



Jasper (Guardians of the North #5)

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Category: Romance

Description: Jasper: Guardians of the North Book 5

A Small Town Military Romance

Vanessa

I have one rule: I don't date military men.

It was a promise I made to Mom on her deathbed.

All my life, I've lived by that rule.

Or so I thought.

Because that whirlwind romance weekend I had with a stranger four years ago?

Turns out the jerk was lying.

And now he's my assigned coast guard liaison for the festival I'm planning.

I should hate him for lying all those years ago.

I shouldn't want to climb him like a tree.

I certainly shouldn't be thinking about uprooting my entire life to build one with him.

Jasper

The night I met Vanessa Wheeler four years ago, she was adamant she didn't get tangled up with military men.

So yeah, I lied.

Because deep down I knew turning around and walking away was the biggest mistake I could ever make.

I had to know her.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:10 am

VANESSA

“Has it hit you yet?” my loyal and endearing assistant Erin asks as I adjust my mom’s necklace in the mirror.

She’s been gone eight years, but the heart-shaped pendant adorned in tiny diamonds always makes me feel closer to her.

As if she’s holding my hand and encouraging me forward, even when things are hard. Tonight, I need all the help I can get.

“Not yet,” I admit.

“You’re not changing your mind, are you?”

I turn to Erin who’s sitting cross-legged on the bed, surrounded by a sea of notes, maps, and lists.

The entirety of the North Haven festival covers her queen-sized bed.

Every last detail we’ve meticulously planned and organized since I agreed to take on the project as a favor to my dad several weeks ago.

“No, I’m not changing my mind. I’m closing Luxe Elevated.

” Saying it out loud makes me tremble a bit.

Though I know in my heart I'm making the right decision, I worry I'll disappoint Dad when I tell him that this festival is the last event I'll ever professionally plan.

For years, I followed in my mom's footsteps.

I've planned exquisite events all over the country, hoping that each one lives up to even half the potential of the events she once planned.

But my true passion lies elsewhere. Another bomb to drop on Dad tonight .

"Good. Because I'm taking that job in Hawaii," Erin says firmly, though a smile graces her lips.

She couldn't hide her excitement if she tried.

When I decided to give up event planning to pursue my passion to write children's books full time, I didn't want a single employee to worry about their future.

When I heard about the opening in Hawaii, I put in a good word for Erin.

But it wasn't necessary as she crushed that interview all on her own.

"And I'm going to come visit the resort after you've infused the place with your magic touch," I promise. "Now get dressed. We have to meet my dad and the Coastguard liaison for dinner in twenty minutes."

Erin hops off the bed, managing not to disturb a single document. "I'll be quick!" She rushes into the bathroom and tugs the door closed.

As usual, I'm ready early.

Leaving me with too much time on my hands to think.

Not only do I have to tell Dad that I'm giving up the event business to pursue a secret writing career he knows nothing about, but I have to break the news that I'm not marrying David. Even if he hadn't cheated on me, something was off before that. Something in my gut told me he wasn't the one .

I move to the window, admiring the coastal view with the mountain back drop.

I've always wanted to visit Alaska. Ever since...

I let out a sigh. One that's both a mixture of happy and forlorn.

Ever since Jasper . That weekend whirlwind romance now four years ago has ruined me.

No matter how hard I tried not to compare David to Jasper, I did anyway.

Just like I have with any man I've dated since.

Jasper grew up in Alaska. He talked about it with such reverie that I practically felt I could travel there simply in his stories.

But that weekend was only ever meant to be one weekend. We were both recovering from back breakups. Both in Cape Cod only for a quick trip. We lived in opposite parts of the country. It had no chance of working out. But boy had it been fun. And the sex...It was off-the-damn-charts hot.

“Want me to turn up the AC?” Erin teases, pulling me from my trance.

I didn't realize I was fanning myself with a brochure, but now that I've been caught, I

set it down.

“You were thinking about him again, weren’t you?”

Erin and I are close. When I first hired her, we were strangers.

Over the years, she’s proven to be a valuable and loyal assistant.

The best I could ever hope for. But she’s also become my closest and dearest friend.

She’s the only one I’ve ever told about Jasper.

A man whose last name I never learned. One of the many rules I set for that weekend in hopes we wouldn’t spoil it with reality.

“How did you know?”

“Your neck gets all tomato-red when you think about him.” She steps up to the vanity to apply her makeup. “I have to admit, I’m jealous. I’ve never had a roll in sheets that left an impression on me four years later.”

“It’s crazy to think he might show up to the festival, right?”

Alaska’s a big place.” I’ve searched my memory a thousand times since Dad asked me to head the planning of the North Haven festival, but I can’t for the life of me remember the name of Jasper’s hometown.

The one with the restaurant his parents own.

I wish I could recall it, because I’d make the trip to try that clam chowder.

To see if his time in Cape Cod was well-spent or a bust.

“I don’t want to be Debbie Downer here, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up. North Haven is a small town in the biggest state in the country. He could be hundreds of miles away.”

It’s too much to hope that he’ll make the trip for a small-town festival, no matter how well-advertised.

It’s not as if my name is on any poster.

He has no way of knowing I’m here. And I have no way of knowing whether he’s married with two sets of twins.

I can’t imagine a man of his charm and ambition stayed single long. Too bad...

After the most amazing weekend of my entire life, we made each other delete our contact information out of our phones.

We agreed it was for the best. Why spoil something so good?

If we’d tried to make the long-distance thing work, it would not only have failed.

But all the cloud-nine memories would’ve been drowned out by the future suffering and resentment.

It was better this way.

“Ready to go?” Erin asks.

“You never cease to amaze me with how fast you get ready. You sure you aren’t

secretly a ninja?”

“Who knows?” She loops her arm through mine and tugs me out the door. “Maybe I am.”

We take the elevator down to the lobby and follow the signs for the restaurant.

Knowing my dad, he’s already saved us a table and is halfway through the bread basket.

The reviews of North Haven’s newest restaurant are stellar.

I’m hoping the food will help ease the blow of everything I have to tell him tonight.

Including why David, the man I know he wanted me to marry, isn’t in North Haven with me.

“There he is,” Erin points to a table in the corner.

Dad sees us and waves.

But I don’t wave back.

I can’t.

“Oh, that liaison is cute. It’s too bad you don’t date military guys.”

I’m paralyzed.

The liaison is very familiar.

I can't breathe.

"It's Jasper," I whisper.

"Wait, what?"

"It's him ."

"It can't be. Your mystery man is in the restaurant business. Not the military."

"Yeah," I say regaining some of composure and feeling it replaced with anger. "He has a lot of explaining to do."

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JASPER

When the admiral gave me the festival liaison assignment last week, the panic didn't immediately set in.

As the only pilot with a sprained wrist and grounded until further notice, I practically had a target on my back for this type of bitch-work.

It was predictable, and I had accepted my shitty fate.

Then he mentioned I'd be glued to the hip of the woman running the show—his daughter.

The panic hit me like a fucking Mack truck after that.

The admiral has no idea that his precious Vanessa and I once shared a very intimate weekend in Cape Cod.

If he did, he'd probably have sent me out on a boat until this whole festival was over just to keep me away from her.

Instead, he introduced us like we were strangers and insisted we all take a seat at a very intimate corner table.

All throughout dinner, I keep waiting for Vanessa to blow my cover. To throw her napkin down and announce that she can't work with me. She was never what I'd call the shy or reserved type. Her boldness and take-charge personality were what drew

me to her in the first place.

But each time she seems close to losing her cool, she reins it in.

It might be the way her dad praises me up and down—something he certainly would regret if he knew just how much of that long-ago weekend I spent naked with his daughter.

Or maybe she's waiting to rip me a new one in private to prevent a public scene.

"Color me impressed," the admiral says, folding his cloth napkin and dropping it on top of an empty plate. "If the food vendors don't hit the spot for the festival, at least the hotel guests have this place. My only regret is waiting so long to dine here."

"I haven't had a steak that good in months," Erin, Vanessa's personal assistant, says.

She's been eyeing me off and on the entire meal, but the interest I sense doesn't appear to be her own.

Not with the way she keeps looking at Vanessa each time.

It might be too much to hope I have an ally in the Vanessa Wheeler department, but I'll take all the help I can get.

I haven't stopped thinking about the curvy beauty in the four years since I've met her. I've tried to move on, but every date has been cut short when the realization dawns on me: no one compares to Vanessa.

"The food vendors at the festival will hit it out of the park," Vanessa reassures, sounding all business.

Tucking her dark, wavy hair behind her ear.

Exposing a neck I have fond memories of nibbling on.

I can practically hear the sexy little coo she makes when I hit the hollow spot that drives her wild. “They’re all carefully vetted.”

Food vendors. Safe topic. Focus, Jasper.

I wonder if Vanessa had a chance to vet Rocco’s Tacos .

That local food truck has gone in and out of business for the past couple of years now.

Though the rumors as of late are that they’ve made a decent comeback, I can’t help but forget the horrid food poisoning my buddy Jordan suffered a couple years back.

I’m about to ask when the admiral cuts in.

“Say, Vanessa. Where’s David?”

The jealousy is a sharp blade to the chest. I don’t have to ask who this David is to know I don’t like him.

Because in the four years Vanessa and I have been apart, she has never once not felt like mine.

Irrational, I know. Yet the thought of another man near her makes me crazy with jealousy.

An emotion I didn’t even realize I possessed until this moment. Apparently, I have it

in spades.

Vanessa empties her cocktail glass, as if using the time to poise herself. With a subtle inhale, she lifts her gaze to her dad. If I'm not mistaken, her hand trembles slightly. "He's not coming."

"Business commitment? He's certainly a busy man?—"

"We broke things off."

I can't help but notice Erin's bouncing gaze between Vanessa and me.

She has to know who I am. Meaning I made a bigger impression than I thought if Vanessa told someone about our weekend.

Do I have a shot at turning this whole thing around?

I have a few stretched truths to sort out.

That alone promises I have my work cut out for me.

But what if this chance meeting is really a second chance for us?

"I'm sorry to hear that, sweet pea."

"Don't be," Vanessa says. "It wasn't meant to be."

"Good." The admiral's tone is firm enough to lift everyone's gaze from the table to him. "I didn't like him."

"What?" Vanessa's shock appears genuine.

“He was wound too tight. Spent too much time on his phone. That and pretending he had a damn clue about the stock market.” He glances at Vanessa’s hand but doesn’t take it.

A subtle gesture only someone paying very close attention would even catch.

Though Vanessa was never forthcoming about her dad being an admiral—that surprise was quite the shock all those years ago—she was open about how unaffectionate he’d been since her mom passed.

“But you told me you liked him. I thought you wanted me to marry him,” Vanessa insists.

“I want you to be happy, sweet pea.”

Vanessa’s shock isn’t as well-masked as she probably thinks. I recognize the surprise dancing in her light blue eyes.

“I think I can speak for all of us when I say we’re happy David isn’t the one,” Erin says with a lighthearted chuckle that breaks the gentle tension. She lifts a glass in toast, and the admiral is the first to join.

“I’ll toast to that,” I join in.

The admiral turns me to me, and for a beat, I fear I’ve overstepped. Just because he’s been talking up my skills and honors all throughout this meal does not mean he’s suggesting I date his daughter. I’m not that stupid.

“Looks like you’ll have your hands full this weekend, Captain Steele.”

“I will?”

“I want you to ensure my little girl enjoys herself. She’s a workaholic, even if she’s in denial about that. I have no doubt that every detail is meticulously planned—” He looks to Erin.

“It is,” she confirms.

“—So I know she’ll have free time on her hands. Show her North Haven before she rushes back to Houston. I want her to at least consider visiting again before I relocate. Think you can handle that assignment, Jasper?” That the admiral is speaking to me so informally is a sign of his trust.

If I fuck that up, it might mean more than my next promotion. It might mean the end of my career. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Then it’s all settled.”

“Dad, this is really unnecessary?—”

“If I could, I’d show you around myself. But you know how it is. We’ll catch up before you fly out,” the admiral says, waving the server down for a check. “I want to hear all about your time in North Haven.”

His words feel like a stern warning to behave myself.

To be the respectable chaperone who keeps his hands to himself.

If I was a smart man, I’d give up any notion I might have about second chances.

Because pursuing Vanessa Wheeler might cost me the career I’ve worked so hard to achieve.

The career that has defined who I am to the core.

That I'm willing to run the risk should rattle me.

For once in my life, I don't want to play it smart.

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VANESSA

He's a coastguard pilot.

Military .

I'm so damn mad I could scream, but making a scene in the ladies' room seems unwise with all this stupid tile.

The echo would carry to every diner in the hotel restaurant.

As I'm not willing to humiliate myself any more than I already have, I settle instead for beating my palms against the marble counter.

Jasper lied to me. When I told him the one thing I don't do is date anyone military, he looked me in the eyes and lied to me. And now I'm supposed to spend the long festival weekend with him without working. Without killing him and hiding the body.

"Maybe he joined the coastguard after you met?" Erin suggests.

"You don't become a captain—or a pilot—in that amount of time." Even if that were possible, the way my dad spoke of him and his impressive career, made it very clear that Jasper is a lifer. "I can't do this," I tell Erin. "I can't spend the next four days with him. You have to take my place."

"I don't know your dad, but..."

“I know, I know. Ugh! ” My dad doesn’t use his pull as a high-ranking military official often, but when he does, it’s because he has a message to send.

Considering Erin’s future job is at a military resort, he could mess things up for her if he wanted.

Though the odds of that are incredibly small, I’d never risk it.

“Maybe this is a good thing.”

I let out an incredulous laugh. “How do you figure that?”

“You two obviously have some things to straighten out. Start there.”

I don’t want to straighten out anything. I want my carefully preserved memories of Cape Cod to remain intact. On the worst days, I’ve been able to escape reality and sit awhile in a hazy daydream. Tangled in silk sheets and Jasper’s hard body. But in none of those fantasies was he military.

Years ago, as my mother was dying, she made me promise to steer clear of military men.

I know she loved my dad with all her heart, but it wasn’t easy.

Dad was gone a lot and she didn’t handle it well.

She didn’t want me to endure the same pain and suffering.

The constant worrying and sleepless nights.

It was the only thing she asked of me on her death bed.

“We better go back out there,” Erin says gently.

I squeeze the heart-shaped pendant and nod.

As I follow her back to our table, I stare at the pattern on the floor to avoid Jasper’s intense gaze.

I can feel it burning into me. Though I’m livid with the man for lying, it hasn’t done much to dull the chemistry between us.

A sizzle of electricity that could power the entire state of Alaska at its worst. At its best...

“Your dad had to run,” Jasper says, drawing my attention to the table. “He asked me to wait for you.”

“Of course he did,” I mutter.

I could take the out. Run back to my room and flip the deadbolt. Deal with Jasper tomorrow. My brain hurts. My heart hurts. I need space. Time to regain my equilibrium. Which is why I have no idea why I slip into my chair and reach for the dessert menu.

“I need to make a couple calls,” Erin says, pushing in her chair before she sits down.

“But you love chocolate cake?—”

She pats me on the shoulder. “I’ll try it tomorrow.”

I think it’s the devilish male smirk across the intimate table that sets me off. With a deep inhale, I close the menu and set it down despite the urge to chuck it across the

table at the smug coastguard pilot. “Start talking,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Vanessa, it’s really good to see you.”

I narrow my eyes at him, pretending my traitorous nipples aren’t responding to the silky smoothness of his voice. “Cut the bullshit, Jasper. You’re in the military?”

“Yes.”

“You lied .”

“Yes, I did.”

I wait for the inevitable apology to follow, but instead the lug picks up the same dessert menu I discarded and starts perusing the selections. “That chocolate cake does sound good.”

“Jasper!” I hiss.

With leisure, he closes the menu. “Do you remember the night we met?”

Of course I remember. Every detail of that magical memory is burned into my brain.

The live band playing on a stage beside the water.

The strings of white lights above the outdoor bar.

The soft caress of dusky darkness. The intoxicating aftershave that wafted to me when Jasper sat down on the barstool next to me.

“Yes, I do. You left out something very important.”

“Do you remember the first thing you said to me?”

If you're a military guy, turn around and walk away now. I give a subtle nod, staring at my sweating glass of ice water because a simple locked gaze makes me all melty inside no matter how pissed I am. My dry throat demands a swallow, so I take one.

“If I had listened to you, the whole weekend would never have happened.” Jasper leans over the table, lowering his voice. “I couldn't stand the thought of never having met you. Of never kissing you. Of never?—”

“I get it!” I hold my hand up in surrender, turning more than a couple of heads.

Dammit. So much for being inconspicuous.

I abandon the idea of dessert, suddenly desperate to get away before I lose the willpower to try.

I scoot my chair back, pretending I don't have a death grip on the edge of it.

“Contrary to what my dad thinks, I do have work to do tomorrow.”

“Then we work.”

“There is no we,” I correct.

Jasper stands, reminding me of his height. Of the way my head once tucked so easily against his chest. “I'm a brave man, Vanessa. But even I'm not brave enough to defy your father's wishes.”

“That didn't stop you four years ago.”

He presses a hand to the small of my back, ushering me toward the exit. My stupid body reacts in a way it hasn't in years. It takes every ounce of strength not to melt into his touch. Not to lean against him and relive a very pleasant memory. "I wasn't the only one lying back then, sweetheart."

"I—" Shit, he's right. And I hate that he's right. I never told Jasper I was a military brat, much less an admiral's daughter. His admiral's daughter.

In the lobby, Jasper stops us both. Without any room to maneuver around him, my palms flatten against the wall behind me as I back up against it.

It's an automatic reaction I have zero control over.

I'm frozen in place as he hovers closer, propping one hand against the cool tile just to the side of my right cheek.

He leans close enough that his breath tickles my neck.

I'm taken back to the magical moonlit night when that first kiss completely rocked my world on its axis.

For years, I've craved even a single kiss that held a candle to that first one I shared with Jasper.

I part my lips in anticipation, lost entirely to fantasy.

Forgetting where we are. Gone is all rational thought.

"I'll pick you up at the hotel in the zero eight hundred hours." With those abrupt words, Jasper pushes off the wall and struts off toward the sliding doors. Leaving me panting and—much to my irritation—wanting more .

One thing is abundantly clear: Now that Jasper Steele is back in my orbit, I'm in serious trouble.

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JASPER

I can't deny that I told a few white lies when I met Vanessa in Cape Cod.

In all honesty, I thought we'd never see each other again.

I remember a nagging whisper in the back of my mind back then promising I was full of shit for being okay with that.

For accepting that as reality. But I shoved that annoying truth down until it went silent, willing to take whatever time she'd give me, however brief.

My only priority was making the most of every moment I did have with her.

Because I've never met anyone like her.

Vanessa's very presence was all-consuming. She was the breath of fresh air I'd spent my whole life chasing. When we went our separate ways, I didn't expect to feel so fucking empty. Like someone had sucker-punched me in the gut and I never quite recovered from it.

Now that she's back in my life, I can't imagine letting her slip away again. Which is what I tell my buddy Joel as I pull up to the hangar the next morning to drop him off.

"You're sure about this one?" He's not only one of the best rescue swimmers I've ever worked with, he's also one of my best friends.

The only other born and raised Alaskan in the J-Squad.

The two of us are the last men standing.

The last single guys in our group. Maybe that's why I feel like he's the best one to open up to.

If anyone is going to play devil's advocate and point out things I need to hear before I get in too deep, it's him.

"You know, looking back, I think I was sure about her four years ago." Just wish I had realized how life altering meeting Vanessa Wheeler would actually be. How it would modify the very way I saw the world. I would've done things a little differently.

Maybe.

I didn't know she was the admiral's daughter until after we'd gone our separate ways.

"Think the admiral's going to go for it?" Joel doesn't hide his doubt.

The admiral likes me—a detail my buddies constantly give me shit about.

Like I'm a teacher's pet or something. But going after his daughter might unravel that relationship quite quickly.

Admiral Wheeler is known for his quiet acts of retaliation.

He's not the kind to lose his cool and yell.

He's the cool and collected strategist who'll destroy your career and watch quietly

from the sidelines as it happens.

“I don’t know, man,” I answer honestly. Though I should care a lot more about the answer to that question than I do, I’m too distracted to focus on the dire consequences.

With Vanessa not just in my time zone now, but my orbit, I can’t seem to think too clearly about anything other than her.

Letting her walk away without giving this everything I have seems wrong. “I hope so.”

“I’ll come to your funeral, but I ain’t planning the shit.”

“Just make sure there’s plenty of Caribou Creek Stout to go around.”

I drop Joel off, longingly gazing at the helicopter on the flight line I should be flying.

I absently rub my wrist brace, silently cursing the careless accident that caused the sprain and grounded me for six weeks.

The sky is my happy place. The place where I find calm among the chaos.

Even in risky storms, I feel the world still.

I could sure as hell use a flight or two to figure this whole Vanessa thing out. To clear my head and make a plan.

Instead, I’m forced to leave behind the hangar and head into town.

Vanessa never told me why she had her rule about not dating military.

I assumed, after I discovered she was the admiral's daughter, that she wanted a different type of life.

But whatever her reason, my resolve to wear her down has only intensified since that dinner last night.

To ensure if she's still clinging to that rule that I convince her to break it.

I pull up to the hotel and am hardly out of my truck before I catch her clearly on a mission to escape me. It's the only reason she'd dodge behind a tall plant near the sliding doors at the sight of me.

"Going somewhere?"

"Damn you military and your early hours," she mutters, letting out a heavy, annoyed sigh from behind the fake plant.

"Where's your assistant?"

"Conveniently MIA." Vanessa drops her eyes closed as she spins around slowly and steps out from behind the tall plant.

With pursed lips, she looks up at me. I subtly rake my gaze up and down her curvy figure once, admiring the dark skinny jeans that hug her sexy legs.

"I don't want to do this, Jasper. I'm still mad at you for lying.

For spoiling that memory for me. It would just be easier if we stayed out of each other's ways this weekend. "

"It would be easier."

“Good. I’m glad we agree?—”

“But sweetheart, I have no plans on taking the easy road.”

“Don’t call me that,” she grumbles.

“Let’s start with breakfast. If you’re planning to be on your feet all day bossing people around, you can’t do it on an empty stomach.

” I might sound a bit desperate, but I’m not driving away without her.

I know I lied, but I also know what we experienced in Cape Cod was real.

“Plus, you can shoot your firing squad of questions at me over the world’s best pancakes. ”

“I already ate.” Her stomach rumbles, as if on command.

Calling out her lie. She grumbles again, and dammit if it doesn’t turn me on.

Then again, damn never everything about Vanessa Wheeler turns me on—from her narrowed eyes to her sly smirk to the way her blue eyes darken when she thinks about the past. “Fine. But after breakfast, I need to see where the festival is being staged. I need to do a walk through and?—”

“ After we eat.”

“Fine. Let’s hurry up then.”

I open the passenger door and offer my hand. She stares at it for several beats, then at the lifted truck before letting out a heavy sigh and relenting.

The contact is almost as electrifying as it was when we shook hands at dinner.

An instant trigger to the memory of a passion-filled weekend.

Last night, we pretended not to know one another.

But the wattage is higher now. More charged after a night apart knowing that out of all the places in the world either of us could be, we were both sleeping in the same small Alaskan town.

My dick twitches against my zipper as my hand brushes side boob.

It was an accident, but her gasp isn't one of shock and indignation.

It's a gasp I recognize from our nights of passion.

A sexy exhale that promises everything we shared then is still present now.

Lurking just beneath the surface, waiting to be coaxed out.

"Don't get any ideas," she says with narrowed eyes.

The minx means to fire daggers at me, but their potency is no match for the desire that is aimed my way instead.

She can pretend to hate me all she wants.

The truth is fighting its way to the surface, and I know it's what's going to win this round.

"Sweetheart," I say, tracing a single finger along her jawline and eliciting that sexy

little inhale I've missed so much, "all I have are ideas."

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VANESSA

“These are the best pancakes I’ve ever had.

” I’m fully aware that I not only moan but also sink in my booth seat as I savor my breakfast. I can’t remember the last time I had such a simple but tasty meal.

The clients I’ve had these past couple of years would scoff at a diner literally called The Diner .

From the outside, it looks a run down. Like a strong gust of wind might blow it over.

The full parking lot, however, doesn’t seem to mind the rough exterior.

“Told you,” Jasper says.

“Too bad they don’t have a booth at the festival.”

“They’ll be plenty busy nursing all the hangovers.”

“Did you grow up here? In North Haven?” I’ve been very careful to avoid personal questions.

Now that the truth is out in the open about Jasper being in the military, I’ve started to question everything else he told me in Cape Cod.

I don’t know that I trust him to be truthful now.

Yet I can't seem to resist the temptation to learn more about him.

There's also the small matter that I never told him I was an admiral's daughter. Seems we both had our white lies back then. Would a fresh start be so...crazy?

"The truth?" he asks.

I let out a soft laugh, feeling the earlier tension between us dissipating. "That would be a good change of pace, don't you agree?"

"Yes." The firmness in his tone does something to my insides. Something that makes them too melty with so little effort. It doesn't seem fair, yet I have no desire to fight the feeling. "No more lies, Vanessa. I swear it."

"Okay."

"Only the truth. From both of us from now on."

He's waiting for me to agree, and I hate how vulnerable that makes me feel. Because I don't want to talk about David or the big bombs I have yet to drop on my dad. "Fine, okay. The truth. But I reserve the right to not answer questions I don't want to."

"Fair enough." He takes a slow sip of his coffee, and dammit if I don't find myself jealous of the mug's rim. "Yes, I grew up in North Haven."

"And your parents? Are they really in the restaurant business?"

"No."

"So that whole elaborate story about scouring the east coast for the best clam

chowder recipe was a lie?" I don't know why this disappoints me so much, other than I really loved the story of his parents.

It was the single detail that explained his presence in Cape Cod.

Being the son of restauranter parents who sent him on a mission to try as much clam chowder as he could.

To bring back ideas to freshen up their recipe.

"Not entirely."

"I don't understand."

"My parents?—"

"Jasper!" an enthusiastic female voice announces, turning most heads in the diner. Including mine. The slender woman has both hands thrown up in the air like she's cheering about a recent touchdown. She sets her sights on Jasper and practically tackles any diners in her way to get to him.

He stands just in time to catch her in his arms.

A pang of jealousy stabs me square in the gut.

The irrational urge to rip her off of him by the arms—and maybe that beautiful black mane of hair—is overwhelming.

But whether anyone in this diner realizes I'm in town to head the North Haven Festival or not, it would be bad press to get into a fist fight in a public setting.

Not exactly the best way to go into retirement. Dammit .

“I didn’t know you were coming home,” Jasper says as he pries her tight arms from his neck. He slides back into the booth, making room for the woman. What the actual fuck?

“You think I was gonna let mamma run that food truck all by herself?” The woman waves for the server, though it’s not necessary with the entrance she made. “She pretends she’s got it all under control, but this is the biggest event she’s ever served.”

“What about the resort?”

“It’ll run without me for one weekend.” The woman turns her attention to me, her eyes sparkling. “Jasper, you didn’t tell me you have a girlfriend!”

“I don’t?—”

“I’m Annie,” the woman says, holding out her arm across the table. “Jasper’s little sister.”

Sister . Instantly, every tense muscle in my body—of which there are apparently many—relaxes. I see the resemblance between them now. The black hair. Blue eyes the color of the ocean. Their slightly upturned noses. Definitely related. “Vanessa.”

“You must be pretty damn amazing,” Annie prattles on.

“Annie—”

“We were worried Jasper would be a bachelor forever. The man is pickier than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Annie—”

“Tons of first dates that never turned into second dates. No woman is ever up to Jasper’s impossibly high standards.

I thought—” Annie is interrupted only by the server taking her order.

She requests a stack of blueberry pancakes, though I have no idea where she’s going to put it all in that tiny frame of hers.

“Tons of first dates, huh?” I ask when the server leaves, unable to resist the temptation to hear more about Jasper from someone who has no reason to lie about anything. She thinks I’m his girlfriend, after all. I probably should correct her, but this is much more fun.

“Most of them don’t even make it through a meal before they get up and walk out.”

“Annie, c’mon now?—”

“He’s been looking for this perfect woman who I swore didn’t exist.” She grabs his untouched glass of ice water and stabs a straw into it. “But it seems like he’s found you, after all.”

Part of me wonders if Jasper has been comparing his dates to me, the same way I compared mine to him these past four years.

It feels a bit conceited to think it, yet I can’t help the thrill that races through me.

What if...what if this really is meant to be something more? What if fate brought us together again?

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JASPER

After I make good on my promise to allow Vanessa to check out the festival grounds—and her assistant chases her off insisting everything on this setup-only day is running smoothly—I decide to take her to one of my favorite places in North Haven.

We have a few hours to kill before I'm due to meet a guy from the Caribou Creek Brewery to store kegs in my garage until the festival setup for vendors opens tomorrow morning.

Then later this evening, I have to pick up a couple of passengers from the airport coming in from Caribou Creek.

But before all that, I don't want to make it too easy for Vanessa to slip away from me.

"Your sister seems fun." Vanessa's eyes twinkle with mischief as I slow the truck. "You've really never made it past a first date in four years?"

Damn Annie . I love the hell out of her, but at times, her inability to hold her tongue really irks me. Her outspoken boldness has gotten her into trouble more than a few times over the years. "Ignore her," I say, parking the truck on a dirt pull off. "Now come on. I want to show you something."

"I really thought you'd be married by now," Vanessa says, catching up to me as I wait at the start of a dirt-packed trail.

“I could say the same about you. Who is David, anyway?” I shouldn’t care. I don’t want to care. They’re broken up. He’s a non-issue. At least, I hope he is.

“Jealous much?”

I step into her path, and she throws out her hand to keep herself from colliding with my chest. Except those slender, silky fingers dig into my peck. Her palm flattens against me. I don’t think I’m the only one sliding back into memory. My hand drops to her hip, my fingers digging in.

I lean in, my cheek brushing hers, and say against her ear, “I could say the same for you, sweetheart.”

“Annie’s your sister.”

“You didn’t know that at first.” Remembering the jealous flare in her eyes when my sister strangled me in a hug amuses the hell out of me.

It reminds me of Vanessa’s feistiest side.

On the outside, she’s all elegant and poised.

A business professional. But on the inside is a she-wolf, both dangerous and wild.

“At least I can get past a first date.” Ouch. She pushes off my chest and moves around me, heading down the hard-packed trail ahead of me.

I chase after her, admiring the sway of her hips and the view of her incredible ass all the way down to the rocky beach.

Waves crash against the shore, the sound amplified by the private alcove.

If we have time, I'm bringing her back here with a blanket and making love to her with the ocean view before us.

"You know, sweetheart, we never got past the first date and you didn't seem to mind that."

"We did too."

I answer with a wicked smirk and let her play out the sequence of events in her head.

We started at the seaside bar and moved the night to a nearby restaurant with some pretty phenomenal clam chowder—not that it could compete with Mom's—and ended up in a hotel room the rest of the weekend, opening the door only for room service so we didn't have to leave.

"That doesn't count," she argues.

"Why?" I challenge, coming close to her again. Relishing in the way waves of heat dance between us despite the chilly ocean breeze. My cock stands at attention, begging to get the fuck out of this uniform and into her pussy. Down boy. All in good time .

"We didn't..." She can't seem to find the words. Probably because they don't exist.

I comb the breeze-tangled hair from her cheek with my good hand and tuck it behind her ear.

Forgetting the reason I brought her out here.

Ignoring the scenery I know would steal her breath away if only she'd look at it.

Right now, the only thing that's going to steal her breath is me.

"Admit it, sweetheart. It was the best first date of your life."

"Jasper." Her name is a plea I don't dare deny. Maybe it's a moment of her walls weakening. Walls she might very well fortify soon after. But I don't worry about that as I lean in, closing the gap between us. Staring hungrily at her lips without apology.

It's only the first brush of our lips that's gentle. Testing. Seeking permission.

Before the second, Vanessa grabs the back of my neck and pulls me in for a kiss that threatens to unravel me to the very fucking core.

It's hungry, raw, and filled with the passion we shared four years ago.

A fire between us that could set the world ablaze.

We cling tightly to one another as the waves crash against the shore.

I'm not much for romantics, but if I was, I would say this moment was one for the books.

When we finally come up for air, I have no concept of time.

No idea how long we spent exploring each other with our mouths and tongues.

All I know is that I'm panting like I was being chased by a damn grizzly bear and wishing I'd asked Joel if I could borrow the hot tub he's never used before I dropped him off this morning.

I'm yearning to recreate one of my favorite Cape Cod memories stat.

“You bring me all the way out here just for a kiss?” Vanessa teases, that familiar fire of long ago dancing in her eyes. Promising that if she’s going to fully come back to her senses that it hasn’t happened yet. I still have a few moments to steal.

“I brought you out here to show you the view.”

She finally stares off toward the water. The bay surrounded by a wall of mountains, offering up one passageway. A ship passes through in the distance, heading toward the marina. “It is beautiful. Even more so than I imagined,” she admits.

“Alaska has a way of stealing hearts.”

“ Just Alaska?”

I snag another quick but hard kiss, thankful the moment isn’t shattered yet.

I know Vanessa well enough to expect her to clam up when she realizes what just happened.

But until then, I’m pretending the odds aren’t stacked against us.

“There’s a sunken treasure out there,” I say, pointing to the opening between walls of mountains.

“Like a pirate treasure?”

“Something like that.”

“How did a pirate treasure sink off the coast of Alaska? I wouldn’t expect this to be a prime location for pirates. Wouldn’t they freeze or hit icebergs?”

I slip an arm around her waist and tug her hips closer to mine. I sense the slightest hesitation, but ultimately, she leans in. “It’s a love story, really.”

“Does it have a happy ending?”

“Not exactly. The Esmerelda is cursed because of love. Or so the legend goes.”

Vanessa stares up at me, shaking her head.

“You’re really going to spoil a romantic moment with a tragic story?”

” Before I can successfully speak another word, Vanessa presses her fingers to my lips.

“You’re better off just kissing me again before I return to my senses and go back to being mad at you. ”

I’m not a fool. I cup her cheek and steal another sultry kiss. One I sure as hell hope will lead to more.

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VANESSA

My lips are properly swollen from making out on the North Haven coast. I can't stop running my fingers over them, fascinated by the way they still buzz.

Is it a mistake to get involved with Jasper Steele a second time?

Probably .

Do I want to stop before things get too out of hand?

Not really .

Should I.

Absolutely .

I lean my head against the passenger window as we drive through downtown, heading away from the hotel and the small crew from the airport Jasper was scheduled to pick up this evening.

I was so caught up in a lustful haze that I missed my opportunity to cut the night short and barricade myself in my hotel room.

I steal a side glance at him, and my entire body quivers with want.

With raw, hungry desire. I forgot how thoroughly that man could kiss.

After our time sucking face like horny teenagers on the beach that definitely got a little handsy, though not quite handsy enough if you ask my aching nipples, Jasper spent the afternoon showing me around the most charming town I've ever visited.

It's like something out of a Hallmark movie, just the way he described it four years ago.

I'm sure it's the nostalgia going to my head, but I keep hearing whispers in the back of my mind that promise I would love settling down here. Making a home. With Jasper .

There's a solid possibility after a good night's sleep, a strong cup of coffee, and busy festival day tomorrow that I'll regret kissing him. Giving in. Because no matter how wet that man makes my panties, I can't fall for him. Not all the way past the point of no return.

But could I enjoy my weekend in North Haven a little more?

The memory of us tangled in the softest sheets in the world begs me to say yes.

To give in to one last passionate weekend before I return to Houston and focus on officially closing my business and settling into my new normal.

Settling down and closing on my new house with the writing office of my dreams. My life is there.

But tonight...I just can't seem to be so troubled by all of it.

"I notice you still wear that necklace," Jasper says as he rolls forward from a stop sign and reaches for my hand.

Ah, there's the reminder I needed. Mom's insistence that I don't get involved with a military man echoes loudly in my mind now that she's been brought into the conversation. "It was my mother's."

"You must miss her."

"Every day." I do my best to refortify my walls, one by one.

My mother made me promise I wouldn't fall for a military man for a reason.

The older I get, the more I yearn for stability.

To settle down and start a family. As much as I admire Jasper, my dad, and all the other servicemen and women for their bravery, I don't want to live the way my mother did.

Constantly stressed and worried when Dad was gone.

Struggling to juggle everything without him around. Moving every three to four years.

"You don't mind a pitstop, do you?" Jasper asks, nodding ahead.

It's only now I notice that we're at the festival grounds. Though most of the vendors are not allowed to set up until tomorrow morning, the town council insisted we make a few exceptions for some of the local vendors. "I should probably get back to the hotel. Find Erin?—"

"C'mon," Jasper says, pushing his door open and hopping. "There's someone I want you to meet."

My heart races in my chest, wondering what trap I'm walking into.

It's one thing to spend this long weekend with Jasper.

To experience a little taste of the fantasy we had that long ago weekend.

It's another to slip too far into his real life.

"I really—" But my objections are spoken to a closed door.

Jasper waits at the front of the truck, running a hand through his hair. It's just long enough to skirt the military regulation line. It makes me wonder if he'll grow it out when he retires. I long to comb my fingers through it, the simple desire enough to get me out of the truck.

"Where—"

He reaches for my hand, threading his fingers through mine.

He doesn't scan the grounds like I do. He doesn't seem the least bit worried who might see us acting so intimately.

It's not likely Dad is here this late at night, but it's still not something I'm ready to explain to him should someone tell him what they saw.

Especially when I have so many other confessions I've yet to make about my life.

"Note for next year?" Jasper says, leaning close enough for his breath to tickle my neck. It takes all my focus to follow his pointed finger to a bright yellow taco truck. "You might want someone to vet your vendors."

“Rocco’s Tacos has over two hundred five-star reviews online?—”

“They’ve also been closed down and reopened more than once. Ask my buddy Jordan about his two-day toilet-hugging experience.”

“I’ll let the committee know.” I nearly choke on the last word because he starts to stroke the side of my hand with his callused thumb. The simple sensation ignites all my nerve endings in a gentle wave. “I won’t be planning it next year.”

“No?”

“This is my last event.” I don’t know if it’s wise to share this with Jasper or not. Erin is the only other soul in town who knows I’m closing down my business. I want to trust him. I do trust him. I just hope that I’m not wrong in doing so.

“What are you going to do instead?”

A pang of disappointment hits me. He doesn’t remember . Before I can get a word out, a loud bang, like a symbol being struck, echoes from a nearby food truck. It’s so loud I jump.

“Annie’s in the truck,” he says in explanation. “She’s a great resort hostess, but a hazard in the kitchen.”

Slowly the pieces fall together. Annie. The food truck. A delicious aroma I can’t quite pin, though hints of seafood wafts in the air. “Your parents don’t own a restaurant, but your mom has a food truck?”

Jasper turns his heated gaze to me, and my insides quiver at that panty-melting smile. “Best clam chowder you’ll ever eat.” He squeezes my hand. “C’mon. I want you to meet my mom.”

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VANESSA

Meeting Jasper's mom tonight has been both wonderful and overwhelming.

She's exactly the way I pictured her. The way Jasper described her that weekend in Cape Cod.

She welcomed me like I was an old friend, no questions asked.

One minute there were hugs, the next we were put to work. She reminded me so much of my own mom.

I clamp my hand around the heart pendant hanging from my neck, forcing down the emotion trying to rise.

I can lose my shit later, when I'm alone.

"This shouldn't take long," Jasper says as he pulls into the driveway of a ranch style log home with a covered front porch.

Buckets of bright yellow flowers hang between poles, and two rocking chairs are stationed off to one side.

It's exactly the way he described it that night we lounged naked in the hot tub. Maybe he didn't lie about everything .

I look over at Jasper as he pulls the keys from the ignition but can't quite bring

myself to make eye contact. I focus on the bay a short two blocks from the house instead.

“You had this view growing up?” I ask, nodding toward the water.

Noting that in Houston, the sun would be long gone by now.

But here in North Haven, despite it being nearly ten o’clock at night, the sun is still hanging above the horizon, giving the water and the surrounding mountains an iridescent glow.

“Yeah. Pretty great, huh?” He reaches his hand across the center console, placing it on my thigh. The warmth soaks through the denim, igniting something within me. As though his touch is thawing the last of the icy layer of protection I’ve kept around my heart.

Don’t fall for him, Vanessa.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yep.”

Jasper lifts one eyebrow, challenging my answer.

“Just tired.”

“I doubt that.” He gives my thigh one good squeeze before he lets go, and I feel the absence of his heat instantly. “C’mon. The bowls are in the kitchen.”

Helena nearly had a panic attack when she realized she’d forgotten all the serving bowls.

Though the festival doesn't start until tomorrow morning, she insisted they had to be in the truck tonight.

Jasper put his arm around his frazzled mother and offered to retrieve them.

It was so damn sweet I practically got a stomachache watching it.

My hand still tingles from the easy way he threaded his fingers through mine and led me to his truck to help him with this easy errand.

Only now that I'm standing on the front porch of his childhood home, nothing feels easy about this.

What was once a whimsical, romantic memory is slowly starting to become a very real reality.

"You sure you're okay?" Jasper asks, unlocking the front door.

I nod, unable to meet those dark eyes head on.

He reaches a hand to my cheek, cupping it ever so gently. As though it's the most natural thing to do. He tilts my chin and waits until I finally give in and meet his gaze. My eyes are no doubt shiny with unshed tears.

Dammit, this is not the time to fall apart.

"You miss your mom?" he guesses, glancing down at the necklace I'm still clamping in my palm.

"Yeah."

His gaze flickers to my lips, and my pulse trips.

I crave his kiss, if only for the distraction I desperately need.

He lowers his head, pressing his lips against my forehead.

My entire body responds to the sweet caress of his gentle kiss.

Electricity zings from my head to my toes and back again, settling right in my core.

I've spent plenty of time wanting this man, but this? This is next level.

It takes all my restraint not to fling my arms around his neck and drag his mouth to mine.

"C'mon," he says, threading his fingers through mine once more and pushing open the front door.

I spot framed photographs on the wall, but the hazy light makes it hard to make them out as Jasper leads me to the kitchen.

Several stacks of paper bowls sit piled on the counter.

It's obvious that Helena plans to sell a lot of clam chowder this weekend, and I hope she does. That chowder is damn good.

"What's down that way?" I ask of a hall leading away from the kitchen.

"Guest rooms," Jasper says.

"And?"

“My old bedroom,” he admits.

I’m on the move before he can catch my wrist.

“It looks like a time capsule,” I say, standing in the doorway of a blue room. The walls are blue, the comforter, the rug beside the bed. Coast guard posters cover the wall opposite his bed, all with pictures of helicopters. He’s always known this was his calling .

“I’ve tried to tell Mom to pack it up, but?—”

“Is that—a stuffed animal?” I lunge for the bed, reaching for a stuffed orange tabby cat leaned up against the pillows. Jasper tackles me onto the bed, his long arm grabbing over the top of me, securing the cat.

“This is Barney,” he says, his body still hovered above mine.

“ This is Barney?” He talked about a cat he loved as a kid. Named Barney. But he never once mentioned the cat was a stuffed animal.

“Mom’s allergic to cats,” he says, rolling to the side and taking his delicious weight and warmth with him. I turn, facing him on the bed. He’s blushing a deep shade of red, and fuck if it doesn’t turn me on even more. “I really wanted a cat. So, I got Barney instead.”

“You’re embarrassed?” I ask.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“I don’t know if anyone told you,” I say, snaking a hand up the side of his neck, “but vulnerability is the new sexy.”

His lips are on mine in seconds. It happens so quickly I can't decipher who initiated it. But now that our mouths are moving together as one, I don't care. I've been craving his kiss since we made out on the beach earlier. Hell, I've been craving his kiss since we parted ways in Cape Cod.

I roll onto top of him, shackling my knees on either side of his hips.

I whimper at the feel of his hard length through his uniform pants, grinding myself against him as the kisses deepen and things get handsy.

Suddenly, it's not enough that his hands are cupping my breasts through my shirt, so I sit up, still mounted on him, and pull it off.

"Fuck, Vanessa," he says, his eyes darkening with desire. As though he wants to devour me.

I forgot how fucking good it felt to be desired by this man.

I reach behind my back and undo the clasp to my bra.

His hands slide beneath the lace before it's all the way off, the skin-on-skin contact making me so damn wet. He kneads my tits and teases my nipples as I shamelessly grind myself against his hardening cock.

Just as I bend forward and Jasper takes a nipple into his eager mouth, a shrill ring echoes.

"Fuck," he grumbles, pulling the phone from his pocket.

"Your mom?" I guess.

“She’s freaking out.” He cups my cheek and kisses me so deeply I can almost feel our souls touch. What the fuck? “We better get those bowls to her before she sends Annie.”

I reluctantly put my bra back on and search for my discarded shirt.

“Vanessa?”

“Hmm?”

Jasper locks his heated gaze with mine as he lowers his mouth against the shell of my ear. “Just know that I’m not finished with you. Not by a long shot, sweetheart.”

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JASPER

“Are you okay?” Vanessa’s voice is muffled as she shouts over the loud engine. Though we both have headsets, there weren’t enough ICS cords for both of us. Her headphones are simply to help reduce the noise of the engine. I’m the only one of the two of us who can communicate with the crew.

I nod in answer, but I have to wonder if my face is fucking green. God I hate not being in the pilot’s seat.

With that raised eyebrow, Vanessa doesn’t look convinced by my answer.

“You sure you know what you’re doing, Steele?” James Devano asks from the cockpit. His question isn’t a surprise. I’ve been braced for it for the past hour we’ve been in the air. If only he knew I’d had Vanessa’s nipple in my mouth less than twelve hours ago, he wouldn’t be so soft about it.

“Admiral wanted me to show her around,” I answer, as though this last-minute request to add both Vanessa and I to the flight roster of a routine training mission had nothing to do with trying to impress the only woman I’ve ever truly wanted.

Admiral Wheeler will probably come across the flight log, but with any luck, it won’t be until Monday.

He might approve on account of his instruction to show his daughter around.

But if he decides to chew me a new asshole instead, I hope it’s after I’ve convinced

Vanessa that she belongs with me—here in North Haven.

Because after last night, I have to convince her to stay.

It wasn't just the way we dry humped like horny teenagers who forgot a condom. It was the way she was so easily accepted into my family, as though she were already a part of it. Mom wouldn't have taken to her so effortlessly if she didn't like her.

Vanessa belongs here, with me.

Which is why I want her to have the best view— my favorite view—of my hometown from the air. I want her to see all this place has to offer. To experience the awe and wonder Alaska has to offer. Even if I feel like I might throw up while she takes it all in.

"I don't think this is what he meant," Joel pipes up from his seat. He's dressed to deploy into the freezing cold waters if an emergency arises, but otherwise, he's just along for the routine training ride.

"It's better than one of those bush plane tours," I fire back. In my defense, I tried to call in a favor with North Haven Flightseeing Tours , but with the festival, they were overbooked as it was. Not even name dropping the admiral had gotten me anywhere.

"We have to stick to the route," James says.

"You say that as we're on our way back to the flightline," I say, my words heavily laced with sarcasm.

"I'm not taking any detours," James adds.

"Not asking you too." If I were in the cockpit, I'd happily veer off course to show

Vanessa the best hidden sights.

But since I'm not the one flying, I'm ready to get back on the fucking ground.

Joel raises a quiet eyebrow at me, but he doesn't out me in front of Vanessa.

She might not be able to hear him, but it wouldn't surprise me if she had a talent for reading lips.

That woman has so many hidden talents I can't keep track.

I glance over at her, and the nausea lifts.

She's glued to the window, just like a damn tourist. Creamy white skin peeks out with the rise of her sweater, and it takes all my restraint not to reach my fingers to it.

If we were in the back of a Cessna, I could get away with touching her.

With slipping my hand onto her denim-clad thigh, teasing her.

Soon .

Vanessa glances back at me, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

As though she caught me staring at her exposed skin.

If it's my last mission in life, I am determined to top that weekend in Cape Cod.

To make this weekend in North Haven together one she'll never be able to forget.

If she decides to leave, I want it to haunt her as much as it'll haunt me.

Not a moment too soon, wheels touch pavement.

I let out the breath I'd been holding as Devano went through his landing procedures and unbuckle myself from the seat. I'm desperate to get my feet on the ground.

Vanessa takes my offered hand. I help her out of the helicopter, pretending that the physical contact isn't igniting every nerve ending in my body.

It's as though a simple graze of her hand is as potent as a low-level electric fence.

Not painful, but definitely not unnoticed.

Probably has something to do with her riding me half naked last night.

The image of those glorious tits bouncing above me damn near makes me hard. Not the time, Jasper .

"That was so much fun !" she gushes as we arrive at the hangar.

"Yeah?"

"Yes! I've always wanted to ride in a Jayhawk."

"You never have?" I ask, confused. Though her father no longer flies, he once did. He's one of the most decorated coast guard pilots I've ever personally met. If he never took his daughter on a flight, that doesn't bode well for me doing it without asking his permission. Shit.

"Mom wasn't a fan of the idea, and Dad was always too busy anyway." Vanessa shrugs her shoulders, the sparkle in her eyes still strong. "Speaking of, there he is."

Double shit .

“Captain Steele?” Admiral Wheeler calls my name from halfway across the hangar.

I instantly about face and stand at attention, saluting him.

It feels like ten fucking years that I hold my hand to my forehead before he salutes back.

His expression is blank. Unreadable. I have no clue if I’m about to get my ass handed to me.

“I thought you weren’t cleared to fly,” he says, glancing down at the wrist still in a brace.

“I’m not, sir.”

His gaze lifts to the men behind us still on the flightline and understanding seems to dawn in his expression. He looks back to me, confusion there now. “You went on a flight as a passenger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“For my daughter?”

Oh thank fucking god. He’s not mad. But I’d like to know who the fuck outed me to him about my minor phobia.

“Yes, sir.”

He stares at me for several intense seconds before giving me a slight nod. I dare say

it's...approval?

“Did you have fun, Vanessa?” he asks his daughter.

“It was amazing! Alaska's so beautiful. I knew, but I didn't really know . It almost makes me want to move here.”

My heart fucking stops beating.

Did Vanessa Wheeler just say what I think she said?

“Don't get too carried away now,” Admiral Wheeler says on a chuckle. “Alaska has a way of sweeping people up in the moment. How would you ever run your business from such a remote location?”

Vanessa's sparkling expression fades, her smile dropping into a frown.

She hasn't told him.

Well, fuck.

Any chance, however small, that Admiral Wheeler was playing matchmaker has just been completely obliterated.

I should've known better. He'd never approve of Vanessa giving up her very successful career to move to some tiny dot on the map.

Even if she tells him what she told me last night outside Mom's food truck, he wouldn't want her moving somewhere small and remote that could stifle her future.

I resist the urge to reach for her hand, desperately wanting to give it a reassuring

squeeze.

“Sir, would you like to join the J-Squad for dinner at The Iceberg ?” I offer, hoping to break the tension.

“Thank you, Captain Steele. But I’m afraid I can’t tonight.”

“Dad, can we talk somewhere?—”

Before Vanessa can finish her sentence, Admiral Wheeler is summoned across the hangar. He pats her shoulder in apology, but doesn’t otherwise acknowledge her plea. Though I have a helluva lot of respect for the man, I’m fucking frustrated with him now. Can’t he see his daughter needs him?

I reach for Vanessa’s hand and squeeze. Her gaze flickers to mine, and I swear a silent conversation takes place in the few seconds I’m daring enough to hold her hand. I feel the disappointment rolling off her in waves, and I’m determined to fix it.

Today.

“Ready for your next North Haven adventure?” I ask.

“More than ready,” she admits, squeezing my hand back before dropping it.

VANESSA

Dinner with the J-Squad is nothing like I expected. Though to be honest, I don't really know what I expected. These six coastguardsmen have been together since bootcamp. They're not just servicemen, they're brothers.

"You ready for the rapid-fire introductions?" Ella Harris asks, leaning her shoulder toward me so I can hear her better. I scan the table, counting six men in uniform and four other women.

"Will there be a quiz later?" I joke.

"Most definitely." The genuine quality of her smile is comforting, as though she's already accepted me into this elite club.

I can't decide if I'm flattered or terrified.

It was one thing to have Jasper all to myself in Cape Cod, only hearing about the people in his life.

But to meet them in person has leveled up the experience.

I just can't decide if I want to fit in or sprint straight to the airport and head back to Houston. It's all so much.

"Okay, so starting at the head of the table, we have Jaxson and his wife, Blakely. He's a rescue swimmer, and she's a wildlife photographer. She's also Jordan's sister.

They just had a baby a little less than a year ago. Doesn't she look amazing?"

"She does."

She continues around the table, pointing out James—another pilot like Jasper—and his wife, Serenity. Apparently she's responsible for the new lodge's construction. Good job, Serenity.

There's Jonas—a flight mechanic—and his wife Mara. She manages the gift shop at the lodge. "Maybe you've seen her?" Ella asks.

I shake my head. I haven't exactly had time to shop for souvenirs.

"They're expecting a baby early fall. We just had a shower for Mara last week. Her parents were up to visit. It was a great time. Too bad you missed it."

"Too bad," I say, almost meaning it. As tempting as it is to want to be a part of this group, I accept this for what it is.

Another special weekend that'll forever live on in my memory.

Like Cape Cod, but somehow better. Or maybe I'm just really enjoying the distraction since Dad's comment about me not being able to run a successful event planning business out of this small, remote town.

I wanted to tell him about my Vanessa Sterling children's books, but he was summoned away as per usual.

"Then there's my husband, Jordan." Ella nods toward the bar where her husband stands with Jasper, ordering drinks.

My gaze drags up and down Jasper's body, undressing him with my eyes.

It's the distraction I need to forget all about tomorrow and what the future actually holds for me. "He's also a flight mechanic."

"And him?" I nod to the only single man at the table, sitting on the side opposite Jaxson's wife.

"Joel. Rescue swimmer."

"He's not married?"

"No, but I think he wants to be."

"Probably hard to find a wife in a remote town like this," I say.

"It's true," Ella agrees. "All of us wives are transplants."

"Really?"

"You'd be joining an exclusive club," she says with a wink.

"I'm not?—"

"Is Ella telling you all our secrets?" Jasper asks, falling into the empty chair beside me with a mug of beer in hand.

He offered to get me a drink when he headed to the bar a few moments ago, but I settled for ice water.

I stare at his mug, wondering what he's having.

No doubt some local brew, like he was the night we met.

He was always particular about his beer.

Knowing this about him is oddly comforting.

“I’m just scratching the surface,” Ella says as Jordan drapes an arm around his wife.

“I thought we weren’t doing secrets anymore.” I reach for Jasper’s mug and take a sip, making eye contact over the rim.

“That’s Caribou Creek Stout,” he says.

“Local?”

“Local to Alaska.” He takes the mug from me, our fingers grazing.

An electric current ripples throughout my body at the simple contact.

A flashback from last night on his childhood bed plays in my mind, and I feel my entire body heat.

It would be so nice if we could skip to the part where neither of us has any clothing on it.

“Speaking of secrets,” James pipes up from across the table, flashing Jasper a shit-eating grin before he shifts his focus to me. “Did you know your boy here gets motion sick in the air?”

“But you’re a pilot,” I say, looking at Jasper with understandable confusion.

I vaguely remember him telling me he drove all the way to Cape Cod because he hated flying.

It was one of the reasons I was so livid to find out he was a coastguard pilot.

I thought he outright lied, but maybe it was more of a half truth.

“I’m fine if I’m the one flying,” he says.

“You’re lucky Ms. Passenger Princess didn’t lose his lunch in your lap,” James adds to me. The table conversation turns animated as the J-Squad recounts several examples of Jasper’s motion sickness.

“Why did you sign us up for a training flight?” I ask him, my voice low. Our conversation is our own now as the group stories grow more enthusiastic.

“Because I wanted you to see North Haven from my favorite viewpoint,” he explains, as though the answer is so simple. He lifts his wrapped wrist. “And I’m obviously grounded at the moment.”

“What happened?”

“Stupidity,” he says with a nonchalant shrug.

I’m sure there’s a story there, but I’m more interested in another detail. “My dad knew, didn’t he?”

Jasper nods, reaching for his stout again.

“You didn’t have to do that, Jasper,” I say, dropping a hand to his thigh.

Is it dangerously high? Maybe. But dammit I want this man.

I want to skip whatever sightseeing event he has planned after this dinner and spend the rest of the day in his bed, tangled in his sheets.

And I don't want to leave until my flight boards Sunday.

"I know," he says. "But I wanted to."

If only Jasper weren't military, I might allow myself to fall for him without abandon. I reach for Mom's necklace and hug the heart charm against my chest wishing things were different. Wishing there was a way not to break my most important promise to her.

Why was the perfect man for me the one I can't allow myself to have?

And the only one I want?

VANESSA

“Tell me the truth,” I say to Jasper as he pulls into the driveway of a ranch style home. Though he mentioned stopping at his house before we hit the road for a late-night sunset viewing, I’ve been secretly hoping this is our last stop tonight.

“About what?” Jasper asks, putting his truck into park.

“Were you really jilted at the altar?”

Red dusts his cheeks, and dammit if it doesn’t make him adorable and sexy all rolled into one. “Not quite.”

“What happened?”

He seems thrown by my easy acceptance.

Fuck, I’m thrown too. Though it would be so easy to hold another lie against him, I know better now.

All of his lies have been rooted in half truths.

This time, there is no fantasy to uphold.

I’m experiencing his life in real time. It’s...

oddly comforting. It hurts my brain to sort all of this out, so I don’t try.

“I was dumped,” he says, reiterating the importance of that element of truth as I follow him to the front door.

I realize now I have yet to see the inside of his house. I’m both excited and nervous at what I’ll find. Will it be a cold shell of a place or a total dump? I don’t think I could handle it if Jasper turned out to be a slob.

“Dumped?”

“Yeah. She broke up with me on the dance floor at a friend’s wedding. But she wasn’t my fiancé. Just by a girlfriend who was never going to stick.”

“Why not?”

He pushes open the door and waves a hand for me to step inside first. His words follow me across the threshold. “I know now it was because she wasn’t you.”

My heart stutters and skips.

It’s too much.

And yet, it’s not enough.

I know if I’m not careful, I could fall really hard and fast for Jasper Steele.

I could fall all the way in love with him.

And where would that leave me? I might be giving up my event planning company, but I have no intention of sacrificing the very comfortable life I’ve established in Houston.

Not to mention the promise I made Mom on her deathbed to steer clear of military men. There is no future here.

But there is right now.

“It’s tacky, isn’t it?” he asks.

“What?” My vision goes from blurred to focused.

It’s not the cold, uninviting space I expected of a single man.

It’s a cozy cottage feel that reminds me a whole lot of Cape Cod.

It has a very distinct rustic seaside cottage vibe.

It’s exactly the way I planned to decorate the house that’ll soon be mine. “This is…”

“Embarrassing.”

I turn to him then, reaching for his arm. “It’s perfect, Jasper.”

“Really?”

“I’m just surprised is all.”

“You thought I’d be a total slob, didn’t you?”

“What? No.”

“You did.”

“You could be hiding the mess in your bedroom,” I say on a flirty shrug.

“I’m not.”

“Or more stuffed animals.”

“Definitely not.”

God, I’ve missed the easy, fun banter between us. Banter that always led to one or both of us missing clothes.

“If you don’t believe me, I can show you,” Jasper adds.

“You just want to get me in your bedroom,” I fire back with a half smile.

“And what if I do?”

My nipples tighten at the thought of tangling in the sheets of Jasper’s bed, our naked bodies intertwined once again after so long apart. Maybe this time, we won’t be interrupted before we can get all of our clothes off.

An urgent whisper in the back of my mind warns me this is a bad fucking idea. That if I’m not careful, one or both of us will end up hurt by the time the festival weekend is over. But that whisper isn’t nearly as loud as the thundering beat of my heart that begs for him to make good on his offer.

I reach a hand to his hip, stepping closer as my fingers dig in. “Then do it.”

His lips descend on mine, the hunger nearly unbearable.

It doesn’t matter that we made out on the beach or in his childhood bedroom

yesterday.

It feels as though lifetimes have passed since our lips last met.

The kisses are brutally urgent. He pulls me tightly against him, and I can feel the hard length of him against my belly.

I moan, sliding my hand between us and cupping him.

“Fuck, Vanessa,” he growls between kisses.

“I’ve missed you.”

“Who?” Jasper asks. “Me, or my cock?”

I lock my gaze with his, so fucking turned on by the intense heat in those dark eyes. “Both.”

He grabs me by the ass, lifting both legs off the ground. I wrap them around his waist as he carries me down the hall to his bedroom. I have two seconds to notice it too is decorated in a similar theme as the rest of the house before Jasper drops me onto his bed.

He kneels in front of me, unbuttoning my jeans and tugging them off.

“We don’t have long if we want to catch the late-night sunset from my favorite hidden viewing spot,” he says, his gaze locked on my red silk panties. Did I wear them with him in mind? Maybe I did. “But we should have more time than last night.”

“You mean this isn’t the sightseeing you had planned?” I ask, rolling my hips.

“Oh, it is,” he says, a wicked smile spreading across lips my own have branded. “Red was the color you were wearing the night we met.”

“You remember that?”

“Sweetheart, every man in the bar that night remembers that. You were a fucking knockout in that little red dress. Don’t pretend you didn’t know that. You wanted attention, and you got it.”

“All weekend long,” I say, my words nearly a purr.

“Let me take you back,” he says, spreading my legs wider. I move to lift my knee over his shoulder, but he pushes it back down so it’s bent over the edge of his very cushy mattress. One that reminds me of that luxury hotel. “Just sit back and enjoying the show.”

Jasper kisses a leisurely trail from the inside of my knee up my thigh.

His warm breath hovers a feather’s width from my damp panties, teasing me.

Taking me back to Cape Cop. But also anchoring me here to this very moment in North Haven.

I don’t know how to makes sense of it, so I don’t try.

I simply sink into the delicious sensation that is Jasper Steele.

He presses his lips to the silk, caressing my bud with gentle movement.

I whimper at the touch I’ve craved for four long years.

He drags his tongue along my seam, and my hips jerk right into his face. “Mmm. You smell just as sweet as I remember.” His words vibrate against me, and fuck does it feel good. “I bet you taste even sweeter.”

My legs spread wider, as though his wicked words are a command. I’m desperate for him to remove the barrier between my pussy and his very capable mouth. Instead, he trails those lips along the inside of my thigh, kissing his way to the opposite knee he started with.

My core aches for his mouth to return.

Jasper slides both hands from my knees to my hips, hooking his fingers into the sides of panties. At last, he drags them down my legs. When they reach my ankles, I kick them away. They fly over my head and land somewhere on the floor beside the bed. I’ll worry about finding them later.

“Eager much?” he teases.

“Maybe a little.” Or a lot.

Of Jasper many talents, his ability to take me to another world with his expert mouth is one of my favorite.

I’ve dreamed about him going down on me for longer than I care to admit.

No amount of self-pleasure in the past four years has come close to what Jasper Steele is capable of accomplishing with that delicious tongue.

He pushes apart my thighs, and I watch in rapt interest as he gives my pussy his full attention.

“I’ve missed this pretty pussy,” he says, his gaze flicking up to mine as his tongue lightly drags through my seam. He takes his time exploring every valley and peak between my legs. My eyes want to fall closed, but I resist so I can watch him enjoy me. It’s so fucking hot.

I rock my hips gently against the rhythm of his mouth, spreading my thighs open even wider, as though it’s not possible to open to him as fully as I want to. I want to surrender to his every touch. To surrender completely to him. Then do it .

His tongue circles my swollen bud, slowly at first. But then faster. And faster. And so fucking fast I can feel the rush of pleasure building throughout my entire body. Like a volcano on the verge of eruption.

“Jasper!” I cry out, right on the edge.

“Come for me, sweetheart,” he says, those delicious vibrating words enough to break me.

I explode apart.

My body isn’t my body anymore

It’s confetti shot out of the world’s largest cannon.

I come so hard my toes tingle, and my hips jerk violently against the face that is fused between my legs.

Jasper doesn’t let up.

He suctions his face to me through every intense convulsion, daring my orgasm to never end. I don’t know if it lasts for a minute or a year. I only know that Jasper

refuses to break contact until my body has fully stilled.

“That take you back to Cape Cod?” he asks, a sly smile spread on lips shiny with my juices.

“No,” I say.

“No?” he asks, confused.

I might be completely damned now, but I’m too sated in this moment to care. “That takes me right here . To North Haven.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:10 am

JASPER

The taste of Vanessa's pussy lingers on my tongue, long after I dropped her off at her hotel room.

Fuck, how I've missed pleasuring her. How I've missed her .

Had it not been for the work emergency—legit because Erin was in tears when Vanessa slipped into her hotel room—I'd have insisted she stay with me tonight.

I head instead to the festival grounds to see if Mom and Annie need help with the food truck.

"Nice timing," Annie says, the sarcastic edge to her voice letting me know that I missed the rush.

"I can help clean up," I offer.

"Get your butt in here," Mom insists, shoving a rag at my chest.

"Where's your girlfriend?" Annie asks, looking out the open doorway, as though searching for her in the dying crowd.

"She's not my girlfriend," I admit. Not yet .

"Why not?" Mom asks as she washes out a large metal soup cauldron.

Last night, when I brought Vanessa to the food truck to try the famous family clam chowder, Mom had instantly fallen in love with her.

Understandable. It was easy to do. I allowed my family to believe she was my girlfriend then without correcting them because it seemed to trip Vanessa up, which only made her more fucking adorable.

And maybe I was being a bit selfish.

I wanted to see her reaction. I needed to know if it was something she thought about. She never once told Mom or Annie they were mistaken about the two of us.

That had to mean something, right?

“She’s the admiral’s daughter,” I say.

“So?” Mom asks, not understanding.

“He doesn’t want to get court marshaled,” Annie says, reaching for the broom.

“They can do that?” Mom asks.

I shrug. “I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“But you’re his favorite,” Mom points out. “Don’t you think he’d want you to marry his daughter?”

“Whoa, we went from girlfriend to wife real fast there,” Annie says, shoving me out of the way so she can sweep the floor where I stand.

“Vanessa’s life is in Houston,” I say, continuing to wipe down the stainless steel

countertop, away from my sister's aggressive sweeping.

"Do they have coast guard bases in Houston?" Mom asks.

"Yes they do," Annie answers for me.

"How do you know that?"

She shrugs, flashing me that I'm not going to tell you smile she's worn so well since she was old enough to talk.

"You want to move to Houston?" Mom asks.

I never thought about it before. Ever since I was lucky enough to get stationed in North Haven, I'd been dead set on doing everything I could to stay until retirement.

It wasn't guaranteed, but as long as I stayed on Admiral Wheeler's good side, the odds were just slightly in my favor.

I loved my hometown. And I loved that the J-Squad—my brothers in arms—were here too.

More than once, we've talked about all of us retiring here and raising families. Watching our kids grow up together.

Could I really give that up?

For her, yes .

"Wouldn't you miss me?" I ask Mom.

“Oh Sweetie,” she says, giving me a side hug. “Don’t worry about me. I want you to be happy.”

“Vanessa doesn’t date military guys,” I finally admit once Annie abandons the broom and slips outside to take a phone call. “And as much as I love her, I don’t think I could give up the coast guard for her.”

“You do love her. I knew it,” Mom says, her smiling beaming.

“I think you missed the part about her not dating military guys.”

“Have you asked her why?”

“Not...exactly.”

“Then maybe you should start there.”

I finish helping Mom clean up—Annie’s still on the phone, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit worried about her pacing back and forth.

She’s not the type to ask for help if she needs it.

She’s convinced she can handle everything on her own.

I’m about to ask Mom when she shoves a container of clam chowder against my chest.

“Saved you some,” she says.

My rumbling stomach reminds me I forgot to actually eat dinner when we were at The Iceberg earlier. “Thanks.”

“Jasper?” she says as I move to leave.

“Yeah?”

“I like her. Don’t mess this up.”

“No pressure,” I mumble, exiting the food truck and searching for my sister.

I find Annie sitting on a riser a couple dozen yards away. I move in her direction, but she waves me off. Warning me not to come closer. A protective instinct comes over me. I go to her despite her objections, and the phone call mysteriously ends before I can reach her.

She’s not crying.

Good.

But she looks pissed.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“What do you think?” she snaps, then immediately apologizes. “Men are stupid.”

“Boys are stupid,” I correct.

“If it has a penis, it’s dumb.”

I cringe at my sister saying penis . “Want to go for a walk?”

“Everything’s closed.”

“I think the snow cone vendor might still be open.”

“What are we five?”

I shrug. “If you don’t want a snow cone?—”

“I didn’t say that.” She pushes up off the riser and chases after me. “You don’t have to walk like you’re hunting someone down, you know.”

“I want to put this clam chowder in my truck so no one steals it.”

“That’s fair.”

Before I can reach the parking lot, I hear someone call out my name. “Jasper, hey!” I turn to see Tommy Clausen flagging me down from a shed. Mr. Clausen—my second grade teacher, now retired—is one of the many volunteers on janitorial duty this week.

“Mr. Clausen, what’s up?” I ask.

He holds up a navy blue bank bag. “Found this just sitting out on a table near the admission booth. I looked for Amy Jenkins and that other young gal who was working with her, but they were both gone.” I suspect he means Erin.

Which could explain the excessive crying I witnessed earlier.

That bag looks stuffed within an inch of its life.

“I know where this needs to go,” I tell Mr. Clausen.

“Oh good. I don’t want to be responsible for it.” He hands the bag off, like he’s happy

to be rid of a ticking bomb. “There’s a lot of money in there.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I reassure him.

“Thanks, Jasper.”

“Taking that to your girlfriend ?” Annie prods.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Sure, whatever.”

I glance down at the bank bag, wondering if this is my chance to fix that. My chance to convince her to give us a real shot. North Haven. Houston. I don’t care anymore. I’m done tiptoeing around this.

Wherever we end up, I’m determined to make Vanessa Steele my girlfriend.

Then my wife.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:10 am

VANESSA

“Erin, what’s wrong?” I ask my faithful assistant, gathering her into my arms as she sobs.

“It’s so bad, Vanessa.” She sniffles. In a mere whisper, she adds, “ So bad.”

“Whatever it is, we can fix it.”

She shakes her head against my shoulder vigorously.

A pang of guilt stabs me square in the chest. Though Erin is very capable, I knew better than to let her take on the responsibility of an entire town festival by herself.

Instead, I allowed Dad’s good intentions to give me the excuse I wanted to spend time with Jasper.

Even when I was still pissed at the man, I wanted to be near him.

Damn the man and his very talented tongue.

“Erin, talk to me,” I say, holding onto her shoulders and pushing her back so she’ll look at me.

“The admission money is missing .”

“How much?”

“ All of it.”

A pit forms instantly in my stomach, but I force my expression to remain neutral for Erin’s sake.

This is bad. Really fucking bad. If we don’t have the money to turn over to the town council, it won’t only be my reputation on the line, but Dad’s as well.

Not the note I want to go out on in my event planning career. “Tell me what happened.”

Erin sits on the edge of her bed, and I hand her a box of tissues.

“I called Amy,” she says of the woman who was responsible for manning the admission booth today.

“She said she left them money with me .” Erin explains, through a fit of sobs, that she walked away from the table for five minutes because she didn’t expect there to be any money just sitting out for anyone to take.

She expected her counterpart to keep an eye on it until she returned.

“When I came back, Amy was gone. The money was gone, too.”

“You don’t think she stole it, do you?”

“No, definitely not. She was just in a hurry to leave. Something about a sick kid at home.”

“Tell me, step by step?—”

A knock at the door has both our heads snapping toward it.

Is it possible someone already knows the money is missing?

Did someone tell Dad it was stolen? Are the cops here to question us?

This is so much worse than admitting to Dad that my time as an event planner has come to an end.

It's quite possibly going out on a sinking ship that's been set of fucking fire.

"I'll get it," I say to Erin, pretending as though I'm not on the verge of tears myself.

To think, I was almost convinced that I could move to North Haven and build a life with Jasper.

Almost .

With a shaky hand I fight to steady, I pull open the door. Remembering after it's too late that there's a peep hole.

Jasper stands on the other side.

"This is not a good time," I hiss.

He holds up a navy blue bank bag, and I nearly crumble to the ground in relief.
"Where did you find this?"

"Good Samaritan turned it in."

"Good Samaritan?"

“My second grade teacher, actually. Mr. Clausen.”

Once again, I’m reminded that North Haven isn’t just a duty station to Jasper, but the place he grew up.

The place that shaped him into who he’s become.

Had it not been for that connection, the admission money might be lost—or stolen.

Never in a million years would I have been this lucky at an event in Houston.

Because I can hear Erin sniffing behind me, I resist the urge to fling myself into Jasper’s arms and kiss him until we’re both breathless. It shouldn’t surprise me anymore how quickly all can be forgiven when it comes to this man. “Give me two minutes?” I ask him instead.

“What happens in two minutes?” he asks, handing over the bag, our fingers grazing. A blazing trail of fire ignites inside me.

“You’re getting me out of here so I can thank you,” I drop my gaze purposely to his crotch. “ Properly .”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:10 am

JASPER

Vanessa Steele is back where she belongs—in my house.

We barely make it inside before she attacks me. Our quickly discarded clothes end up scattered throughout the open concept living area as we practically rip them off one another. There's too much urgency to wait until we reach my bedroom to undress one another.

Her panties—red lace this time—are the last to go. I fling them away, and they catch on the dining room chandelier.

We both laugh.

Then our lips crash together once again.

I lift her bare ass onto the kitchen counter and step between her open legs.

A silver heart-shaped pendant dangles on a chain between her bountiful tits, those pebbled nipples begging my mouth to be on them.

Except our lips are too busy alternating between crashing together and exploring each other's naked bodies.

Her hand fists my cock, and I groan at the touch I've been craving for so fucking long.

“Vanessa—”

“I need you, Jasper,” she says, tugging me closer by my dick. She scoots to the very edge of the counter, bringing my length to her core. Using it to pleasure her swollen clit as she lathers me in her juices. She’s so fucking wet I nearly nut on the spot.

I watch in rapture as she rubs me against her, those sexy moans and whimpers nearly undoing me.

“I want you inside me,” she insists.

“Condoms are in?—”

“I’m on the pill,” she says. “Clean, too.”

“I’m clean, too.”

She raises an eyebrow at me, as though challenging my answer. It doesn’t stop her from rolling her hips against me as my swollen head rubs against her button.

“Funny thing about first dates that always end early,” I say against the side of her neck as I scrape my teeth against that hollow spot I remember so well. “There’s never any sex.”

“You haven’t gone four years?—”

I look her dead in the eye, delighting in the way her blue orbs turn to liquid heat. “So what if I have, sweetheart? Your pussy is the only pussy I want to call home.”

I position my swollen head at her entrance and thrust inside, gripping her hips to pull her close as I sink in deep.

Her nails dig into my shoulders as she cries out.

I pull out slowly and pummel back into her sopping wet channel.

“Touch yourself, sweetheart,” I demand.

Her lips crush to mine as she reaches between us, fingering her clit. I grip her ass and set the rhythm. Slow to pull out. Desperate to be back home. Slow, then savage. She rolls her hips, meeting me greedy thrust for greedy thrust.

During that weekend in Cape Cod, we made love slowly and sensually, we fucked hard, and everything in between. With Vanessa, it’s always been moment by moment, and I fucking love it.

I love her .

“Jasper!” she cries out, rubbing her finger against her swollen button like her life depends on it. I drive my cock into her harder, faster. I’m desperate to release myself inside her depths, but I won’t dare come until she does. She’ll always come first.

“Come for me,” I growl. “Come on my bare cock, Vanessa.”

She explodes.

Her cry of ecstasy will probably raise some concern with the neighbors, but their nosiness is a price I’m willing to pay. Her teeth dig into my shoulder as she rocks violently through her powerful orgasm.

I stop fighting my restraint.

I pummel into her over and over. Until finally, I still inside her. My release is so

intense my legs shake and force me to fight for balance. Vanessa clings to me as hot ropes of cum fill her. Staking my claim—for good this time.

“I love you,” I say against her ear, no longer giving a fuck if my confession scares her. “I’ve loved you since that day I met you in Cape Cod.”

“Jasper, I?—”

Her body stiffens in my hold, and I sense the alarm.

“What’s wrong?”

“My necklace.”

I reluctantly pull back, freeing my cock from her slick heat, and stare down at her chest. The necklace her mother gave her is missing.

“It’s here somewhere,” I reassure her.

“Maybe I left it at the hotel,” she says, panic taking over.

I cup her cheek and turn her face until she looks at me. “You were wearing it a few minutes ago. I remember it dangling between your tits, sweetheart. We’ll find it.”

She nods, quickly at first, then slowly as the panic dissipates.

I lift her off the counter, and we find the necklace within minutes. It landed in a bowl of apples and oranges.

“The clasp broke,” she says, looking defeated.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’ll get it fixed?—”

“I need to go,” she says, suddenly scrambling to collect her clothes.

“Vanessa—”

“Please, Jasper. Please take me back to the hotel.”

I hate how fragile her voice sounds, as though the strongest woman I’ve ever met is seconds from breaking.

I hate even more that she wants to run away from me in this moment of rare vulnerability.

Is it the necklace or is it my unplanned confession about being in love with her that has her so skittish?

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

“Vanessa—”

She reaches up and touches my cheek, forcing a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

“We still have one more day, Jasper.”

One more day .

Fuck that.

“Why don’t you date military men?” The question comes out harsher than I intend,

causing her to flinch. But now that it's out, I'm desperate to know the reason.

"My mom."

"What about your mom?"

"She made me promise—on her deathbed. To never get involved with a military man. She didn't want me to?"

"That's fucking stupid."

Any warmth in her gaze turns to ice in a single heartbeat. "Take. Me. Back. Now."

"Fine," I say, feeling the frustration rise. This is the reason she's avoided military men? Some fucking ridiculous deathbed wish that didn't take into account who she might meet and fall in love with? I want to argue. I want to fight—then fuck—then fight some more.

But deep down I know this isn't the way to convince her to stay.

It's best if we both sleep on this.

Tomorrow, we can sort this out once and for all. I have one more day to convince her to follow her own heart. Because I'd bet my military career that the path leads right to loving me too.

VANESSA

“I thought you were spending the day with Jasper,” Erin says, eyebrows drawn in confusion as I walk toward the hotel shuttle.

“I’m not,” I say, still fuming about the way we left things last night.

How dare he have the audacity to tell me Mom’s deathbed wish was fucking stupid .

It was the only thing she ever asked of me.

The only thing she ever wanted for me—to not know the pain and misery she experienced being married to a military man.

“Where are you going then?”

“To the festival,” I say, as though that were the most obvious answer. “I helped plan the damn thing. I should at least make an appearance.”

I hate that Jasper ruined my perfect memory of Cape Cod. Why did he have to tell me he loved me? I feel the edge of tears desperate to rush to the surface, forcing me to double down on my anger.

“What about your dad?”

“What about him?” I fire back, my harsh words causing my friend to take a step back.

“Sorry. I’m a little on edge.”

“Is this about Jasper?” she asks. Though she was still awake scrolling on her phone when I returned to the room last night, she did me the kindness of not asking any questions. I owe her an explanation.

“It’s not going to work out,” I say. “It was never going to work out.”

“Why?”

“You know why, Erin.”

I watch the shuttle empty, but before I can take a step forward, Erin catches me by the arm, looping hers through mine. “I need to show you something first.”

“I don’t have time?—”

“This won’t take long,” she says, dragging me across the hotel lobby to the gift shop I’ve yet to visit. A woman I recognize from the J-Squad dinner last night is behind the counter. Her hand rubs her belly lovingly as she talks to an elderly couple. It’s stupid that I’m envious of her glow.

I’ve always wanted kids, but my career has been too demanding to even consider it at this point in my life.

It’s why I started writing children’s books.

It was the escape I needed. A way to hold onto that dream. To promise myself someday my future children would read my books.

“Vanessa, hey!” Mara greets me with a hug, as though we’re old friends.

Damn Jasper.

I didn't just fall for him. I fell for everyone in his life, too.

"Hey, Mara."

"Mara, I'm Erin," my bestie pipes up. "I wanted to introduce you to someone."

"We already met," I say to Erin, my eyebrows drawing in confusion.

"Mara, you met Vanessa Wheeler. But have you met Vanessa Sterling?"

"No way!" Mara shrieks, turning half a dozen heads. "You're Vanessa Sterling?"

"I—I'm, uh?—"

Mara drags me by the arm to the book section. "I love your books! I have them all." She rubs her belly again. "I've been reading them to my baby girl every day."

"You have?"

"I can't believe you're the author. But now it all makes sense."

"It does?"

"Jasper insisted we carry these books."

My heart stops beating for several seconds. "He did?"

"He's so proud of you, you know. I just didn't realize you were the same person. Oh, I feel so foolish. But you know, pregnancy brain and all! You have to do a book signing before you leave. I can order more today. How long are you staying?"

“A book signing?” The sound of Dad’s voice causes me to stiffen with dread.

Well fuck. This is not the way I wanted to tell him about my decision to leave the event planning world to pursue children’s books.

Maybe I’ll get some bonus points because I used Mom’s maiden name for my pen name.

Or maybe it’ll just break his heart a little more.

Too late to back pedal now.

Slowly, I turn to face him.

“Dad, we need to talk.”

“Everything okay?” he asks, his expression showing a rare glimpse of compassion.

Erin offers me an encouraging smile.

“Yeah, but I have some things I need to tell you.” I hand him one of my books. “And it can’t wait.”

First Dad.

Then Jasper.

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JASPER

I'm panting heavily after having scoured the entire festival grounds twice in search of Vanessa. She warned me she wasn't going to be glued to my side today, but I went to the hotel early anyway.

She wasn't there.

But she's also not here .

Well, fuck.

If she got on a plane this morning, the admiral will have my ass.

Worse, though, is that the woman I love may have managed to slip out of my life for a second time. Something I swore I would never let happen. Maybe I was wrong to give us both space last night.

"You okay, man?" Joel asks, his eyebrows furrowed in concern.

"Vanessa. I can't find her."

"She's over there," he says, nodding at the Caribou Creek Brewery tent.

The relief I feel at spotting her instantly deflates as I see her standing in line with her father.

He's in plain clothes today, but his massive size is as intimidating as ever.

A reminder of the barrier that exists between Vanessa and me even if I still have a chance to convince her to stay in North Haven.

Fuck.

"You sure this is worth it?" Joel asks, no judgment in his tone, only curiosity.

"One day, you'll understand," I say to him.

"Then, man the fuck up," he says, clapping me on the shoulder. "And good luck."

I force my feet to move forward before my brain can give me a dozen reasons to run the other way.

In less than a minute, I might be putting my military career on the line.

Though I'd always planned to retire at twenty years, I never gave much thought to what I'd do after the coast guard. I've always had time on my side.

But I can't stand the thought of Vanessa getting on that plane tomorrow and possibly never coming back.

I can't let the woman I love walk away without laying it all on the line.

I don't just love her, I need her as badly as I need oxygen to breathe.

If she'd just stop being so damn stubborn for two seconds, she'll realize she feels the same.

She'll realize that it's not only safe to love me back, but necessary to our existence.

We belong together. I've known that since the moment we met at the Cape Cod bar.

Vanessa turns, her cobalt blue gaze locking with mine. Her expression is blank. Better than anger. She lifts a small paper cup to her lips and sips. Fuck me, I'm jealous of that paper rim.

She turns to her dad, saying something. I can't see her face, but I can see his. Dread fills me as Admiral Wheeler lifts his gaze to me. His expression isn't so blank. It's...stern.

Seems like my military career might be finished after all. Maybe Mom needs an extra set of hands with her food truck. Or I could work as a deckhand for a crab boat. Or?—

Vanessa tosses her paper cup in a trash bin and sprints toward me.

I'm certain I'm imagining it.

Until she practically tackles me to the ground. By some miracle, I manage to keep us both upright as she wraps her arms around my neck and drags me down for a kiss that is most definitely not appropriate for the public eye.

But I don't fucking care.

Whatever issues we have to sort out, this kiss tells me everything's going to be okay. I can feel the love infused in it.

"You," she says, a huge smile spreading across those swollen lips when she breaks apart the kiss.

“Me?”

“You told Mara to stock my books?”

“Of course I did.”

“You remembered.”

“You thought I forgot you were Vanessa Sterling, up and coming children’s book author?”

“Well, yeah.”

I cup her cheek, stroking the soft skin with my thumb. “Sweetheart, I remember everything about that weekend. I remember everything about you. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

“I guess it took me a while.”

Is Admiral Wheeler...smiling?

“So funny story,” Vanessa says glancing back at her dad a moment. She bites her bottom lip when her attention returns to me. “My dad was playing matchmaker.”

“No way.”

“Apparently, he hated David and was planning to use you to break us up. But then I showed up without him and made his whole scheme that much easier to implement.”

“Your dad... approves ?”

“Why are you surprised? You’re apparently his favorite.”

“No I’m not.”

She rolls her eyes. “Tell that to entire J-Squad.”

“What about your rule not to date a military man?”

“So, Dad and I had a good long chat about Mom this morning. He thinks Mom would never have given me that advice if she’d been lucky enough to meet you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So what now?”

“First, you’re going to take me back to your place so I can thoroughly thank you in private,” she says, licking her lips.

“Second?”

“Then you’re going to take me to the hotel to pack.”

“Pack?”

“I need to head back to Houston for a couple of weeks to tie up loose ends. Close a business, rescind an offer on a house, and pack up my life. You know, the usual things you have to do to move to a remote Alaska town with the man you love.”

“I like the sound of that,” I say, eager to get started on the first step.

“Would you like the sound of coming with me?” she asks.

“In bed?”

She playfully swats at my chest. “To Houston.”

“To Houston?” I repeat.

“Dad said he’d approve your leave. But if you don’t want to?—”

“I want to.” I draw Vanessa’s lips to mine for a deep, sensual kiss. A kiss filled with promise. Filled with all the love I hold for her. My heart is hers. It’ll always be hers. “I’ve waited four years to find you. I don’t want to waste another day not by your side. I love you, Vanessa Wheeler.”

“You know what?” she says, fingers trailing a playful rhythm across my chest. “I think I love you to.”

“You think?”

“Maybe you should take me back to your place sooner rather than later so I can figure it out.”

“With pleasure.”

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ABOUT A YEAR LATER...

JASPER

“You got the cake?” I ask Joel as he steps into my kitchen.

“Yes, I got the cake.”

“You’re sure it’s the right cake?”

Joel shakes his head, setting the bakery box on the counter. “They swore up and down that it’s the right cake.”

“Good, good.”

“You nervous or something man?” he asks on a chuckle.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Yeah, probably.” Joel lets out a soft sigh, and I catch him staring into space.

“She’s out there,” I say to him about his future wife.

“Probably lost at sea,” he says with an amused headshake. Poor man is the only single one left in the J-Squad. He pretends to be happy living the bachelor life, but I know better. He wants what we all have.

“Then it’s a good thing you’re a rescue swimmer.”

The front door bursts open, and a bunch of excited female chatter fills the air. Several of the wives agreed to help me set up the gender reveal party that Vanessa knows nothing about. Erin, who’s in town visiting for the week, has agreed to keep my wife entertained until it’s time to surprise her.

Either Vanessa will be thrilled by the surprise party or super pissed. Because we couldn’t agree whether or not to find out the sex of our baby or let it be a surprise, we’ve been putting it off.

But our little bundle of joy will be here in less than three months.

I know my wife.

Despite what she’s been saying, she’ll want to know.

Probably.

“Remember the plan,” I say to Joel. “If Vanessa says no?—”

“I’ll take the cake to the shelter the next town over. I swear I won’t eat it. I’ll scrape off the fancy words. No one will ever know what they’re eating.”

“I owe you, man.”

“Yes, you do.” He claps me on the shoulder. “I’ll get the grill warmed up.”

The next hour is a blur of decorations, food prep, and excitement as more people show up. The kind of excitement that reminds me of last summer when I traveled to Houston with Vanessa and helped her move her entire life to North Haven. There was no regret or hesitation. Just pure exhilaration.

We were married a few weeks later, before Admiral Wheeler was sent away on a temporary mission in Cape Cod, of all places. He's back in North Haven now, where he'll be until he retires in six short months. He's planning to keep North Haven as his home base so he can be close to his grandchild.

Vanessa didn't want to wait to start a family. She told me she put that area of life on hold for long enough.

We didn't waste any time getting to work on that request.

And in a few minutes, we might get to find out if we're having a little girl or a little boy.

"I can't wait to be a grandma," Mom says, giving me a side hug. "I'm going to spoil that kid rotten you know."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

"They're here!" Blakely, who's been stationed as the lookout, calls from the living room. She has a camera around her neck, ready to document the momentous occasion. "Places everyone!"

I scan the area once more, ensuring every detail is in place. Pink and blue balloons are scattered throughout. The white-frosted cake is centered on the dining room table. Pink and blue ribbon are strung from the chandelier that once held Vanessa's red panties captive. The memory makes me smile.

The door opens and we collectively yell, "Surprise!"

Vanessa covers her agape mouth with both hands. I make my way across the living room to meet her, relieved that there's an excited sparkle in her blue eyes. Not mad .

“What is all this?” she asks, her eyes instantly shiny with tears. The baby hormones have made her more emotional as of late, but I don’t mind. I never mind a reason to cuddle my wife. There’s nothing better than having Vanessa close—with or without clothes.

“Sweetheart, it’s up to you, but if you want to know what we’re having, we can find out today. Right now, actually.”

“Really?”

“We just have to cut the cake.”

“Cake?”

I lead her to the dining room table, to a white-frosted cake with blue and pink frosting accents that says Congratulations on Your Bundle of Joy.

“Please don’t stab me with this,” I say, handing my wife a large knife. Though I suspect I’m out of the danger zone with the way she can’t stop smiling.

“We’re really doing this?” she says to me, locking her gaze with mine.

“Only if you want to.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then that’s okay. I’ll kick everyone out and Joel will make the cake disappear before anyone discovers what color it is.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, don’t kick everyone out.” She scans the room, her expression glowing. “Everyone we love is in this room.” She hovers the knife above the center of the cake, waiting for me to place my hand over hers. “Together.”

“Together.”

“Wait!” Blakely snaps a few pictures. “Okay, go ahead.”

Together, we lower the knife through the center of the round cake. The cut is clean, but I can see the edges of pink escaping through the white frosting before the knife has sunk all the way through.

A girl.

We’re having a little girl.

“Are you happy?” Vanessa asks me.

“So happy.”

She turns to me, cupping both my cheeks and pulling me down for a kiss. I expect her to pull away after a few seconds, but those fingernails dig into the back of my neck as her tongue demands passage into my mouth. Blood starts to rush south, and suddenly I’m wishing we could kick everyone out.

“They’re family,” she whispers to me, finally breaking apart the kiss. As though she’s read my mind. Or perhaps she just knows what a kiss like that does to me.

“We should probably feed them,” I add.

“Probably.”

I kiss her once more then lean my cheek against hers, lowering my voice against her ear. “But after they’re gone, I have a very special dessert just for you to enjoy, sweetheart.”

“God, I love you, Jasper.”

“Oh, I definitely love you more.”