought Char was your dream girl. See what I mean?”

I laughed. “I hope you’re into it.”

“He’s definitely into it,” Hunter interrupted.

“Ignore him. He’s an overgrown infant.”

“I’ll remember that when you ask me to be your best man!” he called out as I backed out.

I drove over to a public launch on the bayside where the water was calm like smooth glass. I reached up, unstrapping the fasteners holding the paddle boards, turning as Chase hoisted them off one by one.

“What?” I blushed. Chase wouldn’t take his eyes off me.

“I’ll tell you someday.”

“Um, okay. How’s Daisy? Did you remember her eyedrops?”

“She’s happy. Spoiled already. Hunter already called dibs on having her sleep in his room tonight.”

I shook my head. “He’s funny. Charming and can sing.”

“Charlie’s still here.”

“Let it be.”

“I’m trying.”

We each got on a board gently paddling out. The sun was sinking but there was still plenty of light. The sky was turning from blue to orange and pink hues. “There’s a peacefulness out here. Everything’s perfect. No matter what’s happening in the world I feel everything will be okay. Nature assures me. Gives me confidence that everything always works out the way it’s supposed to. Just like the moon triggers the tides and chases the sun.”

“There is something about the ocean. It draws you in. I’ve always felt more at home here than anywhere else.”

“Me too. I never want to leave.”

He smiled. “I’ve never dated anyone like you. You boat, paddleboard, drive a Jeep with no roof and cuddle with homeless dogs.”

I shrugged. “I suck at bowling. Can’t draw a straight line with a pencil. Can’t cook like my Gran—”

“Well, that’s the deal breaker right there.” I lifted my paddle, splashing water at him. “I needed this.”

“What do you mean?”

“This whole weekend, meeting you. It was all a set-up. Bunny came into my office last month asking if I could read over your court filing. She wanted to help you. Hunter and I crashed her bridge night. You made me curious. I had to meet you and not in court. So, I came up with the idea of a 4th of July party at the shore house and

invited my co-workers. Most of them had already rented places down here for the weekend anyway. Bunny didn't know I planned this whole thing out to meet you, so don't be mad at her."

"I'm not mad. I'm flattered. Since we are confessing, when the power went out, I climbed on a kitchen stool to hunt for candles and flashlights. They were behind your Christmas box. I only took the top calendar. I don't know what made me do it; the next day I was putting things back and just grabbed the whole box."

"Was it me or Mr. December? He was pretty jacked."

"It was you. The sexy smirk that oozed confidence. Your 'I don't give a damn' attitude grabbed me. Your abs didn't hurt either."

"Ryan Hill, it's our third date and I already want hundreds more."

"Second."

"Third."

I rolled my eyes humoring him. "Okay..."

"Will you be my girl? I have no interest in dating anyone but you."

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“I still have one more full year of school. Then my master’s program. Probably a Ph.D. after that.”

“I have no problem calling you doctor.”

“I won’t put my dreams on hold for a relationship.”

“I’ll never ask you too. Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way. We can save the details of long-distance for date number four.”

“It’s not that far.”

“It’s not. Besides, while I’m slaving away on contracts you can save marine life, uninterrupted by my charm. But the weekends are all mine.”

“It’ll be dark soon. I made reservations at Sharky’s. I’m buying. Someone left me an envelope of cash this morning.”

We paddled in. Sharky’s was a popular beach bar but everyone wore bathing suits and flip flops. They were known for the freshest catches of the day. We had a table on the beach with a flickering candle between us. Potted palm trees with twinkle lights marked the edges of the restaurant’s perimeter in the sand. A live band was playing beats.

“Well, well. It’s Mr. July.”

Chase stiffened at the guy approaching our table with two giggling girls under each

arm. He was drunk. They all were. The smell of beer came from all of them. His eyes were glassy, his feet unsteady.

“Beat it, Diersky.”

“Don’t be rude. I was offended I didn’t get invited to your party last night, but you can make it up to me by buying us a round. He pulled a chair over to join us. Right as he was about to sit down Chase kicked a leg. The chair fell back and Diersky hit sand.

“Son of a bitch!” He roared.

Chase stood over him. “Get lost. Now.”

“You think you’re so tough, Carmichael? I’ll kick your ass.”

“Try it. You can’t best me at anything. Not in the office, not here.” The man’s eyes shifted past Chase, settling on me. “That’s your girl? That tomboy with no tits?”

Chase moved fast. Picked the man up by the collar of his shirt. His free fist had cocked back. “No.” I stilled him with my hand. Chase was shaking with rage.

By now security was almost here. “He’s drunk. Fell in the sand. I was helping him up. He’s way over the limit. You might need to call a cop.”

“No, I’m good. We’re leaving.”

Chase sat back down but our date now had a dark cloud hanging over it. “What was that about?”

“Diersky works at the same firm. He’s always been jealous of my success. Tries to

undermine me at every turn. He knew if they called the cops, he'd get fired. Our partners don't mess around with their public image. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for what's not your fault."

"You're beautiful. I mean it." His hand covered mine. He stood, moved his chair right next to me. Instead of sitting across from me, his side pressed against mine. I rested my head on his shoulder as we sipped our drinks, listened to the notes from the band mix with the surf and just enjoyed the simplicity of it.

"Come home with me tonight?" The words fell from my lips before I could stop them.

"I'll think about it," he winked.

"I mean. The new season of Creed MC is out on Netflix."

"You want me to come over to watch it with you?"

"Yes. What did you think I was asking?" Somehow, I kept a straight face. I smacked his arm, blushing. Our food came out saving me from further embarrassment. We chatted easily about my thesis paper; he spoke briefly about his work. I had so much knowledge about him for only two days. I had my cash out as the waitress came, but she wouldn't take my money. It seemed Chase pulled a fast one, paying when he excused himself. I lost my nerve about driving him to my place. So, I took him home.

"I thought we were going to your place?"

"Your TV is bigger."

"I'll make popcorn." Chase left me to turn on Netflix. He came back with drinks and a large bowl. His arm curved around my shoulders. Daisy jumped up next to us.

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“Is this Creed Season two? The one where Devon shows up in Springdale?”

Hunter plopped down, shoved his hand in our popcorn bowl and made himself comfortable.

“You’re crashing my date.”

“So? You do it to me all the time.” Hunter’s eyes never left the tv screen.

“What are you talking about?”

“Last Christmas. Last night. Take your pick,” he trailed off.

“Creed two is out? Ah, did you see the previews of the actor playing Rog?” Char squeezed in next to Hunter, lifted the bowl of popcorn off my lap as Hunter put an arm around her.

We watched six episodes before we hit pause to make more popcorn and refill our drinks. “Are you and Chase official yet?”

I turned to Hunter and shrugged. “I was still suing him until this morning.”

He waved his hand. “Foreplay. That’s all it was all this time. You really made him hot. We were at the gym when he got one of your messages on the app. He was so fired up he set a personal best on chest press. I thought he was going to pop a nerve. Now he’s popping something else.”

“Are you always so... crass?”

“I lived in a Frat for way too long. I just call it like it is. Chase is too serious. He needs to loosen up and take that stick out of his ass.”

I started laughing. “That’s exactly what I said to him on the app.”

“No shit?”

“What’s going on?” Charlie came back from the kitchen with Chase behind her.

“Nothing. Ryan and I are just getting to know one another.” Hunter placed a hand on my knee. Chase narrowed his eyes, slapped it away as he sat down, pulling me onto his lap away from Hunter.

He retaliated by grabbing Charlie and doing the same.

Chase growled.

Char rolled her eyes. “Boys. We’re not doing this. You’re going to ruin the show.” She hit play. I tried not to squirm as the scene came on where one of the main character’s best friends meets a handsome hottie in the woods at a summer bonfire where he seduces her into a puddle of mush. They got naked and it was hot watching the actor kiss her breasts. I think Hunter groaned. I could see why Char liked him. He was handsome, honest, and put himself out there instead of being ashamed of hiding anything.

Chase fingers inched under the hem of my shirt. I bit my lip as they traced tiny circles under my navel. My breath hitched; my heart picked up speed as we watched the actors on the screen fall into something.

Chase turned his head slightly; his lips found the spot right behind my ear. When he stood suddenly I was caged between his body and the ottoman. “Ryan and I are going upstairs to make out for a little bit. Be good.”

“Bro, you’re killing me.” Hunter bit a fist as his eyes went from us to the tv.

“Remember I have cameras down here. If you make a move on Charlie, I’ll know.”

I’d be embarrassed by his bold statement if I wasn’t so turned on. Chase grabbed my hand as he led me upstairs into the master bedroom. As soon as the door shut behind me, he turned the lock. The look in his eyes made my knees weak. He took his shirt off. But left his shorts on. Then hands found the hem of my tank top. I still had my tankini bathing suit top on underneath. His warm hands went to my shoulders, rolled the strap down until the fabric moved enough to free my breasts.

“Beautiful,” he sucked in a breath, hands roaming over my mounds, fingers circling the hardened points. Then his head was there taking turns tasting them both. My eyes closed. My hands buried in the back of his golden head. He lifted me, placed me on his bed. My legs opened for him to climb between. This time he let his hips rock into mine.

“Chase,” I hissed.

“I know baby.” His lips were everywhere as we writhed on the bed. My hands reached under the elastic band at his waist, reaching for him. He groaned my name as my hands wrapped around him. I pumped him in my fist as his mouth fastened to mine. Our tongues mated the way the rest of our bodies wanted to. He grabbed one of my hands, laced our fingers together, raising it high on the pillow while his other cupped my mound through my shorts. He molded it. Caressed it. Pressed hard, then light. I screamed into his kiss as I came hard just from the pressure of his hands.

I felt his smirk against my lips. But then he moved his hand inside my clothes, to play with the bud that had already had its release. “Chase! I can’t it’s too much!”

“You can and you will,” he growled. His mouth found a nipple, sucked, and pulled on it as he vaulted me to the stars a second time.

I scooted down, attempted to return the favor when his hand stayed me. “No, baby. Tonight, is about you.”

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“Then give me what I want.” I challenged. I wanted to taste him, make him reach the stars too.

He hissed my name as I got my way. “Tastes better than the gummy ones,” I whispered right before he shuddered and fell back on the bed.

“Stay,” he whispered, stroking my hair as I moved to get up.

“I can’t. We need to make it at least to date number thirteen.”

He groaned. “Now you understand why I’ve been fighting you over how many we’ve had.”

“I’m not a virgin or a slut. I just... I’m afraid of getting hurt again.” He turned his head on the pillow, his hand, stroking mine.

“I’m not that fuck you dated. Look, I’m hardly a saint. I was on a few hook-up apps last year. I quit, cold when I realized I wanted something more. I wasn’t sure what that was until you. We’ll slow this down. This weekend we just collided after months of pent-up feelings that changed quickly. But I’m not going to lead you on into something I’m not willing to see through. And I’ve never cheated. I hate cheaters. Watching my father rip my family apart was enough to make sure I never wanted to be like him.”

I nodded suddenly feeling like I was going to cry and not exactly knowing why. “I need to go.”

“Are you sure? Stay, I’ll just hold you.” I hesitated, thought of my apartment that felt empty these past few nights. “Take a shower, help yourself to my clothes. I’m going to make sure Hunter hasn’t gotten past second base with Char while I take Daisy out.”

I bit my lip nodded and went into his bathroom. I took a hot shower, found one of his workout shirts and crawled into his bed. He came in some time later, took his own shower and curled up behind me. “Good night, beautiful.” He kissed the back of my neck as his thick forearm, wrapped around my waist, pulling me back into him. He moved a leg over mine, anchoring me to him. “I sleep with the ac on full arctic blast. I don’t want you getting cold. By the way, sleeping counts as date number four. In the colonial days I believed they called it ‘bundling.’ The couple would go to bed after their version of a date, but the girl would be sewn into the quilt like a sleeping bag.”

“How do you know this?”

“Eighth grade American history. North Carolina is full of American history. A lot of Scots were sent to settle the colonies and push west after they lost their battle for freedom against the crown. Wilmington was the port the Royal Navy used to bring them all here.”

“I’m very impressed with your patriotic knowledge Mr. July.” I turned in his arms, finding his lips, peppering them with kisses.

“Stop, wench. I’m trying to behave here.”

“You’ll just have to sew me in.”

“Date number four?”

“Date number four,” I agreed as we kissed deeply before he pulled back forcing me to

sigh as he spooned me again. “I changed my mind. Forget thirteen. My new number is six.”

“Not five?” He chuckled against my hair.

“The way you keep count, five will be coffee and toast.”

Twenty-Five

“Did you reach her?”

“No. Her phone still goes straight to voicemail.”

Bunny smirked, as she continued clicking away on her keyboard.

“Don’t say it.” I warned.

“Nope. Not a word from me.”

My hair was sticking up in the back. My usually crisp, starched shirts had a few wrinkles and pieces of dog hair on it. I was called back to Durham for important meetings. My plans to work remotely dissipated before I could implement them. Instead of date number five with my girl, she left on the research vessel to go tag sharks in the Bahamas for a week. We had our one magical weekend and then bam, life slammed into us disrupting our plans.

My cell buzzed. Shit. It was the management company that runs the building my condo’s in.

“Mr. Carmichael?”

“Yes?”

“We’re receiving multiple complaints again today about the sound of a wailing dog coming from your unit.”

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I pinched the bridge of my nose. “My apologies. She’s a rescue and used to being with people or other animals during the day.”

“Something needs to be done. We’re receiving too many complaints.”

My eyes fell to the watch at my wrist it was only 11:30. “Hold my calls Bun. I’m going home to get Daisy.”

“What? Are you crazy?” She hissed. “You have a partner meeting at one. And Adams has a nasty allergy to pet dander.”

I smirked. “Adams is on his way out. I’ll be doing him a favor if he leaves early due to watery eyes.”

“You devil.”

“That’s what your granddaughter said,” I winked. She blushed. “Just kidding Bun. But we would have good looking babies admit it.”

“Don’t tease an old lady with the thought of great grand-babies. That’s just cruel.”

“You’ll have to settle for a great-gran-furbaby then.”

“You are going to get me in trouble.” She wagged a finger.

“Trouble is my middle name.”

“As long as it’s not heartbreaker.”

“That would be Hunter’s.”

It only took me fifteen minutes to get back home. I grimaced, hearing Daisy’s pitiful howls as soon as I exited the elevator.

“Daddy’s home, baby!” I called out as she ran to me. “What did you do?” Her tail sagged. “You tp’d my condo?”

A roll of toilet paper was torn, shredded and everywhere. Her water bowl was tipped over. But at least she didn’t relieve herself.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. You are coming to work, ok?”

I clipped on her pink leash, picked up her water bowl, a box of treats, and left. I didn’t have time to clean.

“That was fast.”

I pressed a finger to my lips indicating Bunny should zip it. I had Daisy under one arm with my suit coat draped over to shield her from view.

“Put her under your desk.”

“That makes me an accomplice.” But her chair rolled back.

I deposited Daisy in the space where Bunny’s legs were, gave her a treat and retreated to the boardroom.

The meeting was long. Boring. Diersky somehow snuck his way in, uninvited as he

wasn't even close to making partner. He caught my scowl returning fire with his middle finger. I rolled my eyes and took notes on the meeting. When it was over, I didn't waste any time heading back to my office.

"How's little tits doing?"

My fist clenched but I ignored him. He was trying to goad me into fucking up my life by breaking his nose at work.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't seen your sister since the Christmas party two years ago."

His face turned purple, but he bit his tongue as I rounded the corner where clients waited in the lobby area.

"One day you'll get yours Carmichael."

I stopped short. "What's your deal, Diersky? I never did a thing to you."

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“Your father fucked Ma. Busted up my parents’ marriage. I never forgot the guy’s name. Carmichael. Was blonde like you too.”

I grimaced so hard my teeth gnashed. “I had nothing to do with that or him. Take your beef elsewhere.”

He was still pissed and looking to fight but I left him behind, pretended to show Bunny the report in my hand and waited for him to leave before scooping up Daisy and bringing her into my office.

This day was fucked. Only thoughts of my golden girl kept me from going into a completely black mood. I missed her. But I would never stand in the way of her dreams or opportunities. Heck I wish I could be with her tagging sharks, living on a boat. Instead, I was stuck in a high rise going over legal papers. At least Daisy was with me. But I needed a permanent solution. I couldn’t leave her home alone and would get caught sneaking her into the office building eventually. I opened a web browser typing in ‘service dog.’ Ten minutes later I had a plan. I’d have to pull a few strings first. I scrolled through my phone until I found my old buddy Clark who just graduated from med school.

“Dr. Clark Greene’s office.”

“I need the doc stat.”

“You’ll need an appointment.”

“Tell him his old frat brother Chase is having an emergency darlin.”

“Chase?”

“How’s it going Clark?”

“What’s your emergency?”

“I’m having anxiety attacks. My job is stressful as shit. I need a therapy dog.”

“Get the fuck outta here. I’m busy ass wipe.”

“Fine. I rescued a Corgi who is having separation anxiety. Can you blame her? You know how the ladies get attached. I brought her to work with me, but I’ll get busted sooner or later. I need a script saying I need a therapy dog so I can bring her.”

He cursed. “I could lose my license for this.”

“We can do a telehealth appointment. Besides, you owe me for covering for you sophomore year.”

He swore again. Thirty minutes later I had a telehealth link and thirty minutes after that a legit script. Clark owed me big time. He got drunk, streaked the quad and had broken into Professor Attwater’s office, snapping pics of the final exam. I kept my mouth shut, was his alibi and here we were years later with me calling in my mark.

I pressed the button on my phone connecting me with Bunny.

“Yes?”

“Bun. I need you to order Daisy a yellow ‘service dog’ vest—maybe a tag for her collar.”

“That’s illegal.”

“I just emailed you the script from my doctor. I’m stressed. Have anxiety. He ordered me a service dog.”

“I don’t even want to know how you pulled that one off.”

“When I go after something, I tend to get my way.”

“My mama used to say, ‘if you can’t hunt with the big dogs stay under the porch’.”

“Wise woman. Order next day delivery. I don’t care what it costs.” The dog pulled on my damn heart strings. She was curled up on my feet, finally sound asleep under my desk. Poor thing tuckered herself out with the nervous breakdown she had earlier. With Daisy curled up on my feet, I read through three different agreements. Drafted new ones. Kicked the shit out of my emails. “Maybe there is something to this therapy dog thing after all.”

“Working late tonight?”

“You know it.” I grinned at Piers one of the partners at my door. Truthfully, I was waiting for everyone to leave for the day before sneaking Daisy out.

I picked up Daisy cuddled her to my chest, snapping a selfie. Then I sent it to Ryan.

Me:My new PA. JK Daisy has been a big help at work. Miss you babe.

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I knew her cell was out of range but couldn't help sending her a few. My eyes fell to the calendar. Not mine but the boring vanilla one my last PA probably picked up at Staples. I never used to care for them. Now I find myself staring at the plain white boxes wishing for them to have their day and be done. The faster this week goes, the closer I'd get to date number five.

Twenty-Six

"I'm pathetic, aren't I?" Princess cocked her head, looked down her feline nose at me as I changed her litter. She was new to the shelter. Young and knew she was beautiful with her snow-white fluffy fur and jade green eyes. Her owner paid thousands for her just to give her up after discovering she had a cat allergy. So, Princess got booted from her sprawling six-thousand square foot mansion on the beach to her 3x3 metal cage. "I miss him. Miss his kiss, his cocky grin—his fancy espresso machine."

Sighing, I shut her crate. It had only been about a week, but it felt longer. After our series of dates in forty-eight hours we stalled out. First because Dr. Winnfield asked me to sail to the Bahamas for four days unexpectedly when she received grant money to tag sharks. Chase was ecstatic for me. Even a bit jealous after I assured him, I'd be safe. "Being a lawyer is boring as fuck," he muttered as he kissed me goodbye. He had shown up at four in the morning with Daisy in tow just as we were about to leave the dock. He kissed me like there was no tomorrow, not caring the crew looked on. I had no cell service out at sea but spent every night thinking as soon as I got back, I was jumping July. But when we were three miles offshore and two bars showed up on my cell, I received his string of texts that work had called him back to the city.

I made the pic he sent me of him and Daisy in his office my screensaver. I was going

to surprise him in the city, but now everything was on hold. Kell's wedding was this weekend. I was a crappy maid of honor being wrapped up in tagging sharks while dreaming of Chase that I had almost forgotten. I ran to my cell as it started buzzing on top of Princess's crate making her hiss.

"Babe?"

"Hey!"

"How was it?"

"Amazing! It was absolutely amazing. You'll have to come next time."

"I'd love that. I can't wait to see you this weekend. I'm leaving Thursday after work and staying until September. I already told the partners I'd be working remotely from my shore house."

"They let you do that?"

"There was little they could do. I threatened to walk."

"What happened?"

"Don't get upset.... I brought Daisy to work since she was getting separation anxiety at my condo. Diersky toed her in the ribs. She's fine. He's not. They fired him immediately. Well, after I broke his nose."

"My poor baby. What kind of asshole hurts a sweet dog?"

"The kind who's in jail for animal cruelty. The DA is an old friend of mine. Bunny was a star witness who saw the whole thing. Anyway. She's good. Misses you too."

“I won’t be here this weekend. It’s my pregnant girlfriend’s wedding. You know Kells?”

“Ah, the infamous Kells.”

“Go with me? It’s in Charlestown. Gran could watch Daisy...”

“Is that date number five? A wedding?”

I blushed. “It is.”

“I’ll be there, babe. Text me the info. I have a meeting in ten. I’ll call you tonight?”

After we disconnected my mind raced. I smelled like diesel fuel and chum. I needed help ASAP.

“Kells?”

“Ryan! Get down here! My tummy popped. I feel fat. My gown needs to be taken out and my boobs feel heavy. I’m horny all the time and never want to let my fiancé out of bed. I’m a mess.”

“I’m on my way, with an emergency of my own. I’m dating Mr. July—you know from the beach house calendar. And he is the owner I sued—who happens to be Gran’s boss.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Well, that just dills my pickle. Did you sleep with him?”

“No, that’s happening on your wedding night.”

“I’m grinnin’ like a possum eatin’ a sweet tater.” She squealed. “But why the wait?”

“I was tagging sharks in the Bermuda Triangle for a week. My nails are down to nothing, my hair fried, my nose burned. I’m feeling insecure instead of sexy.”

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“Honey, a good Brazilian wax, my colorist, and the spa at the hotel will take care of all that. Get your butt down here!”

“As soon as I shower, I’ll hit the road.”

“Ryan? You have a minute?”

Steve was covered in sweat, out of breath his hair messed from his hands raking through it. “Is everything okay?”

“No. My wife is spotting and having early contractions. She’s being admitted to the neonatal unit at Durham General. I think it’s best if we stay in a hotel or rent an apartment there until the baby comes. I need you to run this place for us.”

“Of course. Anything you need.”

“It could be a month or so. I won’t charge you a dime of rent.”

“I love these babies. I’d never abandon them.”

“Thanks!”

He left in a hurry. The animals needed me but so did Kells. “Well, crap.”

I texted Gran.

Me:I need Hunter and Char’s numbers.

Gran:Ask your boy toy.

Me:GRAN!!!!

Gran:Fine. I'll share my contacts.

Me:You know how to do that?

Gran:Those boys are teaching me a lot of new things. Wait that didn't sound right.

I texted Hunter first.

Me:Hey it's Ryan. I have a 911 involving pussies.

Hunter:I'm all over that.

Me:I knew you would be. Here's the address.

He showed up fifteen minutes later. Freshly shaven wearing khaki shorts with a baby pink golf shirt.

“What is this place?”

I opened the door. “Right this way. The cat section is over there. They need fresh water; each gets one can of wet food. Twice a day.”

“What the f—”

“Hey Ryan, I came straight away! Where are these poor babies!?” Hunter's head snapped back as Char came in wearing a cute sundress and strappy sandals.

“Oh, I’m in love. Come to Dadda, you queen. Oh yes, baby doll, you are coming home with me tonight!”

Char and I gaped as Hunter and Princess full on made out. He had the white Persian cat lifted above his face, she was kissing and nipping his nose, purring as loud as the vibrator I use on occasion while thinking of Chase.

“Well, okay then. I’ll be back on Monday. Can I trust the two of you? If you can’t commit, I’ll ask my Gran.”

“No, We’re good. Aren’t we Freckles?”

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She didn't quite meet his eye. "I can handle all the dogs in here. Even the two-legged ones."

"Baby. It's not what you thought. I told you."

Char crossed her arms; her jaw was tight. In that moment she was so much just like her twin. "Where are you off to in such a rush anyway?"

I grinned. "Do you really want to know?"

She blushed. "Big mouth over there will talk anyway."

"My best friend's wedding... and date number five or is it six with your brother. He counts literally everything as a date.

"So, it's the big one."

Hunter walked over with Princess. "He likes to be in control. Don't let it freak you out."

"Are you giving her sex tips on my brother?" Char put a hand on her hip.

"I have some for you too, doll."

"Ugh! I hate you!" She threw her hands in the air, walked over to one of the dog's cages and took them out.

“What did you do?” I hissed.

“Made her scream my name under the pier.”

“Then what happened?”

“My ex was at Kokomo’s. The beach grill bar a few days ago. She was drunk, cornered me when I left Char to use the men’s. I came back smelling like perfume and heartache. My ex followed me to our table hysterical, talking all kinds of nonsense. Char left, thinks I can’t commit. That she’s just the next in line to get hurt by me.”

“Is she?”

He snorted. “That girl’s been it for me since 2010.”

“Then go get her, big guy. Well, that is if Princess allows it.”

“I’m serious. This baby is coming home with Daddy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ever had a cat before?”

“Fuck, no. My parents thought pets were filthy furballs. She’s my first.”

“You’ll never forget her then.” Char snapped.

“...and I’m leaving. Here are the keys and the list of instructions Steve always has on hand. Emergency Vet’s number is on it.”

The tension was thick between them. Princess hissed at Char as she brushed past them. I wondered if Hunter’s new cat was going to do the job Chase was so good

at—keeping them apart.

“You look... hotter than a gator sunning itself in tar.”

She was right. I’d never felt or looked sexier. My skin was sloughed with a sugar scrub. I didn’t even care three strange women had seen all my lady bits. Kells had told them I was also getting laid for the first time on her wedding night. The women giggled treating me like the second bride. I had my first French mani and pedi. My hoo-ha was waxed bare. It hurt and I was told no sex for a few days. But Kells said to apply coconut oil to speed things up. Chase would be here tomorrow evening giving me plenty of time to pamper Kells while getting to know her husband to be.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you.” Kells leaned in close, glass of her virgin drink in hand. “Sienna and Wade are done. She met the governor’s son at the fancy country club Wade’s family belongs to. Dumped Wade cold the second she had her talons into her new mark.”

“How did you find this out?”

“Rachel’s sister is a waitress there. Member gossip is the talk of the staff.”

“I almost feel bad for Wade.”

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“You’re kidding, right?”

I nodded my head. “I’m not wasting another second on my past when my future is my Mr. July.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.”

“He said he can’t wait to meet the women who left candy cocks all over his house.”

“Is he still mad?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, once he gets some of your honeypot....”

I blushed a shade darker than the roses sitting in a cut crystal vase. “I’m nervous. When we touch it feels like threads of fire. It was never like that with anyone else.”

“Girlfriend, that’s how I ended up pregnant after dating my man for three months.”

“I have my fur babies and that’s enough for now.”

“Try on your bridesmaid dress.”

I held up the pale lavender silk to my body. It was the perfect contrast to my dark tan.

“Your man is going to be knocked for six when he sees how beautiful you are going to look.”

“I hope so.” In my mind, I was counting down the hours until Chase arrived.

The next day my hands shook as I read his text:

Chase:I'm on my way. #Date number 5

I wasn't sure what to say. We both knew where tonight would end. I've never had pre-planned sex before. But I didn't want to wait either. I went with humor.

Me:If you snore or hog the blankets, it's over.

Chase:You think we're going to sleep?

Chase:Get your mind out of the gutter. We're dancing all night. I can really cut a rug.

Me: Great. I have two left feet.

Chase: Not in my arms. Baby's gonna fly.

Twenty-Seven

I held her in my arms as we swayed to the notes of a love song floating around us. I'd never much cared for weddings or thought them romantic. But tonight the fireflies were out. The stars twinkled overhead. The venue was a mid-summer night in all its beauty while I held the most beautiful creation of all.

I dipped my head; the silky strands of her hair tickled my nose. She smelled of honeysuckle and roses. The silky gown she wore clung to her curves, her toned, golden skin shone. Sighing, I let one hand fall to caress the skin in the center of her back. I drew lazy circles with my fingertips, groaned when I felt her hardened nipples press against my chest.

The vein in my cheek ticked as I tried to keep my passion reigned in. We couldn't leave until after the bride and groom did. So, we kept on dancing. I hissed through my teeth as she stumbled. The heel of her pumps caught in the hemline of her dress. The motion making her warm body collide with the part of mine aching for her.

"I don't think anyone would notice if we slipped upstairs."

My heart skipped two beats as her head slipped back from mine. The golden streaked strands of her hair caught the light from string lights hanging above our heads. My answer was a kiss. Soft at first. Sweet. Romantic. The way a man kisses his girl to tell her what's about to happen means more than just sex. A joining of hearts. Of souls. That's what I had in mind, after I made her scream my name erasing every touch of anyone but me.

She slipped her hand in mine, as we weaved our way around other couples. We stopped by our table where she picked up her bag and I my suit coat. The wedding took place at an old plantation outside of Charlestown. Ryan had a room overlooking a side garden. The keycard slipped from her nervous fingers. It was then I noticed her shaking hands matched mine.

Hunter would laugh his ass off if he saw me sweating like this. We both paused as we entered her room. Someone had surprised us. White candles were lit. Rose petals covered the bed. A bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket. "Did they confuse your room with the bride and groom's?"

Ryan picked up a pair of fuzzy handcuffs, edible body cream and a bag of gummies that were familiar. "Nope. I know exactly who did this. The card is addressed to you." I took the white envelope from her hand. On it in loopy cursive was my name:

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Chase,

We are very sorry for what happened at the beach house. We honestly were just a group of girls trying to have fun. Ryan didn't do any of the damage or bring any of the 'toys'. We hope we can make it up to you.

P.S.

You better rock her world tonight!

Rach, Kells, Jenna & Ciara

"I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be. They're good friends." She stood awkwardly on the side of the bed. The romantic scene had the opposite effect on the moment. "Hey," I cupped the side of her face. "Don't be shy. I'm just glad to be here with you. I'm going to take a shower." I was hoping some space would help her get comfortable. I entered the bathroom, left the main light off, preferring the coolness of a dimly lit space. I turned on the shower to a lukewarm setting before stripping down. I heard her steps, light and hesitant behind me. My hand tensed on the shower door as I heard the wisp of her dress fall to the floor. Her warm hand gently touched my back. Her lips found my shoulder. This girl kept surprising me.

I opened the door. She followed. I turned. She was unafraid. Not shy, nor should she be. She had the body of a golden goddess. Her tan lines only turned me on more. I reached for her, tangled my hands in her half-wet hair, ground my mouth down on

hers. It was a kiss of possession. A taking. Alone at last, I didn't have to behave or show gentlemanly restraint. This girl was mine and I was about to claim her as such.

"Chase," she moaned as I soaped her curves.

"Fucking mine," I breathed, shuddering as my palms ran down her body for the first time. My lips nipped and kissed every square inch. "Are you ready for me?"

She nodded. I wasted no time, shutting the water off, carrying her out, uncaring water dripped from both our bodies. I threw her down on the bed, a deep rumble coming from my chest as I crawled between her spread body. "This is the beginning of forever," I growled, placing her leg over my hip as I drove home. Nothing felt so good as that moment when I was buried as deep as I could go. My eyes rolled back in my head as my hips pumped in and out.

My hand sought hers, I linked our fingers, our joined hands resting on the pillow by her head. The bed creaked and moaned; the headboard hit the wall. Her hips lifted off the bed. Nerve endings zinged from my toes up my spine and down to the part of me making love to her. It was incredible. She was incredible. My heart tripled in speed, my body trembled as I neared the peak. I already wanted her again and I wasn't even done from this time yet.

"Chase," she gasped as I made sure she hit the stars before me.

"I've got you baby. Let go."

True to my word, we didn't sleep until dawn. I got my revenge on Ms. Ryan Hill. I made her scream my name as her back bowed. Her body was on the precipice when I withdrew the one thing that would help her fall over the edge. The goody bag the girls left for use got some use to. I proved to her I wasn't some strait-laced hot-shot lawyer. I was a man of law who had the best southern charm, but between the sheets

all bets were off. She was beautiful when she came. All wide eyes and dilated pupils. She bit her lip swollen from my kisses, her breath coming out in short gasps. I felt her body coming undone under mine. I lowered my lips to hers as we came together in every way a man and woman should. Then we slept. When we woke up a few hours later we ordered room service, finally popped the champagne. I laughed as we drank it off each other instead of from the crystal-cut glasses.

I'd never felt this way before. Not even for the girl I was in a long-term relationship with two years ago. She was a faded memory. A name I barely recalled. While Ryan Hill was a name I hoped would become Mrs. Chase Carmichael.

Twenty-Eight

I blushed as I entered data into my laptop. My eyes barely scanned the numbers. In my mind, I was naked in Chase's hot tub. His arms on my hips, while I bobbed up and down his shaft in the moonlight. Much like Hannah had rode the stripper. My hands clutched the wall of the tub, Chase's mouth was latched to a nipple. It felt so good when he hit so deep. Wade had never put it on me like Chase.

I couldn't believe I ever settled for the vanilla. To be fair, at the time I thought I was getting strawberry.

After Kell's wedding weekend, we settled into a nice routine of texting during the workday, followed by a sunset cruise, workout and dinner out or at his place. Somehow, I had a toothbrush and razor in his bathroom. We alternated between his place and mine, bringing Daisy here when I needed to be with the animals.

Hunter and Char still helped. Chase finally told Hunter to get his own place after he almost walked in on us. Hunter grumbled but moved his Princess into a real palace. My mouth gaped when he invited us over. Hunter bought a six thousand square foot, beach front, gated, Spanish-style mansion.

He paid cash.

Char confided Hunter only crashed with Chase because he was lonely. After being raised by a nanny while his parents cruised the world, Hunter had some deep scars that he pretended were healed.

The weeks of July had turned the corner into August. The days filled with hot nights and deep kisses. I was falling hard and fast, not even putting up a hand to stop myself.

I lifted my head as Roscoe bounded in the lab followed by Dr. Winnfield. “Storm’s coming.” She turned on the Marine VHF radio. A tropical storm that was in the Caribbean had become a hurricane. It was rapidly moving northeast as it approached the continental United States. There were three possible storm tracks. Two aimed right at us. “I’ll watch the weather but if this thing gets legs, we’ll move the boat to the Chesapeake Bay out of harms way. The University already spend five million on her. I doubt I’ll get another endowment to replace it. You can sail with us or evacuate.”

“I’ll probably evacuate. I have family inland.”

“And your new boyfriend?”

I blushed.

“He likes dogs. Hard not to fall for a guy built like an NFL quarterback, holding a pudgy Corgi under one arm instead of a football.”

Somehow, I finished the rest of my work. Helped the others move equipment on trucks. Our little lab would never survive a major storm surge and Dr. Winnfield wanted to protect everything she could. Hours later, the news was grim. The storm had become a Cat 4, all forecasters and computer models converged. It was coming

this way. A direct hit over the Outer Banks.

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“Babe?”

“Hey.”

“Did you see the weather?”

“Yes. We are packing up what we can. Dr. Winnfield is leaving now. She’s taking the research vessel up to Maryland.”

“You aren’t going?”

“I thought I’d evacuate with you.”

“I have to leave now. Shit is going down at work. Do what you need to do but please leave before noon tomorrow. Come straight to my condo. I’ll text you the address.”

“I will. I promise.”

He hesitated as if he wanted to say more. In the end he said, “I’ll miss holding you tonight, love.”

“I’ll miss it, too.”

I hurried home. Steve had ordered some supplies to be delivered from the hardware store. My muscles screamed as I placed heavy sandbags around the foundation. I boarded up the first-floor windows. Moved all the food on metal shelves. Steve had texted he was in contact with shelters inland and was trying to arrange transport for

the animals we had.

I was bone tired when I finally crawled into bed. Morning came bleak and gray. The ocean was angry, frothy swells already crashing against rocks. Boats that were still here, bobbed wildly. Steve had bad news. The shelters were all full. Ours wasn't the only one who needed help.

My throat was thick with tears. I looked into anxious eyes as I made my morning rounds fed them breakfast, gave them all extra. How could I choose which ones to save? I might be able to pack three in my Jeep.

I crossed the street to Pop's Mako. Secured everything onboard. But I knew she'd only make it with luck and a prayer.

I knew I'd need both.

Twenty-Nine

"Dammit, Ryan pick up!" Her phone went straight to voicemail. "Are you sure she left?"

Bunny nodded. "She swore it. All she had left to do was secure lines on the boat and pack up."

"They're shutting down bridges."

"What about your house? Did you sandbag it?"

"I hired a landscaper to sandbag it. Hunter was still at the shore. He moved what he could to the second floor and attic space."

Bunny and I turned back to the live news feed I was playing on my desktop. “Folks we’re back at the Outer Banks where a CAT 4 Hurricane is expected to make landfall sometime after six tonight. The governor has ordered a mandatory evacuation. There are still several storm paths it could take... from this model the eye will pass right over Kills Devil Hills.”

Kills Devil Hills was only twelve miles north of Nags Head. My heart tripled speed. Where was she?

“I’m leaving. It’s only noon. I could get there and back. What if her Jeep broke down?”

“The roads are closed Chase...” Bunny’s face was white. She wanted me to go.

“So? I’ll ram the barricades. I’ll take Hunter’s truck. I know how to get into his penthouse.”

I dialed Hunter. “It’s all good, bro. I moved everything. I even wrapped the base of your house in 16 mil plastic. You’re welcome.”

“I can’t get ahold of Ryan. Her phone’s dead.”

“I’m already approaching city limits.”

“I need your RAM.”

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“Bro... they’ll never let you in. Even the police have left. They went door to door. I’m sure they got her out.”

“Something’s not right. I can feel it.”

“Take the truck then. Good luck. Use the back roads where you can. Pretend to be an off-duty fireman if you get questioned. Works for me every time.”

“Don’t worry Bun-Bun. I’ll go get our girl and bring her back safe. You get ready for the storm with Daisy. My building has a generator if you want to stay there.”

She wrung her hands. “Times like this. I find it’s best to be in the comfort of your own home.”

“I’ll bring her there then.”

She nodded, blinked back a few tears, and squeezed my arm. “God be with you.”

“It’ll be fine.” I reassured her.

The sky was already darkening as I raced down the freeway in Hunter’s truck. I was still in my work clothes. I didn’t even take emergency supplies. I just prayed like heck, I wouldn’t run off the road and need rescuing before I found her.

Thirty

“Miss? You need to leave. Immediately.”

I nodded but as soon as the officer left, snuck back inside. I had no choice. There was no place for the animals to go and once I realized that I couldn't just leave them to drown and die. I moved crates, litter boxes and food upstairs to my third-floor walk-up. The shelter was built ages ago. But it seemed sturdy enough. One by one I moved animals and their crates. By the time I was done, my small apartment was crammed. I went back down for flashlights, food, whatever I could find. The tide was coming in with the high winds of the hurricane swirling closer. The storm surge alone would be fifteen feet. I was about twenty off the ground.

This was madness. I had to leave. I was on a tiny inlet with water on every side. I told myself I had done all I could. Gave each animal extra water and food. I grabbed my bag, secured the windows, and cut the power myself, worried about the rising water and electricity combining.

"I'm sorry. I did all I could."

I locked up, racing to my Jeep. Water was already over the road. I'd never make it to the highway. This was suicide and stupid. But I still tried. Three miles later I was forced to go back. A tree was blocking the road. All this time I was focused on the water, I had forgotten the damage of wind. As soon as I reached the shelter, I fought with the wind to open my door. My cell slipped under the rising water disappearing under the current. I eyed the Mako debating if I should chance swimming out to where it bobbed. I could use the Marine radio to call for help. But knowing there could be a riptide, I chose to play it safe.

The water was up past my knees as I sloshed around back. I clung to the railing as I climbed the wooden steps. Opened my door to the relief of the nervous animals and braced it shut again.

"Looks, like we'll ride this out together."

I found all my blankets and towels. Lifted the mattress off my bed to wedge between the couch and my windows. The way the wind was blowing, I was sure they'd blow out at some point. My only saving grace was that the foundation was four feet of solid concrete and the building itself was brick. The hurricane could huff and puff but hopefully the shelter would hold. I wrapped Gran's summer quilt around my shoulders. Let the tears of fear fall. With my back against the closet wall, I closed my eyes letting my mind drift to Chase. To the weeks we shared. I thought of Gran, the smell of cinnamon cloves at Christmas... the first soft summer rain. Chimney smoke in fall. All the small things I cherished deep in my soul. I knew the hurricane had landed when the wind roared like an old locomotive engine. My hands shook. The animals barked and cried. I opened the kitchen drawer took out Steve's old iPod and turned it on. Instead of the sounds of fury and fear, I listened to jazz and his gospel tunes. His mix was all over the place, but it kept me together.

I thought of all my wasted moments. Words I couldn't take back. Words I might not get the chance to say. The battery to the iPod died hours later. I opened the crates; freedom helped the animals quiet down.

"RYAN! RYAN!" Over the storm my name was a battle cry.

"Chase? CHASE!" I screamed, running for the door. I flung it open. He was halfway up the stairs, waist deep in water.

"My God you're alive!" He ran up to me, held me tight. I ran my hands up to the side of his face. "How?"

"I made it pretty far in Hunter's truck. Trees and powerlines are all down. The roads are impassable. I ditched the truck when the rising water killed the engine. Kismet. It was kismet. A boat had come undone. I swam to it, started the outboard. We need to leave. Now! The eye of the storm is here, we don't have much time before the backend spins around."

“Chase, the animals. They’ll die.”

“We’ll die, too.”

I cried. He was right. “Can we try taking at least a few?”

He surveyed the room. “Leave the cats. Put the food and water on the counters. They’ll jump on top of your cabinets if it comes to it.”

We took the four dogs. It was hard. The animals were just as scared as us. Once we were all in the small boat, Chase steered us into the stormy sea the town had become. The damage was stunning. The ocean had invaded our cozy civilization. The small boat was no match for the churning waves.

“Chase. We need to find a sturdy high rise. Maybe one of the condo complexes. We can’t last in this.”

His face was grim but determined. There was no high ground to be found out here. “I know a place we can try.”

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The engine struggled as he pressed the throttle down. I held the dogs tight, my head bent to avoid the whipping wind. Time felt like it was moving as fast as the current. Chase cut the engine, dove overboard with a line, tied it around a thick column. He took off his shirt wrapped it around his elbow, with a few quick jabs he had broken the glass window enough to unlock the front door. It was a huge brick mansion, the kind you'd see on an old southern plantation. "It's an old historical society building. My Nana brought me and Charlie here one summer. It's four stories with a walk-up attic. There's a light house and widow's peak on the roof."

Water was four feet high inside the first floor. We helped the dogs climb the stairs. "We're at least a few miles inland, we should be okay here after the eye passes."

We found a cozy study on the third floor. Chase lit a fire while I found what supplies I could. "You came for me. You saved my life."

"Come here, get warm." We both stripped, wrapped a dusty blanket I had found in one of the rooms around us, and sat side-by side.

I was exhausted, cold, and still frightened by my close call with death. I leaned my head on his shoulder. Chase wasn't just some calendar guy, or the hot-shot attorney or even the charming man I had gotten to know.

He was a rock.

My rock.

My shelter in the storm.

Literally.

A man who came for me despite all odds. A man who was dependable, courageous, all the things good in a soul. I loved him. I was in love with him. My barriers came down, the ones I didn't even know I had erected. I clung to him. Kissed his cheek.

As the hurricane raged, I knew he'd keep us safe. He kept the fire going. Comforted the dogs. I rested my chin on my knees. "I love you."

Our eyes caught as he knelt in front of a tired pup. "I loved you first."

"I said it first," I challenged.

He smiled. "Even in all this we're still the same."

"We are. Chase Carmichael there's no other person I'd rather go through this with."

"I'd rescue you a thousand times. I always will."

We kissed, snuggled close, somehow slept. When dawn came, the hurricane was gone leaving a wake of ruins behind. But hope still remained.

"Your house..."

"Is just a house. Home is where you are."

"I'm sorry. It was beautiful. Special."

"I'll build it back better, with you. I have insurance and a dream. We'll make it higher, raise all the mechanicals. Add another bedroom."

“Everyone must be frantic over us.”

“I was so intent on getting us safe, I never bothered with my cell. It’s in Hunter’s truck. But his truck probably washed away.”

“Where am I going to live?”

“It’ll take Duke some time to rebuild the satellite campus. You can stay with me and Daisy in the city while we sort everything out. Your fall semester might be remote or moved to Chapel Hill.”

“I’ll contact Dr. Winnfield when I can. She took the research vessel up to port in Maryland before the storm.”

“I know we started out all fireworks and starry nights. But what I feel for you is the eternal flame. It burns hot, steady, and true. I want you to know that.”

“I do.”

“Those two words sound good to me.”

He wrapped his arms around me as we surveyed the damage from the widow’s peak. The storm surge had already receded, somehow the boat stayed tied. “Can we go back to the shelter and check on the cats?”

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“Sure. But we should leave the dogs here for safety. Maybe we’ll run into rescue boats and will be able to contact Bunny and Charlie.”

“I’ll call Steve too. He’ll want to know who survived.”

“I bet they all did. Because of you and your big heart. But please, don’t ever do that again. I can’t lose the love of my life, just when I’ve found her.”

He held me tightly. There was still enough freshwater in the pipes to leave water for the dogs. We shut them up in the room for safety, waded through the water on the first floor and climbed into the small boat. “Think there’s enough diesel fuel?”

“If not. We’ll find plenty of stray boats.”

Chase turned the boat around, there was so much floating debris we took it slowly. I leaned over pushing larger items out of the way. “This is an environmental nightmare. Sewage, trash, the waters are filled with it.”

“Nature has a way of fixing itself. With a little help from you we’ll get our community cleaned up.”

In the light of day, it was still hard to recognize where we were. Buildings had roofs caved in; cars were submerged. Chaos and destruction surrounded us on all sides. “Chase! Over there!” I pointed to the small Mako fishing vessel bobbing in the water. It was lodged between a street sign and a floating tree. In the pocket of my jeans was still the keys to my Jeep. On the same ring were the keys to the Mako’s engine.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“There’s always something good even after the bad.” He carefully came up beside my boat. “Wait!”

But I had already climbed in. I always stored extra fuel. “The hull is intact. It’s not taking on any water. I’ll throw you a line. Pull me out and I’ll follow you.”

“Babe. It’s still dangerous out here.”

“We might need the extra room. What if there’s people like me stuck who need help?”

He sighed. “My girl, who is always thinking of others. It’s going to be my job to only think of you.”

Once the Mako was free, I turned on the engine. As we got closer to the shelter, we encountered more people out on the water searching the wreckage for any signs of survivors. Thankfully, unlike me, most had left before the storm. I sucked in a breath. The shelter stood but the water damage was extensive. Waves still rolled in over the road. The swollen water from the Bay still overflowed its banks going almost a third of the way up my back stairs. Or what was left of the stairs. If we didn’t have boats, we wouldn’t be able to get to my apartment.

“Stay here. I’ll go salvage what I can. I’ll pack you some clothes. Is there anything in particular you want?”

“My calendars, laptop and books. Don’t forget the cats.” Chase threw me the line to his boat. I tied it with my line, nervously watching as he jumped into the water, using what was left of the broken bannister to reach my door.

“Hey! Do you need help!” Two men in a rubber dingy waved their arms. I waved back,

“Do you have a phone? I was supposed to evacuate and couldn’t make it out. My family must think the worst!”

“Cell towers are down. But we can radio the Coast Guard.”

“Thanks. Mine aren’t working. The Mako survived but the antennae snapped.”

I gave them Chase’s and my information to relay that we were safe, hoping the news would reach Gran and Charlie and that we were holing up in the old historical society building with the rescue dogs until help could come.

“We’ll gather any supplies and food if we can. Would be glad to drop them off to you.”

“Thanks. We might add five cats to our tally.”

Chase opened my door. He had attached rope to the top of the cat cages, lowering them one by one. I took them, carefully depositing them into our boats.

“I’m dropping your laptop.”

I carefully caught it, securing my precious data. “Remind me to upload everything to a cloud server after this!”

Next was a duffel bag with my clothes. Chase was back in the water, carefully getting back into the boat. “I sent word to the Coast Guard we’re safe. Hopefully, Gran and Charlie will get the message.”

On our way back we spotted a few people waving sheets from roofs. News helicopters started circling overhead. “I can’t believe we survived this.”

“I do. Someone up there knew we still had a lot of life to live together.”

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And we did. We had so much living and loving to do.

First Epilogue

December

“I feel so grateful to spend Christmas here with you!” Chase worked overtime, securing building permits, wrestled with the insurance company. My hot-shot lawyer didn’t play games. This time, I witnessed firsthand his sexy ruthlessness at full power. We just received our permit to occupy but the upstairs still needed to be completely finished.

“I love the house even more now with all your suggestions.” We added a wrap-around deck on the third floor with a widow’s peak. We raised the house fourteen feet off the ground, on heavy pilings.

The shelter was still undergoing renovations, but all of the animals Chase and I had saved found homes shortly after the hurricane. Being featured across the state on the news didn’t hurt. A camera crew on a boat had filmed Chase and I on our way back to the old mansion. We gave candid interviews; my voice cracked a few times. Chase became a national hero for risking it all to save me. He was offered roles to host dating shows. A dating app wanted him for their marketing campaign. He turned them all down saying he had more important work to do. I didn’t know what he meant until he resigned from his firm to start his own nonprofit legal foundation. He awed me. Inspired me. He said I inspired him. We bring out the best in each other. I never thought a relationship like this could exist. But Gran said this is what she had with Pops.

Chase was now using his skills to fight for animal rights as well as help ordinary people fight the corrupt insurance and political system. People that had paid into policies for years were now having a hard time collecting their money to rebuild. Once Chase signed on to represent the locals, the companies folded like a bad hand.

A log fell in the fire as it burned, shooting sparks up the chimney. The tree Chase and I had picked out was lit and twinkled. In my hand was his favorite red that he poured for me. Daisy was fast asleep in her doggie bed by the door. I rested my head back against his chest while he lazily played with the ends of my hair.

“Do you want to open gifts tonight or tomorrow?”

“How about around midnight?”

“You’re going to be busy then.”

“Oh really?”

“Definitely.”

I turned my face to his for a Christmas Eve kiss. “I never dreamed a year ago I’d find you.”

He took the wine from my hand, placing it on the sofa table. “Daisy! Come here, girl.” Daisy’s head popped up, eager to please her master. She loved Chase as much as I did. Sometimes at night, we fight over who gets to cuddle closer to him. She trotted over to the couch, jumping right up into his lap. Chase had put a red velvet bow around her neck. “That’s adorable.”

“She wanted to look good for our guests tomorrow. Hunter is driving Bunny. What’s that, girl?” He leaned down, cocking his head to Daisy’s snout.

Before I knew what was happening, he was down on one knee in front of me, taking a diamond solitaire ring from his pocket. Tears streaked down my face.

“Ryan Hill. You drove me crazy, sued me, had me at kismet. Will you spend every day loving me as my wife? Have my children, watch them grow? Live here in this house with me as the years and seasons go by? ... And when the golden years come, I will still love you just as much as I did the first night I fell in love with you.”

“When was that?”

“Is that a yes?”

I nodded, as he slipped the ring on my finger. “Remember the night we went paddle boarding on our 3rd date?”

“Second.”

“Third. Anyway, you caught me staring. You had just unhooked the boards from the roof carrier. You were so strong and confident. So sweet but sure. The sun was sinking behind you, the rays stretched, fell in your hair. I fell hard like a rock. Knew in that moment you were it for me. I was so overcome, I couldn’t speak. I wanted to shout it right then and there. I fell in love first.”

“It didn’t take me much longer. I had to be sure.”

“I know, baby.”

“And I am so sure, Chase. I love you so much. I can’t wait for a life with you, Mr. July.”

“Never again. I’m only your pin up guy.” We kissed, falling back on the couch in a

whisper of hushed words and seeking hands. We came together as one, both feeling renewed in the promise we just made to one another. Afterwards, we dozed off until the sound of Daisy barking at a delivery truck made us stir.

“Relax, girl. It’s just Fed Ex.”

“Expecting any last-minute gifts?” I asked.

“I don’t think so.” He opened the door, brought in the package, and opened it. He shook his head, as he held the contents up. “Is that Hunter?”

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“It sure is. Should I be offended my sister didn’t offer me a month?”

Wrapped in a blanket, with his ring sparkling from my finger, I took the calendar from his hands. “He made the cover?”

“Of course, he did. He probably insisted on it.”

I flipped through the months until I found which one was his. “August. He’s Mr. August.”

“Ugh oh.”

“What?”

“Nothing?” I quickly shut the calendar.

“Babe? No secrets, wifie.”

“Don’t freak out. It’s our engagement night and Christmas Eve.”

“Show me.” He held out a hand. I turned the calendar around, showing him December. It was them. Hunter and Char in ...Vegas? She was wearing a short white satin dress and Hunter was dressed like Elvis. On their hands were matching wedding rings. “He’s dead.”

“I’m sure it’s just a photo shoot. It can’t be real.”

“It’s Hunter. In Vegas with my sister who just happened to bail on us for Christmas to go skiing with her friends in Aspen. All the other months are of men. What is this?”

“I don’t know. Here, I’ll text her a pic of my ring. She won’t be able to resist.”

Three minutes later my phone rang. Chase took it. “Char?” He growled.

“Congrats, baby bro!”

“Funny, I was about to say the same to you. I just saw your wedding pic from Vegas?”

“He promised never to tell you.”

“He didn’t. It’s on the calendar.”

“What?”

“He’s August and your wedding picture, December.”

She was silent for a few beats. “Carlos. He’s meddling. I need to grab him before it goes to mass print. I’ll call you back.”

Chase paced; Daisy followed trying to comfort him. “They’re both adults. Let them work it out.”

“This is exactly what I was afraid of.”

“You have me now and Daisy. Soon our own family. Do you think they’re still married?”

He shrugged, picked up his cell and dialed Hunter. “Bro? What’s up did she say yes?”

“She did. Apparently, so did my sister.”

He was silent before he spoke. “She broke my heart, bro. Asked for an annulment. I never signed but told her I did. She’s still my wife. Where is she?”

“Nope.”

“Aspen.” I answered at the same time.

“I’ll send Bunny in a limo. I’m going to get my wife. Congrats, Ryan... and Chase, I finally beat you at something—getting to the altar.” He disconnected.

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I crossed the floor to my man, kissed his shoulder. “It’ll work itself out.”

His jaw was set. “He ruins everything. Ruined tonight.”

“No. He didn’t. But you might if you don’t let this go.”

“Make me forget.”

“Always. I’m your shelter in the storm just like you are mine.”

“I love you.” He shuddered kissing my fingers.

“I know. Together we can face anything, even Char and Hunter’s shotgun wedding.”

He finally smiled. “I can’t believe they did that.”

“I feel so boring and predictable compared to them.”

“Let’s get drunk then get naked in the hot tub,” he waggled his brows.

I laughed. “Merry Christmas, Chase.”

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Carmichael.”

“I’m keeping my last name.”

He sighed, “Can we negotiate that? I want you to have my name.”

“But it’s so sexist.”

“Fine. I’ll take yours.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“In a nanosecond. Nothing matters except that you’re mine.”

I dropped the blanket on the floor, raced to the backdoor off the kitchen and squealed as my foot hit the icy deck. I lifted the hot tub cover off. The water burned against my cold skin, but I sank right down. Chase stripped, taking his time entering the water. “It’s snowing?!”

Flurries fell softly from the sky. “Come here,” Chase reached for me. I faced him, moved my body onto his lap as he scooted to the edge of the built-in hot tub seat. A position that he found worked well to allow my legs to kneel on either side of his hips. He lifted me up, only to sink me back down.

“Well, ho, ho, ho,” I giggled.

He nipped the side of my neck. I gripped his shoulders, head tipped up to the sky. Wade dumping me a year ago truly was the catalyst spinning me on a different course. One where he was waiting for me. Sometimes the thing that hurts you the most can lead to the greatest thing to ever happen to you.

Gran was always right. Some of it is luck, destiny, or kismet. But you’ll never get there without helping yourself along the way.

Second Epilogue

“Sailor!” She ran on her chubby legs, giggling as Daisy barked giving chase. Daisy

caught up to her easily, using her mouth to grab the top of Sailor's diaper. Both of them went tumbling down in the sand. My heart was so full it did somersaults to keep from bursting. Chase smiled. His white teeth gleaming against his deep tan as he carried his board out of the waves. I sighed at the sight of my calendar guy, now my husband. He lifted Sailor high in the air, making her fly like a kite. Her blonde hair caught the breeze. She looked so much like him. All golden skin and blonde hair. I lifted my coffee to my lips, feeling my tummy clench as Chase and I locked eyes.

"Look at what we did!" His said.

"Want to make more?" Mine replied.

"Sailor! I think it's time to call Gran and ask her for a sleep over."

"Have her take Daisy too."

"Good idea. We have a lot of work to do."

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“Wowrk?” Sailor copied.

“Yep, in the bedroom.”

“B-b eedwroom?”

“Chase!” I coughed as my coffee went down the wrong pipe.

“Actually, the hot tub needs some work.”

My face flamed. But I went with it, knowing I turned him on just as much. “Yes, I can see it does. There’s a small crack here somewhere.” I stood, bending low, letting the neckline of my tank dip, giving him a bird’s eye view of my braless breasts. “Or was it here?” I turned, bending over, feeling my short shorts rise.

“Call grandma now. Tell her it’s a 911 emergency.”

Sailor giggled. “911?” At two and a half she was adorable. Just simply adorable.

“Never mind I’ll do it.” Chase walked them over, dropped Sailor in the small bucket swing he had attached to the tree and grabbed me by the hips. I didn’t care salt water dripped from his body. Every hard inch of him imprinted against me as he captured my mouth. “I’ll never get enough of you.”

“Who knew this house would bring so much love?” We got married right here on the beach. Conceived Sailor upstairs.

“This house wasn’t a home until you. Want to role play later? I’ll be the big-bad lawyer and you can play... the bad girl tenant who has wild sex parties.”

I slapped his butt playfully. “How about you be my calendar guy?”

“I’m yours for life. Every day of every year.”

“How did I get so lucky?”

“I’m the lucky one,” he whispered, kissing me tenderly in the sun.