



Fore Better or Worse (Return to Starlight Bay #16)

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Category: Sport

Description: Sure, I agreed to marry the stranger with the devilish dimples someday. I just didn't think three years later the pro athlete would be back...and hell bent on slipping a colossal diamond on my ring finger.

Okay, so technically I did agree to wed the pro golfer known for being a charmer, but in my defense it somehow seemed to make perfect sense in the moment. Plus, what were the odds this smooth-talking hottie would actually win a major championship?

Apparently pretty good.

Now my fiancé is back in my small coastal town, looking sinfully gorgeous and ready to collect on our improbable pact.

Three years apart should have killed whatever combustible chemistry we had. Instead, one kiss against my bookstore counter and I'm right back to melting under that wicked grin and forgetting every logical reason were completely wrong for each other.

His world is paparazzi and pressure. Mine is coffee shops and cozy nights in.

Hays swears I'm not a distraction, but saying I Do means trading my quiet, predictable life for his jet-setting, headline-making world.

And now I have to decide: play it safe and lose him forever, or believe this man who's determined to prove happily ever after really do come true.

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Chapter one

Leah | Three Years Ago

“S urprise!”

I flinch from the collective shout, my grip tightening on the handrail.

Forcing a smile, I climb the last few risers of the narrow, steep staircase to the boat’s second-floor deck.

Half-empty cocktail glasses litter the table where my friends are gathered, clearly having launched into full party mode without me.

Which is fine. Good actually.

But when I spy the obnoxious, glittery “Birthday Girl” sash Cora holds poised and ready to slip over my head like some sort of festive noose, my smile falters. And my growling stomach drops.

I suppose, in some alternate universe, there could be worse ways to spend your twenty-fifth birthday than being ambushed by well-meaning besties on a sunset dinner cruise. Though, at the moment, I’m struggling to think of what those worse ways might be.

“Sorry,” Tabitha murmurs, emerging from the stairwell behind me in time to help adjust the sash across my shoulder. “I was sworn to secrecy.”

“It’s fine,” I mumble, turning to flash a tight smile at my boss and best friend, who I have no doubt is telling the truth. “Really.”

Even if I’d been looking forward to a quiet evening at home. A night that included a large glass of wine, a warm bubble bath, and the zip of pleasure from selecting another novel off my Tbr pile and flipping to chapter one.

But it’s my birthday eve, so when Tabitha sprung this whole dinner cruise idea on me only hours ago, I reluctantly agreed.

After all, I suggested this supposedly romantic experience to my ex at least a dozen times over the years.

And, true to form, he always agreed it was a good idea then never actually followed through.

Which, in hindsight, was a red flag that should have tipped me off to where the relationship was headed.

But now, I’m surrounded by the cheerful chaos of surprise party attendees who are thrilled they “got me” and the growing realization I’ll have to be “on” for the next few hours when I’d likely be lights out by nine, if left to my own devices.

But the thing is, I promised myself this summer would be different. After getting dumped over Memorial Day weekend, I made a resolution to break out of my carefully constructed routine of daytime shifts at High Tide Tales and evening reading or writing sessions.

To say yes more often than no.

To actually go on adventures or hell, maybe even some first dates.

To have personal experiences that would inspire my stories, rather than living vicariously through my fearless friends.

Not that I've kept that resolution. Or the one I made about eating more vegetables.

So far, my track record has been abysmal, and I've only been to the farmer's market once all summer.

But now, glancing around the table, my lips curve into a smile.

These women, care enough about me to coordinate schedules and purchase tickets and keep secrets.

The least I can do is appreciate the gesture, even if my idea of a perfect birthday involves significantly less social interaction and considerably more solitude.

"Rocking heels tonight?" My book club friend, Sarah, pulls me in for a hug. "This cruise is amazing. You're going to love it. The sunset views are incredible. Bryce brought me as a surprise last month, and it was so romantic."

I ignore the pang of jealousy that hits the back of my throat. I should be happy for her and her new, perfectly thoughtful boyfriend. "I can't wait for the sunset."

"How about a cheers for the birthday girl?" Cora suggests, lifting her glass.

I'd love to enjoy the toast, except Tabitha and I are without a colorful cocktail in hand as the other girls clink glasses.

"Can I get you a drink?" Tabitha's super power has always been reading minds, or at least mine.

“Let me go,” I insist. “I could use a minute.” And a rum and Coke. Some hard liquor mixed with sugary caffeine is the only way I’ll make it through the evening. Unless I jump overboard and swim for it, which would definitely qualify as a personal adventure that could find its way into a storyline.

“Okay, yeah. If you’re sure.”

The others raise their half-empty glasses in my direction as I head off, carefully descending the stairs down to the bar we passed earlier.

I make my way across the dining area, squeezing between chairs and weaving past tables full of passengers who seem far more prepared for maritime socializing than I am.

There are couples sharing appetizers and families with children whose little faces are smashed against the windows. In the corner, a rather boisterous fiftieth anniversary party, complete with oversized gold numerical balloons, has already reached the loud-laughter stage of their evening.

Perhaps, Tabitha was right to spring this evening on me.

I’ve hidden behind my books and writing and pints of mint chocolate chip all summer.

But there’s no way I’ll become a published author without putting in the hours needed to actually finish a novel.

Lately, though, writing has felt like chiseling granite with a plastic spoon.

The aromatic scent of whatever gourmet deliciousness they’re preparing in the galley wafts this way.

My stomach rumbles even though I had a late lunch.

If a sad homemade turkey and cheese on wheat, scarfed down in the stockroom at two this afternoon when I was ravenous enough to gnaw off my arm, can legitimately be considered a meal.

I beeline toward the bar. Its polished wood and gleaming brass fixtures catch the long rays of sunlight streaming in through the windows, but there isn't a single bottle of alcohol in sight.

I sure hope that's because we're on a moving—soon, hopefully—boat rather than because the bar isn't well-stocked.

A man leaning casually against the end of the bar is impossible to miss.

Tall, with broad shoulders, and a well-defined ass, he's rocking a hot pink polo so bright it could guide ships to shore.

Even from behind, his relaxed posture suggests a man comfortable in his own skin, a state both enviable and mildly irritating.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asks as I step up and refocus on the task at hand.

"A rum and Coke, please, and a glass of red wine. Something dry, if you have it. Nothing too..." I pause, embarrassed to use the phrase Tabitha often does without a shred of the self-consciousness that seems to plague me, "aggressively cheerful."

The bartender chuckles, apparently understanding Tabitha's wine philosophy perfectly. "Lime wedge in that rum and Coke?"

"Please." I lean against the bar and draw a deep breath, finally relaxing now that a

drink is on the horizon.

A minute later, as I'm composing a list of topics, besides my single status and the sad state of my manuscript, to talk about at dinner, the boat's engine kicks up a notch. Or ten. A grinding sound reverberates through the deck as we unmoor from the dock and the propellers whir to life.

The boat sways from side to side, and the large vessel's sudden change in momentum catches me off guard. My feet, already precarious in heels, slide out from beneath me.

I throw out a hand to catch myself, but my fingertips slip on the curved edge of the polished bar.

Suddenly I'm careening sideways, directly into the solid warmth of the man in the pink shirt, whose barely worn fashion sneakers provide enough tread to ensure he's sure-footed. And not at all off balance like me.

"Whoa there, sweetheart." Strong hands steady my hips before I completely embarrass myself by taking us both down in a tangle of limbs. But it's the deep voice, all smooth warmth and dangerous promises, that makes my pulse skip.

I look up, and immediately wish I could disappear into the deck below. It's pink shirt man and he's devastating. Thick lashes frame green-blue sea-glass eyes, and an amused smile features twin dimples that transform his handsome face into something absolutely lethal.

I'm in trouble. Not the kind of trouble that involves actual danger, although that might be preferable at the moment. No, this kind of trouble involves a racing pulse and the complete abandonment of rational thought.

Just my luck.

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Chapter two

Leah

I should extract myself from this man's clutch.

Put a reasonable amount of space between us, and thank this stranger politely before retreating to the safety of my friends upstairs.

Instead, I'm frozen in place, studying his smile and wondering how often it's gotten him into trouble versus out of it.

My rescuer is gorgeous in an effortless, sun-kissed way. A man who's certainly never had to wonder if a woman finds him irresistible, because the answer is always a resounding yes.

My whole body hums with the kind of awareness I try to write into my meet-cutes. Because only in fiction do guys this magnetic date bookstore clerks who consider staying up past ten with a new release a wild Friday night.

"Sea legs take practice. Though, if you're going to fall for someone tonight, I'm glad it was me."

Heat floods my cheeks as I scramble to find my footing, hyperaware of how his hands send heat waves through my dress. "I think you meant 'fall on' not—"

"Oh, no. I meant 'for,'" he confirms with a wink that should be illegal in at least

twelve states.

I would laugh off the ridiculous suggestion, but instead, I stand frozen, like a deer in headlights, having completely forgotten how to form words.

“You wear that sash well,” he continues, his gaze raking over me in a way that makes my skin tingle. “It’s just my luck to catch a birthday girl.”

The compliment jolts me back to reality. Right. The ridiculous sash. The surprise party. Surely, this gorgeous specimen, who must workout as if it’s his full-time job, is just being polite to the awkward woman who’s celebrating tonight.

I step back, smoothing my dress and adjusting the sash. “Thank you for the catch,” I manage, aiming for polite but distant. “Though, I should clarify my birthday is technically tomorrow, so your luck might be slightly premature.”

“I’ve been accused of a lot of things, but premature isn’t one of them, honey.”

I said his luck was premature, not him. But the way he twisted my words—and delivered them in a voice fit for an audiobook narrator reading for a dirty-talking hero—distracts me enough that I don’t point out his mistake. Plus, when I look up, the devil grins as if he knows exactly what he’s doing.

“Is that so?” I offer instead, my tone dry as I glance toward the bartender, calculating how long until my drinks are ready.

But instead of taking the hint, the stranger’s grin widens. “Would I lie to a gorgeous woman who’s practically my birthday buddy?”

Birthday buddy? My eyebrows fly to my hairline. This has to be some kind of routine. A well-practiced approach he uses on unsuspecting women. “Birthday

buddy, hmm? That seems awfully convenient .”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe it’s a go-to pickup line you’ve used before. Like your birthday is whatever day suits the situation.”

He laughs, loud and genuine and completely unashamed, and suddenly, I’m fighting a smile, too. When he reins in his mirth, there’s something almost conspiratorial in his expression as he leans close.

“A go-to pickup line? Darling, if I was using a pickup line, you’d know it. I’d tell you that your eyes are prettier than a perfect lie on a pristine fairway, which they are. Or that I’d give my left kidney to get you alone and show you my stroke technique, which I would.”

Is anyone else hearing this? I scan the room and spot some interested glances from a table eyeing Mr. Fuchsia Polo.

But they’re too far away to overhear. And all men, so I think it’s fair to assume I’m the only one who thinks this hottie is ridiculous.

Completely over the top. And yet, I can’t help but play along.

“With lines like that,” I say, my voice deadpan, “I’m shocked you’re still single.”

“Who says I’m single?”

I can’t help but glance down at his left hand.

He notices, raising it to wiggle his ring finger. “I’m completely and utterly available.

Thanks for asking.”

“I didn’t.”

“True, but now, I’m curious as to why you assumed I was.”

“Call it intuition.” I’m finding my footing in this verbal sparring match and beginning to enjoy it. “Or maybe, it’s the way you’re dispensing golf innuendos to random strangers on boats.”

“Strangers? I wouldn’t go that far, especially with how well you fit in my arms.”

Somehow the reminder of the sensation of being pressed up against him sends a wave of heat through me.

“But since you seem to require proof...” He pulls out his wallet, flipping it open. “Scout’s honor.”

I squint at the license. Hays Granger from Arizona. And, sure enough, his birthday was yesterday. Born the same year I was.

But what’s more fascinating is the picture tucked into the opposite transparent sleeve.

An old, worn photograph of what surely is a little boy version of this man, maybe seven or eight, standing on a golf course with a club half as tall as he is.

Next to him, a man who must be his father, stands with his arm wrapped around the boy’s shoulders, both of them grinning at the camera with identical dimpled smiles.

The image is faded, and the edges frayed, but there’s something about the pure joy on that little boy’s face that catches me off guard. Guilt prickles like static across my

skin for doubting his honesty. “So you do tell the truth. At least, occasionally. My apologies.”

“Don’t apologize for keeping me honest,” he murmurs, sliding his wallet back into his pocket. “It’s sexy as hell.” His gaze drops to my dress. “And I have to say, mint green might just be my new favorite color.”

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Chapter three

Leah

Sexy as hell?

I blink at him, dumbfounded. No one in the history of ever has described anything I've said, let alone done, using those words. Especially not my ex. And now he's complimenting my dress like he actually means it, too.

The praise sends an odd little thrill through my chest, a sensation I definitely shouldn't feel from a stranger's compliment. I clear my throat, trying to ignore the way my pulse just kicked up a notch.

"Rum and Coke and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon," the bartender interrupts, setting the drinks on the bar. "That will be twenty-eight dollars."

"Add it to my tab," Mr. Flirty-pants says immediately.

"Absolutely not." I'm already pulling my card from my phone case. "I can buy my own drinks."

He looks genuinely surprised, as if the concept of a woman paying her own way is a foreign concept. Which it probably is, considering his obvious confidence and those dimples that could charm the habit off a nun.

"Consider it a birthday present," he protests, but I'm already tapping my card to the

reader.

“Thank you, but I’ve got it. Really.” I add a tip and tuck my card away.

His lips press together, but he doesn’t argue. However, he does study me with renewed interest. “Is yours the rum and Coke or the non-aggressively cheerful wine?”

I wince then raise the tumbler. “Eighty proof and a dose of caffeine are what’s going to get me through the next two and a half hours.”

“Well, then, don’t let me get in your way. By all means, enjoy.” He gestures toward my glass “Especially because I heard you order before we met, so I know I’m not the cause for your needing a stiff drink.”

The observation catches me off guard. “No,” I admit, processing the fact Hays Granger was listening. Paying attention to details most people would miss. “You’re not the cause.”

This seems to please him, and I’m rewarded with a sincere smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes. For a moment, the easy banter fades, and something more genuine passes between us. Something that makes my pulse quicken in a way that has nothing to do with caffeine.

But I need to go.

“Happy belated birthday,” I offer, grabbing the wine and turning to leave before I start to wish this was more than a conversation he’s likely to forget before dessert is served.

He leans close enough I catch a whiff of expensive and tempting cologne. “Thank you.”

I spin to head back upstairs, already considering how I'll describe this encounter to Tabitha, then curiosity gets the better of me. I turn back, wrinkles crisscrossing my brow and glance around. "You're not here celebrating your special day alone, are you?"

Something in my tone must suggest I'm concerned about him being lonely, because he shakes his head. "No, I'm here on a mission."

A mission?

"And here I was, thinking we were past the cheesy pickup lines."

A deep chuckle. "I'm glad to hear you think so, but I promise it's not."

"He holds up both hands in mock innocence."

"My brother's planned an epic proposal to his girlfriend on this dinner cruise."

I came to run covert ops and lend the assist, along with my buddy, Rory.

Right now, I'm checking on the champagne on ice. "

My nose wrinkles. "Your brother needs a wingman to propose?"

A casual shrug. "I was in the area, and we've always been close. I told him I'd be here to handle the details and ensure everything goes off without a hitch. And to capture the moment, of course."

His obvious devotion to his brother's happiness is endearing. But, given my first impression of this man, it doesn't add up. It's my turn to lean in and lower my voice. "No offense, but you don't seem like a very detail-oriented kind of guy."

The observation earns me a wide, devastating grin. “None taken. That’s what I have Rory for. That, and to keep me on track when beautiful women threaten to derail my focus.”

“This Rory doesn’t seem very good at his job.”

The twinkle in his eyes tells me he’s enjoying our banter as much as I am. “Usually, he’s exceptional, but at the moment, I’m grateful he’s not checking up on me.”

The implication hangs between us, heavy with possibility. I should address it, deflect with humor or walk away, going back to my surprise party. Instead, I can’t help but follow the thread. “I’m assuming this proposal is supposed to be a secret, no?”

“It is.”

“And you’ve just told a complete stranger about it.”

“Meaning?”

“Perhaps, you’re not the most reliable covert operative.”

He draws back and throws his hands up in surrender. “What can I say? Gorgeous, dark-eyed beauties who call me on my shit are apparently my kryptonite. Though, technically, we’re not complete strangers. We’re established birthday buddies, remember?”

“Birthday buddies,” I repeat, testing the phrase. “I suppose that’s one way to classify our relationship. Though, I could argue the coincidence of a two-days apart birthdate hardly constitutes a foundation for trust.”

“Fair point. But I’m working on building that trust.” He leans a hip against the bar.

Again, I'm struck by how at ease he is in his own skin. But more surprisingly, how comfortable I feel around him. "Besides, you look trustworthy. And you're clearly brilliant."

"Which might explain why I'm hesitant to trust a charming stranger who spills family secrets within five minutes of meeting someone."

"Charming, huh?" The lethal grin returns. "You keep paying me compliments like that, and I'll start believing my dreams are coming true."

"Your dreams?"

"That you actually like me, too."

Too?

I can't help the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

But this is dangerous territory. Flirting with a gorgeous, cocky guy, full of his easy charm and some seriously sexy dimples, when I'm ignoring my actual friends upstairs isn't my usual M.O.

Mostly, because in no reality is this even remotely close to my normal Friday night.

"I should get back to my friends before they send out a search party."

"Same." He glances toward the stairs then back at me. "Though I have to say, this has been the highlight of my evening."

Before I can respond, or do something stupid like agree with him, I force myself to walk away. But I sense his gaze following me. All the way until I'm out of sight.

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Chapter four

Leah

The collective gasp from our table pulls my attention from the remnants of a surprisingly delicious salmon dinner.

Across the deck, a man has dropped to one knee beside a table, facing a woman whose hands are pressed to her mouth in the universal gesture of proposal shock.

The evening light catches the diamond he holds up, sending sparkles across the weathered deck.

“Oh my god,” Sarah whispers, tapping my arm over and over again. “Look at that. It’s so romantic.”

But rather than watch the scene unfold, I scan the crowd for a familiar hot pink polo.

Sure enough, he’s there, standing a respectful distance away, phone raised as he captures the moment.

Even from across the deck, Hays’s satisfied grin is hard to miss, thanks to perfect pearly whites.

Slightly behind, and watching the scene closely, is a tall, lean man in a dark green polo who must be the friend he mentioned. His wingman for the covert operation.

The woman says yes, and the entire top deck erupts in cheers and applause.

I clap along, finding, for the first time since I was dumped, that I can celebrate someone's happily-ever-after without that familiar sting of envy.

I don't have time to analyze that thought, though, because Hays catches my eye.

He winks before turning his attention back to his camera.

Something warm unfurls in my chest that has nothing to do with the two rum and Cokes I've polished off, but I ignore the sensation.

After all, everything about Hays screams not my type .

The easy confidence. The way he takes up space as if he owns it.

I spent two years with someone safe and predictable, a guy who's the furthest thing you could get from a cocky flirt.

And look how that ended.

The last thing I need now is a man who's the complete opposite and likely leaves a trail of broken hearts in his wake.

A server appears at our table with a tray of drinks, mostly colorful cocktails, but also a glass of red wine and another rum and Coke.

"For the birthday girl and her friends," the uniformed man announces, setting them down. The girls light up with excited squeals and a chorus of thank-yous, immediately reaching for the drinks. "Compliments of your birthday buddy," he explains in answer to my questioning look.

“Birthday buddy?” Tabitha arches an eyebrow, following my gaze to where it’s darted toward Hays. “And who exactly is this generous birthday buddy?”

Heat creeps up my neck. “I may have had a brief encounter at the bar earlier.”

She slaps the table. “I knew something was up. You were gone for twenty minutes then returned with two drinks and a very unlike Leah smile plastered on your face. Plus, you’ve been so distracted you barely touched your dinner roll.

Care to explain why you’re staring at the tall, yummy specimen over there like he personally hung the moon rather than enjoy a buttered carb? ”

“Nothing happened,” I insist. “He caught me when I almost fell. We talked for a bit. End of story.”

“Uh-huh.”

She doesn’t believe me, but then again, Tabitha’s the one person in the world who knows me almost better than I know myself. She also has details memorized about me that my ex wouldn’t have remembered five seconds later, let alone five years.

“Fine. He’s...got main character energy. And he was charming in a cocky, obnoxious kind of way that should be completely unappealing.”

“But...”

I take a sip of my drink. “But it wasn’t. Even though he’s the farthest thing from my type as you can get.”

“You mean he’s the farthest thing from what you thought was your type.”

“No, I...” I trail off because, as usual, my best friend has a point.

I dated a doormat for three years. David was even more of an introverted homebody than me, so maybe, the fact Hays is basically my ex’s complete opposite is what’s so intriguing.

Plus, he seemed to like me. Or at least, liked talking pick-up lines with me.

“He’s obviously not from Starlight Bay,” she muses, her mind working.

“He’s from Scottsdale, Arizona,” I confirm because that will prove there’s nothing to come of meeting him.

She clicks her tongue. “Already getting location details. And you said nothing happened.”

“Tab,” I say, shaking my head, “he lives across the country. I’ll never see him again.”

Her face lights up. “Exactly!”

“And that’s a good thing because...”

“He might as well be fictional. You can follow up on your promise to live a little and go make a move. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I embarrass myself.”

“So what? He’s a stranger you’ll never see again.”

“We’re not strangers. We’re birth— Never mind.” But she has a point, damn it. I glance back at the happy couple and find Hays mingling in the crowd, his easy smile

like a beacon in the fading light of day. “Maybe, you’re right. But let me Google him first. I think he’s a golfer or something.”

Tabitha arches an eyebrow. “You’re doing research now?”

Ignoring her, I grab my phone. “His name is Hays Granger. I saw it on his license.”

“You checked his ID? How very thorough of you.”

“He showed it to me to prove his birthday,” I mutter, already typing his name into the search bar.

“What?”

But I’m too busy scanning the search results to answer. “Oh.”

“What ‘oh’? Good ‘oh’ or bad ‘oh’?” she asks, leaning over.

My stomach sinks. “He’s... He’s actually famous. Well, sort of famous.” I clear my throat and read aloud. “‘Hays Granger isn’t just one of golf’s newest rising stars—he’s the swaggering, smirking heartthrob who’s making headlines on and off the green.’”

Reading over my shoulder, she continues. “‘After a standout career at The University of Texas, where he racked up a dozen collegiate wins and earned All-American honors, Granger had a rocky season on the Korn Ferry Tour’—what’s that?”

“Hell if I know. But look, it says he managed to rally and officially earned his PGA Tour card last year.” I pause, processing. “He’s a professional golfer, Tab. Like, actually professional.”

“He has the tan to prove it. What else?”

““Known for his killer drive and the kind of effortless charm that makes post-round interviews go viral, he’s got the game to back up the hype.”” I look up at her. “His interviews go viral.”

“Ooh, search for videos later. Keep going.”

““But if Hays wants to go from internet sensation to championship contender, he’ll have to trade a few parties for practice rounds. With talent to spare and a twinkle in his eye, Hays is more than just one to watch. He’s the one everyone’s already watching...and waiting to see if he can deliver.””

I stare at my phone then look across the deck at Hays, who’s now laughing at something his brother says. “He’s an actual celebrity, Tabitha. People write articles about him. He probably has a publicist.”

“So?”

“When I vowed to go on a few first dates after David, I meant with guys I’d actually consider dating—”

“But you haven’t actually gone on a single first date all summer,” Tabitha is quick to point out.

“—and who would consider dating me.”

But even as I utter the words, I wonder if there’s a chance I’m wrong.

Is there a world where Hays would date a small town girl like me?

Or, does he say things like, ‘gorgeous, dark-eyed beauties who call me on my shit are apparently my kryptonite,’ to every woman he rescues at a bar?

Something tells me the answer is no. But surely, that’s the rum talking.

“Okay, first of all, pump the brakes there, girl. No one said anything about dating the man. All I’m suggesting is, you go over and continue the conversation.”

“I work in a bookstore and write novels and sometimes attempt to garden in my spare time, Tab. The guy is a pro athlete who’ll be jetting off after breakfast, not doing Wordle in his pajamas. We’re from completely different worlds.”

“Which is exactly why this is perfect.”

I glance back at the article. “It also mentions parties. Plural. As in, he’s apparently known for them.”

“So? You could use a party or two in your life.”

I shoot her a look.

“What?” she says. “This is the first night in forever you’ve done something spontaneous. Something that wasn’t arranged three weeks in advance and color-coded in your planner. Maybe, it’s a sign.”

She has a point, unfortunately. “This feels like jumping out of an airplane without checking if my parachute works.”

“This is nothing like that.” She nudges my shoulder. “Besides, he’s likely leaving tomorrow, right? You said it yourself. He’ll go back to wherever his fancy golf career takes him. This boat will dock in an hour. What have you got to lose?”

I look at my phone again then across the deck at Hays. He's still there, still gorgeous, and still not my type. But there's something about the way he looked at me earlier, as if I were genuinely interesting rather than just another face in the crowd.

"I'll just congratulate him and come right back." I place my napkin next to my plate.

"Or," Tabitha says, leaning closer with a mischievous glint in her eye, "you could get over one man by getting under another."

"I'm not having a one-night stand with a famous stranger I met on a boat two hours ago!"

Tabitha laughs. "There's a whole spectrum between talking and sleeping together, Leah. You don't have to cannon-ball into the deep end. Maybe, just stick your toes in the water."

Before I can lose my nerve or the liquid courage currently coursing through my veins, I stand. "I'll be right back."

"I hope you're not." Her knowing smile follows me as I make my way across the deck. Then, as if it's an afterthought, she calls out, "Oh, and if you happen to find out the name of Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome hovering behind your birthday buddy, I wouldn't be opposed to that nugget of information."

"Tab," I say, shaking my head with a smile.

"What? I'm just being thorough. You know, in case his friend needs someone to show him around Starlight Bay." She waves me off with feigned innocence. "I'll handle the girls. Tell them you're getting fresh air or something. Take your time."

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Chapter five

Leah

As I make my way across the deck, Hays glances in my direction, a pleased smile curling his lips.

He turns back to an animated conversation with his friend.

Even from this distance, the man I'm assuming is Rory, is gesturing and speaking in what looks like a warning tone.

But Hays just shakes his head with that easy smile and steps off toward me.

His confident stride cuts through the crowd. My pulse quickens. Before I know it, he's there, with that devastating smile, as he guides me toward a secluded spot by the railing.

"Thank you for the drinks," I offer, ingrained politeness outweighing everything else at the moment.

"Anytime."

"I have to admit your covert mission was a success, Hays."

The moment his name leaves my lips, something shifts in his expression, and I wonder if I've made a mistake. But then he clears his throat and leans close enough I

breathe his scent again, an unmistakable smell I'll forever associate with tonight.
"You seem to have me at a disadvantage."

"How's that?"

"You caught my name, but I didn't have the pleasure of learning yours, which left me to speculate what it might be all throughout dinner."

My eyebrows lift. "You've been speculating about my name?"

"It's never a good idea to leave me to my own devices."

And just like that, I'm at ease again. "What did you come up with?"

He examines my face with an intensity that warms my skin, as if he's trying to puzzle out a name. Or memorize every detail. Finally, he says, "Leah."

My jaw drops. "How did you—"

"Lucky guess?" He shrugs it off and tries to look innocent, but mischief dances in his green-blue eyes.

"Hays," I warn, my voice stern.

"I'll do naughty things around you all the time if my reward is you saying my name like that."

And there goes my libido. "You're insufferable, you know that?"

He runs a hand through his hair, his expression half-sheepish, half-proud, and lifts a shoulder. "I may have mentioned to your waiter that I'd appreciate knowing the

birthday girl's name. So much so, I'd be happy to compensate him for the information."

"You bribed my waiter?" This man is too much, but I'm suddenly fighting another smile. "That explains why he kept hovering around our table. I thought he was being exceptionally attentive."

"Fifty bucks well spent," he confirms with such satisfaction I can't help but laugh. Really laugh in a way I haven't in a long time. His face lights up, and for a moment, all the walls around my heart threaten to crack.

"You're ridiculous," I say, shaking my head. "Though, I suppose I can't judge. I Googled you after dinner."

His expression sobers as if he doesn't like hearing that. "You did?"

"Apparently, you're quite the rising golf star. Swaggering, smirking heartthrob was how one article put it." I pause, studying his face for any sign of the ego I expect to emerge. "Though they failed to mention the complete lack of subtlety."

But instead of preening, he shrugs it off and looks out over the water. "What can I say? I'm full of surprises."

"Maybe, but we couldn't be more different," I point out, the rum and caffeine making me babble.

"How's that?" He seems genuinely perplexed.

"You've got a dozen collegiate golf wins, a professional sports career, your own Wikipedia page, and a well-used international passport.

I have a 4.0 in English Lit, a manuscript that needs extensive rewrites, a blue ribbon from the county fair, and a reserved coffee mug at Bayfront Beans with my name on it. ”

“You sure have a unique way of flirting.”

Tabitha’s head would explode if she could hear me right now, but I can’t help but point out what’s blatantly obvious. “I’m not flirting. I’m—”

“What is it they say? Opposites attract?”

“Not in real life! I mean, sure, in theory it works, but think about it. You’re a man who likes to party, out here slinging smiles and making hearts race, whereas I prefer to be at home curled up in bed with a book. Don’t be fooled by the mascara and heels tonight.”

“Believe me, sweetheart, if the choice was between being here right now or being at home in your bed, trying my best to distract you from your book, this boat wouldn’t even be a consideration.”

Oh.

“Plus, you drop the fact you got a 4.0 in college like it's nothing, but you’re looking at a guy who barely scraped by with a 2.8, and that was with an army of tutors and countless hours of required study groups.”

The admission catches me off guard. In my limited experience with successful men, I haven’t found they highlight their academic shortcomings to impress women. But the way he says it, without shame or defensiveness, gives me pause. Not because we’re similar, but more because he’s not perfect.

When I risk a glance at him, there's something unexpected in his expression.

"And you write novels? Believe me, that's much more impressive than being able to smash a ball four hundred yards. What do you write?"

The genuine interest in his voice surprises me. David never asked about my writing. Instead he complained I always had my nose in my laptop rather than giving him the attention he thought he deserved. "Romance."

"You don't sound so sure about that."

I hesitate. "Let's just say I've been less than inspired lately."

The words come out more bitter than I intended, and I immediately regret them. I glance toward the horizon, pushing away the memories of David's excuses and broken promises.

"Then it seems we met at the perfect time. I'm happy to serve as your inspiration."

I can't help but laugh, my imagination already racing with what this man could inspire me to write.

"So," he continues, "you're telling me you're going to be a published author and I'm still trying to win my first tour event? I'd better step up my game if I want to keep impressing you."

"Please."

"No, really. Plus, I'm praying you'll tell me you won that blue ribbon for best pie or something like that. I'm a sucker for dessert."

I wrinkle my nose. “Really?”

“What? You don’t picture me as a dessert kind of guy?” He slaps a hand to his chest in mock offense. “And here I was, thinking we’d already established my honest nature.”

I gesture toward the servers carrying plates of some sort of chocolate dessert across the deck. “They’re serving dessert now, and you’re missing it.”

“Something much more tempting is occupying me, at the moment.”

My cheeks redden at the obvious implication, but I choose to ignore it. “If it makes you feel better, your wish did come true. My blue ribbon is for Dutch apple pie, my grandmother’s recipe.”

“Believe me, sweetheart, I’m wishing for a lot more than pie, at the moment. Although, if you have some at home right now and invite me over after we dock, I’d down at least two slices, I swear.”

Did he really just suggest I invite him back to my place? The casual way he said it, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, makes my pulse race.

Is that how things are in the dating scene now? Straight from hello to let’s jump into the sack without bothering to pass Go? “I’m fresh out at the moment.”

“I’ll take a raincheck.”

I can tell he means it. And the way he acts as if this conversation isn’t idle flirtation to pass the time while we’re stuck on a sunset cruise makes something flutter in my chest.

“Believe me, we’re not as different as you think.” He leans against the railing, close enough that our elbows touch, sending electricity through the point of contact. “I mean, we both prefer individual pursuits over group activities, for one.”

“Individual pursuits?”

“Golf’s a solo sport, darling. Just me against the course and whatever’s in my head.

And writing? That’s about as solitary as it gets, isn’t it?

” His voice drops to the velvet tone that makes my knees weak, and he draws a finger slowly along my forearm.

“Though, I have to say, I’m very good at one-on-one activities, too. Really lets me focus on my technique.”

My breath hitches at the contact, but I hold my own. “Subtle, hotshot.”

His grin widens as if I’ve just given him a trophy. “A nickname? Now, I know you’re really falling for me, too.”

Too?

But the approval in his voice, as if I’ve done something right, something that pleases him, sends an unexpected warmth spiraling through me. God, what’s wrong with me? Since when do I react like this to a man’s approval?

“Plus,” he adds, drawing a lazy circle on the back of my hand, “life’s too short for subtlety.”

“I don’t know about that. But I’ll admit you’re right. We officially have one thing in

common.”

“Surely, you could come up with something else.” He turns to face me and suddenly, the space between us feels charged with possibility. “I bet we’re both good kissers.”

My gaze drops to his lips. Victory flashes in his eyes, and I realize I’ve just revealed my tell. “Why... Why would you think I’m a good kisser?”

“Are you?”

The question hangs between us, loaded with invitation and challenge. I should deflect, make a joke and step away from whatever this is building toward. But before I can answer, a sharp hiss cuts through the air.

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Chapter six

Leah

A firework explodes overhead, painting the deck in gold and red light. The sudden boom makes me jump, and instinctively, Hays reaches out to steady me. His hand finds the small of my back, and instead of pulling away as I should, I find myself tucking closer to his warmth.

More fireworks follow, a spectacular display against the darkening sky. But I'm barely watching. His thumb traces small circles against my back. And, notched perfectly against his side, my senses can't focus on anything else.

I should move away. But when I tilt back my head, catching the reflection of the colorful lights in his eyes, I can't bring myself to care about being sensible.

The finale fades, and I find myself still tucked against his side, reluctant to extricate myself from his warmth. The lighthouse beam sweeps across the water, its light cutting through the darkness beyond the harbor.

"I've always loved that lighthouse." I nod toward the distant light. "Did you know it sits right off the eighteenth green of a golf course at the country club? Not that I know much about golf, but I've heard people mention it."

Hays smiles and follows my gaze. "Have you ever played there?"

"Never." The admission comes easily, though I'm suddenly self-conscious about it. A

man whose life revolves around golf probably can't imagine living twenty minutes from a course and never setting foot on it.

His eyebrows shoot up. "It's one of the best courses in the country. Hell, it might host a major championship someday."

I shrug, hyperaware of how his hand feels against my lower back. "Golf isn't really my thing. Requires more hand-eye coordination than I possess."

"It's not just any course. The Harbor Course is legendary," he continues. "Narrow fairways that'll punish you if you're off by even a few yards. Greens that run faster than anything you've ever seen. And rough so deep you might need a search party to find your ball."

"You're not exactly selling it to a beginner."

His laugh rumbles against my side. "You're right. It's not the best place to learn. A beginner should start somewhere more forgiving." He pauses, tilting his head to study my face. "But something tells me you'd rise to the challenge."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because you're here with me instead of playing it safe with your friends."

You paid for your own drinks, even when I offered.

You called me on my bullshit within five minutes of meeting me.

"His voice drops to that velvet tone that makes my stomach flip.

"Safe isn't really your style, is it, sweetheart? "

No, it is. Really. Tonight has been anything but safe. He's definitely got the wrong impression. But instead of setting him right, I circle back to his question from earlier. "I've been told I'm not bad. At kissing, that is." At least, that's what David said.

Hays leans down until his face is inches from mine. Until the warmth of his breath blows against my cheek. "Only one way to confirm that."

His thumb traces slowly along my jaw while his other hand continues those maddening circles on my back.

My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and his eyes drop to track the movement. It's permission, invitation, surrender to whatever this moment is becoming. And when he kisses me, every rational thought in my head simply...stops.

His lips are warm and sure against mine, gentle at first, almost reverent. But the moment I respond, the moment my hand fists in his shirt and I kiss him back, something ignites between us like a match struck in the dark. He tastes like vodka and mint and it makes my head spin.

One of his hands slides up to cup my jaw, his thumb stroking across my cheekbone, while the other palm presses against the small of my back, drawing me closer until there's no space between us. When his tongue traces the seam of my lips, seeking entrance, I open for him without hesitation.

The kiss deepens, becoming something hungry and all-consuming. He backs me against the railing, his body sheltering me. My hand releases his shirt to tangle in his hair, and when I scrape my nails lightly against his scalp, he moans, sending heat ricocheting through my entire body.

I forget we're on a boat surrounded by hundreds of people.

I forget about my carefully planned life and my recent heartbreak and all the logical reasons this is a terrible idea.

All I can think about is the way his mouth moves against mine.

The way his hand spans the width of my back, anchoring me to him.

The way he kisses as if he's been waiting his whole life for this moment. Waiting his whole life for me.

My knees go weak. I'm grateful for the railing and his solid presence holding me firm, because otherwise I might just melt. I've been kissed before, but never like this. Never with this kind of intensity that makes every nerve ending in my body come alive.

When he finally pulls back, we're both breathing hard, our foreheads pressed together in the intimate space he's created around us. The sounds of the boat, the laughter, the gentle slap of waves, rush back as if I'm surfacing from underwater.

"The last way on earth I'd describe that kiss was 'not bad,'" he murmurs against my lips, his voice catching in a way that makes my stomach flip.

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Chapter seven

Leah

My lips still tingle, my fingers somehow twisting in the fabric of Hays's shirt again, and I'm fairly certain my brain has short-circuited. Rational thought feels impossible. As if it might be challenging for the foreseeable future.

In sixty seconds, this man managed to make every kiss I've ever had feel like a gray-scale imitation of what a kiss should be. What I called passion with David suddenly seems as if we were playing in the kiddie pool, while this feels like diving headfirst into the deep end.

"Come back to my hotel with me," Hays murmurs against my ear, his voice low.

I'm sorely tempted to say yes, blissfully aware of the pleasure that awaits if I were to follow this gorgeous, impulsive man back to the five-star hotel where he's undoubtedly staying.

For just a second, I imagine being the kind of woman who grabs opportunity with both hands and replies with an emphatic yes instead of being one who analyzes every situation to death. But reality crashes back like a cold wave.

"I can't," I whisper, releasing his shirt and smoothing the wrinkles. "I mean, I want to, really, it's just...it would be a mistake."

Confusion mixed with disappointment fills his green-blue gaze as he studies my face

in the soft glow of the deck lights. When he continues, his voice is softer but no less intense. “You’re waiting for marriage.”

It’s not a question, and the certainty in his voice makes me blink. “What? No, I’m—”

“Then marry me.”

My head snaps back, and I lose my balance again in these damn heels.

“I’m sorry, what?” I scramble to steady myself, to right my world back on its north-south axis.

His hands tighten on me. “You okay, there?”

“Yeah, I just thought you suggested I marry you but—”

“I did. Marry me,” he repeats, his hands framing my face. “And not just so I can take you back to my hotel, though believe me, that would be the cherry on top. But because I’ve never felt so sure about anything in my life. Besides golf, of course.”

Before I can process what’s happening, he’s scanning the deck.

“We’re in international waters, right? There’s got to be a captain, around here somewhere, certified to perform wedding ceremonies.

I just need some flowers—” He snaps his fingers and points toward the proposal table. “Perfect. Do you like roses?”

“Hays, wait.” I grab his arm before he can steal the happy couple’s flowers.

“Roses are overdone, but that’s beside the point.

You can't propose tonight. This is your brother's moment.

He just got engaged, remember? If you get married on the same boat, less than an hour later, you'll completely steal his thunder.

"Among a million other reasons this won't happen.

"Sean won't mind," he says without hesitation, that confident grin never wavering. "Trust me, he's so wrapped up in Nicole right now, he probably wouldn't notice if I jumped overboard naked. Besides, he'd be the first one to tell me not to let you get away."

"But—"

"Leah," he says, his voice gentle but determined, "my brother has been dating Nicole for three years and planning this proposal for four months. He's never moved as fast as I have. Trust me, he'd understand."

I grab his arm before he can snap up the roses. "Hays, you're insane."

He spins back, flashing that devastating smile and those dimples that seem to short circuit my brainwaves. "I prefer decisive."

"You've known me less than three hours!"

"And the boat will dock soon, so the clock is ticking, love."

Love?

"Plus, when you know, you know," he says without missing a beat. "I mean, think about it logically—"

“There is nothing logical about this!”

“We already established how much we have in common.”

I stare at him, torn between laughing and ripping off my heels so I can bolt. “That’s... That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. All we concluded is, we both like solo pursuits and are good kissers.”

“So you do think I’m a good kisser.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes heavenward. “Don’t pretend like you need me to confirm what you already know.”

“You’re right, I don’t, but coming from you, that’s like having my swing analyzed and being told it’s perfect. You don’t hand out praise lightly, do you, sweetheart?”

“No,” I admit, debating how to get this conversation back on track.

“And wouldn’t you say that’s a pretty solid foundation? After all, the best partnerships start with two people who know how to handle themselves solo...and who can really bring their A-game when they’re together.”

I smack my forehead because I’m at a loss for what to do with this crazy spontaneous man. “Things like this don’t happen in real life with people who’ve just met on a sunset dinner cruise! I mean, sure, in fiction, maybe...”

I trail off because I can’t help remembering a romance I devoured in one sitting last summer, completely swooning over the instalove premise. But that was back when I still thought I’d found a guy who was likely to be around for the long haul.

“Come on,” Hays says, drawing back my attention. “When’s the last time you did

something just because?”

“Never,” I admit before I can stop myself. “And there’s a reason for that. Spontaneous decisions lead to spontaneous disasters. And I am, by far, the most rational person you’ve met, believe me.”

“Then let’s talk about this like rational adults.”

I could tear my hair out. “I’m the rational one. You’re the one who just proposed marriage to a stranger.”

Hurt flashes across his features.

“Sorry, not strangers. I mean, we are birthday buddies, and we’re both Leo’s, so that’s another thing in common, though I’ve never really identified with that sign, whereas you could be the poster child for it.”

He reaches for my hands, clasping them in his, and looks straight into my eyes. “Rational adults also don’t let opportunities slip away because they’re afraid to take a risk, Leah.”

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Chapter eight

Leah

Before I can respond, Hays moves toward Sean and Nicole's table, glancing around before liberating the half-empty bottle of champagne from the ice bucket.

The sun is dipping below the horizon, painting the summer sky in shades of coral and gold.

A warm, gentle breeze carries salt air across the deck.

While everyone's attention is focused to the west, Hays grabs my hand and guides me toward the port side—or maybe, it's starboard—where a wooden bench, with a sign showing life vests are stored inside, is built against the bridge.

I feel like slipping one of the orange vests over my head and cinching the strap tight, because I'm clearly drowning in whatever this is between us. And Hays seems determined to pull me under completely.

"Champagne?" he offers, extending the bottle in my direction.

"Please." Two drinks is usually my limit, and I've already polished off three rum and Cokes, but this turn of events has me lifting the bottle to my lips. It's perfectly chilled, bubbles dancing on my tongue as I take a sip.

I pass it back, and as he takes a swig, I blow out a long breath. "Explain how

proposing marriage to someone you just met could possibly seem rational to you.”

He sets down the bottle and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. The golden sunset catches the amber flecks in his hair as he stares at the floorboards.

“You want the honest answer?”

“Always.”

“I’ve never felt like this.” His voice has lost its playful edge, serious now as he glances over at me.

“I’ve dated plenty of women, Leah. Most of them threw themselves at me the second they found out who I was.

But you? You basically told me my career was a liability.

You paid for your own drinks. You called my pickup lines ridiculous.”

“They were ridiculous.”

“Exactly.” He shifts closer. “You see me and not just the golf pro with the viral interviews. And when I kissed you...” He trails off, running a hand through his hair.

“Hell, sweetheart, when I kissed you, it felt like coming home after being on the road all season long.”

My breath catches at the raw honesty in his voice, but logic still wins. “That’s just chemistry, Hays. Physical attraction. I mean, sure, the kiss was...spectacular, but it doesn’t mean we should get married. You’re a pro-golfer focused on winning. I’d be a...distraction.”

“Or the best thing that’s ever happened to my game.”

“You don’t know that.”

“My parents fell in love at first sight. Met when they were nineteen and married less than three months later. I never understood how that could happen until tonight.”

The picture in his wallet. Him here supporting his brother. He must be close with his family. I grasp for the argument that might finally get through to him. “And what would your parents say if you got married tonight without them here?”

“My mom would be thrilled, believe me.”

Not the answer I expected, but then again, I’m learning I need to be ready for anything from this force of a man. “And what about your dad?”

“My dad died when I was nine.”

Oh. “I’m so sorry.”

The words feel inadequate, but the shift in his expression tells me he heard the sincerity behind them. The cocky confidence that seems to be his default setting dims, replaced by something raw and unguarded that pulls at emotions deep inside me.

“He had a heart attack during one of my junior tournaments.” Hays looks out over the water. “I was on fourteen when my mom pulled me off the course. By the time we got to the hospital...” He shrugs, his shoulders dropping. “That was it.”

My hand finds his, our fingers threading together easily. “Is that why you don’t wait around for things you want?”

He reaches for the champagne bottle with his free hand, taking a long pull. “Life’s

too fucking short.” He squeezes my hand, and when he looks at me, there’s something fierce in his expression. “My dad always said going all in, whether in golf or in life, is the only way to play.”

The ache in my chest tightens. This isn’t just some player trying to charm his way into my bed.

This is a man who learned at nine years old that tomorrow isn’t guaranteed.

A guy who’s spent his life chasing dreams with the kind of intensity that comes from experiencing firsthand how quickly everything can disappear.

My mind is already drawing parallels to my own childhood when he continues, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand.

“So when I say I want to marry you, I’m not being impulsive. I’m being honest about what I feel, what I want, and what I’m unwilling to lose because I was too scared to ask for it.”

God, how is he making a marriage proposal to a stranger sound almost...reasonable?

“But you barely know me,” I whisper, even as my resolve wavers.

“I know you think before you speak, but when you speak, it’s worth listening.

I know you’re brilliant enough to see through my bullshit, brave enough to call me on it, and generous enough to still sit here, holding my hand, after I told you my sob story.

” His voice drops to that velvet tone again, damn it.

“I know you taste like rum and possibility, and when you kiss me, it feels like coming alive.”

Fire races up my chest, but I don’t pull away. Can’t pull away. “Hays...”

“I also know you’re scared. And you should be. Because what I’m feeling for you? It’s the kind of thing that changes everything. And I can’t wait until the day you feel the same way about me.”

My breath catches. He’s so damn confident.

Like I’m—like we’re—a given. But he’s right about one thing.

I am scared. Not of him. No, I’m terrified by how much my heart yearns to believe him, believe in the happily ever after.

And of how this impulsive, confident man has managed, in less than three hours, to crack open my chest. One I’d sealed shut long ago, then again after David.

“What exactly are you proposing?” I ask, surprised by how steady my voice sounds.

“Since you won’t marry me tonight,” he says slowly, as if gauging my reaction. “What if we make a pact instead?”

My eyebrows lift. “A pact?”

“You like rational, right? So let’s be rational about this.” He leans forward, his intensity focused entirely on me. “What would it take for you to agree to be my wife?”

This is it. My chance to set some guardrails around this madness. “You want to win,

right? At golf?”

“Ever since I was a little boy.”

“What does that look like to you? Winning?”

His response is immediate. His tone filled with conviction. “A major championship.”

“Then that’s what it will take.” I study his face, watching the way his jaw tightens, but I press on. “You need that win, Hays. Not for me or anyone else. You need it for yourself, before you can commit, I mean really commit, to anything or anyone else.”

He’s quiet for a long moment, his thumb still moving in those maddening circles on my hand.

“You’re right,” he finally scoffs, a smile playing on his lips. “I shouldn’t be surprised, after less than three hours, you’d know me better than I know myself, but you’re absolutely right.”

I meet his gaze. “You focus on golf, chase that major. And when you win, I’ll marry you. Not because you need to prove anything to me, but because when you’re mine, I want you one hundred percent. I’m not willing to settle for anything less.”

The stipulation hangs between us while he considers my position. “I’ll wait on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“If I haven’t won by the time we turn twenty-eight, you’ll marry me, even without the green jacket or the trophy or the medal.”

Twenty-eight. That's three years. I do the math. His father died when he was nine, which would've made his dad... The realization hits me like a cold wave.

"So either way, we end up married?" My pulse pounds in my ears.

"Either way," he confirms. "What I feel for you won't change, major championship or not."

My heart hammers against my ribs, but I force myself to hold his piercing gaze as I do the most unlike Leah thing I've ever done in my life. I agree. "Alright."

His eyes widen. "You're serious."

"On one condition."

He scoffs. "Whatever it is, my answer's yes."

"Maybe, you should wait until you hear it."

"There's nothing you can say that would change my mind, sweetheart."

"What about no contact until then?"

"What?" He sits up straighter, his hand tightening on mine. "No contact at all? Leah, that's—"

"Necessary." I pull my hand free. "You'll be traveling all over the world, focused on your game. I'd be a distraction."

"But you'll be able to follow every tournament, every interview, every article. You'll have a front-row seat to my life, whereas I won't know anything about yours."

“You’ll have to trust me. Have faith that everything will happen as it’s meant to.”

“That’s—”

“Completely fair.” I cross my arms. I need this boundary. “I’ll be living my own life, and if what you’re feeling is real, time and distance won’t change it. And if it doesn’t hold up, then we both dodged a bullet.”

A muscle in his jaw twitches. “You’re asking me to wait three years without so much as a hello?”

The boat’s engine shifts, slowing as we approach the harbor. We’re running out of time, and somehow, that makes everything feel more real, more final. “I’m asking you to have faith.” The words come out softer than I intended. “The same way you’re asking me to believe in you. In us.”

We stare at each other in the fading light, the sounds of laughter, conversation, and the gentle slap of waves fading into background noise. He’s weighing the offer, and I hold my breath, waiting for his answer.

Before he can speak, an announcement crackles over the intercom.

We’ll be docking in ten minutes. Hays shifts to one side and reaches into his pocket.

He pulls out something and looks at it for a long moment before holding it out for me.

I take it, not knowing what I expected, but definitely not a pressed penny.

One of those little souvenirs that comes from a crank machine.

I examine the surface, worn almost completely smooth. The inscription, barely

legible, reads, Pikes Peak, CO Elev. 14,110 ft. The words are stamped into the coin around a picturesque mountain range.

I stare at the penny, understanding deep in my gut it's meaningful in a way I may never comprehend. "Hays, I can't—"

"I want you to have it." He plucks it from my grasp and turns over my hand to lay the warm metal in my palm. He closes my fingers around it then raises them to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles. "So you know without a doubt I'm serious about this. About you. About us."

The penny feels heavier than it should. When I look up at him, there's determination in his expression, but also an unexpected vulnerability.

"I'm going to marry you, Leah. I'm going to win that major, come back to Starlight Bay, and make you my wife."

The declaration sends shivers down my spine. This is crazy. Completely and utterly insane. But sinking into his sea-glass eyes, feeling the warm metal pressed into my palm, I find myself believing him. Believing in the fairytale.

"Okay," I breathe. "It's a pact."

His smile is brilliant, transforming his entire face, and before I can second-guess myself, he's leaning in to kiss me again. This time, it's different, soft and meaningful and full of promise. A seal on this mad deal we've just agreed to.

When we break apart, both breathing hard, he rests his forehead against mine. "I can't wait until you're mine."

My fingers close tighter around the penny. "Don't make me wait too long, hotshot."

His laugh is warm against my lips. “I’ll do my best, sweetheart.”

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Chapter nine

Hays | Six Months Later

The California sun beats down mercilessly as Rory, my caddy and best friend, and I trudge off the eighteenth green. Four over par. Four fucking over. The giant scoreboard might as well be a flashing neon sign that reads HAYS GRANGER: CAN'T FIND THE HOLE WHEN IT MATTERS .

I yank off my glove and stuff it into my back pocket, the leather still damp with sweat. Every muscle is wound tight, but I keep my chin up as we walk past the gallery, flashing a quick smile and a wave to the fans still lingering there.

“That lie on sixteen was bullshit.” Rory’s hustling to keep pace with me as I stride toward the scoring tent. He adjusts my bag on his shoulder, the clubs rattling. “Ball was sitting down in the rough like it had been buried by a fucking gopher. Nobody could’ve made that shot clean.”

“Shot was fine. I just pulled it left.”

“Okay, but what about fourteen? That putt broke way more than we read. Even the commentators were talking about guys three-putting from eight feet because the slopes were so deceptive.”

I bite my tongue. If I open my mouth right now, every curse word known to man will come spilling out.

The gallery is already thinning as word spreads about who made the cut and who's heading home early.

I pause to sign a kid's hat, ruffling his hair when I hand it back, and ignore the mom who's blushing and fumbling with her phone camera.

Four months of grinding in the off-season.

Four months of five a.m. workouts, protein shakes that taste like chalk, and swing changes that felt like learning to walk all over again.

And for what? To flame out on Friday afternoon while the leaders, players who've been on tour longer than I've been shaving, cruise into the weekend.

I can already hear the whispers. The Golf Channel guys will have a field day with this. Can Hays Granger handle the pressure? or Is the hype around golf's golden boy just hot air?

"The media's going to crucify me," I mutter.

"Fuck the media. Davidson tweeted about your 'sophomore slump' before you even teed off yesterday."

The scoring tent looms ahead, and my stomach churns.

Officials in their crisp white polos stand with clipboards and tablets, ready to make my loss official.

Inside, I sign my scorecard and hand it to the woman behind the table.

She cross-references it against Rory's matching card then inputs the scores.

“Seventy-three and seventy-five. That puts you at plus-four for the tournament and the cut line is—”

“Plus-two,” I finish for her.

“That’s right.” She makes a mark next to my name on a clipboard with the efficiency of someone who’s delivered this news a thousand times. “Thank you for playing. We’ll see you next week in Phoenix.”

At least, next week’s event is close to home. Not that it makes the sting of this missed cut any less painful. Especially after last week’s less than stellar thirty-sixth place finish.

Rory claps me on the shoulder as we slip out of the tent and head to the clubhouse. “I’m going to tell you something you don’t want to hear.”

My teeth grind, but I don’t bother trying to stop him. If nothing else, twenty years of friendship have taught me Rory will talk until he’s said his peace. Fighting him on it is nothing but a waste of time. And somewhere buried in his bullshit is usually a grain of truth I need to hear.

“You’re playing like a guy who’s got somewhere else to be. Like you’re in such a hurry to race to the finish line, you forgot how to enjoy the journey.”

I pull up and turn to face him. “Easy for you to say. You’re not the one with expectations breathing down your neck.”

“Bullshit. You’ve always thrived under pressure. Remember the NCAA Championship in Stillwater your junior year? You were three shots back going into Sunday, and you walked up to the first tee grinning like you’d already won.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

I lift my hat and run a hand through my hair. “Because I don’t have twelve years to stroke my way to the top, that’s how.”

“Well, rushing your game sure isn’t doing the trick these days, is it?”

“Taking a decade or more to win my first major isn’t an option,” I snap then lower my voice again. “Not for me. The leader out there? He’s in his twelfth year on tour, Rory. Twelve fucking years before he’s even sniffing a major championship. I can’t wait that long.”

“Why? Because of some arbitrary timeline you set for yourself because of your father? Or because of a certain brunette bookworm?”

It’s bad enough he brings up my dad, but throwing Leah into the mix hits like a punch to the gut.

I wonder if either of them is watching. If they’re following the scores and noticing my name is nowhere near the top.

If they’re thinking I’m all talk and no substance, just like everyone else seems to.

“Don’t,” I warn, but Rory’s already nodding with that knowing expression he gets when he’s connecting dots I wish he’d leave scattered.

“If not me, then who?” he presses, his voice serious.

“Look, I get that you want to win. Hell, you’ve been driven to come in first at

everything from rock-paper-scissors to Mario Kart since we were six years old.

But as your caddy and your friend, I have to tell you, this pressure you're putting on yourself...

it's different now. Ever since that night on the boat. "

"You're damn right it's different." The words come out sharper than I intend. "Everything changed that night."

"I know it did. And honestly? Leah read you perfectly on that cruise. You've got something to prove. And you've always wanted to live up to the player your dad thought you could be. Until you get that win, you'd be a shit husband. She was smart enough to see that."

I don't bother to respond. We both know he's spot on, as usual. Plus, I know he's not done speaking his piece.

When he continues, his tone is softer. "When you told me you gave her your ball marker, man...I knew you were serious. But now, you're trying so hard to get back to her that you're forgetting how to play the game that's supposed to get you there."

Of course, he's right. But that's what's killing me.

Six months of radio silence and I'm fucking losing my mind. Without contact, I'm forced to imagine what her days are like and wish I was there to fill her bed at night.

Six months of wondering what book she's reading while I'm over here fantasizing about that smart mouth doing more than just calling me on my bullshit.

Endless hours of replaying that little gasp she made when I backed her against the

railing, the way she fit perfectly against me and kissed as if she were all in.

Hell, I've jerked off hundreds of times since Starlight Bay, picturing Leah in every position possible.

Especially with my face buried between her legs.

And every time, I imagine the day when I finally get my hands on her again, knowing it'll be worth the wait.

She'll scream my name so loud the neighbors will file noise complaints.

"When's the last time you got laid?" Rory asks, reading the frustration written all over my face. "There was that cocktail waitress at the bar giving you the eye—"

"Not happening." I grab a bottle of water from an ice-filled tub and take a long drink. "I told you, no distractions."

"Yeah, but I didn't believe you."

"Believe me now," I snap, cutting him off. "Look, I know how this sounds, but I meant what I said that night. When I win a major, I'm going to marry her. And that means no distractions until then."

"Okay, I get it. But if that's the plan, you need to stay focused. You're going to win a major—hell, probably multiple majors in your career, but—"

"I'm glad we agree on that." Since the day I was warming up and overheard my dad predicting I'd win a major someday, and likely many, the driving need to prove him right has haunted me. Because that was the day he died.

“But not anytime soon if you don’t get your head straight.”

I throw open the door to the clubhouse with more force than necessary. “Pressure makes diamonds.”

He shakes his head as if he knows it’s useless to continue the pep talk. “Alright then. Phoenix it is. But next week, you play for you. Everything else—including your future wife—will have to wait. At least, for now.”

I’m still rolling my shoulders, trying to shake off the shit round, when a woman in a navy blazer appears at my elbow. I recognize her immediately from the Tour’s media relations team. Her smile is professional but warm.

“Hays, do you have a few minutes for the media room?” she asks, tablet in hand. “I know it wasn’t the week you hoped for, but there are still a few reporters who’d like to chat. Jenna Morely from Golf Channel among them.”

I wave off Rory, who’s already heading to the equipment area, then straighten my shoulders and flash my most charming smile. “Absolutely, I’m always happy to talk golf.”

Chapter ten

Hays | Five Months Later

The bottle of champagne refuses to cooperate, the cork wedged tight as I wrestle with it one-handed.

My wrist throbs in its brace, a constant reminder I'm officially done for the season.

There are three tournaments left on the schedule, including the Tour Championship, and I'm sitting on my ass in Scottsdale like some weekend warrior, who can't even grip his own shaft properly.

"Need help there, champ?" Rory calls from the living room, where he and the guys are sprawled across my sectional, ESPN highlights playing on the massive screen.

"I've got it," I grit out, though the cork hasn't budged. Sweat beads on my forehead as I try to get leverage without aggravating the ligament damage that's kept me out of commission for two weeks so far. The orthopedist said four to six weeks recovery minimum, which means my season's toast.

I didn't want to celebrate my birthday at all.

When your season ends with a whimper instead of the bang you'd been building toward, the last thing you want is a bunch of guys reminding you of everything that's gone to shit.

But Rory wouldn't take no for an answer, and when he puts his mind to something, there's no stopping him.

"Famous last words," someone laughs—Emmitt, I think, though with the acoustics in this place, it's hard to tell who's chirping from the peanut gallery.

The cork finally gives with a satisfying pop, champagne foam cascading over my hand and onto the granite countertop. I grab a paper towel, dabbing at the mess.

"Dom Pérignon for a pity party," Marcus calls out, appearing in the kitchen doorway with an empty beer can. "That's very you, Granger."

"It's a belated birthday celebration, asshole. I can drink whatever I want." I pour champagne into six whiskey tumblers because I don't own champagne flutes. "Besides, someone's got to drink the good stuff since you degenerates showed up with cheap beer."

"Some of us don't make millions hitting a ball around. We have real jobs," he shoots back, grabbing two glasses to ferry to the living room.

"Except for Emmitt," Tyler adds. "Not that whacking a puck while getting your teeth knocked out screams 'stable career path.'"

The truth is, I'm grateful my childhood friends and some college buddies are here, having flown in from across the country over the last twenty-four hours to join my local friends.

And that no one is fussing about the no women unless she's got a ring on her finger and shares your last name rule, a policy I had to enact months ago when Thompson brought a handful of aspiring models to my Super Bowl party.

I sent them packing before they snapped a single pic.

“You okay?” Rory asks, eyeing me as he comes to help carry glasses.

“Awesome,” I lie, following him into the living room where the guys have made themselves at home. ESPN is dissecting today’s third round action from the BMW Championship, showing highlight reels of guys I should be competing against instead of watching from my couch like some amateur.

“This is fun?” He gestures toward my face with a glass. “Because you look like someone pissed in your protein shake.”

“Fuck off.”

“At least, you’re not missing much,” Jake says, nodding toward the TV where they’re showing the leader drain a thirty-footer. “Field’s pretty stacked this year. You probably would’ve missed the cut, anyway.”

The comment earns him a chorus of “ooohs” and a thrown pillow, but he’s dead wrong.

After winning in Phoenix in February and earning two more top-tens, including a T-3 at Trinity Forest, I was on a roll, my head in the right place after a long season.

My name wasn’t just being mentioned in conversations as a player in major contention; it was being tossed around as the winner.

Then one fat shot, where I chunked the ball during a Callaway photo shoot, landed me with a hyper-extended wrist, and suddenly, I’m watching the playoffs from my couch instead of competing for a spot in Atlanta.

“Remind me how you injured that wrist again,” Marcus says with a knowing smirk. “Was it swinging for the cameras, or were you handling your equipment a little too aggressively?”

“Jesus Christ.” I roll my eyes as the room erupts in laughter.

“What? You haven’t been spotted with a woman in what? A year?” he continues, clearly enjoying himself. “And now, you can’t even take matters into your own hands. That’s got to be rough.”

“I’m not discussing my habits with you degenerates.”

“So you admit there are habits to discuss,” Tyler jumps in. “Plural. As in, frequent and regular.”

“Multiple times daily,” Jake adds helpfully. “Maybe, it explains the wrist injury, after all.”

I flip them off with my good hand, which only makes the bastards laugh harder. The worst part is, they’re not entirely wrong. My current limitation is driving me slowly insane.

“You could always switch hands,” Rory suggests with mock seriousness. “Might be good practice for your short game.”

“Or he could just, you know, get laid like a normal person,” Marcus counters. “There are literally hundreds of women in this city who would volunteer for the job.”

“Probably hundreds of thousands.”

The conversation continues around me, but I tune them out. They love giving me a

hard time, plus their ribbing changes nothing. I'm still one thousand percent focused on my goal, even if my wrist injury is a setback I didn't plan on.

I'm about to drain my Dom when Rory stands, stretching. "I need another beer. Anyone else?" He heads toward the kitchen as a Ping commercial comes on.

"Hey, Granger," he calls out a moment later, his tone catching my attention. "You see this letter in your mail pile? The return address is from Starlight Bay."

My heart stops.

Completely fucking stops.

I'm out of my chair and across the room, nearly tripping over the coffee table in my haste. There, tucked in the stack of bills and junk mail my housekeeper must have left earlier, is a letter-sized envelope. Cream-colored with the addresses typed neatly, standing out like a diamond in a coal mine.

"Holy shit," I breathe. So she got the birthday present I sent after all.

I snatch up the envelope and rip into it.

I hoped for some sort of acknowledgement, even though I broke our no- contact rule.

Hell, a scolding would be better than nothing.

Instead, the typed letter and handwritten pages inside make me lose my mind.

Hays,

I should probably return the typewriter. According to the terms of our agreement,

birthday presents technically constitute contact, which we both agreed to avoid. But it's a vintage beauty in pristine condition—and mint green—which I have a feeling wasn't a coincidence. So I'm keeping it. Sue me.

I hope you enjoyed a large slice of birthday cake, since you're such a sucker for dessert, and that there wasn't anything more tempting to distract you.

I celebrated with a red velvet cake this year, with old-fashioned candles that dripped wax all over and a pointed party hat.

It was perfect. I wonder what your favorite cake flavor is.

For some reason, I'm thinking anything but vanilla.

I can't help but point out that the typewriter arrived three days before my birthday, which means, once again, you are early, or as, some might say, 'premature.' So despite never having been called that before, I find myself justified in once again assigning that descriptor to you.

You can, however, consider it a character flaw I'm willing to overlook, given the circumstances.

After all, enthusiasm has its merits, even if your execution needs work.

But, since you broke the rules, I figure I'm entitled to a little payback.

Your enclosed 'note' was not only classic, over-the-top sexy Hays, it also had exactly the effect I'm sure you intended.

Which meant I had to take matters into my own hands, considering you weren't here to handle my situation yourself.

So in addition to planting that picture of me in your mind, I thought you might enjoy some Hays Granger fanfic. One possible way that night might have played out if I'd said yes to your hotel invitation. Because, the truth is, I've thought about that evening more times than I care to admit.

Happy birthday, hotshot.

- Leah

P.S. This letter changes nothing regarding our no-contact rule. Oh, and I hope your wrist heals quickly. I'm sure you have very important...activities...besides golf that require a full range of motion.

The postscript nearly kills me. She'd fit right in with the jokers in my living room and hold her own. Even she's not above teasing me about my injury and how it's impacting my needs.

Behind me, my friends are still jabbering something about the playoff race and FedEx Cup standings, but their voices fade to background noise as I flip to the first handwritten page.

Jesus fucking Christ. I figured Leah could write, but this?

After a single paragraph, I'm convinced this is by far the sexiest thing I've ever read.

Internet porn's got nothing on this, and not just because it features me.

It's a glimpse into Leah's deepest, darkest desires.

And knowing the brilliant, guarded woman, who fact-checks casual conversation, has been having dirty thoughts like this and took the time to send me what equates to a

Leah Sullivan Course Management Plan makes it infinitely hotter than any fantasy I could've ever dreamed up.

My cock is harder than trying to read the greens at TPC Sawgrass, straining against my jeans in a way that's both painful and desperate. I need to get to my room, need privacy, need to do something about this situation. Now. But my legs feel like they're made of concrete.

"Granger?" Rory's voice sounds like it's coming from underwater. "You okay, man? You look—"

"Fine," I croak, trying to shove the letter back into the envelope before he can read a word. I back toward the hallway that leads to the master suite, the letter clutched against my chest like a lifeline. "I'm fine. I just need to...make a phone call."

I turn and practically run down the hallway.

"Is he okay?" I hear Marcus ask, setting a glass down on the kitchen counter.

"He's going to be just fine," Rory answers with a chuckle.

With more force than necessary, I slam the double doors shut behind me and turn the lock. I need to get these jeans off. Except my fucking wrist has other plans. The button fights me like a stubborn lie in deep rough, my good hand shaking with need.

I manage to get the zipper down, but the fuckers are so tight getting them off one-handed while sporting the erection of a lifetime proves to be more challenging than any golf shot I've ever attempted.

But when I do and open that envelope again, for the first time in weeks, I'm grinning as if I just sank a hole-in-one.

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Chapter eleven

Hays | Five Months Later

The champagne flute in my hand might as well be filled with battery acid. I force another smile as Sean and Nicole glide across the dance floor, lost in their own world, while Ed Sheeran croons about perfect love.

The Hawaiian sunset paints everything in gold and pink. String lights twinkle overhead, setting the mood for the December wedding, yet I'm standing at the edge of the celebration, cursing the fact I'm here alone.

Sean dips Nicole, and her laugh carries on the breeze.

The same laugh my brother fell head-over-heels for more than four years ago.

I take another sip of champagne and immediately spit it out in the sand.

The bubbles remind me of sharing that snagged bottle with Leah, and suddenly, the Veuve tastes like regret and missed opportunities.

"You know, for someone who delivered a very entertaining best man speech twenty minutes ago, you look absolutely miserable." My mom approaches, elegant in her navy dress, but flashing a knowing smile that sounds alarm bells.

"I'm not miserable."

“You’re not working the room and charming every woman in sight. In fact, I’m pretty sure you’ve turned down three different bridesmaids who’ve asked you to dance.”

She steps closer, straightening the lei around my neck with the same gentle precision she used on me when I was eight and fidgeting in my Sunday best. “Dance with your mother?”

It’s not really a question, and I would never refuse her anything, even if I wanted to. I abandon my glass and offer her my arm, leading her onto the dance floor as the song shifts to something slower. The familiar scent of her perfume, the same one she’s worn my entire life, makes my chest tight.

“So,” she says as we begin to sway, “are you going to tell me what’s really going on, or do I have to guess?”

Shit.

“And don’t think ‘nothing’ will fool anyone, sir. Especially not me.”

As if I didn’t know that already.

I glance over at Sean and Nicole, still wrapped up in each other like they’re the only two people on the planet, and heave a sigh. She knows about Leah. About the pact. It’s not something I would keep from the woman who sacrificed so much for me. “I was going to invite Leah here this weekend.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No.”

Her eyebrows lift. “The Hays I know has always chased what he wants full throttle.

No matter the consequences.”

“Then you’ll be glad to hear I’ve been learning patience lately. Not by choice.”

“Words I never thought I’d hear coming from your mouth.”

“Aren’t I full of surprises?” I say, wryly.

She smiles then pauses, her head falling to the side. “But there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?”

I shrug, unable to put words to what I’m feeling. We’re both quiet for a moment. When she speaks again, her voice is soft. “Any chance you’re jealous?”

“Of Sean?” I scoff, the suggestion laughable. “No. No way. That’s fucked up.”

“Language, Hays Michael,” she chides.

“Sorry. It’s messed up. I’m thrilled for them, really...” I trail off, because as I was standing up for Sean today while he vowed to have and to hold Nicole forever, all I could think about was how badly I want that, too.

“But watching your little brother get his happily ever after when you’re still waiting for yours—”

“Still trying to earn mine,” I correct, bitterness creeping into my voice.

“I thought you said Leah was right to insist you focus on golf. That you needed to win for yourself, not for her.”

“She is. It’s just... Sometimes, I wish that wasn’t the case.”

“When you’ve been chasing a single goal for most of your life, you can’t expect your priorities to change overnight, honey.”

She’s right, of course. She always is. We dance in comfortable silence for a few beats while I look off toward the ocean.

“If you ask me, I’d say Leah read you like a book.”

My gaze snaps back to my mom. “What do you mean?”

“The no-contact rule? Making you wait? She knew exactly what she was doing.”

“No, I—”

“Despite your talent, you’ve had to work at golf.

Earn every win. Even if you tried to make it look effortless.

You’ve never had to do that with women. They’ve been fawning all over you since you hit that growth spurt at fifteen and suddenly started flashing those dimples that make every girl within fifty miles lose her mind. ”

I want to argue, but she’s not wrong. Golf has been hard work, but even my worst seasons on tour have been better than many players’ best years. But women? They’ve always come easy. Until Leah. “I hate that she saw right through me. Right from the jump.”

“Smart women don’t suffer fools.”

“And I’m the fool in this scenario?”

“Of course.” She squeezes my hand. “But the kind worth rooting for.”

The song changes again, something more upbeat, but we keep swaying. I catch sight of Sean lifting Nicole off her feet, and that familiar pang hits my chest.

“It seems to me you’re putting so much pressure on yourself that you’re forgetting why you fell in love with golf in the first place. When’s the last time you played just for the joy of it?”

“Did you and Rory compare notes?” I scoff.

She laughs. “You’re lucky to have him. But no, I don’t need to talk to Rory to see the obvious.”

She’s right. I can’t remember the last time I played for the joy of it. Even yesterday’s round with Sean and the groomsmen, I was grinding over every putt as if it was Sunday at Augusta. Sean just wanted to have fun with his buddies, and instead, I worked on my swing plane.

“You’re in your head, sweetheart,” she observes. “And as tough as your mental game is, you’re thinking too much about the finish line instead of playing each shot.”

“Leah said she’d be a distraction until I won a major. I told her she’d be the best thing that ever happened to my game.”

“Maybe, she wants to be more than just your lucky charm.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I insist, seeing now how I might have come across. “She’s more than that. A hell of a lot more.”

“How so?”

“Her debut novel comes out in just a few weeks. A whole novel. She sent me an early copy.”

“And?”

And there was no note this time, but each of the sexy scenes was flagged with a Post-It. Not that I’ll lead with that fact to my mom.

“It was incredible. She writes like she talks. I could almost hear her voice in my ears. It was brilliant and addictive. A small town romance full of heat and heart was what the back-cover quote. I read the whole thing in one sitting. She’s got this way of making you care about people in just a few pages.

” I can’t hide the pride in my voice. “I wanted to call her immediately and tell her how proud I am, but...”

“But you made a promise.”

“Yeah.” I guide Mom through a turn, grateful for the distraction. “I made a fucking promise. But that won’t stop me from sending flowers. Enough to fill her house.”

“You gave her your ball marker.” It’s not a question. I have no idea how she knows. Maybe, Rory told her, but it doesn’t matter. She knows exactly what that meant.

“You carried it for how long? Fifteen years?”

“Sixteen,” I whisper.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

The question stops me cold. We’re still moving to the music, but my brain has gone

completely blank. “I... What?”

“It’s a simple question, Hays. Do you love Leah?”

I think about catching Leah by the bar. The way she was different from any woman I’ve ever met before.

How she looked in that mint green dress, and how perfectly she fit against me when I kissed her.

Her smile, her laugh, the letter she sent that was smart and sexy and so completely her that I still have it folded in my wallet to this day.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I think I do. Which sounds insane since I spent less than three hours with her, but I just...felt it. I’ve never been so sure about anything in my life. Other than the fact I’ll win a major one day.”

“It’s not crazy, honey. It happens. You know that.”

“But you and Dad were different. You—”

“Do you think she felt something, too?”

I think back to that night. How Leah searched me out after the proposal. The way she stayed with me even when she had friends there she could have been having fun with. The way she leaned in when we kissed, as if she couldn’t get enough. “I think so.”

Mom’s smile is smug but tempered by the love in her eyes. “Trust your feelings. You don’t need to justify them. When you know, you know.”

“Well, I’ve got eighteen months and—”

“I thought you were practicing patience,” Mom interrupts, shooting me a look.

“I didn’t say I was good at it.”

“This time doesn’t have to be just about waiting, honey. Think of it as an opportunity to become the man Leah deserves.”

She’s right. Again. And her suggestion gives me an idea I’ll have to talk to Rory about tomorrow.

“Dad would’ve loved her.”

“He would’ve loved watching you fall this hard for someone.” She places her hand flat on my chest. Right over my heart. “And he would be proud of you, too. Because of your career, but more so, because of the man you are.”

I glance around the reception, at the happy couples and the families celebrating, at Sean and Nicole starting their life together, and I swallow the lump in my throat.

She steps back, her eyes bright. “Now, go get yourself another drink, and stop looking like Scrooge canceled Christmas. This is supposed to be a celebration.”

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Chapter twelve

Hays | Eight Months Later

The bright lights in the media tent are blinding, but I can't keep the excitement off my face as I settle into the folding chair behind the microphone.

Third place finish. My best result in three months, and exactly the kind of momentum I need as I head into the final stretch of the season.

Plus, this press conference has been months in the making, and I can't wait for what I've been working on to finally be made public.

The tent buzzes with the low hum of laptop keys clicking as reporters type notes, their press credentials swaying on lanyards around their necks.

Someone's phone buzzes with what sounds like a breaking news alert.

I survey the row of TV cameras lined up against the back wall, their red recording lights glowing.

The Golf Channel logo is prominent on the center camera, flanked by ESPN and NBC Sports.

Perfect. The more coverage this gets, the better.

This circus gets broadcast to millions of golf fans worldwide, and somewhere in a

small coastal town in Massachusetts, I'm hoping one particular brunette beauty is tuned in, though it is her birthday.

Today's been months in the making—not just the golf but what comes next.

Jenna's exclusive feature story about my new foundation drops next week, and today, she'll ask me about it publicly for the first time.

To whet everyone's appetite for more and garner the attention the launch deserves.

"Congratulations on your finish today, Hays," Jenna Morely, from the Golf Channel, starts after getting the go-ahead thumbs up from the Tour's media relations, up front on the right.

Jenna's professional smile is eager, and I see the anticipation in her eyes.

We've been planning today's questions for weeks.

I lean into the microphone, flashing her a warm smile. "Thanks, Jenna. Felt good to be back in contention."

"Walk us through that birdie on eighteen."

"I had 147 to the pin, with the wind helping just a touch. Hit a smooth 9-iron that released exactly how I wanted it to, left myself about twelve feet below the hole. The putt had maybe six inches of break, and I knew if I could start it on the right edge and trust the read, it was going in."

"Let's talk about your second shot on the par-5 fifteenth," a voice calls out from the back. "You laid up instead of going for the green in two. That's not typically your style."

“Course management,” I offer, settling back in my chair. “The pin was tucked behind that front bunker, and with the wind picking up, the risk-reward wasn’t there. Sometimes, the smart play isn’t the most exciting, but I was hoping that patience would pay dividends, and it did.”

“What about that approach shot on twelve? You caught the fringe instead of the green.”

“Cut it a hair thin. The lie was sitting down in the rough more than I read initially.” I shrug. “That’s the difference between third place and first, honestly. Those marginal calls, the precision on approach shots when you’re between clubs. I need to trust my reads more and fully commit.”

“Before we continue,” a voice calls out from the third row, “can we talk about your wardrobe choice today? You’re known for wearing your signature bright pink polo on Sundays, but today, you went with mint green. Any particular reason?”

My heartrate ticks up, and I turn to face the cameras. “Sometimes, you need to send a message,” I say, a genuine smile filling my face as I think of Leah. “And today felt like the perfect day for mint green.”

“A message to who?” The follow-up comes immediately, but I don’t mind.

“To someone who’ll understand.”

A murmur runs through the crowd as reporters scribble away.

“Speaking of commitment...” Jenna says, her tone shifting as she moves toward what we planned. “You’ve been working on something significant off the course. Care to shed some light on that?”

Perfect. This is it. I sit up straighter, excitement creeping into my voice as I glance at her. “It’s true. I’ve been working to launch a foundation. The team is still putting the finishing touches on the details, but it’s a cause incredibly close to my heart.”

I pause, thinking about my parents—both of them.

“Golf gave me everything after I lost my dad when I was young. My mom did an incredible job raising me, but not every kid has that kind of support system. I want to level the playing field for young golfers from single-parent homes, foster families, those being raised by other relatives...you know, any kid who has the dream, but maybe not the traditional resources to follow it.”

The room goes quiet for a moment as reporters furiously scribble notes or type away. Which is exactly what I was hoping for. Now come the follow-up questions about funding, timeline, how people can get involved...

But instead of the foundation discussion, Davidson from ESPN leans forward. “Speaking of personal matters, there have been dating rumors circulating recently about you and a certain well-respected sports reporter. Care to address those?”

What. The. Fuck? Dating rumors about me and a certain sports reporter? Since when? Where in the hell is this coming from? Of all the days for things to go sideways... Today is supposed to be a celebration.

Fists curled, I glance at Jenna, whose brows have come together. She’s as caught off guard as I am. A flash of embarrassment, or maybe hurt, flutters across her face. Shit. This isn’t how this is supposed to go. Not today.

“I’m not sure what rumors you’re referring to,” I say carefully, my voice steady, despite the way my pulse has spiked.

I flash my practiced media smile and lean back slightly, as if I'm unconcerned.

"But what I can tell you is, this foundation launch will change lives. We're talking about scholarships, mentorship programs, equipment grants—"

"The two of you have been photographed together multiple times at various tournaments," another reporter jumps in. "Dinner, coffee, heading into your suite..." The insinuation is clear. And makes my blood boil. Jenna and I were never alone, no matter what anyone says.

The tone in the tent has shifted. Every camera is focused on me, waiting for a reaction.

"Look," I say, folding my hands and trying one more tactical redirect, "I think we're missing the real story here. In six months, we'll have our first scholarship recipients selected. Kids, who might not have had a shot otherwise, will be on golf courses across the country—"

"But she—"

I can't deflect. And Jenna's sitting right there. I need to navigate this without throwing her under the bus, while also making it crystal clear to anyone watching—especially Leah—that absolutely nothing is going on.

"I've been fortunate to have a team working on a feature story about the new foundation.

The piece requires multiple interviews, background research, and fact-checking.

And frankly, the journalists have been nothing but professional.

No one on the team deserves to have their reputation dragged through the mud because some photographer got creative with his angles. ”

“But surely working so closely with an attractive, accomplished journalist who also loves golf—” someone starts.

“Has been a professional pleasure,” I cut them off, my voice sharper now. I can’t help it. The thought of Leah watching this shitshow, wondering if there’s truth to these rumors, makes my chest tight. Is she reaching for the remote to turn off the TV, convinced I’ve been playing her all this time?

“The staff are some of the best covering the tour. Their reputations speak for them.” I pause, making sure my next words leave no doubt. “But nothing is going on.”

“Speaking of reputations, you’ve been notably absent from the dating scene recently,” another voice calls out from the middle of the room, as if making a juicy observation.

“The Hays Granger who used to make headlines for activities off the course, as much as on it, seems to have disappeared. Are you saying these recent rumors aren’t the cause of your new low-profile lifestyle? ”

I run a hand through my hair, struggling to keep my composure as my patience wears thin.

Leaning in to the microphone, I turn my attention to the cameras.

“Let me be crystal clear since there seems to be more interest in speculation than actual news. I haven’t been and am not dating now because of a promise I made to someone.

” My voice rises slightly, easy charm replaced by raw honesty.

“A promise that hasn’t changed on my end. ”

“Are you saying you’re in a relationship?”

“I’m saying I know exactly what I want, and when the time is right, you’ll know, too.” I flash my trademark grin, but there’s steel behind it, now. “Trust me, when I’m ready to let the world know, there won’t be any guessing involved.”

“What about your prediction for the major next month?”

Thank God. I take a breath, forcing my shoulders to relax. “My game’s exactly where it needs to be. I’ve been working toward this moment for years. And I’m counting on my closing game being stronger than ever.”

I stand up, signaling the end of my availability, despite the questions that keep coming.

As I walk out, my mind races. I can only hope the foundation story still gets the attention it deserves.

And that Leah heard every word I said about exactly where my heart belongs.

Because if she doesn’t believe me, if she thinks for even a second I’ve been anything less than completely faithful to what I promised her on that boat, I might have just lost her before I even had the chance to win.

Chapter thirteen

Hays | Three Weeks Later

The three-hundred-pound barbell crashes back onto the mat at my home gym with a satisfying thud audible over the music blaring from the speakers. Sweat burns my eyes as I drag a towel across my forehead, but anything's better than the constant ache that's been eating at me for almost a month.

Three fucking weeks since that press conference went sideways. And radio silence from Starlight Bay. Not even a scolding for breaking our no-contact rule with the custom initialed leather journal and fountain pen set I sent for her birthday. Not a single word to tell me she believes me.

I chalk my hands and reset my grip, lifting the bar with controlled precision. The burn in my hamstrings and lower back feels good, real, unlike the constant ache in my chest that nothing seems to touch.

The dating rumors are still circulating online, no matter how clearly I shut them down.

Some gossip blogger even published a post titled, Golf's Golden Boy's Secret Romance Revealed!

complete with photos of me and Jenna having what was clearly a professional lunch.

The comments section was a dumpster fire of speculation about whether I was finally

settling down or just having fun with the hot reporter .

I need to stay the hell offline.

I lower the weight and reset, focused on maintaining my form even as frustration courses through my veins.

Maybe, Leah's dating some small town guy.

An intellectual type who can take her to dinner like a normal boyfriend.

A man who doesn't live life in the spotlight, creating complications she never asked for.

A guy who prioritizes time with her over some career goal he's been chasing for years.

I'm staring blankly out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the desert view when my playlist cuts off in the middle of a song.

"I wondered where the hell you were."

I don't bother turning around, just reset my stance and grip the bar again, lifting into position as Rory breezes in as if he owns the place. "Since when do you deadlift three hundred?"

I finish another set, dropping the weight to the mat with more force than necessary. "If you're here to bust my balls, you—"

"You missed your tee time at Desert Mountain." He meets my eyes in the mirror, arms crossed. "When's the last time you skipped a practice round?"

Never. The answer is never, but I'm not giving him the satisfaction. I reach for my towel, swiping my face again.

"Alright, talk to me." Rory leans against the squat rack. "What's going on?"

I move to the bench press, lying back and gripping the barbell. "Nothing to talk about."

"Bullshit. You've been a walking storm cloud since the press conference. And don't tell me it's about your tie for nineteenth last week, because we both know you've bounced back from worse."

He's right, damn it. My game's been solid lately, not spectacular but consistent. It's everything else eating me alive. I press the weight up, muscles burning. "Don't."

"Look, anyone who watched that press conference could tell you were shooting straight." His voice softens as he moves behind the bench to spot me. "The rumors will die down. And the foundation will get the attention it deserves. Give it time."

He sounds like my mom when I told her I was learning to be patient. What a joke. I've been about as patient as a kid on Christmas morning. If this is me learning patience, I'm failing spectacularly.

"You know what the worst part is?" I grumble, lowering the bar to my chest before pressing it back up. "The foundation is actually making a difference. We've got twelve kids lined up for the first round of scholarships. Twelve kids who wouldn't have had a shot otherwise."

I finish my reps, rack the bar, and remember the applications the staff sent me last week to review.

“There’s this kid in Detroit whose mom works three jobs just to keep him in junior tournaments.

Another one in rural Georgia whose grandfather drives him four hours each way to get decent instruction.

Real kids with real talent who just need someone to believe in them. ”

Rory opens his mouth, but I’m on a roll.

“And instead of talking about that, instead of getting people excited about changing lives, those assholes want to gossip about who I’m supposedly sleeping with.”

“Jenna’s feature came out. Obviously, the people who need to hear about it are listening if applications are coming in.”

I grip the bar again.

“Seems like what you’re actually sore about is the fact Leah might think the rumors are true.”

I grit my teeth through another set, my chest burning. “If you were her, wouldn’t you think there might be a grain of truth to them?”

“You don’t know what she’s thinking because she’s sticking to the rules you agreed to.”

“Rules went out the window when I started sending birthday presents.”

“Did they? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like she’s keeping her end of the bargain.”

The possibility she's still holding to our agreement, still waiting for me to win that major, sends a different kind of ache through my chest. Hope mixed with something that feels dangerously close to desperation.

I rack the weights and jump up, pacing by the windows. "I can't stop thinking about her, Rory. It's been forever, and I still wake up dreaming about kissing her. Craving the way she felt in my arms. How she looked at me like she could see right through me."

"Which is exactly why you need to get your head back in the game." Rory moves closer, his tone shifting. "Speaking of which, I came by because next year's schedule just came out."

"And?"

"The U.S. Open's going to be interesting."

I barely glance at him. "When isn't it? It's a major."

"Except, next June, it's being held at Starlight Bay Country Club."

The words punch the air from my lungs. I spin to face him so fast I nearly lose my balance. "What?"

"Harbor course." Rory's grin is slow and knowing. "Father's Day weekend."

My heart hammers against my ribs as if it wants to escape. Father's Day Weekend. Starlight Bay. The place where this all started, when I met the love of my life on a dinner cruise in the harbor that's visible from the eighteenth fairway.

"That's..." I run a hand through my sweat-soaked hair, my mind racing. "That can't

be a coincidence.”

He lifts a shoulder. “The universe works in mysterious ways.”

“The U.S. Open. In her backyard.” I can picture it now. The media, the crowds, the biggest spotlight golf has to offer. And Leah will be right there.

“I need to buy a ring.” The words spill out before I’ve fully processed the thought, but as soon as I say them, I know they’re right. “A fucking gorgeous rock that’ll make her forget every logical reason she has to say no.”

“Whoa there, Prince Charming.” Rory holds up a hand. “Last I checked, you still haven’t won that major.”

“I’m going to win that one.” It’s as simple as that.

“And if, let’s say, you don’t?”

“Then I’ll have a few weeks to convince her I’m husband material. Even without the trophy.” I crush the water bottle in my hand as a plan forms in my head. “But I’m not walking away, not when I’m this close.”

Rory shakes his head, but he’s smiling. “You realize what she’ll say when you show up early, right? Before you win and before your birthday?”

“That I’m premature again?” I can’t help but grin at the thought. “Yeah, probably. But she also said enthusiasm has its merits.”

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Chapter fourteen

Leah | Eleven Months Later | Present Day

Yesterday, my carefully curated selection of golf-related books was arranged perfectly.

Now, the display shelves are completely bare.

It took less than a day for the golf fanatics descending on Starlight Bay to clean out every sports memoir, golf instruction, golf history, and even the handful of mystery and romance novels I'd sourced that featured a hint of golf.

I should be thrilled about the sales spike.

Tabitha certainly is. Instead, we just opened for the day, and I'm focused on restocking the display with new releases or bestsellers that might appeal to the crowd.

And trying not to think about the fact, somewhere in this chaos of media trucks and corporate tents and overly enthusiastic fans wearing visors at seven in the morning, Hays Granger is returning to Starlight Bay.

The bell above the door chimes, but I don't look up.

Yesterday, I spent the day cursing myself for the flutter of disappointment every time it was just another tourist browsing.

Not that Hays, the ninth-ranked golfer in the world, will sweep into High Tide Tales when he's focused on The Open. I mean, let's get real.

So today, I'm facing reality. I won't get my hopes up. I mean, sure, he wore that mint green polo on a tournament Sunday last year. On my birthday. And, yeah, he seemed to be sending me a message during that trainwreck of a press conference, but the man's got a major to prepare for.

I'm determined to pretend today is just another day in Starlight Bay, without the possibility that anything out of the ordinary happening. Even so, I put on mascara this morning. And lip gloss. And a spritz of perfume.

But as I slide another book onto the shelf, the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Something's off, but I can't immediately put my finger on what it is. Maybe, the quiet. Usually customers, especially tourists, are in the middle of animated conversations when they step inside.

Or perhaps, it's the prickling awareness that zips down my spine. A sensation that someone's watching me. I turn slowly, my heart racing before my brain fully processes what I'm seeing.

Or rather, who.

Hays leans against a bookcase as if he owns the place, one arm slung across the top, the other tucked into the pocket of his shorts. He's flashing that same perfect smile with the devastating dimples that's been haunting my dreams for years. And he's wearing a mint green polo.

Our eyes meet across twenty feet of hardwood, and suddenly, the air in the store feels charged. Electric. As if lightning is about to strike and I'm standing in the middle of an open field, holding a metal rod.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.” His voice is pure velvet, just as smooth and dangerous as I remember.

I grip the edge of the display table. “And you’re premature,” I manage, pleased when my voice comes out steady. “Again.”

His laugh is low and rich, the sound wrapping around me like a familiar embrace. “I’m betting on points for enthusiasm.”

I cross my arms, trying to create some semblance of a barrier between us, though we both know it’s useless. He looks good. Better than good. He’s tan and toned and as magnetic of a force as ever.

But there’s something different about him, too. A...quiet confidence that’s replaced the cocky energy I remember.

It looks as if the years apart have changed us both.

“Plus,” he adds, pushing off the bookshelf and taking a step closer, “it’s an established fact I’m not great at following rules when it comes to you.”

“You made it this long.”

“Turns out my willpower crumbles the second I’m in the same zip code as the woman who owns my heart.”

Oh.

The questions that’ve eaten at me for weeks— Is Hays going to show up, and if he does, what happens then? —are suddenly answered in the blink of an eye.

Where are the throngs of customers who filled this place yesterday? Tabitha's in the back office, which leaves Hays and me alone. High Tide Tales suddenly feels too small, too intimate for the two of us.

I take a deep breath, but it's a mistake. The scent of his cologne, exactly as I remember, fills my lungs. I'm transported back to that boat, that night. With the ocean and the sunset and the fireworks. And the kiss.

My gaze drops to his lips, my fingers gripping the paperback in my hand as if it's an anchor.

"How are you?" he asks softly, studying my face.

How am I? That's a loaded question considering the irresistible stranger I agreed to marry years ago has just strolled back into my life and told me I still own his heart.

I'm terrified and exhilarated and completely unprepared for how my hormones have kicked in as if I'm a teenager who just spotted her celebrity crush at the mall and forgot how to act like a functioning human being.

I'm suddenly exactly where I was three years ago. Completely defenseless. "I'm...good."

He reaches up to brush a piece of hair back from my face. "I'm good, too, now."

For a moment, neither of us speaks. Our eyes lock, and the air between us hums. Then Hays is moving, reaching into his pocket with that determined expression I remember. He pulls out a small, black-velvet box. My heart stops.

"Hays, no." I step back, bumping into the display table.

But he's already dropping to one knee right there between the new releases and the staff picks. He cracks it open to reveal a diamond that catches the morning light and throws rainbows across the ceiling.

It's round and brilliant. A simple, classic setting I would have chosen if I'd been stupid enough to dream about such things. It's also ginormous.

"I know I haven't won and it's not my birthday yet, and that was the deal. But I can't wait any longer to make you my wife."

My breath catches as my vision blurs. I refocus, staring down at this impossible man who's just upended my quiet little world with a declaration and a rock the size of a golf ball.

"You haven't won yet," I whisper, falling back on the logic that's been my safety net for three years. "You're still chasing your dream."

"There hasn't been a day we've been apart I haven't thought about you.

" He stands but keeps the ring box open between us.

"I've measured every moment against the memory of kissing you on that boat.

I've dreamed of sharing my good days and my bad with you.

I've turned down every woman who wasn't you because none of them made me feel like I was coming home. "

"You've got the biggest tournament of your career this week," I stammer. "You don't need distractions—"

“You’re not a distraction.” He erases the distance between us. “I promise.”

I stare at him, this force of nature who’s swept in and is, once again, declaring feelings with such utter conviction I can’t even begin to relate.

“Hays...”

“I love you.” The words hang in the air between us, raw and honest and terrifying.

“I loved you that first night when you called me on my bullshit and paid for your own drinks. I loved you when you made me wait, when you challenged me to be better. I love the way you write, the way you think, the way you see right through me and somehow, still want to be here. At least, I hope you haven’t changed your mind. ”

My hands shake as I death grip the display table. Things like this don’t happen in real life.

His chin drops. “But I understand, if you need some time. You’re logical and rational and—”

“Not crazy.”

He chuckles, warmth filling those sea-glass green-blue eyes as he looks at me through long, thick lashes. “I prefer decisive. But,” he adds, “I’m happy to prove to you we’re perfect together. Just give me a chance.”

“How?”

“Spend time with me this week. Find out what you and I are when we’re not separated by three thousand miles and a no-contact condition.”

The reasonable part of my brain screams warnings about paparazzi and media attention and the chaos that follows professional athletes. Let alone the fact he should be focusing on the tournament of his life.

But the hope and determination written across his features win me over. That and the throbbing ache between my legs. “Okay,” I breathe. “A week.”

A brilliant smile transforms his face. “You won’t regret it, sweetheart.”

Before I can process what’s happening, he’s cupping my face in his hands and kissing me as if he’s drowning and I’m oxygen. His lips are soft and demanding and exactly as I remember.

I melt into him as the kiss deepens, his tongue tracing the seam of my lips until I open for him with a soft gasp. My hands fist in his polo, pulling him closer until his heartbeat pounds against my palms.

It’s a kiss that sets my body on fire. Until the bell above the door chimes, and the intimate bubble around us bursts. A family of four comes in, mid-conversation, chattering loudly until the father pulls up short as his eyes widen in recognition.

“Holy shit, that’s Hays Granger!” he whisper-yells to his wife, who immediately starts digging through her purse.

My stomach drops as I realize what I’ve just signed up for.

The attention, the scrutiny, the complete loss of privacy that comes with being connected to someone in the spotlight.

All while I’m supposed to be getting to know the man I’ve agreed to marry.

I take a step back, but Hays reaches for my hand and threads our fingers together.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs against my ear, his voice steady and reassuring.

“Always.”

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Chapter fifteen

Hays

Standing on Leah's front porch ten hours later, with enough takeout to feed a small army, I realize I might have gone slightly overboard. I wasn't sure what she likes, so at the Thai place, a few doors down from High Tide Tales, I ordered one of everything.

The porchlight casts a warm glow over a dozen potted herbs lining the railing. A wreath made of what looks like book pages folded into roses hangs on a sage green front door.

Before I knock, the door swings open, and there she is in a long sundress. My mouth goes bone dry. Her dark hair is loose around her shoulders, and she's barefoot, which is suddenly the sexiest thing I've seen in my life.

"You do realize there are only two of us, right?" she asks, eyeing the ridiculous number of bags dangling from my arms.

"I may have overdone it," I admit, stepping inside when she moves back. "But I wasn't sure if you liked spice."

"If I like spice?" A mischievous flicker in her eyes makes the innuendo clear as she helps me carry everything to the kitchen.

"I figured it was better to have options and let you choose your comfort level," I say

with a straight face, playing along.

Her flirty smile makes my pulse trip. “And what if I told you I like everything?”

“Everything?”

“All of it. From one to five chili peppers. At least...in books.”

“In books?”

She opens a container of pad thai, inhaling the aroma. “Romance novels can get quite... spicy, you know. And I’ve read everything from sweet to so hot the pages practically combust.”

Jesus Christ. The way she looks at me while talking about spice levels makes it impossible to think about actual food. “But what about in real life?”

She pauses then sets down the container. Her voice is softer when she answers. “In real life, my limited experiences have been rather...tame, so I can’t say.”

If she wants me to deliver the spice, I’m happy to. But I’m here tonight to get to know Leah and let her get to know me. Not pin her against a wall and go to town within sixty seconds of walking in the door.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I clear my throat and ignore the way my cock is now a steel rod in my shorts. “For future reference.”

“Future reference.” The promise in those two words makes my balls heavy with need.

I blow out a long breath and glance around. Her house is exactly what I imagined. Small but cozy, with overflowing built-in bookshelves. There’s a candle flickering on

the kitchen counter that smells like vanilla.

This is where she's been all this time. Where she's written her book, drunk her morning coffee, dreamed her dreams. Three years of wondering what her everyday life looked like, and now, I'm finally here. "Your place is very...you."

"Small and cluttered?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of perfect. And exactly where I want to be."

That's when I see it. An apple pie on the stove under a mesh cover. My gaze shoots to her. "You made pie."

Her cheeks flush, and she waves a hand in the air. "I had some apples that needed to be used up."

"Today?" I grin at the thought of her rushing home from work to bake for me.

"Homemade pie takes longer to make than the hour I've had since getting off work," she informs me, arching an eyebrow.

My grin widens. "So you made it yesterday? Before you knew I was coming?"

"Don't read anything into it." The warning is clear, but the bottom lip tucked between her teeth tells a different story.

"Too late, darling. I'm reading all kinds of things into homemade pie." I step closer, backing her against the counter. "You knew I was coming to town for the tournament. Were you thinking about me? About that night when I said I'd down at least two slices if you invited me over?"

“Maybe.”

The whispered admission lands deep in my chest. I can't resist anymore. I cup her face in my hands and kiss her. She melts into me without hesitation, her hands gripping my waist as she kisses back with the same desperate hunger surging through my veins.

Her lips are soft and warm, and when she opens for me with a soft gasp, I deepen the kiss until we're both breathing hard, our hands roaming over each other's bodies, learning the landscape. When I finally force myself to pull back, we're both panting.

Her dark pupils are dilated. I want to drown in them, but I need to slow down. This isn't how tonight should go. We've barely been reunited half an hour. Haven't even had dinner. I blow out a long breath and step back, my cock throbbing in protest.

“I need to stop. I don't want you to think that this, what's between us, is just physical.”

“I—”

“No matter how much I wanted you then, and how much I'm dying for you now, I didn't ask you to marry me because you turned me down. I asked because I couldn't imagine my life without you in it. Still can't.”

“What if I don't want to stop?”

The question hangs between us, loaded with three years of longing and the kind of need that makes me forget every lesson I've learned about patience.

“Leah,” I breathe, her name a prayer and a warning all at once.

But then she's rising on her toes, her hands sliding up my chest to curve around the nape of my neck, and when she kisses me, there's nothing hesitant about it. It's hungry and demanding and full of every fantasy I've had during the endless nights apart.

"I've waited three years," she whispers against my lips. "I don't want to wait three more days, let alone three more minutes."

That's all it takes. My restraint, already hanging by a thread, snaps completely.

I pin her against the counter, my hands sliding down to her thighs to lift her onto the surface.

She wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me closer.

Being tucked against her core, the warmth pressed against my length, makes me groan.

"Are you sure?" I manage, even as my hands are already sliding under her sundress, mapping the soft skin I've dreamed of caressing.

"I've never been more sure of anything." She wiggles against me with an urgency that matches my own.

Her hands are in my hair, her nails raking my scalp, and my heart races like a goddamn freight train. This woman... This goddess tastes like heaven and sin all at once, and I'm already addicted.

"Bedroom?" I murmur against her lips, my hands sliding down to discover a thong and her bare ass. She smiles against my mouth, a wicked little grin that sends a shock of heat straight to my cock.

“Down the hall,” she breathes. “Second door on the left.”

I carry her there, her lips on my neck, her teeth nipping at my ear. I can’t focus on anything but the feel of her. I’ve been with other women, but this? This is different. This is Leah, and she’s all-consuming in the best possible way.

We tumble onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and laughter. I pin her beneath me, struck by how her curves fit perfectly against me. It’s as if she were made for me, and the thought sends a shiver down my spine.

“You’re gorgeous, darling,” I murmur, my mouth moving down her neck, my hands cupping her breasts through the thin fabric of her sundress. She arches into my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips.

I lower my head, finding the valley between her breasts. I kiss every inch of skin, my fingers tracing the neckline of her dress. I tug at the fabric and her bra, freeing her breasts. They’re full and round and fit perfectly in my palms, the hardening nipples begging for my touch.

I take one into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, sucking gently, then harder.

Leah gasps. Her fingers grip my shoulders as her legs are a vise-like grip around my ass.

I lavish attention on one breast, then the other, kneading and caressing, my mouth tasting and teasing.

Each touch of my lips, each flick of my tongue elicits a gasp or a moan from her, and it’s driving me fucking wild.

I move down her body, kissing every inch of skin, then grasp the hem of her

sundress, pulling it up and over her head as she shimmies out of it, revealing a nude thong that makes my mouth water.

I look up at her, our eyes meeting, and the raw desire in her gaze is a look I'll never forget.

And suddenly, I'm desperate to taste her.

I hook a thumb on either side of her thong and barely get it past her knees before I'm trying to dive in.

She kicks it off and spreads her legs, sucking in a sharp hiss when my tongue finds her clit.

I waste no time getting down to business.

She tastes incredible. I can't get enough. Her hips rock against my mouth, her core soft and warm and drenched. I could go for hours, but barely a minute later, I can tell she's getting close, her muscles tensing.

My cock is so hard it's painful, but I don't want to rush this. I want to savor her, to make her come like never before. I'm so focused on her holding her squirming hips tight, on lapping up every drop of pleasure, that when she shatters beneath me, my release threatens just from watching her.

Her orgasm rips through her as she arches off the bed.

A cry of pleasure that's never sounded so sweet echoes through the room as her thighs squeeze my head with a force that nearly crushes my skull, and I love every second of it.

The vision of her head thrown back and her lips parted as her fingers twist in the quilt is now officially the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen.

Once the shudders subside, I shift back up onto my knees and pull off my shirt, tossing it aside.

"I knew you'd have six-pack abs," Leah says, breathless as she runs her hands down them, "but these are...wow."

"I'm glad you approve." I suck in a breath as she continues south, fumbling with my belt.

I help her, standing only long enough to kick off my shoes and peel off my shorts and boxers.

I'm desperate to be inside her, but I pause, wanting to remember this moment.

The way she looks, the way she feels, the way she makes me feel.

Her gaze drops to my cock and fuck, if she doesn't lick her lips. I'm already riding a razor-sharp edge struggling to keep control, and she bites her lip and hums appreciatively.

That's it. Exactly two seconds later, I'm sinking into her. She's so tight, so wet, so fucking perfect. And like nothing I've ever felt before. I grit my teeth, freezing for a moment, and focus on taking a deep breath to keep from losing it, right then and there.

Then I start to move, my hips thrusting, our bodies moving in sync. Her nails dig into my back, and I'm lost. Completely consumed by her.

“I can’t...” I growl, pumping faster, desperate to hold off as long as possible.

“Hays, please,” she moans, meeting me thrust for thrust. The plea is my undoing. She’s clenching around me, her body trembling, and I know she’s close. But I’m determined to summon every last ounce of willpower I have not to fill her with my seed. At least not yet.

I want to see her come again. I want to feel her orgasm while I’m buried deep inside her. Shaking with the effort, I barely manage to hold on until she cries out, her body convulsing around me, milking my length.

Then I couldn’t hold back if my life depended on it. My orgasm rips through me, intense and explosive. And it’s confirmation I’m never going to get enough of this woman.

I could stay buried inside her forever. Leah’s everything I remembered and a thousand things I never dared to hope for. I fell for her the night we met, but now? I’m completely and utterly ruined for any other woman. Ever. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Chapter sixteen

Leah

Hays's T-shirt falls to my mid thigh and smells like expensive cologne and pure temptation. He's shirtless, moving around my kitchen as if he belongs there, reheating our forgotten Thai food with the kind of easy confidence that makes my stomach flutter.

The atmosphere between us has shifted. Not that I'm surprised after the mind-blowing sex only minutes ago. The anxious edge from earlier has mellowed into something that feels dangerously close to domestic bliss.

Which should terrify any rational person, but here I am, practically purring in his oversized T-shirt like some romance novel heroine.

"You know..." I say, resting a hip against the counter. "Most people would consider cold pad thai a tragic waste."

"Most people haven't just had the best sex of their lives," he replies, without missing a beat, flashing me a devastating grin over his shoulder. "I could eat cardboard right now, and it would taste like gourmet cuisine."

"The best sex of your life? That's quite a claim for someone with your...experience."

He abandons the food entirely, turning to face me with an expression that's suddenly serious.

“Leah, what just happened between us?” He steps closer, his hands coming to rest on either side of my hips. “That wasn’t just sex. That was...everything.”

My breath catches at the raw honesty in his voice, but then again, he’s always been straightforward. Thankfully, before I can respond, his gaze shifts.

“You’ve been busy,” he observes.

I follow his line of sight to my refrigerator, covered in photos held up by a random collection of magnets.

“Oh.” I push off from the counter. “Those are just...”

But he’s studying them with genuine interest. There’s the shot of me on Mount Marcy, windblown and grinning despite the grueling hike.

Another where I’m rocking a welding helmet and protective gear, blowtorch in hand.

And my personal favorite, me on the Brooklyn Bridge at sunset during my solo trip to New York for a writing conference.

“Adventure shots,” he says, his voice filled with something that sounds like admiration. “You’ve been busy while I’ve been grinding on tour.”

I lift a shoulder. “I vowed to be more adventurous.”

“After that night?”

“Actually, before that. A few months before. After my ex dumped me. But it wasn’t until I met you that I really started.”

He turns back to me, and there's something in his expression that makes my pulse skip. "The woman I met on that boat was incredible, but this?" He gestures toward the photos. "You've gone out there and lived."

"Doesn't mean I'm not still logical. And rational."

"Not yet crazy enough to marry a man you barely know."

I hold his gaze, thinking of the ring sitting in the box on my dresser. I wonder if he saw it sitting there. If so, he didn't mention it. "I'm working on it."

"Good."

"You're different, too," I point out, studying his face. "You're mature in a way you weren't before. More quiet confidence than cocky swagger."

His lips quirk. "Cocky swagger?"

I throw a dishtowel at him. "You know what I mean."

"Three years of learning patience will do that to a man," he scoffs. "Though my willpower apparently has a very specific expiration date that coincides with being in the same room as you."

The microwave beeps, and he turns to retrieve our food. "Come on; let's eat before I forget about dinner entirely and carry you back to bed."

We settle at my small dining table with the Thai spread between us. It's surreal, having Hays Granger, the ninth-ranked golfer in the world, sitting at my thrift store table, using my mismatched plates as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

I take a bite of what I thought was mild pad thai and immediately regret every life choice that led me to this moment. Fire explodes across my tongue, and tears spring to my eyes as I try to maintain some semblance of dignity while my mouth feels like an inferno.

“You okay there, sweetheart?” Hays asks, pausing midchew with obvious amusement dancing in his eyes.

I nod vigorously, which is a mistake because it makes my eyes water more. I reach for my water glass and drain half of it in one gulp.

“Perfectly fine,” I croak, my voice about three octaves higher than normal.

“Uh-huh.” He leans back in his chair, clearly trying not to laugh. “You know, most people start with the mild dishes when they’re not sure about spice levels.”

“I can handle spice,” I insist, trying to double down even though my entire mouth seems to be swelling.

“Jesus, Leah.” He’s up in a flash, disappearing into my kitchen to return with a glass of milk, which he presses into my hands. “Here, drink this.”

I take a grateful sip, and the cooling relief is immediate. “How did you know that?”

“I live in Arizona, remember? Plus, I’ve eaten my way through half of Asia on tour.” He sits down, sliding his own milder curry toward me. “Try this instead. And next time, I’ll be sure not to order the ‘Thai hot’ level.”

“You ordered Thai hot?” I stare at him in horror. “At Harbor Thai ? Are you trying to kill me?”

His grin is pure mischief. “Weren’t you claiming, not half an hour ago, that you like everything from one to five chili peppers?”

Heat that has nothing to do with the food floods my cheeks. “That was about books!”

“Was it?” He takes a deliberate bite of the nuclear pad thai without even flinching. “Because I’m starting to think, maybe, you’re all talk when it comes to handling heat.”

The challenge in his voice flares something competitive in my chest. “Oh, really?”

“Really.” He leans forward, his voice dropping to that velvet tone that makes my stomach flip. “Though I have to say, watching you get all flustered and pink is pretty entertaining. Makes me wonder what other kinds of heat will make you react like that.”

I nearly choke on the milk. “You’re terrible.”

“And you’re adorable when you’re trying to prove a point.” He reaches over to brush a tear from my cheek with his thumb. “But maybe, stick to the mild curry, for now. I need you to be able to taste things properly this week.”

The gentle praise combined with his protective tone does something to me I don’t want to examine too closely.

Because when he takes charge, but in a way that shows he genuinely cares about my wellbeing, that makes me want to...

What? Please him? The thought should alarm me, but instead, it just warms me all over.

I snatch up my fork. “Are we doing dinner again this week?”

His smile turns wicked. “Among other things.”

I tuck into the milder curry, filing away that hint in the back of my mind.

“So...” he says, twirling pad thai. “Tell me about your writing. Last time we talked, you said you’d been feeling less than inspired.”

I nearly choke on a bite of chicken. He remembers that? I clear my throat. “It’s been going better lately.”

“I read your debut novel. Cover to cover in one sitting.”

My heart stops.

“You did?” I mean, I’d figured he’d read the parts I flagged for him, but the whole thing?

“It was incredible. The way you write emotion, the chemistry between your characters...” He leans closer. “It wasn’t as good as the scene you sent me for my birthday, but I’m glad that was for my eyes only.”

“But that scene was just...raw fantasy. No plot structure, no character development, no—” I pause, realizing I’m basically admitting it was straight erotica.

“It had a happy ending.”

Oh my god, did he just—

“What are you working on now?”

I freeze, hesitating, because the truth is my second manuscript features a pro golf hero and a small-town girl.

The story was easy to write because despite the conflict, there was no doubt it would end in an actual happily ever after.

Unlike real life, where my ending—our ending—is still not guaranteed, despite the pact.

“Just some ideas. Nothing concrete yet.”

He studies my face as if he’s trying to read between the lines, but thankfully, he doesn’t push.

“Speaking of projects,” I say, grateful for the chance to redirect, “I caught part of that press conference where you mentioned starting a foundation. Something about helping young golfers?”

His expression shifts, the playful teasing replaced by something more serious. “You were watching my press conferences?”

Heat creeps up my neck. “I may have kept tabs on your career. You know, just to see how the whole ‘winning a major’ thing was progressing.”

“Just professional interest, huh?” His smile is knowing, but he lets me off the hook.

“The foundation is... It’s something I’ve been working on for a while.

Kids from single-parent homes, foster families, kids being raised by grandparents or other relatives.

Golf gave me everything after my dad died, but not everyone has the support system I had. ”

The passion in his voice makes my chest tight. “That’s incredible, Hays.”

“We launched six months ago. Already have twelve kids lined up for the first round of scholarships.” He runs a hand through his hair, and I can see how much this means to him.

“Your foundation is named after your dad, isn’t it?”

He nods, his voice quieter now. “The Michael Granger Foundation.”

“He’d be proud of what you’re doing.”

“I hope so.” He reaches across the table to cover my hand with his. “It’s funny, when I was starting the foundation, it made me think about the future. About what kind of legacy I want to leave behind.”

The weight of his gaze makes my pulse skip. There’s an unspoken question about the kind of future we might build together. I breathe a sigh of relief when, rather than continue, his gaze shifts to the hutch against the wall.

Chapter seventeen

Hays

I study the framed photo in the hutch. “Is that your mom? You have her smile.”

“She would have liked to hear that. Even to this day, I can hear her saying, ‘Smiles are contagious.’”

Something in her tone makes my chest tighten. “Is she—”

“Gone. Five years now. Cancer.”

Fuck. The quiet way she says it, as if she’s practiced delivering this news without falling apart, makes me want to pull her into my arms.

“I’m sorry.” I keep my voice gentle, recognizing the careful control in her expression.

“She was... Everything good about me comes from her.”

I glance over the other photos, noticing what’s not there as much as what is. “And your dad?”

“Walked out when I was six.”

The words hit me like a sucker punch. Six years old. The same age I was when I still believed my dad would live forever, when I thought he’d be there for every

tournament, every milestone. But while my father was ripped away by a heart attack, hers made a choice to walk out. The bastard.

“I see why you were so hesitant to say yes to my proposal.”

Her spine straightens. “Because I have daddy issues?”

I hold up both hands, not wanting her to think I’m judging her. Hell, we’ve both got our damage. “I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. It was a smart play, really. Makes sense you’d want to see my scorecard before backing me.”

Despite the serious turn our conversation has taken, her lips quirk upward. “You’re comparing our marriage pact to a golf game?”

“You wanted to see if I had staying power. If I could go the distance for eighteen holes.”

“And you think you can?”

“Sweetheart, I’ve been obsessed with you since the night we met. If that’s not staying power, I don’t know what is.”

No matter how much I reassure her, doubt lingers in those dark eyes. And suddenly, I’m wondering if my absolute certainty about us is exactly what scares her. Maybe, my confidence feels like pressure. Maybe, she needs me to acknowledge that forever is terrifying, not just inevitable.

Before I can dig myself deeper into serious territory, she glances toward the corner where a putter leans against the wall. “Want to see how good your short game really is?”

I follow her gaze to an area near the fireplace, where she's set up what looks like a makeshift putting green with a drinking glass at the end, and burst out laughing. "You've got to be kidding me."

"My neighbor loaned me a putter and some balls."

"I could've supplied you with some."

She rolls her eyes as she retrieves two Titleists from under the couch. "I figured if I'm going to date a professional golfer, I should at least understand the basics."

The word 'date' stops me cold. I take the putter from her, letting my fingers brush hers. "Date? Is that what we're doing?"

She looks off. "Let's call it that for now."

"I'll take what I can get. As long as this...dating ends with a ring on your finger and you by my side. Forever."

She takes a shaky breath, and I watch her struggle with the concept of forever. Can't blame her, given what I know now.

"Not all stories get happy endings, hotshot."

There's that nickname again. And the doubt I'll erase from her mind, no matter how long it takes, but for now, I let it pass. "Ladies first."

She sets up a ball and grasps the putter lining up for the shot. "Let me try the full Hays Granger routine." She takes exactly three practice swings, adjusts her grip twice, then goes completely still for a beat—nailing my timing to the second—before putting.

My jaw drops. The impression is so spot on it's almost unsettling.

The ball rolls wide, hitting the wall with a soft thud.

"Jesus Christ, Leah." I stare at her, my chest tight. "How long have you been watching me play?"

She fiddles with the putter. "I may have caught a tournament or two over the years."

"A tournament or two?" I step closer, studying her face. "You just mimicked my pre-shot routine like you've memorized it frame by frame."

"Maybe, I have," she admits quietly, and the admission hits me hard.

"Well, you've got the routine down, but your execution needs work." I move behind her, covering her hands with mine on the club, unable to resist the excuse to touch her. "Like this."

I press my chest against her back, breathing in the intoxicating floral scent that's been driving me crazy, now mixed with my own cologne from my shirt she's wearing. The combination does something dangerous to my self control.

Her body relaxes into mine.

"I can't concentrate when you're touching me like that."

"Then my strategy is working perfectly."

She elbows me playfully, and I step back with a laugh. She lines up another putt, and I watch her concentrate. This time, when she swings, her ball rolls straight but stops just short of the glass.

“Close,” I say, trying to keep the pride out of my voice and failing.

“That was sabotage on your part,” she accuses, pointing the putter at me.

“That was poor concentration under pressure. Very telling about your mental game.”

“My mental game is fine, thank you very much. Unlike some people, I don’t need to grip my shaft in front of an audience to prove my skills.”

My eyebrows shoot up. Did she just—? The guileless expression on her face while delivering that line is going to be the death of me. “Did you just—”

“Make an innocent golf observation? Absolutely.” She bats her eyelashes with fake innocence that fools absolutely no one. “Why, what did you think I meant?”

I open my mouth then close it again. She’s playing with me, and I’m torn between calling her bluff and letting her think she’s gotten away with it.

“That’s what I thought.” Her grin is pure triumph. “You know, most guys try to play it cool. Keep some mystery.”

“Why would I want to be mysterious when being direct got me this far?” I step closer, unable to resist the pull of her energy.

“This far being what, exactly?”

I let my gaze rake over her, taking in the way my T-shirt falls to her midthigh, the way her hair is still mussed from earlier. “Half-dressed in your living room while you’re wearing my shirt and trying to pretend you don’t want me to kiss you again.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Maybe, but I’ve got excellent follow-through.” I flash her my most devastating grin. “And I always finish what I start.”

Even as I say it, doubt creeps in. Is that what she needs to hear? Or am I pushing too hard, too fast? Maybe, she needs to know I can be patient, not just persistent.

“Do you practice those lines in the mirror?”

The question makes me laugh. “Sweetheart, with you, I don’t need to practice anything. It all comes naturally.”

And it’s true. Every word, every touch, every moment with her feels like the most natural thing in the world. Like I’ve been waiting my whole life to find someone who brings out this side of me—not the media-trained golfer, but whoever the hell I am underneath all that.

My gaze drifts around her living room, taking in the cozy space, and lands on the vintage typewriter sitting on a small desk in the corner. The mint green Olympia I sent for her birthday, with a sheet of paper still rolled into it.

“You’re actually using it,” I say, nodding toward the typewriter.

She follows my gaze, and her cheeks flush. “Every day, though not usually anything as...inspired as what I sent you.”

Too bad.

She settles onto her couch, tucking her legs under her in a way that makes my T-shirt ride up dangerously high on her thighs. “So, what’s the plan for this week? Besides convincing me to marry you, I mean.”

I join her on the couch, resting a hand on her bare thigh. “Tomorrow night, I’ve got a sponsor event. Callaway’s schmoozing their biggest clients. I’ll spend three hours pretending to care about their latest driver technology.”

“Sounds thrilling. I have book club anyway.”

I arch a brow, and she rushes to add, “Nothing spicy. It’s a crime thriller this month.”

“Any good?”

“Not bad.”

I move my thumb back and forth across her skin, gearing up for what I’ll say next. “Wednesday is the Pro-Am and a cocktail party. I’m hoping you’ll be my date.”

She tenses beneath my hand. Her eyes go wide, and I practically see her mind racing through all the reasons this is a bad idea.

Sure enough, she says, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea...”

“Why not?”

“I wouldn’t know what to say to people.”

The insecurity in her voice hits me like a blade between the ribs. I knew it was asking a lot, requesting this brilliant, private woman to step into a world where she’ll be scrutinized and judged by people who don’t know the first thing about her.

But I also know she’s stronger than she gives herself credit for. “You’d say whatever brilliant thing comes to your mind, same as always.”

I reach for her hand, threading our fingers together. “Besides, I’d like you to meet some of my friends.”

“I don’t have anything to wear to a golf cocktail party.”

I pull out my wallet and extract my black AmEx, holding it out to her. But as I watch her stare at it as if it might bite, I realize this moment isn’t just about a dress.

This is about the gulf between our worlds. My credit card probably has a higher limit than she makes in a year, and we both know it. I remember how she insisted on paying for her own drinks that first night, how she rattled off our differences like evidence in a case against us.

“I can’t take that.”

“Why not?” I keep my voice gentle.

“Because...” She struggles for words, and I see the internal war playing out across her features. But she doesn’t finish the thought.

I lean forward, my voice softening. “You think I care about money? About what you can or can’t afford?”

” I pause, letting that sink in. “I fell for a birthday girl on a boat who paid for her own drinks and called me out on my bullshit. That woman doesn’t disappear just because she’s wearing designer clothes. ”

Her breath catches, and I see the exact moment she decides to take the leap.

Her fingers close around the card, and I feel as if I’ve won something infinitely more important than any golf tournament.

“Okay. I’ll take it. But I’m not getting anything ridiculous.”

“Deal.”

Chapter eighteen

Leah

The eyeliner pencil trembles in my hand as the Golf Channel reporter on screen announces Hays's pair finishing the Pro-Am.

The camera pans over, showing Hays high-fiving Emmitt Buckley as they celebrate what must have been a good round.

As they make their way off the green, they're ushered toward her, and I can tell she's going to have a chance to ask them a few questions.

"You might want to put the pencil down," Tabitha says wryly from her perch on my bed. "Unless you want to poke your eye out before the big night."

I follow her advice and grip the edge of my vanity, watching as Hays approaches the camera with that easy confidence. He's wearing a navy polo, and he lifts his hat to run a hand through his hair in a way that is incredibly sexy.

"The round went well," he's saying, in answer to her question, with a relaxed smile that makes my stomach do a little flip.

"Emmitt's a natural athlete, so even though hockey's his game, he can hit a ball nearly as well as a puck.

Plus, he's got the trash talk down to an art form, which keeps things entertaining. "

The camera shows Emmitt, the Phoenix Freeze's star forward, grinning and shaking his head in the background. They must know each other. One of the friends Hays wants to introduce me to tonight.

"Speaking of entertainment..." the reporter says. "There have been some interesting photos of you around town this week. Care to comment on the mystery woman who seems to have captured your attention?"

My breath catches. Mystery woman. That's me. I'm now a "mystery woman" being discussed on national television.

Hays's smile grows wider, those dimples on full display.

"I can confirm there's a woman who's turned my world upside down in the best possible way," he says, his voice softer.

"Someone who sees right through all this," he gestures at the cameras and crowd around him, "and somehow still thinks I might be worth her time. Whether I'm good enough for her..."

Well, that's what I'm hoping to prove this week. "

"The photos show you at a local bookstore where she appears to work. Can you tell us anything more about her?"

I swallow hard. They know where I work? Did they follow him here?

But before I can spiral, Hays continues.

"Only that she's brilliant, beautiful, and way too good for a guy who hits a ball around for a living.

” His self-deprecating charm makes my heart skip.

“That’s all I’m comfortable sharing at the moment. ”

“Will she be a distraction this week when you’re favored to be on the leaderboard going into Sunday?”

“A distraction? She’s the reason I’m playing the best golf of my life.”

“So you—”

“I need to get cleaned up for tonight’s event,” Hays says firmly, that perfect smile never wavering as he steps away from the microphone.

I reach for the remote and press mute, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“Well,” Tabitha says. “Look at you, mystery woman.”

“He...he basically told the world he’s in love with me. On live TV.” With cameras rolling and the golf world watching, he could have easily deflected or given some generic non-answer. Instead, he put his feelings out there for everyone to see.

“The man’s completely gone for you,” Tabitha confirms with a click of her tongue.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, unease sweeping through me. “Tab, I’m freaking out.”

“About what he just said? Because that was—”

“About tonight. About all of this.” I gesture toward the screen where Emmitt is now fielding questions while Hays can be seen in the background signing autographs for

the throng of fans.

“I don’t understand what it is about him.

We’re complete opposites. He thrives in that chaos, enjoys the spotlight.

I live a quiet life in Starlight Bay and—”

Tabitha silences me with both hands on my shoulders, giving me a small shake.

“Love doesn’t have to make sense, babe. It just has to feel right.”

Love. The word hangs in the air, terrifying and thrilling at the same time.

“But what if it doesn’t work?” I whisper.

“What if we’re too different? When we’re apart, like now, it feels impossible.

All I can think about are the reasons we shouldn’t be together.

But then when I’m with him...” I trail off, remembering Monday night, at my place.

How natural it felt to spend time together.

“When you’re with him?”

“Nothing seems impossible.” I pick up the eyeliner again, my hand steadier now. “It’s like he’s determined to make me believe in the fairytale version of my own life.”

“Maybe, because he sees the you that you’re still learning to give credit to.”

I glance at her in the mirror. “What do you mean?”

She slides onto the counter and shoots me a look.

“You’re not the same person you were when you met Hays that night on the boat.

” Her voice is gentle but firm. “You were still heartbroken over David, convinced you weren’t cut out for grand gestures or adventures.

But look at what you’ve done since then. ”

She’s right. I’ve gone on adventures like I promised myself I would. But still...

“With David, I knew exactly what to expect,” I admit. “It was safe, predictable.”

“Boring,” Tabitha adds.

“With Hays, it feels like jumping into the ocean without knowing where the tide will take me.”

“And that terrifies you.”

“Completely.” I start working on my other eye.

“Good,” Tabitha replies, testing the shade one of my lipsticks on her hand. “Especially because you already agreed to marry him. It’s just a matter of when. Unless you’re going to change your mind.”

I pause, mascara wand halfway to my lashes. Do I want to change my mind? The logical part of my brain screams yes, that the arrangement was insane to begin with. That I still barely know the man who’s from a world that might as well be on a foreign planet. That happily ever afters are for books.

But my heart? It remembers the way he caught me when I fell, the way he listens when I talk, the way he makes me feel like the most important person in the world.

And my body? It is still aching sore in the best possible way from Monday night.

And still remembers the way he kisses as if he can't get enough of me.

"Honestly?" I set down the mascara and turn to face her. "I never really believed the pact would hold up. I figured he'd forget within a month. Maybe, two."

"So you didn't expect him to show up with a rock the size of Gibraltar and tell you he's been thinking about you every day for years?"

"No!"

"Are you going to wear it tonight?"

My lips press together. "I'm not ready to. Not yet."

"The man on the screen, just now? He'll wait, believe me."

"You think so?"

"I know so." She slides the cover back on the lipstick. "I mean, didn't he give you carte blanche with his credit card for a shopping spree for anything you might need for tonight?"

"Because I needed something to wear for my first real taste of what his world looks like up close and personal!"

"You're going to be fine." Tabitha slides off the counter and grabs the hanger off the

closet door, holding my new dress up against her in front of the mirror. “And look like a million dollars.”

The nerves fluttering in my stomach like moths around a UV bug zapper say otherwise. “All those sponsors and VIPs and photographers. I have no idea what I’ve gotten myself into.”

“You’ve gotten yourself into a chance at happiness with a man who’s clearly crazy about you.”

I take the dress from her, running my fingers over the silky fabric. “Speaking of crazy about someone, want me to pass along anything to Rory about what you’re looking for in a man?”

Tabitha’s cheeks turn pink. “Oooh, let me think about that.”

I stand and start changing into the dress. “I’ll make sure to mention you’re single and available.”

“A good start—”

“And that you’re fantastic at giving relationship advice.”

“Maybe, he needs it.” She throws a pillow at me, but she’s laughing.

I head into the bathroom and slip into the dress. I barely recognize the woman in the mirror, who looks back at me with bright eyes and flushed cheeks. A woman who seems as if she might actually belong at a fancy cocktail party on the arm of a professional athlete.

I emerge and Tabitha smiles. “You look beautiful,” she says. “And brave. And ready

for whatever tonight brings.”

I take a deep breath, thinking about Hays’s protective deflection during the press conference. Maybe, jumping into the ocean isn’t so scary when you trust the person swimming beside you to help you find your way back to shore.

“Okay,” I say, reaching for the lipstick. “Think this is the right shade?”

Chapter nineteen

Hays

The moment Leah steps out of the town car at the country club, every coherent thought in my head evaporates.

Her dark green dress hugs her curves in all the right places.

Her hair falls in soft waves over one shoulder, and when she looks up at me with a smile that's slightly nervous but trying to hide it, I'm completely done for.

The color is perfect on her, bringing out the warmth in her skin and making her dark eyes look almost luminous.

For a split second, I can't help but think how perfectly the engagement ring would complement this look, but I bite back the urge to mention it.

The ball's in her court now, and I'm practicing patience, even if it's killing me.

"Jesus Christ," I breathe, unable to stop myself from drinking in every detail. "You are absolutely stunning."

A blush creeps up her neck, but she smiles as she clutches a matching small purse. "Thank you." She brushes a hand down her dress. "I've never owned anything this expensive in my life."

“Worth every penny to see you in it.” I offer her my arm, my heart hammering as she slips her hand through the crook of my elbow.

Her gaze travels over my navy suit and tie, and her eyes darken. “You clean up pretty well yourself. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you in anything but polos. Or that T-shirt the other night.”

“That T-shirt looked better on you. But I’d wear a suit every day if you promise to look at me like that again.”

She fights a smile, while I add, “Though I have to warn you, I’m going to have a hell of a time concentrating on anything with you at my side tonight.”

She clicks her tongue. “And here you were telling reporters I’m not a distraction.”

“What, you don’t believe me?”

But she just shoots me a sidelong glance. “This is a professional event for you, I know.”

“Professional went out the window the second you agreed to be my date.” I lean down to whisper against her ear, breathing in that intoxicating floral scent. “You ready for this circus?”

She takes a deep breath, her grip tightening on my arm. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

There’s my girl.

As we enter the ballroom, I try to see the event from Leah’s eyes.

String lights twinkle overhead, crisscrossing the ballroom ceiling.

Elegant floral arrangements fill every corner, and the floor-to-ceiling windows showcase a perfect view of the harbor.

Sponsors' logos are displayed tastefully throughout, and servers weave through the A-list crowd with champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

But within seconds, I feel the energy shift. Conversations pause midsentence as heads turn our way. Camera phones appear out of nowhere, and I practically hear social media posts being composed in real-time.

Leah's steps falter, but I cover her hand with mine and lean in. "I've got you," I murmur. "Just stay close to me."

She nods, straightening her shoulders with a determination that makes my chest swell. This woman has no idea how magnificent she is.

"Rum and Coke?" I offer, steering us toward the bar.

"Might need to make that a double."

I smile down at her, then catch the bartender's attention and place the order. "That bottle of champagne is itching to be nabbed," I whisper, nodding toward an open bottle resting in an ice bucket behind the bar.

Her laugh is genuine, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. "You're the worst."

"Hays!" A familiar voice booms across the room, and I turn to see Emmitt making his way toward us, trademark grin splitting his face. "There's the man of the hour."

"Emmitt." I clasp his hand in a firm shake, genuinely glad to see him. "You recover from that six-hour death march yet?"

“Hey, give me a pair of skates and I can go for hours, but walking eighteen holes while you’re trying to teach me the difference between a wedge and a nine iron?” He shakes his head dramatically. “My feet are killing me. How do you do it?”

“We don’t usually take twenty practice swings per shot,” I tease. “Or stop for a photo op at every tee box.”

“Those sponsors paid good money for those photo ops,” he shoots back with a grin. “Plus, I had to document proof I can actually hit a golf ball. My teammates will never believe it otherwise.”

“You weren’t that bad. That shot on sixteen was actually decent.”

“Decent? I’ll take it.” He laughs, then his attention shifts to Leah, and his expression sobers. “And you must be the woman who’s got golf’s golden boy wrapped around your little finger.”

“Leah,” she says, extending her hand with a smile that doesn’t quite hide her nerves. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Emmitt takes her hand, but instead of shaking it, he brings it to his lips for a kiss that’s pure old-world charm. Bastard. “The pleasure is entirely mine. Anyone who can make our friend, Hays, here, forget how to form complete sentences is someone I need to know better.”

“I never forget how to—” I start to protest, but Leah’s soft laugh cuts me off.

“He does seem to have that problem around me,” she agrees, and the mischief in her eyes makes my pulse quicken.

“Smart and gorgeous.” Emmitt grins at me. “You better lock this one down before

someone with more sense comes along.”

“Working on it,” I say, my hand finding the small of Leah’s back.

“Speaking of which,” Emmitt continues, turning back to Leah, “you should come out to Phoenix sometime. Catch a Freeze game. I’ll make sure you get the VIP treatment.”

“I’d love to. I’ve seen the Boston Blades play a few times, but I’ve never been to Phoenix.”

Emmitt scoffs dramatically. “The Blades? Those amateurs? Sweetheart, you haven’t seen real hockey until you’ve watched the Freeze. We’ll spoil you for any other team.”

Leah’s eyes dance in a way that sends warmth flooding through my chest. “I can see why you and Hays get along so well.”

Emmitt shoots her a wink and claps me on the shoulder. “And I can see why he’s smitten. Don’t screw this up, Granger.”

As he walks away, I turn to Leah, handing her the rum and Coke. “You’d really want to come to Phoenix?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” She tilts her head, studying my expression. “You seem surprised.”

“It’s just...” I glance around the room. “I wasn’t sure if you were ready to be a part of my world. To travel and—”

“Hays,” she says softly, “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Before I can respond, we're approached by a couple I recognize from the tournament sponsor's executive team.

Then comes a sports reporter from ESPN, followed by another player who wants to talk shop about course conditions.

Each conversation requires introductions, small talk, and careful navigation through questions that edge too close to personal territory.

I watch Leah handle each interaction with grace, her intelligence shining through as she asks thoughtful questions and makes genuine connections. But the tension builds in her shoulders, and her smile becomes more forced with each conversation.

"Excuse me," a photographer says, appearing at my elbow. "Could we get a few shots of you and your lovely companion?"

"Not right now."

"It'll just take a—"

"I said no." My tone invites no argument, and he gets the point and moves on.

"You okay?" I ask, leaning down. "We can get out of here if you need some air."

Relief flickers across her features. "Could we? Just for a minute?"

I don't hesitate. Scanning the room, I spot the French doors leading to the balcony that overlooks the harbor. "This way."

I guide her through the crowd, dropping our empty glasses as we go.

I use my body to create a buffer between her and the curious stares that follow us.

I hold her hand tight the entire way, and when Martinez from First National tries to intercept us, I brush him off.

I need to talk to the guy, but now's not the time.

"Sorry, we'll catch up in just a bit," I say smoothly, not slowing down.

The warm evening air hits us as we step onto the balcony, and I feel Leah's entire body relax as she draws a deep breath.

The noise from the party fades behind us, replaced by the gentle sound of waves lapping against the rocks below.

The lighthouse stands out in the sky, its beam cutting through the starlit night.

"Better?"

She nods, moving to the railing and gripping it with both hands. "Much. I just...needed a moment to breathe."

I stand beside her, close enough our shoulders brush. "Too much?"

"It's a lot," she admits quietly. "But I'm okay."

Something fierce and protective surges through my chest. "You don't have to do any of this, you know. We can leave right now—"

"No." She lays a hand on my arm. "I want to be here. With you. I just...have never been the center of attention like this before."

“You’ve handled everything perfectly.” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “You were brilliant in there. Charming, intelligent, completely yourself. I was so fucking proud watching you.”

Her breath catches, and suddenly, the space between us feels charged with electricity. The moon dips behind some clouds, casting shadows across her face.

“Hays...” she whispers.

I cup her face in my hands, thumbs stroking across her cheekbones. “You have no idea what you do to me, do you? How beautiful you are, how smart, how—“

Before she can respond, I’m kissing her, pressing her back against the railing as my mouth moves desperately against hers. She responds immediately, her hands grabbing my jacket as she kisses me back with equal hunger.

She tastes like she did that night. Like rum and possibility, and when her tongue slides against mine, I groan low in my throat, my hands sliding down to grip her hips and pull her closer.

The kiss deepens, becomes more urgent, more desperate. I want to devour her. My lips trail along her jaw to that sensitive spot below her ear, and when she gasps and arches against me, I nearly lose what’s left of my control.

“Leah,” I breathe against her neck, trying to dial it back, to remember where we are, but it’s difficult, if not impossible.

I pull back just enough to look at her, taking in her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. “I want you so fucking much,” I admit, my voice barely controlled. “I—”

“If you don’t take me back to your room tonight,” she interrupts, her tone full of

conviction, “I’m definitely calling off the pact.”

My brain short-circuits. “What?”

She straightens my tie with shaking fingers. “You heard me, hotshot.”

Holy shit. I stare down at her, this brilliant, beautiful woman who’s just invited me to make her fantasy come true.

But then she pauses, uncertainty flickering across her features. “Unless...the first round is tomorrow. Will this distract you? Maybe, we should—”

“Leah.” I capture her face in my hands again, desperate for her to understand. “The only thing that will make me lose focus tomorrow is if I don’t get to hold you tonight.”

Chapter twenty

Leah

The door to the hotel suite clicks shut behind us. In an instant, Hays has me pinned against it. Though I know in vivid detail exactly what is about to happen, my breath still catches when his hands capture my wrists, stretching them high above my head, just like I wrote.

Countless romance novels describe moments just like this, but none of those descriptions come close to the reality of how my entire nervous system is short-circuiting from a single point of contact. A sole act of control.

His body presses against mine, the expensive navy suit doing little to hide the hard, muscular physique beneath it.

The fabric rustles as he shifts closer, trapping me with his hips and chest. He's made it impossible for me to move, but his delicious heat erases any coherent thought.

His cologne, that same intoxicating scent from the boat, fills my senses.

"This is exactly how you wrote this, me pinning you against the door," he murmurs against my ear, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine. His thumb traces along my throat. "But you didn't mention how your pulse would race right here."

Heat spirals through me. He's memorized every detail of my fantasy. His lips brush

against my neck, featherlight kisses that tease their way to my mouth, which he claims in a fiery kiss so intense my heartrate explodes.

His hard cock throbs against my belly, thick and promising.

A moan escapes my lips, and he pulls back just enough to look into my eyes, his own green-blue gaze burning with desire.

“I’m going to make you forget every other man who’s touched you,” he growls.

“I won’t stop until you’re screaming my name. ”

I try to catalog the sensations, the texture of his stubble, the heat of his breath, but thought becomes impossible when he trails kisses down my jawline, nipping at my skin.

I wiggle against him, seeking more. One hand still holding me hostage, the other slides down my arm to cup my breast. His thumb grazes the nipple through the silk, and I gasp, arching into his touch.

“You like that, don’t you?” His eyes darken as he watches my reaction. “I can’t wait to see you squirm beneath me, begging for more while my face is buried between your thighs, just like you described.”

My thong is officially soaked.

He continues his exploration, his hand hiking up my dress, the cool air a stark contrast to the heat of his touch. The callouses on his palm skim my thigh while his fingers tease the lace edge of my panties. “Are you wet for me?”

“Yes,” I admit, my teeth grinding.

He glides his fingertips lightly over my panties, and I gasp. Fortunately, he can't resist for long. Barely a second later, he slips one beneath the scrap of fabric and finds my clit. I jerk against him, a sharp hiss escaping me as my eyes squeeze shut and my head falls back against the door.

"Eyes on me," he commands, his voice sharp. I force them open, meeting his intense gaze. He rewards me with a slow, sensual smile, his finger continuing its torturous dance. "Good girl," he purrs.

I'm almost certain a praise kink wasn't in the scene I wrote, but if I didn't include it, I should have because, coming from Hays, it's hot as hell.

He leans in, his lips capturing mine for another searing kiss. His finger moving in rhythm with his tongue, stroking, teasing, driving me closer to the edge. Then he pulls away, his breath ragged. The bastard.

Releasing my wrists, he runs a finger under each of the spaghetti straps of my dress, wiping my own moisture over one shoulder.

He leans forward to press a kiss to the trail, then follows the path with his tongue as he slips the straps off each side and shifts back so the dress can fall to the floor and pool at my feet.

I stand exposed in my heels, the air conditioning sending a shiver through me as his gaze drops to my brand new, black-lace crop bustier and matching thong. Courtesy of him.

"You are fucking gorgeous." With a rakish glint in his eyes, he twirls his finger in the air as if he wants me to spin around. Such a simple command, but it makes me feel like the most desirable woman alive. I obey, turning slowly, feeling as sexy as hell under his intense scrutiny.

“And here’s where I go off-script,” he murmurs as I face him again, the raw need in his eyes confirming I’ve succeeded in driving him wild.

He reaches down, lifting me as if I weigh nothing. My legs wrap around him, my hands grabbing hold of his shoulders. The hard muscles of his body flex against me as he carries me down a hallway, past a full kitchen and sitting area to the bedroom.

He lays me on an oversized bed with a duvet so soft it must be a million thread count Egyptian cotton. Then he tries to sink down on top of me, but I have other plans.

I press my hands against his chest, halting his descent. His eyes widen.

“My turn to improvise.” The words come out bolder than I expect, but this man makes me feel as if I can do no wrong. “After all, you wanted me to be able to taste things properly this week.”

“Fuck, Leah,” he murmurs. “You are a dream come true. But fair warning, with a mouth like yours, I won’t last.”

“Would you say,” I start, coming to my knees as he props himself up on his elbows, “that you might be...”

I leave him hanging as I don’t bother with any of his clothes, rather, going straight for his zipper. The sound fills the silent room before I free his impressive length. My mouth goes dry at the sight of him, thick and hard and ready for me.

“...premature?” I finish as I take him in my hands, reveling in the velvety softness of his skin. I meet his gaze, holding it as I bend and slowly lick the tip, circling with my tongue.

“God, yes,” he pants, his fingers tangling in my hair as his hips jerk. “You’re about to

make me earn that reputation in record time.”

The thousands of romance books I’ve read didn’t prepare me for the powerful feeling of reducing this cocky athlete to trembling need.

I smile as I take him into my mouth, my hand gripping the base of his shaft.

He lets out a guttural moan, his head falling back onto the pillow.

Smears of my lipstick cover his jaw and neck from earlier. The sight is incredibly erotic.

I suck hard, my cheeks caving in, and sure enough, his body tenses, his breath coming in short gasps. But after a few more strokes, just as I think he’s about to come undone, he pulls me off him, his chest heaving.

“Soon enough, darling,” he says, his voice rough, “I’ll let you take your sweet time sucking me. But tonight, I’m not coming until I’m buried deep inside you.”

In a swift motion, he flips me over onto my stomach, his strong hands gripping my hips and pulling me up onto my knees. He comes up behind me, hooking his fingers into the waistband of my thong, and wastes no time tugging it off. I lift my knees, helping him, my body trembling with need.

He raises the scrap of fabric to his face, inhaling deeply. I glance over my shoulder just in time to see him tuck it into his pocket.

“This,” he growls, distracting me by trailing a finger down my spine over the lace of my bustier, “is sexy as hell.”

“It comes in four other colors.”

“I hope you bought them all.”

“Not yet, but I will.” If this is what happens when I wear them.

“Good girl,” he purrs, and my thighs clench at the praise.

He bends over me, his breath hot against my skin as he trails kisses over my ass, and then lower, licking me once from clit to ass. I jolt, my cry muffled as I bury my face in the duvet.

He straightens, and without bothering to undress, he lines up and thrusts into me, hard and deep. The sensation is all-consuming, my body stretching to accommodate him. He stills for a moment, his breath uneven.

Then he starts to move, each stroke deliberate and powerful. My body rocks with the force of it, my hands twisting in the sheets. He builds a rhythm, his pace increasing, his body claiming mine in a way that’s primal and raw and perfect.

“You like this, don’t you?” he growls, his fingers digging into my hips. “You like being fucked hard.”

“Yes,” I cry, my body on fire as every coherent thought dissolves into pure sensation. I push back against him as my pleasure builds. My focus narrows to the place where I’m meeting each thrust with a hunger that matches his.

One of his hands snakes around my waist, his fingers finding my clit with unerring accuracy. He starts to circle it, his touch featherlight, teasing me even as his thrusts grow harder, more demanding. The tension within me coils tighter and tighter.

“Come with me, Leah,” he growls, his voice a low command. “I want to feel you come apart around me.”

I can't hold back any longer. With a cry that's loud enough to be heard down the hall, I come undone, my body convulsing around him, my inner muscles clamping down on him like a vise.

"That's it, sweetheart. Yes."

And then his body is jerking against mine, his cock throbbing within me as he finds his release.

We ride out the waves of pleasure, but he doesn't pull away.

Instead, he wraps his arms around me, holding me tight against his chest as we both struggle to catch our breath.

His suit is disheveled, his expensive cologne now mixed with the scent of sex and sweat.

He presses his face into my hair. "Say yes to me, Leah," he whispers against my ear, his arms tightening around me. "Marry me."

Chapter twenty-one

Hays

I twist open a Gatorade and stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows of my suite. The twinkling lights of Starlight Bay stretch out along the coast, the harbor dotted with boats that bob gently in the evening breeze. Anticipation thrums through my veins. Leah should be here any minute.

“You’re humming,” Rory observes from where he’s sprawled across the leather sectional, reviewing tomorrow’s pin positions.

“Am I?”

“Brother, you’ve been humming more than a princess waiting for her prince this week.”

I turn to face him. “Have you been watching animated movies again?”

“I need to keep up with the latest releases,” he grumbles.

“If it wasn’t for Sophie, I’d think you actually enjoy them.”

He ignores my comment about his niece, sets down the tablet, and fixes me with that look I’ve learned to dread. “Can we get back to focusing on golf, please?”

“Fine. How are we looking for tomorrow?”

“Depends. Are you asking me as your caddy or your best friend?”

“Never a good question,” I mutter.

He arches a brow. “As your caddy, I’m concerned that you’re sitting at four under going into the weekend when Wilcox is at eight under and looking dialed in.

Steward’s right behind him at seven, and that bastard always peaks in majors.

” He gestures at the tablet. “Plus, Rahmisk shot sixty-six today, and he’s never missed a cut at a major. ”

“My iron play has been dialed in,” I counter. “My putting stroke is smooth. And if you haven’t noticed, I’m looser than I’ve ever been.”

“You’re four back against the strongest field in years,” he points out. “McMurphy’s been waiting to get his hands on another major, and Kopp lives for this shit.”

“You think I don’t want this just as bad as every other guy out there?”

He ignores my outburst. “I think you’re distracted.” He grabs his tablet and swipes to a news app. “Half the golf media is already blaming your lackluster performance on her. Look at this shit.”

He turns the screen toward me. The headline reads Granger’s Game Slips as Details about New Girlfriend Emerge . Below it is a photo of Leah coming out of a coffee shop, her face half-obsured as she turns away from the waiting paparazzi.

“They’re wrong.” I deny the ridiculous claim immediately, but rage builds in my chest like a wildfire. My hands clench into fists as I stare at the picture.

“Are they?” Rory sets down the tablet and fixes me with a no-bullshit stare. “You’ve been ignoring your routine all week. Monday night, instead of getting a massage and reviewing course footage like you’ve done before every major since you earned your tour card, you went to her house for dinner.”

“I needed to eat—”

“Wednesday at the cocktail party, you were so busy playing boyfriend that you barely spoke to Martinez from First National, the one guy your agent wanted you to get some face time with. You know that deal could set you up for life, and he flew out here specifically to meet with you.”

Heat floods my face because he’s not wrong. “I introduced him to Leah—”

“And last night?” Rory stands and paces. “Instead of stretching, along with your protein shake and film study, you took her to the driving range to play golf instructor.”

“That was still golf-related,” I protest weakly.

Rory’s laugh is sharp. “Hitting some balls while teaching your girlfriend how to swing isn’t practice, it’s foreplay with golf clubs.”

I can’t argue with that assessment. Especially after what the foreplay led to.

“Today was the second round of the fucking U.S. Open,” he continues, his voice rising. “You might as well have shown up to the tee box in flip-flops.”

The truth of his words hits like a right hook. Every major I’ve ever played, my routine has been sacred. Methodical preparation, mental visualization, physical maintenance.

I take another swig of Gatorade. “You knew from the moment the Harbor course was named that I’d be spending time with her this week, if she’d have me.”

“She’s still not wearing your ring.”

As if I need the reminder. I twist the cap on the bottle and toss it onto the couch. “She’s going to be here any minute.”

“And are you going to send her away?”

“Hell no.”

He scoffs. “I didn’t think so.”

“Rory, I—”

“I’ve been watching you prep for tournaments since we were kids, Hays. You’re the most disciplined player I know, except when a certain brunette bookworm makes you lose your damn mind.”

He pauses, running a hand through his hair. “Plus, your mom’s flying in tomorrow, even though you’re a long shot at this point.”

My chest tightens. Mom’s coming to watch me play on Sunday, despite everything.

“Sunday’s Father’s Day,” I say quietly, the words carrying more weight than they should.

Rory’s expression softens. He knows what that means to me. But before he can say anything, my phone buzzes on the coffee table. Leah’s name flashes on the screen. Rory scoops up the tablet, already heading toward the door as I grab the phone,

expecting to see the car I sent for her is downstairs.

Instead, my world tilts sideways.

I'm sorry. I can't do tonight. I know you swear I'm not a distraction, but I've seen the headlines, and apparently, you're the only one who believes that. I hope you understand. Good luck this weekend.

The words blur together as I read them once, twice, three times. My chest feels as if someone just drove a seven-iron straight through it.

"Hays?" Rory asks, eyeing me.

But I'm too busy shooting back a reply to answer. Are you okay?

It's a minute before the little dots appear. Then, even longer until her reply comes through. Yeah, just need some space.

"She's not coming." I'm already reaching for my wallet on the counter. "I'm going over there."

"Whoa, hold up." Rory jumps between me and the door, hands raised. "Think about this for a second."

"Think about what? The fact some assholes with cameras and microphones made her feel like she's destroying my career?"

"Look, I get that you're pissed, I do, but you're four shots back with thirty-six holes to go in the U.S. Open."

"This isn't just about golf—"

“Everything’s about golf right now, man. That’s literally why we’re here.”

“They need to leave her out of it.”

“You know that’s not going to happen.”

“But—”

“She knew what she was getting into, Hays. That it was a possibility.” He unlocks the tablet to scroll through more articles. “Look, Leah Sullivan, bookstore employee, debut novelist. They’re following her around town, snapping pictures of her at the coffee shop.”

“She’s not the reason I’m not leading.”

He sets down the tablet, not meeting my eyes. I can tell he doesn’t agree.

“You’re sitting at four under,” he points out again, as if it’s proof.

“So this is my fault.”

“Yeah, it is. But not for the reasons you think.” He sits across from me, leaning forward. “You want to know what I think?”

“Even if I didn’t—”

“Leah’s smart enough to recognize you need to prove—to yourself and to everyone else—that you can win a major. And she doesn’t want to be the reason you don’t.”

Fuck. He’s right. I meet his eyes. “She’s not the reason.”

Rory leans back. “Doesn’t matter. But what I do know is you play your best golf when you have something to prove.”

I think about tomorrow’s round. About proving Leah’s not a distraction. Showing her, and everyone else, that loving her doesn’t make me weak. It makes me unstoppable.

“You’re right,” I say, blowing out a long breath. “This weekend, I’ll show everyone exactly what I’m made of.”

“Now, you’re talking.” Rory grabs the remote. “Pin positions are brutal tomorrow. Flag on seventeen’s tucked behind that front bunker. Eighteen’s playing long with the wind gusting up to twenty.”

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Chapter twenty-two

Leah

I love the satisfying clickety-clack sound the keys on the vintage typewriter make when I'm in the flow and the words are coming easily, a story gliding from my fingertips.

But right now, with nothing staring back at me except a pathetic single line I managed to peck out an hour ago, the silence feels deafening.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my temples.

It's dark in here, even with the lights on.

But, thanks to the media camped outside, I can't open the window shades to let in what little sun peeks through the thick gray clouds.

Photographers, patient as all get out, have been lurking since dawn, waiting for their chance to snap a photo of the woman destroying Hays Granger's chance at a major .

I roll my neck and try again, positioning my fingers over the keys.

Nothing.

With a frustrated sigh, I abandon the typewriter and pad to the kitchen. It's nearly two o'clock, and I haven't eaten lunch, so even though I'm not hungry, I open the fridge

and scan the options. Looks like it's a turkey and cheese on wheat. Then maybe, I'll try to read a book.

I put the ingredients on the counter, but they sit untouched as my gaze drifts to the TV in the family room. I swore I wouldn't watch the round today. That I needed space to breathe.

But I cave.

The Golf Channel springs to life, a wide shot of the Harbor course filling the screen.

The commentator's voice, in that hushed, reverent tone they always use during tournaments, is saying, "...and Granger's really struggling to find his rhythm today.

After starting the day four shots back, he's now fallen to six behind the leader. "

My stomach drops as the camera cuts to Hays lining up a putt. Even from this distance, I can see the tension in his shoulders. He takes his usual three practice strokes, but something's off about his timing, and his grip seems too tight.

The ball slides past the hole.

"Another missed opportunity for Granger," the commentator continues. "He just can't seem to find the bottom of the cup today."

Another analyst chimes in. "You have to wonder if the media attention surrounding his personal life is affecting his concentration."

The camera zooms in on Hays's face, and my heart clenches. Frustration etches in every line of his features. This is my fault. I know it, and from the looks of things, so does everyone else.

I reach for the remote to turn it off, but freeze when they cut to a slow-motion replay of his swing on the previous hole.

“Notice the rhythm there. It’s just not clicking for Granger today. He’s built his reputation on unshakeable self-confidence, that impenetrable mental game, but it’s almost like hesitation is creeping into his swing today.”

I snap off the TV and make my way to my bedroom, cracking open the jewelry box on my dresser, and staring at the engagement ring nestled inside. The happily ever after it teases is an unlikely scenario now, not that I ever really believed it was a real possibility.

I snap the box closed and set it back down.

Next to it, in my ring dish, sits the pressed penny.

The token I learned, months after he gave it to me, Hays used as his ball marker for years.

I slide it out, rubbing the surface between my fingers and close my eyes, remembering the night on the boat when he pressed it into my palm.

“So you know without a doubt I’m serious about this. About you. About us.”

Even then, his faith in me, in us, was unwavering. While I’d been cataloging all the reasons it wouldn’t work, he’d been carrying around proof some things are worth holding onto forever.

The sound of car doors slamming makes me freeze. Then, a few seconds later, when my doorbell rings, I startle.

“Leah? It’s us!” Sarah calls through the door. “We brought reinforcements!”

I breathe a sigh of relief and slide the penny into my pocket, heading to the front door. Sure enough, through the peephole, I see Sarah, Cora, and Emma standing on my porch, loaded with a tray of coffees and what looks like enough takeout to fuel an army.

Grateful for the distraction, I unlock the door and open it wide enough for them to slip inside. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Rescue mission,” Cora announces, squeezing past. “We figured you might need some company.”

“And coffee,” Emma adds, carrying the to-go cups that smell like heaven.

Sarah gives me a long look as she enters then she pulls me in for a hug. “Tabitha said you look like hell, and she was right, babe.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, grateful Tab’s holding down the fort at High Tide Tales while I’m in hiding, and for my friends’ presence. I close the door and lock it. “How did you guys get past the media circus?”

“We may have created a diversion,” Cora says with a mischievous grin.

Despite everything, I find myself smiling. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not,” Emma replies. “But they deserve it.”

We settle in my living room, the coffee table quickly covered with an assortment of sub sandwiches, chips, and cookies. For a few minutes, we eat and chat, but I feel something coming as they glance at each other.

Finally, Sarah breaks. “So, want to tell us why you’re hiding in here instead of out supporting your man?”

“He’s not my—” I start then stop. The denial feels hollow even to me.

“Leah,” Cora says gently, “we saw the interview footage from Wednesday. The pictures of the two of you at that swanky party. That man is completely gone for you.”

“Which is exactly the problem.” I run my thumb up and down the paper coffee cup. “Haven’t you seen the headlines? They’re blaming me for his performance.”

“And you believe them?” Emma asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I can see it for myself! He’s playing terribly, and it’s because he’s distracted by—”

“By what?” Sarah interrupts. “By being happy?”

I open my mouth to argue, but she continues.

“Leah, you write romance novels. You know better than anyone that love doesn’t make people weaker. It makes them stronger.”

“That’s in books,” I protest. “This is real life. We’re from completely different worlds. He’s a professional athlete who travels constantly. I’ve never even been on an airplane!”

“So?” Cora shrugs. “Bryce and Sarah are complete opposites. He’s got his MBA, works in finance, and travels for business.”

“Yeah, and I teach third grade and make crafts on weekends,” Sarah continues.

“Somehow, we make it work.”

I was a bridesmaid in their wedding two years ago and can attest they’re blissfully happy, but still... “That’s different.”

“How?”

“Because...” I struggle for words. “Because strangers don’t meet on boats and fall in love in three hours and spend three years apart and then get married and live happily ever after. They just don’t.”

The three of them exchange glances. Again.

“What?”

“Why not?”

I ignore them, instead moving on to other concerns that will prove my point. “And there’s the media attention,” I continue, setting down my cup. “My life is already upended, and with him? It would turn upside down.”

“The tournament ends tomorrow,” Cora points out. “The media are here for that, and because you’re a new face on Hays’s arm, you two are something to talk about. Marrying Hays doesn’t mean you’ll be followed by paparazzi every day for the rest of your life.”

“But—”

“Leah.” Sarah’s voice is gentle but firm. “What are you really afraid of?”

The question stops me cold. I stare at my friends, these women who’ve known me for

years, who've watched me play it safe, time and time again, despite my personal adventures.

"I think you're afraid of getting hurt again," Emma says gently.

Cora reaches for my hand. "Or maybe, of not being enough for a charismatic guy like him."

"Maybe, that if you believe in the fairytale, it'll all fall apart and you'll be left with nothing?" Sarah adds.

How is it they can articulate in three sentences what I couldn't untangle in three years of overthinking?

"I'm not afraid," I insist, but even as I say the words, Hays's voice from that night on the boat replays in my mind. "Life's too fucking short."

I fiddle with the chips on my plate. While I've been overthinking every angle, analyzing every risk, he's been living by the philosophy that when something matters, you don't wait.

The room is quiet.

"Has he given you any reason to think you're not enough?" Emma asks softly.

I think about Monday night, the way he looked at me like I was the most beautiful woman in the world. How he'd said "You're not a distraction" with such conviction, as if the very suggestion was absurd.

Then Wednesday at the cocktail party, how he'd been so happy to introduce me to his friends, his protective hand planted at the small of my back.

“No,” I admit.

“Has he ever made you feel small or insignificant?”

“The opposite.” I think about how he’s always given me his full attention when we’re together. How, from that first night, he’s always made me feel as if he likes me for me. “Hays makes me feel like I could conquer the world.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

I close my eyes and swallow hard. The issue becoming crystal clear.

Me. “I’ve been the roadblock. This entire time, I’ve been the one making excuses, pushing him away, coming up with reasons why it won’t work.

” My voice cracks. “He’s done nothing but prove himself to me, over and over again, and I just kept moving the goalposts. ”

The realization hits me like a physical blow. “I even canceled on him Friday night,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “Told him I needed space, that I was protecting him from the media attention.”

I look up at my friends, shame burning in my chest. “But really, I was punishing him. For what? For keeping his promise? For being exactly who he’s always been?”

Sarah’s expression softens. “Oh, honey.”

“Nothing that’s happened this week has been his fault,” I continue, the words tumbling out now. “Not the media attention, not the headlines, not the pressure. That’s all just part of his world, and instead of standing beside him through it, I ran. I abandoned him when he needed me most.”

“And?” Cora prompts gently.

“And I love him.” The words come out in a rush, like a dam bursting. “I love his confidence and his dimples and the way he makes everything feel possible.”

I think about that first night, how he’d said “when you know, you know” with such certainty. He’d known. From the very beginning, he’d known what we could be, and I’d spent three years trying to prove him wrong.

The tears flow freely now, but I can’t stop. Hays never asked me to change. He just asked me to trust him. To trust us.

“He’s given me so much.” I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. “And what have I given him in return? Doubt. Fear. Conditions.”

My voice grows stronger as the truth settles in. “The least I can do is give him my love. Unconditionally. Win or lose, major championship or not. He deserves someone who believes in him the way he’s believed in me.”

Sarah squeals as Emma claps her hands together. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

I look around my friends, who did who knows what to come here and stage an intervention. Incredible women who have systematically dismantled every excuse I’ve built up to protect my heart.

An idea forms in my mind. Something bigger than just showing up at the course. Something that would prove to Hays I’m all in.

“I need to get to the tournament tomorrow,” I say, setting my plate on the coffee table as I jump up and start pacing. “And show him what real follow-through looks like.”

My friends erupt with enthusiasm, but I'm already thinking ahead. After all, Hays isn't the only one who can make a grand gesture.

"Speaking of the tournament," Emma says with a mischievous grin, "What about that caddy of his? Rory? He's..."

"Hot," Cora finishes with a dreamy sigh. "Like, seriously hot. Dark hair, those intense eyes, and did you see his arms when he was carrying that golf bag?"

"Down, girls," I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in days. "Tabitha's already called dibs."

A chorus of groans erupts, but I grab my coffee and take a sip, already thinking about tomorrow when, win or lose, Hays will know exactly where my heart belongs.

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Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:19 am

Chapter twenty-three

Hays

Yesterday's cloud coverage blew out to sea overnight. The threat of storms has passed, and the late June sun burned off the last wisps of the misty morning hanging over the Harbor course hours ago.

I take a deep breath, trying to let the familiar scent of fresh-cut grass center me, but it doesn't help.

I'm in the second-to-last pairing, six shots back, going into the final round.

Not exactly where I pictured myself when I arrived in Starlight Bay six days ago with a ring in my pocket and forever on my mind.

The practice range is nearly empty, with most of the field already out on the course. Only the top players gunning for the trophy remain, but the energy from those still here is palpable.

We all have a shot at the win.

The rhythmic punch of balls being struck echoes through the air. Caddies stand watch over their players, their voices creating a low hum of strategy and encouragement.

In the distance, a growing rumble of spectators across the course can be heard spread, but a good number have gathered behind the ropes here at the range, watching the

leaders warm up with the intensity of scouts evaluating prospects.

Fragments of their conversations drift over.

Predictions being made and bets being placed on who's going to come out on top when the dust settles.

I ignore everything, determined to focus on my game today. I line up another seven-iron, settling into my pre-shot routine, but something feels off. The ball flies true enough, but it lacks that crisp contact that tells me everything's dialed in.

"That's...better." Rory's tone is carefully neutral, which means he sees what I'm feeling. "Just need to find your rhythm. How about another?"

I step away and adjust my grip, rolling my shoulders before setting another ball. Ever since Leah's text on Friday night, I haven't quite felt myself. I'm not sure I was right to follow Rory's advice and give Leah the space she asked for, but I have, and there's no going back now.

Today, I've got to leave it all on the course, and then I'll deal with what's next for us. But I did wear mint green.

"Conditions are perfect today," Rory continues, his voice taking on that tone he uses when he's trying to pump me up without being obvious about it. "No wind to speak of. Greens are going to be receptive. This is a day made for going low."

I nod, working through my bag. Driver, three-wood, five-iron. Finally, some swings seem to connect, muscle memory taking over as my body remembers what it's supposed to do when my head isn't completely fucked.

"Plus," he adds, pulling out his yardage book, "half the guys ahead of you have never

been in contention at a major on Sunday. Pressure does funny things to people who aren't used to it."

"And I am?" The question comes out more bitter than I intend.

He looks at me as if I've lost my mind. "You've been handling pressure since you were little, playing in junior tournaments and standing over putts with your college scholarship on the line. This is just a bigger stage."

He's right, of course. But yesterday felt different. As if I were carrying the weight of the tournament, the media scrutiny, Leah's absence, and my own expectations. And rather than step up, it crushed me.

"Hays!"

A voice cuts through the background noise, familiar enough to make my heart stutter. But it can't be. The sound gets swallowed by the crowd noise and the general chaos of a major championship Sunday morning.

I must be hearing things. Wishful thinking mixed with sleep deprivation and the kind of hope that makes you imagine what you need most.

"Hays!"

There it is again, clearer this time, slicing through the air as if it's meant for my ears only. I turn slowly, afraid to believe, my heart hammering against my ribs. But there she is.

For a split second, the entire world goes silent. The practice range, the crowd, the other players—everything fades to white noise.

Leah stands against the rope, wearing a fuchsia shirt. The same bright pink I used to wear on Sundays. My original signature color. Paired with a white skirt and sneakers along with a ponytail, she looks as if she belongs here, as if she were born to stand beside fairways and cheer from galleries.

But it's her left hand gripping the rope that makes the seven-iron slip from my fingers. The engagement ring catches the sunlight, the diamond sparkling. She's wearing it. Actually, wearing it.

My brain short-circuits. This can't be real. Two days ago, she needed space, convinced she was ruining my career, and now...

"Leah," I breathe, moving toward her before conscious thought kicks in.

The rhythmic thwacks of practice swings die out around us.

Conversations taper off midsentence. I feel every eye on the range turning our way.

Fans, caddies, officials, even the other players pause their warmups to watch this unfold.

Camera phones appear, quiet murmurs of excitement filling the near silence.

"You're here," I say when I reach the rope, because apparently my vocabulary has been reduced to stating the obvious.

"I'm here." Her voice is soft but steady, carrying the mix of vulnerability and strength that first made me fall for her. "And I'm wearing your ring."

"I can see that." The words come out rough, as if I've been swallowing sand. I want to vault the rope, pull her into my arms, kiss her until neither of us can think straight.

Instead, I settle for covering her hands with mine. “But what are you doing here?”

“You want the honest answer?”

The question is one I asked on the boat that night. I answer the same as she did. “Always.”

“I was wrong.” The words come out in a rush, as if she’s been practicing them. “I was wrong to pull away on Friday. Wrong to let the media noise get in my head. Wrong to keep making you prove yourself when you’ve done nothing but love me since that first night.”

My throat goes tight. The practice range has gone completely still, everyone holding their breath.

“When I saw you on TV yesterday struggling,” she continues, her voice growing stronger, “I knew it was my fault. Not because you can’t handle pressure, but because I took away the one thing you asked for. Me.”

“Sweetheart—”

“I love you. Win or lose today, major championship or not, I love you and I want to marry you. As soon as possible.”

The air rushes from my lungs as her words sink in, settling deep in my chest as if they’ve found their home. My vision blurs, and I have to blink hard, my throat working. Three years of waiting, of wondering, of hoping, but now, she’s here, and she’s wearing my ring and she loves me.

“I spent yesterday hiding,” she continues, “convinced I was protecting you by staying away. But all I was doing was proving I don’t trust you, don’t trust us. And that’s not

fair, because you've never given me a reason not to."

I squeeze her hands, the familiar feel of her grounding me, pulling me back from the edge of losing it completely in front of half the golf world.

"The headlines, the distraction—"

"Are bullshit." The curse word sounds foreign coming from her, but the conviction is pure Leah. "I've been so busy cataloging all the reasons we shouldn't work that I forgot to appreciate the miracle that we do."

My throat clears, and the cocky confidence that's been my trademark since junior golf resurfaces. Because she's right. We do work. Against all logic, against all odds, we work perfectly.

"Damn right, we do," I say with a smile. "I told you that first night we were perfect together."

"You did." Her laugh is watery but genuine. She pulls her hands from mine to reach into her pocket, pulling out something that makes my heart stop.

My ball marker.

The pressed penny from Pikes Peak I convinced my dad to get for me the time we went to play The Broadmoor and enjoyed a detour to the base of the mountain together. The one thing I could give her that first night, that would show how serious I was.

Tears prick the back of my eyes.

"I want you to have this back," she says, pressing the warm metal into my palm. "I

want you to play with it today knowing that no matter what happens, I'm yours."

I close my fist around it, unable to speak.

"I know what being with you means now," she says, her dropping. "But I'm ready for the adventure. As long as you're by my side."

I can't hold back anymore. Leaning across the rope, I cup her face in my hands and kiss her as if my life depends on it. She tastes like a dream finally coming true.

Around us, the practice range erupts in cheers and applause. Camera phones have captured everything, and voices call out congratulations, but I don't give a damn about the photos or the headlines or what story the media might spin from this moment.

Because this woman is mine.

When we break apart, my heart is pounding. "Will you meet me at eighteen? Whether I'm in contention or not, will you be there when I finish?"

"Try and stop me." Her laugh is pure joy.

My assigned tour official, a middle-aged man with graying temples and the efficient demeanor of someone who's worked dozens of these events over the years, stands about ten feet away, clipboard in hand, having watched the entire reunion play out along with everyone else.

"Jim," I call out. "Could you help me with something?"

He approaches with obvious recognition of what's coming, his eyes darting between Leah and me. "What can I do for you, Mr. Granger?"

“Player Family credentials,” I say, gesturing to Leah. “She needs to be inside the ropes.”

“I’m sorry, but without official documentation, you won’t be able to get Family credentials.” His tone is apologetic but firm.

I notice the gold band on his left hand and shift tactics, my voice softening but loud enough for the gathered spectators to hear. “You’re married, Jim?”

He blinks at the change in direction. “Twenty-three years next month.”

“Do you remember the first time your wife told you she loved you?”

His expression shifts, confusion mixing with something warmer. “Of course.”

“How did it feel?”

A small smile tugs at his lips, despite himself. “Like I was the luckiest guy in the world.”

A few murmurs of agreement ripple through the crowd behind the ropes. I feel their energy shifting, getting invested in this moment.

I nod toward Leah. “She just told me she loves me for the first time. Right here, in front of all these people.” My voice catches. “This is the biggest round of my career, and having her there when I finish... It would mean everything.”

“Come on, Jim!” someone calls out from the crowd. “Let love win!”

“Make it happen!” another voice adds.

Jim looks at Leah, then he glances at the crowd, all of them invested in our story, now.

“Player Guest credentials,” he says finally, pulling out his radio. “I’ll make it happen.”

More cheers and applause from the crowd.

“Thank, man,” I say as he steps away to make the arrangements.

Leah shakes her head in amused disbelief. “That was smooth. Reminds me of that time you bribed my waiter.”

“Anything for you. But hey, I have to get back to warming up.” Even though everything in me wants to stay right here, holding onto this moment, I do have to go.

“I know.” She reaches to wipe lipstick off my lips with her thumb. “Go show them what Hays Granger is really made of.”

I press a kiss to her dark hair. “I love you, too,” I whisper. “More than any major championship, more than any win. You’re my trophy, sweetheart.”

“Go,” she says, giving me a gentle push, her blush beautiful in the midday light. “Play this round, so we can celebrate properly tonight.”

As I walk back to my bay, the ball marker warm in my palm, I feel like a million bucks. Filled with the kind of bone-deep confidence that comes from knowing exactly who you are and what you’re capable of.

The media wrote me off after yesterday’s round. Six shots back, playing in the third-to-last group, they’ve already started crafting narratives about my “disappointing

week” and how the pressure got to golf’s golden boy.

But they don’t know what I know. They don’t understand everything just changed.

I close my fist around the pressed penny, thinking about my dad. About the nine-year-old boy who learned life doesn’t wait for you to be ready, that when something matters, you go all in.

“Well?” Rory asks as I approach, but his wide grin tells me he already knows exactly what I’m about to say.

“Let’s do this.”

He whoops loud enough to turn heads then pulls me into a fierce hug that’s part celebration, part relief.

“About damn time,” he says against my shoulder. “Congrats.”

When he pulls back, his expression shifts into the focused intensity I’ve seen a thousand times. “Alright then,” he says, shouldering my bag. “It’s on.”

I take one last look toward the ropes where Leah still stands.

She raises her left hand in a small wave, the diamond flashing like a promise.

For the first time all week, I can’t wait to get to the first tee.

I already have everything I want. And now, I’m about to show the world what happens when I have nothing to lose.

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Chapter twenty-four

Hays

The roar from the gallery builds as I stride up the eighteenth fairway, the sound rolling toward me like an ocean wave.

Close to eight thousand people are on their feet, their cheers almost deafening.

But instead of feeling the pressure, a quiet calm settles over me. I shoot a smile at Rory on my left.

My approach shot sits twelve feet from the pin, a manageable putt that could put me in the clubhouse lead.

Behind me, the final groups work their way through the course.

One glance at the leaderboard shows two players still have a chance to catch me, maybe force a playoff, but right now, all that matters is this moment.

Then I see her.

Leah stands inside the ropes near the green, that fuchsia shirt blazing like a beacon against the crowd. The sight of her waiting makes my chest tight. But it's who's standing beside her that makes me nearly stumble. My mom.

Their arms are linked, the two chatting easily, heads bent together like old friends.

When Mom throws back her head, laughing at something Leah says, an overwhelming surge of pure happiness nearly stops me in my tracks.

“Good lie,” Rory says as we approach the green, but I hear the grin in his voice. He saw them, too.

I mark my ball with the pressed penny and step back, zeroed in on this shot.

Rory scans the green. “Twelve feet, slight uphill. Five, maybe six, inches of break from right to left, but it’s subtle. The grain’s running away from you, so it’ll be a touch slower than the practice green.”

I nod, reading the line myself. The green slopes gently toward the harbor. The lighthouse in the background, its white tower standing high over the water, reminds me I’m back where Leah and I began.

“Pace is key,” Rory continues. “Get it to the hole with good speed and let the break take it. Nothing fancy.”

“Don’t worry,” I assure him, with a wink. “I’ve been working on my stroke all week. I know exactly how to get it in the hole.”

Rory shakes his head with a snort. “Jesus, Granger. Even now?”

“Especially now,” I grin.

And with that, his caddy mask slips, replaced by the friend who’s been by my side since we were kids. He claps me on the shoulder, his voice dropping to something only I can hear.

“Take your time. Enjoy this moment. You’ve earned it.”

I will, believe me. Because when I sink this putt, I'll be the leader in the clubhouse at the fucking Open. The stakes are massive, the pressure should be crushing, but instead, I feel like I did when I was little, when my dad was my coach and caddy and assured me I could do anything.

I pick up the pressed penny, replacing it with my ball, and slip it into my pocket, sending a silent Happy Father's Day wish out to him, because there's a chance I might be about to make his prediction come true.

With a deep breath, I step up to the ball. Three practice strokes and I'm feeling the weight of the putter in my hands. I adjust my grip twice, just like always, making sure everything's perfect. Then I go completely still, the crowd noise fading to white noise as I read the line one more time.

The putt feels perfect the moment it leaves the blade. I watch it track exactly where I aimed, taking the subtle break, rolling with that confident pace that says it's never going anywhere but the bottom of the cup.

It drops with the sweetest sound in golf, that satisfying rattle of ball against plastic.

The crowd erupts like a bomb went off. Thousands losing their minds, their cheers echoing off the clubhouse and rolling out over the harbor. I raise both arms, letting the club fall to the ground as the moment washes over me.

Rory's there in an instant, pulling me into a fierce hug I return with the deep gratitude I have for this man who's been by my side through thick and thin.

He pounds my back but doesn't say anything, which tells me more than words ever could.

As we part, I lift my hat and run a hand through my hair before I lose it right here,

right now.

It takes a minute to shake my partner's hand and his caddy's, as well, accepting their congratulations, but then, I'm walking off the green, searching the secure area that leads to the scoring tent.

And Leah's right there. She rushes toward me, a huge smile filling her beautiful face. I catch her, lifting her off the ground and spinning her around while she laughs against my neck. She feels perfect in my arms, solid and real and mine.

"I can't believe you just did that," she breathes against my ear.

"Believe it, sweetheart." I set her down, turning as Mom appears at my shoulder.

I pull her into a fierce hug.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. "And somewhere out there, I know your dad is, too."

I swallow hard, the emotion swelling within me. "I played with the marker today, and he was right there with me."

Tears stream down her cheeks as she steps back, swiping them away with the back of her hand. It nearly breaks me, but I reach for her, and when her fingers curl around mine, I let out a long breath.

"I see you've met my fiancée," I say, clearing my throat.

"We've been having the most wonderful chat," Mom says, beaming.

The moment's perfect, but reality intrudes when Rory catches my eye. Two players in

the final groups could still catch me, forcing a two-hole playoff. I need to get to the range, stay warm, and keep my swing sharp just in case.

“I’ve got to head to the range,” I tell my mom and Leah. “Stay loose in case there’s a playoff.”

“Go then,” Leah says, giving me a gentle push. “We’ll be fine.”

“No way.” I squeeze her hand. “You’re coming with me.” I look between her and Mom. “Both of you.”

I’ve been in a playoff before, at a tournament event in Hawaii, and despite the tropical paradise, staying warm on the range felt like torture.

The waiting, the watching the leaderboard to see if my lead will hold.

But today, with Leah and Mom chatting casually only feet away as I hit practice balls, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

While I work my way through my bag, mom shares embarrassing childhood stories that make Leah laugh.

And Leah returns the favor by telling her about that night on the boat and how I insisted we get married right then and there in international waters.

Their voices create a comfortable background hum that keeps me loose and relaxed.

The competitor in me still wants this win, but no matter what happens—win, playoff, or even coming in second—I have no regrets. I gave it everything out there today, played the best golf of my life when it mattered the most.

Twenty minutes later, Jim, the official, who's still with me, relays a message from his walkie talkie.

“Steward is facing a fifteen foot putt for birdie to tie your score on eighteen.” Sure enough, the crowd goes silent then, moments later, builds to a crescendo before suddenly cutting off with a collective groan that echoes through the air.

My heart stops.

Leah and my mom clutch each other as Jim, holding the radio to his ear, nods and meets my eyes. “Congratulations, Hays. You’ve won the U.S. Open!”

My legs go weak as the reality of winning a major crashes over me. I’ve done it. After everything—the pressure, the doubters, the years of grinding—I’ve actually done it.

Heat floods my chest, spreading outward until my entire body feels as if it’s vibrating. This is what winning a major feels like. Proof that hard work and determination, along with persistence and belief, can actually pay off.

“You won!” Leah throws herself at me, and I catch her instinctively, holding her tight as I give in to the emotions rushing through my veins.

I can’t speak. My throat’s too tight, my chest too full.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispers against my neck, and that’s when the tears come.

The ride back to the clubhouse in the golf cart feels surreal. Officials and photographers surround us, and there’ll be hours more to go with the trophy presentation and interviews, but all I can focus on is Leah’s hand in mine, the press of her engagement ring against my palm.

Mom sits shotgun next to Jim, her smile brighter than the late afternoon sun, while Rory, in the back, grins as if he just won the lottery.

Leah squeezes my hand. “This must be the best day of your life.”

I look at her, this brilliant, beautiful woman who saw what I needed, who waited for me, and now, who’s wearing my ring and promising me forever.

“It is,” I say, bringing her hand to my lips to press a kiss to her knuckles. “So far.”

Her eyebrows lift. “So far?”

“I have no doubt the best days of my life are still ahead.” I hold her gaze, letting her see everything I feel, everything I promise. “With you.”

The lighthouse comes into view as we round the corner of the clubhouse, its white tower standing against the dusky sky.

“Remind me later to tell you about my second novel,” Leah says, biting her lip as if she’s hiding something.

“You didn’t seem to want to share details the other night when I asked about it.”

“Because I didn’t want to jinx anything.”

Wrinkles crisscross my brow, but she just smiles slyly and leans her head on my shoulder, settling perfectly against my side.

“So what happens now?” Leah asks softly, her voice barely audible over the rumble of the cart.

“Now?” I press a kiss to the top of her head. “Now, we get married.”

“About time, hmm?”

“You can say that again.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 2:19 am

The same dinner cruise boat that changed my life three years ago rocks gently beneath my feet, but this time, I'm not gripping the railing. Now, I'm Mrs. Hays Granger, and the only thing making my pulse race is the way my new husband keeps looking at me as if he wants to devour me whole.

Six weeks. That's how long it took us to plan this wedding once Hays won the U.S.

Open. Not because we were rushing, but simply because we'd already waited long enough.

And when I called to book the date—exactly three years from the day we met, smack in the middle of our birthdays—and the boat was available, it felt like the pieces falling perfectly into place.

The overhead string lights cast the same magical glow they did that first night, but now, they're celebrating us.

Champagne flows freely and laughter echoes across the deck.

Everywhere I look, our two worlds have blended seamlessly.

Hays's buddies are sharing stories and, from the looks of it, tongues soon, too, with my friends.

A server appears at my elbow with a familiar drink on a silver tray. "Rum and Coke with a lime for Mrs. Granger. Compliments of your husband."

I laugh, accepting the glass. "Thank you."

Barely a second later, my husband approaches with a wide smile.

"The drink that got me to follow up with you that first night," I say, lifting the glass as I smile at the memory. "I was so nervous."

He presses a kiss to my hair. "And now?"

I look at him, even more devastating than I remember. "Now I know exactly where I belong."

"Glad you finally realized it."

"Hey, I agreed that night, didn't I?"

"Yes," he admits, taking a sip of his own drink, "but it was touch and go there for a little bit."

"True."

I look around and spot Hays's mom, deep in conversation with Tabitha about something that has them both doubled over with laughter.

But it's the sight of Rory, today's best man, leaning against the bar, completely captivated by whatever my gorgeous maid of honor is laughing about, that makes me smile the widest.

"Look at that," I murmur, nodding toward them as Hays's arms slip around my waist from behind.

"About damn time," he says, his breath warm against my ear.

“She’s been asking about him since that first night.” I lean back against his solid chest, the soft fabric of his mint green dress shirt smooth against my bare shoulders. “Though, I think your matchmaking skills need work, hotshot.”

His laugh rumbles through me. “My matchmaking skills got me you, didn’t they?”

“Sean’s taking credit for that.” I lift my chin toward where his brother is regaling a small crowd with the story of his proposal night, complete with a dramatic reenactment of his popping the question.

“He’s not wrong,” Hays murmurs against my temple, a smile in his voice. “Without his romantic dinner cruise idea, we never would have found each other.”

“Because I certainly wasn’t to be found at the Harbor course.”

“Come with me,” Hays says suddenly, taking my hand and swiping a half empty bottle of champagne from a nearby ice bucket as he leads me away from the crowd.

I follow without question, my heels clicking against the deck as he guides me to the exact spot where we made our impossible pact three years ago. The same railing, the same view of the harbor stretching out toward the lighthouse, the same feeling that anything is possible.

But everything else has changed.

“You’re even more gorgeous tonight than I could have imagined,” he says, his voice dropping to that velvet tone that still makes my knees weak.

“Wait until you see me later...in white.”

He hums under his breath. “Please tell me you ordered all the colors.”

I chuckle. "You remember that?"

"Sweetheart, I remember every word you've ever said to me." His thumb traces along my collarbone, and I suppress a shiver. "Especially the dirty ones."

"Hays," I warn, but there's no heat behind it.

"What? I'm just appreciating my wife." The word 'wife' rolls off his tongue as if he's been waiting his whole life to say it. "My brilliant, beautiful, perfect wife who looks like an innocent angel in white, but who likes things as spicy as I do."

"About that," I murmur, pressing closer. "I've been working on something new. Something that makes that birthday letter look tame."

His grip on my waist tightens. "How tame are we talking?"

"Let's just say it captures the very thorough celebration of your major championship win. Remember? That night after the party at your house...in the bathroom?"

"Fuck," he breathes against my ear.

I trace a finger along the platinum wedding band on his finger.

"Any regrets?" he asks softly, his sea-glass eyes serious, despite the smile playing at his lips.

I pretend to consider the question. "Well, I did always picture myself having a longer engagement."

"Three years wasn't long enough for you?"

"I meant officially engaged." I lean closer, lowering my voice. "Though I do need to

rewrite the ending of my second book now."

"The mystery project?" His eyes light up with interest.

"Turns out my golf pro hero and the small-town heroine he falls for at first sight end up together after all."

"Well, of course," he says with that trademark grin. "You had me as source material. Poor fictional girl didn't stand a chance."

"Modest as always," I laugh, shaking my head.

His voice drops to that velvet tone. "I hope your fictional hero makes his girl scream his name just like you scream mine."

"Actually, I've been documenting all your best moves," I say with mock seriousness. "That thing you do with your tongue? Definitely going in chapter twelve. And the way you make me beg? Chapter fifteen is going to be very educational."

He looks amused. "That so?"

"I'm nothing if not dedicated to my craft. Though I might need some refresher sessions to make sure I get all the details right."

"Good things come to those who wait," he murmurs, pulling me closer until there's no space between us.

"And great things," I reply, thinking back to that first night, "come to those who take risks."

The truth of that statement settles deep in my chest. Three years ago, agreeing to marry a stranger felt like the craziest thing I'd ever done. Now, standing here as his

wife, it feels like the sanest decision of my life.

“Thank you,” he says suddenly, his expression growing serious.

“For what?”

“For saying yes. For wearing my ring. For believing in us.” His thumb traces across my wedding band. “For making me the luckiest bastard alive.”

Tears prick the back of my eyes, but they’re the good kind. The kind that come from being so completely, utterly happy your heart can barely contain it.

“You know what I realized today?” I ask, straightening his tie.

“What’s that?”

“That night when you said when you know, you know ? You were right.”

His smile is brilliant, transforming his entire face. “And now?”

I rise on my toes, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that tastes like champagne and promises and the rest of our lives. “Now, I’m ready for more adventures. As long as you’re there with me.”

“Always, sweetheart.” He reaches into his pocket, pulling out something that makes my heart skip. The pressed penny, worn smooth from years of use, catches the glow from the string lights overhead. “I carried this for good luck today. Figured if it got me you once, it might keep you forever.”

I close my fingers around his, the warm metal pressed between our palms. “Forever’s a long time, hotshot.”

“Not nearly long enough.” He grins that same cocky smile from our first night. “But, speaking of growing old together, how does it feel to be almost twenty-eight, Mrs. Granger?”

“Ask me tomorrow,” I tease. “For now, you’re the old man who’s twenty-eight and married.”

“I am,” he confirms softly, his chin falling for just a minute before he meets my eyes. “And it feels amazing to be alive. And even better to be yours.”