



Piercing Eyes (The Perfect Man #2)

Author: *Kate Hunt*

Category: Sport

Description: All I wanted was a fresh start.

My ex-fiancé shattered my future, and I need a new job.

But when I walk into the interview, my potential boss isn't just anyone.

He's Aiden Edwards, the sinfully gorgeous ex-baseball player...

...and the guy who used to make me cry on the playground.

Working for him should be out of the question.

Except he doesn't recognize me. Oblivious of our past, he offers me the job on the spot.

And I might just be desperate enough to take it.

Total Pages (Source): 8

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RORY

I should be on my honeymoon right now.

Instead, I'm sitting in my car outside an unfamiliar neighborhood coffee shop, second-guessing my outfit choice. The blazer I'm wearing might be too formal for a coffee shop interview, but showing up underdressed would be worse. The job listing was frustratingly vague—it just said seeking general assistant—but my bank account isn't giving me the luxury of being picky. San Francisco rent waits for no one, not even jilted brides.

I reach up to smooth a wayward strand of hair, catching sight of my bare ring finger in the rearview mirror. There's still a faint line where my engagement ring used to be. Three weeks ago, that ring—and my entire future—disappeared when Michael had his great revelation that we “weren't meant to be.”

Something tells me there was more to that revelation than he let on, but I'll never know for sure. Just like I'll never return to my job at his family's company—the thought of facing pitying looks in the hallway makes my stomach turn. Finding a new job has been harder than I expected, but something will work out.

It has to.

I take a deep breath and step out of my car. The coffee shop is tucked away on a quiet street, far from the bustle of the rest of the city. Everything about this feels odd—the

out-of-the-way location, the vague job description, the instruction to look for someone in a navy blue shirt.

The whir of an espresso machine and gentle clinking of cups fills the quiet space as I step inside. Only a handful of people occupy the tables, most of them absorbed in laptops or books. My eyes scan the room, searching for navy blue.

Then I see him, and my heart nearly stops.

The man in navy blue isn't just anyone. He's Aiden Edwards, former shortstop for the Stallions, now retired and apparently looking to hire an assistant. But that's not the only reason why my pulse is racing. I know Aiden from long before his pro baseball career—we went to elementary school together.

I've never told anyone about that connection. After all, who wants to brag about knowing someone when your main memories of them involve being the target of their relentless teasing?

My first instinct is to turn around and walk right back out the door. But I force myself to move toward him, reminding myself that we're both in our thirties now. Elementary school was a lifetime ago.

As I approach his table, Aiden looks up and smiles, rising to his feet in one smooth motion. My mouth goes dry as I take him in. He's kept every ounce of that athletic build even after leaving pro baseball—his broad shoulders fill out his navy shirt, muscles clearly defined beneath the fabric. But it's his eyes that really get me, so blue and piercing that I nearly forget how to speak.

“You must be Rory.” His smile is warm and professional, without a hint of recognition.

I swallow my disappointment, though I'm not sure why I expected anything different. It's been over two decades since we were in school together, and unlike me, he hasn't had the constant reminder of seeing his former classmate on TV.

"Aiden Edwards." He extends his hand, and a jolt of electricity shoots through me when our palms meet.

"I know," I say with what I hope is a professional smile.

Aiden's smile deepens as we sit down to start the interview. "Thanks for coming out here. I know the job posting was vague and this isn't exactly a central location."

I open my mouth to respond, but he keeps on talking. "I wanted to avoid people applying just because of who I am. You wouldn't believe how many opportunities people try to take advantage of when they recognize my name."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Sure, being hounded by fans must be annoying, but there's something a little too self-important about assuming everyone's dying to work for you.

"The job itself is pretty straightforward," he continues, still not giving me a chance to speak. "I write children's books now, which means managing writing deadlines and promotional appearances. Plus being a former Stallion comes with its own commitments—charity events, special appearances, that kind of thing." His fingers drum against the table, the movement of his muscled hands temporarily distracting me. "I need someone to handle my schedule, travel arrangements, emails, and so on. I've been doing it all myself, but my sister and her husband finally convinced me I need help."

"That does sound like a lot to manage alone," I say, finally getting a word in. Aiden's blue eyes lock onto mine, and my heart somersaults. I force myself to stay focused.

“What kind of experience are you looking for?”

Our conversation flows easily from there. He asks about my background in executive assistance, and I find myself relaxing despite my initial nerves. Well, mostly relaxing—every time he leans forward to make a point, the way his shoulders move under his shirt threatens to derail my train of thought completely.

I tell him about coordinating complex travel arrangements in my previous role and describe the charity gala I organized last spring.

“How are you with large groups of kids?” He leans back in his chair. “The book events can get pretty wild.”

“I don’t have much experience with children’s events,” I admit. “But I’m excellent at handling chaos.”

Those insanely piercing eyes of his crinkle at the corners when he smiles, and I feel something dangerously close to melting.

By the time the interview ends, I’m confident I’ve managed to come across as capable and professional, even if I did have to repeatedly remind myself to stop getting lost in how gorgeous Aiden is.

“I’ve got to say, Rory, I’m really impressed.” He sits forward, resting his forearms on the table. “I don’t need time to think about it—the job is yours if you want it.”

My pulse quickens. After all the job rejections I’ve gotten, this feels almost too good to be true. “Yes, absolutely. When would you like me to start?”

“How’s tomorrow?”

I blink. “Tomorrow?”

“I’m flying to New York to meet with my publisher, and it would be great if you could come along.” He says this like it’s the most normal request in the world, asking someone he just interviewed to fly across the country with him.

I take a steadying breath, reminding myself that this is exactly the kind of thing an assistant should be prepared for. “I can make that work.”

“Perfect.” He stands, his big athletic frame unfolding in front of me. “Let me walk you to your car.”

As we step outside, he asks, “So are you from around here?”

My stomach tightens. He really doesn’t remember me at all. I consider telling him about our elementary school connection—about Mrs. Watson’s third grade class, about how he used to steal my lunch desserts, about all the times he made me cry on the playground.

“Yes,” I say simply. The words sit on my tongue: We went to school together, Aiden . But what would be the point? Drawing attention to our past would only make things awkward, especially now that he’s my boss. Some things are better left buried in the past.

“What time should I get to the airport tomorrow?” I ask.

“I’ll email you the flight details tonight,” he says as we reach my car. “I’ll handle booking everything—just show up ready to go.”

“Sounds good. I’ll make sure I’m early.”

He starts to turn away before pausing. “Oh, and Rory?”

“Yes?”

“I take my coffee black with an extra shot.” He flashes me a smile that would be devastating if it wasn’t so clearly paired with an expectation that I’ll show up tomorrow with his coffee order in hand. I get it—I’m his assistant now. But he could at least phrase it as a request.

I watch him walk away, torn between attraction and exasperation. My new boss is absurdly hot, used to be my childhood bully, and clearly hasn’t changed much in the ego department. What did I just get myself into?

A job, obviously—one I desperately need. But as I slide into my car, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m playing with fire.

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AIDEN

I shouldn't be thinking about how gorgeous she is. I shouldn't be tracking the way her hips move in that skirt.

But as I watch Rory walk toward me, coffee cups in hand, it's all I can think about.

Hiring her was a dangerous call. She's going to be around constantly, running my schedule, traveling with me everywhere. I've got three books to finish and more appearances than I can count—the last thing I need is this kind of distraction. But something about her during our interview yesterday grabbed me. I couldn't let her walk away.

"Good morning." Rory hands me my coffee with a smile that hits me right in the chest.

"Morning. Thanks." I take a drink, watching her settle into the seat beside me. That's when I notice the pale strip of skin on her ring finger. Is she married? The thought disappoints me more than I care to admit. It shouldn't matter either way.

"I hope you're okay with a lot of traveling," I say.

She nods. "I love flying."

"What I meant was, I hope it doesn't interfere with your life outside work. You have

any pets?”

“No. I was going to adopt a dog with—” She presses her lips together, clearly wishing she hadn’t started the sentence. “With my fiancé. But we aren’t together anymore. So no, no pets. Do you have any?”

An ex-fiancé. That explains the ring mark. “No. My sister’s family has a real sweet German Shepherd, though. I get my dog fix whenever I see them.”

Her smile comes back. “Yeah, I love hanging out with my friends’ dogs too.” She pulls her phone from her bag. “So, I went through everything you sent over last night. I made some notes about additional points we might want to bring up with your publisher today.”

I want to know more about her, not what she thinks about the files I sent over. But she’s already launching into meeting preparations, and she’s thorough. We’re still discussing it when they call our boarding group.

With our first class tickets, we’re among the first to board. As we’re getting settled in our seats on the plane, I take the opportunity to bring our conversation back to a more personal topic. “What kind of other traveling have you done?”

“Oh, nothing too exciting.” She continues arranging her things under the seat in front of her. “I wouldn’t consider myself a world traveler or anything.”

“What’s been your favorite trip?”

She thinks for a second. “When I was a kid, my family went to Glacier National Park. It was so pretty—it felt like we were on a different planet. I have a lot of fond memories of the time we spend camping there.”

“That’s sweet,” I say, smiling. “You said you grew up in San Francisco. Is your family still in the area?”

“Yeah, they are.”

“How many siblings?”

Something flickers across her face. I can’t read it, but it makes me pause. “Should I not ask about them?”

“No, it’s just...” She twists her hands in her lap. “Um, okay, this is kind of awkward, but...we actually went to the same elementary school, Aiden.”

“What?” I must have heard her wrong.

She bites her lip. “Mrs. Watson? Third grade?”

I stare at her. There’s no way. No fucking way we were in the same class.

Her cheeks flush pink. “You used to steal my desserts at lunch. And one time you convinced everyone I had a contagious disease, so no one would play with me at recess for a week.”

The memory crashes into me. Suddenly I can see it clear as day—little Rory with her dark braids, sitting alone at lunch. Me and my friends laughing, watching her shoulders hunch as she tried not to cry. Jesus Christ. More memories surface, one after another, each worse than the last. I was such an asshole to her.

“Fuck.” I force myself to meet her eyes. “I can’t believe this. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. And God, I’m so sorry for what I did when we were kids. That’s?—”

“In the past,” she says firmly, cutting me off. “We don’t need to talk about it. I didn’t even want to bring it up.”

Her words don’t do anything to lessen my guilt. “I feel like such an idiot, Rory. On multiple levels.”

“Don’t. It’s fine.”

How can she say it’s fine? How can she drop a bomb like that on me and expect me to act like it’s no big deal?

“In fact,” she says, smoothing the fabric of her skirt, “I’d prefer it if we considered this a fresh start and didn’t bring it up again.”

Does she really mean that? I watch the way she won’t quite look at me, trying to read what’s really going on in her head. But it’s impossible to tell.

“You sure?”

She nods. “I’m sure.”

Problem is, now that I’ve remembered, I can’t stop thinking about the past. Every memory hits like a fresh wound—Rory sitting alone at lunch, the cruel jokes, the way her shoulders would hunch when we laughed at her. The memories follow me through the whole flight to New York, torturing me as we check into the hotel and head to Manhattan for the publisher meeting.

I manage to keep it professional during the meeting, but my mind keeps circling back to one thought: how is Rory sitting here next to me, being so damn composed about all of this? She should hate me. Instead, she’s taking notes and asking intelligent questions about marketing strategies for my next book series.

We're walking out of the publisher's building when I can't take it anymore. I need to talk to her about this, not just brush it off like she wants to. I'm about to suggest we grab coffee—or maybe something stronger—when a familiar voice cuts through the crowd.

“Aiden? Holy shit, it is you!”

A hand claps my shoulder as Jackson King appears, grinning like we're still rookies sharing a dugout. “What're you doing in New York, man?”

His timing is terrible, but I can't help returning his smile. Jackson and I go way back—he was there for some of my best seasons with the Stallions before we both retired. “Jackson, hey.” I pull him into a quick hug. “Just wrapped a meeting with my publisher.”

“That's right—you're writing those kids' books now.” He raises an eyebrow. “What, all those years in the majors didn't set you up nice enough?”

I laugh. “The books are a passion project.” I turn to include Rory in the conversation. “Jackson, this is Rory. Rory, Jackson King—former teammate and perpetual pain in my ass.”

Rory offers her hand with a friendly smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Jackson shakes her hand, but his eyes dart between us with amusement. “Well damn, you two make a gorgeous couple. How long you been keeping this quiet, Edwards?”

My stomach drops. “Rory's my assistant,” I say quickly, catching a blush creep across her cheeks.

“Shit.” Jackson winces. “My bad. Let me make it up to you both—drinks on me?”

There's this great little place around the corner. Best dirty martinis in Manhattan."

"Thank you, but I should really get some work done," Rory says, already putting space between us. "It was nice meeting you, Jackson. Aiden, I'll check in later about tomorrow's schedule."

She disappears into the crowded sidewalk before I can stop her. Part of me wants to go after her, but Jackson's already steering me toward the bar. And, honestly, I could use a drink and a friend right now.

The bar is exactly what you'd expect—narrow, dark, with decades of stories soaked into the worn wood surfaces. We slide into a booth with our drinks, and Jackson wastes no time cutting to the chase.

"So," he says, leaning forward. "Want to tell me what's really going on there?"

I take a long pull of my whiskey. "Nothing's going on."

"Bullshit. I saw how you were looking at her. And how quickly you jumped to correct me about the couple thing." He points an accusatory finger at me. "You've got that same look you used to get before a big game. All intense and wound up."

"It's complicated."

"When isn't it?" He sits back, crossing his arms. "Come on, man. Talk to me."

Maybe it's the whiskey, or maybe I just need to tell someone, but I find myself spilling the whole story—how seeing her yesterday knocked me completely off balance, the bomb she dropped this morning about our shared past, the flood of memories about my bad behavior back then.

When I finish, Jackson lets out a low whistle. “Well, shit.”

“Yeah.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

I stare into my glass. “What can I do? I’m her boss now. And after what I did to her as a kid...”

“But she took the job,” Jackson points out. “She must have forgiven you.”

“Or she really needed the work.” I drain my glass instead of dwelling on that possibility.

“Look,” Jackson says, his voice gentler now. “You were a kid. Kids can be cruel. But you’re not that person anymore—anyone who knows you can see that. Hell, you write children’s books about kindness and friendship.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

“No, it doesn’t. But beating yourself up won’t fix anything either.” He signals the bartender for another round. “As for those other feelings you have for her...sorry, man, but this is clearly one of those situations where you need to just let it be. She’s your employee.”

I know he’s right. The responsible thing is to keep things strictly professional, to focus on being a decent boss and proving I’m not that same thoughtless kid who made her schooldays hell. But getting rid of the desire I feel for her is going to be far easier said than done.

“Another round?” Jackson asks, reading my expression.

I nod, thinking I might need several to get through this. “Keep them coming.”

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RORY

TWO WEEKS LATER

I've never seen a group of children sit in such mesmerized silence. I'm standing at the back of the bookstore, watching a sea of kids sit perfectly still, their eyes fixed on Aiden as he reads from his most popular picture book. His voice rises and falls with each character, and my pulse quickens at watching this side of him—the gentle storyteller who's nothing like the cocky Stallions player he used to be or the boy who used to tease me.

It's almost annoying how good he is at this. Not just the reading, but the way he has every kid in the room hanging on his every word. The former star athlete turned master storyteller. Because apparently being a professional baseball player and devastatingly handsome wasn't enough—he had to go and be good with kids too.

These past two weeks have been...interesting, that's for sure. Don't get me wrong, I'm very grateful for the job. But telling Aiden about our past history that day on the plane to New York was so uncomfortable, and then when his old teammate Jackson assumed we were a couple? God, that was awkward. At least nothing else like that has happened since then. But there's still a weird energy between us.

And, despite myself, I still keep getting lost in those damn piercing eyes of his.

Aiden closes the book and thanks everyone for coming. The spell breaks, and the

room fills with excited chatter and applause. I slip into assistant mode, weaving through parents and kids to help manage the signing line. It's my first book signing event, but the skills from my old executive assistant job translate surprisingly well, and I focus on keeping the line moving while ensuring each kid gets their moment with Aiden. I find myself falling into an easy rhythm, and it would feel completely natural if I could just ignore how my skin prickles every time I brush past Aiden.

I'm not the only one affected by his presence. The moms in line are all looking at him like they're smitten, and honestly, I get it. The sight of this tall, athletic man kneeling down to get on eye level with their kids, giving each child his full attention—the swoon factor is through the roof.

After the event is over and Aiden and I are walking out to the car waiting for us, I can't help myself from saying, "I think you broke some hearts in there today."

"What?" He looks genuinely confused.

"Those moms were giving you serious heart eyes."

He laughs. "I didn't notice. I was focused on the kids."

We climb into the back of the hired car, settling into the leather seats. The space shouldn't feel intimate, but it does. I pull out my phone and start running through his upcoming schedule—baseball appearances, book readings, charity events—trying to focus on work instead of how aware I am of Aiden's presence.

And then my phone rings.

Michael's name on the screen stops my heart mid-beat. I decline the call, but moments later a text appears: Seriously, Rory? You're going to ignore my call?

“Everything okay?”

I look up to find Aiden watching me, concern etched across his features.

“Fine,” I say, but my voice gives me away.

The truth is, Michael has been reaching out with increasing frequency these past few weeks. At first it was just apologies, but now his messages have taken on an edge I don’t like. He told me he wants me back, and apparently my complete lack of interest is a foreign concept to him. He’s not used to being told no, and definitely not by me.

“You sure?” Aiden’s voice is gentle. “You look rattled.”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about.” His concern is sweet, but what exactly am I supposed to say? Hey boss, my ex-fiancé is having trouble with the concept of ‘no’? Besides, what could Aiden possibly do about it?

I set my phone on the seat between us and dig through my bag for the paperwork about an upcoming baseball clinic. “So about next weekend’s appearance?—”

Another text lights up my screen. Aiden and I both glance down automatically.

HELLO?? DON’T IGNORE ME RORY.

I snatch my phone away, but it’s too late. The flash of fury that crosses Aiden’s face makes my breath catch. His jaw tightens, and suddenly I’m seeing exactly why he was so intimidating on the baseball field.

“Who’s texting you?” His voice has gone hard with protectiveness.

“No one. Don’t worry about it.” I slip the phone into my bag.

“Rory. Someone’s clearly threatening you. I can’t just ignore that.”

I stare out the window for a long moment, my chest tight. “It’s my ex,” I finally admit. “He’s been texting me. A lot. He wants to get back together and isn’t handling rejection well.”

Aiden’s eyebrows push together. “How long has this been going on?”

“A few weeks. It’s fine, really. He’s just?—”

“Do you feel safe?” Aiden cuts me off, his eyes intense. “At your place, when you’re alone?”

The question catches me off guard. “For the most part, yes.” I hear the hesitation in my voice and rush to add, “I really don’t think he would do anything scary.”

“Well, I’m still not comfortable with this.” He looks at me carefully. “How would you feel about having security keep an eye on your place?”

“That’s really not necessary.”

“But would it make you feel safer?”

“Well...yes.”

“Good. I’d rather be safe than sorry.” He pulls out his phone, his fingers moving quickly across the screen. “I know a company that handles personal security. They’re discrete, professional?—”

“Aiden.” I reach out and touch his arm without thinking. “This is too much.”

He keeps typing, seemingly unfazed by my hand on his arm. I should tell him he's being overprotective, that I can handle this myself. But watching him take control of the situation, seeing how seriously he's taking this—I can't bring myself to stop him. Maybe having someone watching my back isn't such a bad idea after all.

Aiden: Hey. Just checking in to let you know that the security detail is in place.

Me: Thank you. I really appreciate this.

Aiden: Marcus will keep an eye on things. He's one of their best.

Me: You didn't have to do any of this.

Aiden: Look, I know this is your personal business and I don't want to overstep...

Aiden: But your safety matters.

Me: Thank you. It means a lot.

Aiden: Of course. And hey, I have selfish reasons too. Can't afford to lose the best assistant I've ever had.

Me: I'm the only assistant you've ever had.

Aiden: Details, details. But seriously, I realize I haven't said this yet—you're doing an incredible job. Everything runs so smoothly with you handling things.

Me: I'm glad to hear that. Is there anything you'd like me to do differently, though?

Aiden: Are you kidding? You're so efficient I actually have free time now. It's weird.

Me: Sounds like someone needs a hobby.

Aiden: Any suggestions?

Me: Knitting? I hear it's very therapeutic.

Aiden: You mean like...sweaters and stuff?

Me: You could start with potholders.

Aiden: What other suggestions you got?

Me: Pottery? Origami? Rock climbing? Woodworking?

Aiden: I actually tried pottery once. Let's just say there's a reason I stuck to baseball.

Me: Wait, something you're not good at? I'm shocked.

Aiden: Ha. Hate to break it to you, but I'm not perfect.

Aiden: Anyway, I'll let you enjoy your evening. Just wanted to check in. And if anything comes up, anything at all, call me. Doesn't matter what time.

Me: Thank you, Aiden.

Aiden: Good night, Rory.

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RORY

ONE WEEK LATER

“These appearance categories need more definition.” I tap my pen against the contract spread across Aiden’s desk. “The way it’s written, they could classify any event as a ‘major appearance’ and expect you to be there. We should specify what qualifies—opening day ceremonies, jersey retirements, that kind of thing.”

My phone buzzes against the desk, interrupting my train of thought. Unknown number. I decline the call and turn back to the contract.

“Was that him?” Aiden asks, his voice tense.

I shake my head. “Just spam. I blocked Michael’s number.”

“Smart.” He studies me for a moment. “Everything still okay with the security detail?”

“Yeah, Marcus is great. Very professional.” I point to the contract, ready to move on. “So about these appearances—I’m thinking we cap it at six major events per season, plus maybe ten smaller commitments like autograph sessions or VIP events. And we should add specific compensation tiers for broadcast appearances versus in-person events.”

He doesn't answer right away. When I glance up, he's got this distant look on his face, like his mind is somewhere else entirely.

"Aiden?"

"Those numbers work," he says, finally focusing on the papers. "And add language about reasonable notice—minimum three weeks' advance warning for major appearances, two weeks for everything else."

I scribble the notes, aware of him leaning closer to see what I'm writing.

"The response deadline isn't until Friday, right?" he asks.

"Yes, why?"

He pulls out his phone. "Good. I'm calling us a car."

I set down my pen. "What? Why?"

A subtle smile touches his lips. "It's a surprise."

I tell myself Aiden isn't being romantic, he's just being spontaneous. Or he's bored with contracts. Or both. But as our car winds through the city streets, I can't stop the butterflies that take flight in my stomach.

When we pull up to Pier 39, I turn to him in surprise.

"This is where we're going?"

"I know it's a total tourist trap," he says, a grin spreading across his face. "But I thought we could both use a little fun."

I take a moment to process this turn of events. Here we are in the middle of a workday, and my boss just brought me to a place where it's all about having a good time. It doesn't make any sense...and yet, somehow, it feels like exactly the kind of thing I need. I can't remember the last time I did something purely because it would be fun.

"As long as I don't get in trouble for playing hooky," I say, giving him a challenging look.

"If you don't tell, I won't," he says, and the ridiculously handsome smile he gives me makes those butterflies in my stomach burst into flight.

We step out into the afternoon air, immediately surrounded by the buzz of tourists and street performers. Fresh-baked sourdough mingles with the salt breeze, and seagulls dive between buildings, searching for abandoned french fries.

"So." Aiden turns to me, his focus making the back of my neck heat. "We've got the aquarium, the carousel, about fifty shops selling overpriced hoodies, and a mob of sea lions. What sounds good?"

"We definitely need to say hi to the sea lions," I say. "And I wouldn't say no to a carousel ride." I pause. "But you forgot one of the best parts of Pier 39."

"What's that?"

"The mini donuts."

His eyes go wide. "Oh shit, you're right." He grabs my arm. "We need those first. Like, right now."

The scent of cinnamon and sugar leads us straight to the donut stand. We watch,

mesmerized, as perfect little rings of dough drop into the oil, emerge golden brown, and get tossed in cinnamon sugar. When we get our paper bag of still-warm donuts, they're almost too hot to hold.

"These are ridiculous," Aiden says through a mouthful of donut. A bit of sugar dusts his lip. Ugh, those lips . How can a man have such perfect lips?

We wander past shop windows, sharing donuts and pointing out the most outrageous tourist items we can find. A tie-dyed sweatshirt with a pot-smoking peace sign. A mug shaped like a cable car. Salt and pepper shakers that look like tiny fog horns.

We also pass racks of t-shirts and hoodies, most of them plastered with cheesy San Francisco logos. But one actually catches my eye—a dark blue hoodie with a subtle design of the Golden Gate Bridge embroidered in copper thread.

"Ooh. I want to try this on," I say, pulling it off the rack.

The fabric is incredibly soft. I slip it over my head and check my reflection in the mirror. "What do you think? Is it worth—" I check the price tag and suck in a breath, showing it to Aiden.

His eyebrows shoot up, but then he tilts his head, studying me. "You do look really cute in it."

Really cute. Did he really just say that? The words echo in my head as heat rises to my cheeks.

"Um—thanks. I'll think about it."

I grab the hem of the hoodie to pull it off, but as I lift it over my head, my shirt starts coming with it. The fabric keeps rising, exposing more of my stomach, and I feel a

flash of panic—but then Aiden’s hands are there, holding my shirt in place while I wrestle the hoodie off.

When I emerge, my hair is probably a mess and my cheeks are definitely pink, but at least I’m not half-naked in the middle of a tourist shop.

“Thanks,” I breathe.

He’s standing so close. I can feel the warmth radiating off him, see the flecks of darker blue in his gorgeous eyes?—

“Can I help you find anything?”

We quickly pull apart at the sales associate’s voice.

“No, thanks,” I say quickly. “We’re fine.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon exploring everything Pier 39 has to offer. We visit the sea lions, laughing as we watch them lounge on their wooden platforms, barking and shoving each other around. On the carousel, we each choose a brightly colored horse, and I hold tight to the brass pole as the ride spins, feeling like a kid again as the world whirls past in a kaleidoscope of color and music. After that, we split an order of fish and chips, the paper-wrapped bundle warm and crinkly in my hands as we sit by the water listening to a street musician play Spanish guitar.

By the time Aiden pulls out his phone to call our car, I’m full of good food and wrapped in a contentment I haven’t felt in months. I tell myself it’s just the magic of playing tourist for an afternoon—the salt air, the music, the feeling of doing something completely unplanned. But I know it’s also because of him. The afternoon felt so natural, so easy, like we were just two friends spending time together.

But as we're driving away from the pier, my phone rings. It's Aiden's publisher from New York, and just like that, I'm back in assistant mode.

Back to the way things are supposed to be.

AIDEN

“ I ’m assuming you’d like to RSVP yes to the fundraiser, right?” Rory asks without looking up from her phone. She came by this morning to review upcoming events, and I’d be lying if I said these work sessions weren’t the highlight of my days. Even when we’re just going through schedules and contracts, having her here in my space makes everything feel...well, so much fucking better.

“Yeah,” I say. “Definitely RSVP yes.”

The fundraiser isn’t just another event. Making sure kids can access baseball programs, getting them proper equipment, offering scholarships—it’s about opening doors that would otherwise stay closed. I grew up watching other kids show up to practice with brand new gloves while I played with my cousin’s old hand-me-downs. Now I get to help make sure other kids don’t face those same barriers.

Rory nods, typing. “And should I mark you down for a plus one?”

There’s only one person I want to bring, and she’s standing right here in my kitchen. Ever since she came back into my life, my feelings for her have been spiraling like crazy, demanding more attention every day. But I can’t ask her. It wouldn’t be appropriate—she works for me. The lines have to stay clear.

Except...it’s not actually a date. Just a work event.

“Would you come with me?”

She looks up from her phone, startled. “What?”

“To the fundraiser. Would you like to be my plus one?”

“I don’t understand.” Her fingers still on the screen.

“I think it’d be nice to have you there.” I keep my voice even, but my heart is pounding so goddamn hard, like I’m asking her on a date.

“As your assistant?”

“No.” I meet her eyes. “Just as you, Rory.”

Her cheeks flush pink. “It’s black tie. I don’t have anything to wear.”

“There’s plenty of time to shop. I know a great place that rents formal wear. I’ll give them a call, set everything up. You can pick whatever you want—it’s covered.”

She hesitates, working her bottom lip between her teeth. “If you really want me there, I can come.”

I want to tell her how badly I want it. How I’ve barely been able to think about anything but her. How I’ve pictured a thousand different ways to cross this line between us, consequences be damned. If she wasn’t my assistant, I’d confess it all in a heartbeat.

But all I can say to her is this: “I really want you there.”

Three weeks later, I’m knocking on Rory’s door, feeling giddier than I should for the

evening ahead. When she answers, I'm rendered speechless. The long silky black dress she's wearing fits her perfectly, hugging her thick hips like the silhouette was made for her. Her hair is pulled back in a low bun, and her lips are cherry-red with lipstick. But none of it is more beautiful than her eyes. Jesus, she's gorgeous. I knew she'd look good, but this is almost more than I can take.

"You look amazing," I croak out.

Rory smiles. "Thanks. You look nice, too."

"I feel like I should've brought you a corsage or something."

She laughs. "What, like it's prom?"

We head toward the waiting car, our footsteps falling into rhythm. "Yeah. I never went to prom. At the time, I thought I was too cool for it. Looking back, I wish I'd gone."

"I didn't go, either."

The car is waiting for us at the curb. I open the back door for her, and she slides in, the silk of her dress slipping over the leather seats. I get in beside her.

"You didn't, huh?" I say. "Did you feel too cool for it, too?"

"No." She smooths her dress over her knees, keeping her eyes down. "No one asked me."

I feel a pang of guilt, as if it was all my fault. "I'm sorry. That sucks."

"It's okay. Really not a big deal, in the grand scheme of things."

“Well, maybe tonight will sort of make up for it.”

She smiles, but then her eyes widen. “Wait, there’s dancing at this thing, isn’t there? Oh, God. I need to warn you that I’m a terrible dancer.”

I laugh. “Define terrible.”

“Terrible as in you’ll regret inviting me as your plus one.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“I’m not kidding. I have no sense of rhythm whatsoever. Please tell me we don’t have to dance.”

Now I’m really intrigued. “Tell you what. You give me one dance, I won’t ask for anything else.”

“Are you serious?”

“Rory,” I say in a very solemn voice, “it’s for a good cause.”

She gives me an unamused look in return. But then, shaking her head, she says, “Fine. One dance. But I’m only saying yes because you’re my boss.”

When we arrive at the venue, it’s decked out for the occasion—white flowers everywhere, champagne fountains, the works. But I can barely focus on any of it because of Rory. Her black dress hugs every curve, and she’s radiating beauty in every possible way. My hand hovers near the small of her back as we navigate through the crowd, but I stop myself from actually touching her, knowing that would cross a line I shouldn’t cross.

At our assigned table, I spot my former Stallions teammate Luke and his wife—my sister Thora. They both know exactly how complicated things are with Rory. When they spot us approaching, I catch their quick exchange of glances, but they both stand and introduce themselves to Rory warmly. I'm grateful they're acting like it's totally normal that I brought her as my plus one, even though I know I'll be getting an earful about it later.

Dinner feels dangerously natural. Watching Rory laugh at Luke's stories about our playing days, seeing her and Thora make easy smalltalk—it all feels right in a way that makes my chest ache. When Luke casually feeds Thora a bite of his steak, telling her she has to try it, I catch myself imagining doing the same with Rory. The thought of that kind of easy intimacy with her, of being able to reach for her hand whenever I want, of having her here not as my assistant but as my date...it's torture.

Sweet, exquisite torture that I shouldn't be letting myself think about.

The auction starts after dinner, and Luke and I immediately fall into our old competitive ways. When a dinner for two at an exclusive restaurant comes up, we start driving up the price, grinning at each other across the table like idiots.

"Come on, man," Luke calls out as I raise my paddle again. "You know Thora's been dying to try that place."

I just shrug and raise my bid higher. Back and forth we go until we've pushed the dinner package well past \$10,000. It's worth every penny—it's all going to the kids' program, and the look on Luke's face when I win is priceless.

Later, when the DJ starts playing dance music and people begin filling the floor, I turn to Rory with a grin. "Time to pay up on that dance you promised."

"Oh God," she mutters, but lets me lead her out there. The bass thrums through us as

we start to move, and she wasn't kidding about having no rhythm—but watching her try to find the beat, her face scrunched in concentration, might be the most endearing thing I've ever seen.

“Here,” I say, placing my hands lightly on her hips. Christ, it feels good to touch her. “Just follow the beat like this.” I guide her movements, and after a few moments, she actually starts to get it.

Until I let go, and she loses the rhythm again.

“See?” she says, laughing. “I'm hopeless.”

“No, you're adorable.”

She flushes, her eyes darting away before meeting my gaze again. As she continues to dance out of sync, she leans in so I can hear her above the music. “That was really amazing, what you did during the auction.”

“It's for a great cause.” I shrug. “When I was a kid, my parents struggled to pay for extra-curricular stuff. I almost had to quit the team at one point. Now that I can help make sure other kids don't have to face those same struggles...well, it's the least I can do.”

She looks up at me then, really looks at me, and the way her expression softens makes my heart bang violently against my ribs.

“I had no idea you grew up like that,” she says. “It's really good of you to give back.”

The music shifts to something slower, more intimate, and I feel her start to pull away.

“Wait,” I say. “This is a good song.”

“I can’t.” She smiles at me, but there’s something else in her eyes, too. “I gave you one dance, that was the deal.”

Before I can convince her to stay, she moves away. Suddenly she’s moving through the crowd like she can’t get away fast enough.

“Rory!” I push past other couples, trying to keep sight of her black dress in the sea of people. By the time I make it outside, she’s standing at the edge of the valet area, arms wrapped around herself as she stares up at the night sky.

“Are you okay?” I ask, though I can see she’s not.

She shakes her head. “I shouldn’t have come tonight.”

“Why not?”

When she meets my eyes, the raw emotion there steals my breath. “You know why.”

And I do. Of course I fucking do. The attraction that’s been simmering between us is impossible to ignore, crackling in the space between us like lightning about to strike.

“You know how fucking badly I want to kiss you right now?” The words come out of my mouth rough and desperate. I shouldn’t say it. But I can’t hold back anymore.

“Aiden, I—” Her voice breaks. “We can’t.”

“I know.” I drag a hand through my hair, probably ruining whatever styling product was in it, but I couldn’t care less. I stare up at the stars, trying to get my racing pulse under control, trying to remember all the reasons this can’t happen.

Finally, I look back at her. “I’ll call the car. Let me take you home.”

The ride back is excruciating. Neither of us speaks, but I'm acutely aware of every breath she takes, every slight movement of her dress against the seats. When we pull up to her building, the driver announces, "We're here, miss."

Rory is out of the car before I can even move to open her door for her. I watch her walk away, my hands clenched into fists in my lap. Then something in me snaps.

"Wait," I bark at the driver.

And then I'm out of the car and running after her before I can think better of it.

I catch her just as she's unlocking her front door. She gasps as I come up behind her, spinning to face me, and Christ, the way she looks up at me with those big beautiful eyes—it takes everything in me not to kiss her.

Instead, I say, "You need to find another job." My voice comes out rough, almost angry, but I can't help it. The need to touch her, to taste her, is driving me crazy.

She gapes at me. "Are you firing me?"

"Not unless you want me to."

Several heated seconds pass as she stares into my eyes. "I want you to."

A growl of frustration tears from my throat. "I need a justifiable reason to fire you, Rory."

"I'm sure there's something I haven't been doing well."

"No, that's the goddamn problem—you do everything perfect."

“That can’t be true.”

“For fuck’s sake, Rory.” I’m breathing hard now, my control hanging by a thread. All I can think about is how goddamn gorgeous she is, how badly I want her, how impossibly complicated this whole situation is. “I’m going crazy. Tell me what to do. Either tell me to do the right thing and walk away, or tell me to kiss you.”

6

RORY

I tell him to kiss me. Of course I tell him to kiss me. I know it's wrong but I've also never wanted anything more in my life. Aiden makes me feel a way I didn't even know was possible. I need to know what it feels like to be kissed by this man.

Even if it screws me out of a job and puts me right back at square one.

The words kiss me are barely out of my lips before he wraps his broad hands on either side of my face and drops his mouth to mine. The moment his lips capture mine, my whole body shimmers with achy pleasure. Whether he's just a good kisser or there's something particularly magical between the two of us, I don't know. All I know is that I want more.

With our lips locked together, I pull Aiden into my apartment. He slams the door shut behind us and pushes me up against the wall. Our kiss deepens, our tongues meeting, the desire between us searing hot. When he pushes his hips against mine to pin me in place, the magnitude of his erection takes my breath away. Jesus, he's big. The thought of him filling me with that huge cock, slowly pumping in and out of me, fills my head so vividly that I let out a moan.

Aiden pulls his lips off mine, breathless as he looks me in the eyes. His eyes are as beautiful as they always are, but now there's a feral darkness to them. I stay lost in his gaze, happily trapped between him and the wall as he slides a hand down my curves. Slowly, so slowly, he slides it down, until his hand is between my legs. He

presses his fingers against my clit and I suck in a breath. He's touching me over the silk of my dress, but it feels as good as if it's skin against skin.

"This okay?" he asks, his voice low.

I nod.

He starts to move his fingers in deliciously slow circles. "And this?"

A high little moan escapes my lips. Aiden smiles, the darkness in his eyes gleaming.

"I'll take that as a yes," he murmurs.

He continues to touch me, watching me ache under his control. I don't know why it's so hot that he's touching me fully clothed, but it is. My panties are growing damper by the second. My nipples are hard, visibly pebbled against the fabric of my dress. Much more of this, and I'm going to come. Oh, God. But what I really want is for him to fuck me, to thrust his big cock into me...

"Aiden," I choke out.

"Yes, beautiful?"

Him calling me that almost makes me come right then and there. I gasp for breath.

"Take my dress off and fuck me."

"No."

What? "No?" I echo.

"Not yet." The pace of his fingers on my clit picks up. "There are things I want to do

to you first.”

My breath hitches. “Like?”

“Touch you. Make you come. Then lick you and make you come again.” He brushes his lips over mine, the corner of his mouth tilted up in a smile. “And, if you’re hungry for it, feed you my cock.”

I can’t stand it. He can’t possibly expect to talk to me like that and not tip me over the edge. I let out a cry as intense pleasure crashes over me, weakening my knees. Aiden gives a satisfied grunt of approval, kisses me, and then drops to his knees. I’m still recovering from my orgasm as he pushes up the silk of my dress and tugs off my panties.

Then his mouth is on me and his tongue is exploring, groans of pleasure rising out of his throat as he tastes me. I thread my hands through his thick hair, in a daze that doesn’t feel real.

Aiden takes his time, drawing out each lick, backing off when he can tell I’m getting too close to coming again. It’s maddening but also feels so damn good. Over and over again, he brings me close, then eases up, then brings me close again.

Somehow, it feels too soon when he makes me come. I let out a loud moan as another huge wave of pleasure washes over me, Aiden’s name threaded through the sound.

And when he rises up onto his feet and kisses me, pressing that massive cock against me again, I feel an intense rush of contentment knowing this man isn’t leaving my apartment anytime soon.

7

AIDEN

So this is what it feels like to be in love.

Really in love, I mean. The kind that rewrites every plan you ever made.

Rory is curled against my side, still asleep, her breath warm on my chest. Looking at her now, I can hardly believe she's real. That after everything—the history between us, the weeks of wanting her, the torture of keeping my distance—she's here in my arms.

I realized I was in love with her sometime between the third and fourth time I made her come apart. She was moaning my name, squeezing those gorgeously thick thighs around my waist, and I felt a surge of emotion like I'd never felt before. She's the one, I found myself thinking. She's the one I'm meant to be with. Not just for a while, but for the rest of my life.

Rory stirs against me, and I hold still, wanting to catch every second of her waking up. Her eyes flutter open, immediately finding mine.

"Morning," she says, groggy with sleep.

I laugh softly and lean down to kiss her forehead. "Good morning."

"Oh God, my hair must be a mess." Her hand moves to smooth it down.

“Leave it messy.” I trap her hand in mine. “It’s sexy as hell.”

She laughs and lets her hand fall back to the pillow. Her eyes lock with mine, a look of gentleness coming into her face. “Did last night really happen?”

“You mean did we really have mind-blowing sex five times?” I trace my fingers over the soft curve of her chin. “Yep. I distinctly remember every single time you screamed my name.”

She smiles, blushing sweetly, and Christ, the way she looks at me—it hits me right in the chest. Three words press against my lips, begging to be said.

I love you. Rory, I love you.

But I can’t say it. Not yet. Because what if she doesn’t feel the same way? Or what if it’s too much, too soon? The thought of her pulling away, of losing what we’ve just found, halts the words in place.

“We should get some breakfast,” I say instead, running my hand through her hair. “Let’s go to the best place in your neighborhood.”

“God, yes. I’m starving.” She stretches, the sheet slipping down to reveal more of her gorgeous curves. Then she sits up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “I’ll just take a quick shower first.” As she starts walking away from the bed, she looks back at me over her shoulder, a flirtatious gleam in her eyes. “Want to join me?”

I’m out of bed before she finishes the question.

“French toast is not better than pancakes.” Rory points her fork at me, her eyes lit up with that playful spark that drives me crazy. “You’re objectively wrong.”

“Objectively?” I shoot back, grinning. “Rory, Rory, Rory. You clearly haven’t had the right French toast.”

“I’ve had enough to know.” She takes another bite, making this little moan that goes straight to my cock. “This right here? This is breakfast perfection.”

“You’re cute when you’re wrong.” I reach for a bite of her pancakes, but she blocks me with her fork. God, I love seeing her like this—completely relaxed, completely herself.

Then her whole body goes rigid. The playfulness vanishes from her face, replaced by something that makes my muscles tense. I follow her gaze across the restaurant and spot a guy with his arm around some woman’s waist.

“Is that Michael?” I keep my voice steady, but anger starts burning in my chest.

She nods. “And apparently his new girlfriend.”

I study Rory’s face, looking for any sign that seeing him is triggering bad memories of his harassment. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I just...” She presses her lips together. “I really don’t want to deal with him.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

Her eyes widen. “Shit. They’re walking this way.”

Every protective instinct in my body goes on high alert. I’ve seen the texts he sent her. I don’t want that piece of shit anywhere near my girl.

“Rory?” Michael’s voice carries enough artificial warmth to make my fists clench.

“Hey.”

“Hi Michael.” Rory replies without a hint of a smile on her face.

“This is Jessica.” He squeezes the woman’s waist, clearly trying to show off. “Jess, this is Rory, my ex.”

The woman gives an awkward wave, probably sensing the tension rolling off all of us.

Michael’s eyes narrow when they land on me. I see his jaw tighten as recognition hits—he knows exactly who I am.

I meet his stare head-on, letting him see that I’m not someone he wants to fuck with.

Jessica tugs at his arm. “We should find our table.”

“Right.” His eyes linger on Rory with an intensity that makes my blood boil. “Good seeing you.”

The second they’re out of earshot, I lean forward. “Are you okay? Do you want to leave?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I’m not letting him chase me out of here.”

She picks up her fork again, but her hands have a subtle tremble. Every fucking muscle in my body wants to go over there and teach her ex a lesson about respect, but I also don’t want to make things worse, so I follow Rory’s lead instead. We try to get back to normal, but the easy vibe from earlier is shot to hell.

When we finish eating, I head to the counter to pay. When I turn back toward our

table, what I see makes my vision go red. Michael is standing over Rory, his body language screaming aggression.

“Just hear me out,” he’s saying as I approach.

“I told you to leave me alone.” Rory’s voice shakes, and that’s it—I’m done being diplomatic.

“Back the fuck off.” My voice cuts through whatever bullshit Michael was about to spew.

He turns to face me, trying to puff himself up. “This is a private conversation.”

“No, it’s harassment.” I step into his space. “And if you don’t walk away right now, you’re going to regret it.”

“Stay out of this.” He tries to turn back to Rory, but I grab his arm, spinning him to face me.

He takes a swing that I see coming a mile away. I block it easily and use his momentum to slam him against the nearest wall, my forearm pressed against his chest.

“Listen carefully, you piece of shit.” I keep my voice low but deadly serious. “If you ever come near her again—if you so much as breathe in her direction—I will personally make sure you regret it. Understand?”

The fear in his eyes is exactly what I wanted to see. I release him and he practically runs back to his table.

I wrap an arm around Rory’s waist as we leave. Rory is quiet as we walk to her place,

silently nodding every time I ask her if she's all right.

But the moment we step into her apartment, she breaks. Her shoulders start shaking with sobs that tear right through me.

“Hey.” I pull her against my chest. “Talk to me.”

She presses her face into my shirt, her tears soaking through the fabric. After a few moments, she takes a deep breath. “No one's ever stood up for me like that before.”

My arms tighten around her. “I'll always protect you. Even if you weren't mine, I'd do anything to keep you safe.”

She lifts her face to look at me, wiping away the tears from her cheeks. Seeing her so raw and vulnerable makes it impossible to keep the truth to myself.

“I love you, Rory,” I say.

She inhales a little breath. Then the sweetest, gentlest smile lifts the corners of her lips. “I love you, too.”

Hearing her say it back to me makes the whole world feel right again. I drop my lips to hers as she tilts her head up to meet my kiss. When our lips meet, everything inside me ignites—love and desire tangling together so intensely I can barely fucking breathe.

I lift her into my arms and carry her to the bedroom, where I lay her on the bed. I undress her slowly, kissing her soft skin, telling her how beautiful she is over and over again. She undresses me too, her hands tugging off my clothes until there's nothing between us but skin and heat and need.

I reach between us and fist my hard-on, guiding it between her spread thighs. I push the swollen head of my cock into her wet slit, overwhelmed all over again at how good she feels. Sliding in deeper pulls me straight into bliss, but it's the high moan that Rory lets out that really does me in.

Breathing hard, I watch my cock slide deeper into her pussy, claiming her inch by inch. When I slide out, my cock is slick with her cream. Jesus Christ. With a groan, I push back into her, thrusting deep.

I raise my eyes to Rory's and hold her gaze as I roll my hips, giving her everything. She keeps her eyes locked with mine, her lush lips parted and her grip tightening on my biceps as I drive harder and harder into her, her pussy squeezing tight around me. How anything can feel this right or this good is beyond me.

And to think that in the near future we could be wearing matching wedding bands, and that not long after that, her belly could be round with our first child...

A groan spills from my throat as I hear Rory telling me she's close. I drop my mouth to hers, capturing her pretty lips as she comes. Her pussy pulses hard around my cock, milking me like crazy. I spill into her, filling her with a thick stream of cum as I think about how I can't fucking wait to propose to her.

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6 MONTHS LATER

I can't imagine a more perfect honeymoon.

I'm lying on a ridiculously comfortable lounge chair, watching palm fronds sway against the bright blue Hawaiian sky. It's day three of our ten-day trip, and I still can't quite believe this is my life right now. The beach stretches out in front of me, a postcard-perfect view of white sand meeting stunning turquoise water. Talk about heaven on earth.

"Here you go, gorgeous. One virgin strawberry daiquiri." Aiden appears beside my chair, fresh from the hotel bar. He hands me the drink, his eyes crinkling with a smile that makes my heart skip, then leans down to press a gentle kiss against my baby bump before claiming the lounge next to mine.

"Thanks, hon," I say before taking a sip of my drink. The deliciousness of the drink barely registers because I'm distracted by watching my husband as he stretches out on his chair. I blame the pregnancy hormones for making me extra mushy, but damn, my husband is handsome. I exhale a sigh as I lose myself in the sight of him. "God, you're pretty."

He laughs, those infinitely gorgeous eyes of his turning warm as he looks me over. "You should check out a mirror, Rory. You're the gorgeous one."

I make a face at him, but I love how he looks at me like that. Six months of being together, and he still manages to make me feel like I'm the only person in the world. The whole assistant-to-girlfriend transition should've been weird, but it wasn't. Turns

out we make a pretty incredible team when we're not trying to pretend our relationship is purely professional.

And yet, even with things going as well as they were, I wasn't prepared when Aiden proposed to me during another visit to Pier 39. One evening he insisted we take a walk there, and I didn't think anything of it until we rounded the corner to the sea lion viewing area. The whole spot was filled with flowers, and the sunset was turning the bay this impossibly perfect shade of gold. Before I could even process what was happening, he was down on one knee, telling me how in love he was with me and how he couldn't imagine any other future than one where we were making a life together. When I said yes and leapt into his arms for a kiss, the sea lions erupted in a chorus of barking like they were cheering us on.

"Aiden? Is that you, man?"

We both look over to see Jackson King walking toward us, his big frame casting a shadow across the sand.

"Jackson, hey!" Aiden sits up straighter, grinning. "What are the odds? What are you doing in Hawaii?"

"Just needed a vacation. Finally decided to check Hawaii off my bucket list." Jackson grins, his eyes moving between Aiden and me with barely contained curiosity. I can tell he's wondering about seeing us together but trying not to jump to conclusions this time.

Aiden laughs. "I can tell what you're thinking, man. A lot has changed since we last saw you. Rory and I got married last week. We're actually expecting a baby, too."

Jackson's expression completely softens. "Are you serious?" His eyes actually get a little watery, which is endearing coming from someone as big as him. "That's—wow. That's really beautiful. I'm so happy for you guys."

“Thanks, Jackson,” I say, genuinely touched by how emotional he is about our news.

“Hold up.” His eyes widen. “You said you just got married—am I interrupting your honeymoon right now?”

“Yeah, we’re three days in,” Aiden says, looking as content as I’ve ever seen him.

“Oh man, I’m totally in the way.” Jackson shakes his head. “What are you doing talking to me? Get back to enjoying paradise. Seriously, congratulations—you guys look really happy together.”

We watch him disappear down the beach, and I can’t help laughing. “What are the chances of running into him again?”

“Right?” Aiden is quiet for a moment, then turns to me with a thoughtful expression. “Hey, you don’t have any single friends who might be good for Jackson, do you? He’s been single for ages.”

“Not at the moment.” I take another sip of my drink. “But if any of them become available, I’ll keep our favorite big softie in mind.”

We finish our drinks and gather our things as the sun starts its descent toward the horizon. The temperature has dropped just enough to make me grateful when Aiden wraps his beach towel around my shoulders.

“So,” he says as we walk along the path back to the hotel, “how many little baseball players are we planning on?”

I laugh. “Bold of you to assume they’ll all play baseball.”

“No pressure.” His eyes sparkle with amusement. “But I’m just saying, with those Edwards genes...”

“You do remember that any babies we have will be getting my genes in the mix too, right?” I laugh. “And in case you’ve forgotten, I have exactly zero athletic ability.”

“Maybe we should have four then,” he says. “You know, even out the odds of getting at least one baseball player.”

“Four?” I stop walking to stare at him. “You’re really planning ahead there.”

He grins. “What can I say? I love the idea of having a big family with you. Though maybe not all at once.”

“How generous of you to space them out.” I start walking again, shaking my head. “You know they might want to do other things, right? Like paint or play chess or—I don’t know—write children’s books?”

“Even better.” His voice goes soft in that way that makes my heart flutter. “As long as they’re happy. That’s all that matters.”

I lean into him as we walk, loving how he can shift from playful to sincere in an instant. Even though Aiden is always joking around, he has this way of knowing exactly when to be serious, when to really listen.

“Hey.” He stops suddenly, nodding toward a restaurant nestled against the shoreline. “That place looks nice. Want to check it out?”

I’m about to point out that we’re not exactly dressed for fine dining, but he’s already leading me toward the entrance. The hostess smiles as soon as she sees us. “Mr. and Mrs. Edwards? Right this way.”

I shoot Aiden a look, but he just gives me his most innocent expression as we follow her through the restaurant. She leads us to a corner table on the outdoor terrace, positioned perfectly to watch the sunset over the ocean. There are fresh flowers on

the table and a bottle of sparkling cider already chilling.

“You planned this,” I say once we’re alone.

“Maybe.” He reaches across the table to take my hand. “Or maybe I just got really lucky with the timing. And the reservation. And the flowers. And?—”

“Shut up.” I’m trying not to smile but failing completely. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make me fall more in love with you every day.”

His expression softens in a way that makes my chest ache. “Just trying to give you the life you deserve, Rory.”

After dinner, we head back to our luxurious honeymoon suite—which I’m still getting used to, even after spending two nights here. I tried to talk Aiden out of it when he first showed me the reservation, insisting it was too extravagant, but he wouldn’t hear it. Now, watching the moonlight spill through the floor-to-ceiling windows onto the plush white carpet, I have to admit the view alone is worth it.

While Aiden changes, I take the opportunity to pull out my phone for a quick check of my work email. I know it’s our honeymoon, but I can’t help myself.

His protest is immediate. “Don’t even think about it.”

“It’ll take two seconds,” I promise, swiping the screen. “I just want to make sure there aren’t any urgent emails for you.”

“Everyone can wait.” He crosses the room in three long strides, leaving his shirt half-unbuttoned. He plucks the phone from my hands and sets it on the nearby table. “I’m

officially forbidding you from checking your email for the rest of this trip.”

“You can be really bossy sometimes, you know that?” I tilt my chin up at him, trying to look annoyed even as heat pools in my stomach at the commanding tone in his voice.

“You like it.” His hands find my waist, backing me up against the wall.

“Oh, you’re telling me what I like now?” My words come out breathy despite my attempt at indignation.

“I know exactly what you like, sweetheart.” His hands smooth over my hips as he dips his mouth to mine, his eyes alight with heated desire. “Your body tells me everything I need to know.”

When his lips meet mine, everything else disappears completely. There’s only Aiden, only this kiss, only our endless affection for each other. With this man, I’m happier than I ever thought possible. I’m loved, protected, and exactly where I’m meant to be.

And I know that decades from now, when he looks at me, it will still make my heart melt.

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