



Something Beyond Fame

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Description: I wanted to lose myself in her arms. I wanted to become someone else in the hunger of her kiss.

This is an Age Gap, Ice Queen Lesbian Romance. Super steamy and a Happy Ever After.

Singer Raven Ramsey has spent her adult life performing to adoring crowds. Now she is nearing 40, her fame is fading, and she finds herself headlining on a sapphic women's only cruise.

Her music career is in its dying embers, her love life has never taken off and she wonders what is next.

The women on the cruise are obsessed with Raven and she almost feels like her old self.

She could sleep with any number of adoring fangirls if she chose to, but her interest is drawn by the one woman on the cruise who seems to have no idea who Raven Ramsey is. The cool aloof effortlessly beautiful woman in a business suit.

Who is she? And will she succumb to Raven's charms?

Will Raven find love? And will she find something beyond fame?

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Iran my fingers through my short choppy bob and frowned as I assessed myself in the mirror. I was not conventionally beautiful. Throughout my teens I had tried to conform to society's standards of beauty—long blonde hair, glittering eyeshadow, and pale pink lipstick. I was like any other girl who'd wished to be on the cover of Miss Teen magazine, trying to blend into what society dictated to be beautiful. You would never have noticed me. Average height, slim build, average features. Nothing at all special about me.

I've been singing and playing my guitar and writing songs as long as I can remember. People sometimes said they liked my songs, but nobody ever remembered me after I'd performed.

Born in a small town in a small state and filled with even smaller-minded people, it took moving to the big city to find myself. With a back pack, guitar, and a head full of dreams, it seems funny that the defining moment in my life, my change in luck and the shift in my life's trajectory, came from the styling chair of a back alley hair salon.

My box-dyed blonde wasn't cutting it. The ends were frazzled, and the limp color along with the city's humidity just made my hair appear less blonde and more mousy.

"I need a change," I declared. The hairstylist in her early fifties looked at me with raised eyebrows. "I'm a singer, and I just want people to remember me." I don't know where those words came from exactly. It wasn't a conscious need, but clearly it was there all the same.

Her hands moved quickly, with expertise. Tilting my head from side to side and pulling my hair up, changing the angle, she surveyed and assessed me in the mirror as she moved.

“I can give you a change. The question is, are you truly ready for a change?”

It wasn't like it is on TV. She didn't cover the mirror or wait for a big reveal. I watched her chop away, inch after inch of blonde curls littering the floor. I was in shock, my eyes wide open as I wondered how I could ever return home now with hair like this. After the cut came the color, a deep dark brown that appeared as silky and smooth as dark chocolate under the light.

She added the final layers, spinning me around in the chair with a watchful eye, a master of her craft.

It was short, like a boy's haircut, but not quite the same. On me it was elegant, sexy, masculine, feminine, and beautiful all at once.

Had my face changed? No. But it appeared to be different. Suddenly I had high cheekbones and a strong, angled jaw. My thin lips seemed fuller, my eyes deeper, and my complexion glowed.

“You need makeup, but not too much. Go dark. Dark liner and darker eye shadow. And a glow. Here.” Her thumb smudged across my cheek in an unnatural upsweep. She caught the reservations in my expression and simply shrugged. “Trust me.”

She was of course, right, a contouring expert a decade before it became popular. I never caught her name, I never went back. I shrugged off the old me right there in that salon.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Rachel Ramsey,” I said, and she shook her head and screwed up her face.

“No,” she said firmly, and I knew she meant it.

She looked lost in thought for a moment.

“Raven,” she said with confidence.

“Pardon?” Just for a moment, I was confused.

She ran her fingers through my short dark hair. It was tousled and sexy, and I looked like someone else. Her stern blue eyes fixed mine in the mirror. I liked the feeling of her fingers on my scalp.

“Raven Ramsey.” She indicated my reflection in the mirror. “This is Raven Ramsey. People will remember Raven Ramsey.”

And she was right.

Rachel Ramsey with her box-blond average looks and average life died in that salon. And Raven Ramsey was born.

I went to the same clubs at which I’d begged to perform weeks before and hustled the exact same way, but this time their gazes lingered. Their attention was caught by Raven Ramsey in a way it’d never had been with Rachel. The men were interested, although I had no interest in them. And the women, even the straight ones, were curious, drawn in by the first flash of confidence that came from being Raven, followed by the melodies that dripped from my lips like honey.

I faked it as Raven Ramsey before I became her, and then there was no one else. Now, I’ve forgotten what I was like before.

I knew I could sing. My voice has never been a problem. But finding confidence and a direction gave me something more, that pinch of what Simon Cowell would now coin as his own phrase, the X-Factor.

But men are fickle creatures. They love the thrill of the chase, and love to let their imaginations run wild but my hard and constant no creates contempt in the end. I couldn't thrive in the music industry if I wasn't prepared to change my morals, sexuality and generally every fiber of my DNA.

Needless to say, I wasn't.

Then I met Clarissa. She flew in the face of adversity. She wore a t-shirt that said Dyke for Lyfe and if asked, she would say, "If you take their ammo they can only shoot blanks." Her club was the hottest spot in town at the turn of the millennia. Mindsets were changing, and different was becoming cool, but Clarissa didn't give a fuck about that. All she cared about was a good night, a good show, and a good fuck at the end of it.

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She opened me up in a way I'd never felt possible. I sang on stage and I owned it. I felt beautiful, bold, strong, and powerful. Then she would slip into my dressing room and make me orgasm loud and hard. Sex was no longer taboo. It was a journey, a discovery, and I was along for the ride.

When I got the invite to headline at the pride concert, I was excited and thrilled, and I expected Clarissa to be over the moon. But I was wrong. She was subdued. Withdrawn. Knowing. "I knew you were made for bigger things. I just thought we would have longer together."

I was only twenty-six. I brushed her comment off, but it changed things. We changed. I played at the club sometimes, but much less regularly. New bookings kept coming to me, crowds got bigger and the hotel rooms did, too. So did the pay-checks. I stopped looking at my bank account. Suddenly money was plentiful, and I no longer needed to check. I didn't think about it, and I didn't see it, but everything I needed and asked for came to me in seconds.

Clarissa let me go. There was no dramatic breakup, no scene, just a soft parting of ways as I climbed the ladder of success and fame. As I climbed high, my career was my sole focus for many years. I poured my heart and soul into songs, music, and performances. Every night, for audiences all over the world with adoring crowds of women, I was giving it my all.

But we all have a vice.

Mine, as it turned out, was the adoring women.

I fell hard and fast and deep. In love, lust, or something along either of those lines. Hurtling through one intense relationship after another, constantly afraid of being alone. Clarissa had shown me how good life could be when you had someone by your side, when you could share it, and I craved it. I needed to feel loved and wanted, so I dove in with no restraint and time after time got my heart broken.

Earlier, I said men were fickle. I would like to retract that statement and instead go with this: the music industry is fickle. After years of flying high, the gigs began to run dryer. With fewer calls, big spaces in my life opened up, and for the first time since becoming Raven Ramsey, I found myself with more time to think and be alone with my thoughts.

I no longer wrote songs because no one wanted new Raven Ramsey material. The fans that were left for me wanted a medley. They wanted the big hits, the ones my loyal fans sang their hearts out to every time I took to the stage.

Of course, the lesbians still loved me. I was out. I was proud. I looked a certain way that appealed to them. The Raven Ramsey haircut was still commonly sported by many a lesbian—although obviously I still wore it best. It had evolved slightly over the years, had become more edgy, but it was always a version of the short, dark, casually sexy look I had started off with. Even once my mainstream star dwindled, or more like went out completely, the lesbians still wanted me. And I suddenly needed them to keep my head above water.

I obliged by singing what they wanted to hear, but it became a job. It became a chore. I lost faces in the crowd. If you asked me the date, the day, even the state I was in, I had no idea. I was on autopilot and heading for both a crash and the tail end of my 30s. Neither of these were something I wanted.

In my early 30s, I should probably have reinvented myself. Maybe all stars burn out sooner or later. Perhaps my ten strong years was more than most of us get at the top.

My manager suggested a reinvention, but I didn't go for it. We couldn't settle on what a reinvented Raven Ramsey would look like, and I think deep down inside, I was still struggling to find myself. I ended up breaking up with my manager a year ago. The money I earn these days no longer justifies the cut she'd take from it.

That was when I got a call from Voyager Cruiseline. They were looking for a headliner to perform on the maiden sail of their very first Sapphic women's only ship: Pride of Paradise.

Clearly I was still the most famous lesbian performer, and that thought made me happy for about a minute. It was probably more like I was the most famous lesbian performer within their budget.

A two-week paid vacation around the Caribbean performing every third night to adoring women at the onboard theatre. Was I interested? Hell, yes, I was interested. I signed on the dotted line, packed my designer swimwear and I climbed aboard.

That was nearly five years ago. And here I still am. Many, many cruises later, still on board the Pride of Paradise. I didn't want to be a cliché, a washed-up cruise singer, a has-been, the talented, nearly-made-it-but-not-quite performer. The one who still slept with fans just to feel good about herself.

But perhaps that's exactly what I am.

There's no denying that cruise life is appealing—particularly for someone like me with no family, no home ties, and nothing really in my life beyond performing. I have seen so much of the world and have enjoyed the freedom the cruise life gave me. Performances are every other night now, but that still gives me long free days to enjoy the ports. To earn my keep, I have to assist with events on sea days and encourage guests to enjoy some of the many activities we offer.

I can tell you with complete conviction that cruising isn't for everyone, but it's certainly for me. I love it even after all this time. The cruise life is just something that can't be captured in a few words.

Cruiseliners offer that five-star quality with high-end touches and excellent service. They are also a gateway to glimpses of many places. If you can appreciate a snapshot, if you can make the most of a few hours, if you can plan and prepare yourself for dashing days full of excitement topped with luxurious nights crammed with entertainment, cruises may be for you. Cruise life doesn't just have to appeal to the over 65s. It may also be loved by a thirty-nine-year-old woman with adventure in her soul.

Can you call a cruise ship elegantly beautiful? Seems like an odd choice of description. But from the soft echoes of violins to the perfectly polished mirrors and soft velveted couches, it felt that way to me. And even after five years, I still feel those tingles when I board.

It wasn't the cruising life that filled me with disdain. It was my own life, and that's what I was contemplating as I straightened my Pride of Paradise jacket and applied a final coat of ruby red lipstick.

It was a new cruise day, so all staff needed to be in the grand foyer to welcome aboard the guests for the next two weeks.

A cruise of the British Isles was always fun for me, especially the first one of the season. After a couple of months of the same route, you may miss a day off the ship at ports you didn't really love, but the first cruise of the season always sparkles. Everyone is refreshed and ready for a new beginning.

I felt that now, if not also a little withdrawn.

“Ready?” Urduja, head of sound for the ship and also my closest friend in the world, nudged me. She was a petite, beautiful Filipino woman whose soft rounded features and warm eyes drew you into her kind and calm nature. But in reality, her name actually meant legendary warrior, a princess in Filipino folklore, and I had seen her make grown men crumble to their knees. She ran the sound department holding no prisoners and delivered top-tier quality in every venue, on every deck, and at all hours. She was a sound-bringing machine of a woman and I was in awe of her, and also a little bit scared.

“Are you?” I asked with raised eyebrows, and she laughed.

“Give me a break. You know they will all make a dash for you.” She rolled her eyes and put on her fakest American accent. “Oh my god. Oh my god, it’s Raven! Raven Ramsey! Do you know I had your poster on my wall. I was so in love with you. You’re the reason I knew I was gay. I used to finger blast to you every night. I used to...”

“Okay, okay” I laughed cutting her off. “Don’t let Fernanda hear you.” As if on cue, the cruise director gave a glance our way before the doors opened.

“Gah, that woman needs to get laid. Never met a woman so far...”

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She was cut off again as guests began to enter the ship. There was low-key chatter, wide eyes, and soft awws, and then their eyes fixed on me.

“Oh my god. Oh my god, it’s Raven!!!”

“Told you,” sighed Urduja.

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Waking up for an early start is what port days are all about, when your eyes are sleepy but your mind feels wide awake because you’re just so excited to see something new. Today’s port was a fresh addition to the British Isles itinerary, meaning it was my very first visit—the channel island of Guernsey. Most of my knowledge about it comes from The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. I’m not sure it’s the most reliable source of information, but I felt excited nonetheless. I felt the tingles of anticipation at having my toes find new places to roam.

Taking the tender to St Peter's Port was an experience. Lots of bobbing, water splashing, and a feeling of very much being on the sea. But being one of the first to arrive on the island made the sleepy yawns worth it. The tender only had a couple of people on it, and everyone appeared to be as excited as me except for one woman. She was striking, and I couldn’t stop my gaze from drifting to her. She was the only woman on the tender who hadn’t greeted me by name and didn’t seem remotely interested in me.

She didn’t appear sleepy, it was as though 6:30 a.m. starts were her everyday normal,

but she looked extremely bored. She checked her cell phone every few seconds as we bobbed closer and closer to shore, letting out a little sigh when she didn't get the magic bar she was hoping for. She huffed a little louder, and my gaze ran over her body.

Mmmm, I thought to myself. I've always had a bit of a thing for expensive-looking blondes, and she fit the bill exactly.

If I were being honest, she didn't look as if she was on vacation at all. If anything, she seemed more suited to a big office in the city with her immaculate power suit, briefcase, and look of unadulterated disdain, but she left my thoughts the moment I stepped onto dry land.

For around 30 minutes, the sun forced its way through the clouds and lit up the port and quaint English streets in a dusky morning glow. Then, just as the mass of cruisers invaded the clouds knotted together to fill the air with a misty drizzle.

I hopped on the local bus. It took around 30 minutes to complete a round trip of the east side of the island, and at \$1.50, I felt it was worth the money to see the tiny filter now streets, the way the bus straddled the pavement and road to make way for cars, and how we stopped at old ladies' houses to pick up the locals because who needs a bus stop when you know everyone?

Tea houses, village shops, and local produce filled High Street. The paths were cobbled, the steps well worn and the town sprawled outward from the church center. In the oddest of ways, it felt homey, a community, and I felt lucky to see it, even if just for a few hours.

I was never truly alone on these jaunts. Even with my sunglasses on, I was recognised by some of the cruise guests on the streets, and I even occasionally got knowing looks from some of the locals.

I noticed the expensive blonde woman on High Street. She didn't belong here either. She was strikingly beautiful and moved with grace. I couldn't take my eyes off the sway of her hips.

She didn't notice me.

I had to head back to the ship pretty early. The Captain's dinner night was always accompanied by a big show. The theater would be packed with guests, all of them expecting a spectacular performance, and I would give nothing less.

Checks, checks, and more checks. Outfits, sound, lighting, cues, and timing. All of the normal things that ensured we gave a memorable night at sea. Many people on board this ship might only ever take one cruise, and they may have saved for years to be able to come and experience something like this. That was always on my mind when I performed.

I might be fed up with my top three hits. I might be on autopilot. But for some in the audience, they would never forget the night they heard me sing the lyrics live that they related to so well.

I made sure I looked at the part. My short hair was styled just like my posters used to be, that dark kohl liner, the smudges of smokey black.

The theater stage was stark, the musicians hidden from sight, and each note was played beautifully, ringing out with perfect clarity as a hushed silence fell across the space. The spotlight shone unwaveringly on the center of the stage, illuminating the silvery steel microphone. I took a deep breath, still feeling the same nerves that I always had, just for that second before I stepped forward into the light.

My boots were black and heeled, and they clicked softly against the floor with each step. My fingers reached forward, caressing the steel pole, bringing the microphone

to my lips. My dress was a simple black that hugged my figure, with thin straps that brushed over my shoulders, soft fabric kissing the swell of my breasts before following the dip of my waist, caressing my hips and finishing mid-thigh. My long legs were on show.

My lips parted and each word slipped from them meant and felt. “And my baby you got me like oh.” I let go of the steel stand, my fingers slowly trailing up my sides, my hips swaying softly.

My hand returned to the microphone, and I unclipped it from the stand. I sung soulfully, my lips kissing the microphone, every word sung from deep inside. Walking forward, I knew my skin shone pearly under the light, and my short dark hair looked messy like I’d just been fucked, and I felt sexy.

I looked up, my eyes searching the crowd, and I saw them all, saw them singing back, singing with me, and I felt on top of the world again.

Then I saw her—the expensive blonde woman from the tender that morning, her phone still in her hand, but I this time I had her attention. Her focus. Her gaze was fixed on me as I sang, and even though we were strangers and I knew nothing at all about her, I felt the spark of a connection and the desire to know more.

My set played through the hits. Some were mine, some were covers, but they all made their mark. The audience was happy. I even saw a short smile from Fernanda, which meant it must have been better than perfection.

Three outfit changes, 12 songs, two dance routines, and a full piano solo, and I fell off the stage and into the greenroom exhausted.

“I think I’m too old for this,” I half-joked as I collapsed onto the sofa.

Urduja rolled her eyes and tossed me a bottle of water before she returned to bark at some poor soul through her headset.

“It just isn’t that fucking difficult! Do I need to come up to the Rivera deck myself and show you? No, I didn’t think so. Just do your fucking job, Sasha.” She cut the call with a sigh, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

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“You know you’re going to pay for that later.”

She gave me an icy look and then a smirk. “That’s half the fun. Angry sex is great. Anyway, what happened with you?” she asked, looking at me with a sudden intense interest.

“Me? Nothing. Why?”

She waved her pen up and down as her gaze surveyed my face. “You’ve got that... look.”

“I do not have the look,” I replied with a huff, although we both knew I absolutely did.

I thought about the expensive blonde woman a lot over the next few days. I don’t know what it was about her. Maybe it was the way she seemed like she wanted to be anywhere else. I kept seeing her around the ship, and our gazes would meet. Her blue eyes were distant and tough looking. Her skin had this caramel glow I longed to touch. At times her perfectly highlighted hair slipped from her band and curled softly around her beautiful heart-shaped face.

There were definitely times on this cruise, as with all the other cruises, that fans wanted to sleep with me, although so far on this trip I had refrained. I’m not a saint. I had fallen into more than a few beds here and there in the last five years, even though it absolutely wasn’t allowed. The entertainment staff were given a little more of a free pass than the other staff members when it came to guest relations, but even then it was a sackable offense if I were to have been caught.

But I wasn't going to get caught, so it hadn't mattered. I generally waited until the last day or two of the cruise so I knew it wouldn't get awkward. No one wants drama or sad goodbyes. Better to enjoy and let go than hold onto something that can never be.

I was a feeler. Fell into the feels every chance I got. My head ran away with my thoughts, hoped and imagined more. After so many heartaches and heartbreaks, I had gone for the no feelings approach. I didn't want to know anything about the woman except to capture a moment with her, and it was working out okay if it weren't for the total loneliness I felt.

But this time, the expensive blonde woman drew me in, and I felt this magnetic pull that was so hard to explain when I'd committed to shutting down my feelings.

The ship had stopped on the coast of Ireland and I wanted to explore.

I headed into Cork, deciding I wanted a taste of Ireland, and I'm pleased I did.

A leisurely walk down the coastal road on a sunny morning was heavenly. It seemed as if the locals weren't anti-cruiseships as some of the banners had indicated at the port, and most were happy to say good morning, chat, and ask questions in their soft Irish accents.

The town itself was well-loved. At least fifteen locals were out doing small chores—repainting a wall, digging up weeds, repairing a curb edge. The sense of community was overwhelming.

The sail away was a highlight, standing at the very front of the ship watching the people from the shoreline wave to us as we left the port side and headed out for the Irish sea. It was only ruined for a brief moment as the horn sounded and made my ears ring for about ten minutes.

It had been a long time since I'd performed in Ireland. Life was simpler then. I was shipped off to an outdoor festival. Rihanna was the soundtrack of the season, the rain poured and the beer flowed. I learnt how to pull my first pint in an Irish pub. It took me a week to understand a word of what the locals said. I was isolated in the middle of nowhere with no signal on my flip phone and an iPod classic for company. But it shaped me at that time and taught me peace in simplicity. The honesty in less. How a happy heart didn't need much to find smiles.

I wish I still felt like that.

I decided to dine at the Elite Members Club on the ship that night. Guests would sometimes buy me gifts like that, and I had a few reservations I could cash in, so I called through to the pretentious front of house and got ready.

I went for a suit. Fitted, perfectly pressed dress pants that did more for my ass than a dress ever could. A shirt of the palest blue that made my gray eyes spark, unbuttoned a little lower than what could be considered as conservative. Killer heels because I absolutely loved my fucking heels.

I slipped inside the big double doors, but someone was in front of me, and I recognized the curve of her body and her pale golden hair even from behind. "Did you make a reservation?" the host asked the woman in front of me in a bored tone as her finger slid across a glassy iPad screen.

The expensive blonde woman shook her head softly, a slight annoyance spreading across her already pink cheeks. Even though I recognized her designer dress and knew it cost more than a year of the host's salary, clearly the host didn't register that. Of course the dress was stunning, the shade of blue mirroring magazine covers. She was outfitted in the height of fashion. Her hair was curled to absolute perfection in glossy swirls of gold, and the soft blends of her eye shadow looked as if it were applied by a professional. She sparkled in the dimly lit foyer, and yet I could tell from

her stance that she'd rather be anywhere else.

"No, I..." she began. But a bored expression quickly shifted to exasperation as the host smoothed out nonexistent creases from her freshly pressed suit before her gaze rose to give the expensive blonde an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "Madam, this is La Côte de Louxor. We don't accept walk-ins." Her nose curled in dismay as if she had uttered a word that should be banned from current vocabulary.

"Yes, I—I am aware," she stuttered, feeling more pressure, I'm sure, as she felt me behind her, not to mention my eyes on the curve of her ass. Now she was aware that she had an audience to witness her interaction. "I don't have a reservation, bu..." She hadn't even started the enunciation of her T before the host's voice sliced through her again like a knife.

"Then you are probably aware that we have a waiting list even for our elite guests. No reservation, no table."

The host didn't ask her to leave, but disdain laced through every word, and the way she pursed her lips gave a very clear indication that from her point of view, the conversation was very much over.

I watched as her eyes filled. Irises that shimmered in a cerulean blue now swam like storm-filled seas. It wasn't anger but frustration that brought on the surge of overwhelming emotions. The words seemed to be caught in her throat, and each breath appeared increasingly labored.

She stepped back, the heel of her brand new stiletto dragging through the plush, freshly valeted carpet before it caught. She stumbled, a tiny slip of balance before my palm found her lower back.

My hold was firm, steady, commanding and yet gentle. The slow spread of fingers

guided her back onto balanced footing. I was taller than her, both of us in heels. My hand lingered, not touching, just close enough to catch her again if she wavered.

I knew before she knew. And then I spoke with confidence. I'm Raven Ramsey, after all.

“We have a reservation.”

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The Maitre D' looked as if she had been slapped by my voice. Visibly shrinking before me, knowing exactly who I was, and now finding something on the i-Pad intensely important, her head quickly lowered. The expensive blonde woman noticed how the host's hand trembled against the screen, and I saw a new shiver run through her body, too.

She turned, at the same time pulling her shoulders back, pushing her breasts forward. My gaze dropped to the swell of them. Of course she looked stunning. Of course I was right in my recognition, she was the expensive blonde I couldn't help noticing again and again.

"Mademoiselle," I whispered with a smile. My commanding voice seamlessly transformed into one of concern and deep affection. Up close, she was taller than I'd expected, and she looked younger, too, although much of that vitality was found in the blue of her ocean eyes. Invading her personal space as if I owned it, I stepped in closer.

I had to go for it. I'd made out as though I knew her, that she was my date. I raised my hand again, reaching up, turning her face from side to side and giving each blushing cheek a genuine kiss. There was no mwah-mwah sound. I meant it, so there was no need to pretend.

Still, with her beautiful face in my hands, I continued talking, my eyes fixed on her dazzling blues, although my words were now meant for others to hear.

"You must think me such a bitch to leave you waiting like this."

I was playing with authority. Although we'd only just met, she could read it in the way my face brightened as she gasped at the expletive. She could also see how I used the pause to look down over her, my eyes caught inside the cut of her gown before finding her smile as it formed on perfect glossed lips.

"We'll be in the bar."

I reluctantly had to release my hold on her, but it allowed my fingertips to brush a fallen golden curl behind one of her ears. There again, at the switch in my voice, she turned toward the cocktail lounge before I had finished speaking.

"I assume we don't need a reservation to get a drink around here?"

If she'd stumbled before, my expensive blonde now glided. The thin straps of leather that had been marking her slim ankles and the buckle that pressed against the bone seemed to loosen their grip.

I wondered if she tingled where my fingers had touched and if she would relive each and every imaginary mark I had left behind on her skin.

The exclusive restaurant knew its audience—rich, beautiful people who sought out a stage to display their good fortunes. The lighting was dimmed to cast shadows in all the right places. The tones were warm and gentle to add softness to every shade.

Music drifted, soothing notes that lingered in the air. The bar was occupied but not busy, and luxury was held in the details. Glasses sparkled like crystals. The ice was perfectly clear and cubed. The labels exotic, serving only the finest quality.

I stepped forward and leaned in to order, exchanging words with the bartender, who set to work instantly lining up a row of polished stainless steel measuring cups and pulling down a half dozen bottles from the extensive range on display behind the bar.

I felt my surprise date's eyes follow the exquisite cut of my dress pants, her gaze starting at the hem and slowly rising upward. There was no doubt they were fitted, as they rested perfectly against my thighs and ass. I knew what I was doing when I'd chosen them. My shirt was tucked, pressed to perfection, a light blue I knew looked crisp and sharp. I felt a slight flush rise to my cheeks as her elegant fingers reached out on impulse, the soft pads of her fingertips brushing against my bicep. I knew the luxury cotton of my shirt was smooth and cool to the touch.

I turned slowly, my eyes on her French manicured fingernails then a slow sweep of my focus over her beautiful body and up to her wide blue eyes. She paused under my gaze and then gave a quick inhale as her teeth softly sank into her bottom lip. Then I saw a sudden change.

It was like a mask dropped, a wall fell over her lovely features as she turned to stone. The flush of her skin disappeared as her smile froze.

"Thank you, for saving me from more embarrassment, but the truth is that while I don't have a reservation in my own name..." She added a little eye roll and annoyed sigh. "I do have a meeting. I'm just not sure what name the reservation would be under. I'm a little early."

Her hands moved to her dress, pulling it down, adjusting. It all fell into place.

I'd thought my expensive blonde needed rescuing, while in truth she was here on a meeting, and her frustration and moment of vulnerability were due to the fact she felt she was wildly out of place. My guess would be she'd hoped for a boardroom. I imagined that would be her comfort spot. She'd probably visibly recoiled when formal elite dining had been suggested and then agreed to.

What on earth was a woman like this doing on a lesbian cruise?

“Well, that’s okay. We can wait together.”

The bartender presented her drink with a flourish, pausing as he held a liquor-soaked cherry above the glass with a pair of silver tongs. Reaching into his pocket, he slipped out a polished Zippo. "Madame. Your Shattered Glass." The Zippo sparked to life and her cocktail was served with a flaming cherry garnish. An aromatic hiss filled the silence between them, and the barman returned the lighter to his pocket.

Her eyes widened and a flash of fire reflected in the sea of blue of her eyes as she watched the flames lick the glazed curve of the crimson cherry. It was over in a second, but the moment lingered in my mind.

Focused on her drink, she watched the alcohol swirl, the colors mixing as the cherry fell through the layers, resting at the very bottom of the glass. She gave a slight sigh before letting the glass meet her parted rouged lips.

She drained her drink in one deep swallow, her lips leaving a faint press of red at the rim. She didn’t look up as she finished. Instead, her finger and thumb reached into the V, catching the plump cherry between her glossy nails. The pads of her fingers squeezed and a drip of sweetened alcohol ran down her fingers as she delicately fed herself the best part of the drink. Her lips closed as her teeth sank into the treat, and her eyes closed as she truly savoured the indulgence as I watched her greedily.

When her eyes reopened, she noticed she had gained my complete attention. She whispered just loud enough for me to hear, “I don't think I really belong here.”

As if there had ever been in any doubt.

As her body moved forward, I immediately felt doubt creeping back into my mind.

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Having held her before having spoken, before even having seen the true beauty of her face, the loss of my connection with her was tangible. She took a delicate hold of the cocktail glass and met my gaze. I felt our bond growing closer for a second before she broke her gaze from mine and pulled away.

The lead crystal glass with my whiskey had barely touched my lips before she was draining any last remnants of hers from her glass. She threw her head back, her slim throat bared, the pale skin of her neck exposed. Thoughts of kissing and biting her neck made me pause. I almost forgot where I was as this primal desire to touch her continued to overwhelm all my other thoughts.

Now, as she placed the empty glass on the table, a new flush of color was rising on her smooth cheeks, I instinctively leaned close to her as she did.

I could see her caught between maintaining the iciness of her walls and the draw of giving in to the fire that was building between us. My eyes stayed on hers, my gaze focused, until we were suddenly interrupted.

“Claudia! Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

A woman approached whom I recognised as Sue Smith, a seasoned guest of the ship. Retired, or sort of, very gay and very happily married, she and her wife spent at least six months of the year onboard the Pride of Paradise seeing the world. I knew she was super wealthy and had majority shares in major multinational corporations, so retirement was just a phrase that meant working less and in the settings she chose. I often saw her with her laptop working from the ship.

“Although I’m not that sorry if it means you got to share a drink with the famous Raven Ramsey.” She beamed at me with knowing eyes, and I felt a warm genuine smile spread across my face. Claudia looked curious but gave no hint of knowledge or recollection as to who I was or ever having heard even my name before.

Of course. I’m crushing on the one woman with whom I can’t use my name to seduce! She must be straight if she hasn’t heard of me. Surely?

“A pleasure to meet you again, ma’am.” I grinned in reply, and she fawned.

“Oh, you. Get away with your Southern hospitality,” Sue tutted and laughed. Her short gray hair shimmered in the light. “If you keep calling me ma’am, I am gonna think my mama is around, and she would NOT like the sexual orientation of one hundred percent of this liner, let me tell you.” She laughed, but it was also probably a hard truth. “I’m sorry, but I have to steal the wonderful Claudia away. I can return her to you later.”

“No, we were...”

“Oh no, it’s...”

I glanced over at my expensive blonde, whose name had turned out to be Claudia. She didn’t look like a Claudia, but the more I thought about it, the more it suited her. She nodded to me and I continued.

“Thank you, but I was just heading out myself. Have a wonderful evening, ladies.”

And I left. I didn’t even bother with my reservation.

It tossed and turned all night. My small but very comfortable single-crew cabin wasn't the issue. Nor was the calm Irish sea. Claudia filled my head. She had drawn me in. I thought about the way her dress clung to her, so undeniably sexy. I thought about how vulnerable she seemed, the stumble, the touch. But I felt the touch of that iciness, too. Was that all a front?

It was refreshing the way her gaze lingered on me but unknowingly. No flash of recognition, no spark of I know you. She didn't care who Raven Ramsey was, and that made me want her even more.

I decided to distract myself the following day, but I had a plan for that evening.

Tenders are my least favorite thing about cruise life. You should never have to get into a lifeboat under any circumstances, never mind for half an hour from ship to shore. It makes me feel so sick, and I have no idea why we couldn't dock closer, but then again, that's why I'm not a captain. I kept myself hidden. Most fans would recognize me by my hair, so I wore a baseball cap and kept my makeup to a minimum.

It was a short train ride from the port into Dublin. I navigated Dublin to perfection. I knew it was going to be a highlight. Too soon yet to say if it was the best stop on the route, but it would take some beating.

Dublin was bustling metropolis that somehow had the charm of an Irish town rather than the city it actually was. The people were sunny, happy, chatty, and warm. The streets were clean, the atmosphere was welcoming, and I was in love.

I shopped—new shoes always make me happy. I saw the sights, and I took a little bit of Irish charm with me in my heart as I left.

If someone asked me where should they go? What should they do? What made it

special? I don't know as I could put my finger on any one thing. It wasn't Temple Bar, Grafton Street or Trinity College that made it sparkle. It was just the entire place, from the river to the train, from the schoolboys sharing Jammie dodgers in the carriage, to the woman in Deals who wished me a grand day with my poppets.

I'm sure you wouldn't need to look hard to find the parts of a city that make it dark. The homeless, the graffiti, the drugs, the inequality. But my eyes only saw the sunshine side of Dublin town.

I smiled to myself as I made my way back to the ship. I'd had a lovely day.

I called through to Urduja. "All set."

From the echo, I knew I was speaking to her through the bluetooth, but I swear I could hear the eye roll, too. "Yesssss. All delivered, all accepted. Front row. You'll see her if she turns up. That part, unfortunately, I can't guarantee."

Her. Claudia.

I was desperately hoping she'd turn up to see me perform tonight.

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“Thank you. You’re a star.” I grinned.

“I know, I know, you owe me.” She disconnected as she started to yell at someone else.

I drew women in because I could be vulnerable. I was happy to expose myself on stage, to show that sexy didn’t just mean sex. But on a cruise ship, sometimes sexy could be more obvious. Not tonight.

I felt like Claudia needed to see a side of me that showed more than tight leather. I took a slow walk to my position, settled in place, my heart beating—no, thundering in my chest as I took a deep breath.

My bare feet rested on the pedals as the theater lit up in a soft warm glow. The grand Steinway piano dominated the stage, proud of its commanding presence. Me, I was merely draped on a worn stool, the soft red leather peeling from years of use. A white silk robe fell across my shoulders, loosely tied at the dip of my waist. I reached forward, my fingers offering the lightest of touches against the smooth keys.

"When I feel like this..." The words fell softly from my lips. My fingertips idly meandered across the gleaming ivory keys, giving only the briefest of pressure for each gentle note. I was casual tonight, my makeup minimal and my hair in messy short damp curls. I was making myself vulnerable, although my confidence grew with each word softly sung.

I extended my leg, my bare foot catching the left pedal to soften the tone of the chords, my robe slipping higher up my thigh.

I had chosen to be naked under the ivory silk robe. I enjoyed the thrill of it and giving the audience something different, and it worked so well for this song.

I reached forward, taking the microphone in my hand and rising as the drums began. I slowly made my way to the front of the stage, my bare feet dancing over the worn wooden boards. The cable tangled through my fingers as I sung each soft note, my hips slowly swaying with the beat. I felt eyes on my body, and the heat rose in my cheeks as I blushed, a shy, sexy smile spreading across my face as I bit my bottom lip, my eyes cast down as I fumbled with the mic stand. I dared not look for her, but I felt as if her eyes were on me.

As it fell into place, I looked straight up, and the light caught my eyes. Both my hands rested on the mic stand, and my fingers slowly rose up, drawing it to me. My body moved with a sway to the music, the microphone faintly brushing against my lips.

As the song faded out, the lights dimmed.

The audience was so silent you could hear a pin drop, and then came the cheers. I knew it was a good performance, probably one of my best, and only then did my gaze drop, my eyes lingering on the front row, searching. Looking. And then I found her.

Claudia.

Right there, where I'd hoped she would be.

My dressing room door opened, and I knew it was her before I even turned around—just the sweet scent that suddenly entered the room, the hesitation in the way she tapped, the slowness of how she opened the door.

“Thank you, for the tickets and the invitation.” She held the envelope in her right

hand and a nearly empty glass of white wine in the other.

“Would you like a refill?” I asked softly as I stood. She finished the last sip of her wine but then shook her head.

“I’d better not,” she answered with a soft smile.

She seemed more comfortable in herself tonight, in her clothes. She was wearing fitted dress pants and a cute fitted top. It was simple but in expensive fabrics. Nothing special. You wouldn’t pick it off the rack, but it fitted her well. It suited her height, her frame. It drew me to the curve of her small breasts. It made her look effortlessly feminine, and I liked it. Her long thick hair was drawn up into a neat, high bun, and her makeup was minimal.

I had changed, but had only slipped into something more comfortable, a silk tank and shorts.

“So this is where the magic happens?” she asked with a smile as her fingers reached for the clothes rack, thumbing through the leather jackets, sparkly gowns, and tight pants.

I laughed and moved closer. “I like to think the magic happens on stage, but I guess it starts here, becoming Raven Ramsey.”

Claudia looked at me, her eyes as bright as silvery diamonds. “And who is Raven Ramsey before she gets here?”

There was an intensity and heat to her gaze and to that moment between us, and I chose to not hold back.

I didn’t think. My hands rose to my shoulders and gave a soft sweep across my skin,

letting the straps fall. The satin fabric dropped effortlessly. My breasts fell free with a soft bounce, my nipples already hard, not from the cold, but from desire for her. One hand reached out for her ass, the other rose to tangle in her hair. And then I drew her to me, my lips parting to take a long, deep kiss.

Her lips met mine, opening slightly as she slid her tongue between my lips to dance with mine. I grabbed the hem of her top and took it off. Her sunkissed body stood in front of me. Her erect nipples met mine, pressing against them. She took my bottom lip in my mouth and softly sucked on it.

"I need you," she murmured into my mouth.

She hooked one finger into the waistband of my shorts and then slowly pushed them to the floor as I moaned softly at the taste of her tongue.

I felt that need, too. A hunger for her. My fingers released her hair tie and grabbed handfuls of her hair, pulling her lips from mine, gasping as she dragged my lip with hers before she released. I stepped out of my shorts and stood in front of her naked. I wanted to give myself to her. I went back to kissing her, from her lovely lips, down over her throat, and over her small breasts before taking a firm brown nipple in my mouth and sucking. God, I could stay happily there forever, but it wasn't where I wanted to be, so I continued down, kissing her belly and her naval. I released her pants and black lace underwear and as she easily shrugged them from her hips and gracefully stepped out of them. I settled on my knees in front of her.

"I need you, too. I've needed you desperately since the moment I first saw you."

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She bit her lip as she looked down at me on my knees. I knew I was looking at her hungrily.

“I need to taste you,” I said as I looked at her beautiful naked body and felt my mouth watering in anticipation. Her pubic hair was rich dark gold curls, just like the hair on her head. I was so close I could smell the deep earthy scent of her desire.

She slowly lifted one leg up, placing her foot on a chair and ran the fingers of her right hand through my short hair, inviting me closer.

My lips parted and my tongue swirled over the skin of her inner thigh, tasting her, then my teeth sank in for a soft, fleshy bite. “You are delicious.” My mouth headed inward, closer and closer toward her pussy. I grabbed her ass cheeks with my hands while I buried my face in her, devouring her with my tongue.

Long strokes, nibbles, sucks. She was exquisite and soaking wet for me, and I wanted to taste all of her. I made out with her pussy just as though I was making out with her mouth.

She let out a loud gasp as she watched and felt me exploring her most intimate parts. Not taking her ocean eyes off me, she fixated on my every move.

I took a moment to inhale deeply and breathe in the scent of her. Goosebumps formed on her body when I softly bit down on her labia.

I found her clitoris with my tongue and I circled nice and slowly feeling it swell under my tongue. I wanted to feel her tremble, wanted her to ache, and then finally

gave a full firm press of my tongue over her clit.

She leaned back into the wall and let out a loud moan and I took her clitoris into my mouth and sucked.

I glanced up, enjoying her beautiful body coming apart for me.

I reluctantly released her clitoris from my mouth and returned to long hungry strokes of my tongue. Her clitoris. Her vulva. Her anus. I tasted and teased all of her with my mouth. Then I pushed my tongue inside her pussy as deep as I could and felt her pulsing around it.

Her hips instinctively started to work slowly front to back, side to side matching the rhythm of my tongue.

I loved how she moved with me, against me, feeding me her pussy as she wanted me to take her. It made me so wet for her, I could feel myself tingling between my thighs. I just couldn't get enough of her. I was licking her enthusiastically before I pulled away just for a second to look up at her, meeting her gaze. "You are more than I could have ever imagined."

Grabbing my hair and holding it in a firm grip, tilting my face up so she could look down and watch me. Her body gently quivered as she felt my tongue slide back inside her, oh so slowly. She raised her leg to the top of the chair, giving me easier access to her burning core. "You look like an angel on your knees," she panted. Her moans increased as I continued to lick and explore her. Her hand curled, gripping my hair and gently pulling me into her.

I didn't want to stop. I pressed my face forward and felt her wetness on my lips, chin, nose. I wanted to be messy. I wanted to be covered in her. My hands slid up her body and cupped her beautiful breasts, feeling their swell in my palms before my finger

and thumb moved together and lightly pulled.

She worked her hips more, up and down, side to side and in a circle, grinding her perfect pussy all over my face. I watched her. Seeing me covered in her wetness was driving her wild. She took needy, hard grinds against my face. She was moaning louder and louder. Her stomach muscles tightened as her body began to tremble. I knew she was close.

“Claudia,” I moaned against her pussy, lapping at her faster and firmer as my touches against her nipples became rougher and more intense. “You are so fucking beautiful,” I whispered to her pussy as I adored her, and she ground herself against my face.

Throwing her head back and letting out a long loud moan, her legs trembled as I felt her orgasm building. “I’m going to come in your mouth” she cried out.

“Please,” I gasped as I took a quick breath. “Come for me.”

"Oh fuck, I'm so close! I want to look in your eyes as I come." Grinding harder, her body began to tremble violently, and a scream filled the room as her climax crashed over us both.

She pulsed against my tongue and gushed in my mouth, and it ran all down my chin. I never took my eyes off hers for even a second.

We stayed like that for what seemed like forever, her pussy now still against my mouth as she looked down at me.

I smiled and inhaled the sweet musky scent of her once again. I knew right there I would never get enough of her.

She reached down and hooked her hand under my arm to pull me up to her, looking

me in the eye. "You're fucking incredible," she murmured as she ran her tongue from my chin to my lips, tasting herself off of me. Pressing her lips against me and passionately kissing me, she lifted me up and wrapped my legs around her. She turned slowly and walked toward the couch and laid me down amongst discarded clothes.

"You are so sexy. I love the taste of you. Fuck, I like you." I kissed her hard and full. Lying down, we sank into the couch and then kissed some more. I wanted to lose myself in her arms. I wanted to become someone else in the hunger of her kiss.

Getting on her knees next to me, she began kissing me some more. Her lips moved down to my neck and traced her tongue along my neck, followed by her lips, making her way down my chest and around one of my breasts then around the other. Stopping and looking at me, she whispered in awe. "They're so perfect," she said, and then placed her lips over one of my nipples, softly sucking it into her mouth and letting it pop out as she pulled away.

"You are so perfect," she murmured into my chest as her sapphire eyes met mine.

Her tongue traced my stomach as she scooted onto her knees, tracing down my body. Licking, kissing, sucking, and nibbling. She looked up at my body as she began to work her way back up from my toes. Her tongue glided along my foot to my calf to my inner thigh before grabbing my leg and spreading it. Her tongue ran up the crease of my groin. I felt myself shudder. I knew I was about to explode. Every touch of her tongue, of her fingers, anywhere on my body was driving me crazy. She turned her head. She looked exquisitely beautiful between my legs. For someone who had looked so out of place from the first time I'd seen her on the ship, she suddenly looked to be in exactly the right place. She paused a second and breathed me in in exactly the same way I had done to her earlier.

I felt myself blush. My cheeks pinked as she laid me out and started to explore me. I

was nervous. I'd wanted her, and then she'd told me she thought I was perfect and I melted for her.

I'm not usually nervous during sex. God knows, I've picked up enough women on enough cruises for enough no-strings sex encounters, but this...this felt different somehow from the very start, although I couldn't have put my finger on why.

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Sure, she was different from the women who usually threw themselves at me. Maybe it was her iciness, her aloof indifference, that gave me so much pleasure to see it melt away from her along with her clothes.

I told myself to stop overthinking it and simply enjoy.

Gasping as she sucked on my nipple made me tingle from head to toe. After she released my nipple, that's where her mouth went again, all the way down to my toes, and all the way up to my face, kissing, licking, and adoring every inch of me. I felt myself coming apart under her tongue. I felt wide open and vulnerable for her. I was desperate for her, and yet at the same time an inexplicable and unusual shyness overcame me. I felt nervous to open my legs, but her gaze was determined, and her hands pushed my legs apart. "Oh," I moaned as I watched her reach my inner thigh. I could feel the invisible lines her mouth had left on my skin.

She pushed my legs further apart and her face moved back between them.

Her tongue ran over my vulva then softly teased over the top of my labia. I watched as she breathed me in again. Her fingernails softly raked up my inner thighs as her tongue pressed against me, sliding and working her way between my lips, taking the first taste of me and I watched as I felt myself tremble.

Her tongue ran down between my labia, taking my left fold and sucking it into her mouth, gently pulling until it slid out. Then she did the same to my right before lowering to my opening, running her tongue back and forth before she slid it inside.

"Oh, Claudia." I moaned, I loved her name on my lips. I was trembling. I could feel

myself flooding with wetness already, wet from making love to her and now wetter still from having had her teasing me. Ultimately, she was at my most intimate place, looking up at me as she licked every tiny little part of me, outside and inside. "Don't stop," I heard myself gasp. "Please..."

She began to work her tongue inside me, running it against my walls and moving it to all the right spots as she explored, pulling it out only to make her way almost casually to my clitoris. Her lips covered it and sucked as two of her fingers slowly and gently slid inside me and curled up to meet my G spot. They pulled out and firmly pushed back in, determinedly pressing my G spot. Once. Twice. Three times.

Claudia was most certainly not straight.

"Oh!" I struggled to keep control. Then I let go in a hot wet explosion for her. Even as I was in mid-orgasm, I reached for her. I wanted her lips, kisses, and touch as I let go. "Oh!"

She continued licking, tasting and lapping up my orgasm. She climbed up to me, pressing her lips to mine and deeply, passionately kissing me, stealing each long, deep moan of my orgasm from my trembling lips.

I could taste me in her kiss.

Her. Us.

As our bodies came down from the high, our minds were still up there, lost. Holding onto each other tight, my thoughts couldn't manage anything other than, "Wow."

4

The untangling was seamless. As we both came around, we dressed slowly with

smiles and touches.

“I should go,” she started just as I began.

“I probably should...” We both laughed.

I would have invited her to my room, but there were super strict rules about guests in crew cabins, and I didn’t have my wits about me to sneak her down that night, but I have no doubt I would in the future.

All of my guest rules had gone out the window and had been lost at sea. Claudia. Who was she? I didn’t have much of an idea, but she consumed me. She was smart, beautiful, intelligent, cool, calm, and sophisticated. She didn’t care who I was, didn’t even know who I was before she saw me sing to her on stage. She was drawn to me for a different reason.

She slipped out of my dressing room with a soft smile, whispering barely mouthed, “I will find you.”

Not unless I found her first, I thought to myself.

How right I would be.

The next day was a sea day and I was, to my annoyance, very busy with on-ship activities. I threw myself into them because there wasn’t much point in avoiding them. The time would only drag out longer, and it was actually more enjoyable if I pushed myself to have fun.

Women flocked to me, asking for autographs, telling me how they had come on this ship just to see me sing, how last night in the silk robe, singing my most intimate song, was the most incredible live performance they’d ever seen. Okay, that part did

make me glow a little.

I looked for Claudia everywhere, but I wasn't too surprised that I didn't see her. I assumed she would be working, as she seemed to be glued to her phone. Playing the dumb games we dreamed up to entertain the guests just didn't seem to be her kind of thing.

I couldn't stop thinking about last night, about how incredible the sex had been, so intimate. The spark of lust that had been simmering between us had burned into an explosion of pure, unadulterated desire, and I'd loved every single second of it.

That evening, I headed to La Côte de Louxor. I figured I might see her there at the bar, as it was the only place we'd accidentally met before. But after my third cocktail, which I had made last two hours, I called it a night. Impulsively, in my cabin, I called guest services and asked to be transferred to her room, only to be told she'd set her room to do not disturb. The optimist in me told me she probably had a long day and wanted an early night. The realist told me to take the message as delivered—do not disturb.

A gray morning settled over the shore and the wind hit me full-on in the face the second I stepped onto the ramp to head to the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland.

The landscape was different to what I'd seen before. Green for sure, but the lack of trees, bushes, and flowers made it sweepingly stark. The sheets of grass were only peppered with animals. Cows were laid out, and sheep huddled in the brisk breezy morning.

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The shuttle bus took us into town. Our first stop was the cathedral. I lit a candle. I'm not sure why I still did such things when I'm no longer a believer, but it is somewhat of a tradition. It made me think of Clarissa, how she would laugh at the things I couldn't shake from my religious childhood, and I felt a pang of longing. I missed her. We were never meant to be together. It never would have worked, but I missed her laugh, and I wondered if after all this time if she ever still thought of me. I guess first love lingers like that.

The town was cute, nothing too special, but it was filled with clashes of culture and history. The port itself was spilling with stories of past lives. From warships to Vikings, kings to pirates. It was clear we were by no means the first ship to settle at its shore.

I took a walk out of town in hopes of seeing seals and puffins, but all I did was lose my banana bread to the wind.

Honestly, I had little interest in seeing the standing stones. They're 5000 years old, but I couldn't focus. I'm not sure why, but my brain wanders. I wish I wasn't wired that way, but I am. I heard people, other Americans, talking loudly after about the theories, animatedly discussing the options, yet for me, I felt a little indifferent, distracted, my thoughts on a beautiful blonde with eyes that shimmered like the ocean itself.

As I fell out of the bus at a crossroads with new animated acquaintances, the sun blessed us with heat that seemed to cut through the wind.

The shore of the loch lit up, and there, right in front of us were basking seals soaking

in the rays. It was a moment that would define my season. Cities and sights come and go. History defines the paths and culture paints the colors. But nature is mysterious as to when she will show her beauty.

You could wait hours, days, or weeks. Seals don't work on my timeline. But there on that shore, at that moment, we shared a quiet space in the world.

I started to wonder if I had imagined our encounter. I looked for Claudia incessantly on the ship, but I never found her. She wasn't at my shows, the bars, or the restaurants when I checked. I also called her room a few times, only to receive the elusive do not disturb message. I could deny it as much as I wanted, but the truth was becoming increasingly harder to ignore. She was avoiding me.

It took two days for Urduja to get involved.

"Look, I'm not saying I have spies everywhere, but the truth is that I have spies everywhere," she said with a raised eyebrow. "I cannot cope with this moping and pining anymore. I'll tell you when and where she appears tonight, and you will go and speak to her. I cannot tell you she is going to feel what you feel. She may say it was a mistake and to leave her alone. But at least then you'll know and can stop with all this nonsense. Yes?"

I nodded, although I wasn't entirely sure what I was agreeing to. She was right. I was like a moping teen in the midst of an angsty breakdown. I needed closure one way or another.

It took a lot for me to not go all out. Heels, sexy outfit, dramatic makeup. I thought about it, but really, I was past that point. Claudia had wanted me for me. Or so I'd thought. If she didn't want me at all, I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

I got my code signal from Urduja. "She is in the Explorers Bar!" Not really much of a

code, and I took a deep breath. Better to know, right? I kept repeating that mantra as, although it felt as if suddenly there were oceans between us, I nervously made my way across the ship to her.

5

I saw her sitting at the bar. For a woman who seemed to be dismissive of attention, her red dress demanded it. Tight, silky satin clung to her in all the right places. She seemed more comfortable than other times I'd seen her in public, and I wondered if that was because of the nearly empty glass of red wine she absentmindedly swirled in her right hand.

The seat beside her was taken by a girl trying to get her attention.

She stood slowly after a few minutes. The girl's attempt in capturing Claudia in conversation had failed. I walked over, trying not to seem too desperate, trying to maintain a gait that didn't show how badly I wanted to be in that seat next to her.

She barely noticed me. Her gaze on the barman, watching him make fancy drinks with ease. Her fingers absentmindedly traced up and down the stem of her wine glass.

I waited, stealing glances her way, hoping to make eye contact, but instead I was looking at her glass of wine, watching it slowly empty.

She took the last sip, crimson lipstick stains on the rim of the glass. I saw her debate with herself as whether to have another, and as the thought crossed her mind, her eyes drifted to me for the first time.

I leaned over with a smile. "Can I get you another drink?" I asked.

Her head tilted a little, her eyes giving nothing away, but maybe, maybe there was a

hint of a smile. The pause lingered.

“Sure, I’ll have another,” she finally said.

I tried to stop the sigh of relief on my lips after the long, lingering pause. I was mostly successful. I turned to the bartender. “Two, please.”

Her eyebrows raised as she settled back in her seat, and her red dress rose up her thighs a little higher as she unashamedly let her gaze linger over me.

“You didn’t strike me as a red wine type of girl,” she said.

I looked back at her. “There’s a lot that you may not anticipate with me,” I said, taking my wine and swirling it in my glass a little before I took another drink. I looked at her over the edge of the rim.

“Like what, then,” she said, with a bit of a challenge in her voice.

I took a small sip from the glass, looking over at her with a small smile. “I’m not too picky with my wine,” I said before continuing. “I like to drink in a lot of things. Wine. The presence of a beautiful woman. The way she looks. The small smile. The glances. I take it all in. Very observant.”

I took a little inhale, weighing her up and finding her incredibly hard to read. Maybe that’s what caught my attention the most. My teeth lightly ran over my bottom lip. My glass settled once more on the counter.

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"And what catches your attention?" she asked.

"A classy woman alone at the bar sipping on wine. Dressed up, but tough to get her attention. That catches my attention."

Now I'd finally gotten her to smile, though I could tell she was trying to hide it.

"They can be hard to come by," she murmured as she shifted a little in her seat, sliding an inch forward, just a tiny bit closer but not much.

"And what catches your attention?" I asked with a little smile, inching just a little closer, too.

Her hand settled on the bar top, slender fingers fanning, then red nails lightly tracing while she mulled over my question. Then she looked straight at me. "Usually something that brings trouble."

"Here's another thing you may not suspect about me." I leaned in close to her. "I tend to cause a lot of trouble."

She watched me, taking in the way I leaned in with confidence and weighing it up in her mind.

She stretched out her leg, her ankle circling and her foot casually glancing against my leg.

"What kind of trouble?"

I took a deep breath. We were doing the dance, and it would have been so easy to give her what she wanted. The flirt, the tease, the fuck. But there was something I needed to acknowledge.

"I think you know, Claudia." Her eyebrows raised as I said her name. I leaned in next to her ear and whispered softly, "The kind that makes you want to come back for more even if you almost wish you wouldn't."

There was another pause.

"Do you think I'll want more of you?"

I felt the closeness, how she invaded my space with ease. Her words lingered against my ear, and goosebumps lined my skin. I tried to hide my shiver. My nipples hardened under my shirt.

I took a chance. "I think you already do. Don't you?"

She leaned in until her lips brushed against my jaw. Reaching my ear, she paused—a soft breath, almost a pant—then her hand moved to my thigh, nails lightly digging in as her teeth nipped and pulled on my lobe before she whispered, "Maybe."

Electric shock ran right through my body and pulsed between my legs.

I smiled and pulled my face away a little. Then I leaned back in to find her lips. I kissed them, a light, soft kiss. It didn't last long, yet it lingered. "You can say yes."

My kiss surprised her, my softness in contrast to her boldness. Full of surprises. Her hand that still lingered on my thigh slid up.

"In my experience, women who bring trouble," she said, inching higher and higher,

"don't go for the easy yes."

She pulled her hand away, back down my thigh, retreating just an inch or so from my space.

"Then let me get you another drink," I said with a smile. I was a little surprised at her movement away from me. I turned to face her, my hand lightly brushing along her outer thigh.

She looked down, watching my hand graze along her bare skin. Her fingers moved to my shirt, the pads of her fingers dancing over the cool cotton over my shoulder.

"Maybe we should have a drink somewhere else," she murmured.

I stood up and extended my hand to her. "Where did you have in mind?" I asked.

She reached for her drink and drained her glass before she stood. Her dress had ridden up her thighs again, showing off long legs and barely covering the curve of her ass. She threaded her fingers with mine.

"I have a room, if you'd like a more private drink?" she said.

I couldn't help but stare at her exposed legs, wondering how good my hand would feel on her ass. I had to let those thoughts pass quickly, though. I gave her hand a squeeze and extended my other arm out.

"You lead the way," I said.

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She strode forward, stilettos clicking against the floor. With every step, her hips rolled, a slow seductive movement showing off her curves as she took us to the elevator. We stepped inside, our first moment alone again, and she leaned across me to select the floor.

When the doors closed, I couldn't help but turn to her. I pushed her against the wall of the elevator and kissed her. I knew we'd have to break the kiss as soon as the elevator doors opened, but at that moment, I just focused on the way her lips felt against mine.

With her pinned against the metal interior of the elevator, I could see us in the reflection and at every angle as my body pressed against hers and her lips found mine with all the want I knew was inside of her, even if she chose to try and resist it. Her chin tilted up, and her hand that was holding mine guided my palm to her ass as she returned my kiss. My entire body tingled as I took a full, firm squeeze of her ass.

I wanted to push her panties to the side and fuck her there and then up against the wall of the elevator. I found my hand straying around to push between her legs and threatened to do just what I was thinking about. Then the ding of the elevator sounded.

It took me a second to release her. But the moment I did, she moved with intent, fumbling for her keycard before leading us to her room.

I followed behind her, recapturing my breath and staring at her ass. My own intent was crystal clear in my movement—to get to her room as quickly as possible.

She let go of my hand while she let us into her room. As soon as the door closed

behind us, she turned away from me.

She slowly bent over, fingers on the clip of her stiletto, and she knew exactly what she was doing. Her dress rode up so high that I could see that soft, sexy swell of her ass, and I caught a strong glimpse of the black lace panties that covered her pussy. She removed her left shoe then her right shoe.

I stared as she teased me with her slow undressing. It took everything in me to not let out a gasp. I felt my control leaving my body with every passing moment. I took a step forward and found my hand on her ass once again.

She stayed where she was, feeling my hand against her, bent over she reached back and slowly peeled her dress up, red satin riding up her ass to rest at her hips. Her lacy thong hid very little and her ass cheeks were smooth and creamy.

I thought my mind and body might explode there and then. I'd never met anyone like her.

I'd never wanted anyone sexually in the way I wanted her.

I studied her for a moment.

"Why don't you take your panties off for me?" I whispered, but it came out in a breathy hiss.

She looked at me from over her shoulder, watching me study her as her fingers found the elastic at her hips. She slowly and obediently slid her underwear down, her thighs slightly parted, the fabric gliding over her ass. Then she let go, the black lace dropping to her ankles.

"I could take you right here," I said. "Touch that beautiful pussy of yours. Would you

like that? For me to fuck you bent over right here, right now?"

"Is that what you want?" She swayed her hips softly, such a fucking tease. "Do you want to fuck me from behind like this?"

Her hands grabbed the fabric of her dress and pulled it up and over. She threw the fabric onto the floor and stood before me. Naked. Bent over. Looking over her shoulder at me with bedroom eyes.

"Do whatever you want to me," she whispered. Her words were like silk.

I felt a rush of pleasure like nothing else run right through me.

I tapped her ass with my palm a few times, watching her body respond to my slaps. I spanked her harder. I enjoyed hearing her moan and watching her her body move under my hand. Her ass colored up beautifully in red hand prints.

Fuck, she was so beautiful.

"I will do exactly as I please with you," I said, buoyed with confidence.

I spanked her again. Hard. She cried out and moved so she could grip onto the sheets of the bed with her hands.

I spanked her again and enjoyed watching her flesh ripple around my hand.

I could see glimpses of her wanting pussy as she moved. It glistened wet in the light as though begging for me. I couldn't wait to take her.

I moved my hand to her hips, gently touching her sides before gripping them more firmly. She gasped as my hands roamed her body.

“I’ve wanted to bend you over and fuck you since the first moment I saw you,” I said.

She gasped and buried her face in the bed. Her back arched and her ass rose up to me and welcomed me in.

My fingers ran down the cleft of her ass, softly, gently, teasingly.

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I ran them around the rim of her anus and she moaned for me.

I slid them down into her wetness and she moaned again, wriggling her feet wider apart to give me better access.

Slowly, I pushed two of my fingers into her pussy, letting her adjust to me before I began to move them, spreading them inside her.

She gasped, and when I pulled back, my fingers were coated in her wetness.

I gripped her ass in my left hand, giving it a hard slap as I began to fuck her with my right hand, making sure that she could feel the slow curl of my fingers inside her down toward the swell of her G-spot.

I added a third finger and it slid in easily. She was so wide open and wanting for me.

She let out a cry, her pussy tensing hard around my fingers as another slap vibrated through her. A beautiful red handprint colored up on her left ass cheek, and her body responded, pushing back into my fingers so each movement became harder, deeper, rougher.

“This is exactly what I wanted to do to you,” I growled, picking up my rhythm and fucking her harder. I gripped her left hip hard with my left hand and moved faster with my right. She moaned louder, and her cries became more desperate for me.

“You like it rough, baby?” I asked.

“Mmmm, yes,” she murmured, barely coherent. Her face was buried in the bedsheets, her hair was a tangled mess, and she lost herself to the fucking. I glanced between her legs and saw long, glistening strands of her lust.

Our bodies moved together as I held her hips tightly and rocked my fingers into her again and again. And she was not fucking quiet. She moaned loudly, over and over, her legs trembling as she pushed back against me. She desperately needed everything I gave her. I gave her another slap as I continued to push, gripping her hip again to pull her back onto my fingers.

She squirted for my fingers, and I felt the gush of it against the palm of my hand. I paused for a second to watch as it ran down the inside of her thighs and onto the carpet.

“Messy girl. Aren’t you?”

“Uh...mmm.” Her words were incoherent.

“Let’s see if we can make more of a mess of the carpet,” I said, and her ass pushed into me.

“Please...” I heard her say, and I leant in close to her face to hear what she wanted.

“More...” Only one word fell from her lips, and I was more than happy to give it to her.

I added a fourth finger and went back to fucking, fucking her harder than anyone I ever have in my life. I’ve never known anyone want for it quite like she did, moaning, crying, pushing her ass back at me.

Her body tensed, sweat glistening on her skin. Her moans were loud as her hips

dipped, bending over more, just begging for relief. Her orgasm was hard and fast and came with a lot of squirting. I felt overwhelmed as she collapsed onto the bed. I slid my fingers in and out slowly and gently, over and over, to fuck her through it, until I thought she was done. I was about to withdraw when I felt her hand reach back to touch my wrist.

“Don’t,” she murmured.

“What do you need, baby?” I asked, leaning forward again to hear her answer.

“Your hand. All of it. Gently.”

It wasn’t what I was expecting to be asked for, but I was happy to oblige. She was lying prone on the bed now, I tucked my thumb in and pushed back inside of her. I marvelled as she eased herself slowly backward onto my hand, her wetness gradually opening to take me inside.

All of me.

As my hand slid all the way in and I curled my fingers into a fist inside of her, I felt her pussy tighten around it and close around my wrist. I felt desperate to hold her close. I lowered my body on top of hers and I rocked her on my fist.

“You’ve got all of me, baby,” I said, holding her tightly with my left hand and pushing my body down on top of her.

Her breathing quickened. It was different than before. Deep, intimate, close. She rocked to another orgasm pinned beneath me, tiny movements of my fist buried deep inside of her. Her orgasm seemed to take over her as her body shuddered around my fingers again and again and again. She seemed transported to another world as I held her tightly and stayed inside of her as she came again and again.

It felt like forever before I carefully slid out of her, finally and completely, and she winced at the loss of me. Her body was shaking and glossy with sweat beneath me. I rolled off to the side of her.

She turned back and reached for me, collapsing further into my arms, and I held her close to me. She was crying, and she buried her face in my neck.

“Oh, Raven,” she managed from her breathless lips, and my heart leapt to hear my name on her tongue.

6

I'd like to say that following a wild night of sexual escapades I felt clearer in my feelings for Claudia, but the truth was she only pulled further away. Finding her became a game of hide and seek. She didn't want to be found, she didn't open up to me, and her icy front remained completely intact except for the rare moments of vulnerability she'd showed me when she let me into her space to fuck her and she'd orgasmed for my tongue and fingers.

She would often cry when she came. But, she would never talk. Not really. Nothing real. Then she would just close down from me again until the next time.

"Do you think you might ever turn your phone off of do not disturb?" I asked her playfully one night as our naked bodies lay tangled on the sheets. I felt her stiffen.

"Why would I do that?" she asked coolly.

"Well, so I don't have to spend hours at night looking around a ship for you. I could, you know, just call you and see you and spend time with you without walking up and down every floor."

That wasn't exactly true. Urduja enjoyed her role in the find Claudia game and took great pleasure in trying to beat her record time of eight minutes with a precise location, but the truth was, I was feeling needy and unsure of where I stood. Chasing someone down every night when I was used to them chasing me wasn't doing much for my self-esteem.

You know, the magic when you start a sentence, not really knowing what it is you are trying to say, and the words just fall into place? That never happened with Claudia. She gave me little to work with, no openness into her life, emotions, thoughts, or feelings, and yet honestly, I was hooked. It only made me want her even more.

“You don't need to come and find me if you don't want to find me, Raven.” I wish I could say she said it in a warm tone with a hint of need, but she gave me nothing.

“Don't you want me to come and find you?” I asked softly. My heart crushed when she replied with a nonchalant shrug.

The next day I had a full day off, and I decided I needed to get my head out of my thoughts, so I took a second trip to Edinburgh. My first had been on my last cruise, and it was not my favourite.

I had sailed through Fjords, glimpsed polar bears, straddled continents, and discovered the land of fire and ice. Gothic architecture on a gray drizzly day seemed drab.

My first step that day into a sun-filled Edinburgh started on a brighter note. Warmth was in my heart, and a smile was on my face. Urduja and I set off to explore but already, I understood a little more about the pull of this city.

Warning—don't go to Edinburgh if you don't like walking hills or steps. I felt like the Grand Old Duke of York. In full disclosure, I'm still not a fan of gothic architecture. It looks less drab in the sun, but even so, it's not a style I truly appreciate.

Scotland has a lot to offer its residents. Free healthcare, women's products, higher education, and museums, among other things.

I had a great time there. Urduja was like a kid in a candy shop, and that excited energy was infectious. We wandered through the Egyptian tomb, learned about mammals, and lastly, the energy machines.

I probably was having a slightly internal gray day. It happens. But she pulled me through with a bounce in her step and wide eyes. I could see Edinburgh had cast its spell on her, and I had a very strong suspicion that I'd be making my third trip in the not-so-distant future on the next tour around.

Our next meander was to Princes park. Sitting on wide-open green spaces, looking down with the castle above us was idyllic. Times of peace in a genuinely busy city is not easy to find, and I'm happy we did.

Wandering with no purpose came next. Ambling down busy streets. Nipping in and out of shops and soaking up the ambience of that fairytale city.

The train station brought a moment of stress. We dashed the terminal, only for me to realize I had the backpack, so Urduja didn't have the tickets, to get to our train with ten seconds to spare. It was a breathless rush that left my heart racing.

Collapsing on my seat, it took a second for my pulse to settle, and as the city drifted from view, I felt the gray settle again.

Urduja leaned forward, her hand resting over mine. "The thing is, Raven, and I know you don't want to hear this. But if you keep chasing her, she just isn't going to realize how special you are and how lucky she is to have your attention. And I don't mean because of your killer body, sexy smile, or come make sweet love to me now voice. I mean because you are a genuinely amazing woman with a big heart. I think she knows that. I think she hates that she wants you. But until you force her to actually make the effort for you, she just isn't going to."

I sighed deeply. I knew she was right.

“I’m not good at that, though. When I want something, I don’t know how to pause and slow down. I only know how to chase after it,” I said.

Urduja nodded knowingly. “Maybe Claudia could be exactly what you need after all, then, to learn how to value yourself.”

A single light beamed on the stage. The black piano, perfectly polished, gleamed in the light. A deep red-orange gown spilled across the top and gave a glimpse of my pale skin. Mist rose, seeping around a single shadowed pianist dressed in black, only his fingers visible as they softly caressed the keys, gliding along the ivories with a slow stroke as the first note rang out.

I stretched across the dark smooth wood of the piano, my hair tamed as I spread out across the polished mahogany. My eyes closed with sweeping dark lines of makeup brushed over my eyelids. I slid my legs over the edge, softly falling to my feet. Padding barefoot to the center of the stage, my gown flowed behind me in a river of fire. My lips almost kissed the microphone as my fingers slowly curled around the stand.

“I Put A Spell On You...”

My gown was stunning, falling to the floor in a fiery pool of blood red scarlet and smouldering orange. I sang soulfully.

The spotlight dimmed, and an arch of flames ignited behind me, casting flickering embers over me, my skin bathed in its fiery glow. My breasts swayed as I moved to the music. My hands ran down my body, my fingers gliding over my dress. My eyes sparkled, seeking her as I looked out searchingly to the crowd. “I’m yours right now.”

I didn't see her.

I gripped the metal stand hard, drawing it to me, pressing my mouth firmly against the microphone. My lips parted as I breathlessly sang in a husky tone. As my body continued to move soulfully, I let the beat wash through me as the last chord rang out. "Because you're mine."

The audience paused for a moment, and I slowly inhaled. That wait is always hard, not knowing if I hit the mark. Two or three seconds seem to last hours. Then the crowd cheered, standing in rapturous applause. I know I'm not the Raven Ramsey I once was. I don't sell out concerts or perform at sold-out shows. But this adoring crowd of my people made it bearable to accept that fact. Made it easier to acknowledge I was past my peak but still had something to share.

Hours and days passed. I went back to my normal routine, trying hard not to think about Claudia 24/7. I volunteered to host some of the daily activities, and I didn't bother to leave the ship, I was in a gray mood, and I didn't want to ruin any amazing destinations by bringing my storm cloud with me. I painted on a smile for the guests, and to be honest, being around a bunch of vacationers, it wasn't too difficult to feel the pick up from their excitement.

Urduja was on top-tier best friend behavior. While it was never easy to relax around her, as any second the boss would start hollering into her headset, she genuinely made the effort to distract me and keep me smiling. But after nearly three days of trying not to seek her out, it was time to accept the facts. Claudia just wasn't interested in me.

"Look, we need to go out. Let me nip back and get changed, and I will meet you at

the bar,” Urduja said with a smile, and I raised my eyebrows. She frowned and paused for a second.

“Fineeeee,” she reluctantly agreed with an elongated e. “I will leave the bluetooth at home.” I gave her a huge smile as she sulked off.

I went to the Explorer's bar and ordered a diet Coke. I was comfortable in my jeans and a plain black tee. I had no plans to drink much tonight. I did have my fucking beautiful new heeled boots on , though. I just wanted to hang out and maybe watch the women's soccer on the big screen and pretend I gave a shit just to have something to distract me. I didn't like to talk too much about my home life with Urduja. She'd happily open up, but I knew that beneath the feisty exterior she missed home a lot. A cruiseliner's life had opened up a world and possibilities to her and she was grateful for that, but it certainly came at a cost.

My diet Coke came and I took a deep drink, but it didn't really hit the spot. I let out a soft sigh as I debated ordering some whiskey to accompany it when I heard a soft yet undeniable voice beside me.

“No wine?” I took a second, composing myself before I turned to her. She looked the most casual I'd ever seen her, in comfy slacks and a loose blouse that screamed elegance and sophistication. I softly shook my head, then turned back to my drink, determined not to get my hopes up, as it could all just be a chance encounter.

“Do you mind if I take this seat?” she asked softly, and I felt my heart thunder in my chest. It took all my restraint not to launch into an absolutely yes please sit here and stay with me all night monologue, but I managed to keep some of my cool, at least.

I'm a performer, let's not forget.

“Of course,” I confirmed with a gesture, and she slowly slid onto the stool, ordering

herself a wine.

“I haven't seen you around,” she said.

A debate ensued in my head. Casual. I have been busy, true, but that was not the reason she hasn't seen me. Honestly, I didn't like the way her constant rejection felt. True, but not the best start to the night.

“I was busy, and I didn't really get the impression you wanted to see me.” Diplomacy won in terms of an honest yet softened mash-up.

She hesitated, taking a long drink of her wine, as if mulling over how to respond. “I guess that's fair. The thing is, Raven...” Someone came up behind her to order a drink and she stopped. It had apparently knocked her off her flow. I didn't want to push her. I wanted her to open up in her own time.

“Do you mind, if we get a table?” she asked, and I nodded. We both rose and made our way to the dark edge of the bar. I saw Urduja come in and spot me. She started with an excited wave and then saw I wasn't alone. She beamed and gave me the thumbs up, which made my eyes widen as I gave her the cut-it signal just as Claudia turned around, so I had to quickly and awkwardly scratch my neck.

“Is here okay?” she asked me uncertainly, and I wondered what on earth I must have looked like.

“Yes, this is fine for me,” I replied, settling into one of the comfy soft leather seats.

“I know I haven't been very fair to you, Raven. The thing is, I absolutely did not want to be on this fucking cruise. I hate boats, I hate sailing around the UK, the internet is shitty, the food is too much, I can't get my work done, and I don't understand why I needed to be here.” It was the most I'd heard her say in one long consecutive

sentence.

“I’m not here on vacation. I’m supposed to be ironing out the details of a merger. My company has been trying to get it finalized for months, nearly a full year. And Sue Smith, the woman you saw me with the other night—I need her, but I can’t pin her down. She spends all her time on these,” she waved her hand around “fucking boats. So here I am trying to finish the merger, and it’s just so stressful. I’d much rather be at the office.”

I noted that she said at the office and not at home like someone else may have said in a similar sentence.

I nodded, taking a sip of my Coke, still not wanting to interfere with her flow of thought.

“I didn’t expect to meet someone here. I mean, yes I’m gay, and this is a boat full of gays.” She paused.

I don’t know what offended me more, to be referred to as “gays,” or to call this beautiful ship a boat, but I kept quiet.

“But I don’t really date anyway, and I just wanted to get on and off. I was hoping I wouldn’t even need to be here for the full cruise, but now it seems as if I’ll have to stay on for another trip around, as this needs sorting, and this is where Sue Smith will be—when I can get time with her in between her social schedule,” she said, her voice trailing off.

My pulse quickened. Another tour around, another ten days. She seemed so upset by the thought, but all I could think about was how maybe we’d have more time together.

“So, I have been distant with you, Raven. I didn't know who you were, and I was very grateful that first night in the restaurant. I had no idea the staff here could be such assholes, no offense.”

I chewed down the response that I wasn't a member of crew staff but entertainment. And I was not an asshole.

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“I felt completely out of place, and you really did save me from a lot of embarrassment. And of course, you’re beautiful. I was instantly attracted to you.” She paused. “Anyway, the next night when Sue insisted I came to the show because you had reserved those seats, I didn't even know it was you on stage in the beginning. You were mesmerising, and as much as I wanted to keep away and focus on the reason I’m here, I just couldn't stop myself from being drawn to you.”

I blushed a little, finally feeling a little warmth, a little acknowledgement that it wasn't just me feeling these emotions.

“I’ve never really given into passion like that. To feel the touch of a woman and enjoy it over and over in the way I have with you. Don't get me wrong—I like sex, and I’m not shy, but I suppose I’ve never let myself go in the moment. I imagine some would say I’m repressed, but anyway, that night in your dressing room, then that night in my cabin...” She paused, trying to find the words. She reached for her drink with a shaky hand.

“I guess I pushed you away, and it took not seeing you to realize just how much I was hoping you’d keep making the effort to see me. So I came here tonight because I wanted to find you. I wanted to have a drink with you. I wanted to talk to the famous Raven Ramsey, about whom I know nothing about, and afterward, I wanted to invite you back to my room, not to kick you out after you make me a hot wet mess for you, but for you to stay the night, because I have two weeks left on this boat, and I would really like to spend most of it with you.”

She looked me straight in the eyes with a clear, focused stare.

I took a deep breath.

“Claudia,” I started. “I’d love to do all of those things with you, and more, as long as you stop calling this magnificent ship a boat.” Then I grinned and slid my hand across the table to entwine her fingers with mine.

7

Claudia and I tangled into each other over the next few days. I only left her room to work, and even that took effort. I could talk for hours about the sex, which Urduja urged me to do when she came into my dressing room after each show to try and extract all the details.

“Come on, girl, have some sympathy for us here who have to rely on the terrible buffer rate of the ship’s wifi for our porn fix. Give me all the juicy details,” she teased.

I’d replied with a roll of my eyes, and she’d dramatically collapsed on my sofa.

“Well, as much as I miss my best friend, I have to say this sexathon is doing wonders for your complexion, shows, and style. Even Fernanda has been commenting on how this has been your best circuit yet, and you know how hard it is to get a compliment out of that wet fish,” she said.

“High praise indeed.” I laughed, but I felt myself glowing.

For such a confident woman, Claudia hid behind her steely shell. The first night in the restaurant when she showed her vulnerability, I could never have known that that would be such a rare and difficult thing for her to do.

She struggled to share her emotions, and when she talked about her thoughts and

feelings, past or present, it was always so matter of fact that she sounded cold and detached.

But I could see through it. I could hear the forced edge, the mask she'd been wearing for a long time.

"I know it may seem like I'm some posh bitch with no emotions. But I'm not. I wasn't always like this, Raven, but I had to become this," she admitted during a late-night cuddle, while I pretended to watch some nonsensical show on TV.

"I don't think you're a posh bitch with no emotions, Claudia," I murmured as I pulled her closer, holding her tight against my chest. I wondered if she could feel my heart beating.

"I didn't have a choice. My mother barely spoke English, and my father was a waste-of-space asshole. We had nothing. I had nothing, and I knew I could be something. The world is changing. It is my hope that girls today don't need to become heartless to make it in this world, but thirty years ago, that was the only option. If you wanted to play in the same league as the guys, you had to be better than them, and even then, better wasn't enough. Best. You had to be the best to even be given a thought. My mother died before I really got anywhere. Any reason I had to hold onto all that emotional stuff died with her. It sounds dramatic, doesn't it? It wasn't. It just happened slowly until I realized I was fifty with no friends, relationships, or anyone I actually gave a fuck about in my life."

I kept still for a moment, letting her tumbled words swirl around in my head. I didn't want to instantly reply to her. I wanted to give her the care and consideration she deserved when she'd opened up such a deep part of her feelings and thoughts to me.

"I loved someone once. A girl," Claudia continued. "The greatest love of my life didn't feel like that at the time. We grew in love. Yes, there were butterflies, passion,

falling. But it wasn't a movie moment. It was a movie in itself. Just two kids who lived three doors apart. For the longest time, she was my best friend. We created worlds in our back gardens. We built swings in the quarry. I was bossy, and she listened. I made the plans, and she made them come to life. Or she tried because my imagination was always so much bigger than reality." She sighed deeply, lost in thought.

"I loved her dad and she loved my mom. She sat through the long nights of crying, of wishing I could escape from my dad, wanting to break away from this suffocating place. She held my hand when my dad went on rages, and then when he stopped caring, and then when he moved out. Funny, how after he left my house felt so much calmer, and yet my mom and I seemed to miss the turbulence."

It didn't feel like she was talking to me anymore. She was lost in her memories. "There wasn't some big moment. Just fingers that gravitated toward each other. Holding hands. The hugs goodnight. Then the first kiss under a blanket. Giggling. No idea what it meant or where it would take us. Sixteen and in love. And then she moved, left, and I never saw her again. That was my first and last feeling of love, 35 years ago. Sad isn't it?" she said with a laugh that didn't take the edge off.

"I don't think it's sad at all. I think it's beautiful to have one love that sits with you like that."

"What about you?" she asked, turning to look up at me.

"Love is magical. It defies all the odds. Sparks from nowhere and can turn upside down all the things we hold close—logic, sense, reason. I thought I'd find it hard to love, but I don't. Not at all. In fact, I find it easy."

I took a deep breath. I felt a little unsure and on uneven ground as I continued.

“But being in love is different. Being in love is when you think about someone the moment you wake up. When you read their messages and you smile. When you make time for them in your day because they give you butterflies. When you see them in everything you do because they’re never far from your thoughts. When they tell you they want to touch you and your heart races. When they whisper your name and you can’t catch your breath. When you have said it a million ways but you haven’t said it directly in three words. I. Love. You. because the most terrifying thought is that they don’t feel the same. Because for me, being in love, it’s like in the movies, it’s the lyrics in songs, the beauty in the paintings, the whole, all in, romance. All people have ever written about. The kind of love that makes the world stop. Being in love has no lists. No plans. No brakes. No rational thoughts. No pauses. No stops. It just is.”

We didn't have sex that night, just cuddled like that. Neither of us slept. We just lay wrapped up in each other's arms, thinking about love and wondering what it all meant.

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Claudia and I became the worst kept secret on the ship. All the staff knew we were together, as I did nothing to hide it and neither did she. She invited me to fancy business lunches. If I was being totally honest, I could understand her work frustration.

Sue seemed overjoyed that I was now a regular at their working dinners. Sue was a big Raven fan.

“I just feel like I am sitting here with actual cruise royalty. I can't contain myself, really. Raven, I just have to know everything about you.” She had the softest southern drawl and the warmest open heart I knew.

“Oh, no ma'am. I'm here to observe only. Not a peep from me. I just want to learn how you super talented women get things done around here, because if it were me, I'd constantly be distracted by that buffet.” I gave her a conspiratorial wink, and Claudia mouthed a thank you to me.

Sue looked as if she wasn't happy with moving into work talk, but Claudia seized the moment and pounced. “So Sue, as you can see here, the projections show...”

I zoned out, happily distracted by the buffet. I had a secret suspicion that Sue knew exactly what she was doing. You didn't become head of a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate without having your finger on the pulse. However, my instincts told me she wanted to be wined and dined, she wanted to feel special and important, and I think the fact Claudia was here just for her played into her ego. She looked dapper in a masculine suit and tie. Perhaps she felt pushed out since her “retirement.” Having Claudia, and now also me, it seemed, chasing her seemed very much to entertain her.

But for all of Claudia's frustrations at the situation, she was the best for a reason. I loved watching her. She effortlessly played into Sue's ego, drawing her in, getting her excited, asking for her opinion and then steering the conversation accordingly so Sue would feel as if it was at her initiation.

As we began our second tour around the British Isles with mostly new guests, the pressure eased. Claudia had done the hard part now, and she could finally relax a little into her time on board. We had ten days. I guess it could feel like a countdown clock, time ticking away until the moment we must part. But I wasn't in that mindset at all. I was enjoying every moment with her.

"Urduja, I need a favor," I said, sliding into her cabin with a big smile and a bag full of sweets for her efforts. She eyed the bag and my smile.

"I'm listening."

And I launched into my plan.

"Here, no, you need to slide under." I held up the rope and giggled as Claudia got tangled in the fastenings. "Here." I turned, lowering, guiding her through the closed-off gate onto the staff open deck.

"Are you sure this is allowed?" she asked uncertainly.

"I'm absolutely sure this is not allowed." I smiled, and she looked uncertain.

"But we can break a couple of rules. Really, it's just the fact you are not staff. Otherwise, we're allowed to be here," I confirmed as she followed me through the narrow gangway to the small staff deck.

I knew I had set Urduja a difficult task, but she'd delivered in the most spectacular

fashion.

A small area of the deck had been stripped bare, and she'd hung soft fairy lights around the edge. Laid out on the wooden beams was a warm blanket, and a basket was off to the side, spilling over with treats and goodies.

"Oh," Claudia gasped beside me.

The little deck was isolated from the rest of the ship, barely used anymore. It was more of a hidden quiet spot some of us would sneak off to when the indoors got to be too much. But Urduja had placed a sign on the inside so no one would come out and disturb us.

Even though we were on a ship carrying thousands of people, it was eerily quiet, just the noise of the engines taking us through the channel as water softly lapped at the side.

I'd told her to wear something comfy and warm and she'd listened. Her hair was pulled back in a cute pony, and she was wearing soft gray slacks and a warm cashmere sweater. She looked unbelievably beautiful.

"You can't really say you've been on a ship if you don't spend one evening out on deck under the stars," I said.

I moved the blanket and brought it to my nose. It smelled of cherry blossom soap powder. I smiled at Claudia with a shy smile and spread it out on the deck, watching her as she lowered herself and stretched out, grinning and getting comfy as I took out some speakers. Thank goodness we live in the time of wireless technology. I pressed play.

She settled softly, her eyes warm as she found a comfortable spot. The soft lights

only highlighted her beauty, giving her warmth when she smiled. She took my breath away, and I felt the nerves rising up inside me.

As the music started, I suddenly felt shy. The soft blush rose to my cheeks instantly. There was no Raven Ramsey to hide behind here, no big show or stage persona. Just Claudia and I on our tiny spot in the sea. My fingers trembled as I took a tense deep breath, my eyes finding hers. That moment they met, I felt mine well up with tears. Pure uninhibited emotion.

“I was just coastin'. Never really going anywhere.”

As the singer's soft sweet voice filled the speaker, my hips started to sway softly. I circled my ankles, shook off my sandals and felt my toes run through the blanket.

The thin straps of my dress rested against my collarbone. My tan was already faded, and my skin was soft and pale now, just the tiniest kiss of the sun still lingering. My dress blew in the sea wind, and goosebumps lined my skin. My confidence grew under Claudia's watchful gaze, and I bit my lip as I pulled the straps from my shoulders, feeling them slip down my arms.

My dress didn't just fall. It clung to my breasts, hugging my body so tight I had to peel it from my skin. The slow reveal of my breasts, my nipples, still soft for a brief moment but hardening almost instantly with the breeze caressing them as I met her eyes. I watched as her gaze trailed the curves of my body, the dip of my waist and the flare of my hips. My fingertips continued their undoing.

As my hands ran down my thighs, my dress finally fell, and I was naked. No panties. Just me. My instinct was to cover myself, my hands already sliding to cover the area between my legs, to cup my shy but wanting pussy, my arm moved across my breasts, grazing my nipples. But her look stopped me.

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I lowered myself slowly onto my knees, moving toward her. Making my way up her clothed body, my breasts swayed a little with each movement, I felt my body bared to the elements, nature's gentle kiss on my skin. I wondered if she could see in my eyes how I felt, how she made me feel. I didn't say the words, but they lingered on my lips. All of my emotions were there, on show. She held herself up on her elbows, her thighs together so I could straddle her. My fingers traced up her chest as I burst into a smile.

I rested, hovered slightly above her, my knees bent sliding wider to straddle her hips. My fingers trailed through her hair as my thumb ran over her cheekbone. She was so beautiful. So warm.

So mine.

Cupping her face, I brought her to me as I moved over her. Always in sync, we shared a soft, light kiss. Our lips barely moved, the gentle touch of her breath on mine, just offering each other a tender caress and the promise of more.

We spent the entire night out on the deck watching the stars dance above us as the moon painted our naked bodies in its soft romantic glow.

9

I'd been to Belfast before, but I'd never stepped off the ship, so I hadn't much of a clue as to what to expect. We docked a little way out of the city and took the shuttle into the center, and then I stepped into the heart of Northern Ireland.

Except it didn't really feel that way.

Belfast is the pulsing hub of Northern Ireland's industrial center. The port is a working area filled with workers loading and offloading freight.

The city could have been in many places in the UK. The high streets were familiar, the shops the same. The accent was softer than in the south, and there was much less Irish cheer.

Claudia didn't seem to know the meaning of the word relax, which amused me.

Her first words were, "Finally, I can get the UK signal," the second we stepped off the ship. She checked her mobile at least every thirty seconds, and that was no exaggeration. The times she didn't check, she seemed to have a wrist flick down to an art, where she could scroll her watch for the latest updates she had missed in those all-important minutes she hadn't been able to detach from the real world.

"Don't you get tired?" I asked as we walked, and I licked my ice cream. It wasn't the weather for it, but I was in the mood for some creamy goodness. She looked at me with her eyebrows raised as I chased a drip down my cone, and then she smiled warmly.

"Yes, I get tired. Just like anyone does, I guess, but at the same time, I also love the speed, the pace, the hustle and bustle of my job. I'm not sure how I'd cope if I didn't have it. My mind works fast, you know," she teased.

"So do your fingers," I teased back and got the pleasure of her light pink blush.

"Raven!" she exclaimed as I laughed.

"Joking. Joking. Kind of."

Belfast did have its charm. It reminded me in some ways of home, that port city feeling. But it wasn't a touristy place. There was no spot that made me ooo or aaah. I took maybe five photographs, and only a day later I probably couldn't tell you anything distinctive that stood out for me in Belfast.

But I'm happy I went, because as our coach crossed over the river and Claudia slipped her hand into mine for a light squeeze, I felt my heart pang, an explosion of feelings, and all of a sudden Belfast held that spark of something special.

That night on stage, I felt different. I stepped forward slowly, my hand shaking as I gripped the microphone stand. For a bustling cruise ship stage, my nerves hold. But for her, it was intimately intense as I felt her gaze on me. As usual, she sat in the front row. The light was soft. There was no spotlight tonight, just a warm glow that caressed my figure. My black dress was simple. Tied in a loose knot at the nape of my neck, the fabric ran down in thick black strips over my breasts, hugging my hips as it fell to the floor.

My skin was so pale it seemed to glow. I closed my eyes, singing softly. As my eyes flickered open once more and my eyes met hers, I almost lost my place. My fingers gripped the stand tighter, and my knuckles whitened as I tried to stay composed.

I drew the microphone closer, the steel pressed against my dress. My lips kissed the microphone, my mind losing itself in the lyrics.

My body swayed, my hips circling, and I felt as if I was singing for her alone.

My Claudia.

"You were breathtaking tonight," Claudia murmured as she entered my dressing room. I looked up at her through the mirror and felt myself going pink, bathing in her attention and affection.

“Thank you. I was singing for you,” I said softly, shyly.

“I could feel that. I felt every single word, Raven. You really are so talented. I was wondering if tomorrow you would let me arrange something for us. I’d like to spend some time with you. Do something special. If you have time.”

“I have time.” I smiled. “But I have one request,” I said as I slowly turned and stood.

“Oh yeah? What is that?” she asked playfully.

“If we’re doing something special, I want absolutely zero, and I mean zero, cell phones.”

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I could see the surprise in her expression. The calculation that ran through her head. Finally she nodded.

“Okay, I can do that. For a price.”

I laughed. “Oh, really. What’s your price?”

“Hmmm. Four kisses.”

“Kiss one.” I took her hand, our fingers threading as I guided it upward. Looking at her shimmering blue eyes, I offered the softest, lightest kiss against her pulse on the sweet, sensitive skin of her inner wrist.

“Kiss two,” I murmured as I pulled her into my space. My fingers took her shirt with a firm tug. Pouting my lips, I headed toward her lips, but my mouth moved at the last second. I left a perfect outline of my lipstick pressed onto her neck as I left my mark on her skin.

“Kiss three,” I whispered, my voice now laced with want. This time my breath tickled against her neck, softly dragging my teeth upward, my body pressed firmly against hers as I kissed just to the side of her lips. So close, and yet so far.

“Where would you like number four?” I asked and waited for her response, except she didn’t answer. Instead, she placed her hand on the top of my head and pushed firmly down, guiding my lips to exactly where she wanted me to place kiss number four, five, six, seven?—

The next day I woke up with an excited energy. Liverpool. Not a city I know very well other than that it was home to the Beatles. It wasn't Liverpool that excited me, though. It was the thought of spending a full day with Claudia, doing something she wanted to do with me. Something she had planned, thought of, and arranged. To me, that made the city sparkle before I had even set one foot away from the ship.

I went smart casual. I wanted to be comfy, but I also wanted Claudia to find me attractive, sexily so. The weather was pretty good for the UK. Warm with a little cloud but no rain, so I went for my new fucking beautiful boots, tight denim jeans, and a gray sweater I knew clung to my breasts nicely and matched my eyes.

She met me at the boarding ramp. She was perfectly on time, not a minute early or a minute late, and I was pleased to see she had also gone with a similar outfit. Just classier. Everything she wore somehow came off as classy.

“Hey you.” I smiled as she came over to me, and I hesitated, unsure if she would give me a public display of affection, but there was no hesitation on her part. She leaned in and kissed me full on the lips. The show of intimacy startled me but also made my heart swell in my chest. It just felt so right to be around her. Every second was like magic.

“Come on, we have a cab to catch,” she said with a smile and guided me down the ramp.

I was like a teenager, holding hands, bounding after her, led blindly to whatever adventure she had her sights set on for us. But the truth was we could be going anywhere, and I would be in it one-hundred percent. I thought about the definition of love I'd given to Claudia just days before. How she hadn't exactly agreed. I realized she didn't have to agree with my definition, and to be honest, sometimes I didn't agree with my own, either. Love is tricky like that, easier to say what it isn't rather than what it is. And even then I could have debated with myself about it.

But I couldn't deny the truth. If I hadn't already, I was on the path of falling head over heels in love with Claudia.

We slipped into the cab, our fingers laced together. Wherever we were going, the driver was already well aware and there was no acknowledgement from Claudia. I guessed this was how fancy people travelled—in silence.

“Where are we going?” I whispered, and Claudia laughed.

“You don't need to whisper. You can talk normally.” She grinned, leaning in a little closer, closing the gap between us to plant a soft, sweet kiss on my lips. “And I’m not telling you.” She grinned and then continued to kiss me.

It was the quickest hour cab ride I’d ever taken.

When we pulled up outside what I would call the projects but in reality was some urban concrete jungle that lacked a lot of love, I was surprised.

“Don’t worry, we aren’t staying,” she said softly as she wound her window down. She counted the windows across her finger and then pointed up. “That was where I grew up. That was my little space in the world for eighteen long years.” She paused, lost in thought, I watched the memories flicker through her eyes. She was looking at the window, but that isn't what she was seeing. I knew she was seeing all the times and moments that had passed. I slid my hand into hers and said nothing, but I let her know I was right beside her as a tear rolled down her cheek.

My free hand reached up, my thumb smearing softly against her skin to wipe away the lucid drop that glistened on her smooth cheek. She sniffled.

“Wow.” She laughed. “I can’t remember the last time I cried. Well, I guess it’s been thirty years or so since I’ve been back here. I am allowed one tear.”

I smiled softly at her.

“You’re allowed as many as you need. Anytime, Claudia. Showing your emotions doesn't make you weak, it’s what shows your strength.”

She took a deep breath, her finger reaching for the window, and the black tint slowly rose, protecting her from the outside once more.

“Okay, let’s get some food.”

Our trip was to her favorite cafe. To the outside world looking in, it was a small town version of a greasy spoon. I could almost hear my wardrobe crying in shock at the calorific content on the menu, and the smell of oil frying and cooking hung in the air.

But that was the outside. On the inside, we sat in worn leather seats at the window. She ordered two of her favorites, and the elderly waitress looked at Claudia with a keen eye, a hint of someone she used to know but couldn't quite catch the name of.

“You never talk about your family,” she probed as she sipped her coffee, and I looked at her in surprise.

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about your parents.”

“I think I told you that my mother has bipolar disorder. Highs and lows. Mania and depression. My father worked every day of my childhood to keep the balance, the peace, to give me stability, but really, she needed medication, and that just came and went. Years of gray, no happy or sad, just stoic. My mother couldn’t love me when she was on medication. She couldn’t love anything or anyone. She was simply indifferent.”

“Then there were the times without the medication. As a child, I loved the manic times. So much love, energy, and freedom. Excitement burst from her, and gray days burst into every color of the rainbow. Then came the black. The depression that gripped our home was like a black storm. Words dripped with hate, looks laced with disdain. So that was the foundation of my home life. A family that gravitated around the mood of one person. I don’t blame my mother. I love her, and I understand how hard she tried, how difficult life is for her, and how her brain just works differently.” It was true. I held no malice now. It was the past I’d left behind.

“Her mantra, though. Life lesson, motto, whatever you want to call it. Perfection is a projection. I grew up in a small place. It was stifling, suffocating, especially because I knew I was gay. I knew I was never going to be accepted. So I left. I left that world behind me with a smile and warm thoughts but closed that chapter.”

I look up from my coffee. I’d mumbled, talking more to myself and hoping Claudia could overhear the monologue rather than feel as if I was sharing it directly with her.

“Thank you. I know it isn't easy to walk down memory lane.” She gestured at the cafe around her with a knowing smile. “But I like sharing with you, and I like you sharing with me. I was lonely, Raven, and with you I don't feel like I'm lonely at all.”

The waitress slid in, leaving our plates. I felt an overwhelming burst of emotions, and my cheeks pinked as the thoughts ran through my mind. To stop myself, I grabbed my fork and took a huge bite of something deep-fried. The taste of grease filled my mouth, I could barely get my mouth to work, never mind swallow. I forced it down and took a second bite then looked her straight in the eyes.

“Claudia, I love you, but I can't eat this.”

The silence lingered. My world paused as her fork stilled at her lips.

“I love you, too.”

And just like that, my world exploded into a rainbow of colors.

10

Claudia turned into me, and I woke to soft, sweet sleepy kisses dotting my face. She softly, breathlessly murmured against me. It was only 4 a.m., but my body was very much awake.

“I just want to breathe you in. Take in the way you smell. Listen to how you breathe. And nuzzle you just a tad,” Claudia said.

“Oh,” I moaned softly, then replied. “I want that.”

“Me, too. Just to rest and cuddle against each other. Lots of kisses and snuggles. One on your nose. And cheek. And forehead. And lips.” After she said each place, her lips

found my skin and peppered me.

“I do like a lot of kisses, and I like them everywhere...”

“Hmm. Like where?” she asked playfully.

I rolled slowly onto my front, moving my hair to one side to show the nape of my neck. “Here.”

Her lips moved down to my neck, and she placed a kiss right on the nape of my neck. I turned my cheek, smiling softly. My fingers moved to my shoulder and slipped off a strap. "And here."

She moved to where the strap previously occupied my skin and placed another right on the bareness of my shoulder.

I bit my lip. I could feel the tingle of her kiss against my skin. My fingers moved to the other shoulder and slipped that strap off, too. "Or my left side will be jealous."

"We can't have that, can we?" She laughed and moved to the left side and gave it a nice kiss, as well. Just to keep things fair.

I laughed and shook my head. "We can't have that." My fingers curled into my shirt, trying to pull it down, but it was tangled. "You may need to help me."

Her hands worked it at a different angle and ever so slowly, nice and patiently, helped me pull it down my body, over my chest, dragging over my nipples. I felt them harden against the bed. She pulled my shirt down my stomach to rest at my hips and the bottom of my back until my back was exposed. "I like kisses there, too."

She began to move down, her breath hot on my back, and then she leaned in and

placed one kiss and then another, and another, working slowly down my body, placing kisses all over my bare back.

I shivered. My hands took the sheets and bunched them in my palms. Fuck, it could be such a simple thing, but each kiss made my head spin. Her lips followed the bumps of my spine, my soft pale skin, inching lower and lower.

She slowed and took her time, following the shivers as she worked down my back. I took it all in as she moved lower, kissing along my spine, her tongue trailing down.

I felt the line her tongue left, reaching the dimples of my lower back. "I think we have a problem," I whispered, feeling the bunched fabric of my vest and shorts very much in the way.

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"Hmmm. I think we may. What do you suggest we do about it?" She said with a small smile. Her face pressed against my lower back.

I squirmed. "Hmmm," I echoed. I slowly raised my hips, my ass rising up just a few inches, a gap between my hips and the bed now. "I think you should maybe take it all off for me."

Her hands moved to my shorts. They hooked in and she slowly wiggled them down. smiled, stopping the movement of the shorts. "Would you like that?"

I felt her pause right on the curve of my ass. I could hear the smile in her voice, and I knew she was teasing me. "Yes, I'd like that. Otherwise, how else are you going to kiss everywhere I need you to?"

Claudia pulled them the rest of the way down and then moved to my shirt. She pushed it up this time and worked it over my head.

"You bring up a good point," she said with a smile as she looked back at me, now completely naked.

And I felt it. Stripped and bare, laid out in front of her. I was all hers to kiss and adore. I turned my head, my eyes looking for hers and when they found them, I smiled.

She returned to my lower back, where she placed more soft kisses, working down. And then she moved to the back of my legs. She started low and kissed up slowly, taking her time and letting her tongue drag as she worked back up them.

I felt the heat between my thighs, and I started to wriggle, my hips moving to grind a little against the bed, wanting—no, needing—pressure. Because each kiss, each lick, made me ache for more until I couldn't take it. Then I slowly spread my legs, my body turning, maneuvering until I was facing her, giving her more places to kiss.

She smiled and looked up at me. Slowly kissing my inner thighs, she inched up to where I needed pressure until she was right above my pussy. Her breath was hot on my clitoris. I could feel her so close before she stopped, looking up at me with a big, knowing smile.

I took slow, deep breaths. I wanted to enjoy her. Enjoy every second. Feeling her kisses move upward and inward, so close. I looked down, watching her between my thighs. She was so perfect. All mine to use and enjoy. "Kiss me," I directed softly.

She leaned in with a soft sigh and found my pussy with her lips. She gave it one kiss, and then another. And then another. Soft contact with her lips was followed by a small flick of her tongue.

"That's it, baby," I murmured. I knew she could hear the gasp on my lips, see me tremble and flush at that first touch. Fuck it felt good. Her lips were so soft, kissing me so gently. It was heavenly, her tongue giving me jolts of pleasure with each flick.

Inspired by my words, her tongue ran along my labia. My gasps. My trembles. And flushes. Her lips continued to kiss me, her tongue running along my pussy, taking it all in as it traced the most intimate part of my body as though trying to memorize every inch of me.

My knees were bent, my feet resting against the bed, my thighs spreading up and wide into a V. I had more control now, and I took it, slowly rocking my hips forward to feed her my pussy, to press against her and grind against her lips, her tongue. I watched her every movement.

Her tongue moved a little more eagerly, hungrily, as I pressed against her and ground against her mouth. Her tongue slowly pushed inside of me and she let out a small moan. Her eyes glanced up at me so she could watch each and every one of my movements.

"Oh," I gasped as her tongue entered me. It felt so good, but my clit demanded her attention again, so I reached out, my hand fisting in her hair. I held her in place as I dragged myself down and pressed firmly forward.

Her tongue left me, dragging her through my folds to my clitoris, and there I took the pressure I desperately needed, thrusting forward as I pulled her to me. "Fuck. Fuck. You're so good. Such a good girl," I moaned, panting.

Her tongue gave me that pressure I wanted. It rolled. It flicked. It gave me everything as I pressed and thrust up against her. I delighted in her face in my pussy. She blew on my clit as she continued to apply pressure, watching the pleasure fill through me, and she tried to chase more of it with every movement she made and every movement I made against her.

"Fuck." I felt the edge coming, her mouth and tongue lavishing my clit with attention, flicks and swills, sucks and kisses. I didn't hold back, I used her, both hands on her, softly cupping her cheeks, adoring her, and then finding the tight grip as I pulled her harder against me. My body writhed.

"Fuck, baby, you are so wet, so covered in me. Fuck."

She let me take it. Her mouth was mine to use to get me where I wanted and needed to be. She gasped a little as I pulled harder, but then relaxed as she felt me cover her face. It felt so good. So right. She took it as she tried to give me whatever she could. But I took what I needed from her. A complete balance of give and take.

I pulled her head back for a second, feeling that space, the cool air against my heat. "Look how fucking wet you make me," I panted. Then I ran my fingers over my pussy, three fingers and palm, so wet and slick. Covered. Then I wiped them over her face, her cheeks, nose, forehead, up through her hair. "Do you want more, baby?"

She looked at me wide-eyed. She watched my fingers run over my pussy and then over her face. It sent a shiver down her spine, and I felt her tremble between my thighs. "Yes, so fucking badly." It was almost a whine that left her lips. "I can't help it. At all. I want more of you."

My hands fell away as I gave a final thrust of my hips so my ass left the bed. Fuck, I was so fucking ready for her. "Then make me come all over you, baby. Be my good girl. I want it all."

She leaned in, pressing her face tight against me, her tongue hungry on my clit, giving me that pressure, licking eagerly. I could tell she intended to make me come all over her.

"I want it all. So fucking bad," she whispered against me as her lips and tongue conveyed what she wanted.

"I'm going to come so hard in your mouth, baby."

"Fuck..." I heard her murmur into my pussy. "Please... please..." She continued to lick intently, and I knew I had her exactly where I needed her.

"You are going to belong to me. Everything you do, for me." I lost it. Lost complete control. I gave in to the overwhelming need to claim her, own her, have her. And I orgasmed hard on her face and in her mouth. I pulled her against me so she couldn't breathe in air, only me.

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And when I finally released her and saw her face coated in my pleasure and her big blue eyes wide with their adoration for me, I felt a connection with her so intense I thought nothing could ever break it.

I was awoken a second time at 7 a.m. by an announcement from the Captain. She gave her usual spiel to let everyone know we'd docked, what the weather was like for the day, and how to leave the ship if you wanted to disembark. Claudia had a work thing all day today with Sue. She'd managed to pin her down again, so I was flying solo.

As much as I hated the never-ending early wake-up calls, especially after a late night working, the Captain's voice always put me at ease. Her soft but raspy tones were a damn sight better than the heart-racing foghorn noises that phone alarms insist on using.

I jumped out of bed and straight into the shower. I knew if I scrolled through my phone in bed, I'd most likely fall back to sleep and then kick myself for wasting the morning.

I got changed, dried my hair, grabbed my bag, and headed down to the ship's main cafeteria. While it's customary to start your day with a coffee, this morning I opted for a hot chocolate with extra cream. I felt like I needed sugar more than caffeine, and no one made a silkier hot chocolate than Ron, the barista.

I held my cup tightly, shoved a few breakfast snacks in my bag, and made my way to the disembarkment area. This morning I was going it alone, as Urduja was stuck on board working. I could hang out with the other crew who were leaving for the day,

but I felt like I was due a day by myself.

I scanned my ID on the way out and trundled down the ramp, careful not to spill my drink—something I'd seen far too many people do—and took a deep breath of sea air. Hull, the city once voted the worst place to live in the UK as well as the worst place to live in the North of England, was an area described in the past as a “sad story.”

However, I wasn't going to let any of that influence my day. Beauty is subjective, so I was going in with a positive attitude, especially since I hadn't had the best attitude yesterday. I was determined to be different this morning.

Lucky for me, there were no gray clouds in sight, and the Humber Bridge sparkled to my left. I snapped a few pictures, as I was genuinely taken aback by its presence. Sometimes, things look better in pictures, but other times, like today, things look far better in real life. It wasn't a beautiful bridge by any means, but it was impressive and formidable against the desolate landscape.

I headed off toward the old town to wander around the shops. A majority of the time, I'm only ever window shopping, but I found that looking at clothes, shoes, bags, and knick-knacks helped me unwind more than a spa day ever could. At least when I'm walking the aisles of New Look, strangers aren't rubbing my neck or prodding my back.

After imagining myself in all the outfits I didn't buy, I walked to The Deep. The Deep was listed as one of the most spectacular aquariums in the world, and I won't lie, I was a little bit excited.

Being an adult definitely doesn't mean you should stop exploring the world around us, and once I got inside and started gawking at the beauty of the sharks, turtles, and penguins, I stopped thinking about what others might think about a lone woman in

her late 30s walking around an attraction that spends a lot of money advertising to children.

I grabbed a keychain and dolphin plush from the gift shop. The keychain was for me and the dolphin was for Urduja. I was sad in the end that she'd missed the part of Hull. She found the natural world to be far more exciting than anyone I'd ever met, but hopefully, my small gift might make her feel a little better.

Selfishly, it made me feel a little better, anyway.

While the weather was still on my side, I decided to walk around the city as much as I could regardless of how tired I felt.

I meandered around the shopping center, grabbing an extra large coffee with cream, and continued through the cobbled streets along the Marina, finally stopping outside the Minster.

I found a bench to admire the view and refuel with the snacks I'd brought with me. I had a slice of banana bread and a fruit tart. This was me telling myself I was making healthy choices.

It was early afternoon, and I was running out of steam. Maybe days alone weren't a good thing. It was far too easy to talk myself out of walking or activities when I was tired. Sometimes, you need someone with you to keep you in check.

My final few hours were spent in St. Stephen's Center and a few thousand more steps walking the vibrant city streets.

As I headed back to the ship, I felt a warm rush inside, not just from the lowering sun but from the wonderful day I'd had. Perhaps Hull has revamped itself since it collected its large list of terrible accolades, or maybe the judges needed to go to

Specsavers because I'd been to some drab places in my time, and Hull was not one of them.

A single beam lit up the stage. The band sat in a semi-circle around the edge. Mist rose, seeping around the shadowed musicians dressed in black, only fingers visible as they softly caressed keys, gliding along the ivory with a slow stroke as the first note rang out and the sensual strum began. "I remember..."

My eyes were closed with sweeping dark lines of make-up brushed over my eyelids. Padding barefoot to the center of the stage, my gown flowing behind me in a fiery red blaze. My lips almost kissed the microphone as I sang softly. My fingers curled slowly around the stand, drawing it close to me, hooking the mic in place, and then my eyes opened wide.

"Yeah, it's you..." I sang from the bottom of my heart, every single word felt as my gaze scanned the crowd until I found her.

The song went smoothly, and I fell back to my very best performances. I was at my peak, even if my star was fading.

A flush spread across my chest as I bit down on my lip, leaning into the microphone one last time as I whispered over the last fading notes of the band. "You. Claudia." And I fade to black.

I had never done that before. Never said a name in a performance. I knew it could ruin the moment for the fans. But I needed that moment with her. I needed her to see that she meant so much to me. She was all I could think about, all I wanted and needed, and no matter what the future held, we would navigate the seas together.

"I want to spend all morning with you," she whispered against my skin as the sun had barely risen across our infinite blue horizon. Starting slow. Quickening, sweat on our

skin as we fell into each other, then changing positions, slowing down. We could both orgasm at any moment, but we didn't. We just gave in to each other, letting our bodies decide how deep, how slow."

Each whispered word brought me around. Her hands meandered around my body as her voice grew huskier, laced with sex.

"Giving in to pleasure and what feels good. No rush. Just instinct. Drawing it out until we're drowning in it. Lost. Each other's touch is the only thing that keeps us above water. And even then, I'm drowning in you. Aching for each and every touch. Kisses that just last hours, my lips so hungry for all of you. Limbs aching but not stopping because I need you so much," she whispered.

"I need you too, Claudia," I replied. "Every touch I take shows. Every sound that leaves my lips only to find yours proves it. The way my fingers caress you. The way my tongue dances with yours. The tempo varies the time between changes. But each one is charged with the same primal desire."

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It's all giving and taking. Her fingers locked with mine, to pin my hands above my head, control taken, her hips rolled against me, finding that pace that's too much but yet not enough, a perfect balance. All while I gave into my every feelings.

“You look so good pinned like that. Giving in as I take you. You take me, too. It's a flow and an ebb. Hips roll and I give—or is it take? They both flow together on a lazy morning just like our bodies into each other.”

It was heavenly. Time didn't matter. As she let go of my wrists, we rolled over to find me on top, riding her, claiming back some of the control, the rhythm, the grind. But then her hands dropped to my hips guiding me, directing me. Sharing the give and take.

“I want that. I want those hours with you,” she moaned.

Thrusting her hips up to me as she pulled me down, I felt so sexy. The way my body bounced and shook on top of her. Her hand had to pull me down so she could lean up and give me a kiss. So many kisses.

“I want those hours, too, where nothing else matters except me and you,” she whispered against my lips.

My hair fell across her face as I leaned down, my fingers cupping, holding her so softly. She was the most important thing in my universe. Our lips met, kisses that blended with moans and gasps, because we didn't stop giving and taking. We just gave and took more until I didn't know where she ended and I began.

Her hands cupped mine, too, stroking softly as she thrust up, hard, feeling that long, deep grind of our hips together. I was hardly aware of where I was anymore, just lost in her. I didn't care. All I wanted was more of her. To give her more. To take more. I drove my tongue into her mouth to dance with hers as we continued to give and take.

“I want all of you.” I moved lower and turned and she followed effortlessly, not even a pause, until I was beneath her again. Only this time, our bodies pressed together perfectly, skin on skin, heat against heat. She could feel every tremble and moan that vibrated against her lips, our hips moving slow and deep. Because I had to feel it all. All of her.

She set a rhythm meant to give me all. “I need to feel all of you, too.”

The way our skin felt against each other. It was just so hot. Our lips, the sounds. It was almost too much. I'd lose myself totally if not for her lips to steady me. They helped allow me to lose myself in her instead. Fuck, I wanted her so fucking bad, and every slow deep roll of my hips showed her. That I needed all of her.

How much could I give her in that moment? My fingers loosely locked in her hair, my other hand finding her hand to hold onto so I could fall with her. My head tipped back, I let out a longer deeper moan, but her kisses didn't stop—peppering my chin, neck, and throat until we found each other again. My legs spread and closed around her. Embracing her tight against me, she gave my hand a squeeze, holding onto me as her mouth found mine and took my moans.

“I want to give you everything. I want you to give me everything,” she said huskily.

I held on, my grip tight. I gave into the shudders, letting them overwhelm my entire body. I shook beneath her as I whimpered, “It's you. All you.” My orgasm, held off for so long, now demanded relief. My heart thundered in my chest as my lips whispered against hers. Everything I'd held back, I let go. I wrapped her up in my

arms. My kisses lingered, but my moans took over. My orgasm was long. It came from deep in me, made me feel on fire. I could barely take it. Fuck, but I gave it to her. Over and over. Letting her feel just how much she made me feel for her.

She was right behind me. Her body tensed up, and then I felt that warm wetness flood my sex. A moan and then a groan followed as she held on to me tight. I felt every shake she made for me. We held tight against each other as we climaxed for each other.

It was such a primal need, a basic instinct, but I craved it. Craved to feel her orgasm. The claim she took over my body, it was incredibly intimate, but I wanted to share every intimacy with her, soaring high as if nothing else would ever matter other than her.

11

Love can make you do and feel crazy things. Before, I'd traipse around the ship, but now I felt as if I floated. Claudia had a lot more free time with the deal pushing through, so I monopolised it, but there were moments she went into hotshot businesswoman mode and I had to fill the spaces with time to myself. I booked us some tickets for Paris. I felt like Paris was the place to be when you were high on love.

I wondered if my public announcement of love would annoy my fans, but if anything, they seemed more eager to hunt me down and have a taste of my love story. "Raven, Raven! Who is Claudia? Can we meet her? Are you going to write new songs about her?"

I was a pro and battered away their questions with a smile and a knowing wink which only made them ask for more.

Urduja found the whole situation immensely entertaining and liked to tell different people different stories to see which gossip would spread faster.

“Oh. She is a Russian billionaire who lives on the ship. Claudia? Yeah, I know her, she is an engineer, and never comes up from the lower decks. Raven’s girl? She hates being on the sea, so she takes private jets to meet Raven at each port. I know it must be real love.”

It meant that within a few days, a very odd picture of some billionaire businesswoman who was also a model with a hidden private jet became the sole focus of the Raven Ramsey fan club.

“Urduja, you have to stop.” I laughed, after Fernanda, the cruise director approached me looking sheepish and talking in riddles about how I was a highly valued member of the team.

“She is an ass. She only said that in case you become the owner of the ship.” My eyes widened, and she stretched out on my bed giggling as she stole my secret chocolate from my top drawer.

“Does she think that’s a possibility?!” I asked in shock.

She shrugged nonchalantly. “No idea. I forgot what I said and to whom, but something has her spooked. I thought you were going to get a dressing down after the whole, ‘I love you Claudiahhh’ on the stage thing. If anything, I have done you a favor.”

I rolled my eyes and tossed a pillow at her. “Oh yeah, a real favor. And stop eating all my chocolate.”

I decided to take a walk. I knew Claudia had a big meeting going on in one of the

conference rooms on deck ten, so I made my way up there in the hope I might catch her afterward for a drink and to make some plans for the evening.

I propped up the bar, and I didn't have to wait long to see the exodus from the conference room, except there were way more people than I was expecting, and the air seemed tense. I caught Sue's eye, and though she gave me her warm sunny smile from across the way, it didn't quite reach her eyes as she hurried off in the other direction.

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I knew Claudia had seen me. It was the way she angled herself in every movement to purposefully avoid my gaze. Whoever she was talking to had power over her, and more importantly, held her respect.

They all talked further for a few minutes and then dispersed. Maybe I was reading too much into it, but I felt like I saw her take a deep breath before she turned to walk toward me.

Then I saw the look in her eyes and I knew I hadn't read enough into it at all.

“Would you like a drink?” I started, but my voice faded off as she shook her head.

“No, sorry I can't stay.” Her tone was clipped and brisk. The old frosty Claudia shone through loud and clear.

“Okay, what about later? Would you like to get dinner or—“ I was overcompensating. Extra sunny, extra smiley, reaching for her hand, trying to bring her back to me, but she shrugged me away.

“I can't do dinner, but you can come by my room. Do you have a show?”

I dropped my hand. “No. No. I don't. What time?”

She glanced at her watch. “Maybe at 8? Then you can get dinner afterward.”

“Oh, okay. Sure.” For the first time since she'd strode over, her gaze found mine. It cut like ice to feel that coolness.

“See you at eight.” And with that, she turned and strolled out, never looking back.

I watched as minutes turned to seconds that had spaces in between. Could a digital watch conspire against me? It seemed to. I got ready, then I changed, then changed again into nearly the same thing in a different shade. I hated my hair. My makeup was smudged. I couldn't get anything right.

The world was upside down, and I was waiting for the bomb to drop. I knew it was coming. Something. I just didn't know what.

I'd lost the bounce in my step. I took a slow meander to her room, and after all that waiting, I was almost late. Not that she would have noticed. She was on the phone when I knocked, beckoning me in as she continued to talk a hundred miles an hour.

“Yes, I get that. No. No. The merger prep is here. Alistair has the other file. It'll be sent across. Yes, I've already confirmed that. Okay. And the NY office? Right. Mmmm. Well, sure, but it won't be until tomorrow when I can get off this damned boat.”

Sting. I felt that one. I started to look around and I noticed her things that had once been neatly situated around her suite were now away, gone. Her closet was open and all of her clothes had been removed. Then I saw the suitcases peeking from the other side of the bed.

“Sorry about that.” She cut through my thoughts to bring me back into the moment with a thump.

“It's okay,” I managed, but I felt the lump in my throat.

“Raven. Things have changed.”

She stayed standing as I sat perched on the edge of her suite lounge. Already the dynamic was off.

“My company has decided that with the takeover, I am needed in the US.”

I sat back and let that process. I mean, it wasn't ideal. But Claudia and I had been too lazy to talk about the future. I assumed she would stay in London, which meant I'd need to make some changes and see how I could accommodate that to spend as much time with her as possible.

New York was a past life for me, but with Claudia, I could see the possibilities.

“Okay. I mean it isn't ideal, but you know we can figure something out. When do you have to go?”

“I leave in the morning. The thing is, Raven...” She started to pace. “The thing is, that I guess we could figure something out. But right now, I need to be focused. I need to be in the office. I need to be working. I need to get this job done.”

“Well, I understand that, Claudia. I know how important your work is to you. I wouldn't get in the way of that. I think you know that.”

She sat down on the bed with a frustrated sigh.

“Yes, I know. But the problem is, Raven, is that you already do. I know that isn't your intention. I really do, and I take responsibility. But my company is going through a billion-dollar merger. This is all I've been working on for years and now you've come into my life at the worst time. Everything I need to do I can't do because I've been so wrapped up in you. I should have been fired earlier for the terrible mess I made in that meeting. I just wasn't prepared. And that can't happen again. I won't let it happen again.”

“Well, what does that mean?” I asked in a small voice, regretting it the second I asked because I knew she was going to spell it out.

“I’ve had a wonderful time with you on this boat. Ship.” She corrected herself quickly, and I would have smiled if it weren't for the tears I was holding back.

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“And you are a very special woman, but in the morning, I need to leave. I need to leave this ship behind, and I need to leave you behind, too. I’m sorry.”

I tried to find the words. They were there. I could plead, beg, shout, cry. But I knew that look in her eyes. She’d already made up her mind, and I wasn’t going to embarrass myself anymore by giving in to those emotions.

I stood slowly, taking a deep breath before I walked out of her suite and out of her life.

My world had turned the right way up, and it felt as if there was nothing left about it that I recognized.

12

Time is such a funny thing. On a ship, time works differently. We measure the days by events, schedules, food, and performances. Dates lose their meaning, and seasons pass like the tides.

But in my tiny bunker, just below sea level, land passing by on the horizon, it could have been any day. Any time. Any month. Any season. None of it mattered.

I didn’t think I was a wallower. I absolutely didn’t think I would be the kind of woman to not get out of bed for two days because of a breakup. But I couldn’t face the world.

Urduja stepped up to be the ultimate wingwoman. She brought me chocolate and

alcohol and covered for me with Fernanda.

The good thing about cruise life is the closed environment. If you're sick, you are to stay in your cabin. No exceptions. Outbreaks of spreadable illnesses are bad for business, and so I took my two days to process my loss.

Relationships ending are a grief process. Two parts. You grieve what you had that's gone, and you grieve for what you never got to have together. How long had I known Claudia? Well, time is a funny thing, isn't it? Those few weeks could have been my whole life. I gave her all I had—my body, my love, affection and soul.

Did time really matter? Not to me. She'd seen parts of me that I hid from myself, and she in turn had opened her box of memories that I doubted even she had flicked through in years. We were connected. We were real. Honest. And it was gone.

Six a.m. Another early wake-up call from the Captain's announcements. It took me longer than it should to focus. I'd lost all sense of awareness. I'd been awake since just after 3 a.m. with my mind racing over and over. It'd been three days since Claudia had left the ship. Three days that had felt like three weeks or even three years.

I was still in shock from the callousness of her departure. Maybe that was just the anger talking. I knew the Ice Queen act wasn't the real Claudia. It was a mask she wore to hide her feelings. But it didn't make it any easier, and as my thoughts spiralled, I found myself asking which was the true mask. Either way, my stomach ached as much as my chest, and being in a windowless cabin the size of a garden shed wasn't helping.

I hadn't been to work since she'd left, but today I was scheduled for a day off anyway, so I didn't feel guilty about leaving the ship. None of the crew ever wanted to stay on board when they didn't have to, even if the port of call wasn't particularly

interesting. Today, however, was Paris. Le Harve to be precise, a small coastal town two and a bit hours drive from Paris. The most romantic city in the world, supposedly, as if I needed this kick in the stomach.

I'd booked my coach ticket days ago—well, two tickets.

But Claudia wasn't here to go with me, and who wanted to walk around Paris alone, not just alone but heartbroken and alone? A glutton for punishment, it would seem.

The fantasy I'd had since booking the tickets of what our day in Paris was going to be like was now completely and utterly shattered. How was I going to walk along the Seine holding hands with the woman I was in love with if the woman I was in love with wasn't there?

But the truth was my sanctuary had become my prison, and I just couldn't stay in this room any longer. And walking around the ship with guests asking questions or wanting me to stop for general chit-chat about their travels wasn't on my list of things to do for the day, either.

Sometimes, there was no better feeling than sitting down in one of the ship's bars for a drink with an elderly couple as they showed you pictures of their grandkids, but I didn't have the heart for that today.

I hopped in the shower, hoping a cold wash would help me make a decision. Besides, it was always harder to cry in the shower when your body could only focus on the fact that it was turning into an ice cube. And I was determined not to start my day with tears. But I did feel the numb. I felt the cold water grip my skin like my pain gripped my heart. I held my breath under the stream just so I could feel alive as I was forced to take deep, gasping breaths when my lungs screamed for relief.

I slipped into something I wouldn't usually be seen out in public in and was changed

and ready just in time for the Cruise Director to announce that the coaches were ready for boarding. I took this as a sign. I knew I was grasping at straws, but it helped me get out the door.

I grabbed a coffee from the barista on my way out, and I didn't even have the energy to force a smile as I made my way through the ship's security and onto the coach.

Two and a half hours is not a huge amount of time. In that time, you can watch a movie, listen to an album, or scroll through an endless amount of social media. But with my mind not focused, two and a half hours seemed like an excessive amount of time for a day trip I wasn't even looking forward to. I watched the digital clock at the front of the coach take its sweet time to get through the numbers.

What the fuck was I doing?

Fortunately, since Claudia wasn't there, the seat next to me was unoccupied, so I could at least mope in silence.

I stepped off the coach, setting a reminder on my phone of when to head back for the return journey. If I missed the final evening embarkment, I'd be in serious trouble, no matter what port I was in. So, I always had a plan in place to ensure I never ended up being one of those people frantically waving at their cruise ship to come back and pick them up while the captain sailed off into the horizon without a care in the world.

That was the last thing I needed right now, to be an American stranded in France.

I walked through the gardens toward the Eiffel Tower. I was genuinely trying to focus on the good, admire the beauty of this attraction and feel the awe of seeing it in real life. But how can you do that when men were trying to sell you repackaged tap water and keychains every three steps?!

Breathe, Raven. Breathe.

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I took out my phone and took a few snaps. My selfie was pathetic so I tried again. I put on my best natural smile. Much better, so I posted it to Instagram. I didn't know if Claudia would check my account. I doubted it, and I hated myself for that pettiness that wanted her to look and think I was doing just fine without her when we all knew I absolutely was not. I looked at my phone to see where the next “big thing” was to see. The Arc de Triomphe was 30 minutes away, so I set my directions and headed off.

The thing no one tells you about Paris is that the city is huge. Overwhelmingly so. And the big attractions are few and far between in comparison. Don't get me wrong. There are plenty of Parisian cafes, cute side streets and architecture to admire, but the main attractions that put Paris on the map are a hefty walk between each one.

But a walk can be good for the soul. The repetitive action of simply moving your feet. One in front of the other. Step by step until you get somewhere new, and you didn't even notice how you got there.

I gave myself a pep talk as I weaved through the streets and ran across the roads. Traffic lights don't seem to have the same meaning in Paris as in the rest of the world, but today I didn't have the patience or the inclination to be cautious as I stepped out into weaving traffic and honking horns. I finally made it to the Arc in one piece and circled around it, taking a few photos. It was fine, I guess. Nothing special, but it lived up to its name.

I headed down the road to walk along the Champs-Élysées. I have to admit, that was something I was excited about. I loved a good shopping spree, and it would certainly help take my mind off things.

Oh, how wrong I was. Even window shopping on this street seemed expensive. Of course, I know I was on one of the most revered shopping streets in the world, but I would struggle to even get a coffee down here. I didn't expect there to be any bargains per se, but items in the sale were still three times the price as back home.

I sulked off the street, feeling disappointed. I decided to take a coffee break and headed to a picturesque cafe a few streets over. I was going to treat myself regardless of how much it cost.

As I sat sipping my expensive but almost worth it coffee, I watched the world go by. I was thinking about the loves and lives of those around me.

For me, I felt as if my world was crashing a little. Every thought I'd had about my future with Claudia was no longer true. Every feeling I'd had was crushed. And any prospect of experiencing the incredible world around us with the one I loved was gone. I understood her reasoning to an extent, but shouldn't it have been a conversation? Did it really have to be that cold of a goodbye? Hadn't I meant more to her than that?

I battled with my inner demons, rejection flaring up to see the worst side of myself in full view. And yet, to everyone else I was just the extra sipping coffee in the background.

This helped me put my feelings into perspective just a tiny bit. Sure, I was crushed and dealing with something awful, but aren't all those around me right now also experiencing the same in their own way? I finished my coffee and paid the bill.

I made my way down the river, watching as the water glistened in the afternoon sun. I walked around the outside of Notre Dame, wrestling other tourists for a good spot to take a couple of photos. Then I walked across the bridge to the other side of the river, stopping to get some macaroons to go on the way to the Louvre. French macaroons

cannot be beaten, and as it was the first thing I'd eaten in days, they tasted even better.

Although I didn't pay to go into the art museum, I did explore the gift shop and the other public areas inside. It was busy, and I knew I'd be stressing about the time if I went to check out the Mona Lisa. But what I did see was enough, especially since I'd recently finished reading the Davinci Code, and for about ten minutes I was convinced I could walk the Rose Line and follow Robert Langdon's footsteps.

Time was pressing on, so I went to spend my final hour in the Jardin des Tuileries next to the Louvre. This place was stunning. Even with a broken heart, I could see, feel, and smell the beauty of these gardens. I sat on a chair next to the fountain and watched the ducks bathing and protectively circling their babies whenever a kid got too close to the water. For a moment, I felt genuine bliss at the peace surrounding me.

It felt as I had the moment in the Orkneys. Nature has a way of doing that, humbling you. Bringing you back to your senses when the world seems too overwhelming to handle.

The coach stop was too far to walk, or rather, I was too tired to be able to walk fast enough and make it in time, so I jumped on the metro to go back to the Eiffel Tower. The metro was incredibly loud and rickety, although I enjoyed the fact my mind was being distracted by something even louder than my thoughts.

I made it back to the coach in time and settled down with a canned cocktail I'd bought at the corner shop. It was cold and refreshing, exactly what I needed to unwind after an emotionally draining day. As the coach drove along back to the ship, I reflected on my day. My visit to Paris was underwhelming. Was I suffering from Paris syndrome, or was I just too dejected to see why Paris was held in such high esteem?

I had a strong suspicion that had I come here with Claudia by my side, fingers entwined as we perused the Parisian city streets together, I wouldn't have felt an ounce of disappointment.

I guess the true beauty of the most romantic city in the world was not the place itself, but it would always be about who you shared it with.

13

After Paris, I didn't leave the ship again. There was just no point. I lived, worked, ate, and slept in a near zombie-like cycle. Even Urduja began to lose patience with me as I went round and round the British Isles on what seemed like a never-ending loop of pain.

"Don't you want to get off?" she asked with a frustrated edge as she bounded into my room and tried to get me to at least see some daylight on firm ground.

"No, Urduja. I do not want to get off. I won't be getting off until we complete the Transatlantic and I can finally get out of this gray, raining, depressing place and see home again.

She didn't say a word, just looked at me with wide eyes and slipped out.

Then I felt like a bitch.

The show must go on. I sat on the white leather stool at my dressing table. The dark room was lit with the soft yellows of the bulbs that lined the frame of the mirror. I leaned forward and let my gaze sweep over my features. Big gray eyes scanning every detail, from lightly curled lashes to full rosy lips. I gave my head a little shake, and my short dark hair fell forward to frame my face. I tried to remind myself that the audience didn't need to know about my dead heart and blank mind. They needed me

to perform. So I tried my best.

The steel stage floor reflected the single beam. It was the only light. The rest of the stage was submerged in darkness. The mood was eerie, the silence deafening. It seemed like even the ocean had stilled. Then a white flash, almost like a lightning strike, thundered through my body, and the music started.

Diving into the song, I laced it with sex, hiding behind what the women here wanted. They wanted to imagine being with Raven Ramsey. They all wanted a taste of me—or of who they believed me to be. And I had no idea what was real anymore.

I felt real for the first time with Claudia. But now she was gone, and it had me questioning if that was the real me at all.

I sang with a raspy edge, letting the band take the lead, but I followed with tones meant to entice, to seduce and, as the song played out, I heard the pause before shocked applause that never seemed to end.

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“Well, fuck me.” I heard Fernanda murmur into my earpiece, and I thought to myself...

At least I got that right.

The cruise ship continued to sail, and every day got easier for me. I stuck to a routine, and I never deviated. It was probably a sad existence, although it seemed to keep Fernanda happy. I'd never tossed more beanbags in my life. The guests saw more of me. I was fed by their energy, their enthusiasm, and their devoted love of me. They pushed me to keep giving even when I felt empty inside.

Urduja tried her best to keep me in better spirits, and I in turn tried for her to not be a mope. I ached for Claudia. I longed to hear her voice, to know how she was, to kiss her, taste her. But she never reached out to me, and I respected her wishes even though it was excruciating for me to accept the silence.

The countdown to leave Europe and take the Atlantic crossing kept me going. And as we set sail across the ocean, I watched the miles run down until I would be back home. I'd never longed so much for the States as I did right now.

It was my break anyway. Three months of off-ship time. Fernanda had confirmed with me that I intended to return, and I told her yes, even though I wasn't entirely sure that was true. I needed time, I needed space to think, and I couldn't do that here, but I'd know as soon as my body had stopped swaying whether or not I could do another cruise route.

One thing was for certain. It wouldn't be the miserable British Isles if I could help it. I

needed some sun on my skin.

Urduja and I didn't do great goodbyes. We knew we'd find each other on the next ship. We would keep in touch. She was my sea soul sister, and emotional goodbyes just weren't our thing, but I must admit this time we hugged each other a little longer and a little tighter as we disembarked in New York.

"Message me!" she exclaimed as she dashed off down the ramp. She was heading to La Guardia for a flight back home and only had forty-five minutes to navigate the New York City traffic.

I was much slower to leave. I'd made a reservation in the city for a few days and then I was thinking about driving out west, taking some time to explore and see a little without much real purpose. Definitely no schedules or wake-up calls.

Collecting my luggage from the crew station, I was meandering over to the taxi rank when I heard a voice call my name.

"Raven! Raven!" I turned slowly. Fans didn't usually make their way down here.

My thoughts trailed off as I saw her.

Claudia.

She looked so fucking good in a white suit and big sunglasses, and her hair was freshly cut, streaked, and blow-dried.

She was walking across the other side of the barrier with a stride in her step, trying to keep up with me as I made my way along.

"Raven! Wait." I stilled, my cases coming to a halt. I just stared at her as she caught

up to me.

“Can you come here?” she asked as she pushed her glasses up and into her hair, letting me see her beautiful face and those eyes that made my icy heart melt.

But I hesitated. I couldn't do this. Not again. It had taken me weeks, months, for her not to consume my every thought, and here she was again about to take over.

She caught my pause. “Please, Raven. I just want to talk to you.”

I left my cases and moved to her. The pull was magnetic. The second I took the first step I was going nowhere else. I was drawn to her as I always had been. My heart leapt, laced with hope, though my head was screaming warnings, danger, red flags, abort.

I ignored them all as I closed the distance between us.

“Raven,” she started as I met her, keeping a little distance, the railing between us. “I love you, and I should never have let you go. I’ve been an idiot. I want to be with you. I want to make this work. I will even live on this bloody boat...ship...whatever, if you want. Just please give me a chance.”

I needed a second to let the words register. “Do you mean it?” I asked softly. Shyly.

She nodded. “I want to kiss you right now. Can I?”

“What kind of kiss?”

“A big one. One that shows how much I care for you. Not quite a superhero kiss. Maybe a sidekick kiss. Not because I don't want to give you a superhero kiss. This one just seems like it should be one designed to help you. To wipe away doubt as best

I can. To let you know that things are okay, that we are going to be okay.”

“I want that kiss,” I replied softly.

“I can give it to you, Raven.” She took a step toward me, wiping hair from my face. Tucking it in. Softly caressing my cheek as her eyes found mine. Lips inches away from mine.

I tilted my head just an inch, melting into her touch. Trembling, I took a breath. My eyes were wide, searching for hers.

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“I don’t know if I’ll ever be enough for you,” I whispered. Honestly. The words caught in my throat. Then I closed the gap and kissed her.

She gave me the kiss she’d promised. Her other hand found my back, and she rubbed it. Her other hand was still on my cheek. Her lips took away my doubts, working to let me know I was enough. The sidekick kiss pressed into me, a big kiss that carried her sighs even as they plucked mine from my lips.

My eyes fell closed, and for a few seconds, I just let her kiss me. My lips were soft, lightly moving with her, letting her set the pace and take the lead. Then my hand rose, my palm gliding over her jaw to trace through her hair. I was still taking, her sighs, her kisses, everything she gave me.

And she continued to give it, not wanting our moment to end. If our lips were together it couldn't end. Her hand left my cheek to find my hand in her hair and she gave it a soft squeeze, continuing to give me all she could.

I’d shown my weakness, my doubts, and my fears, so my kiss was laced with vulnerability. Not demanding, but pleading for her to take care of me. To hold me. To not let us crash. Her heat surrounded me. Holding me close, her gentle caress kept me there, locked with her so nothing had to break.

Her arms wrapped around me, squeezing me tight to her and rubbing softly. Her lips were steady against mine to help steady my pleas. To take them and let me know I was safe in her embrace. Vulnerability was okay. Fear was okay. It was all okay. In this kiss, she and I were okay.

It took time, but she could feel it. She could feel the moment when my mind started to believe this was going to be okay, and finally, my body relaxed into her embrace. The tension I was holding softly, slowly slipped away, and I began to mirror her lips, kissing her back.

Her hands held me tight, still running along my back. Soft, gentle. I felt tensionless as our lips continued to move in an eager dance.

I felt her hands on my back, right at the bottom of my spine, sending shivers. My lips parted on an inhale, and she filled my lungs. And then my tongue traced against her lips before taking a light swirl. It was a slow dance. Seductive. Edged with need. But I was still hesitant. Taking my time.

Her tongue was ready for the show. It led and set the pace but was ever cognizant of mine, of my need. It tasted when it swirled back against hers. She chased the shivers with her hand, slowly indulging in them as she found more.

She knew me, could read my body like her favorite book. With each shiver I gave her, she chased the next until I was dancing that edge of sexual tension.

She broke the kiss so she could find more of my skin, places where she'd made marks before. She dragged her tongue along them and sucked on my neck hungrily, then moved further down to my collarbone.

My head tilted back. My neck stretched, exposing soft, vulnerable skin. Hers for the taking. Her lips found the memories of the old marks, kissing them, tasting them, her teeth grazing over my collarbone, which elicited a tiny moan from my lips, only for her to steal as she returned to them. I responded, my fingers tangling in her hair to grip hard, my nails scratching down her back to show my ache for her.

I was spinning. Dizzy, utterly lost in the moment with her, not knowing where she

ended and I began. And then I heard a clatter behind me and I pulled away breathlessly.

“Who the fuck left these here!?” a crew exclaimed as his own case scuttled off across the path, clattering into the railings. I flushed sheepishly.

“I am so sorry. Those are mine,” I dashed over to grab my suitcases, pulling them with back over to the railing toward Claudia. “I think we should get out of here.” I smiled.

“I couldn't agree more,” she replied.

THE EPILOGUE

I padded through to the bedroom, a huge smile spreading on my face as I watched her laid out, tangled in our crisp white sheets. The sun has risen, but only just slightly, and normally I wouldn't be the one to be up early and busy, but I had to get things ready for our trip, and packing was a chore very firmly written on my list of things to do.

Not that we really split the chores like that, but travelling was on my list of things to arrange and fix. Especially this one, as it had so many moving parts, but I was confident that all those years of cruise life had prepared me for such an occasion.

“I'd love to be lying in bed with you right now,” I said with a soft sigh, laundry draped over my arm, my head running through all the things I needed to do before Monday.

“Come lie with me, then,” replied Claudia with a slowly spreading seductive smile. I felt it, the tightening in my chest. I knew I was already lost, a slave to her every desire.

I thought about it for less than a second, then dumped the laundry on the chair and slipped off my shorts and slid into bed in just my panties and a tank, getting super snuggly. Her arms wrapped around me, snuggling me up nice and tight to her.

“It's not Sunday. You think we can have a lazy Saturday and a lazy Sunday, too?” I asked with a sly smile.

“We can have a lazy weekend.” She grinned,

“I would adore that. I need someone to take care of me.”

“I can do that.”

“How are you going to take care of me...?”

"How do you need to be taken care of?"

“I think you should be taking all my clothes off, kissing me and loving every inch of me, so I feel very taken care of.”

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Her hands went to my tank top, slowly pushing it up. Hands ran along smooth skin as she exposed it. She kissed the back of my neck and worked down to the fabric as it pushed up from the other direction.

The fabric was stretchy and tight against my skin, so it was a slow peel, exposing me inch by inch. Her lips on my neck made me shiver, my toes curling as I stretched out for her, feeling my breaths come deeper and slower as I felt the arousal spread through me.

It was a slow peel, but she was patient. We had as long as it took. Her finger rubbed up as more skin was exposed. Her hand wrapped around me, lightly stroking. She landed more and more neck kisses as she licked down right to the edge of the fabric. She pulled away so she could slowly work it up, not stopping though, just moving lower so she could caress my now bare shoulder with her lips.

It made me tremble as she reached my shoulder, her breath was light against my collarbone, pressing kisses over my skin. I felt every single touch, leaving invisible marks on my skin where she had been. I tried to stay still, but I writhed a little, deep breaths turning into soft gasps all for her.

Her lips pouted, and she blew cool air over my skin. Her fingers trailed up, reaching my chest. She gave my breasts a squeeze as she placed kisses on my collarbone, giving a soft suck on it, enjoying the way my body shivered and writhed for each of her touches.

With that cool blow, my gasps became louder. My breasts filled her palms, my nipples hardening at her touch. It all felt so fucking good. My eyes closed, my body

waiting for her next kiss, next lick, next squeeze, and I felt the wetness spread against my panties

The squeeze came on my other breast, and then on my nipples as her fingers found them, too. The lick came at the side of my neck, followed by a nice soft kiss that went up to my jaw, spaced with licks.

“Oh.” Claudia rolled my nipples between her finger and thumbs, a flash of pain followed by a surge of pleasure. It was a hotwire straight between my thighs. I tensed and relaxed, melting into her kisses. So soft. So gentle. Fuck. I felt so special to her.

One of her hands moved down all the way to the waistband of my panties. She didn't enter, didn't even try. She didn't rub over. She just kept it there, teasingly playing with it. Her other hand squeezed one breast and then the other. The second one got the roll of the nipple and a light pull this time. Her lips continued to pepper me with kisses, a little less organized than before, wanting to make as much contact as she could with my skin.

My hips started to move, side to side, up and down, trying to take more than her tease, desperate for more—her knuckles against my hip, fingertips gliding along just inside my panties. Fuck. She was so close. So so close to where I craved her to be.

My head started to seek her, lips searching for hers, wanting her attention. Her taste.

Then her fingers finally slipped inside my panties. They started to rub my pussy as her mouth met mine. Wanting my taste right back. Her fingers began to give me what I wanted. She kissed me hard as her fingers started to play, they started to give me that pleasure I needed so desperately, a soft, slow rub that was already starting to build a little with every moment.

My first moan was stolen by her lips. My panties kept her hand close to my mound,

trapped against my heat as her fingers lower, sliding against my wetness, slipping against my clitoris and lower again, as though they might penetrate me at any moment. My hands moved reaching around her back as my thighs slowly spread, my nails lightly running down her back as I kissed her back, deep but slow.

My nails felt so good on her back. I knew how much she loved it, and I could feel them cause goosebumps to form. They made her body tremble when they first made contact. Her lips pushed into mine, her fingers beginning to rub my clitoris and give me the delicious pressure I so desperately wanted. And then she started to slowly slide her fingers inside of me, slow to match our kiss.

The light scratch of my nails became deeper and needier as her fingers circled my entrance and then pushed inside me. My lips stilled, my body tensed, responding to her fingers, and then she was inside me and I relaxed, remembering to breathe again, but the only air I could take in was hers, filling me everywhere, making her my everything.

Her fingers began to move faster inside me to match our kiss. Curling up to meet my G spot, beginning to thrust inside me.

"Fuck." My nails ran up her spine to the nape of her neck and then ran through her hair, a tight hold, trying to keep some control, but by this point, I clearly had none. She could feel each moan vibrating against her lips, tiny whimpers as my hips started to move, guiding her fingers deeper into me. We moved so slow. It was maddening, but felt so fucking good. "You are my world," I managed to murmur against her lips between kisses, through them, because I couldn't stop.

"I want you to feel special." Her words took forever to get out in between the kisses. "Because you are." she said, continuing to kiss me. She picked up the speed just a little as my hips rocked into her fingers. She went even faster, wanting me to feel all that pleasure as she chased those moans both with her lips and with her fingers,

continuing to push at that slightly faster speed.

With that increase in speed, my body ignited, heat spread through me and as I moved with her, I felt my pants quickening. She responded to every touch, as her fingers curled and I trembled. She noticed, doing it over and over, taking me to the edge. That exquisite spot where desire and pleasure collide.

I'd never in my life felt as special as I do since being hers.

My breasts were crushed against her chest, our nipples grazing, which only edged me further, only made me moan louder and deeper against her lips. The pace of her fucking increased again. Faster and harder and it was a ride I never wanted to get off.

"Are you ready, baby?" she asked softly, such a tease.

I was trembling, more ready than I had ever been. I nodded, I nodded and pleaded with my eyes, but I knew she needed to hear me say it. I knew she wanted the words, so I tried, with a shaking voice. "Yes. I need it. I need you. Please, can I come for you?"

"You are my special girl. Come for me, baby."

As the words left her lips, I was lost. Falling, drowning, gone. I sank into the bed, letting go and giving her all of me. Everything. My orgasm came hard, slow, a long crashing wave that didn't end, giving and taking from each other.

We collapsed together. "That was incredible. You are...just. Fuck. You blow my mind," I murmured against her lips.

"You are so special."

My cheeks turned pink and I grinned at her with a shy smile, my legs and arms still tight around her with no intention of letting go. "You are."

She smiled and nuzzled against me. Her arms were still wrapped around me. Our desire was mutual. Not letting each other go.

“Raven...you told me all of this was organised and I had nothing to worry about.”

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I did love this woman, but dear god, she stressed the life out of me. After nearly five years together, we'd found a rhythm of things, where Claudia would steer the ship on around 92% of the decisions and actions needed, and she would, moan, complain, and stress about the 8% she'd given to me, and that 8% I had to negotiate hard for.

I loved our life. She still ran the New York office but had a much more reasonable work/life balance. I left the Pride of Paradise that summer and had never returned. Instead, I'd returned to the NY club scene, but rather than standing on the stage, I ran things from behind the curtain, putting on shows and events and finding new talent who were desperate to be found in the bustling streets of the Big Apple. It worked. I was happy, and she was happy, our perfect compromise. Although, there were times I did sneak back on stage for a song or two.

"It is all organized," I replied with a sigh, letting my voice trail off. I knew she wasn't listening. She could only see the fact that we were cutting the time close to the wire, and that if we were not careful we were going to miss our flight.

"Then why are we taking this route? It is so far from the airport to take the ring road. We could have been there if we'd taken the left before we hit Manhattan." She leaned forward to try and direct the driver again. He gave her a calm shrug, which only served to infuriate her more before she settled back in her seat.

My hand slid across the seat, taking her fingers in mine with a gentle squeeze. "Do I seem panicked?" I asked softly.

Her face turned to me and she analyzed my features, not just a glance, but a real in-depth search of my expression. I felt the scrutiny, but I also knew I didn't have the

slightest worry in me, so I was not overly concerned.

She sighed after a second. “No.” she confirmed.

“Then can you please trust me that I have absolutely everything under control?”

I knew it killed her to do it, that it wasn’t in her personality at all, but sometimes she needed the push. “Okay,” she agreed with a tiny smile, and I crossed the distance of the middle seat to plant a soft, warm kiss against her pouting lips.

“Thank you. I love you.”

I knew it’d be impossible to keep the secret any longer after we pulled into the docks, which is why I had to plan something a little different. It seemed I’d formed the closest bonds with highly skilled, high-achieving super organized women. This was why at the port entrance there was a perfectly hung sign with:

Welcome Aboard Claudia and Raven

The big blue letters were followed by a small crowd of our friends and family, including Sue Smith, who was beaming in her Bermudas and Hawaiian shirt. For all the money that woman had she still went for the boldest option in Target with no fucks given.

Some other friends stood there from our home, from work, from our past. And Urduja beaming, bluetooth still firmly attached, began to wave.

“You did this?” Claudia turned to me, her eyes wide and shimmering with tears.

“I had a little help.” I smiled.

“But, where are we going?”

“Well, I thought that maybe we should go back to England. It’s been a while. And maybe this time, we might get to see Paris together.”

Her eyes swam with tears as she nodded. “I would love that. I would love that very much.”

And together with our closest friends, we set sail once more on the Pride of Paradise across the ocean. Close to my heart, I kept a sparkling diamond ring that I hoped on our return would be wrapped around her finger, just as my heart was.