



Play Action Pass (Archers Football #2)

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Category: Sport

Description: In one devastating moment, Emmie's life changes forever. Desperately trying to reconnect with the brother she lost, she follows his footsteps to the charming town of Anchorridge Cove. There she meets "Coleson", and they quickly bond over their shared grief.

After winning the Super Bowl, Crew Coleson Kiles learns his mentor has died. He travels to Anchorridge Cove to honor the man he considered a father figure, and meets the woman of his dreams.

Both hide who they really are. Will their fake identities bring them together or end their future before it's even begun?

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As soon as Emerson stepped into the country club dining room, she spotted her parents waiting at their usual table by the window. Bunny and McBride Adinson had an excellent view over the golf course that allowed them the opportunity to not speak to one another. Why talk to your spouse when you can watch little round balls go flying while drinking endless mimosas? She sighed and dragged her feet, not wanting to sit with the toxic people she called Mom and Dad.

“One day, I’m going to bring a man to one of these fuck-awful brunches and tell them he’s my lover,” Jacoby muttered.

Emerson glanced at her twin brother. “I dare you to do that.”

He cracked his knuckles. “Oh, it’s on. Never dare a darer.”

She chuckled, unable to stay stern with him. “I’m surprised you’re here. I haven’t seen you for weeks. Been hiding?”

He shrugged and slid his arm across her shoulders. “Needed a break from this fucking place. Bunny told me if I didn’t come, they’d cut me off. I’m not meant to look this good just to do menial labor and get paid minimum wage.”

She pushed his arm off her. “God forbid you have to work.”

“Snark isn’t a good look on you,” he admonished.

“Every time you piss them off, they come after me,” she grumbled, as she turned to him to straighten his tie. “They’ve been forcing me to go on dates with men they

deem worthy of the Adinson name.”

“Oh, shit,” he said. “They spotted us. Too late to run now.”

Emerson glanced over her shoulder and saw their mother’s frowning, disapproving face staring at them. Beside her, their father held up his wrist and tapped his expensive Patek Philippe watch, pointing out they were late. Jacoby grabbed her hand as he pulled her along.

“Mamacita,” Jacoby greeted. He saluted their father. “Papacita.”

“Sit down, Jacoby,” McBride snapped.

Her brother held out her chair and pushed it in as she sat, before sitting himself. Immediately, Jacoby raised his finger for the server.

“Stop summoning the help,” Bunny ordered. “It’s vulgar.”

“How else am I going to get enough alcohol to deal with whatever bullshit you both are going to sling my way?”

Emerson lowered her face to hide her smile. Her brother made pissing their parents off seem effortless. Predictably, they glossed over Jacoby’s sarcasm. Instead, they laid down a gossip news rag that sold papers by lying. She and Jacoby were front and center on the cover.

“This was brought to our attention,” Bunny said, her tone nothing short of Antarctica.

The picture was grainy in the low lighting, but Emerson remembered that party very well. At least, most of it. It was right before Jacoby disappeared for a month. She had gotten shitfaced and took some pills her friends had, and didn’t remember much after

that.

“Oh, yeah.” Jacoby mumbled as he leaned closer to her. “That’s the party where you flashed everyone your tits.”

“Great,” she muttered.

“Enough!” McBride barked. “Both of you are a disgrace. In order to salvage the Adinson name, at the spring formal in April, I will announce your engagement.”

That statement stole all the oxygen in the room.

Jacoby blinked. “Come again?”

“We’ve found you a wife,” Bunny told him. “A decent woman. One who has been trained to be a CEO wife. She’s perfect stock.”

“What, and I mean this from the bottom of my heart, the fuck?”

Bunny’s jaw hardened so much it looked like she could crack diamonds between her teeth. “Language, Jacoby. Don’t talk like a Section 8 trash eater.”

Emerson’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Mother, that’s an awful thing to say.”

Bunny’s cold gaze flickered to her. “I’m not talking to you.”

Rebuked, Emerson dropped her gaze.

“Don’t talk to my sister like that, Bunny,” Jacoby snapped as he stood up. “You’re both pathetic assholes, you know?”

Their father slapped his hand down onto the table, making Emerson jump. “Sit down! Unless you no longer want access to your trust fund.”

Emerson blinked. “You can’t do that. Grandmother gave us that—”

“We can hold it up in litigation until there’s not a single cent in that account,” her mother threatened, cutting her off.

Emerson looked at Jacoby and mentally asked him if they could do that. He raised an eyebrow, giving her an uncertain answer, then he sat back down. Running a hand through his hair, he glared at both parents.

“Just so you know, I sat back down for Emmie’s sake. As for me, you can take my trust fund and shove it up your ass. But that might lead to some uncomfortable questions by your so-called society, especially if your children end up living in squalor.”

“Language,” Bunny ground out. “Why do you always act like this, Jacoby? We gave you everything, and all we ask is that you marry a small slip of a girl—”

“My life is mine. Why can’t you let me live it?”

“Jacoby, being born into one of the wealthiest families in America means you don’t get to live a normal life,” McBride explained. “Your life belongs to the name. You have appearances to uphold, just like your mother. Just like your sister.”

“What if we don’t want to be a part of your fucking name?”

“What are you going to do?” McBride taunted. “You have no life skills. No knowledge how to do anything but be a spoiled brat. You will marry the girl we chose and you will finish college. One day you will lead the company.”

Emerson kept her gaze on her him, willing him to shut up. She'd always been the one to cave to their parents' demands. Didn't want to rock the boat and make them turn their vitriol on her. The Adinson family got rich during the Gilded Age, gobbling up land and reselling it at exorbitant inflated prices. They made their money walking across the backs of the working class.

"Do you really want to live your life having to work in fast food?" Bunny asked. The server came over with two plates and sat them down in front of Bunny and McBride. "Be some nobody like this woman?"

Emerson glanced at the server, whose mouth had thinned, and felt absolutely horrified at what her mother just said. How could she be related to such an awful person? Maybe she and Jacoby were adopted? Or maybe Bunny and McBride Adinson paid off their real parents. She mouthed sorry to the server, but the woman only turned and marched away, head bowed.

"I'm not going to marry some airheaded socialite just to further your business interests," Jacoby said angrily. "And I refuse to go to college."

"You will do as I say," McBride said, a hard edge to his voice. "Because if you don't, since you don't seem to care for yourself, your sister will pay for your stubbornness. Her little animal project will be gone. Her money dried up. She'll have to live on the street."

What he said just got worse and worse. Tears welled up in her eyes and she stared at Jacoby, unable to look anywhere else. Her animal "project" was going to the shelter to volunteer. Cleaning out cages, walking the dogs, cuddling the cats, and helping the animals get adopted. Would her father get the shelter shut down? She couldn't let that happen, but she was too afraid of her parents to speak up. So, she did the only thing she could think of, and that was silently beg Jacoby. She couldn't lose the shelter. She just ... couldn't.

Jacoby stood so forcefully his chair toppled back. Every eye in the place turned toward them.

“Sit down,” McBride snapped.

“What’re you gonna do, Dad? Take away my charge cards? Get me banned from this fucking country club? Oh, please! That’ll do me a favor!”

McBride stood up and grabbed Jacoby’s arm.

“I can have you admitted for drug addiction,” their father hissed in a very low tone.

Shock filled Emerson. What? Was Jacoby doing drugs? Why didn’t she know this? Her father had to be wrong. He looked clear-eyed. Didn’t look like he needed a fix. She was his twin. Surely, she’d know if he was falling into the hole of addiction.

Jacoby rolled his eyes “Try again, McBride . I don’t give a rat’s ass about fitting in with all these snooty, stuck-up sonsabitches.”

A round of gasps echoed. Emerson saw the ma?tre d’ hurrying their way and wished the floor would open up so she could disappear into the ground.

“You’re all a bunch of fucking hypocrites!” he yelled, looking at the people gawking at them. “You’re all sheep! Hear me?” His gaze fell on Emerson. “You coming with me, Emmie?”

If she went with him, would her parents follow through on their threat to take away the only thing she cared about? She couldn’t lose the animals. At the same time, she agreed with her brother and wanted to go with him. As she hesitated, trying to figure everything out in her head, an ugly sneer twisted his face.

“Seems like you made your bed,” he spat, then turned on his heel and marched out.

Emerson watched him, feeling miserable. She would have to beg her brother’s forgiveness, once he calmed down. Her father sat back down and picked up his silverware as if his son hadn’t just had a meltdown. Her appetite fled, and she spent the rest of the luncheon sipping the mimosa that had been brought to her.

The next day, Emerson called Jacoby, but he didn’t answer. She hated when he ignored her. She called every hour but he still didn’t pick up. Part of her sulked and wanted to hide her head under the covers. However, this was her twin. When he hurt, she hurt. So, when he still hadn’t picked up the phone by the evening, she decided to go over to his condo and hash it out.

Driving over to his condo, she waved at the concierge before entering the elevator that whisked her up to the penthouse. She unlocked his door, confused when silence greeted her. The alarm wasn’t on, which meant he had to be home. More confusing were the boxes stacked up in the living room. It almost felt like he was getting ready to move.

“Jacoby?” she called out, heading to the kitchen and turning on the light. “Are you ignoring me? Jacoby?”

She headed toward the bedroom but he wasn’t there. Not in the bathroom. He wasn’t anywhere, which really perplexed her. As she passed by the window, she happened to glance over toward the large hot tub spa, and saw Jacoby facedown in the water.

“No!” she screamed. “Jacoby!”

Fear. Panic. Denial. She rushed toward the door, threw it open, and jumped in the tub.

Turning him over, she ignored the fact his eyes were open but unseeing.

“No, no, no!” she sobbed, trying to push him from the water to the decking. “Jacoby, please. Please don’t do this. Wake up. Wake up, damn you!”

He was dead weight, already stiff from rigor mortis, a fact she tried desperately not to think about. It might have only taken a few minutes to get him out of the water, but it seemed like a lifetime. She had to get help, but she didn’t want to leave him. Her mind fractured with different decisions. Did she leave him to call for help? Start CPR? Running, she headed back to the kitchen where she threw her purse and yanked out her phone, placing a call to 911 as she ran back.

“What is your emergency?”

“My brother! Please, he’s not breathing!”

“Okay, I’m here for you. Tell me the address so I can get first responders on the way.”

Emerson rattled off the information, then the dispatcher walked her through checking his vitals before starting CPR.

“Please don’t leave me, Jacoby,” she cried, tears streaming down her face. “You’re my twin. You’re supposed to grow old with me.”

Finally, the first responders arrived, escorted by police and the building manager. The EMT took over from her, and the police led her away. Sobs poured out, and she half collapsed into the policeman’s arms. After that, everything became one big blur. People came in and out, a million questions were asked, and she did her best to answer them. At some point, her parents arrived and she stared hollowly at them. They didn’t even come over to console her. Instead, they stood in the corner, talking

with the detective. At one point, her mother even grinned.

She hated them. They lost their son, and yet they were grinning. She didn't want to be related to such horrible people. Then the gurney went past her with a black body bag strapped on it, and she knew what was in that bag.

Her brother was dead.

Her twin.

Life was never going to be the same.

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It all came down to this last play.

Seven seconds to throw the ball into the end zone and score a touchdown.

“Ideas?” Crew asked, while they all stood in a huddle.

“Play-action,” Kaiden Demay suggested.

“They’ll be watching for a fake play,” another player said.

“Not to me,” Kaiden replied. “They’ll be expecting you to throw me the ball. I can draw their attention, while Crew passes to Regan.”

All eyes looked at Regan, who was an offensive guard.

“Me?” he asked, looking a little perplexed.

Crew nodded, liking the idea. “No one will think about covering you. All right. On the snap, Kaiden, you take off to the left and Regan to the right and get in the end zone. I’m passing to you, big guy.”

“I’ll win us the game,” Regan assured.

Crew smiled. “Then one, two, break!”

They all clapped and lined up on the three-yard line. Seven seconds. His heart pounded in his chest, but his hands were steady. He gave one last look at his

teammates, being sure he didn't bring attention on Regan. Then he got into position.

"White eighty!" he yelled.

The snap came back, he did a throwing motion to Kaiden, and the other team seemed to fall for the ruse.

Four seconds.

He saw Regan cross over into the end zone.

Three seconds.

Regan looked at him and gave a small nod.

Two seconds.

Crew threw the football. It soared and fell neatly into Regan's hand. The stadium erupted as the last second ticked to zero, ending the game. The Archers just won the Super Bowl. Crew took off running to Regan, screaming in absolute joy, not even realizing he was crying. The other players converged on the big offense guard, and complete chaos ensued. Exuberant, amazing. The field turned into a big mosh pit as the celebration erupted.

After that it all became a blur. Confetti in the team colors floated in the air. Fireworks went off. Family and friends found their way onto the field to congratulate everyone. Romilly ran toward Kaiden and he scooped her up into his arms, burying his face in her neck. Tears of happiness coursed down her cheeks. The MVP award went to Kaiden, and it was well deserved. The man was an endless boost of enthusiasm that kept pushing the team to be better. The Vince Lombardy Trophy came out and was presented to the team owners. Speech after speech was given. News cameras were

everywhere. People chanted his name. It was a circus, but Crew absolutely loved it.

He hoped Thomas was watching. Hoped he understood he was a part of this celebration even though they were a thousand miles apart. Crew wouldn't be where he was if it hadn't been for Thomas taking him under his wing and teaching him the fundamentals of the game, as well as how to be a decent human being.

Finally, it was all over and he headed into the locker room to get clean so he could continue partying with his teammates. The festivities never really stopped. From champagne spewed in the locker room, to champagne flowing like water at the clubs. After Crew showered and dressed, he placed a call to Thomas. He'd be so proud of him. This win belonged to his mentor, because without him Crew wouldn't be the quarterback he was today. However, it rang and rang but no one answered. Crew was a little disappointed, but he figured it was too late to call. He'd try again in the morning. Now, it was time to celebrate.

The next morning, the shrill ring of his cell phone pulled him from sleep, only to discover he wasn't alone in the big hotel bed. Two women bracketed him. Drunken flashes of partying danced through his memory, and he winced at his behavior. He'd picked them up at the VIP lounge in the club they had gone to party, and after several rounds of hardcore booze, everything took on a hazy remembrance. He reached over one unconscious woman and grabbed his phone, frowning when he saw the name of his lawyer.

"Hello?" he answered, scooting off the bed to talk privately. He went into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Mr. Kiles, this is Caleb Walker."

“Hey, how can I help you?”

“I’m afraid I have some bad news. I’m sorry to inform you that Thomas Campbell passed away the other day.”

They were words he never wanted to hear. His first instinct was to yell “Liar!” No, no way did Thomas die. He’d been sick, but Crew had hired the best medical care to help him, including home infusions.

“Hello? Mr. Kiles?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. He wanted to bury his head in the sand until he woke up. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The lawyer’s voice held a note of sympathy. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Crew sat down heavily on the closed toilet as tears welled up in his eyes. He blinked them away, trying to push down the emotions. He cleared his throat as he processed what Caleb said.

“Wait. The other day?” He frowned. Dread settled in the pit of his stomach. “Why wasn’t I notified sooner?”

“Mr. Campbell gave specific instructions to call after the game,” the lawyer replied. “He didn’t want his death to throw your concentration off, so to speak.”

“Damn it, Thomas,” Crew choked up.

“You are the sole beneficiary of his estate. He left you all his possessions, including his home in Anchorridge Cove.”

Caleb droned on, talking about how to claim his inheritance and whatever else lawyers had to divulge, but Crew didn't process any of it. His mentor, the man who practically saved his life, hadn't lived long enough to see him win the Super Bowl, and that broke his heart.

After making plans with Caleb to meet up at the beach house, Crew hung up. Then he sat in the dark and let the tears flow.

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Emmie pulled onto the driveway of the small beach house she'd rented for the summer. Her home for the next three months. Away from prying eyes of the press. Away from the fake grief of her parents. Jacoby's death tore apart the fragile threads between her and them.

When they had ordered her to talk about Jacoby on talk shows and interviews, she had declined. Refusing to turn his memory into some kind of sounding board which promoted their own agendas, garnering sympathy and pity, as well as donations for their pet projects. It made her sick to her stomach. It had been the last straw. Packing up her stuff, she'd moved out of her parents' palatial house but it hadn't been far enough. Maybe Anchorridge Cove was her salvation. At least she had three months to figure out the next step in her life.

Grabbing her overnight bag and purse, she exited her vehicle, inhaling the salty air into her lungs. The crash of the waves were soothing sounds that beckoned like a siren's call. In that moment, she knew this was exactly where she needed to be. To heal. To remember without crying. To honor her brother's memory, instead of stripping it. He would've been so proud of her for leaving the toxic environment of their childhood home. Neither she nor Jacoby had the courage to walk away, but his death changed everything.

It changed her on a fundamental level.

Punching in the code to the door, she entered the small cottage. The charming décor brought a smile to her face. Everything was pure white, with pops of bold blues and warm reds scattered around the comfortable interior. Coral terracotta tiles lined the floor in the kitchen, matching the ones in the bathroom. Two bedrooms, with the

master having French doors that opened to the beach. Stepping onto the deck she became mesmerized with the vast ocean that stretched into eternity. As deadly as it was breathtaking. She wanted to let the water take her away. Drown out the sadness that clung to her bones like an albatross.

She headed back inside and closed the French doors, making her way to the kitchen. Everything was updated and modern, with white granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. Emmie knew how to boil water and heat up things in the microwave, but she was determined to learn how to cook, and had trusty old YouTube there to teach her. Which meant she needed groceries. Grabbing her purse, she locked up and went back to her car to head into the quaint picturesque town.

Tourist season hadn't quite started, so the streets weren't too overly crowded. From research, she knew a boat race was set to run in two weeks, which was the official opening of the summer in Anchorridge Cove. The only boat she'd ever been on was the yacht her father owned.

Parking at the grocery store, she locked up and headed inside. She pulled up the list she'd made and started shopping, quickly realizing it wasn't going to be as easy as she thought. How many different types of pasta brands were there? And why? What cut of meat was the best? Who the hell invented all the spices?

She was rapidly losing patience, and the urge to give up was strong. Then Jacoby would flash across her mind, and her determination resurged. This was the beginning of her new life. The jumping-off point to be something more than an empty socialite, and she had a lot to learn about herself. So, she Googled everything that caught her eye, and two hours later walked confidently back to her car with several bags of food.

As she drove back to her temporary home, she couldn't help but feel pride she accomplished something mundane. Might sound pretentious, but she'd never even picked out fruit. Or bought fast food. Or had to put groceries away. Or wash clothes.

There was a lot she had to learn, and she'd get there.

Once evening fell, she wrapped a blanket around herself and walked down the beach. Brine scented the air, and a cool breeze chilled her face. The moon reflected on the hypnotic waves crashing onto the shore. Time became endless. She could've been out there for half an hour, an hour, or forever. Jacoby was never far from her thoughts, and once more tears welled in her eyes. How was she supposed to move on? When would the pain lessen? Questions she may never get answers to. When her teeth began to chatter, she turned to go back inside.

Only then did she see a lone figure in the same pose she'd been standing, staring out into the vast ocean. Contemplating. Reflecting. A man she guessed by his silhouetted stance. She should've been scared that they were the only two people around, but something about the droop in his shoulders told her he was grieving too. For some strange reason, his presence gave her a modicum of comfort. Proving true the old saying, "misery loves company."

For one moment, they were only two people in the world, sharing a beach. Attempting to move past heartbreak. It made Emmie glad she wasn't totally alone in her grief.

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Crew parked his truck in front of Thomas's house. Or, he guessed, it was his now, and man, did that kick him in the gut each time. Thomas had been more than a mentor. He'd become the father figure he'd desperately needed at the age when little boys stood at the cusp of transformation. An angry teen needing to vent his frustrations. He owed Thomas everything, and now the old man was gone. He never got to see him win the Super Bowl, and that was a bitter pill to swallow.

Grabbing his duffle, he hopped out of the cab and walked up the steps to the front door of the beach house. Overgrown foliage hung over the sidewalk and shadowed the steps to the front door. All the homes along this stretch of road were built a little higher, just in case of flooding. When he stepped inside, the pungent scent of mothballs let him know the house hadn't been aired out in quite a while. He immediately went to the trifold doors and pushed them open, tasting the salt-heavy air as he took a deep breath. He'd only visited the ocean once, a long time ago before his father died and his mother mentally checked out.

The deck didn't have any furniture on it. He made a mental note to buy some, if he chose to keep the house. It'd be nice to sit at night and watch the moonlight on the waves. With a heavy sigh, he turned back to the interior. Thomas had retired in Anchorridge Cove a couple of years ago, and unfortunately a slew of stupid excuses had come along to prevent Crew from visiting. Now, he regretted that more than ever.

The furniture had a well-worn look to all of it. Armrests on the recliner were threadbare as the fabric frayed. Scratch marks covered the dining table and chairs. Crew didn't understand what he was seeing because he sent Thomas an allowance, letting the man live comfortably in his retirement. It'd been enough to buy everything new, so why didn't he use it?

Heading down the short hallway that had both bedrooms and one bathroom, he turned on the lights to study which room he'd take. One clearly belonged to Thomas. The twin bed rested against one wall and the nightstand was littered with amber medicine bottles. Two years prior, Thomas had a stroke, which prompted him to retire from coaching. He's always wanted to live near the ocean, so he bought the small, pale, coral-painted beach home. Thomas had been very proud of his retirement, and Crew had it in his head that his mentor was living the good life, but the décor didn't quite jive with that perception.

The other room had a duplicate twin bed, much to his dismay. He stood six foot five. No way that tiny bed was going to support his ass. He would have to pull the mattresses side by side and sleep on the floor. As he left the bedrooms, a knock sounded on the door and he went to open it. Caleb Walker stood on the stoop and Crew waved him inside.

"Thanks for meeting me here," Crew said. "I'd prefer it if you didn't announce I was here to anyone. I really don't want fans to come find me."

"Of course." The lawyer stepped up to the small kitchen island and opened his file folder. "Here are the transfers of titles to the house, the boat, and Mr. Campbell's accounts."

Crew picked up the papers. "This states his estate is worth one point five million. Why the hell did he live like this?"

"He was a proud man," Caleb replied, holding out a sealed envelope. "I believe this will answer a lot of your questions. I just need you to sign where the tabs are."

Crew took it, staring at it with mixed feelings. "What about his, er, burial?"

"He took care of all the details. His ashes will be ready at the end of the week."

Crew was relieved that he didn't have to arrange a funeral.

For the next few minutes, Caleb went through each document. Once Crew had signed everything he needed to sign, he shook the lawyer's hand and Caleb left just as quickly as he'd shown up. Taking a deep breath, he walked over to the recliner and sat down, staring at the envelope. Part of him didn't want to read the words. They were the last bit of Thomas he had. Setting the letter aside, he went to make himself a bed.

There were lots of problems he had to tackle in the morning, but as he lay in the dark, his mind wouldn't rest. All he kept thinking about was the fact that Thomas died alone. He should have been there, holding his hand. Giving him strength as he passed from this world to the next. When the thoughts became too loud, he rose and grabbed a jacket before heading to the beach.

There were a million stars twinkling overhead, rarely seen above the city lights he lived under. He became mesmerized by the ocean waves crashing over the sandy shore, hammering home how alone he was. He should've made time to visit. He should've called more. The should've-could've regret was a bitch, and if he wasn't careful, it would suck him down into a bottomless well of sorrow.

Movement caught his attention and he glanced to his right, seeing another figure silhouetted against the moonlight. A woman, by the shape of her body and long hair blowing in the chilled air. He didn't know her, but for a moment her presence made him feel not so alone.

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Emmie poured herself a cup of coffee, grabbed Jacoby's notebook from the kitchen island, and headed outside to the deck. The early morning chill had her wrapping a blanket over her legs. She took a sip of her morning brew and opened the journal.

Her brother's penmanship was neat and precise. Bold with masculine lines. She had discovered the book while she had been packing up Jacoby's condo. All the stuff she had wanted to keep, she placed in storage, to examine them at some later date. When she could breathe normally once more.

The notebook, however, was the last bit of her brother that she had. His words were a balm to her soul. So even if he'd hoped his journal would stay forever unread, there was no way she couldn't read it. Over and over, she studied what he had written. It had been the first time she'd ever heard of Anchorridge Cove, and the small coastal town had beckoned her with the promise of divulging some of Jacoby's secrets. She hadn't even known he'd left the State of New York, let alone spent time in Maine.

Why this place? Why not someplace glamorous, like Los Angeles? Or Vegas? Hell, even Disney World would've held more interest than this sleepy little community. Not that she was complaining. She thought the town charming. It was simply the fact that none of this reminded her of Jacoby. He hadn't been the type to stare at the ocean or rusticate in a beach house. She wanted—no, needed—to figure this out.

She took a sip of coffee and spotted a jogger running across the damp part of sand near the receded tide. Despite the cool breeze, he didn't wear a shirt. The sweat on his muscles gleamed in the morning light. She didn't know what he looked like, but from the neck down she could certainly enjoy the eye-candy. Then, as if he knew she was watching, he turned to look at her and gave a little wave. With a grin, she waved

back, suspecting this was the person she'd seen last night. Once he passed, she returned to sipping her coffee and reading the notebook.

Jacoby had written a lot about an ice cream shop in town located on Main Street, so that's where Emmie figured she'd start. If she walked in her brother's footsteps, perhaps she'd get the answers she sought. Or if not that, at least clarity.

For the rest of the morning, she read. Even saw the same man jog back. He occupied her attention until he passed, giving her another wave. She noticed he ran up to the cottage next to hers, which really wasn't that close. He was, however, her nearest neighbor. His muscles were a sight she wouldn't mind seeing every day.

After she finished her coffee, she rose and headed back inside to get dressed. She had an ice cream parlor to find.

Crew loved the early morning chill as he ran. It felt good against his heated skin. When he went past the house where the woman from last came from, he waved at her. He saw long, chestnut-colored hair, but couldn't focus on any facial feature. She waved back, and that brought a small smile to his face.

Once he was done with his early morning run, he went inside and took a nice hot shower. After, he walked into the living room and spotted the envelope with his name on it. He still didn't know if he was ready, but he had to read the damn thing. If nothing else, maybe it provided guidance about Thomas's last wishes.

Sitting down, he took a deep breath and opened the letter. Thomas wrote about how proud he was of him, how he always knew Crew had that special spark that only true greats possessed. How he believed in him, and to never take his ability for granted. The words were bittersweet, and he was secure enough in his masculinity to cry. He

was going to miss Thomas.

Once he dried his tears and blew his nose, he looked in the fridge and realized he needed food. He slipped on his sneakers and a t-shirt, grabbed his wallet and keys, and crammed a baseball hat on his head. It wasn't much of a disguise, but it'd have to do. If he had been smart, he would've gone the whole undercover look with a mustache or beard.

As he drove down Main Street, heading to the only grocery store in town, he happened to see long, chestnut-colored hair swinging and realized it was his neighbor. She entered an ice cream shop and he didn't know what possessed him to pull over and park, but he had this urge to see her closer. Without questioning it, he slipped on a pair of sunglasses and headed inside the little ice cream parlor.

"I'll have a scoop of the salted caramel ribbon swirl," his neighbor said.

He was able to observe her for a moment. She was tall for a woman. Only five or six inches shorter than him. The thought he wouldn't have to bend down all that much to kiss her flittered through his head. Then he wondered why he was thinking about kissing her when they'd never met. Once she paid for the cold treat, she turned to leave and came to a stop as their gazes met.

Beautiful didn't do justice to describe her. He had a sense of free-falling into the bottomless pool of her big brown eyes. A cute little smattering of freckles dotted her perfect button nose. Cupid's bow lips were a natural shade of pink. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"Hi," she said, beating him to speak.

Crew cleared his throat. "Hi. I think I'm your neighbor."

“I think so, too.”

Another few seconds passed as they stared at one another. The bell over the door chimed, dragging him from whatever spell she’d placed on him.

“I’m, uh, Coleson,” he said, remembering at the last moment to use his middle name.

“Emmie.” She held out her hand and he shook it.

Electric shocks tingled where their skin touched. By the widening of her eyes and the flare of her nostrils, he bet she felt the same stimulation. His thumb rubbed her soft skin, wondering what the hell was going on. Being a famous quarterback on the NFL team that just won the Super Bowl provided his share of beautiful pussy to choose from, but this was something different. Something ... he had no idea what to even compare it to.

“Excuse me,” came an annoyed voice. “Are you in line?”

“Oh,” he said moving out of the way. Emmie’s hand slipped from his. “Sorry.”

The woman frowned at him and stepped up to the counter.

“Aren’t you going to order?” Emmie asked.

He shook his head. “Would it sound creepy if I said I only came in here because I saw you enter?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Utterly creepy.”

He grimaced. “Sorry.”

“I didn’t say creepy couldn’t be charming.” She tilted her head. “Unless you turn into a serial killer. Or a serial rapist. Or anything having to do with serial in general.”

“Scouts honor,” he said, raising his hand. “No serials.”

She grinned. “Why do I feel like you weren’t a Scout?”

“Is it my rakish allure?”

“Oh, definitely,” she murmured. “I thought to myself, self, that man can’t possibly be the next Ted Bundy because he’s got a rakish allure.”

He chuckled.

The salted caramel ribbon swirl dripped onto her fingers so she had to hurry and lick the melting sides. Crew had never wanted to be an ice cream cone more. His body reacted very inappropriately for being in a public place.

“I, um, have to go,” she said.

“Yeah, right. Me too. I’m heading to do some grocery shopping.”

“I did that yesterday.” She glanced down, and a look of uncertainty crossed her face.

“I know we don’t know each other, but would you like to come over for dinner?”

“Yes,” he replied softly. “I would love that.”

“Great. So, is six tonight okay?”

“Well, let me check my calendar, oh, wait, I’m on vacation. Six would be great.”

“Great,” she answered.

“We’re saying the word ‘great’ a lot, did you notice?”

“Yeah, isn’t that great?”

He laughed.

“Do you think you might need directions to my place?”

“I’m pretty sure I can Google map it.” He winked. “Bye for now, Emmie.”

With one last lingering look, she left the ice cream parlor. Crew watched her get into a very nice car and drive off.

What the hell just happened?

He had this weird feeling he’d just met his future.

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What the hell just happened?

Emmie didn't know but whatever it was, she had a feeling it was life-altering. She hadn't been on a date in over a year, since before Jacoby had died. She'd been wallowing in grief for so long she couldn't even remember the man she'd dated.

Coleson thrown her for a loop when he'd greeted her in the shop. The woman working behind the counter hadn't known her brother, but she said the owner would be there the next day. Emmie had every intention of stopping by with her fingers crossed that she could talk to the person who had captured Jacoby's attention. If not, she'd visit every place he'd written about in the hope of understanding why he'd come to Anchorridge Cove.

When she arrived back at her cottage, she saw that she had about six hours to prepare dinner. First, she had to figure out what she was going to cook. Had to be something easy because this would be the first thing she ever attempted. No pressure, indeed.

She sat down on the sofa and brought up YouTube and started playing through cooking videos, finally settling on spaghetti and garlic bread. This was it. The start of a new life. She might not have to work nine to five, but she wasn't going to be a pampered little princess anymore. If Jacoby's death taught her anything, it was that she needed to be self-reliant and a good person. A good, self-reliant person, because nobody made it out alive.

Once she had everything prepped, she glanced at the clock and discovered she had another five hours to wait and decided to take a long walk on the beach. Slipping flip-flops on, she headed down to the shoreline and watched the ocean in all its glory. It

was there long before her and would be there long after, which made it an excellent place to scatter her brother's ashes. As long as the ocean lasted, so too would Jacoby.

She wasn't quite ready, though, to let him go.

Slipping off her shoes, she carried them as she walked along the damp sand. Occasionally, the waves would be a little more forceful, and soaked the bottom of her linen pants. She found seashells, seaweed, tiny crabs burrowing into the sand. A lot more garbage than she expected. Guess the people posting about all the plastic floating in the ocean were correct. She saw small boats bobbing on the horizon, seagulls flying around, some even dive-bombing for the little crabs.

As she headed back, peace settled over her. Back home in New York City, she constantly had to stay on her guard. Against her parents, the paparazzi, strangers she didn't even know, even her friends. Whenever she did something stupid it was splashed not only over social media, but on the gossip magazines. Try growing up with a bazillion cameras trained on every move you made. Jacoby hated that. Maybe that's why he had come here.

Entering her cottage, she hurried to take a shower, dressing in another set of drawstring linen pants and a Boho lace top. Then she turned on YouTube and prepared to cook. Water boiling, check. Bread covered in butter and garlic powder, check.

"What does al dente mean?" she muttered to herself and had to look up the meaning. "To the tooth? What do teeth have to do with pasta? Oh. Al dente pasta is firm when bitten without being hard or chalky. That shouldn't be too hard to figure out."

Twenty minutes later, she was eating those words. Apparently, it was that hard.

"What the hell is wrong with the pasta? Damn it," she muttered to herself. "This is

supposed to be easy. Why is it clumped together?”

While she was Googling the mishap, a knock sounded on her door and she gave a little groan. Great. He was going to realize she was stupid. Throwing the towel on the island, she looked out the peephole and saw Coleson. Maybe if she didn't answer he'd think she wasn't home.

“That probably would've worked if you hadn't said it out loud,” he said through the door.

Rolling her eyes she opened the door. “It's not what you think.”

“If you don't want to have dinner with me, no worries—”

“It's not that, I just ... well, um, I don't know how to cook.”

He blinked and amusement filled his blue eyes. “What were you attempting?”

“Spaghetti.”

He bit his bottom lip to keep from smiling, but failed miserably. She sighed and shook her head, standing aside to let him in.

“It's okay to laugh. I'm hopeless in the kitchen.”

“I get it,” Coleson said as he stepped inside. He handed her a bottle of red wine. Emmie took it and closed the door behind him. “Fast food is far easier.”

She grew up with a chef cooking amazing dishes, and since she was supposed to be a normal girl, couldn't admit she never had fast food. “Yeah. You too?”

“Sometimes,” he replied as he rolled up his sleeves. “Okay, let’s see what we have.”

He picked up pans and threw away the clump of spaghetti in the trash. He rinsed out the saucepan that had burnt pasta sauce. He tossed the blackened garlic bread. Washing his hands, he started the meal over. Just took over her kitchen as he moved fluently from sink to stove to oven.

“Why don’t you pour us a glass of wine while I get this sorted out?” he suggested.

“That I can do,” she said and grabbed a corkscrew to open the bottle. She poured out a healthy amount and handed him a glass.

“Thank you,” he said.

She took her wineglass and sat on one of the island stools. “I feel bad that I invited you over a meal, and now you’re making that meal.”

He shrugged. “I’m used to cooking. My mother…” Coleson hesitated, the muscles of his jaw moving as he clenched and unclenched his teeth.

Emmie got the impression it was a touchy subject, and she didn’t want to make him feel self-conscious.

“My mother can’t even microwave a cup of water,” she said, filling the silence. “Probably doesn’t even know what a microwave is. She’s spoiled and entitled, and utterly exhausting.”

His gaze flickered up to meet hers. “Is that why you’re here?”

Emmie shook her head, wondering how much she should reveal. Coleson didn’t seem like a man who’d go blabbing to the press, but she had to be careful.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” he said softly.

“It’s okay. A little over a year ago, I found my brother floating in his hot tub.” Damn it! She blinked rapidly to hold back the emotional tears. She didn’t want to start crying, but her chin wobbled a little. “My parents went around telling everyone he’d OD’d. They got all manner of sympathy, but it was a lie. He’d taken some Xanax for anxiety and drank whiskey, and that, combined with the heat of the water, caused him to pass out. He ended up drowning.”

“I’m so sorry,” Coleson said. Sadness and understanding were etched on his face. He reached out his hand to cover hers, and she liked the bit of warmth he offered. “Growing up, I was a little punk since I had no adult supervision, and my coach on the youth football league kind of whipped my ass into shape. If it hadn’t been for him, I have no idea where I’d be today. Probably in jail or in the ground. When he retired, he moved into the beach house I’m staying in. He passed away three months ago so I’m here to pack everything up.”

“I’m glad you had him,” Emmie murmured.

He gave her a little smile, squeezed her hand, and went back to cooking. “Yeah. Me too. Did you have anyone?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Not like you. It was my brother and I growing up. He, ah, wanted to divorce our parents, but I was too scared. It haunts me, that he died thinking I was a coward.” When a tear rolled down her cheek, she quickly wiped it away and gave a self-conscious laugh. “Sorry.”

He reached over and patted her hand. “You don’t have to apologize.”

She sniffed. “He was my twin. I thought we’d be together always. I thought he’d make fun of me if I ever got married. I thought I’d definitely make fun of him if he

did. He wasn't supposed to die, especially not like that."

Coleson came around the island and wrapped his arms around her, giving her a tight hug. She stiffened at first, but then relaxed when she realized all he wanted to do was comfort her. When he pulled back, he swept some of her hair behind an ear. That spark she'd felt earlier ignited again, causing her heart to skip a beat. She glanced at his lips, wanting to kiss him, but knowing it was inappropriate to kiss a man she'd only known a handful of hours.

He cleared his throat and took a step back, and she immediately felt bereft. Which was stupid. She'd just met this guy. Still, she never had tingles dance over her skin before. Or have a man stare at her like he wanted to eat her up. At least, none that didn't see dollar signs first.

An easy smile plastered on his face.

"Dinner is about done," he said.

She nodded, letting him know she understood.

He drained the pasta, mixed it with the sauce, and took it to the small dining table before getting the perfectly cooked garlic bread out of the oven and sliding the pieces into a bread basket.

"Ready?" he asked.

Emmie brought her glass of wine over, and he held out her chair as she sat down. Then he grabbed his own glass and the bottle of wine and sat across from her.

"To new friendships," he said, holding up his glass.

“Yes.” She lightly tapped his with hers, then they both took a drink. “It looks and smells wonderful. Thank you for saving dinner. YouTube never prepared me for how hard it would be to cook.”

“YouTube?”

She gave a one-shoulder shrug as she filled up her bowl with food and added a little parmesan cheese. “I thought it would be the perfect app to teach me, but I underestimated how difficult it’d be to watch everything so it wouldn’t burn.”

He grinned. “It does take a little time to learn how to manage it all. No one ever was great the first time.”

“Not even Gordon Ramsey?”

“I’m pretty sure he made some type of deal with the Devil.”

She laughed. “They don’t call it Hell’s Kitchen for nothing.”

They ate for a few minutes, and it was nice having a companion. She didn’t feel quite so alone.

“What do you do for a living?” he asked.

For a moment, panic set in. What did she tell him? Sticking as close to the truth as possible sounded like a wise decision. “I, um, I work in the local animal shelter. Taking care of them. Helping them get adopted. Cleaning cages and taking them on walks.”

“That’s amazing,” he said.

“Animals will never betray you,” she explained. “If they don’t like you, they’ll let you know. You treat them with kindness and they’ll love you forever.”

“They are far better creatures than mankind.”

Emmie smiled, glad he understood. “What do you do?”

“Nothing right now,” he replied.

“In between jobs?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

Every time she looked at him, he stared back in a type of visual foreplay. He held out his hand, and she slowly put her own in it, and his fingers traced over the skin. “Why do I feel like I know you?”

She stiffened and pulled back. “What?”

“Last night, I saw you on the beach,” he said. “And it felt like we were the only people in the world.”

She relaxed at his explanation. “Like we were no longer alone. I felt that, too.”

He nodded. “Is what we’re feeling because of our shared grief?”

“You mean, did we somehow subconsciously know the other was hurting and it drew us together?”

“Yeah.”

Emmie bit her bottom lip as she thought that over. “I think our attraction to one another brought us together. Grief is just something we have in common.”

“I wonder what else we have in common,” he mused. “Let’s see. I like jogging on the beach.”

“Jogging? What is this jogging you speak of?”

“Strike one. How about this?” His gaze sharpened to laser focus. “I like watching football.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Football. Go Knicks.”

He blinked and visibly relaxed. “Yeah. Go Knicks.”

“I like wine.” She saluted him with her glass filled with said beverage and then took a long drink. “I like funny movies. Coffee. I don’t care for chocolate or rude people. I wish I had the guts to tell my parents to fuck off. I’d give anything to be able to go back in time, to when my brother asked me to run with him out of our parents’ lives. If I had, maybe he’d still be alive.”

“Time is always slowest in our memories. If I could’ve done this, or if I would’ve done that. I kept delaying on calling Thomas, and now, it’s too late. He’s gone.” He sighed. “It’s hard to break things off with parents. I know that from experience.”

“Is your mother still alive?”

He shook his head. “Alcohol was her killer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve had a lot of therapy to come to terms with her decisions.”

“Another thing we have in common.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

She nodded.

“May I kiss you?”

Her mouth went dry even as her heart hammered in her chest. “Yes.”

He rose and came over to her. Emmie looked up, and he held out his hand. Wondering if this was smart of her, she decided to hell with playing it safe and placed her hand in his. Being safe had gotten her nowhere. It caused her to leave her brother behind when he needed her, a decision with devastating consequences.

Maybe it was the intimacy of the setting. Maybe it was because he was the first man she’d had a date with who didn’t know who she was. That her bank account was probably bigger than he could possibly imagine. It was why she’d dyed her hair brown, covering up the honey locks she was known for.

When he tugged her closer, she eagerly stepped into his arms, not having too far to reach to fuse their mouths together. His heart thundered beneath her hand, his muscles ripping with every breath he took. Everywhere they touched, electrical charges danced over her skin. Heat, desire, need. How did a man she just met invoke such white-hot lust? His kiss was voracious, taking everything she had to give and demanding even more. When they finally broke for air, she stared up at him in complete surprise. He must have felt the same because he looked like a Mack truck just blindsided him.

“You make it hard to be a good boy,” he murmured as he trailed his fingers across her cheekbone and pushed some hair behind her ear.

“Why do you have to be good?”

He smiled. “Because I’m not going to take advantage when we’re both hurting.”

“Fair enough,” she replied.

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her into his warm body.

“Thank you for dinner.”

“Thank you for cooking.”

“I’d be happy to give you lessons.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Or whatever. I’d just like to see you again.”

“How about I bring you lunch tomorrow? From a deli that knows what they’re doing.”

“I’d love that,” he replied.

“Oh, um, one little question,” she said, spacing up her index finger and thumb about an inch apart. “Would you happen to know how to operate a washing machine?”

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The next day Emmie parked in front of the ice cream parlor and saw through the window a young woman making an ice cream shake for a customer. Locking up her car, she headed inside, waiting until the customer paid and left. Then she stepped up to the counter, and the employee smiled sweetly at her. She had an air of sadness around her that matched the sorrow radiating from her eyes.

“What can I get you?”

“Hi, are you the owner?”

“I am.”

Emmie pulled up a picture of Jacoby on her phone and held it up. “I was wondering if you recognized this man.”

Immediately, the smile left the woman’s face as she studied the photo. “Did he do something wrong?”

“Oh, no, he’s my brother.” The present tense she used hurt her heart. “Are you sure you don’t recognize him?”

The woman shook her head. “Is he missing?”

“He passed away,” Emmie said softly. The woman’s eyes widened and she quickly looked down. Something told Emmie this woman had, indeed, known Jacoby. “He left a notebook that talked about this town. About how wonderful it was.”

The woman cleared her throat. “Well, I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Disappointment filled Emmie. “Can I leave you my number? Just in case you happen to remember something?”

“Uh, sure.”

The woman held out a pen. Smiling, Emmie grabbed it and a napkin, jotting down her cell.

“Thank you,” she said, holding it out. The woman slowly, or perhaps reluctantly, took it. “I’ve missed him, and I don’t understand why he’s gone. In his notebook, he detailed how much he loved your shop. How he’d come every day for your salted caramel ribbon. So, I thought maybe you’d remember him and it would bring me close to him again. Like he’s not impossibly far away. Anyway, thank you for your time. Have a nice day.”

Reluctantly, she left the ice cream parlor and only when she stepped outside did she realize she’d been crying. Wiping her cheeks, she headed to the sub shop down the street. Beyond any doubt, the woman knew her brother, but Emmie couldn’t figure out why she lied. She could only hope the woman called her.

She ordered lunch for her and Coleson, and then drove to his house. As she approached the front door, it opened and he waved her in. The interior was straight out of the sixties. Or seventies. Or whatever age crushed velvet had been a thing. Boxes were all over the place. The heavy scent of pine cleaner hung in the air.

“You can set the bag on the table,” he said. “What would you like to drink? I’ve got water, coffee, and beer.”

“I’ll take a beer.”

He opened the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles, twisting off the caps. Emmie took the one he offered and sipped. The bitter taste of hops made her grimace. Coleson smirked.

“Not a beer lover?”

She shrugged. “Not really, but I wanted some fortification.”

Coleson sat down and pulled out the sandwiches and chips, handing over hers. “Fortification from what?”

Emmie took a bite to think about her answer. What did she share? How much was too much in order to conceal her real identity? Then again, what did she have to lose?

“After my brother died, I was the one who had to pack away his life. Choose what to keep and what to donate or get rid of.”

“That must have been hard.”

“I couldn’t trust my parents to hire someone instructed to toss everything.” She took another bite, chewed, then washed it down with another sip of beer. “I found this journal he’d kept. Page after page of his thoughts. Dreams. Fears. A large portion was about his time here in Anchorridge Cove.”

They ate for a few more minutes, and she was thankful he wasn’t pushing for more information. Giving her time to figure out how to articulate her emotions.

“I didn’t even know he had visited Maine,” she admitted. “He kept writing about the ice cream shop, which made me think he must have known someone there. I managed to talk to the owner but she said she didn’t remember him. I’m not sure I believe her ... something in her tone, something on her face. She seemed off.”

“If it was a love affair, maybe she doesn’t feel comfortable sharing intimate details,” he suggested.

“Yeah. Maybe. I just ... I miss my brother. So much.” Again, with the tears. She blinked until they were gone, wiping away a stray one sliding down her cheek. “I just want to connect with places and stuff he liked. Or loved. There’s a reason he wrote this in a journal, right? He spent a lot of time here, and I’m hoping to understand why.”

He reached out and picked up her hand, threading their fingers together. “I’m in the process of making the same decisions you faced. What to keep of Thomas. What to let go of. He might not have been my biological dad, but I considered him my family. And as sad as I am, I can’t imagine the heartbreak you must be feeling from the loss of your twin.”

The waterworks turned on from his words, and she couldn’t hold back the tears. He scooted his chair back and beckoned her, so she rose and walked to him. Coleson eased her down onto his lap, then tucked her chin in the crook of his neck while she cried.

“I’m so tired of crying,” she sniffed.

“It’s better to get it out than keep it in,” he murmured. “The pain turns to poison if you don’t purge it.”

“I’ve been so alone with this,” she admitted. “My parents offered no consolation as they played the grieving couple.”

He held her, rocking her in comfort. Eventually, the tide passed, leaving her drained. Surprisingly, she felt better. The grief was still there, but for the first time since Jacoby died, strength filled her. That was when she knew she was going to heal. That

everything would be okay.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“My pleasure,” he replied. “Sometimes we just need a safe place to weather the storm. Once the dark clouds are gone, the sun eventually shines again.”

Emmie liked his metaphors. She wasn’t sure how long she stayed on his lap, with his arms wrapped around her and her head resting on his chest. Suddenly, the mood shifted. The air electrified. She pulled back to look at him.

“Are we done reminiscing?” she asked breathlessly.

A smile pulled up one side of his mouth. “I guess so.”

“Thank God,” she said, then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him like there was no tomorrow.

Then he maneuvered her until their bodies were pressed together and then immediately deepened the kiss. Her hands rested on his chest and she could feel his heat burning through his shirt, his muscles ripping with every breath he took. As his tongue pushed into her mouth, dancing with her own, a voltaic current charged through her body. His tongue was bold and demanding as it swept into her mouth to twine with her own. For a long moment, her body melted into his, and she was about two seconds away from unbuckling his belt. Sanity tried to return when they broke for air, although her eyes rolled back in her head when he kissed his way over her cheek to her ear, taking the lobe between his teeth and biting gently. The slight bite of pain only heightened the pleasure.

Suddenly, he gripped her around the waist and lifted her up, setting her down on the table. He swept everything to the side to give her room. The remainder of their lunch

went flying. Beer toppled over. The unexpected move made her giggle. With a smile, he trailed his fingers down her neck and over the pulse beating wildly. Over her collarbone and chest, skimming past her breasts to reach her thighs.

“More?” he asked her.

She nodded. “I want to feel alive again.”

Slowly, he bunched the hem of her skirt until her thighs were exposed. Rough patches on his fingertips abraded over her milky-white skin, sending delicious little shocks across her nerve endings. He stared her in the eyes, and she knew he was watching to make sure she was still onboard with what he was doing. There was no way in hell she’d tell him to stop.

“Open for me,” he whispered.

She licked her suddenly dry lips and parted her legs as he commanded, giving him access. He brushed across her panties, the only thing separating him from her, and she sucked in a breath. Excitement made her heart pound and her pussy slick. Rubbing little circles over her sensitive nub, she couldn’t hold back the moan. Her hips jerked up, unable to stay still.

“Holy moly,” she breathed.

“Do you want more, Emmie?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, please.”

He dipped a finger under the silk barely covering her femininity. As she stared into his eyes, she undulated her hips, wanting more. Wanting to put out the hot need coursing through her body. Coleson jerked his hand from her panties and fell to his

knees in front of her. He was so tall that the table level didn't even factor. She panted as she watched him. Down he yanked her bit of lace and she lifted her hips so they were easier to remove. He lifted one of her legs over his shoulder as he settled between her thighs.

Although she couldn't see what he was doing, it didn't matter. With his touch, she lay back, her body suddenly going limp with one swipe of his tongue. Oral sex was hit-or-miss, mostly miss because guys thought flicking a clit ninety miles an hour with their tongue was sexy. It wasn't.

He obviously knew what he was doing when he found the spot that made stars explode behind her eyelids.

"Coleson!" she moaned. "Oh my God!"

For a spilt-second, he halted, but before she could say anything, he resumed the sweet torture. He didn't let up and soon she lost control as her body shook with the approaching climax. She hovered for a second on the precipice before falling. The climax consumed every inch, exploding through what felt like every cell, causing her body to seize up before euphoria hit. Riding that high on a cloud until she drifted back down, panting, and unable to form words.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Coleson murmured as he withdrew.

He straightened her clothing then pulled her into his arms, hugging and holding her as the aftershocks rolled through her.

"You—"

"Shh. This isn't about me." He pressed his lips against her temple. She heard his ragged breath, proving he was just as affected as she. "I had a feeling it would be this

powerful between us.”

“I’m ... this...” Her wits were scattered. The few times she’d dated she’d never felt this breath-stealing attraction, and never had an orgasm so powerful.

“I’ve never felt like this before,” she finally admitted.

“Neither have I,” he said.

She peeked up at him. “I find that terribly hard to believe.”

“I can say the same to you.” He gave her a knowing look. “Attraction has many layers. I’m not saying there haven’t been other women, but never to this depth. Maybe once the summer is over, we can—”

She placed a finger over his mouth. “Don’t make promises you might not be able to keep.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“It’s not that,” she said. “Magic fades, and I don’t want us to make promises in the heat of the moment.”

He studied her face, searching, and slowly he nodded his agreement.

“For the summer?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she replied. “For the summer.”

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The next morning, a knock sounded on her door, and Emmie carried her morning coffee over to look through the peephole. Coleson gave a jaunty little wave. Smiling, with giddy butterflies dancing through her belly, she opened the door. Leaning against the doorframe, she took another sip of coffee and perused him up and down.

“Looking mighty fine,” she murmured.

“Back at you,” he smirked. He held up a set of keys. “Wanna go for a boat ride?”

“You have a boat?”

“I’m not quite sure what it looks like, but I’m hopeful it’s still floating.”

“How can I say no to that ringing endorsement?” She stepped back and invited him in. “Give me ten minutes, big boy.”

As she sauntered to her bedroom, he called after her. “Flattery will get you everywhere with me.”

Emmie laughed.

She dressed in record time, throwing her hair up in a ponytail and forgoing makeup. Once upon a time, she never would’ve stepped outside her condo without her full mask on. Heavy eyeliner. Painted lips. A shield against the world. Her priorities had been extremely skewed, thinking the only things that mattered were popularity and gossip. A shallow world that ate people up without remorse.

She walked over to her dresser and laid her hand on the decorative urn that held her brother's ashes. Jacoby's death put everything in perspective, and it didn't take very long to realize just how superficial she'd been. There was so much she regretted.

"Miss you," she whispered.

Pushing aside her perpetual sadness, she joined Coleson and a minute later they were on their way to the marina. It had been a while since she'd last enjoyed a day soaking up the sun on the back of a boat. The dock itself was rectangular in shape, residing inside the sweeping C-curve of the bay. Coleson parked in the designated lot and she threw her beach bag over her shoulder as she followed him.

"Let me notify the manager we're here," he said.

She nodded. "What's the name of the boat?"

He glanced at the deed. "The Henrietta . Slip twenty-five."

"I'll meet you there," she said. He nodded and walked toward the office. Emmie strolled toward the correct slip, reading the names of each boat until she found the Henrietta , a twenty-foot bowrider that looked like it had been well cared for.

Her father had a sixty-foot yacht he used to wine and dine clients. The glazed parapets, balustrades, and transparent barriers allowed the passengers breathtaking wraparound views even from the flybridge. She'd only been on it once, when she and Jacoby had been about fifteen, and the only reason McBride Adinson allowed his children onboard at all was to pretend they were one big happy family in front of the Governor of New York. When their usefulness was no longer needed, he'd sent them back to their corner of the luxurious high-rise penthouse.

She jumped when a hand settled on her hip.

“Sorry!” Coleson said. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

She waved away the apology. “It’s fine. I was woolgathering.”

He looked over the bowrider. “She looks in pretty good shape. Wanna go test it out on the ocean?”

She nodded. While she stepped onto the deck, he untied the moorings. After joining her, he sat in the captain’s chair and started up the engine. It purred like a kitten.

“Thomas took great care of the Henrietta ,” he stated.

“You know how to drive a boat, right?” she asked.

“How hard could it be?” he counter-asked. She blinked, and then after a moment he chuckled. “Yeah, I do. Spent many summers off the coast of North Carolina, boating and fishing.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yep.” He slowly navigated through the heavy traffic of docked boats. “Grew up in Raleigh. Thomas was my youth football coach and when he found out my mother was basically drunk off her ass every night, he made sure I had enough food to eat. Made sure I went to school. During the summer, he’d always take me to the coast to fish and enjoy the beach.”

“I’m glad you had Thomas,” she said.

“Yeah, me too.” He glanced at her. “Was it you and your brother against your parents?”

For a moment, her memories flashed through her head. “He usually got us into trouble. A bad influence, our parents would say.”

“Fuck your parents.”

Her eyes widened, and then she laughed. “Yeah. Fuck my parents.”

Once they passed the bay and the Atlantic stretched before them, Coleson sped up. The cool wind contrasted with the hot sun, and she leaned back to enjoy the dueling sensations. They headed down the coast and she honestly couldn’t remember having a more enjoyable time. For the first time in the past year, she was having fun. After about an hour, Coleson turned the Henrietta around to head back to Anchorridge Cove. The landscape was breathtaking, and she understood Jacoby’s fascination with this part of the country. It almost felt like he was guiding her beyond the grave, following his footsteps, and with clarity knew this was where he’d want his ashes.

When Coleson docked the Henrietta , she hopped onto the slip to tie the boat up. Once everything was locked up and covered, he joined her and it seemed as natural as breathing when he took her hand and threaded their fingers together.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Starving.”

“Let’s head into town and find a nice place to grab lunch.”

They settled on a seafood restaurant with a table by the huge window so they could look out over the bay.

“I want to scatter my brother’s ashes on the ocean,” she said.

“Thomas wanted that too.”

“Maybe we can have a goodbye ceremony, you and I.”

“That sounds a great way to honor their wishes. You said your brother had a journal of Anchorridge Cove?”

She nodded.

“Why don’t I help you walk in his footsteps?”

Emmie cocked her head. “What?”

“Let’s go to all the places he went. It’ll be part of saying goodbye. Letting him rest in peace.”

A lump rose in her throat that she had to swallow down. “You’d do that with me?”

When he held out his hand, she placed hers in it without hesitation. “I have the feeling you’d offer the same if our places were reversed.”

“I would,” she confirmed.

A united front over their shared grief.

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Emmie's phone rang early the next morning, waking her from a sound sleep. She sat straight up, blinking as her mind tried to process where the shrill bell was coming from. When she realized it was a call, she groped for her cell and answered.

"Hello?" Her voice came out as a croak so she cleared her throat and tried again.
"Hello?"

"It's ... I'm ... my name is Mallory Lacefield, and you came by the other day."

It took Emmie a moment to realize Mallory was the ice cream shop owner. "Yes! Yes, thank you for calling me."

"It wasn't easy for me to make this call."

"I understand," Emmie said. "Did you know my brother?"

"I did," Mallory replied. "I thought he forgot about me. When you said he wrote about my store in his journal, my heart broke all over again. He didn't forget, did he?"

"No, he didn't."

"I loved him." Mallory sniffed, and her voice was thick from crying.

"Can I come over?" Emmie asked.

"I would like that."

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.

“Okay.”

“Thank you, Mallory.”

The call disconnected. Emmie leaped from bed, and after the world’s fastest shower, she dressed in the first clothes she could find, jeans and a t-shirt. Her mother would pitch a fit if she had seen Emmie wearing them, so she mentally flipped the bird at her mom.

Eight minutes later, she pulled up in front of the ice cream parlor. A CLOSED sign rested on the door, but it opened immediately, as if Mallory watched for her arrival. Emmie stepped inside the cool interior and Mallory closed it and locked it behind her. Her dark hair was styled in a blunt cut that framed and complemented her delicate features. Wide brown eyes were a little swollen and red, revealing a night spent crying.

“Thank you for reaching out,” Emmie said. “I’m Emmie, by the way.”

She held out her hand, and Mallory shook it. “You look like him.”

“We’re twins.” Emmie sucked in a deep breath. “He was about ten minutes older than me.”

“I knew he had a sister, but I didn’t know...” Mallory cleared her throat. “I mean, he didn’t really talk all that much about his family.”

“I’m not surprised,” Emmie said. “Our parents weren’t cut out to be the nurturing types.”

They stood in front of each other awkwardly before Mallory gestured to a nearby table.

“Would you like some ice cream? I’d offer coffee but I don’t have any.”

Emmie shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m good.”

They sat across from each other, and Emmie linked her fingers together to rest on her lap.

“Jacoby always ordered salted caramel ribbon. Just like you.”

“It was our favorite,” Emmie replied. “Can I ask how you met him?”

“I was on vacation in New York City,” Mallory said, smiling a bit dreamily as her memory drifted back in time. “I was doing one of those boat tours around the Statue of Liberty and had just gotten off the bus when I knocked this guy down. He looked up and I looked down, and that was it. I just knew this was the man I was going to marry.”

Emmie’s heart hurt. It was torture listening to the happiness in her tone.

“He spent the entire weekend with me, and when I had to come back home, he followed. Stayed a couple of weeks before he had to leave.” She wiped a tear off her cheek. “He said he was coming back to be with me, but I never saw him again. I thought ... I thought he changed his mind.”

That explained where he’d been for that missing time right before his death.

“Did you know who he was?”

Mallory shook her head. “He never talked about his background, except to say he had a sister and didn’t talk to his parents. Truthfully, none of that mattered to me. With money, without money. I fell in love with the man, not the name.”

“I’m glad he found you,” Emmie whispered. “That he had love.”

“When you said he died, it was a complete shock,” Mallory continued, chin wobbling. “I went from thinking he didn’t want me, to finding out he was no longer in this world. And I wish I’d been able to say goodbye.”

Emmie reached over the table to lay her hand on Mallory’s. “I think he was planning to move here. For you. A lot of his stuff had been packed in boxes.”

Her words unleashed Mallory’s sorrow. Tears poured from her eyes, and she couldn’t hold back the sobs. Emmie rose and moved around the table to kneel and hug her as the torrent of emotions unleashed.

“Shh,” she said. “I’m so thankful he had you.”

For a long moment, they hugged each other. Emmie would always miss and mourn her brother, and although she may not be ready to lay him to rest, perhaps that was a disservice to his memory. Maybe the only way to move past the heartbreak was to truly let him go.

“In his journal, he talked about how much he loved this town,” she said. Mallory pulled back, blinking at her. “For the past year I’ve stared at his urn, asking why he was taken from me. We came out of the womb together, so how do I go through life missing my other half?”

“H-how did he die?”

“He drowned. Took some anxiety medicine that caused him to fall asleep in a hot tub.” Emmie rubbed her forehead, frowning. “What an utterly stupid way to die, and I was so mad at him. Mad at myself because I should’ve felt something, you know? Aren’t twins supposed to know each other’s feelings? I couldn’t understand why I didn’t feel him dying.”

“I’m glad you came here,” Mallory said. “I’m glad to know what happened. I can lay him to rest in my mind.”

Emmie thought for a moment. “I came here to Anchorridge Cove to be closer to him. If you’d like to come with me, I think I found the perfect place to scatter his ashes.”

“I’d like that.”

Emmie smiled and stood. “All right. I’ll get everything set up and tell you when as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Emmie.”

“You’re welcome.”

When Crew took his early morning jog, he noticed that Emmie wasn’t sitting in the deck chair. He quite liked having her watch him as she sipped her coffee. Sunlight shimmered on top of the waves and a cool breeze slid over his heated muscles. Dawn had only risen about twenty minutes earlier, casting long shadows on the sand.

He liked Anchorridge Cove. Nobody noticed him and the press hadn’t found where he’d gone. The publicist for the Archers team reported he was snorkeling in the Maldives, so no one suspected he was in Maine. It was a fantastic fake play.

When he finally made it back to his cottage, which had been booked under a pseudonym, he made a beeline to the bathroom for a nice, hot shower. He wrapped a towel around his hips just as the doorbell chimed. He had a feeling he knew who was there, and with a wicked grin went to the door.

“Who is it?” he called out.

“It’s Emmie,” she replied.

He unlocked the door and opened it, and Emmie’s expressive eyes widened as she took in his near-naked state.

She gulped “Y-you’re naked.”

“Not entirely.”

“That’s a real small, um, towel.”

“It’s the only thing that’s small.” He winked, and her face flushed scarlet.

“Perhaps I should come back—”

Before she could finish that thought, he gently gripped her wrist and pulled her inside, closing the door behind her. He grinned when she kept her gaze upward. He couldn’t resist teasing.

“Wanna help me pick out some clothes? And help put this towel away?”

Her mouth dropped open. “Uh. Sure.”

Her response surprised him. Crew took a step closer and rested his hands on her

shoulders. Damn. His heart rate sped up like an Indianapolis Five Hundred racer. Resting his hands on her shoulders, he slowly pulled her into his body, giving her enough time to move away or resist if she didn't want to kiss him. She did neither. Instead, she licked her lips and he was a goner.

He captured her lips, swiping his tongue across them, demanding they part. Hot. Wet. Sinful. It consumed him, and he wondered how this small slip of a woman overpowered every memory of anyone else. The years of women he'd enjoyed, the jersey chasers, simply vanished from his mind. It now focused only on her, Emmie, and he didn't even know her last name. Knew nothing about her, but suddenly, somehow she'd stolen his attention.

Wrapping a hand around the nape of her neck, he kissed her like there was no tomorrow. Like his life depended on it. She took and gave back in equal parts of pleasure and desperation that coursed through his body. As they broke for air, he rested his forehead against hers.

"Fucking hell," he muttered.

"Ditto."

He chuckled. "Hopefully, by the time I dress, this damn hard-on deflates."

"Sorry, not sorry."

"Brat," he said and kissed the top of her head. He turned to go back into his bedroom, grimacing as he adjusted himself. He grabbed some jeans and a t-shirt, dressing quickly, and picked up his baseball cap before rejoining her.

"The owner of the ice cream parlor called me and I went to see her this morning."

“Really? What’d she say?”

“Her name is Mallory and she met my brother when she came to New York City on a tour. They spent the weekend together and then he came here to Anchorridge Cove. I think he was planning on moving here to be with her.”

He rested his hands on her shoulders. “He loved her.”

“Yeah, I think so. She definitely loved him. I could see it on her face. Hear it in her voice. She thought he abandoned her.”

“I’m glad she talked to you.”

“Me too,” Emmie said.

“Do you still want to trace his steps?”

“Absolutely,” she replied. “Also, I’d like to take his ashes out to the Atlantic. I think if I had to ask my brother where he’d want his ashes to be scattered, I’m pretty sure he’d say the ocean. He’ll ride the waves for the rest of eternity.”

“All right. I pick Thomas’s ashes up at the end of the week. How about we go then?”

“Perfect.”

He linked his fingers with hers. “Ready?”

She tugged on their connection and he glanced down at her. “Thank you for being with me.”

He nodded and kissed her gently on the mouth. “Let’s go find your brother’s

memory.”

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They arrived at the lighthouse parking lot and Emmie had to crane her head back to take it all in. The imposing structure towered over its dominion, bright white paint covered the conical tower, reaching about two hundred feet in the sky. It made her feel tiny and insignificant.

Coleson slipped on his dark sunglasses and plopped his baseball cap backward on his head before he gripped her hand. He led her to the large house that served as the family quarters for the men who maintained their watch over the bay. Nowadays, it was a gift store. With the advancement of more sophisticated and effective navigational technology, lighthouses were an outdated maritime tool. Still, they were a gorgeous shoreline décor.

They entered the cool interior of the gift shop, with wooden floorboards that creaked as they walked. There was a stillness in the atmosphere of the old house, as if it cried out to be rescued from the archaic service.

“Hello,” a woman said as she came from a different part of the house. “Welcome to the Parrmer Point Lighthouse.”

“Thank you,” Coleson said.

Emmie pulled up a photo of her brother and held it out to the woman. “Does this man look familiar? He visited sometime last year.”

The woman looked and immediately smiled. “Oh, yes, I do remember him. He was with his girlfriend and they didn’t stray too far from one another.”

Emmie smiled. “They were in love.”

“Very much.”

“He was my brother,” Emmie explained and slipped her phone back into her pocket. “He, um, passed away and I just...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, my dear,” the woman said.

“Thanks.” She cleared her throat. “He was happy here. I’m just trying to find a way to let him rest in peace.”

The woman walked over to her and took hold of Emmie’s hand. “He and his girlfriend went to the top. Please, feel free to explore.”

Coleson stepped forward and reached for his wallet. “How much?”

The woman shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. I offer my condolences.”

“Thank you,” Emmie whispered, blinking rapidly to halt the imminent fall of tears.

Coleson took her hand again and led her back outside to the footpath that led to the lighthouse’s entrance. Emmie wiped the moisture from her cheeks.

“I very much hate crying,” she muttered.

“Crying helps you heal.”

“It makes me feel weak.”

“You’re not weak.” He squeezed her hand. “You’ve handled all this by yourself, so

your shoulders are heavy. But that doesn't make you weak."

She didn't reply. Truth was, Jacoby had always teased her when she'd cry over the dumbest stuff, and she knew he wouldn't want her to do that over his memory.

When they entered the lighthouse, a sign proclaimed that there were two hundred and nineteen steps and they walked up at their own risk. Several people came down the spiral, metal staircase. They smiled at Emmie and Coleson. Then, it was their time to go up.

Walking up a winding two hundred and nineteen steps was no laughing matter. By the time they reached the top, both were panting. Sweat dotted their foreheads.

"Jesus," Coleson muttered. "I thought I was in shape."

"Oh, good," she huffed. "I don't feel so bad now we're both hacking up a lung."

He grinned and once they got their heart rates under control, they explored the watch room, where obviously men watched for any ships getting too close to the rocky shore. Emmie suddenly understood how Rapunzel felt trapped in her tower. They continued up and came out on the gallery deck. A high railing encircled the perimeter, offering a false sense of security. The cool breeze coming off the bay fluttered her hair as she breathed in the brine-scented air.

The view took her breath away.

Gripping the railing, she closed her eyes and thought of Jacoby. She could almost feel him with her, his ghostly presence using the breath of wind as his own, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. One more piece of her broken heart mended. In her head, she wished him goodbye. When she opened her eyes, Coleson's attention centered on her, offering a tender smile.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“We’ve just begun.”

She looked at him with uncertainty. “Are you sure? I don’t want to bore you with...”

He placed a finger over her mouth, effectively shutting her up. “I wouldn’t have volunteered if I didn’t want to, and I’m not bored.”

Emmie nodded. For a moment, their gazes locked and something sparked within her soul. More than desire. Deeper than a craving. By the way his finger traced her lip, she knew he had to be on the same wavelength.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, and for a moment she thought he meant the carnal kind of hunger. Then her belly rumbled and one of his eyebrows shot upward mockingly. “I think that answers my question. How about we get some lunch and figure out our next destination?”

“Okay,” she agreed.

He drove them through town, stopping at a bustling diner at the end of Main Street. A plethora of delicious scents greeted them as they stepped inside.

“You can sit anywhere,” one of waitresses called out.

Coleson took hold of her hand and led her over to a booth. As soon as they sat, another waitress hurried over with menus.

“What can I get you to drink?”

“Iced tea, please,” she replied.

“Same.”

With a smile, the woman hurried away.

“What are you in the mood for?” Coleson asked, looking over his menu.

He hadn’t taken off his sunglasses or his baseball cap, and she wished she could see his beautiful cerulean eyes. She perused the menu.

“I’m going to get the club sandwich,” she said. “You?”

“Steak and eggs, baby.” He patted his flat belly. “I’m a growing boy.”

“You’re a six-foot-something behemoth,” she commented dryly. “You grow anymore and you’ll not fit through the door.”

He chuckled.

When the waitress came back, they placed their orders. Emmie tasted the iced tea, grimacing at the bitter tang, and grabbed a few sweetener packs to dump into her drink. Coleson did the same.

“Do you have your brother’s journal?” he asked.

“In the car,” she replied. “There were a few places he mentioned more than once. Like the lighthouse and ice cream parlor. He also wrote about some waterfall in the national park.”

“It might be too late in the day to visit that now,” he said.

Emmie pursed her lips. “Okay. We can go tomorrow to that one. He also mentioned a flea market in the Mermaid Wharf. They don’t actually sell fleas, do they?”

He blinked. “Are you joking?”

She tilted her head, waiting for him to answer.

“You’re not joking.” He shook his head. “No, they don’t sell fleas. Well, maybe if there are animals being sold, but I doubt that on a pier. Anyway, vendors set up and sell previously owned items.”

She frowned. “What sort of previously owned items?”

“Clothes. Shoes. Knickknacks. Odds and ends. Stuff like that.”

“Why would people buy used stuff?”

“I guess you’ve never shopped at a thrift store,” he said. “Well, lots of different people shop at flea markets. You can find some great bargains for great prices.”

It still didn’t make any sense to her. “But why call it a flea market?”

“That I don’t know.” Coleson grinned at her. “Just wait. You’ll see what I mean.”

Once served, they finished lunch quickly and Coleson insisted on paying for it. He placed a hand on her lower back and steered her back to his car. After sitting down and putting her seat belt on, Emmie tapped into her phone while he slid behind the wheel.

“Okay,” she said, reading. “It’s from a French translation. Le marché aux puces . Literally means market of fleas. Are you sure they’re not selling them there?”

“Positive.” He plugged the address into his phone and a moment later the first direction popped up. Then he pulled out onto Main Street and headed east. “It’s a half hour drive. Why don’t you tell me a little about yourself.”

“Pretty sure I’m boring.”

He shot her a quick glance. “Nothing about you is boring.”

“My ex-fiancé would beg to differ.”

“You’re engaged?”

“I was engaged,” she clarified. “For about two seconds. It was arranged. I was always afraid of my parents, but after my brother died, I didn’t give a shit about anything anymore. How about you? Ever engaged?”

“Nope. Never found the one woman I wanted to grow old with, and I’m not interested in settling down without the right person.”

They arrived at Mermaid Wharf, and Emmie couldn’t believe her eyes. The five-hundred-foot wooden walkway extended out across the Atlantic Ocean with the entire structure enclosed. Coleson parked and waited for her to reach his side, taking hold of his hand as he held it out. Once more, sunglasses perched on his nose and his baseball cap pulled low, as if he was trying to hide. As someone who had, on occasion, used disguises to fool the public, his actions were suspicious.

People swarmed around, and they blended into the flow, heading up the steps to a variety of souvenir shops, fashion storefronts, craft stores, and the promised flea market. There was so much stuff to see, Emmie was afraid of missing something. She understood now why Jacoby had liked this place. It was busy, loud, and the scents drifting from the various food stands were mouthwatering.

The flea market was a revelation. Antiques, jewelry, old clothes and hats, toys, cookware. Everything. Everywhere she looked. Her eyes couldn't get wide enough to look at everything. Before she knew it, she had an armful of things she probably didn't need, but wanted nonetheless. Especially the old jewelry. It almost felt like they belonged to her. That she had to take care of the beautiful old pieces. Coleson had a hard time not smiling at her, but she didn't care. She was having fun and handed over cash to pay for her goodies.

As the sun set, the night-lights came on, bathing the area in a fun, carnival theme. Coleson bought her a funnel cake, another thing she'd never tried before. Heaven. Truthfully, there was so much she'd been exposed to on this quest to reconnect with Jacoby, and she wondered if this was how her brother had felt. Why he'd fallen in love with Anchorridge Cove and had plans to move here.

Finally, the pier closed and it was time to return home. She half-dozed on the way back to the beach houses, and when Coleson pulled into her driveway, all her tiredness disappeared in a blink.

"I know we don't know each other all that well," she said. "But I was wondering if you'd like to stay at my place tonight. The kind of staying that has you eating breakfast with me in the morning."

His eyebrows shot up. "Are you sure?"

She frowned. "Unless you don't want to. I don't normally do this type of thing. Invite men I've only met a short time ago to stay over, but I've had this need to break out of my gilded cage. Only if you want to, of course."

He lifted her chin with a finger. "Of course I want to. I only hope I'm not making you feel like you have to."

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I like you, Coleson.”

He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. “I like you too, Emmie.”

“Then, please come in.”

With a tender smile, he nodded.

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When the front door shut behind him, Coleson flipped the lock and then immediately pulled her into his arms. Running his thumb gently across her lips, his eyes darkened with arousal. Sliding his hands down her hips, he pulled her in close before fusing his mouth to hers. Emmie stood up on tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck as fire licked through her body. She arched into his touch, into his kiss, into everything he was doing to her. Wanting him. Needing him. The electricity grew with each passing moment. Hungrily exploring each other, tongues dancing together. The kiss morphed into something more primal. Raw and unyielding.

Emmie slid her hand inside his shirt, scraping her fingernails across his pectorals. His stomach muscles tightened at the caress as chill bumps sprouted on his skin when she brushed over his nipples. When they finally broke off the kiss, they stared at each other, and she touched her tingling lips.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, brushing some hair off her forehead.

“So are you,” she whispered.

“Oh, baby, I think you might need some glasses.” He grabbed hold of her hips and maneuvered her backward down the short hallway to the bedroom.

“And I think you’re teasing. You know you’re good looking.”

“It only matters that you think that. Are you sure you want me to spend the night?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Good,” he said.

As soon as they stepped into the bedroom, he slid his hands down to cup her butt to lift her up. She immediately wrapped her legs around his waist, muscles bulging as he held her. He carried her to the bed and tumbled her onto the mattress before coming down on top of her, kissing her mouth, her neck, sucking on her earlobe. Clothes quickly came off, both chuckling as they helped each other get naked.

He was a beautiful man, with a streamlined physique. Corded muscles on his arms with classic washboard abs. The V-cut defined his pelvis, leading into strong thighs. Whatever he did for a living kept him in immaculate shape.

Emmie ran a finger down his torso to his groin, and over the tip of his cock. A bead of moisture appeared and she scooped it up, rubbing the dew over the head before licking it off. Coleson moaned and buried his hands in her hair. Taking that as encouragement to continue, she kissed the hot skin at the base of the shaft then trailed her lips upward. More pre-cum leaked and she lapped it up, loving the salty essence on her tongue. His hips twitched, as if his control slipped.

“You look so sexy with your lips wrapped around my dick,” he whispered. “Come here.”

He pulled out of her mouth and brought her up to crush her body against his. As they kissed, he buried his face in her neck and breathed her in, relentless as he gave little love bites over her skin. Coleson cupped her breasts, carrying their weight as he pinched the taut nipples. The jolt shot all through her body, causing an ache between her thighs. As soon as he slid his finger along her slit, a deep moan escaped. Her heart felt like it pounded out of her chest.

“You’re already wet for me, Emmie.”

“Yes, please,” she gasped, thrusting her pelvis up. She needed his touch like she needed to breathe. She craved him, her drug of choice. Emmie parted her legs even more, as his thumb found her clit and pressed, circling the nub. He slipped a finger inside and immediately her pussy contracted on the penetrating finger. He eased a second in, the entire time still rubbing her clit with his thumb. Emmie couldn’t help but push back, fucking against his fingers, needing to get off. The pressure almost too much to bear.

Just when her body began the climb to orgasm, he pulled away, groping for his pants. The sound of a condom wrapper seemed exceptionally loud in the quiet. He said not a word, but that was all right with her. She didn’t want to hear the empty promises made in the heat of the moment. He lined up, hands on her hips, and entered her with a smooth, mighty thrust.

“Oh, fuck, you feel good,” he whispered into her ear, the harshness of his breath heating her neck.

“Yes,” she managed to get out.

He set a smooth pace, surging forward and then retracting until only the head of his cock poised at the entrance. They stared into each other’s eyes, and somehow that made this different. That they weren’t just fucking. Their connection ran deeper, and for a moment she wondered how she would be once the summer was over and they went their separate ways.

Shaking off the melancholy thought, she pushed it far away. This was not the time to be wondering about the future. This was their time together.

His speed increased, until he was thrusting with abandonment, and still, they stared at one another. It was magical. Pleasure sluiced through every cell in her body. Emmie matched his wildness, hurtling toward completion. Beyond reason, beyond anything

but pure bliss.

Emmie cried out his name as she reached it—that platform of ecstasy which flung her out into the universe—soaring high among absolute sensation. A second later Coleson joined her, groaning out his own pleasure before slumping over her back. Both sweaty and panting heavily. It was sublime. Perfect exhilaration.

“Holy fuck, woman,” he muttered. “That was absolutely amazing.”

Her whole body shook in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

“Ditto,” she managed to say.

Coleson reached down to hold onto the condom as he pulled out of her. He rose and headed into the bathroom, where the faucet ran a moment later. He wasn’t self-conscious at all as he walked back to bed, and she couldn’t help but ogle him, already wanting round two.

He laid down and she propped her head up with her palm, unable to keep from smiling. Coleson ran a finger down the bridge of her nose.

“What’s going through that devious little smile?” he asked.

“Not devious. Just ... happy. I’ve not felt that in a long time.”

“I’m glad. You deserve happiness, Emmie. Come here.”

He wrapped his arms around her. She laid her head on his chest, right over his heartbeat. The rhythm lulled her into a sense of enchantment.

She closed her eyes and slept.

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Emmie panted, pausing on the sharp incline to catch her breath. Coleson steadily walked further ahead, apparently not realizing she was having a stroke. Or a coronary. Maybe she had asthma. Or lung cancer. Whichever is due from lack of oxygen...

“You all right?”

She jerked her gaze up and met his amused blue eyes. Instead of using precious air to reply, she held a thumbs-up. Many curse words coursed through her mind, all railed at Jacoby, who probably looked down from his ghostly cloud to snicker at her predicament.

“Need help?”

Emmie shook her head. “I can do this all day.”

“Sure, Captain America.”

Without even thinking about it, she flipped him off. All he did was laugh harder. Eyes narrowed, she marched up the incline, intending to punch the smirk off his face, but he caught her easily and dipped her. Like in an old movie, he kissed her soundly. Which made her breathless for a whole different reason.

Before someone came along and was traumatized by their makeout session, they ended the kiss and he pulled her upright once more.

“I think you’re one of the bravest people I know,” he whispered, nuzzling her neck.

“First you face your heartbreak, and now you’re tackling your fear of exercise.”

“I’m not afraid of exercise, you goofball,” she muttered, pushing him away. “I just prefer a more academic lifestyle.”

“Good save,” he said as he took her hand. “I’ll help you up this hill.”

She wanted to say something sassy, but once more the oxygen was too precious to waste on talking. An eternity later, or maybe just ten minutes, they reached the top. They overlooked the base of the falls, and a fine mist settled on them from the powerful tumble of the water. Nestled in a canyon, the majestic whitewater fall spilled at about one hundred forty feet. The sun hit it at the right angle to produce a rainbow.

Spring Meadow Falls.

A white, frothy cascade plunged against the large boulders at the bottom and mellowed out into a calm pool. Jacoby had gushed on how exquisite this place was, and he was right. It was humbling to be in the presence of such breathtaking beauty. Like at the lighthouse, she felt his spirit wrap around her, and she closed her eyes to savor the invisible connection. One more piece of her fractured heart mended, and she took a deep breath. Exhaling slowly, Emmie opened her eyes.

The day seemed brighter.

Coleson was a steady presence beside her, staying silent as she processed everything. They were frozen in this too brief moment of time, and when she looked up at him, she saw the same emotions reflected back.

“I bet Thomas had been here,” he said.

“I bet so, too.”

He looked down at her, and tears swam in his eyes. “I owe him every thing. And he’s gone.”

“But he’ll never be forgotten.”

Emmie wrapped her arms around his waist, leaning into his strength as well as giving all she could back to him. All too soon, the bubble popped as a couple more hikers showed up. Camera out, they snapped shots, and it surprised her when Coleson dipped his head lower and spun away. Holding onto her hand, he pulled her away.

At least, going down was a lot easier than going up.

Crew had this burning needed to consume her. To taste her until she was nothing but a wriggling mass of pleasure.

“I want to eat you until you come on my tongue.”

“Yes,” she moaned.

Excitement surged through him, making his hands slightly shake.

“God, you’re so fucking sexy,” he breathed.

His hands glissaded over her shoulders, down to her ass, grabbing hold of the plump cheeks to pull her into his body. She was butter melting in his arms. Crew buried his face into the curve of her neck, breathing her in. Licking her soft skin and taking a little nip. Not enough to give her a hickey, but he was tempted to put one there.

Leaving her delectable ass, he slid his palms up her rib cage until he found the curve of her breast. Cupping the shape, molding her to his palm as he gently squeezed. Her nipple pebbled under the thin material and he traced over the turgid peak with his fingertip. She arched and gasped and that's when he began to maneuver her toward her bedroom, walking her backward as he kept lavishing her soft skin with kisses.

Once inside the room, Emmie backed up, keeping her eyes on him, until the bed hit the back of her knees. Then she flirted with a little striptease, slowly removing her clothes. Shucking her pants, pulling her shirt up and over her head. Lace cradled the globes of her breasts, pushing them together. All he wanted to do was tear the bra with his teeth and suck on her pink nipples. Then down came her panties and she stepped out of them. Naked, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"I'll be just a moment," she murmured, giving him a wink and heading into the bathroom. A moment later, the shower turned on.

He took the opportunity to shed his clothes, tossing a condom packet onto the bed. Then he took his dick in hand to run his hand up and down the shaft. Squeezing the tip with each stroke. Only a few minutes later, Emmie returned, still completely naked, only with beads of water laying on her soft skin. A flush from the hot shower lingered on her cheeks.

She walked up to him and took over slowly jerking his cock, watching him with a little smirk lifting the corners of her mouth. He cupped her face, his thumbs brushing her cheeks and capturing her lips in another soul-melting kiss, his tongue sliding in easily to dance with her own.

This woman was magnificent. Her body didn't have the stick-thin malnourished look that so many women favored, thinking men liked to fuck skin and bones. Although naturally slender, she was soft and round in all the places a woman should be soft and round. Real breasts and an ass he could grab and hold on as he rode her.

When they broke apart to breathe, he scooped her up in his arms and laid her on the bed. Crew straddled her body and bent his head and closed his mouth over one nipple, lavishing it with his tongue and teeth, tugging tenderly until she lay beneath him writhing. Then he kissed his way down her body. Over her tummy. Her hip bone. All the way to the apex of her thighs. God, he wanted nothing more than to sink his steel-hard cock into her wet cunt and pump her until they both splintered apart. Instead, he came to his knees and pulled her body upward until her legs fell open. Holding onto her ass, he saw her pretty pussy, all plump and swollen with desire. Moisture glistened around the curls covering the hood, and he gently touched her, barely brushing against her slit as a moan erupted from her lips.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” he murmured. Then he kissed her, right on the spot he’d just touched and her hips jerked up, bumping against him.

“Please, Coleson,” she breathed.

The name was jarring because he wanted her to scream his real name. His first name. The fakeness of the relationship weighed on him, and he came to the conclusion that he wanted to tell her the truth. It had to be the right moment, and he hoped once he came clean, she wasn’t pissed off at his duplicity.

He licked along her seam, finding her clit to tease the bundle of nerves. As soon as his tongue rasped against the sensitive nub, her body arched like it had touched a live wire. Her hands buried in his hair, pulling it almost too aggressively. It gave everything an edge that pumped through his blood, lighting him on fire.

“Fuck, you taste like honey,” he groaned. “I could feast on you every night.”

Her body tightened beneath him and he could feel her quivering around his fingers. Panting. Begging. Incoherent little moans escaping her lips. She tasted so damn good and he never wanted to stop. If he could live between her thighs he would.

When he blew against her overheated pussy, she screamed in pleasure and immediately fell apart. He had never seen anything more sensual, more addicting, than Emmie in the throes of bliss. When her body finally relaxed and she sagged back onto the blanket, he placed his hands under her knees and pushed her legs up until they hung over his arms. He was so fucking hard it was actually painful to kneel in such a position.

Grabbing the condom packet, he ripped it open and sheathed himself. As soon as he entered her wet depths, something meaningful singed through his blood, and he suddenly knew Emmie wasn't just another woman to him. More than a meaningless fling. He knew in an instant that this was his forever girl.

"Fuck!" he groaned, leaning over to rest his forehead against her own. "What are you doing to me, woman?"

"I suspect the same thing you're doing to me."

He grinned, glad this wasn't one-sided. He held onto her, going a little deeper, a little harder, with each thrust. Her tight little cunt sucked him in, turning his brain to mush. He was fast losing control and wished this moment would never end. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that she'd been made just for him.

"Christ, I'm close," he muttered.

Crew sank his fingers into her ass, lifting her as he pounded her pussy. Sweat broke across their skin, and all he wanted to do was give her the best fucking orgasm of her life. He tapped her clit with the backside of his finger, making sure to use the nail to give it that little extra sensation, and that was all she needed to fly apart. Her pussy spasmed around his cock and her incoherent cries of pleasure pushed him over the top. He came with a loud shout, filling the latex barrier with his cum.

For the first time, ever since he lost his virginity to Caroline Tucker at age sixteen, he wished the condom wasn't there. It was primitive of him to want to see his cum leaking from her pussy, but the damn caveman inside him wanted to bang his chest and howl at the moon.

He had to find a way to tell her who he really was, and hope like hell she forgave him for lying.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:07 am

Large television screens were stationed around the bank of the docks, which had been roped off. Several hundred people clustered around each one, leaving very little room to maneuver through the crowd. Emmie held Coleson's hand, and they strolled along the edge of the crowd. She didn't care if they weren't front and center. It was a race between go-fast boats, speeding from the home base in the harbor to the open water. Many stationary boats were posted around the perimeter of the track, where buoys were set to guide the pilots.

The buildup was interesting. Vendors sold food and drink. Bands were set up far enough away from each other as not to compete against the music. An emcee kept the crowd entertained with jokes and impressions. It was a thrilling experience to be lost among the spectators.

"Um, are you Crew Kiles?"

Coleson tensed beside her, smiling at the kid who had asked the question. "I wish. I'm sorry but I'm not."

"Oh." The kid looked crestfallen. "Sorry to bother you."

"No bother at all."

The kid scampered away, quickly lost in the sea of people.

"You must really look like that guy," she said.

Coleson shrugged. "We all have a doppelganger, I guess."

Once the race started, all gazes stayed glued to the monitors. The speedboats were high performance, manufactured with lightweight materials and state-of-the-art propulsion systems. They cut through waves at breathtaking speeds, looking like they hardly touched the surface at all. The crowd went wild as the boats worked hard at not crashing into each other. It looked dangerous, but was thrilling to watch.

She ate far too much junk food, stuffing her stomach with cakes, BBQ, and fruit on sticks. They stayed until the sun began its descent into the horizon. Then they drove back to her place where he loved her through the night.

“Grip the rim in your palm,” Coleson called out.

“Like this?” Emmie held up her hand, showing him.

“Yep. Don’t grip too hard. Now place your thumb on the top and your fingers on the edge. Then flick your wrist.”

She did exactly as he instructed, but the Frisbee immediately crashed into the sand. Frustration overrode her enjoyment of the simple game.

“This isn’t easy,” she grumbled.

Coleson jogged back toward her, picking up the downed disc. “Here, let me show you.”

He moved behind her, slid his arm around her belly as he stepped into her heat. Then he covered her hand that held the Frisbee and leaned down to talk softly into her ear. His breath brushed against her hair and tickled her cheek, which had her body tightening with arousal. Her nipples beaded, pushing against her t-shirt since she had

forgone a bra. She couldn't help but thrust her ass into his groin, teasing him. Which worked since he groaned in her ear.

"What're you doing, woman?"

Grinning, she rocked her hips, grinding back into his rapidly hardening cock.

"Stop," he said, nipping her earlobe. "You're a naughty girl, aren't you? Maybe I should take you home and fuck you until you're incapable of teasing me."

She turned her head toward him, bringing her mouth directly over his. "But you said you'd teach me how to play Frisbee."

"I can hardly believe you haven't ever touched one."

His words were like throwing cold water on her. All her ardor immediately drained as she remembered she was lying to him. As if sensing the mood change, he went back to instructing her, even with his dick poking her ass. He showed her how to flick her wrist so the Frisbee can catch the wind and fly farther. Then he stepped back.

"Go ahead," he instructed. "Try it again."

She followed his instructions and the Frisbee took off, soaring over the sand. Elation filled her. It might be something silly, but it meant a lot. It proved she wasn't just the socialite waiting for an arranged marriage. Emmie laughed, filled with an excitement Coleson probably couldn't understand. These little trivial things that most people took for granted meant the world when she mastered them. She didn't have to be a pro or a record breaker, but the simple fact that she made a Frisbee soar on the wind thrilled her. Coleson jogged away once more, grabbed the Frisbee, and returned it to her. She ran, caught it, and sailed it back. The disc didn't fly as far as his did, but that didn't matter. She was having fun.

After a while, they ended the game and started racing the waves. They'd chase when the water receded, and then ran away when it surged back. Emmie didn't think she'd ever laughed as much. He'd tease her by picking her up and threatening he was going to throw her in, and she'd squeal and thrash around until he relented.

Night had fallen by the time they made it back to his house. With the absence of streetlights and a million cars, it was utterly dark except for the moon shining down. The muted sound of crashing waves the only symphony. After washing up, Coleson made them turkey sandwiches with fruit salad as their dinner.

"Can I ask you a question?"

He nodded. "Ask me anything."

"Are you going to keep this house or sell it?"

He took a bite and washed it down with his soda before trying to answer. "I think I'm going to keep it. Renovate it, of course, but I love it here."

"Me too," she replied.

"You're from New York City, right?"

"Born and raised, only now..." she trailed off with a shrug. "There're too many people. I love city life, just not with eight million people living on the boroughs. I think I'm going to downgrade when I get back."

"That's an interesting way of saying you're going to move. Anywhere in particular?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'll have to do some research."

“May I add St. Louis to your research?”

“Why St. Louis?”

This time, he shrugged. “I happen to live there.”

Emmie blinked and then smiled. “Okay. I’ll put it on the possibility list.”

After they ate, she helped him clean up. Then he took her hand in his and threaded their fingers together.

“I know we’ve been on the beach all day, but do you wanna go for a walk?” he asked, gesturing back to the beach.

“I’d like that,” she replied.

They walked along the coastline with their pant legs rolled up, as the cold Atlantic tickled their bare feet. Coleson was a quiet presence by her side, lending support even if he didn’t realize it. In Jacoby’s journal, he had written about leaving their old life behind, as if the tide would take away all the hurt and bad memories. How ironic she may be the one leaving it all behind.

“You know,” she said, “if you listen closely, you can hear the hiss as the sun settles into the ocean.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Yes, it is!” She laughed. “Once, I bet Jaco-uh, my brother five dollars he couldn’t hear the hiss.”

“You swindler,” he teased. “What did you do with your windfall?”

“Blew it all on candy, obviously. Had a terrible licorice habit growing up.”

“Black or red?”

“Both. Duh. Only savages don’t eat licorice.”

“You’re adorable,” he said, smiling down at her.

A comfortable silence fell between them. Emmie loved this. Loved the peace soaring through her soul. It didn’t surprise her that Jacoby loved that peace, too. Maybe his presence still lingered in Anchorridge Cove, Maine. Every place she went, she encountered someone who held her brother in high regard, and she came to the realization that she didn’t need a notebook to reconnect with her twin. He was all around her, deeply embedded into her DNA, and she knew he always would be.

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Exactly at nine in the morning, Mallory pulled into Emmie's driveway. She was dressed in dark colors, and a sad air circled her. Emmie opened the screen door and her arms, and Mallory accepted the gesture of comfort. She wrapped her arms around Emmie's waist, shuddering a little.

"I don't know if I'm ready," Mallory whispered in a broken voice.

"I know I'm not," Emmie replied equally as soft. She had twelve months to reconcile that Jacoby was gone. That she'd never hear his laugh again. See his smile again. Mallory had only a few days to realize the man she loved was no longer in this world.

Both took a deep breath and let go of one another.

"My friend, Coleson, had to pick up his loved one's ashes earlier. He's waiting for us at the marina," Emmie said. She grabbed her beach bag that held her brother's urn, locked up, and walked to her rental car. "I'll drive."

They sat in silence during the ride. Mallory stared out her side window and Emmie gave her space, not bothering to make small talk. It didn't take long to reach their destination, and Emmie parked her car in a front row spot. She turned to Mallory.

"You still want to come with us?"

"Yes. I-I need closure."

"I get it."

Emmie held out her hand and Mallory took it, together walking to the pier where the Henrietta was tied up. Coleson was on deck, dressed in shorts that showed off his perfect muscled legs. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and her mouth watered. She wanted to lick him so very much...

"You might not want to say that in public," Mallory said.

Emmie jumped and sheepishly looked at her. "I said that out loud?"

Mallory nudged her with her shoulder. "I promise not to say a word."

Embarrassed, Emmie bowed her head. When they reached the slip, Coleson waved at them and said they could come onboard.

"Coleson, this is Mallory," she introduced.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

"You too." Mallory cocked her head. "You know who you look like?"

"Unfortunately, I do," he said with a chuckle. "I wish I had a dollar every time someone told me that."

"I guess we all have a doppelganger."

"That's what I said." He untied the moorings and pulled the rope onboard before sitting behind the wheel. "Here we go, ladies."

Slowly, he maneuvered the boat from the pier and past the local traffic, where he opened the throttle and headed out to open waters. The sun was bright with fluffy white clouds floating in the perfect sky. A cool wind whipped their hair around,

contrasting with the warmth of the day.

There wasn't too much to say, at least until the boat came to halt and the wind and engine noise shut off. A few seagulls squawked overhead since they were still close enough to the shoreline to travel. Other than that, the peaceful rocking of the boat, along with the waves gently slapping the sides, made everything more poignant. She tried blinking back the tears threatening to spill.

"I hope you don't mind, but I wrote out a eulogy," Mallory said.

"Oh, that's wonderful." Emmie smiled and wiped away the tear under her eye. She looked up at Coleson as he joined them on the back of the boat. "Do you mind if Mallory goes first?"

"Not at all," he replied.

Mallory pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. She opened her mouth, only to shut it immediately. It was clear she struggled to get the words out. Deep breath in. Quickly released. One minute stretched into two, but Emmie and Coleson didn't rush her. This wasn't the time to be impatient. Finally, a heartbeat later, Mallory started again.

"Dear Jacoby," she said, sniffing back the tears already forming. "We didn't have forever. We only had a summer, but that was all I needed to realize I had fallen madly in love. You were funny, and kind, and I loved our conversations. I loved holding your hand. I loved kissing your lips. You left with a promise to come back, but days turned into weeks, into months. My heart broke thinking you forgot about me. And then it broke all over again when I learned you were gone. I will always love you, and I hope one day I can see you again in Heaven."

Mallory folded the piece of paper and slipped it back into her pocket before sitting

down. Emmie reached over and squeezed her hand, then stood to say her own words to her brother. She cleared her throat and then smiled at the other two before speaking.

“A day hasn’t gone by that I haven’t talked to my brother.” Emmie looked at her silent companions. “He’s probably telling me to shut up with the mushy stuff.”

That was all she could say, since her throat closed on a sob. Instead, she reached into her beach bag and pulled out Jacoby’s urn. She hugged it, standing at the precipice of letting go ... not sure if she could do it. This was the last step in her road of healing, although she still felt hints of depression. By releasing his ashes, she’d finally have to accept he was gone forever. That this world would never know him. Nothing more than a byline on some Internet search.

A warm hand slid around her waist, and she was pulled into Coleson’s body.

“You don’t have to do this right now,” he murmured in her ear.

She appreciated that, but she knew it was time to say goodbye. Emmie glanced up at him.

“Wanna do your eulogy to Thomas and we can both release them together?”

He smiled. “I think Thomas would like having a companion.”

“I think so, too,” she whispered.

“I’ve said it before but without Thomas I’d be some delinquent. He saved me in ways even I can’t comprehend. I’ll miss him every day.”

He went back to the captain’s chair and picked something up. When he turned

around, Emmie saw he had Thomas's urn.

"Let's make sure we pour downwind," Mallory said. "I loved Jacoby but I don't want to wear him."

It took a moment, but Emmie couldn't help but chuckle, and a heartbeat later, so did Coleson. They opened the urns to reveal a thick, plastic bag with grey ashes inside. Coleson used a knife to slit it open, then passed it to her. Once both bags were ready, Mallory took one side and she the other and then they poured.

Most of it dumped into the ocean, and Coleson did the same. The ashes mingled and the breeze lifted some, dispersing over the water. It was a thing of beauty. Coleson stepped between them and put each arm over the shoulder of each woman, offering comfort as they watched the last link of their loved ones start their never-ending adventure in the Atlantic Ocean.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:07 am

As Emmie walked into the grocery store, a flyer on the window caught her attention. A music festival was scheduled the following weekend, advertising bands of all genres, in a town called Gracelyn thirty miles away. She had never been to a music festival. A couple of times she went to the New York Philharmonic and saw a performance in the Sydney Opera House down under, but she had a feeling this was quite different.

She shopped and bought her groceries before heading back. She had left Coleson napping on her couch, taking the opportunity to run out and stock up on things. Not that she knew how to cook any of it, but she hadn't given up on learning. Putting everything away, she turned and noticed Coleson watching her with a dopey smile on his handsome face.

"I thought you were sleeping," she said.

"Just watching a beautiful woman being all domesticated and shit."

"What a smooth talker," she said with a smile.

He held out his hand, so she headed over to him and took it. He pulled her down to the couch, and she sat next to him.

"I saw an advertisement announcing a music festival. I was wondering if you'd like to go with me."

"I'd love to," he replied, running his hand up her leg.

“Good, because I’ve never been to one. I’m afraid I wouldn’t know what to do.”

His hand stopped moving. “You’ve never been to a festival?”

She shook her head.

“You’ve not done a lot, have you?”

“I ... my parents didn’t think too much of cultural diversity.”

One of his eyebrows shot up. “What does that mean?”

“Their world was a bubble that didn’t allow for trivial things like a music festival,” she explained dryly. “They wanted me to follow their rules. Be the good daughter and fall in line. Marry the man they chose. Be seen but not heard. Donate time to charity, but not work. Have children and raise them exactly like I was raised.” She shook her head. “It wasn’t a horrible life, but it wasn’t exactly a free one either.”

He watched her in that too-perspective way. “I have an idea. Do you have paper and a pen?”

“Uh, I think so,” she said, rising and heading back to the kitchen. “Saw this archaic pad of paper when I moved in. Almost like no one had ever heard of cell phones or Alexa.”

She opened a drawer and grabbed the paper and the pen next to it, holding them out to Coleson.

With a smile of thanks, he sat up and wrote on the top paper, “Music Festival.”

“I was thinking, we could write down suggestions of things you’d like to do.”

Emmie blinked. “I love that idea, but what if you don’t want to do the things I want to do?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I guess you could.” She sat down next to him. “So, what would you like to do?”

Instead of answering, he tore off a few sheets of paper and handed them to her, along with the pen. “Write down some ideas.”

She looked down at the paper, her mind blank. “I-I don’t know. What ideas can you give me?”

“You don’t have anything you’d like to see? Experience?”

Emmie racked her mind to come up with something, but it was blank. How pathetic. Put on the spot, her mind was blank. She looked hopelessly at him, so Coleson took the pen from her and wrote something down, then showed her.

“Bowling. Yes, please! I’ve never been bowling.”

“I figured.” He wrote down another idea. “Karaoke. Miniature golf. Country bar and line dancing.”

“All of that sounds amazing.”

“Good,” he said. “We’ll start with those and go from there.”

“Okay.”

He put the paper and pen down and then wrapped his arms around her. “Now come

here and give your man a proper hello kiss.”

“Your man? My man? Is that who you are?”

“You better believe it. Just like you’re my woman.”

“Primitive but adorable,” she smirked.

He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and gently gripped the hair. Pulling her head back so he could ravish her lips.

“Now,” he growled, once they broke to breathe. “I’m going to fuck your little pussy and give you as many orgasms I can before you pass out.”

She had no plans to stop him.

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“Are all the balls supposed to be heavy?”

Crew searched her face to see if she was joking, but he couldn't see any guile in her expression. Emmie was an enigma he couldn't figure out. Her brother's name sounded familiar but he couldn't remember why. Hell, he didn't even know her last name. Then again, she didn't know his, so he guessed they were even. Once that can of worms opened, he was afraid she'd turn into some damn groupie or something.

“You, uh, find the weight that isn't too heavy for you to roll.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. “Gotcha.”

She left, picking up various bowling balls until she brought back a six-pounder that was really made for kids. Her fingers were so slender, however, that they fit perfectly in the holes.

“Now what?”

“Put it on the turnstile and put on your shoes.”

A look of disgust crossed her features. “Are they sanitary?”

“They're cleaned with disinfecting spray. They're safe. I promise.”

Clearly unsure, she sat down to swap shoes. Curbing a smile, he quickly put on his shoes and grabbed one of the heavier balls.

“Want me to go first?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He sat down at the scoreboard table and plugged in their names. Then he rose and grabbed his ball, focusing on where to place it when he had to let go. It rolled quickly down the lane, slightly off from center, and all the pins scattered.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed. “You knocked them all down.”

“It’s called a strike,” he said. “Your turn now.”

“Aren’t you supposed to go again?”

“Not on a strike.”

“It’s going to be a minute before I understand the rules.” She grabbed her ball and walked up the line, then practically threw it. The ball landed with a thud and rolled right into the gutter. “That’s not what it’s supposed to do, right?”

Trying to contain his laughter, he shook his head. She was so damn cute.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said. On the scoreboard panel, he activated the bumpers for her, and they immediately came up for her second roll.

“That’s awesome,” she said happily. She rolled the ball, and it bumped slowly down the lane. She managed to knock a few down and the joy on her face was contagious. “I did it!”

He held up his hand. “High five.”

She slapped his hand and practically skipped to her seat. Smiling, he took his turn and came up with a spare. Then it was her turn again, and when the bumpers came up, she relaxed into the game. He got a big kick watching how happy she was, and obviously having fun. Little things didn't add up with her, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what.

He won the two games they played, but she didn't seem to mind. The smile never left her face. He'd never encountered someone so open to joy that even the most trivial thing made her happy. It made him want to make her smile all the damn time. They returned their rented shoes and he held her hand as they made their way out of the bowling center.

They barely made it through the door of her house before they were pulling each other's clothes off. Crew picked her up by her thighs and pinned her against the wall. She wrapped her legs around him as he found a condom in his pocket, sheathed himself, and sank into her hot depths. Their lovemaking was fast, furious, and so intense he swore he felt her touch on his soul.

The next night, he took her to play indoor mini-golf. The area was dark with glow paint designs all over the place. Rock-n-roll music pumped through the speakers. The sets weren't too elaborate, so she was able to pick up on how to play quickly. By the end of their game, she edged him out by one point.

That night, he joined her in the shower, kissing his way down her beautiful body until he fell to his knees. Worshipping as she was meant to be worshipped. The water beat down on top of his head as he sucked her little clit into his mouth to drive her crazy. By the time he got back onto his feet, she had a condom ready. He spun her around, placed her hands on the tile, and popped her ass out so he could sink into her from behind. It didn't take her long to climax, and he followed her into mindless pleasure.

As he watched her sleep, he realized he was quickly concluding that he didn't want

this to end when summer was over.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:07 am

The raucous music reaching the parking lot didn't sound all that pleasant, but she was willing to go out on a limb. Coleson held her hand as they walked to the entrance of the bar. He had his baseball cap pulled low, obscuring some of his features. Just as they reached the heavy door, it opened and two men came stumbling out. Coleson immediately pulled her behind him, as if protecting her, and her heart gave a little jump.

“Hey, hey,” Drunk Man One slurred. “It’s the football dude.”

The other man narrowed his eyes, even though he was weaving a little. “Football dude. Aw, man! You were break. I mean, great. Great. So great.”

Coleson smiled, gave a casual wave, and then pulled her past the threshold and into the country bar. It had been the second time someone mentioned him and football together.

Once inside, the music was better than the disjointed noise she'd heard in the parking lot. In the darkened interior, people sat at tables near the door, with LED candles flickering like a real flame. The bar ran the entire right length of the building, with two bartenders serving drinks. On the opposite side, a large stage supported a DJ, with people line dancing on the dance floor. The place held a frenetic energy that immediately captivated her. She'd been to high-scale nightclubs and parties aplenty, but this was something different. Something more than all the cowboy hats, boots, and flannel on display.

“This is ... this is ... awesome,” she finally managed to say.

He took her hand and led her toward a table. “Stay here, I’ll get us a drink.”

She nodded that she heard and understood him, but she was entranced by the people dancing in lines. It looked like a lot of fun. A moment later, Coleson slid onto the chair across her and placed a wine cooler in front of her.

“Figured you’d prefer that instead of beer,” he said.

Emmie picked up the bottle and took a tentative sip. She was pleasantly surprised. “Oh, I like this.”

He winked at her.

“Have you ever done that?” she asked pointing to the dancers.

“Once or twice that I remember,” he admitted. “Once or twice that I don’t.”

She laughed, and for the next couple of songs, she tapped her feet and sipped her drink. There wasn’t one person wearing Louboutins, or wearing a dress that cost more than the gross national income of some third world countries, and she was having fun just watching everyone. She wore jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers, and had never felt more comfortable in her life.

When the current song ended, the DJ took to the mic.

“We’ve reached the part of the evening where it’s time to belt out your favorite tunes!”

The crowd whooped and hollered.

“I’m gonna need those of you ready to continue this party to write out your choice

and pin it on the note board!”

Something nudged her elbow and when Emmie looked down, Coleson had pushed a white binder closer.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s time to pick a song.”

Emmie blinked. “To sing?”

“Yep. It’s karaoke time.”

“Are you going to sing?”

“I will if you will, baby.”

She smiled. “Deal.”

He scooted closer and they began to peruse together. It wasn’t long before he found one and grabbed the order sheet at the back of the binder to write down his selection.

“I don’t know any of these songs,” she complained, flipped through the pages. “Oh, wait! I know this one.”

“Go ahead and write that down, then I’ll take it up to the front.”

“Okay.” She dutifully wrote down her name and the song, then held it out to him.

“I’ve never done this before.”

“I know,” he said, rising and placing a quick kiss on her lips. “You’re going to be

great.”

He headed up to the stage and placed both their sheets on the board. As he headed back to her, several people stopped him to talk and he smiled and answered before waving at them to continue his way to their table.

“We’re about tenth in line,” he told her.

Emmie loved watching ordinary people get up on stage and belt out tunes even though almost all were tone deaf. That didn’t matter. Every person who took hold of the microphone was fearless. They were having fun , and that was what she wanted. Every day for the rest of her life. To not be miserable, especially with a spouse her parents had chosen. They wanted her to be them, but there was no fucking way.

Jacoby’s death had woken her up.

There was nothing left for her in New York.

A thousand-pound weight was lifted from her shoulders. Peace descended into her heart. All from watching people enjoy belting off-key songs in a Country-Western karaoke bar. She glanced at Coleson. Maybe he had a hand in it as well.

Her name was called out, snapping out of whatever self-inflection she’d been lost in. Coleson smiled and gave her a thumbs-up. Each step up to the stage matched the staccato rhythm of her heart. When she reached the microphone, the DJ gave a thumbs-up and the words appeared on the monitor in front of her. The music started, and a moment later, she sang the words to “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” She had a friend at the all-girls boarding school she’d attended, who loved Mama Cass. She’d play her music over and over. Some of the other girls in the dorm hated the repetitive songs, but Emmie enjoyed listening to something that had been forbidden by her parents.

Emmie wouldn't call this a country song, but it definitely was a song that brought back happy memories. Once she was done, the whole place started clapping. She flushed and bowed her head as she made her way off the stage, but Coleson was there and he grabbed her hand, pulling her back. He took the microphone and the music started. Emmie couldn't be embarrassed when she was trapped in his beautiful gaze. He started serenading her to a song by Phil Collins, called "Groovy Kind of Love," and the melody was soft and beautiful. He stared into her eyes as he sang to her, and her heart swooned. In that moment, it was suddenly clear she didn't want them to end when summer was over. This was a man worth being honest with. A man she could share her secrets with.

When the song ended, he scooped her up in his arms and marched across the stage while people whooped and hollered while clapping. The next singer came up and gave them a thumbs-up. Once off the stage, he kissed her like a man dying of thirst who just found an oasis.

That night, their unspoken feelings heightened every kiss. Every caress. He settled between the apex of her thighs. Using two fingers, his talented tongue rasped against her sensitive clit, and her body arched like it had touched a live wire. She buried her hand in his hair, making sure he stayed where he was until she vaulted over the edge.

Then they were moving together in a rhythm older than time. Straining. Yearning to fly. And when they reached that plateau of Heaven, it was if they were one body. One beating heart. Emmie knew it was time to come clean, sooner rather than later, and hoped like hell Coleson wanted to stick around.

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The ice cream parlor was busy. Emmie and Coleson waited patiently in line, talking and keeping to themselves. He kept pulling her close and kissing her somewhere on the face. She'd laugh and pretend to pull away and he'd pull her back into his arms.

“What flavor ice cream are you going to get?” she asked.

His eyes widened. “What? You don't know my favorite flavor of ice cream? I'm devastated. You don't care for me—”

She slapped a hand over his mouth. “Oh, my goodness. Are you always so dramatic?”

He nipped at her fingers and she pulled them away. “Moi?”

Rolling her eyes, she shuffled forward as the customer in front of her finished their order. Coleson wrapped his arms around her to murmur in her ear.

“You're going to get salted caramel ribbon, am I right?”

He nipped her earlobe and she squirmed.

“Stop that,” she whispered.

“Why?” he probed while his warm breath softly blew in her ear. “Are you getting hot and bothered?”

“Just wait until we get home,” she warned. “I'm going to drive you crazy.”

“Oh, baby, you already do.”

“Emmie, Coleson, it’s so good to see you again.” They whipped their heads around and saw Mallory smiling at them. “Let me guess. Salted caramel ribbon? Double chocolate fudge?”

“Right on both. How’d you know?”

“When you run an ice cream parlor, you gain the wisdom of the cosmos.”

She seemed so serious, until a small smile cracked her mouth. Then they were laughing.

Once they got their ice cream, Coleson paid and they waved at Mallory as they headed to the exit. As soon as he opened the door to exit, a flash went off in his face. He blinked and stumbled back, directly into her which caused her to drop her ice cream.

“Damn it,” she muttered.

They were surrounded by reporters as they pressed forward, each one trying hard to outdo the other. Questions flew, surrounding them. Each one more intrusive than the other. Coleson pushed her back into the ice cream parlor and closed the door. The reporters pressed up against the window, cameras going off to capture a perfect shot. The remaining patrons inside the shop stared at them, whispering to each other.

“Shit,” Coleson muttered. “How the fuck did they find me?”

“How did they know I was here?”

Both turned to look at each other.

“You?”

“What do you mean, you ?”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve not been completely honest. Coleson is my middle name.”

She blinked. “What’s your first name?”

“Crew. Crew Coleson Kiles. I’m a quarterback with the St. Louis Archers, and ... we just won the Super Bowl.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t mean to omit that from you. I was flying under the radar. I didn’t want to share my grief with the paparazzi.”

She held up a hand. “I completely understand.”

“You do?”

She nodded. “My real name is Emerson Adinson.”

He tilted his head. “That’s a horrible rhyming combination.”

He was being sincere, which only made it funnier, and Emmie burst into laughter. A moment later he joined her.

“I don’t know who you are,” she managed to say when she got herself under control.

“I don’t know who you are either.”

“You mean to say we were both using pseudonyms when we didn’t have to?”

He laughed even harder, nodding.

“Come on, you two,” Mallory said, waving at them. “Go out the employee entrance in the back. I’ll distract them.”

Coleson, or Crew, gave Mallory his ice cream and then grabbed hold of her hand and led her through the privacy door, which led to a narrow hallway. A small break room rested on the right, and a bathroom on the left, and at the end, the exit. He opened the door and stuck his head out to make sure the coast was clear, then he yanked on her hand and off they went, hurrying down the alley. Emmie was glad it wasn’t as disgusting as the New York City alleys.

“My car might be compromised,” he said.

They reached the end and both peaked around the corner. Mallory held court, engaging with the reporters. Crew pulled out his car key and they kept their heads down as they hurried to the car. And then they slipped inside and Crew quickly drove away, leaving the reporters behind.

“So,” she said. “St. Louis, eh?”

“Have you ever been?”

“No, but suddenly I find I have a fascination to visit it.”

He smiled. “I’m kind of hoping you’ll stay longer than a visit.”

She blinked. “What are you implying?”

“I thought that was obvious. I want you to visit and stay.”

Excitement pulsed through her body. Her heart rate jumped, causing all type of butterflies to swarm in her belly.

“We’ve only known each other for a minute,” she said. “What if you get sick of me?”

“What if you don’t like watching football?” he countered.

“What if you find someone else?”

“What if you get bored?”

“What if you cheat?”

He threw her a quick glance. “What if you cheat?”

“I’ll have you know that I don’t believe in cheating,” she said firmly. “If you feel like you’re going to cheat, then just break up with the person you’re with.”

“We happen to be in agreement on that,” he said calmly. “I think it’s the second most important thing in a relationship.”

“What’s the first?”

“Respect.”

She liked that answer. “Like I said, we don’t know each other very well.”

“True. But that’s what relationships are all about. I can’t do long distance. It never works.”

“I’m warning you right now, my past relationships are plastered all over the Internet,” she said. “My great, great, great ... well, I’m not quite sure how many greats they were, but my ancestors were smart enough to buy a lot of land in New York City, back when it was known as New Amsterdam.”

“Fuck. American tycoons?”

“Pretty much. I guess I’m what you’d call a socialite. Or, at least I was.”

“What are you now?”

“I am what I told you.” She took a deep breath. “A sister mourning her brother. However, I used to be one of those girls who thought about nothing more than clothes, jewelry, and anything else that lacked substance. Drinking. Partying. I’ll be the first to admit I wasn’t the most conscientious person.”

“Thomas had to kick my ass once or twice because I was a horrible brat,” he said.

“Thanks for trying ... oh, shit,” she gasped.

“What?” he demanded.

She pointed at the limo in her driveway. “My parents are here.”

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Crew came to a stop. “How are we going to play this?”

“Can we go hide out at your place?”

“Do you think they’ll go away if we do?”

“Probably not,” she muttered. “They’re persistent assholes, to the say the least.”

“Hey,” he said, placing a hand under her chin and bringing her gaze to meet his. “I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

She grasped his hand and linked their fingers together. “They’re horrible people. Don’t think less of me because I came from them.”

“Never,” he whispered and bent his head to place a kiss on her lips. “Together?”

Suddenly, things shifted. A dynamic formed between them that hadn’t been there before, like they were true partners. Puzzle pieces suddenly fitting together. A united front against the world that would try to devour them through the media. She’d had some run-ins with paparazzi, and she was sure so had he. Where she’d been alone in a world that had turned on her after Jacoby had died, along with the parents who acted like they didn’t give a shit. Cole—no, Crew—understood in a way no one else could possibly imagine. With him she felt safe. Protected. Emmie immediately became addicted to the intoxicating emotions, in all the right ways, and she had this vision of the future where she was happy. No, not just happy. Fulfilled. Loved. That’s all she had ever wanted.

Emmie drew in a lungful of air, lightheaded after holding her breath for the past year. “Are we doing this?” she answered the question with her own.

“Damn right we’re doing this.”

He kissed her knuckles and then continued, pulling into her driveway a moment later. Only after they both exited the car, did her mother step out of the limo. Her father walked around it to join her. A wall of self-righteous entitlement against their wayward daughter.

“What are you two doing here?” Emmie demanded.

“Do not talk to us like that,” Bunny Adinson ordered in a cold tone. “What have you done to your hair? Brown looks horrid on you.”

“Gee, thanks,” she sneered back, matching the chill. “And don’t you tell me what to do. Why the hell are you both trespassing into my vacation?”

Her father raised his hand, as if to strike her, but Crew caught McBride’s arm before it connected.

“Don’t touch her,” Crew warned.

Her father yanked back his arm. “I beg your pardon? Who the hell are you?”

“I’m hers,” Crew said confidently. Boldly. It turned her on. “And she’s mine. There’s no place for narrow-minded parents.”

“How dare you!”

“No.” Crew shook his head. “How dare you? This isn’t the Dark Ages. There’s no

gilded cage.”

At that moment, a car rolled by, slowing down as if curious about what was happening.

“Let’s go inside so we can talk.” Bunny turned to march toward the front door.

“Why don’t you just leave and I’ll call you in a few weeks?” Emmie suggested.

Her mother didn’t even break her stride. Sharing a look with Crew, they followed her parents. Once inside, all pleasantries dropped.

“All right. Mother, Father, what are you doing here?”

Bunny looked around the beach house with disdain. “Saw you’re infamously shamming your status in some derelict country bar and came here to take you home.”

Crew opened his mouth, ready to defend her. Emmie laid a hand on his arm, shaking her head. She didn’t need him to rescue her.

“I’m not going back with you. I’m finishing my vacation and then after, I’m...” She looked at Crew, who watched her with a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. He gave an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement. “Then after, I’m moving to St. Louis.”

“Hell, yeah, you are,” Crew said, smiling.

“You will not ,” her father snapped. “You will return to New York. You will marry who we’ve chosen—”

“I’m not marrying anyone,” she interrupted. For the first time in her life, she took a

stand against them. “Least of all to a man you think is the best choice.”

“You forget, without us you have no money,” her mother spat. “No future. No hobbies. Not even your precious animals.”

Emmie crossed her arms over her chest. “You forget that you weren’t privy to Jacoby’s will.”

Her parents blinked at her, looking like they just ate a lemon.

“What will?” her father asked.

“Jacoby’s death opened up his trust fund, and he left it all to me,” she explained. “And there was enough to secure the animals in the shelter. You can’t touch them. Plus, I had a lawyer investigate that little threat you gave about locking up my inheritance. And it was bullshit. If you try to hold it up in court, it’ll be you paying the price. My birthday is next month, and then I’ll have enough to live comfortably, until I figure out what I want to do. Now I know I’ll be in St. Louis. In any case, however, I never want to see either of you ever again. So kindly fuck off.”

She opened the door and stood by, staring expectantly at her parents.

“If we walk out that door, you are cut off!” her mother yelled.

“I suppose you’re deaf now, too.” Emmie shook her head. “Leave. I’m divorcing both of you.”

She held her mother’s gaze for a long moment, and then true to form, Bunny Adinson stuck her nose up and marched out of the door. A heartbeat later, her father did the same and Emmie slammed the door behind them.

There was a moment of silence, then her eyes grew wide. “Did I just do that?”

Crew settled his hands on her hips and pulled her into his warmth. “You sure did. You’re a badass, and you turn me on so fucking much.”

Then he kissed her. He kissed her so long and so deep, she was ready to combust when they broke for air.

“Can you fuck the aggravation out of me?” she asked, batting her eyes innocently.

“I can fuck you into next Tuesday, if you’d like.”

She beamed. “Yes, please.”

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Emmie stood in the private stadium box, staring down onto the football field below. The Archers had won the Super Bowl the previous year, and was the favorite to win again. It was a showdown between the old St. Louis team and the current champion. Los Angeles verses St. Louis.

“I’m so nervous,” Romilly Demay said, her hands clasped together in front of her. She, too, looked down onto the field where the players were warming up. “Even more so than last year.”

She and Romilly had become fast friends when they’d been introduced to one another. Over the past year, she had been teaching Emmie everything she needed to know about football and being a football girlfriend. As well as being a great friend.

Emmie never thought she’d be a fan of the game, and she knew Jacoby would’ve laughed at that. Neither of them had been very athletic. The pomp of the game started, with a flyover from the Air Force, the national anthem sung by one of the hottest singers out there. Since the Archers were considered the visiting team, Crew called the coin toss and deferred.

When the game started, Emmie couldn’t sit down. Luckily, most people sharing their box had the same frame of mind. Back and forth, the game played out. Both teams were strong, giving and taking. Sometimes the Archers were in the lead. Sometimes the other team. She’d scream and clap along with everyone. At halftime, while she was talking to Romilly and watching the show, several celebrities came by their box to talk. Having partied with several of them, it was like a reunion. However, she didn’t miss that life now.

Since moving to St. Louis, she decided to build a no-kill shelter for unwanted pets and strays. Even though her parents had threatened to withhold her inheritance, they had no legal ground to stand on. She rolled that money into her love of animals, and her name to garner donations.

After the halftime show, the game resumed. Little by little, the Archers began to pull ahead. The other team missed several small plays that were adding up to a big deficit. Crew kept calm. Being Super Bowl champs took the nerves out, and he was throwing beautiful passes. The last minute of the game brought her to her feet. Her heart thundered as she counted down the time. Crew threw the ball, it sailed in the air toward Kaiden, who was in the end zone. He caught it beautifully and the crowd went wild. She and Romilly jumped up and down. Everyone jumped up and down. The place was electrified.

Then it was time to join the winning team on the field, and Romilly held her hand as they followed security. Through the crowd, past the media. Crew found her and hugged her, lifting her up to bury his face in her neck.

“That was amazing!” she cried. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I love you, baby,” he said.

“I love you, too.”

“Will you marry me?”

She jerked back and he grinned at her.

“You ask me now? Here?”

“The world is watching,” he murmured. “And I’m mic’d up so they’re hearing as well. So. What do you say?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into his ear. “Absolutely.”

The End