



Spring Break With A Gold Medalist (Love Beach Spring Break Collection #9)

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Category: Sport

Description: While sidelined with an injury, will love heal her heart?

Maya

A major injury sidelines me. With my teammate planning her wedding and winning matches with another athlete, I'm stuck alone in Love Beach to heal and rehab. I've never shaken the teenage pain of always being the tallest, biggest girl and I'm not comfortable with training under the harsh scrutiny of the public eye. When a sexy, gymnastics gold medalist offers me the use of his private, elite training facility I hope this will be my perfect sanctuary. Despite my many flaws, he acts like he's attracted to me. But how could someone hot and sweet like him ever want me?

Phillip

I know what it's like to be in the spotlight after an injury so offering Maya space to train in my gym is a no brainer. Sparks fly when we start training together. I want her. However, I recognize how insecurities are holding her back, both on the volleyball court and in life. For her to believe in us, first I need her to see herself the way I do: strong, talented, and stunningly beautiful. How do I help her overcome her doubts to embrace life, me, and the love she deserves?

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one

Maya

I can do this. But when I stare up the steps to the small landing outside the apartment door, the distance seems to stretch on forever. Some days the slow climb is no problem. Others, like today, make me wish the rental was on a ground floor. Maybe I should have agreed when my brother wanted me to move somewhere else while rehabbing my knee.

Except I really love this apartment over a chocolate shop and the owners who have been so kind. Besides, climbing steps is part of my PT.

I'm just getting home from that therapy. They worked me hard today. The effect of my post workout ice packs is wearing off. Once I get upstairs I'll use the cold therapy machine I've rented and try to relax. Tomorrow I need to start looking for a gym where I can augment my physical therapy.

Moving my recovery to a public location scares me. Even when healthy I always prefer to stay away from public inspection. I'm not as tall as many of the top beach volleyball athletes. And I'm thicker than most. It shouldn't bother me, but it does. I'm part of a great team. A successful team.

No, that's not really right. I was part of a team. Ellie and I were getting close to being recognized as possible Olympians. Blowing out my knee brought our upward ranking climb to a screeching halt. I couldn't allow my awkwardness to hold her back. She tried out a few other girls and now has teamed up with someone who has the needed

skills to enhance and compliment Ellie's game. Now they're winning tournaments and rapidly climbing in the ranks.

Ellie has the life she's dreamed of since I met her and we became besties in college. Even more than that now since she and my brother finally admitted their love for each other. Before they hit the circuit again, I'd encouraged them to get married because they belong together. Forever. But Ellie refused only because at the time I could barely hobble six feet. She's insisting they wait until I'm able to walk the entire length of the aisle then dance at their reception.

I'm looking forward to that day—whenever it happens. It's one of the few things encouraging me to keep up with my recovery.

Groaning, I rest my cane against the baluster and ease myself down to sit on the steps. A little rest and I'll start the climb. Digging through the pile of mail I'd picked up at a UPS store I find a letter from my best friend. Ellie's distinctive handwriting always makes me smile. She dots the 'I' in her name with a tiny volleyball. The girl has a one-track mind. A good thing when reaching for gold medals.

In the thick envelope I find some folded pages obviously torn from a bridal magazine. Ellie's drawn circles around a number of dresses with a dark marker. The bridal gowns make me smile. They're all basically the same. She definitely has a style and will look fabulous in any one of them.

Sticky notes next to bridesmaid dresses explain her ideas for a specially designed dress for me. The dresses are all beautiful but I can't imagine myself in any of them. I'll ruin her wedding.

The weight of the day, the pain in my knee, wedding expectations, even the stupid staircase are suddenly too much. Tears sting my eyes before trailing down my cheeks. I don't even care enough to brush them away. Crumpling the slick magazine pages as

I stuff them back into the envelope, I ignore the letter. She always sends what she calls happy mail. Right now I'm not in the mood for happy. I'll read her missive when my mind is in a better place.

"Hey, everything okay?"

The question from a low tenor voice stalls the breath in my lungs. The resonance hovers in my chest a moment then exits on a sigh. Ignoring my unusual reaction, I look up at the man standing a few feet away. The late afternoon sun creates a halo around him and I lift one hand to shade my eyes to get a better look.

Because there's a tiny bit of hope hovering in my chest that his appearance will match his voice.

He's not extremely tall—not like the beach volleyball guys I'm accustomed to. His shoulders are wide and his body tapers to a trim waist. He's wearing jeans that I can tell hug thick, muscular thighs even with the sun nearly blinding me.

"Sorry," he says and takes a couple of steps to the side. "Didn't mean to make you look into the sun. Are you okay?"

Now I've got sunspots dancing in my vision. I blink a few times but that only releases the tears that were hovering on my lashes. Great. He's going to think I'm?—.

"Hey, don't cry. Is there anything I can do?" He moves closer, stopping far enough away so he doesn't come off as threatening. There's something sweet about his actions and I appreciate the consideration.

"I'm okay. It's just been a long day that isn't going well. Thanks for asking."

"I'm Phil Tolenski."

His name sounds familiar however at this moment I can't figure out why. Maybe once I've relaxed a little it'll come to me. "Maya Davis."

"The volleyball player. Beryl's told me a little about you and your injury."

It's not like my blown-out knee isn't common knowledge, but I'm not sure I appreciate my landlady talking about it with random guys. "You know Beryl?"

He gives a dry chuckle and there's a sense of sadness to his expression. "She coaches some of the younger kids in gymnastics, so we work together. Her son is one of my best athletes, going to go far in the sport. Olympic level far."

I must have made some sound because he sits beside me and after a moment's hesitation takes my hand. "Shit, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made the reference."

I swallow the lump of pain hovering at the base of my throat. I have got to get over falling apart any time the Olympics are mentioned. I'm not upset because I won't make it there, but my injury means Ellie had to start over with a new partner.

"No, it's okay, Phil. I'm okay with how everything's turning out. Really, I am. It's just been... a really hard..." I can't finish. I can barely breathe. Damn it all to hell. This isn't the time for a panic attack. I struggle to fill my lungs. When finally I do, I burst into tears.

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two

Phil

I 'm far from a knight in shining armor, and I know the phrase 'damsel in distress' isn't acceptable in today's world, but I just can't walk by when a beautiful woman is sitting on a set of stairs, crying. Especially when I've wanted to meet her since the first time I saw her a couple months ago. Stuffing the receipt from Choco-Love in my pocket, I stop and softly ask, "Hey, everything okay?"

She tries to convince me, and probably herself, that she's fine but she's barely holding it together. I've coached too many young athletes with the habit of negative self-talk and this young woman exhibits the same symptoms. I didn't help the situation when I brought up the Olympics.

The first time I saw Maya was on the beach outside a local bar, practicing for the first Love Beach tournament. I was drawn to her short dark hair and how her muscles moved under what I imagined was satiny smooth skin. Then she was injured and had to withdraw from the event. Out of curiosity I'd followed the news about her torn ACL, although after her partner started winning with another athlete, there wasn't much airtime spent on Maya Davis.

Fucking shame, that's what it is.

Now I've reminded her of what she's lost, at least for now. She could be back on the beach in a year, or her injury might have sidelined her completely. Blown out knees are a tricky bitch.

When I mentioned the Olympics, she'd caught back a sob. I'm an idiot. Now I need to make her feel better. Sitting beside her on the steps, I'm surprised when she allows me to take her hand. "Shit, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made the reference."

She tries to brush off my concern and bursts into tears. I did this to her and now I need to correct my fuck up. All these tears can't be only because I mentioned the Olympics. How do I fix something when I don't know for sure what I'm fixing. Taking a huge chance, I ease her into my embrace. "It's okay to cry, baby doll."

She sniffs against my neck. My cock stirs. What the hell? How are tears and snot an aphrodisiac? I haven't been that long without a woman. When I can't remember my last hookup, I'm forced to admit it has been a long time. A year? More?

Even though I knew Beryl wasn't really the one for me, when she rejected me after her college boyfriend turned up in Love Beach, I wallowed for an unreasonable amount of time. I focused on training kids and when other professional sports teams in the area contacted me about building on to my gym to create space they could use, I threw myself into the expansion.

Guess I've ignored other parts of my life and now I have a stunning beauty in my arms. The only thing on my mind should be drying her tears, not kissing her.

She shrugs and presses the backs of her fingers to her nose. It's not helping. Using the tip of one finger I lift her chin and use the hem of my tee to wipe away her tears.

"Oh don't do that," she complains and twists away. "I don't want to ruin your shirt."

"No worries, this shirt has wiped away a lot of tears."

She gives me a disbelieving glare.

“It’s true. I coach kids. Some of them are still pretty little and their small hurts are huge to them. Or they haven’t figured out how to deal with the frustration of not getting a move right after fifty tries. Tears are a default reaction for many of them. Especially when their moms are around,” I end softly.

Tugging on the hem of her own shirt, Maya leans back and dries her face. “Okay, I’ll give you that. It’s the same with volleyball. I remember bursting into tears when I couldn’t serve the ball over the net.”

“And how old were you?”

She fights a smile. “That was last year.” Shaking her head, she continues, “No, I was six. My brother is older so he was already playing team volleyball in middle school. I wanted to be just like him.”

“And?” I prompt. Maybe she’ll talk herself out of her funk.

“Obviously, we both had successful college careers. He went to the Olympics on the National indoor team. Then he started coaching. He has a dream like yours though.”

What’s she talking about? “I don’t understand.”

“I know who you are, Phil. And I remember watching you at the games. You and all your gold medals. And now you’re helping young people discover and hone their abilities. Coaching future gymnasts. Even though he hasn’t really talked much about the possibility, I know my brother would like to do the same with volleyball. Set up a permanent facility for training and team development. I expect him to pursue that after Ellie wins her gold medal.”

Sadness tightens the skin around her eyes, but she sheds no more tears. There’s more she needs to say, but I know she won’t. I’m not sure how much she even realizes.

“That sounds like a solid plan. They—your brother and Ellie are getting married? Is that what I heard before they left town?”

“Ha. Love Beach really is just a small town, isn’t it? All the rumors. I pushed for them to get married before they went back on the circuit. But Ellie insists it won’t happen until I’m able to walk the aisle as her maid of honor. That’s part of why I’m so damn weepy today. Therapy was hard. I hurt more than usual.”

She lifts the thick envelope from her lap. “Then I got this in the mail. She keeps sending pictures of dresses I’ll never be able to wear. I can’t. I don’t want to ruin her wedding by not looking presentable in any of her choices. And then... and then these steps. There’s so many of them and my knee just didn’t want to make the climb. I was resting when you showed up. So, there ya go. My life and today sucks.”

I’m inordinately glad I’d parked behind Choco-Love today otherwise I would have missed the opportunity to meet Maya. Hold her. Capture her tears with my shirt. Okay, that’s not a good point. However, I can give her a little help to make her day better.

“Allow me to help you up the stairs.”

She captures her bottom lip between her teeth and I swallow a groan. Eyes wide, her gaze darts around like she’s a trapped animal. I don’t mean to frighten her.

“Just some support for your tired knee. I know how difficult the physical therapy can be.”

“Have you had a knee injury?”

I nod. “Hmm. In high school. Damn near made me stop gymnastics. But somewhere I found my determination. Full recovery, except now sometimes when the weather

changes it gets achy. Could be age, too, I suppose.”

Silent, I wait for her to make her decision. I want to help her. Almost feels like I need to help her. Need with a capital ‘N’. To protect her from further harm. To make sure she’s safe and comfortable. And most of all, just to be near her.

Is this warped or what?

“Um, okay. I’d appreciate the help. If you really don’t mind.”

“I have nowhere else to be—” I stop myself before calling her baby doll again.

She hands me her stack of mail and uses the handrail to pull herself to her feet. She grabs her cane and once I’ve risen, she turns and peers up the flight of stairs. “Here we go.”

Cane first. Then she lifts her uninjured leg. After making sure she’s steady, she lifts the repaired leg. Stepping with her, I keep the palm of my hand against the small of her back, supporting without being obtrusive. I glare at the steps as we climb. I’m guessing she’s far enough out from the surgery she should have more mobility and strength. I’ve known athletes who don’t consider themselves as talented as they are who self-sabotage their recovery by not doing the work.

I was completely focused and single-minded after my first injury, I never would have even considered not doing the exercises the physical therapist prescribed. In fact, they had to tell me to slow down. That I could do more damage by doing too much too soon. I listened.

I don’t know what Maya needs to hear or the best way to help her. I’ll figure it out as I get to know her better. Because now that is my focus.

We're three quarters of the way to the landing when she stops with a whispered, "Shit, shit, shit."

"Maya?"

"I'm sorry. I need to stop for a minute. To rest. I've done too much today. You can go ahead and leave. I'll make it the rest of the way after a breather."

Yeah, no. Not going to happen. This woman will be safely in her apartment, feet up with an ice pack on her knee before I'll even consider leaving. I hand her back the mail. "Hang on."

Mindful of her knee, I slip one arm behind her thighs, the other around her shoulders to lift and hold her against my chest.

"Wait. What the heck are you doing?" She drops the cane and wiggles to be put down.

"Getting you safely into your apartment."

"You can't lift me. Or carry me."

I climb the last steps. "Really? Then what am I doing?"

"I'm too heavy. Too big."

"Obviously not, baby doll. Now unlock the door and we can get you inside."

"You'll have to put me down so I can get the keys out of my pocket."

The thought of slipping my hand into the pocket of her lightweight slacks is tempting

but instead I carefully set her on her feet. “Open the door. I’ll get your cane.”

She’s pushed the door open and limped inside by the time I’ve rescued the cane from its tumble down most of the stairs. When I return to the apartment she’s made it as far as the kitchen island. “Thanks. I’m good now.”

Her face is pale and she’s standing so there’s no weight on her injured leg. She’s not okay. I take the cane to her then stand a mere twelve inches in front of her and cross my arms. She’s a couple inches taller than my five nine so I tip my chin up to stare into her eyes. “I am not leaving until you’re settled and comfortable. I do understand what you’re going through. And everyone needs a little help occasionally. When’s the last time you allowed anyone to do something for you?”

“Fine. What’s it going to take for you to go?” There’s a slight upturn of her tone at the end of the question she tried to make a demand. Deep inside she wants someone to take care of her but probably doesn’t want to appear weak or needy.

“You with your feet up. Water and snacks nearby. Something pleasurable to do while you’re resting. I see you have a cold therapy machine and it needs to be doing its job. Think we can handle that?”

Her shoulders slump. “Yes. That’s what I was planning. I’ve got some writing I need to work on. I’ll get everything set up and?—”

“I’ll take care of whatever you need. You go find your comfortable spot.” I wait until she’s settled into a large recliner with the cold therapy wrap in place and the machine running. “What would you like to snack on?”

“I don’t really need anything. Just some water.”

“You’ve expended a lot of energy. You need a snack. Cheese and grapes. Perfect.”

There isn't much in her refrigerator but those few grapes and a couple hunks of cheese from Landon Dairy Cheeses next door. A new plan forms in my brain. I put the snack on a small plate then set it and a large bottle of water on a side table next to her. After double checking the wrap on her knee, I cross toward the door.

"You don't have anything here for supper."

She shrugs. "If I get hungry I'll order delivery."

"What's your favorite take out?"

She eyes me with suspicion. "Chinese. Why?"

"I'll be back later with supper. Happy Family okay? Egg drop soup?"

"You don't need to bring me food. You don't need to do anything else for me. I appreciate your help, but I can take care of myself."

I suppose she can, but she doesn't need to. Not when that's my job now. The realization and truth of that feeling settles like a warm blanket around my heart. I smile and her determined expression softens to questions. She can argue all she likes. She's not winning this one. "I know you can, baby doll. You just don't have to."

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three

Maya

That's what, the third or fourth time he's called me baby doll? Why does it do funny things to me when I should be upset at his audacity? Oh, those idiotic butterflies in my belly. The tingling in my lady bits. It's been such a long time since I've felt anything like this. Even then I don't remember the effects being as strong.

I don't have enough energy to fight him on this, and Chinese food sounds really good. "Okay, you win. Happy Family is fine, as long as you get an extra order of crab rangoons."

His satisfied smirk is almost enough for me to take back my agreement. The opportunity to get to know him better wins. I already like him. His kindness and willingness to help a stranger is a huge checkmark in his favor. The way he looks doesn't hurt either. I've always appreciated a broad chest and muscular arms. Evidenced by his firm muscles when he picked me up and carried me without any difficulty, he works out a lot.

I wonder what he looks like without his shirt. Does he have a six pack? An adonis belt? He's got a tribal band just above the elbow on one arm. Any more tats? I can go either way with those.

With a wave he turns to exit the apartment. Nice butt, too.

If I was wise, I'd get up, lock the door, and ignore him if he really does return.

Instead, I munch on the grapes and sip my water as I relax. Closing my eyes, I tell myself I'll work on my manuscript once my cold therapy time is up. Instead, I doze off until a knock at the door jerks me awake.

Blinking to clear the sleep from my eyes and focus I call, "It's open."

The door opens slowly and a hand holding a large paper bag appears easing around the edge. The savory aroma of ginger, garlic, and soy makes my mouth water. A quick glance at my watch shows I've slept for over two hours.

"Is it safe to come in?"

I chuckle at Phil's question. "Yes, as long as you're going to share that food. Smells wonderful."

He enters and sets the bag on the counter then puts a smaller bag into the freezer. "Want me to bring you a plate, or are you up to eating over here?"

Lowering the leg rest, I scoot forward in the chair. "I've got to... umm... I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Take your time," he says as he turns toward the dish cupboard.

Thankful he doesn't think he needs to help me to the bathroom, I use the cane for support—which I don't always do when I'm alone. I'm in the mood for supper, not a lecture. It is easier to get around using the metal stick I've named Erika. I shouldn't be so stubborn.

Wanting to be done with the healing process and therapy while at the same time not following the doctor's and physical therapists' advice is a human thing to do, but stupid. I know that. In fact, I've been outlining a chapter for my book on balancing

life and sports covering just this topic. So why don't I do what I'm supposed to?

Full plates are waiting on the island when I return and once I've settled awkwardly onto the bar height chair, I turn my attention to Phil. His face is calm and exposes none of his thoughts. He lifts a glass of iced tea in salute. "I'm not a fan of hot tea. I hope this is acceptable."

"It is. I like cold tea better, too." Clinking the rims of our glasses in salute, we share an interesting, soft stare I don't really understand. So I pay more attention to my plate. Besides the main dish, there's fried rice and a thick egg roll. A pile of rangoons fill a plate between us.

He slides a large plastic cup of the red, sticky, American version of sweet and sour sauce next to the plate. "For dipping."

"Perfect."

I've nearly cleaned my plate and am reaching for another crispy Rangoon before realizing how much I'm eating. Shit, this isn't my normal having a meal with a guy behavior. What's he going to think?

As though he's reading my mind, Phil asks, "How long has it been since you've had a real meal?"

Because I'm not really sure what he's asking, I'm not sure how to answer. Is this a comment on how I've been shoveling in the food? Or on how empty the fridge is?

"Maya, you haven't been eating regularly, have you? Or getting the proper nutrition to help with your recovery. Why haven't you been taking care of yourself?"

The sad concern in his expression seems real. I'm usually pretty good at reading

expressions so I don't know why I'm questioning what I see. Why is he concerned anyway? "I'm doing fine. I just haven't, ah, ordered groceries for a while. I'm not that active, so I don't need all the energy."

"You're talking to a lifelong athlete, Maya. And as a coach I know the signs when another athlete isn't following program." He reaches across the island and taps one finger against my forehead. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours, baby doll?"

Touch me again, please. I jerk back and nearly overbalance and tip myself off the stool. That would make a great impression. Leaning forward with my elbows on the island I sigh. "Everything and nothing."

He chuckles, a sound lighter than I expected with his speaking voice. "Well, that explains it."

"I mean, I don't know. And I should have a clue. I'm writing a book about balancing sports and life. I'm not sure I know what I'm writing about." I slap the counter. "No, that's not right. I know the right things to say. I'm just not living them. I'm out of balance and I'm not sure how to fix myself. And why the hell am I telling you this?"

He shrugs one shoulder. "Because I asked. Done?"

I nod, then shake my head and grab one more rangoon. "Now I am."

With an ease that makes it feel like he's done this here a million times, he puts the leftovers away, rinses, and adds our plates to the dishwasher. "There's ice cream for later. Let's sit somewhere more comfortable and you can keep on telling me things you don't think I need to know."

I return to my recliner and he sits on the couch facing me. I'm able to direct the

conversation away from me although his half-grin tells me I'm not going to be able to get away with diverting the attention from me for long. Maybe if I give him just a little, he'll be satisfied.

"Then today my physical therapist suggested I add visits to another gym to my routine. More strength training. Mobility. Which, okay I get that." My face heats. "I just don't feel comfortable working out in a public gym. Even when everything worked right, it wasn't my favorite thing to do. Ellie, my partner, didn't care. She likes when people recognize her. I'd just as soon remain anonymous. Not draw any attention."

"Interesting attitude for someone who's been considered for a national team. That calls for a lot of attention." He leans forward, genuine concern filling his expression. "How do you handle that?"

"It's different. Because Ellie drew most of the attention. We shared the weight of expectation, both good and bad. We've been friends and teammates long enough she automatically covers for me by keeping the focus more on her."

"Hmm. I see. Elite athletes are often more image conscious and use that to their advantage."

"So, you're saying I'm an oddity?" The statement comes out more accusatory than I meant.

Phil doesn't bat an eye. "No, just not what people consider the norm. Fans tend to expect their favorite athletes to be larger than life. With loud, 'look at me' personalities. There are probably more who are naturally less showy, like you. They either aren't noticed or fake the overt personality well."

"You're very observant." His intelligence and insight impress me. I think I could talk

with this man forever. He certainly isn't boring.

"I think coaches need to cultivate that ability. We need to know our athletes well enough to determine when there could be issues." He give me a pointed look then leans back with his hand behind his head. "I may have a solution for you."

"For which issue?"

"First we'll tackle your need for additional training and rehab time." His eyelids drop to half cover his eyes. "Once that's taken care of..."

He's promising me something. I don't have a clue what that might be. Except the way he's studying me sends goosebumps down my spine. "So?"

"Come work out at my gym."

I arch my brows. "With the gymnastics kids?"

"No. My facility has expanded to include state of the art weights and therapeutic opportunities. There's a number of local professional sports teams in the area. In cooperation with them, I've created a private area for rehab and specialty training needs. I have a masseuse on staff, however each team provides their own doctors, trainers, and support personnel."

"I don't have any of that." I refuse to allow myself to hope for such an ideal gym. Nor will I take any more funds from Ellie and her new partner to hire my own trainer, even though she and Sean insist I pull a 'salary' from the team while recuperating.

Phil leans forward again. "Here's the deal. Come use my facility. I'll serve as your trainer. Don't worry. I know exactly how to rehab a knee like yours. Of course I'll be in contact with your doctors and current therapist."

“You’ve thought a lot about this.”

“I like to be thorough. Don’t make a decision now. Come visit the gym and see what you think. We can schedule your time when there aren’t others around.”

I can’t—and really don’t want to come up with a reason to say no. “I’ll visit and see.”

“Saturday?” His eager expression makes me smile.

“That’s in two days. So soon?”

“Actually, it would work out great. We’re having a watch party for the college national championships. All the kids, their parents, coaches.”

“Won’t you be busy?” I’d be foolish to hope for time with him when there’s no way it can happen.

“No more than usual. I’ll be able to slip away to take you on a tour. Beryl and Noah are providing a chocolate gymnastic display and I could arrange for you to ride over with them. The day’s competition will be over late in the afternoon, then I’ll be able to bring you home.”

That adorable, irresistible smirk is back. “Besides... there’s chocolate.”

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four

Phil

When Maya refused to give me a definitive answer about Saturday, I wasn't above finding a way to give her a little push. After Beryl chose another man over me, we tiptoed around each other for too long. Finally we discovered a good working relationship and settled into a strong friendship. It took Beryl only a short conversation and a request for help she and her husband didn't need to set up the chocolate display to persuade Maya to show up.

After giving Maya a job that allows her to sit, Beryl corners me at the treats table. "So... what's up with you and Maya?"

"She's looking for a place to augment her physical therapy. You know we've got exactly what she needs here."

"I'll ask again. What's up with you and Maya? When you see her you get this look."

Aw shit. Am I that obvious? "A look? What's that supposed to mean?"

She chuckles. "Fine, play innocent. Just take it easy, okay? I think there's a lot more going on in her life, in her head, than she lets on."

"I've already figured that. I appreciate you're watching out for her."

"And now you're ready to take over that job?"

I shrug one shoulder making her laugh again.

“Go slow, Phillip.”

That’s advice I know is good. I nod.

Once the kids and their families arrive the noise level increases at least tenfold. A couple of the kids recognize Maya and before I close the distance between us, they’re rapid firing questions at her. Her grin is relaxed and when our gazes meet, she waves away my concern and says something that makes the kids cheer. I’m going to ask her about that later.

She holds court as others join her circle of admirers, speaking to everyone and when a mom pulls a sharpie from her purse, Maya signs a few tee shirts.

One of my assistants rings a bell for attention. “Events start in five. Find seats, everyone.”

Today we’re watching the men’s national championship events on the huge, wall-sized screen. Since I’m recording the events, I make notes of routines and skills to highlight for my gymnasts over the coming weeks. With the size of the replay, it’s easy to focus in on the tiniest of movements for educational purposes.

When there’s a break in the action, we attack the treats table. Choco-Love created a remarkable display of chocolate apparatuses with a variety of filled candies, taffy, and caramels standing in for the athletes. As a ‘bring something to share’ treat table, there’s plenty other sweet and salty snacks. I’m strict about healthy beverages in the gym, and only bottled water is available.

Once everyone settles again, I turn over the note taking to one of my coaches and squat next to Maya’s chair.

“How you holding up?”

“Mostly okay. I haven’t been around this much noise since the tournament though. Feels like my ears are ringing.”

“Hmm. It does get loud in here.”

Cued by my words, a cheer rises for a stuck landing after a rings routine. Once the shouts fade, I take Maya’s hand. “Would you like the tour now?”

“Don’t you need to be here?”

I sweep my gaze over the gathering. “Nope. The coaches have everything under control.” Nodding toward a far door, I continue, “Can you make it that far?”

Pulling her hand from mine, she reaches for the cane she’d propped against the wall. “As long as it’s not a race.”

“As slow as you need...” I almost call her baby doll. Just what the small ears close by don’t need to hear. Nor does anyone need to know how I visualize slowly taking care of Maya’s sensual needs. I’d debated wearing the oversized jersey today. Now I’m glad I did.

Once we close the heavy metal doors behind us the sudden silence is a shock. Maya shakes her head like she’s clearing away thoughts. “Wow. I didn’t realize how loud it really was in there.”

“There are times when louder is better for keeping most of the kids focused. Did you notice the little girl who sat next to Beryl?”

“The one wearing headphones?”

“She has issues with noise. She’s still quite young and very talented. Determined to win medals. We’re working with her, her folks, and a therapist to help her adjust to competition situations. I have no problem with her wearing noise cancelling headphones during practice. Unfortunately, they aren’t allowed in competition.”

“Changing the rules and ideologies for well-established sports takes a long time and a determined fight. Ellie and I always had to field questions about why we wore shorts or leggings as our uniform instead of bikini bottoms. Some people even claimed we were breaking the rules.”

I would give my right nut to see Maya in a bikini. I bite back a snort. Maybe not my nut, because I’d want to be feeling it against her. Have her cup it in her hand. And... my cock agrees. Down, boy. Now is not the time. Nor is this the place.

Turning slightly sideways I point to an electric golf cart parked next to its charger. Maya’s mouth parts in surprise. So damn kissable. I’m in to her way too deep and I don’t want to surface.

“A cart? Your place is that big?”

“The additions to my original facility have expanded the square footage a lot. The cart was provided by a local pro hockey team to assist their players get to the rehab room. Or for anyone else who needs a ride. So?”

She smiles and her eyes sparkle. God, I love sparkly eyes. “A ride sounds like fun.”

Even though the cart has a top speed of about 10 miles per hour, Maya waves her hands in the air, telling me she’s always wanted to ride in a speeding convertible just to feel the air rushing over her body. The joy and exuberance filling her expression erases the lingering sorrow she seems to carry with her. The need to see that delight wells up in me. As does the desire to see her joy turn to passion. Imagining how she

might look when an orgasm washes over her, I nearly crash the cart into the doors leading to the rehab gym.

“Oops.”

“Guess maybe I should have fastened my seat belt. Are you always such a... ahem... good driver?”

I'll show her how good I am at driving. Driving her senseless with passion. Focus Tolenski. “What can I say? The need for speed got to me.”

Her golden laugh echoes in the empty hallway, filling cracks in my soul I hadn't realized were still there. Reminding me there's more to life than workouts and coaching. Without effort, she's bringing balance back into my life. She is my balance.

With that confusing thought, I circle the cart and hold her hand while she maneuvers her leg to the floor and stands. She doesn't take her hand away and I'm more than happy to keep her fingers entwined with mine. I open the doors and the lights come on automatically.

“Wow,” she whispers and takes a few halting steps into the cavernous space.

I attempt to see the area through her eyes. Equipment is grouped into areas of specialty—shoulders, arms, legs. More common exercise equipment like treadmills and stationary bikes face a long bank of windows overlooking a nearby park. The center of the room is open while opposite the windows small private rooms are used for things like ice baths and therapeutic massage. One of the hockey guys even has an acupuncturist come in to use a room once a week.

Guiding her toward the leg specific apparatus, we slowly cross the room. She studies the machinery. “And I'd be able to use this?”

“As long as no one else is using them. There’s only a couple guys from the hockey team needing the equipment now. Oh, and three or four from the football team. I anticipate baseball injuries to start trickling in before too long.”

“This is amazing. And it must have cost a fortune. I take care of the finances for our team...” Her voice fades, the joy disappears, and she sighs. “Well, for Ellie’s team now. And I know how much something as simple as one of those balance balls cost.”

“My partners—the owners of the various teams—have deep pockets when it comes to keeping their players healthy and on the active roster. I’m just glad I bought up extra land when I decided to build my gym here in Love Beach. One of my better decisions. So, ready to get to work?”

She gives me a disgusted look. Even that looks cute on her. “Uh, no. I’m going back for more chocolate.” She tilts her head and grins. “As long as you agree to drive safely.”

A week passes before I see Maya again. I’m swamped with the usual requests that come after a big competition. Suddenly parents are determined to place their kids in sports programs and gymnastics is no exception. Being an elite facility with strict standards I can easily redirect the majority of requests to local programs. While we do have classes for any interested children here in Love Beach, our main focus is preparing athletes for national and international competitions.

While it would be easy to have a blanket ‘not right for your child’ letter to send to parents, I don’t have it in me to turn down a hopeful gymnast without explaining why. I spend a good portion of time crafting detailed rejection letters. Some parents have thanked me for my honesty and suggestions, others can’t fathom why their precious darling wasn’t selected.

Whenever Maya’s been in the gym, I’ve either been tied to my desk or actually

coaching. Knowing she's so close yet untouchable is killing me. Late Saturday afternoon I toss the final letter of this batch onto the pile the receptionist will take to the post office on her way home from work Monday. My eyes are tired and scratchy but rubbing them with the heels of my hands doesn't help.

I need to get out of here and I have the perfect idea to both get me out of my funk and have some fun. When I drop off the mail at the reception desk, I check the sign in sheet. Thank god. Maya's here.

She's finishing a set of exercises while being spotted by a hulking hockey player. Glaring at the guy, I cross to them. He's got his hands resting on the weights too close to Maya. If he touches her I'll lose my shit. The rise of possessive anger doesn't surprise me. I know she's mine. Tonight, I'm going to show her. Convince her. Prove to her she's my one and only.

Managing to get myself under control, I nod a greeting to the guy before moving in front of him and focusing on Maya. "How's the knee?"

Hockey guy gets my message and steps back. "See ya,'round, Maya."

Once I no longer feel his presence and my shoulders relax, Maya frowns at me. "That was rude."

"What? I simply asked about your knee."

"Why'd you chase Jason away? He's had a torn ACL and he's been helping me all week. He knows what I'm going through."

"He's not the only one who understands." I tug on the leg of my shorts to show off my scar.

Her cheeks turn pink. “I’m sorry. I forgot. I didn’t want to bother you. You’ve been busy.”

Hoping the reluctance in her tone is real, I sit on the bench next to her. “It’s been a crazy week. I’m taking the night off. And I’d like to take you with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“How about a cheap, early evening movie, then supper?”

She glances down at herself and her wrinkled workout clothes. “I need a shower first.”

Unable to help myself, I lean closer and inhale deeply. I spend a good share of my days surrounded by the pungent aroma of kid sweat. She smells like heaven. I stop myself from saying that out loud though. I’m not a total idiot. Glancing at my wrist, I tap my watch. “I’ll change here and drive you home. There’ll be enough time for you to take a quick shower.”

Tempted to offer to share the shower her, I catch the inside of my cheek between my teeth and bite to keep from saying more.

“That sounds like fun. Thank you for thinking of me.”

Thinking of her? That’s about all I’ve been doing. That and jacking off.

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five

Maya

Phil waits in the living room while I rush through my shower. As the water flows over my body I imagine him entering the bathroom but waiting for me to invite him under the spray. Sometimes he's very much the alpha male—like when his simple actions chased Jason away. Other times he's sweet and endearing, one of the most caring men I've ever met. I'm not sure which Phil I like better.

I'm greedy. I want them both.

Along with any other aspect of his personality I haven't witnessed yet.

My hands slow then I plant them at my hips, letting the warm water sluice away the soap. There's always the chance those hidden parts could be one hundred percent unlikeable. Maybe even dangerous. No, not my Phil.

My Phil. I've been calling him that in my mind ever since that first day in his gym. I've claimed him in my heart. Yet for some reason my head refuses to agree.

Some reason? Heck, I know the reason. There's no way someone like Phil would be honestly interested in me. I'm too tall. Too... chunky. Not particularly shapely in the way guys seem to prefer. So, what am I thinking?

I'm pretending, like I always have. Even back in high school if a guy paid even the tiniest bit of attention to me, I'd fall for him. Just a crush but still, no matter what

happened, it was damaging to my insecure self. Excelling in volleyball helped some. At least I knew why someone was interested in me. Teaming with Ellie brought a stream of interested males to our door. They loved her shape, her long hair, her smile and easy laugh. She barely paid them any attention. Even before she and my brother finally admitted feelings for each other, no man really interested her.

Automatically towel drying my short hair, I stare at my reflection trying to understand what Phil might see in me. Giving up, I make a face at myself, decide to wear the flower print dress Ellie sent me from Hawaii. She and her new partner placed first in the tournament and have secured the top spot in the rankings for the past three weeks. Wearing her gift will feel like we're celebrating together.

I miss my bestie. And my brother, but I'd never tell him that. Only a few weeks and there's a break in their schedule and they'll be coming home.

I pause with only one of my ballet flats on. When did I start thinking of Love Beach as home?

A long, slow wolf whistle greets me when I exit my bedroom. Phil rises from the couch, takes one of my hands and encourages me to spin, showing off the full skirt. "You look fabulous, baby doll."

It's been over a week since he's called me that. Warmth fills my chest and curls lower. Someday I'll work up the courage to ask him about the—my thoughts stutter on the implications—endearment. Except he said that the day we met, so it can't mean anything that special.

"I'm not sure I want to share you with the world, Maya." He releases a dramatic sigh. "But I promised you a movie and a meal. We'd better get going. Parking near the theater can be tricky. You going to be okay with a short walk?"

“I’d prefer not to take the cane.” I don’t need constant support, now it’s more of a security blanket that I’m ready to retire. I did a lot of reps today though, and I’m not sure how long the sensation of normal strength will last.

“You can hang onto me anytime,” Phil offers with arched eyebrows. “As often as you need. Or want.” He offers his crooked elbow. “Ready? There’s two movies starting soon. A psychological thriller or a more family-oriented movie based on a video game. Your choice.”

“To be honest, psychological, scary movies make me want to hide in my closet. I can’t shake the creepy stuff quickly.”

“Video game movie it is. Some of the kids have been talking about this one during practice. They got me interested.”

“Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“I’m not just saying it. As long as you don’t mind that we might see some of those kids there and ruin our reputations.”

He makes me laugh. “What reputations?”

“Being adults, of course.”

After thoroughly enjoying the movie, I decide my knee can take a little more walking so we stroll to a small, Italian restaurant. Best chicken piccata I’ve had in forever. Excellent conversation as well. Phil is easy to talk to and even our silences are comfortable.

On the way back to his car, we pass a group of teenagers hanging out in front of a burger joint. They’re not loud and obnoxious but I still hear their comments about my

height. The difference in our heights. My response is a well ingrained defense. My shoulders hunch forward and I slouch, painfully bending my knees to make myself smaller.

Phil stops us and encourages me to face him. “What are you doing?”

I play dumb and hope it works. “Walking back to your car.”

His brows lower over his intense, searching gaze. The set of his jaw firms. “Don’t give me lies, Maya. You were, you are, shrinking in on yourself. Your spine’s curved, your shoulders have dropped. If I lift your skirt, I’m sure I’ll find your knees flexed. What are you doing?”

I don’t know how to answer him without chasing him away so I remain silent, staring at the toes of my shoes. Posture is important in gymnastics. I should have known there was no way he wouldn’t notice.

“Come here, Maya.” He leads me to one of the benches along the sidewalk and tugs me down to sit next to him. With one hand he keeps my palm pressed against his jeans covered thigh and uses his curled finger to tip up my face. “Tell me.”

This is a truth we will have to deal with eventually if I hope he’ll stick around. Now isn’t a good time. I fear later will be even worse. He moves his fingers until the tips curl along my jawline. His eyes are solemn and curious as he waits.

“Did you hear those teens?” I ask. “What they said?”

He glances back toward the gathering. “I was too interested in the woman beside me to pay any attention to that lot.”

“They... were laughing at my height. How I’m taller than you. I’ve always been

teased about my height. It was fine for me to have a brother who's six four, but when I neared the six foot mark myself... I've always tried to make myself look smaller. To be a more acceptable height."

"How tall are you?"

I'm tempted to lie although I'm sure he knows the numbers so I answer honestly. "Officially five eleven. Unofficially a bit more. It's an average height for volleyball and when I was little, I wanted to grow to be over six feet."

"And I'm tall for a gymnast. Five nine. There was a time I prayed I'd stop growing. Many doubted I'd be successful in college, let alone be part of an Olympic team. Win medals. Gold medals. I don't see what the problem is, Maya."

I wish he'd call me baby doll. Maybe I've lost that, too. "I'm taller than you."

"Yeah. So."

"People talk."

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Who the hell decided a man needs to tower over a woman and not the other way around? Fuck, look at some of those hockey guys or football players who are well over six feet yet have tiny girl friends or wives. That's perfectly acceptable isn't it?"

"I... I suppose."

"So why is it different when a woman is taller than a man?"

"I know it shouldn't be that way." Damn it, the sting of tears fills my eyes. As though this situation isn't terrible enough already.

“Maya, baby doll, I don’t care that you’ve got a couple inches on me. You don’t need to try to be something you’re not with me. Don’t hide your glorious height, the strength you carry as a woman. Shit, don’t cry, honey.”

He catches a stray tear with his fingertip, stares at the glistening droplet for a long moment, then wipes his finger on his jeans. “I need to kiss you.”

“Please.” My plea escapes on a whispered sigh and he closes the distance between us. The soft press of his lips against mine isn’t tentative nor demanding. It’s a promise.

Then he kisses my cheeks before easing back. “Maya, if you want to wear six inch spike heels when you’re with me then wear the damn things. You will never, ever be too tall for me.”

His words ring with truth and I believe him. “I’d never be able to walk wearing six-inch heels. Especially now with my knee.”

With one brow arched high, he tilts his head and grins. “I never said anything about walking in them, baby doll.”

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six

Phil

A few moments pass before what I've suggested registers with Maya. Her face flames and her eyes go wide. I can't help myself and draw her into my arms for a much more satisfying kiss than our first. Her back is straight, her shoulders stiff and it feels like she's fighting to keep from responding. I'm determined not to allow that to happen. I need her response.

Coaxing her lips to part the slightest bit, I run the tip of my tongue over her lower lip then close mine around it, giving a soft tug. Finally her hands lift to my shoulders and her fingers flex. If we were in private, I'd accept her unconscious invitation and deepen the kiss. Out here, I don't want to give those kids any more of a show, so I ease away.

Aching to take her home with me, I'm afraid my smile is sad. "We'd better go."

"Yes."

When she rises, she turns a narrow-eyed gaze toward the teens then squares her shoulders and lifts her chin. Her back is straight showing every inch of her height. I take her hand, kiss the back, then turn it to brush my lips over her palm. A shiver travels under my lips and I trace it to the inside of her wrist. Then I smile at her. "Good girl."

She catches her lower lip between her teeth. Dear god, this woman is going to kill

me. She returns my smile. “Thank you.”

“Any time, honey.”

When I pull up behind her apartment and put my car in park. Maya reaches over, turns off the ignition, and removes the key. “You’re coming upstairs with me.”

My cock jumps to attention. Telling myself she might not mean what I hope doesn’t do anything to curb my body’s enthusiasm. I find my voice. “Bossy little thing, aren’t you?”

“So my brother loves to tell me. The bossy part anyway. Sometimes being straight forward and bossy is the only way to get what you want.”

“What do you want, Maya?”

She holds my gaze without flinching. “You.”

Once in the apartment though, her bravado fades and she faces me, dismay conquering her expression. “Phil, I’m sorry. I want to... be with you. I just don’t know how this is going to work. My knee...”

I’ve been thinking about this possible moment way too frequently and my mental list of possibilities races through my brain. “Will you trust me, baby doll?”

“Yes. Even if all we do is make out, that will be enough for me tonight.”

“Really?” I circle her, skimming my palm around her waist.

“I... yes. For tonight.”

Pressed against her back, I catch her earlobe with my teeth and nip hard enough to make her gasp. “Not for me, Maya.”

“Phil, I can’t promise... I don’t know how to manage with my knee.”

“If I... if we do anything that causes you pain, tell me immediately.”

“Like a safe word?”

She needs to know that even when we’re lost in passion, I won’t ignore her wishes or her safety. “Yes.”

“Pushup.”

“Maya?”

“That’s my word. If I say pushup you’ll stop?”

Pressing my mouth to the rapid pulse on her neck I chuckle. “I’ll stop. When I do, you must also promise to tell me why. What I’ve done that’s uncomfortable so we can try again a different way.”

“This sounds like you’ve done this before.” Her tone is rough with rising passion.

I’m not sure if she’s asking for confirmation or accusing me of dark sexual acts. Not that I wouldn’t be tempted with her in my bed. That’s play for another time. Tonight is about forging new links in our relationship. Testing the compatibility we share. Hell, just making her feel good.

I need her to feel more than she ever has. A better buildup of tension. More spectacular orgasms. I need this more than air. “Not in the way I think you mean,

honey. No matter what you hope to do, to feel, no matter who, or when, consent is vital.”

“I’ll try not to disappoint you.”

Whirling her to face me I capture her face between my hands. “Maya, listen to me. I’ll only be disappointed if you hide your wishes or reactions from me. Making love is a partnership.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “Not always an equal one. That’s why communication is so important.”

“I do understand. Really. I’m just... nervous. About my knee.” Her gaze skitters away and she attempts to duck her head.

My hands hold her in place until she finally opens her eyes and really sees me. The sparkle returns to the dark depths, her invitation blatant and irresistible.

Who am I to try and resist the irresistible?

Parted lips welcome mine as with a soft whimper of need she presses her body against mine. Perfect. There’s want and desire in our slow, exploratory kisses but no desperation. As though we have eternity. That’s what I want. An eternity with Maya.

Breathless, we ease away from each other. She takes my hand and leads me into her bedroom. A flash of doubt shadows her eyes. Before my passion muddled brain reacts, she steps away and lights a trio of candles on the dresser. “Ambiance is always good.”

Lifting the hem of her dress she exposes her knee. “I’d like to keep the brace on, if that’s okay? For support?”

“You don’t need permission, honey. Whatever makes you comfortable, secure.

Whatever you want.”

“I want you, Phil. More than I can stand.”

“Then stop standing, baby doll. Let’s get you comfortable.”

I’m shocked when she reaches under her skirt and removes her panties. My jaw drops when she shimmies out of the dress. Since she wasn’t wearing a bra, she now stands before me, bathed in candlelight, naked except for the black brace supporting her knee. “Oh, Maya. My beautiful Maya.”

She’s worked her knee a lot today so her limp is more pronounced when she walks toward me. I meet her in the center of the large room and sweep her up into my arms.

“Phil, put me down,” she laughs.

“When I’m damn good and ready.” I carry her three steps to her bed and sit on the edge with her on my lap. My hand glides over the warm, trembling skin on her side up and over her breasts. I hesitate only a moment before dipping my fingers between her legs.

I groan at the silk of her smooth mound and the evidence of her arousal. Slipping a finger between her folds, I capture her sigh with a kiss. Now I’m desperate for her, my mouth demanding as I tease her clit. Somehow without stopping the kiss, I ease her to the bed. “I’ve got to taste you, baby doll.”

Using pillows, I prop up and protect her knee. Her eyelids are half lowered as she watches me care for her comfort. Her little half smile is so damn sexy. “I really wish you’d take your shirt off.”

It’s a struggle to tear myself from her for even the shortest time. I manage to stand

and pull my polo over my head.

“Can I change my wish?”

“Anything.”

She licks her lower lip and my cock jumps. “I don’t think it’s fair that I’m nekkid and you’re not.”

“Nekkid?” The word makes me laugh, the idea...best idea so far. “I can do that.”

The relief when my cock rises free of its denim prison and I give a firm stroke only increases my need to pleasure my woman. Ladies first as my dad always told me.

“Phil?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“What are you waiting for? I’d be concerned you’ve changed your mind but...”

I give my cock another stroke before settling my shoulders between her thighs, careful to avoid bumping her knee from its pillow perch. “I can’t wait to taste you, baby doll.”

Her fingers appear in my narrowed focus to spread her sex, exposing herself to me. She’s shaking, whether from desire or fear, I’m not sure. Either way, I’m making it right for her. Cupping one hand over hers, I guide her fingers to her clit. “Show me what you want. What you like.”

She hesitates, her breathing harsh. Her hips tilt. I could take over except she needs this to believe she’s desirable. Some dick in her past broke her confidence. We’ll fix

this. Together.

“Phil.” My name is a sigh and her finger moves from side to side. “This, like this.”

Inching forward, I match the movement with my tongue, relishing the uninhibited sounds she makes in response. Then my mind blanks to everything but her pleasure. Licking, sucking, nipping until she’s writhing against my face. Panting my name. With one hand I steady her thigh. The other finds her wet, slick channel. One finger. Two. I stroke in as deeply as I can then angle to find her g-spot.

The jerking of her muscles and her low moan tell me I’ve discovered that special place. Experimenting with speeds and pressures I wait until she tells me, “Yes. That. Like that.”

I give her that. Like that. Moving my hand from her thigh, I rest my palm below her navel. My tongue and lips are busy on her clit. Silently I encourage her as I press down on her lower belly. That’s it, Maya. Feel how I’m making you come. Come for me, baby doll.

With a sharp cry, she explodes. Lightly sucking her clit, I draw out her orgasm, loving how her body clenches around my fingers. As she calms, I crawl up the bed and lay on my side facing her.

“You are so beautiful when you come, baby doll.” I lick my fingers. “And tasty.”

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seven

Maya

As my breathing steadies and my heartbeat slows, panic sets in, nearly negating how good that orgasm made me feel. I don't know what got into me. Why I acted in such a brazen fashion. Stripping in front of a guy? Demanding he do the same? Touching myself to show him...

I wait for the heat of embarrassment to replace passion's flush, but it doesn't happen. In fact, everything feels so right. Like the missing parts of my life have fallen into place.

All I had to do was fall in love with the right man. I'd attempted to ignore the signs. Love found me so suddenly I didn't realize what was happening. I'd felt instant attraction to the muscular gymnast and spent too much time denying and fighting those feelings. Now I've accepted and acted on that love.

I'm not done yet. I need him to love me, too. How do I make this happen? No. I can't make him love me. If all we have is sex, I'll take the moments and cherish each one.

I'm not done yet tonight either. "Phil," I sigh. "It's your turn."

"I don't need anything, honey."

"That hard poking at my hip tells me otherwise."

“Not important.”

Careful of my knee, I wiggle onto my side facing him. “As much as you think my pleasure is important, that’s at least as much as I expect to give you.”

His grin is lazy and wickedly sexy as he strokes my side. “What do you have in mind?”

“You inside me.”

“Right to the point.”

I mirror how he touches me, discovering the ridges of his firm abdominal muscles. The trail of hair leading to his cock. Our mouths meet and with my tongue I show him what I want. “How do we do this?”

“Hmm. Kiss me again, baby doll.”

While his lips tease, he eases my braced knee, complete with its pillow, over his hip. His flexibility amazes me as he tugs another pillow from the head of the bed to the back of his thighs and arranges my leg.

“Okay? Any pain?”

I shake my head.

“Good.” His expression darkens. “We forgot protection.”

I snuggle against his chest and nip at his shoulder. “We already covered how it’s been a long time. For both of us.” Easing back, I can’t hold back my sigh. “Even though I never really thought I’d need it, I’ve been taking the shots.”

“And that makes you sad?” His confusion is endearing. Like I need more to love.

“Not really. I never believed I’d want to have babies with anyone.”

“And tonight? Us? Is this different?”

I can’t figure out his neutral tone. If I tell the truth and say yes, will that chase him away? We promised only truth.

“Everything is different with you. I want things I’ve never wanted before. To experience more than I believed possible. Truthfully, yes. I might be falling for you. Wanting babies. But only with you.”

A brilliant smile brightens his face. Candlelight reflects in his eyes. I glance away to trace the tribal tattoo band above his left elbow. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have just blurted that out. We don’t know each other that well. It’s too soo?—”

His fierce kiss swallows my apology. He cups my butt and pulls me closer to capture his hard cock against the seam of my sex. “I have more than fallen for you, Maya. You’re my heart and my soul. I love you. And yes, baby doll, making babies with you...” He executes a trio of short thrusts, igniting every nerve in my body. “...is a damn good idea.”

“You want babies? With me?”

“That’s not the important bit, honey. What you need to know, to always remember, is that I love you.”

“My heart and soul love you, too”

“Good. Now help a guy out here, will you? Guide me in.”

Lying on our sides, my knee propped comfortably, he enters me with a long, slow stroke. The angle is amazing and the intensity of a growing orgasm tightens with each thrust and retreat. I've never had sex in anything but the old traditional way but this position feels like it brings us closer. I tighten my arms around him and throw back my head.

His lips find the pulse point in my neck, sucking and laving my sensitized skin. Thrusts deepen to stroke my inner walls at a new angle. The nest of hair at his groin rubs my clit. When he slips one hand to my breast and tweaks my nipple, my hips strain toward him. I take more of him deep inside me. "I'm going..."

"Come for me, baby doll."

"You first," I gasp. "Only fair. Oh, oh, yes."

"May—ah. Mine."

With jerking thrusts his release spills heat to my core. My walls clench around him and, with a wordless keen, I explode into a universe of stars.

I'm not sure how long we lay entangled, struggling to catch our breath while sharing heated kisses. Too soon he eases away from me and slips from the bed. "Wait here," he says.

"Yes."

He goes into the bathroom and soon I hear the sound of water filling the deep soaker tub. Knowing how considerate he's been all evening, he must be running a bath for me. Thank goodness my scar is healed enough for a bath. His concern screams after care and I melt a little inside. I think about telling him to add some of my favorite bubbles but he returns to grab the candles from the dresser and takes them into the

bathroom.

“Let’s get this brace off,” he says matching actions to his words. This time I don’t complain when he scoops me into his arms. I could get used to this.

Leaning to one side he has me test the water temperature with my toes. “Perfect.”

He doesn’t set me in the tub. Instead he slowly steps into the water then sits, easing me between his spread thighs, my back against his chest. “This feels so good.”

“I don’t want you to feel anything but good with me, Maya. I know we’ll have some shit times. We both have insecurities and issues.”

“Everyone does. I’m willing to give us a try.”

“Just a try?” He’s nibbling at my neck and skimming a washcloth over my body. Gotta love a multitasker. And I do love him. Now and forever.

After a night of love and conversation we make a simple breakfast together. Phil shoves his scrambled eggs around his plate until I cover his hand with mine. “What’s wrong?”

He sets down the fork. “Nothing.”

“Don’t give me that. I know when a guy plays with his food, he’s got something on his mind. Do you regret last night?”

His eyes go wide with shock. “Fuck no, honey. Last night was perfect. You were perfect.”

“You’re not so bad yourself. What’s going on up here?” I tap his forehead.

“There’s something I’ve been thinking about. Something that involves you.”

I clasp my hands and with my elbows on the island, rest my chin against my fists.

“Ooh, do tell.”

“It’s not so much a tell you thing. More of a show you kinda thing.”

“It’s Sunday. Neither one of us have to be anywhere. Show me.”

“Get dressed then and we’ll go.”

I’m a little disappointed his ‘thing’ doesn’t have anything to do with staying here and continuing the day in bed. There’ll be time for that later. “Okay. It shouldn’t take me long.”

“Uh, would you wear that dress again? The one you wore last night?”

Curious as to why he wants me to wear the dress that’s been a wrinkled pile on the floor since we got home yesterday, I nod and leave him putting dishes in the dishwasher.

“Why are we here?” I ask as we pull into the parking lot of Tolenski’s Gym. “Your show instead of tell is here? You could have done this yesterday.”

With a half smile and a one shoulder shrug, he says, “No, not really.”

He takes my hand and after he unlocks the door, we enter the building. “So, no one else is here?” I ask.

“Nope. Whole building is closed today. Follow me.”

The large gymnastics training room is eerie with the dim light filtering through the window lining the top of two walls. We stop at the pommel horse and he backs me up against the apparatus. “I’ve fantasized about you here.”

“What kind of fantasies?” His hard cock has formed an interesting bulge in his jeans so I’m pretty sure I’m right. “You mean like wet dreams?”

His snort of laughter eases the odd tightness of worry from around his eyes. “I suppose so.”

“Suppose so? You mean you?—”

His hard kiss stops my words. The fingers of one hand spear through my hair, twisting to make a knot of the short strands. Using his other hand, he tugs my skirt up. “You have to tell me, baby doll. Is this okay? I’m going to bend you over this horse and...”

“Fuck me from behind?”

Startled, he looks ready to deny my question, then when his hand moves to where I’m not wearing any panties—I had my hopes—his pupils expand and his mouth takes mine again. “Maya,” he groans.

“More than okay, Phil.”

“Then hang on, baby doll.” He flips me around and with his palm against my shoulder blades, pushes me forward between the wooden pommels. I grip them tightly as I spread my legs and tilt my butt higher. He bunches my skirt around my waist and strokes my butt cheeks. “God, Maya. You sure?”

“So sure. So ready.”

“Your knee?” I hear the rasp of his zipper and his exhale as he frees his cock.

“Never better. I need you. I need to feel...”

He tests me with a gentle swipe of his fingers then positions the head of his cock at my entrance. I’m so wet he easily slides deep. His hands move to my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh. This time is going to be fast, furious, and I’m going to love every moment.

“I should have... foreplay...prepared...” His hands pull me back as his hips jerk forward.

“Stop talking. Make me come.”

“There’s my bossy baby doll.” No more words are needed. The only sounds are the rising intensity of our uninhibited, pleased cries, the slap of skin against skin each time he pounds into me. The pressure builds. I use the pommels to lift myself until my feet don’t touch the floor, giving him another angle. One hand moves from my hip to find the firm bundle of nerves aching for his touch.

One harsh word joins my panting breaths. “Now.”

Thumb tight and circling against my clit he buries himself deep within me. Wave after wave of a powerful orgasm blasts through me. My scream echoes off the gym’s high ceiling. The sound has barely faded when his shout rises as he joins me.

He collapses against my back, then eases some of the weight by wrapping his arms over the pommels. Our panting breaths are loud in the quiet space. “Holy fuck, baby doll.”

“No kidding.”

“Maya, I have something important to say.”

“I don’t know if I have energy to talk.”

He straightens, steps back, then pulls my skirt down and helps me stand. I turn and kiss him. “Okay, lover. Say what you have to say.”

“Maya, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Will you marry me?”

Tilting my head, I stare at him. His brows get lower the longer I remain silent. We’ve only just begun this relationship. It’s been fast. But somehow the timing seems just right. Why prolong the inevitable?

“Of course I will.”

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epilogue

Maya

Four Months Later

Ellie and my brother are coming back to Love Beach now that their tournament schedule is winding down. I moved into Phil's place a couple months ago but kept the vacation rental so they have a place to stay. Although Ellie's hinted at looking for a house to buy. They both say big changes are coming but won't say anything else. I've talked to Phil about it and all he does is grin and tell me not to worry about it.

I don't like it when people keep secrets from me. Once Ellie and Sean are settled, there will be a discussion. Until then I'm so looking forward to having my bestie and brother close. Maybe we can settle the final plans for their wedding. I'm moving great now. The extra work in the gym—and the personalized attention from the owner really helped. I'm ready to walk down the aisle for Ellie so before long she can walk down mine.

We meet at the Sandy Sipper and as a treat Nyla serves us the beach volleyball special sandwiches she created for the Love Beach tournament. Ellie and I do the majority of the talking, because there's a ton of stuff to catch up on, so much that couldn't be said in letters, texts or phone calls. Our men remain indulgently silent.

"We need to settle on the location for our wedding soon," Ellie says while staring out over the beach. Then she gives me a side-eye glance. "Before I grow out of my dress."

“That makes no sense, Ellie. As long as I’ve known you, you’ve looked the same. Not even those fabled freshman fifteen made any difference.”

“I only gained five pounds freshman year.”

I give a soft snort. “Whatever. Is there a problem with your dress? I thought you’d settled on one months ago.”

“I did. And I love it. I don’t want to give it up just because I’m pregnant.”

It takes a long moment for her words to sink in. I lean forward then surge to my feet. She rises and we squeal as we hug then jump in a small circle.

Sean elbows Phil. “Told you.”

Jerking to a stop, I glare at the love of my life. “You knew about this?”

He has the gall to not even attempt to look repentant. Instead he winks. “Yep. Calm down, honey. We’ll talk about it later.”

My brother also has a shit eating grin. In two steps I stand in front of him and poke his chest. “What are you not telling me?” I give each of them a hard glare. “Why are you all keeping secrets from me?”

Sean shakes his head. “Not really keeping stuff from you, baby sis. More like waiting until you regained the focus to be a part of all this. With your healing, and finishing your book, and...” He jerks a thumb at Phil. “...this guy, I didn’t want to add anything more to your plate.”

“You guys suck, you know that don’t you? All three of you. Now tell me what’s going on or I’m walking.”

Sean raises his hand. “I’ll start. First by apologizing. We thought we were making it easier for you by not adding more worry to your list. I was wrong in that assumption. My news is that I’m quitting individual coaching and starting up a permanent facility for volleyball camps and training.”

“You’ve had that dream for a long time, big bro. I’m so much more happy for you now than I was pissed you haven’t said anything.”

“Thanks, I think. Ellie’s father is one of the financial backers for the project and we’ve already completed site design.” He rushes to continue. “Which I’ll need your approval on. This is partly for you, Maya. I value your opinion and suggestions. I want this to be a family endeavor.”

Ellie draws a deep breath. “I’m quitting the circuit. I was thinking about it even before...” She pats her lower belly. “Sean has really drawn me into his dream. His vision is mine now, too. I’m hoping to help coach or do whatever’s needed to make Sean’s dream a success.”

“But you were doing so well with your new partner. How does she feel about your retirement?”

“No problem there. You’ll never guess who she’s teamed up with.” Ellie is barely holding back a devilish grin.

Realization hits me like a brick wall. “No. With Karol? You’ve got to be kidding.”

Sean sets his empty glass on the table. “Actually, they make a pretty good team. Compliment each other’s play. Personality wise? Not sure it’s going to work out. Only time will tell.”

I’m amazed at how all the twists and turns in life can actually come together successfully. “I wish them both luck.”

One more confession to go. “And what about you?” I ask Phil.

“That extra land I bought when I established the gym? There’s still a large tract that’s undeveloped. Your brother’s plans and initial sketches were enough to convince me to become a partner in the project as well. Another expansion to Tolenski’s Gym.”

I slip onto his lap and run my fingers through his hair. “You need a better name to encompass all the sports and offerings.”

“Want to help me think one up?”

“I’ve got a few ideas.”

Ellie clears her throat and glances at her watch. “Didn’t you say you had plans this evening?”

I grin at Phil. Every month we’ve had a special celebration to mark the day he found me crying on the steps. The day we met. And from what we’ve told each other about that day, it was also the day we both fell in love.

“We do,” I reply and stand. “And didn’t you say you had something for me?” I ask Ellie.

“Oh, yeah, I do. Come with me and we’ll get it from the car.”

When she hands me the cloth bag, Ellie leans closer to peer into my eyes. “Are you sure about this? Don’t tempt fate and injure your knee again.”

“I won’t. Thanks for your concern. And a huge thanks for getting these for me. I owe you.”

She waves away my words. “I’m just happy you’re, umm, getting out of your shell a

little. The right man can sure help with that. Speaking of, here come the guys. You'd better get that hidden."

After hugs for Ellie and my brother, Phil and I head home. I'd like a little time to prepare my surprise celebration so I need for him to stay away for a while.

"Uh, baby doll, is it okay if I drop you off at home?. There's something I need to get for tonight."

Fantastic. I struggle a little to keep from fist pumping the air in celebration. "Sure, no problem."

I've completed my preparations and I'm waiting on our front porch when he drives up in a classic chevy convertible. Red. With the top down. I race from the porch and he catches me in his arms.

"You remembered," I say then cover his face with kisses.

"I was only able to rent this for an hour. I hope that's okay."

He's adorable those few times when he seems unsure of himself. I press a longer kiss to his mouth. "It's perfect. Let's not waste any time."

With a gentlemanly bow, he opens the door and I slide onto the cream-colored leather seat. Someone spent a lot of time and money making this vehicle a standout. Once we're buckled in, he asks, "Where to?"

"You know what I want."

We drive through town, making one circle on the main drag then head for the highway. I lift my arms to try to catch the wind and shout for joy. Much too soon we have to head back to town. I'm sad this fun drive has to end and also excited for him

to discover what I've got planned.

"Don't be too long," I tell him when he drops me off at home.

"Ten minutes. Tops."

I watch him drive away then rush into the house. I leave the rest of the house dark and light candles in our bedroom. I open the bag Ellie got for me and pull out the shoes. The six-inch spike heels aren't much bigger around than an ice pick. The deep purple straps look barely wide enough to keep the shoes on.

Definitely not made for walking.

I strip and place a few drops of his favorite vanilla fragrance in strategic, erotic places. Then I rearrange the pillows on the bed, adding a few more from our stash in the closet. A glance at the clock shows nine minutes have passed. The low rumble of the garage door opening means he's home. With a minute to spare.

Dangling the heels from my fingers, I position myself on the bed then struggle to get the silly things on my feet.

The door from the garage slams shut. "Maya?"

Finally the shoes at least look like they're on. I rearrange myself so the first thing he sees when he enters will be how my feet arch in the shoes, and the thin, thin spiky heels.

I'd left the bedroom door cracked and he pushes it open. "You in here?"

"Phillip," I whisper.

The bouquet of flowers falls from his hand to the floor. His mouth moves silently.

Then he blinks and starts clawing at the buttons on his shirt.

“Baby doll, you remembered.”