



Spring Break with a Hero (Love Beach Spring Break Collection)

Author: *Zee Irwin*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: A steamy small-town suspense romance where a possessive military protector will stop at nothing to keep her safe... even if she refuses to admit she needs him.

When an anonymous tip for my latest news story pulls me into the path of an illegal smuggling ring, the last thing I expect to become is the target for danger. And now? My old enemy is assigned to protect me.

His orders? Keep me safe. His method? Drive me crazy. His presence? Temptation in combat boots.

I don't need a bodyguard, but as the action heats up, the tension between us explodes. Suddenly, I fall for the one man I never wanted to rely on—and he's the only guy who can save me.

He'll be the hero once again. But can I finally admit I want him to be the hero of my heart as well?

Find out in this adventurous, steamy small-town romance where passion and danger collide in Love Beach!

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ONE

WALKING INTO DANGER

JACKSON ALEXANDER

Stakeouts in movies may look exciting, but in real life they're a total bore—unless you're into squeezing yourself behind a crate on the dock for hours waiting for the bad guys. If they finally show, though, that surge of adrenaline will hit me while busting their asses, and that's the greatest feeling in the world. I'm that guy—the hero who makes it all happen.

Sitting near a fishing boat reeking of fish guts is hardly the life of a legend, yet here I am tonight. Patience isn't my strong suit, and I'm not one to call this drudgery fun. Still, I wouldn't trade these moments for anything—especially when in a few hours, if our intel is correct, our mission will be accomplished. Bad guys locked away. Accolades for my bravery handed to me. If all goes as planned.

After my team scores a juicy last-minute tip via radio surveillance on smugglers hauling guns from Central America to Love Beach, we're locked in at the docks waiting for the drop. The smugglers are due here tonight to meet their buyer, international gunrunner Lorenzo Ybarra—a real piece of work I've been tracking for ages, and I can't wait to capture him.

Ybarra frequently uses locations in small towns like this for his business transactions, hoping to fly under the radar. But the special ops team I work for are on to them now. The only problem is, my guys are still en route.

We've got eyes in the pitch-black sky—a drone courtesy of my crack special task force from multiple agencies. On land, I'm teamed up with Officer Davis Levigne and his local police crew posted strategically around the perimeter. We're all on edge, ready to pounce on any sign of trouble.

I check the time again. "Something's off," I say low to Davis, irritation lacing my tone as we've been hunkered down behind crates for hours. "My gut tells me tonight's drop is not happening."

"Maybe a decoy? If they sniffed you out, they could be moving the meeting. Heck, they might even be testing your intel," Davis replies, sharp as ever. I wouldn't trade him for anyone as a liaison on this gig. My team is top-notch, but my gut agrees with his take.

"This is Jackson. Sound off by position," I bark the order, the small earpiece I wear doubling as a microphone and radio. The latest tech is our salvation on operations like this.

"Dawson here. North section clear. Over."

"Parker here. West section clear. Over."

One by one, the rest of the team checks in. The closest units to the drop are me, Davis, and his two officers, Noah Dawson and Alden Parker—old friends and fellow Love Beach officers. The home field advantage is real, which is why the brass of my unit trusts me to run this show here.

"Maintain positions," I confirm with a sigh as I glance at the sky. Partly cloudy yet still able to view an incredible show of stars, chilly evenings in early spring like these will soon progress to more mild nights as the temperatures rise. Just in time for spring breakers to flood the tiny town.

“About three more hours until dawn,” Davis says.

“Looks like tonight’s a bust. You might as well have stayed home with Belle and that little one baking in her oven. Hey, I’m catching Beau playing in the game Friday night. Come with me?”

“I wish. It’s been a while since I caught one of your brother’s hockey games. Looked at his stats the other day; Beau’s killing it this season. But my weekend’s taken. Belle’s got me on a tight leash,” comes his reply.

“Man, get over being pussy whipped,” I tease, coughing into my hand over the words for effect.

“Real mature, Jackson. Or maybe you’re just bitter you don’t have a warm, willing woman waiting for you in bed every night,” Davis snaps back. We’ve been friends forever, so I’m not worried about getting his back up.

“Sure, you got me. A woman’s exactly what I need to complicate my otherwise perfect life right now,” I say, every syllable laced with sarcasm. Truth is, I crave complication—but not from just anyone. A particular woman comes to mind who I’d enlist to make my life more difficult.

“Belle thinks you do. Not sure what’s gotten into her lately with the baby and all our nesting?—”

“Nesting? That some new naughty move I haven’t tried?” I quip.

“I wish. It’s where you barely leave the house except to make a hundred trips to Babies Are Us to deck out the nursery. Anyway, Belle’s convinced you and Gigi should hit it off now that you two are older.”

I snort at that. My lifestyle doesn't suit dating or settling down—and Gigi probably still considers me her sworn enemy from high school.

“So consider this fair warning in case my wife invites you and her sister over for an innocent little dinner once she finds out you're back home,” Davis chuckles, throwing his hands up in defeat.

Home... makes me wonder. After my last visit to Love Beach, I thought I might stick around, even considered getting out of the military altogether. But once Davis and I shut down a drug cartel's plan to use our town as a money-laundering haven a couple of years ago, things went quiet here. The brass asked me to extend my contract, then sent me over to the smugglers' task force in Central America.

Now I'm back, under the guise of being on leave to visit my family, and I still haven't seen Gigi. While here, I'll be overseeing a covert operation to apprehend Ybarra, and I have no clue how long this mission will last.

“Well, hell, we should call it a night,” I start.

The radio crackles, jolting me. “Jackson, we got movement—west dock—closest to me. Solo figure, small build. Could be a woman. Should I check it out? Please advise.” Parker's voice is urgent.

“What the—?” Davis squints through his binoculars. “I'm not seeing anyone.”

I grab my special ops binoculars with night vision and scope it out myself, zeroing in on a female silhouette in a black hooded sweatshirt. When she curves around the warehouse corner, I catch a glimpse of a glow-in-the-dark rock band logo on her chest. When the woman pushes thick-rimmed glasses up her nose, my heart drops.

I recognize her instantly. “Damn. It's Gigi,” I mutter under my breath, holding back a

string of harsher words reserved for the woman who drives me crazy—in more ways than one.

She's rocking the same garment she pinched from me back in high school one night when Beau and I held a party while our grandparents were traveling. I never let on that I knew she took it because, honestly, the thought of her in it, especially close to her bare skin, got my blood pumping.

"Why the hell is she here?" Davis grumbles.

"Probably sticking her nose in where it doesn't belong. The last thing we need is her scribbling about our operation in the Love Beach Buzz daily news, setting the town gossip mill running," I retort. "She'll screw this up, or worse, get caught in the crossfire and we won't be able to protect her."

"I swear my sister-in-law can be a royal pain sometimes." Davis shakes his head.

I hit the radio again. "Parker, are you on her?"

"I got eyes on her and tracking. She's inside the warehouse. Moving in closer. Over," he reports.

Then Dawson yells through my earpiece, "We got company—a truck headed right toward her position."

"You want me to grab her?" Parker asks.

I bark out, "Hold your position. Everyone stay put until I say so. Out." The last thing I want is gunfire, with Gigi caught in the middle of the chaos.

Keeping low, I work quickly, making my way down the dock and across to the

warehouse, everything unnervingly quiet except the approaching sounds of a truck. I peek my head in through the warehouse door, but there's no one around as far as I can see in the moonlit vast space filled with crates stacked here and there.

I move in, sticking to the shadows, crate to crate, but my pace stumbles when I catch the sound of a struggle and Gigi's muffled scream. By the time I round another box, I find her crumpled on the ground with retreating footsteps echoing toward the door. I lift my gun to fire a shot, but it's too late. The perp escaped. I don't see a soul.

Except Gigi. My heart pounds out of my chest. If they hurt her?—

I rush over and crouch beside her battered form, calling into my earpiece, "The woman is down. The perp slipped away. Anyone got eyes on them?"

"They must have ducked back into the truck because it's high-tailing it out of here. On foot, I can't get close enough to make out the plates," Parker calls into my ear.

"Stand down," I respond.

Without a second thought, I scoop her into my arms, my hands trembling as I brush strands of hair from her face, noticing a trail of blood from a nasty gash on her forehead—probably from being bashed with the butt of a gun.

"I can't lose you, Gigi. Stay with me." Holding back raw emotion, I can only manage a whisper.

Her eyes flutter half open, finding my face. She utters a weak, fragmented "Jackson?" before her body goes limp in my arms.

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TWO

LED ASTRAY

GIGI BAYMONT

Unimaginable agony slams into my head, plunging me into darkness. I've never experienced pain like this—never a car accident, a sports injury, a broken bone; just the occasional headache from work stress. Lucky, until now.

This relentless pounding won't stop. Where am I?

I try to open my eyes, only to be met with blinding light and blurry images. Muffled voices swirl around me as I struggle for clarity, trapped as if inside a fog-filled glass box.

Help! I cry, but no one comes to my rescue. My fists pound against the invisible barrier, catching no attention. I scream once more with all my might...until someone gently places warm hands on my cheeks, grounding me, waking me.

"Gigi? Gigi? It's okay. You're in the hospital," a familiar deep voice with a slight southern drawl soothes me—softer than usual.

"Jackson?" I croak, my throat dry. Forcing my eyelids open, I see the face of an attractive man sporting just enough dark five o'clock shadow to drive a woman crazy, even though he's a little blurry around the edges and I haven't any idea of the time. Still, his gaze is filled with concern—something uncharacteristic of him for me.

In my confusion, I'm tempted to slide my thumb seductively along his full, inviting bottom lip just to feel how soft and kissable it is. He's touching me, and it's only fair I return the favor.

"I'm here, G, er... Belle and Davis are too," he adds quickly, withdrawing his hands and slipping them into his pockets, leaving my cheeks still warm from his touch. But why does he seem so worried? Jackson usually treats me as someone to tease and spar with, nothing more. Besides, he's supposed to be off in some faraway place, saving the world from bad guys, and we've never been particularly close. Tolerating of each other by osmosis, I suppose, since we co-exist in the same close-knit group of siblings and friends that have been together since high school.

Suddenly, the fog in my glass prison finally lifts, and clarity strikes me like another blow.

"Jackson?" I repeat, scrunching my face as I come to my senses. I tug at the oxygen tube attached to my nose, eager to discard this ridiculous contraption.

"Whoa, darlin'. Hold it," he growls through clenched teeth. So much for his softer side—although that sexy growl might be acceptable if that's how he shows care. Despite all his flaws and all the ways he's pestered me over the years, I secretly can't help but have a crush on him.

Ugh, stop it. I don't have time for this.

"Oh, thank goodness you're awake. Gigi, that wasn't funny. Don't ever scare me like that again," Belle scolds, delivering a sisterly slap to my arm.

"Bells, come on. Leave her be. I was in a coma, and I don't recall you slapping me that hard. Besides, she's only been out for about an hour compared to the length of time I was out." Poor Davis and what he went through when involved in a hit-and-run

accident a couple of years ago that nearly ended his life. He pulls my sister close into his side. Protecting her or protecting me from her? Maybe both.

Belle was so patient with him as she waited for him to recover, utterly devoted no matter how long it took for him to realize his love for her.

I'm relieved he finally got his act together. Married and expecting their first child, they're like relationship ideals to me—even though I'm in no hurry to settle down. With the Love Beach Buzz now mine since Dad retired, and a five-year career plan that trumps any man's distractions, I might as well start collecting battery-operated “survival gear” to take care of myself when certain urges strike. I'm too busy for a man.

“You're right. I just can't stand the thought of losing my sister. I'm due this summer and my baby needs an auntie,” Belle explains softly, rubbing her barely noticeable, enviable belly.

“I'm not dying. Though this pounding in my head feels like it could be the closest thing to death,” I complain, raising an arm to the side of my head to pinpoint the source of the pain—only to have a large hand intercept it.

My breath catches as electricity pulses around my wrist, drawing my eyes to meet the bluest pair of aqua orbs I've ever seen; they could rival the waters of Passion Cove, one of my favorite spots in Love Beach.

“Stitches. Don't touch, G.” Jackson calls me G, like it's too much trouble to say Gigi. He's the only person I've ever allowed to shorten my already tiny name. I don't even know why I tolerate it.

“Enough of this. I have work to do. Belle, get me out of here,” I insist, trying to sit up despite the crippling pain. In an instant, Jackson's hand presses firmly against my

shoulder, guiding me back down. Sparks of energy crackle between us. An undeniably awkward mistake.

Oh, I get it now—my head must have been hit so hard it scrambled like eggs. I'm clearly reading too much into things. He's probably frustrated he even has to touch me.

I shove his hand away, determined to handle this on my own, ready to bust out of the hospital if need be.

“What the heck were you doing at the docks this late, anyway? Our small town is usually safe and quiet, but you know certain spots can be trouble. You should've called me and Davis to let us know where you were,” Belle chastises, treating me like a child.

I almost retort, then remember that Jackson was at the docks—and while I was slipping in and out of consciousness, I distinctly recall hearing Davis too as they drove me here.

I shoot them a glance, both of them remaining silent, giving me the eye. An acknowledgment passes between us. Belle remains unsuspecting and kept in the dark, typical of police work to sometimes keep details under wraps from loved ones. Which means the tip I received about trouble at the docks was spot-on. And I should be grateful they were there—what if the attack had been worse?

I shudder, but before I can ponder further, the doctor enters with a nurse trailing behind. I'm off the hook from answering Belle's worries for the moment.

“Gigi. I'm sure I don't have to ask how you're feeling given your injury,” Dr. O'Rourke greets in his usual charming manner, a kind smile on his face. He and his staff have run the Love Beach Clinic for years—some things in our small town really

never change, and I love that. But with everything that I am, I have big plans for the Love Beach Buzz. Someday, it'll be more than a sleepy little paper for a tourist beach town.

"I've never felt this awful before," I admit.

"Apparently, someone struck you on the head with a blunt object." He glances over my chart as everyone steps aside to let him near me. "Let's check you out now that you're awake."

He spends a few minutes assessing me—shining a light in my eyes for responsiveness, testing my coordination with some simple tasks, and asking questions. When he and the nurse help me sit up straight, dizziness overwhelms me, accompanied by a wave of nausea. My gasp tells enough to the doctor about my condition.

After examining my wound, he nods, leaning against the bed as I settle back. "Seventeen stitches. You're lucky Jackson got you here quickly; otherwise, the bleeding could've been much worse."

"Do you know what hit me? Did anyone see who did this? What happened?" Even in pain, my inner journalist begins firing off questions—many I end up keeping to myself.

The doctor looks at Jackson for confirmation. "None of us witnessed what happened." That's all the man says, clamming up. I take it as a sign he won't talk in front of certain people in the room.

The doctor makes a note in my chart. "While you were unconscious, we did a CT scan to rule out internal bleeding or fractures. From what I see, you have a mild concussion. I've prescribed pain medication—stronger than what you'd get over the

counter—but be aware it will make you sleepy. No driving. Follow the medication instructions carefully. The nurse will go over your wound care, and most importantly, you shouldn't be left alone for the next twenty-four hours. When you sleep, someone should wake you every two to three hours to check on you."

After rattling off a few more instructions—most of which I barely catch as new questions pile up—he mentions he'd like to see me again in about a week, before leaving the room.

"Belle, get me home," I demand as soon as the medical staff exits the room.

"I'm going to have to stick my foot down there. Belle experienced some cramping and spotting last week and her ObGyn ordered her to rest and reduce stress. I have to get back to the station, and I don't want her to be left alone to watch you," Davis interjects, still holding his protective arm around her.

"Cramping? I had no idea. Belle, why didn't you tell me?" I shoot at her with accusing eyes. We usually tell each other everything—almost.

"It's nothing—" she begins.

"It is a big deal. We're talking about your health and our baby," her husband corrects.

"How about Dad then? I could drop you off with him, Gigi, and stay for a while," she suggests. I shake my head vehemently.

"Are you kidding me? I just took over the Buzz, finally convinced Dad that the paper is in good hands—mine, and that he's safe to retire. If he finds out I was chasing a story and got hurt, he'll be furious. I'm already working my ass off to prove I can handle this."

“I’ll watch over her,” Jackson offers.

“What? No way.” I scoff. “Look, I’m fine, everyone. I’ll take the day off and work from home. I’ll be as good as new by tomorrow.” To prove my point, I try to get off the bed but, as my feet hit the cold linoleum flooring, I wobble. My head spins wildly like a stray spaceship lost in the universe, until Jackson’s hands catch me, steadying me—especially the one resting at the small of my back, where apparently I’m exposed under the hospital gown. Our bodies are so close, our faces nearly touching, our breaths mingling—it does nothing to quiet the hurricane of emotions inside of me.

“I got you, G.” There’s that softening of his eyes and voice again. It’s too easy to fall for it, when a voice inside of me says I should know better than to trust Jackson. Belle clears her throat, snapping us out of it. Somehow, he retrieves my things from behind him and shoves them into my arms. “You should get dressed. I’m about to let go now. You alright? I need to step out and make a call.”

Speechless, I can only nod as he leaves me leaning against the bed, watching him exit the room like a bat out of hell—a cute one with an amazing ass in jeans. But I rebel at the thought; if he’d caught me like that in his arms yesterday, my first impulse would’ve been to knee him in the groin. Today... I’d like to tour his groin with my tongue.

Belle clears her throat again, and I jerk my head away from Jackson’s magnetic pull.

“Actually, Jackson is right. He’s clearly the best option for you. I can see you’d be in his enormous hands—er, in good hands, I mean. Davis, shall we go?” she says.

“Yes, dear,” Davis responds with a wink.

“Stop it, you two. You know damn well there’d never be a thing between me and

Jackson. Belle, please help me get dressed,” I beg.

Davis kisses her cheek and leaves the room. As soon as the door shuts, I open my mouth to scold Belle for playing matchmaker—but then I stop. All these swirling questions about what happened at the docks probably have answers only Jackson can give. So I take a deep breath and resign myself to this unwelcome invasion of his presence in my life, whether I like it or not.

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THREE

HER-ICANE GIGI

JACKSON

Nothing amuses me more than watching Gigi argue with the staff as we leave the hospital. Despite her repeated claims she could walk, she stubbornly sits in her wheelchair with her arms crossed. She's always been feisty, which is why I don't let her stand as soon as we step outside. I lift her out of the chair and march her in my arms over to my truck, laughing to myself at the way her face turns red.

"Get mad all you want, G. You're at my mercy for the next twenty-four hours—deal with it," I say, barely concealing my smirk.

"Why are you doing this? Who even are you? Can you please bring back the Jackson I know—the one who doesn't go out of his way to do nice things for me?" she snaps, rolling her eyes while clutching my neck for dear life.

"Nothing's changed. I'm still the same awesome me," I reply.

She snorts at my arrogance. "Put. Me. Down."

"Yes, ma'am," I answer, unlocking the door and settling her into the passenger seat. She flinches as I fasten the seatbelt around her body, tugging the strap snug. "Safe and sound—just how you'll be after twenty-four hours with me on guard."

“Nope. Take me to my dad’s,” she retorts, her posture stiff with indignation.

“Are you sure about that?” I stare her down. I know her better than she realizes. “Or do you want answers? I can see the questions about last night in your eyes coming at me from a mile away.”

Her shoulders sag, as though a part of her pride falls away.

“I thought so.” I shut the door and hurry to the other side before she can even consider jumping out. As I drive toward her place, I continue, “Here’s the deal—it goes both ways, G. I need answers too. What the hell were you doing at the docks?”

“That’s my number one question for you, “ she fires back.

“I was there on a mission. You know, one of those dangerous military situations where you shouldn’t have been poking your nose around,” I assert, unable to keep my anger contained as I recall finding her on the floor, bleeding from a head wound an unknown assailant gave her. The guilt plagues me. I’ve replayed the night over and over in my head. Could I have gotten there a minute faster and prevented her attack?

“So, you’re investigating the illegal game fishing ring, I presume?” she asks, raising an eyebrow as if waiting for me to confirm that we’re on the same case. Compared to my actual case, fishing is trivial, but I play along despite the long-standing rumors swirling around Love Beach about illegal fishing off the coast.

“Yep, you got me, darling—just trying to take down some bad guys for catching fish,” I reply with a twitch of a smile that gives me away.

“Screw you, Jackson,” she mutters, diverting her eyes out the window. “If you want to mock this, then go ahead. I’ll be busting my ass figuring out who’s behind it.”

I dodge the topic and glance at her sideways. “How did you even know to be at the docks in the first place?”

“I have my sources.”

“Who?”

“I’m not legally obligated to share that.”

“Gigi, if you know anything that could help take these guys down, you need to talk.”

“Not happening. I never compromise my sources.”

“If it involves a federal crime, you might as well. You could be subpoenaed and forced to talk if the illegal fishing takes place in international waters. So, what exactly do you know about this ring?” I ask, gripping the wheel tighter. Our task force isn’t focused on this case—it doesn’t really concern me—but I can’t stand the thought of Gigi getting into deep trouble. My years in Texas in the Coast Guard taught me a thing or two about ruthless bastards in illegal game rings, and I don’t want her to cross paths with them.

Something isn’t sitting right about her investigation and my mission. But I can’t put a finger on what.

She clams up like she’s holding a precious pearl in her mouth. At a red light, I observe her profile: she somehow tamed her wild red curls into a ponytail, and her graceful neck curves for my view—flawless creamy skin under her earlobe is a lickable spot to start.

I remember the first time I fell for her back in eighth grade, not reciprocated, of course—maybe thanks to my relentless teasing, a clueless kid with his first crush. I

recall our head-to-head match in the Love Beach Spelling Bee, where neither of us missed a letter until I finally bested her with the word “logorrhea” and claimed victory.

I’ll never forget how her pink lips pouted and puckered, and how her green eyes burned into me, vowing revenge. Back then, I wanted her attention, so I fought her like hell in any competition I could.

These days? I’d let her win any game if she’d let me in... Deep inside of her.

Damn. I shake that thought away. “Look, people have been catching fish they shouldn’t for ages. Why are you suddenly so obsessed? Did you become an environmentalist while I was gone from Love Beach?”

“Sharks deserve to live, too,” she replies with a shrug, her gaze drifting back to me, with a subtle plea. “I need this, okay? No one here takes me seriously since Dad retired. The Buzz is just a quaint small town newspaper.”

“Hate to tell you, sweetheart—Love Beach is exactly that, a quaint little town. Haven’t you noticed?”

“You sound just like my dad.”

“He’s a smart man. I’ve always liked Bill Baymont.” I add, “Keep your company simple and you’ll be safer darlin’.” And I wouldn’t have to worry about her next investigation landing her in even deeper trouble.

“Sure, small town news has its place. But I want to elevate the paper with some real journalism, and hard-hitting investigative stories. There’s nothing wrong with taking what my dad built and doing it better,” she explains.

“I don’t know. This town might not be ready for Hurricane Gigi unleashing a story about fish,” I snort, aware it’s a low blow. Judging by her contorted expression, she hates me for it—even though a part of me revels in seeing her get worked up. My preference would be that she channel all that anger into letting me fuck her good and hard with her back up against the wall. We have years of pent-up frustration with each other, so by my estimation, we should get started now, making up for it before we get any older.

I know I’ve pushed too far, when she shoots back, “And what exactly were you and Davis doing at the docks? My source told me a ship was arriving with fish and that a truck would meet them and make the transfer of goods. So, I’m guessing you’re back in town chasing the same scum I am?”

I flash her the widest, most cocky grin I can muster and reply with a classic military quip: “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.” I fix her with a smoldering look, and she simply rolls her eyes—tough crowd tonight.

A block away from her place, I realize I can’t let her stay angry with me for the next day or two. One of us has to give. “Look, G, even though you shouldn’t have put yourself in danger, the moment I saw you, I rushed over to pull you from what could have been a really dangerous situation if my team had closed in on the perps. You could have been caught in the crossfire. But by the time I reached you, you were already on the ground. The perps got away—we didn’t see a thing.”

I don’t divulge how our drone ended up following the truck, but lost it when it parked under a clump of trees at a nearby library. The occupants dispersed before the drone and our team could find them.

“You tried to play hero once again,” she retorts flatly, her voice winding down into a tired yawn. The painkiller the doctor gave her must be finally working.

“Would that have made the front page of The Buzz? I can already see the headline: ‘Love Beach Hero of the Day: Jackson Alexander Saves Gigi Baymont from the Clutches of Evil Fishermen.’”

At least she manages a half-hearted laugh, shaking her head. “Could you be any more cocky right now?”

“Hell yeah, I could,” I reply as I park in her driveway. Too bad she doesn’t peek down at my lap, where my confidence is growing by the second. She defiantly unbuckles and reaches for the door handle. “Hold on. Wait for me.”

I jump out and dash around to catch her as her feet hit the ground, meeting her face-to-face once more. We’re so close that I can see the depths of her eyes in the soft light of sunrise. But I can tell she’s exhausted. Suddenly, I feel guilty for teasing her so relentlessly when her body and mind are trying to recover from a vicious attack.

“Gigi, I’m?—”

“I’m fine,” she insists, not letting me apologize, pushing past me as she moves toward her front door. I keep a couple of steps behind, ready to catch her if she stumbles. Because that’s me. The hero. And I could be hers if she’d let me.

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FOUR

RANSACKED

JACKSON

When we arrive at the red door of her light blue-painted craftsman house, she glances down at herself as if something essential is missing.

“Where’s my purse? I had a crossbody bag with me when I went to the warehouse. Where did it go?”

“You didn’t have anything on you or nearby where you fell,” I reply.

“Oh, my God. Call your people and find out if anyone picked it up from the scene. That purse contains my life: my phone, keys, wallet, notebook,” she exclaims in panic.

The entire time I’ve known Gigi, she was never without a precious notebook. She took copious notes in classes, but as an adult and a journalist, her notebook contains details for her articles.

“On it,” I say as I dial up Davis, tapping my phone while she bends over to retrieve a key from under a planter. “Seriously, Gigi—that key isn’t exactly a secret anymore. I’m pretty sure half the neighborhood knows you hide it there.”

“It’s a quaint, small town, remember?” she snips, echoing my own words as she

unlocks the door.

“Yeah, until I busted that cartel for trying to launder money here. Things change. You should be more careful?—”

Before I can finish, she swings the door open to reveal a chaotic mess inside.

“What the hell? Someone broke in?” She stares, unmoving.

I spring into action, shoving the phone at her. “Tell Davis. Stay here until I give the all clear,” I hiss.

Drawing my gun, I step in front of her. I methodically sweep the place room to room—every closet, nook, and cranny—unable to risk any further harm coming her way. With drawers upturned, furniture scattered, and debris everywhere, I make sure the scene is secure. Only once I’m satisfied that it’s safe, do I return, noting the whites of her knuckles while she clings to the door frame and her eyes widen with shock.

“Either someone was searching for something or they were trying to intimidate you. How long have you been digging into that illegal fishing ring?” I ask cautiously.

My gut tells me there’s more to this.

“Off and on, for a while now,” she admits, finally stepping into the doorway and scanning the ruined space. “My house... I feel so violated.”

A thousand thoughts race through my mind. “Are you sure you don’t want to divulge your source now? They might’ve set you up last night to keep you quiet.”

She shudders visibly, rubbing her arms. “No. No way. I—I need to find my laptop

somewhere in this mess.”

“You shouldn’t touch anything. This is an active crime scene. I need Davis’ team here to dust for prints.”

“What am I supposed to do, then?” she asks, massaging her brow, clearly exhausted as the painkillers begin their work.

“Get in my truck and rest,” I order as the sound of approaching sirens grows louder. Of course, she fights me on this, stubborn as always. A part of me feels terrible for her.

I understand why chasing this story is important to her though, wanting to prove herself to the world, to the citizens of Love Beach, and her father. When I enlisted in the Coast Guard, I did it to get out of this small town and see the world. Initially, I took none of the military seriously, barely made it out of boot camp, always the good time guy looking for a party.

Eventually, at my post in Texas, something clicked for me and I wanted to prove myself that I could reach for more. I worked hard and got noticed by the higher ups, eventually getting promoted into Officer Candidate School.

After I graduated, the men and women I led often said they respected me more than a traditional officer because I’d started at the bottom and earned my rank. My last unit called me Captain Badass for it. But I can’t stand the bureaucracy of the military sometimes.

When I got chosen for this interagency task force, it was like a higher calling. I found I could thrive in covert operations. I still answer to the brass, but I have to rely on myself to get through any situation, which appeals to me as a self-made badass.

As the officers work through Gigi's home one room at a time, she leans against the living room wall, watching, yawning, wary. The physical and emotional toll wearing on her face. When I think she's had enough, I march over, hoist her over my shoulder, and carry her to my truck.

"Jackson, please," she protests weakly, "I can't just leave my house."

"Quiet, G. You're coming with me." I buckle her in and go around to my side.

As I start the truck, she rubs her eyes and asks, "Where?"

"My place. You'll be safer there with me. And no more arguments—you'll lose this fight," I warn.

True to form, she tries to argue, a few more words escaping her mouth, until her head lags as the painkiller takes full effect.

"Close your eyes, darlin'," I whisper. "Trust me. I'm the hero you need right now."

For the next six hours, Gigi slept in my bed. I woke her up twice to check on her, as per the doctor's orders, only to be met with grumbled retorts telling me to go screw myself. Apparently, her mild concussion hasn't softened her attitude toward me much.

I take a call from Davis, keeping me updated. His officers lifted the prints and were rushing them through the system. They'd photographed everything, but couldn't determine who was behind the break-in yet. On a hunch, I ask if his crew could find Gigi's old notebooks and search for any mention of her current investigations.

When I mention her research into the illegal game fishing ring, he laughs. "There's nothing there. Believe me, if there were, I'd devote resources to it—but our small

town's budget is already stretched thin, and my officers have more pressing concerns here in Love Beach. Especially now, with Spring Breakers flooding in soon. You grew up here; you know how wild it gets. I'm not sure how much longer I can have my guys help you in the case."

"I understand." I force my mind to skip past the good times Beau, and Davis and I had with hot spring break chicks in our younger days. Although I could stop and reminisce with him about it, I don't. "Do you get many leads about illegal fishing, though?"

"Any strong ones we get are sent off to the local Coast Guard. They handle the rest."

"Okay, man. Thanks."

"Hey, how's Gigi holding up?" he asks.

"Sleeping like a baby. Gotta go." It's time to wake her up, so I head to the bedroom. If I don't, I fear she'll never get to sleep later tonight. Although the damn painkillers would probably knock her out again.

Here I am, running on no sleep myself. But I'm used to long hours awake on a mission. If she's up all night, then so am I. I can sleep when the mission is over.

There she lies on her back, the comforter barely covering her. My sweatshirt has ridden up, exposing her midriff thanks to low-slung jeans. I squint and blink, and notice a new piercing at her belly button. That's hot. The view wakes up the beast in my pants. When was the last time I'd seen Gigi in a bikini? Far too long.

Her body was always awkwardly curvy in school, but this womanly version of her... she owns her curves.

Oh, to kiss her there on her midriff and head lower. I bite my tongue to stifle a groan. Hovering over her, I reach out and do something I've been longing to do for ages. A stray red curl has escaped her ponytail, falling across her forehead. I straighten it a bit, then let it coil back into place. She's always had the wildest hair.

The scattering of freckles across her cheeks is fucking adorable, always has been. Then I realize her glasses are gone. Maybe knocked off of her face during the attack?

Back in school, I used to tug at her braids and she used to poke fun at my braces. Look at us now—nothing much has changed.

Except I've been fantasizing about her a whole helluva lot over the past few years since Beau married Addie, Davis's sister. I returned on leave for their wedding, and although I'd had a crush on Gigi as a kid, as a man, those feelings have morphed into something hotter, fiercer, and dangerously enticing.

The way we argue always makes me think we'd tear each other apart in bed. And something tells me we'd be incredible together. Could there possibly be something more? As long as we don't kill each other first.

I'm unapologetically cocky; getting women into bed has never been a problem for me. But easy conquests aren't nearly as stimulating. When the time comes to settle down, I want someone who keeps me on my toes and ignites a fire in my soul.

Gigi has always done that.

My phone vibrates in my pocket—it's from my commander—and I step out of the room to take the call.

"Alexander," Commander Daniels addresses me formally. "I got your message. Fill me in on the details."

I walk into the kitchen, set the call to speaker, and start making coffee as I explain how last night's bust was interrupted—telling him about Gigi, the perpetrators slipping away, and even her investigation into the illegal fishing ring.

“So, you're saying you both had intel that her attackers and your gunrunners were at the same dock last night? Coincidence or connection?” he asks, voicing the very question I've been mulling over.

“Not sure yet. I think she was definitely targeted—between the attack and her ransacked house.”

“Could this woman be hiding more than she lets on? Did she catch any detail during the attack that might help?”

“I haven't pushed her for details, sir. Everything happened so fast. The pain meds are helping her rest now.”

“Make sure you get on her and press her as soon as you can,” he instructs.

“Yes, sir.” My lips twitch as my mind wanders to less professional thoughts—my superior's orders to press her hard and get on her as soon as possible. I'd gladly comply—once I'm sure she won't knock me out when I try.

“Until you figure out if there's a connection, keep her close. Don't let her out of your sight.”

I don't plan to. “Babysitting duty. Got it.”

“Send me daily reports.” The Commander clicks off, and I hear a noise behind me. I swivel on my heels to find Gigi standing there in the doorway, mouth slightly agape.

“How much of that did you hear?” I ask.

“I don’t need a babysitter, especially not you, ” she retorts, squinting and complaining—clearly she only heard the tail end of it, thank goodness.

“Well, too bad, baby. You’re stuck with me.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.” She crosses her arms like a petulant child.

“So help me, Gigi. I’ll handcuff us together and throw the key into the ocean if you don’t cooperate.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she hisses.

It sounds like a ton of fun to me; I almost beg her to be a bad girl and try me. Instead, I cock a brow with an icy stare that strongly suggests she shouldn’t test me.

“You are the most irritating man, Jackson Alexander. I have work to do, you know. You can’t just follow me around 24/7.”

“Yeah, I can—and I will. If it means keeping you safe, nothing else matters.” I stand my ground, watching her reaction.

“You’re impossible.”

“And you’re awake. Come here,” I command, pulling a chair over to the sink and patting the seat. “Let’s change your bandages and wash your hair.”

“You... want to wash my hair?”

“Yep. And I promise to be careful—get any remaining blood the nurses might have

missed, and clean the area around the wound.”

She chews her bottom lip, then slowly saunters over. “Fine. But don’t get soap in my eyes,” she grumbles.

“Wouldn’t think of it. You can trust me.”

“Hmph.”

As she sits, I can’t help but appreciate the sight of her backside—firmer than I remembered. Nice.

“Lean back.” I begin rinsing her hair. “Is the water temp just right for you?”

With a shrug, she doesn’t really give me an answer, still not giving me an inch despite everything that’s happened.

“I wish I knew where I went wrong with you, G.”

“How do you mean?”

“Most women seem to think I’m just fine. You, though, must be the only one in the world who isn’t easily won over by me.”

“Hurt your ego?” she smirks, and a part of me wants to grab the spout and douse her with water. But I hold back—I’m a grown man who’d think twice before doing that. I wouldn’t mind giving her bratty self a playful spanking, though.

“Nope. Just like any competition we’re in, it makes me want to work harder to win.” I wink.

“Win what?” She scowls. Why is it that every feeling Gigi has about me wears across her face a little too easily?

“ You, Gigi.” I lower my voice and fill it with every intention.

Her breath catches as I wash her hair. Our eyes meet, as if acknowledging the inevitability brewing between us. She fights it, though, recovering with her signature roll of the eyes.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she says, her arms crossing beneath her beautiful breasts. Tilted toward the ceiling like perky peaks, they’re on full display for me—the only man here lucky enough to admire them, and I plan on keeping it that way.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:03 am

FIVE

BUZZING

GIGI

There's no dodging Jackson when his unmistakably masculine scent clings to me—from the blankets on the guest bed I slept on to the t-shirt he insisted I wear overnight. It surrounds me like a heady mixture of leather, cedarwood, and tobacco with a hint of salty ocean air, serving as proof that I spent the night at his place—even if we slept in separate beds.

I stretch, admitting that this bed is far more comfortable than my own; I slept like a baby, or perhaps it was the pain killer medicine. When I see the doctor again next week, I hope to be done with it. Cautiously, I run my fingers over my bandage, making sure it stayed on overnight, and they brush against my soft curls. I can't help but wonder what kind of conditioner Jackson used when he washed my hair—applied with the ease of a man who's done it for countless other women—but I decide not to dwell on it or it might make me crazy. Not that I have any right to be jealous.

I'm not accustomed to his kindness, and I should dismiss his silly declarations of wanting to win me over. What exactly does that mean? Especially after the way he steadied me, carried me like a hero claiming his prize, and then tenderly played with my hair in the sink. He volunteered to watch over me and made every effort to cheer me up, even reminiscing about our school days over the perfectly pan-seared scallops he cooked last night.

Who does he think he is, morphing into this different person? Then again, he has to be—he's only following orders from his superior officer. He probably knows he's far more tolerable shape-shifting into this decent guy, than he would have been in order to make our time together one where we weren't ripping each other's throats out. After all, I'm just a small part of his mission; I'm not going to pin my hopes on someone who's been known to move on to the next assignment as soon as one is done.

The silence of the house, and the pale light filtering through the windows, indicate it's still early morning. With a dull throb in my head, the quiet offers the perfect moment to shove aside thoughts of him and focus on the attack, the chaos in my life, my house, and my investigation. I feel violated—did I really stumble into a sphere of unknown danger when I stepped foot in the warehouse? When I picture fishermen, I think of Dad, an avid angler who loves his rods and reels, not hardened men clashing with criminals under gunfire.

By the time I catch the sound of Jackson moving about in the kitchen and the aroma of brewing coffee reaches me, I'm still no closer to any answers. All I know is that I desperately need to get out of his t-shirt before it drives me crazy. I change into yesterday's clothes, aching for the comfort of my own belongings. Without my phone, I feel lost.

Regardless of what Jackson might say, I decide I'm swinging by my house today—the twenty-four-hour watch will be over soon. I'm feeling fine, and there are piles of work waiting for me at the office.

Once I step into the kitchen, it's crystal clear I can't spend another day here anyway, not with Jackson standing there in nothing but jeans and a smile while he cradles two mugs of coffee.

“Oh, you're up. I was just about to bring you coffee in bed. How do you like it?” he

asks.

“How do I—?” I begin, my eyes trailing down the front of him, taking in the sight of golden abs, and promising happy trail, especially noting the single undone top button of his jeans. I like it, very much.

“The coffee, G. Do you take it black or...?”

“Just cream,” I reply sharply, meeting his knowing grin as I take the mug and pour my own cream from the container on the counter.

“We’re leaving in a few minutes. I have to check in with Davis at the station, and your dad called. He wants us to swing by his diner for breakfast,” he says, taking up all the room in the middle of the kitchen with his manly frame, and sipping from a mug that says Hero, naturally. Cocky ass.

About my dad. I groan inwardly. That means someone talked, and word has spread around Love Beach—now he knows I was attacked last night. Figures. “I’d rather you drop me off at my house or the office instead.”

“Nope. I’m not having this argument again. Wherever you go, I’m coming along until it’s safe for you to be alone. Period.” He downs his coffee, rinses the cup, then buttons his jeans as he passes by me. I chew on my nail. “Why do you suddenly seem so worried?”

“I’m dreading Dad calling me out for going to the docks. After all, he struggled with handing the company over to me. Now this will make him rethink everything.”

“Maybe a good kick in the butt by Bill is exactly what you need,” he insists, leaning casually against the kitchen doorway with a thumb inserted into his belt loop—a sight too sexy for my current state to handle.

I snort. “I love him, and I get why he’d be upset, but you have no idea what it’s like living in that man’s shadow all my life. Ever since he retired, and I took over, everyone still sees me as his little girl following in his footsteps. No one—even you—believes I can take this company to the next level.”

“Whoa. Hold on. I never said that,” he protests, lifting away from the doorway.

“You did. You told me to keep things simple and safe,” I accuse, my voice rising, stepping forward.

“Because I never want to see you lifeless on the ground again, G. Do you have any idea what that did to me?” His tone escalates and we’re back to clashing, inches apart, heated stares between us. His fresh breath washes over me like the best cinnamon flavored toothpaste, sending my heart pounding and my tongue desiring a taste. But he takes a beat and steps back, shaking his head, then he saunters down the hall, and barks, “We pull out in ten. Be ready.”

I scoff. “You can’t order me around like one of your soldiers.”

His bedroom door slams. Though my cheeks warm with his concern, I remain determined. I’ll show him—and everyone—that I’m an outstanding journalist ready to take the Buzz to new heights.

Over steak and eggs at Dad’s favorite diner—a place he’s frequented daily for ten years ever since Mom passed away—I endure his criticisms and concerns for my safety. I know he means well.

“Stay away from the docks, Gigi. Nothing good happens down there. Besides, being in charge now comes with a great amount of responsibility. If you don’t think you can handle it—” He grumbles and I cut him off.

“I’m fine, Dad. No docks. I get it. And I’m handling the job just fine.”

“I have to agree with you there. The docks, especially at night, are not always safe.” Of course, Jackson sees eye to eye with Dad, which irks me; no other guy I brought to meet him has ever treated my father with the same level of respect as Jackson does, and earned it back, as well.

It’s a shame, we’ll never be anything more than “sorta friends.” After all, this is Jackson, the guy with a woman in every port, and I refuse to be his temporary attachment here just because he’s in town again.

I barely keep up with their conversation—ranging from sports to spring breakers overrunning Love Beach—silently thankful Jackson is there to keep Dad entertained and off my case. Until I overhear Dad mention his new fishing buddy.

“Guy Zephyr is his name—a rough-around-the-edges type who’s recently started a new fishing operation here,” Dad says, describing the Zephyr vessel in intricate detail. I lean forward, capturing every word. “Top of the line beauty. Must have cost him plenty.”

Then I notice his new blue hat emblazoned with a Zephyr Cruises logo. “He’s been trying to convince me to join him on some night fishing. Could be fun. After all, I have nothing but time on my hands now. I must say, retirement is treating me well, honey.”

“If he’s new, then I should swing by and tell him about our advertising program,” I suggest, which would get me access to him. Would Guy have seen people doing illegal stuff out on the ocean... or could he be a suspect?

Jackson and I exchange a look. Is he thinking what I’m thinking?

Once we leave Dad—amid my half-hearted promises to stay out of trouble—Jackson checks his phone. “We need to check in at the station, and I have to confer with my team.”

“Fine, you do that. I’ll head to my office on foot,” I reply. He yanks me back by the arm and walks me to his truck.

“If you think I’m buying that, G, you’re mistaken. I saw that look in your eyes—you plan to speak with Zephyr.”

I shrug. “Only because he has a new business here, and I have an advertising quota to meet. We have an incredible new business package at the Buzz.”

“Stop it. You need to step back and let me handle this. My team will run checks to ensure he’s legit, has filed all the proper licenses, and?—”

“Are you finally admitting illegal fishing is your mission now?” I tease with an arched brow.

He scoffs. “You know better than to think that. I’m on a more important assignment. But to ease your mind, I’ll have Davis send an officer over to scope him out.”

“Right, and you think Zephyr would be more forthcoming with a police officer than with me, approaching him innocently with an advertising opportunity? Which would get him to open up with any useful info, do you think?”

After running a hand through his hair, he mutters, “Fuck. I hate admitting you’re right sometimes.”

I cock my head and grin. “I know you do.”

“I’ll take you. There’s no way you’re going to see him alone.”

“It’s just a chat with a town newcomer. What’s the worst that could happen?” But upon Jackson’s glare, I backtrack. “Okay. Fine. Now let’s move out, soldier. Time’s wasting.” I jump into his truck ahead of him, already planning my pitch for Zephyr. If only I had my notebook and pen with me to write out some questions on the way to the docks; there’s something about the old school method of carrying a notebook with me into interviews that makes me feel like people see me as a serious journalist.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:03 am

SIX

QUITE THE HANDFUL

GIGI

Jackson and I arrive at the new Zephyr Cruises office near one of the docks. The very first—and only—person we encounter upon entering is the man Dad had mentioned, his new fishing buddy. His blue shirt matches the cap Dad wore at breakfast, with Guy embroidered under the logo. The rugged man looking to be in his forties, bears the marks of a hard life with scars up and down his tatted arms and one under an eye.

I start off with the truth. “Hi, I’m Bill Baymont’s daughter and owner of the Love Beach Buzz. He just raved on and on about your fishing cruises over breakfast. We had to come check you out. Congratulations on your new business.”

“Nice to meet you.” He directs the gruff greeting toward me, but keeps a wary eye on Jackson.

“Oh, and this is, um...” I begin, uncertain what to say as I point at him—something I hadn’t prepared for on the ride over.

“I’m her boyfriend,” Jackson cuts in, placing his hand on my lower back. I stiffen at his touch, my pulse quickening instantly.

“Anyway, I’ve just learned about your burgeoning venture today. I wondered if you’d be interested in the business advertising package we have at the Love Beach

Buzz. Our paper is the best way to spread the word around the county about your cruises to both locals and tourists.”

While talking, I see a chance to develop a bigger story and a featured article in the Buzz. In my next breath, I pitch the idea to him. He seems open, and it would give me the perfect opportunity to stay in his orbit, gain his trust, and potentially gather more details.

“What kind of fish do people catch on your cruises? Sharks?” Jackson asks.

“Some—only the legal ones, of course,” the man replies briskly, rattling off a list of species he targets. He then even offers to take us out on the water and show us his shiny new boat. “The two of you could take a cruise together and then leave a review online.”

Jackson ducks his hands into his pockets and moves over to a wall adorned with a dozen framed photos.

“That’s great—I can snap some excellent photos for the article while we’re on the water,” I say, though my memory of the attack makes me shudder, worried about being out on open water with him. Changing the subject, I ask cautiously, “How did you get into fishing, if you don’t mind me asking?”

With a hint of a grin, he explains his father used to take him on fishing trips down to the Gulf of Mexico while riding motorcycles with a club. “That’s when I fell in love with the sport,” he adds.

Before I can ask another question, Jackson abruptly cuts in, his impatience obvious as he eyes one of the photos on the wall. “Is this you pictured here among the Mississippi Mudrunners, wearing their patches? Weren’t they notorious for all sorts of illegal activities?”

I peer at Guy, who shifts uncomfortably. “Well, no—at least not the club. I, er, I mean, my dad was involved with that.”

Jackson returns to my side. “Have you been approached by parties willing to pay big money for the catch of illegal fish?” My eyes double at his cocky questioning; I thought we had agreed to deal with this carefully under the guise of my newspaper opportunities.

“No, never.” He swallows hard. “Are you a cop? Look, I run an entirely above-board operation. I’d never break the law here.” The fisherman grows defensive.

“What about as a member of the motorcycle club?” Jackson’s jaw clicks and doesn’t give up his questioning.

Before I realize what’s happening, the man bolts out the back door with Jackson hot on his heels. It all escalates so quickly, it takes me a moment to process the situation. Then I sprint after them, quickly overtaking Jackson in my haste.

“Jeez, G. You never could keep up with me in track and field back in school,” Jackson calls out.

“I’ve been training this past year because the Buzz is the main sponsor for the new Love Beach Marathon this fall, and I’m determined to finish it,” I reply, not out of breath yet.

We might both be chasing after Zephyr with the same goal in mind, but now our running becomes a contest—each of us trying to outdo the other. Although as Zephyr reaches the chain-link fence surrounding the property and attempts to climb it, I hit my limit. A fence climber I am not.

“Let me show you how a hero gets it done, darlin’,” Jackson boasts, his cockiness

both infuriating and oddly alluring. My hands on hips, I gulp deep breaths as I watch him scale the fence with the agility of a monkey. In mere seconds, he brings the man down and cuffs him, executing the move as if he'd practiced it all his life.

Later that day at the police station, we learn that Zephyr's alibi clears him for the night of my attack—a local woman he'd been seeing had invited him over for dinner while her folks were in town. Add in a sighting from the liquor store clerk where he'd stopped to buy a bottle of wine before meeting them for dinner, and I strike him off my list of possible attackers.

“Well, Zephyr swears he's been trying to keep a low profile, rebuilding his life and staying out of trouble here, and that he wouldn't get involved in illegal fishing. Although he does have an outstanding warrant in Mississippi. He's scheduled to be sent back there tomorrow morning after spending the night in jail,” Jackson explains, finally finding me in Davis's office where I've waited for a couple of hours.

My shoulders slump. “I was so sure this was going to lead somewhere.”

“Don't be too hard on yourself yet,” Jackson says, leaning a hip casually on the desk a few feet in front of me. “He did mention one more thing—as a demand for leniency in his case. At the docks, he overheard some chatter among boat captains and crew. One night, a few deckhands grumbled about not getting paid enough for what they called ‘the shark job,’ and they even discussed roughing up the manager at the Love Beach Yacht Club, blackmailing him for more money or they'd turn him in.”

“Yacht Club? Do you think that's worth investigating?”

“Illegal big game fishing is backed by wealthy patrons, and the Yacht Club fits in perfectly.” Jackson runs a hand over his chiseled jaw and scruffy beard as his hair falls into his eyes. If he ever caught the eye of Hollywood, he could star in one of those action thrillers, causing women to fall instantly for him.

“Did Zephyr say which boat the deckhands worked for?” I fire off, my mind already racing ahead.

He grins. “Why am I not surprised you know the right questions to ask? Yep. Believe it or not, the boat is named The Jailbird.”

“Then it might be docked at the club. We could go look. Dad and I have a membership there to keep abreast of news and events.”

“Hold up. We’re keeping the name of the boat a secret for now. Only Davis and us know about it. If you go snooping around, you could set off all kinds of alarms with the wrong people.”

“Come on, we have to check it out. It’s our only lead.” I declare, rising to my feet. Jackson follows.

“Do you think I have time for your little news investigation, G? I’m busy running an operation to catch—” he begins, but stops as I arch an eyebrow.

“Catch who?” I press since he’s off guard.

“Not going there.”

“Then I’m heading to the club,” I announce, moving toward the door. But Jackson grabs my arms, pulling me back.

“No way, G.” I glare at him. “Seriously, if looks could kill, your eyes would burn me to a crisp right now,” he teases.

He’s right—only there’s something even more intense between us, a heat I’m not ready to fully acknowledge. I shrug off his hold and cross my arms defiantly. His

gaze drifts down to my chest as he licks his lips. I can tell I've rattled him, and I like that I have. But I'm determined not to let him have his way.

"I never said you had to be involved in my investigation. But your bosses clearly think I need babysitting. Do they pay you enough for that?" I challenge, cocking my head.

"Considering you're quite the handful, absolutely not," he replies with a snarky tone.

I scoff as I head toward the door, only for him to come up behind me and slam his hand on it, shutting it forcefully. His lips hover dangerously close to my ear as he murmurs, "Goddammit, woman, you drive me crazy."

"The feeling is very mutual," I answer breathily, tilting my head so close that our breaths mingle for a moment—if only that moment could last.

A knock at the door startles me, and we quickly break apart. Davis peeks in, eyeing us both. "I've got a hit on the fingerprints from Gigi's house. You're going to want to see this, Jackson."

He follows Davis out, but when I try to join, his raised hand stops me like an immovable barrier.

"Nope. You stay here. I'll be right back. Then... fine, we'll check out that boat at the Yacht Club—but this time, we do it my way. Clearly, your method with Zephyr today didn't work," he declares.

"Only because you charged in like a bull in a china shop, the moment you saw that motorcycle club photo," I huff, pacing the office.

"I trust my gut and never regret following it. You can't tell me you don't have those

instincts too, G. We're very similar in that regard, except you should learn to trust yours more often." Our eyes meet for a split second, as if silently acknowledging our shared quirk.

"Whatever," I grumble.

"Look, I'll run the Yacht Club manager through our system and check for any previous records or warrants. Then we'll go to the club and see what we can uncover. Now sit down—this won't take long," he orders, pointing toward the chair. I don't move. He snaps his fingers and points again.

I snort and sit, and finally he leaves. My thoughts scatter in a hundred different directions, until I focus on Jackson... The way he'd called himself my boyfriend in front of Zephyr. What was that about?

I can't deny what I felt when he stood behind me at the office door a minute ago, though. Before Davis interrupted us, sparks flew up and down my spine. Even now, Jackson's body heat lingers on my skin as if he wrapped himself around me. I hug my arms, then I catch a whiff—a scent that unmistakably smells like me.

Ugh. I've been wearing these same clothes for nearly two days now. Bled in them, slept in them, and ran in them. I hope Jackson hasn't noticed... not that his opinion matters much. But if we're going to show up at the Yacht Club, I can't look like this. I need him to take me home so I can shower, change, and be surrounded by my own things.

Jackson takes longer than I expected. When he returns with a scowl on his face, he waits until we're in his truck before he breaks the news.

"The fingerprints match a rough Central American guy—a real intimidating character you'd never want to cross. Now, unless you've been dating this type of guy, there's

no reason for him to have been at your house, right?” he asks with a sidelong glance.

“I don’t know a single soul like that.”

“It means he’s likely the one who attacked you, since you said your purse was missing. I think we can assume he found your keys and address on your ID and went to the house next.”

“Why? Just to warn me away? What does it mean?”

He doesn’t answer, but grips the steering wheel tighter. I can tell there’s more to this that bugs him. But I don’t have time to seek it out, when the turn off for the Yacht club is ahead, while my house lies in the other direction.

“Wait, we can’t go to the club like this. There’s a dress code. I’m begging you—please take me back to my house so I can shower and change. This sweatshirt reminds me of the attack,” I plead, tugging at the hem. “There’s even blood on it.”

“Yeah—on my sweatshirt. Admit you swiped it that one night during the party Beau and I had, and I’ll take you home,” he retorts.

My head snaps toward him. “What makes you think it’s yours?”

His glare says he knows the truth. I don’t know how he knows, but yes, it was me. It wasn’t that I desired him back then or anything. But I loved this band in high school, and I didn’t think he deserved to wear it more than me.

“Okay, I took it. Happy now? I’m desperate for a shower and change of clothes, so please, if you don’t mind.” I gesture toward the direction of my house. He turns and I endure his not-so-subtle chuckling all the way home.

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SEVEN

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

JACKSON

At Gigi's house, the moment we approach and I see her wince and shiver, I rip off the yellow police tape draped across her front door. "We've got the evidence now—no need for this." She's been through so much, and I know I should leave it up, but my urge to protect her eclipses protocol.

Inside, we're met with the chaos once again. Only this time, I reach for her dining table and chairs and set them upright. "Let's put your place back together," I suggest, and somehow, we manage to do it without a quarrel.

Afterwards, Gigi digs through the debris until she locates her laptop. A smile of relief spreads across her face as she clutches it to her chest. I watch as she takes it to the table, sits down, opens it up, and waits for it to boot—while absentmindedly pushing her wild locks to one side, letting the curls cascade over her shoulder. God, she's gorgeous.

"It's all good. Everything is here. Whew." Over her shoulder, I view how she clicks through file after file, then opens email. She'd called her office from my house after we'd left the hospital, giving directions to her staff, conceding she'd be out for a couple of days. "Look at all these emails and messages. I know we want to get to the yacht club, but I need to go through them real quick, so..."

She glances up at me as if seeking guidance—a new behavior. Normally, for this sort of thing, she'd have kicked me out and taken charge. Is this progress?

“Sure, take your time. I need to make a few phone calls, anyway. I'll just be out here. Holler if you need me.” I exit her sliding glass door that looks out upon her small but tidy back yard, giving us both space.

My first call is to Davis, asking him to swing by my house, pick up a change of clothes, and bring them over so I can look presentable for the fancy club tonight. When he and Belle built a new home together, I took over his place, and he now keeps an eye on it since I'm often away on a mission, so he'd have access to grab clothes for me.

Though the Alexanders have always been among the richest families in Love Beach, my grandparents abandoned their club membership long ago, preferring their private life in their cliff-top mansion overlooking Passion Cove. The club has never been my ideal hangout either.

I settle into a cedar chair on the patio, keeping within view of Gigi, and return a call from my commander. When he answers, I update him on the prints we lifted from her home.

“Now that we know her attacker was from Central America, I can't deny there might be a connection between the cases,” I conclude, silently cursing that she's been dragged into my mission.

“Our intel tracked the gunrunners from Belize to Love Beach. It's too much of a coincidence. And it's odd her source would have her show up right where you were during the dock stakeout. Press her for the details. Keep on top of her.” Once again, everything my superior officer says regarding Gigi always comes off with a suggestive twist. “Also, have Davis assign someone to trail her, just in case.”

“Yes, sir.” Fuck that. If anyone is following her pretty little ass, it’s me, especially at the fancy club tonight, but I don’t tell him I’m about to chase another lead with her.

“One more thing,” the Commander adds. “Your extension papers are ready. CGIS sent them over today. I realize you only have a few months left, but you’ve become indispensable to our interagency unit. We’d very much like to keep you on board.” Before being reassigned back to Love Beach, we’d discussed extending my contract—a proposal I welcomed then. But now, why am I hesitating?

“Right. Send them over and I’ll have a look,” I say.

“Hopefully, your team can wrap up this beach mission soon. We need you with our team in Belize; it’s a total shit show down there.” He continues his briefing, and by the time I hang up, the decision I need to make about my career—my life—leaves me numb. But I can’t afford to dwell on it now, so I tuck it away in the recesses of my mind.

After the debacle of our run-in with Zephyr, I’m not taking chances. When I had Davis search Mike Knowles through his database at the station, I found the yacht club manager doesn’t have any priors, but I enlist my interagency crew to serve as my eyes in the sky tonight, just in case. Besides, thanks to Gigi, once inside the club, with access to the marina, I can snap some photos of the boats docked there, where the vessel name and registration numbers are always painted on the bow. My crew can run each through our system to see if any tie to our potential gunrunning suspects.

With everything set, I head out front to the street to meet Parker, who was sent by Davis. He shoves a bundle of clothes through his driver’s side window and laughs.

“Yacht club date? Really? You’re clearly going way above and beyond for Gigi, aren’t you?” His tone is laced with mockery. “It’s usually easy for you to get a woman into bed without needing a dinner reservation at the club—especially during

spring break when there are extra women trolling the boardwalk right now.”

“Stop joking before you piss me off. You know this is simply part of the mission,” I reply tersely, dismissing his banter. “Wouldn’t you go out of your way for a friend or someone you care about—say, your sister?” I must have touched a nerve because his jaw tightens and clicks.

I know Parker’s been through hell since what happened to his sister in New York. As a public defender, Kelsea Parker had discovered that a client she fought for in court and won actually was the killer. The man attacked her so viciously, she’ll be confined to a wheelchair for life. They caught him though and he rots in prison, while Parker moved her to his house in Love Beach to care for her. I admire him for going above and beyond.

I walk away, but he continues. “I overheard you and Davis talking about Mike. Do you really think he’s running the illegal fishing ring? I’ve known him all the years he’s managed the club. Seems like an upstanding family guy.”

“We’ll have a talk with him and see. Gotta go. Thanks for bringing these.” I head inside and change clothes in the half bath off the living room.

While waiting for Gigi, I distract myself by grabbing a broom and pail from the pantry—there’s shattered glass and broken porcelain from the intruder’s havoc near her built-in bookshelves and fireplace mantel, and I figure I might as well help clean up.

After restacking her books on the shelves, I notice that one of the broken items is actually part of a message in a bottle. A piece of paper, rolled up like a scroll, is lodged in the neck of it; the rest lies in scattered shards on the floor.

Something about it seems oddly familiar.

I carefully pick up the translucent green pop bottle, avoiding the jagged edges, and bring it closer to inspect. My name is scrawled on the paper, and suddenly I'm flooded with a vivid memory of an eighth-grade field trip to the beach on boat safety.

For fun, our teachers had each of us bring a glass pop bottle, write a message, roll it up, and seal it inside. We'd glued on a cork and wound twine around the bottle.

"Oh! What are you doing?" Gigi calls from behind me, startling me; I nearly drop the bottle. I turn, about to ask why she has this when all the eighth graders had thrown our bottles into the ocean that day once the boat left the shore. At the sight of her, my heart skips. I haven't seen her looking this damn sexy since Beau and Addie's wedding.

"Wow. Gigi, you're..." I trail off, taking in her appearance. The sleek black pumps elongate her legs, showcasing the results of her running program. Her little black dress ends at mid-thigh, and my hand is tempted to reach out. And that heart-shaped neckline, revealing just the right amount of cleavage—she's mesmerizing.

She smiles, casually draping her purse and a coat over the back of a chair. "Apparently, I can render the ever-so-cocky Jackson speechless. Interesting."

"Uh..." To make a certain thing even harder, her fragrance—a blend of wild floral blooms—wafts over from across the room, leaving me utterly tongue-tied and my cock bulging. I clear my throat, nodding toward the bottle in my hand, and manage a single word: "This?"

"Right. Funny story—I actually found your bottle in the bay last year. Well, Tawny found it," she explains, and I can't help but grin at the mention of our town dog—a scruffy but beloved golden retriever that no one really owns but everyone adores. Local businesses along Main Street feed her and set out water, and she's often found at the beach, always ready to fetch a ball. The vet in town looks after her health for

free. “I was walking along the shore one evening when she trotted up with it in her mouth. When I saw your name on it, I could hardly believe it.”

I nod, regaining my composure. “Remember that day? We all made wild guesses where our bottles would end up—some said India, others Peru. I joked mine would travel all around the world and finally return to Love Beach.” I’d always dreamed of leaving this small town to see far-off places—the military has provided, to a certain extent.

“Over the years, many of the bottles did wash back ashore, returning to Love Beach, like yours. I kept it because the color of the bottle complements the blues and greens of the painting on my mantel. I figured someday when you came back to Love Beach for good, I’d give it back,” she explains.

The fact that my bottle landed here and in Gigi’s hands feels pretty damn significant—as if it were some sort of sign, the universe telling me what decision to make regarding the extension of my contract.

I pull the paper out. “Did you ever read what I wrote?” I ask, waving it gently.

“No. It was meant to be secret, remember? We wrote our messages in class and the teacher sealed them in the bottle immediately.”

“You’re not even a little curious?”

“Do you recall what you wrote?”

“Yep. Something about leaving Love Beach to see the world, but someday I’d come back and marry you.” I confirm by glancing at the paper.

“M-marry? What?” She snorts and steps back, surprised.

I roll the message back up, tucking it into my pocket. “Come on—I was just a kid with a crush.”

“On me? You only ever picked on me.”

“Yeah, G. Why do you think that was? I liked you,” I shrug. “Classic pre-adolescent boy behavior.”

She rests a hip on the couch and sighs. “I used to think you were just a bully.”

“Get real, I wasn’t a bully,” I scoff, though I catch her vulnerable eyes, telling another story. “Damn, G, that hurts that you’d think of me that way.”

“Good.” She retreats into the kitchen, dabbing at her eye with a finger. Did she really mistake my teasing as bullying? I hurry after her.

“G, I had no idea you felt that way. I just thought we teased and taunted each other because that was what we did as friends. I should have been honest with you about how I felt back then.”

“Why couldn’t you? You dated all the pretty girls, but to me, you were relentlessly mean.” She leans her back against the sink, facing me.

“I can hardly recall a single girl from school, but you—I could never forget.”

“Sure. If it weren’t for our friends and family ties, you’d have forgotten me, too.”

“Doubtful. I didn’t date you because... you were better than the rest. And I liked what we had, the constant challenges and competitions. I didn’t want to ruin it by getting soft with you. Back then, I didn’t know how to be in a partnership where we help each other grow in a kind and supportive way. I do now.”

“I can’t even believe we’re having this conversation.” She launches away from the sink and flounces out of the room. When I follow, I find her fiddling with her coat. I step in to help, holding it up so she can slip her arms in one at a time.

“I’m sorry, Gigi. For all the teasing, er, bullying, as you call it. I never intended to hurt you. I’d take it all back if I could, all the way to the sixth grade dance at Valentine’s. Only instead of mocking you with your hair all up in a twist like a cone, and calling you a conehead, I’d ask you to dance with me.”

She moves away from me and toward the bookshelf. For a moment, she sifts through a stack of albums while I stand there, hands stuffed in pockets and awkward, unsure of our next steps. So much has been unearthed between us.

After a brief search, she returns holding an old photo from that dance. “You mean this one where I really did look like a conehead?” A playful grin lights her face. I take the photo and look it over.

“Yep, that’s the one. A big red, beautiful conehead.” We both laugh, the tension easing. As we pause to catch our breaths, our eyes meet—melting together as if finally bridging the gap that had long separated us.

I feel a surge of yearning to pull her into my arms and kiss her fiercely. “Gigi...” I begin, my tone soft and pleading, but her mood shifts.

“We should go. It’s getting late.” She quickly gathers her things and heads for the door. I get the sense that while she met me halfway today, there’s still a long way to go before we fully close that divide.

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EIGHT

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

GIGI

This has to be what it's like to act in a spy movie. At a glossy bar fashioned from exotic zebra wood, leisurely sipping our drinks, it's all too easy to pretend. How is this my life right now when two days ago my only concern was getting through my inbox and voicemails and filling my father's big shoes?

In the mirrors behind the bartenders, I catch my reflection, glad I opted not to wear the bandage around my head tonight. Just a little one, not noticeable, strategically hidden under my curls.

The mirrors also give us a perfect view for people-watching. Outsiders might assume that the way Jackson drapes his arm possessively over the back of my barstool and stays close enough to talk, signals we're on a date. In truth, I'm pointing out new faces in town while he recalls old classmates, now grown into adults.

A few of them even come up to us for a brief hello and handshake, asking Jackson what he's up to these days. He answers each with a simple label: government contracting.

I catch more than a few lingering glances from women around the room who appreciate his style. I do as well because he cleans up good. This side of Jackson in a dark blue suit with a white t-shirt tucked in, and his hair slicked back, a silver

necklace at his neck, his dog tags hidden underneath, has me hoping I don't wet my panties or bite my lip or do anything to give away how heated I am just being in his presence.

Jackson remains oblivious to the attention of others, his eyes fixed only on mine. A thrill runs down my spine, fueled by the allure of having such a charming military man by my side. A part of me remains skeptical, though—does he do all this for his mission, or is there genuine concern for me behind his actions?

I'm still a little taken aback by the memory of him declaring he wanted to marry me back in elementary school. But as an adult, I have no time for that kind of whimsical notion. I need to keep my feet firmly planted in practical thoughts. He's in the military, and his missions take him all over; Love Beach is merely a random stopover for quick encounters, not a place for a serious relationship.

At an awkward pause, he studies me, a stray lock of his slicked-back hair falling into his eyes. He isn't the type to settle down and embrace small-town life—and I have no plans of ever leaving. That's the only thing holding me back from running my fingers through his long, gorgeous hair, wondering if there could be more between us.

I still remember when he turned eighteen and committed his life to the military. I'll never forget seeing him with his buzz cut on his first leave home visiting his grandparents; though I much prefer his longer style now.

Departing from our talk about people, I ask, "What's with the hair, anyway? Shouldn't you be sporting the high and tight like most military men do?"

"One of the perks of being undercover here in Love Beach is that I can blend in by letting it grow out, skipping the usual weekly cuts." With a sly, panty-melting grin, he dares, "Admit it. You want to touch it, don't you?"

Oh, there's so much I'd like to touch on his body, but I will myself away from that thought. And, finally, Mike comes into view.

"Negative, soldier. Our target has arrived. Three o'clock over your left shoulder," I announce, taking another sip of my drink.

His eyebrows shoot up. "Careful, you have no idea how much it turns me on when you talk like that," he growls. Then, catching something in his earpiece, a few seconds later he chuckles—a reminder that his team is listening. I roll my eyes.

"I feel like a third wheel on this date," I complain.

"Date, huh?" He leans in, his lips nearly grazing my earlobe. "Trust me, darlin', you're the only woman at the center of my every thought right now." I almost lose myself in his words until I sense someone else's presence.

"Gigi, what a surprise to see you. It's been a while." Mike's greeting pulls Jackson away from me, pitting me between the two men. He regards Jackson off-handedly.

The two couldn't be more different. Jackson exudes the confidence of a hero who has won a hundred times and earned the right to the name, while Mike carries the entitlement of a man used to getting his way.

For a brief time, several years ago, he pursued me when he first moved to town. But then he met his now-wife, from a prominent family, and quickly lost interest in me. I wasn't that into him anyway. I know little of his life since then, but it's not a stretch for him to know people with money who could keep an illegal fishing ring afloat.

"Hello, Mike. I've been busy with the Buzz—my dad retired," I explain.

"So I've heard," he replies, glancing at Jackson as I introduce them.

“This is Jackson Alexander, Beau’s brother. He’s in government contracting,” I say, choosing my words carefully since everyone knows Beau, the star defenseman for the Charleston Renegades hockey team, one of our town’s few celebrities. “And this is Mike, the manager.”

“Chief Executive Officer,” Mike snidely corrects, extending his hand. The two men shake and size each other up. “Welcome. I hope you two have a pleasant visit tonight.” He attempts to move on, as if all we’re worth to him is this minute of his time compared to other couples he’d rather schmooze.

Jackson holds Mike’s handshake for a beat longer. “Actually, we’d like a word with you.”

Here we go again, Jackson jumping in. They teach bedside manner to doctors. Don’t they teach the art of subtle communication to military undercover agents?

“About?” Mike asks, frowning as he retracts his hand and turns his attention to me.

“We’re following up on a tip about a ring of fisherman catching things they shouldn’t.” I speak low and gauge his reaction.

His eyes go wide, at first, then he balks. “This conversation would be better suited during office hours than during our busy dinner service. You have my number, Gigi. Make an appointment.”

Jackson stiffens next to me from the unmistakable disdain in Mike’s voice. “I think you’ll make the time right now. Should we follow you to your office or make a scene right here?”

His eyes dart around us. “Make it fast, and keep your voices down.”

“Have you come into contact recently with anyone willing to pay for the catch of illegal species?” I ask, assuming he’ll deny it.

“No. And if I did, I’d certainly turn them in to the proper authorities,” he stammers, tugging at his tie as if nervous.

I press on with another question. “Has anyone approached you to hire a boat for big game fishing?”

“People charter boats all the time. That’s a service we provide, matching boat owners with clients. But never for anything illegal, especially not at my yacht club,” he insists.

“If we took a look at the docks for a boat called The Jailbird, what would we find?” Jackson interjects. Mike shifts, rattled, opening and shutting his mouth. I feel certain he knows more.

He focuses back on me. “Personally, I find these questions offensive, Gigi. I’ve been here for years serving this community, and never once has my integrity been called into question. This is an insult. But what do I expect from a small town reporter?—”

“Hey,” Jackson cuts in, grabbing Mike by the tie and yanking him. “Watch how you address Ms. Baymont, or you’ll have me to deal with. You have two choices: cooperate and tell us everything you know, or I’ll have a search warrant for your office—and for every boat docked here—in the next hour.”

His protective intensity takes my breath away as I watch Mike crumble under Jackson’s threat. When he finally releases him, Mike recovers, straightening the silk around his neck, and sticks his nose in the air.

“Then I’ll be waiting for the warrant. Now, leave my club before I have the guards

throw you both out.” He stonewalls us and shoves past, clipping Jackson hard in the shoulder. Before he can pummel the CEO flat on the bar floor, I yank him back by the arm.

“Take it down a notch or five, soldier,” I order.

“He knows something, I feel it,” he hisses.

“Me, too. But I suppose I have no choice but to talk to Davis and see if he’ll bring Mike in for questioning and get a warrant to search.”

Jackson leans on the bar with a sigh to calm himself. I know he didn’t want to become a part of my story, but then what was that show of defending me all about? If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’s invested now.

When he finally finishes his drink and abandons the glass at the bar, he offers me his elbow. “Would you like to go for a stroll down the docks with me since we’re here? We can scope the boats out and see if The Jailbird reveals itself.”

“Gee, that almost sounds like a romantic date,” I remark with a bit of sarcasm.

“Yeah? Should I turn on all my charm then to impress you?” His smoldering gaze flutters the butterflies in my stomach to life.

I’d say I already am impressed by him, more than I ever expected to be, but I don’t want him to get any cockier. I chuckle and take his arm, letting him lead the way. If I dare admit it, I have a thing for the cocky guy. But I still can’t see getting involved with him when I remind myself his mission will eventually be over. His appearance in Love Beach has an expiration date.

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NINE

THE JAILBIRD

JACKSON

While walking arm in arm from boat to boat, I use my phone to snap pictures of names and registration numbers, holding it in such a way no one would know. “Each vessel is required to display these near the bow,” I explain to Gigi.

“I know. I’ve lived in Love Beach my entire life, and have picked up a thing or two about boats,” she insists.

“That’s right. You’re a lifer,” I tease, but I don’t like the frown she wears as a response. “Team, are you getting these and running the registrations? Confirm if we get any hits.” I say, knowing that my phone instantly uploads to their computers in an undisclosed location.

Seconds later, a voice crackles in my ear. “Yes, sir, we were on it. Over.”

“The marina must have a dozen docks. Cataloging everything in one night is impossible. And I’m worried Mike won’t be too pleased to see our faces around here again.” Gigi glances back over her shoulder and tightens her arm around my elbow, as though trusting me to protect her. It’s remarkable how far we’ve come in just a couple of days compared to before.

“Don’t worry. My guys have eyes on security several docks away. They’ll warn us.

Let's just keep our eyes peeled for The Jailbird," I say, and resume our mission-focused walk, even though my arm occasionally grazes the swell of her chest beneath her coat.

At the end of a second dock, we reach a large, covered boat slip with a metal roof and two closed sides, commonly reserved for elite yachts—or in this case, hiding The Jailbird. This wouldn't be visible from the club and hard for our satellites to pick up the image.

"There she is. Holy shit," I mutter, and take the photo of the name and number. "Team, tap into CGIS databases and interagency intel to dig deeper. I want to know everything about this ship. Over."

"Yes, sir."

I take several more photos from different angles while Gigi stands off to the side, rubbing her arms and glancing back like she's nervous. Soon enough, my team reports back with the details I need.

"We got it, sir. Jailbird is registered to a company out of Belize—Blue Sky Holdings."

"What does Blue Sky specialize in?" I ask.

"Officially? Not much. Unofficially? Our database shows they're a shell company, a long-suspected front for various smuggling operations and drug trafficking. Over."

"We need to board for a closer look." I reach for Gigi's hand, but she hesitates.

"Are you crazy? What if the owners come back?"

“My people have eyes on this place and will tell us. Now come on. You wanted a story, right?” I shake my hand and she relents. I’d prefer her by my side rather than left exposed on the dock.

I leap onto the lower-deck of the yacht and then pull her up to join me. Drawing my gun just in case there’s anyone else aboard, we push further into the quarterdeck—the command center where the captain would oversee guest lists, crew rosters, and cargo manifests.

The comm crackles again. “Sir, based on your photos, we’ve traced her previous docking locations worldwide. And get this. She’s been spotted at known smuggling sites for both illegal big game fish and weapons. Over.”

“Shit. Cross reference with known locations of Lorenzo Ybarra,” I bark.

“Who is that?” Gigi asks.

“Someone you definitely don’t want to mess with. Help me sort through these manifests. We need any lists of cargo, anything that looks off.” Although we find nothing illegal, I’m convinced that any records of it they’d have locked up somewhere.

“I need to explore the lower decks. You coming?” I ask Gigi, whose wide eyes betray a thrill of danger—one I feel every single time.

We descend, expecting lavish sleeping quarters for a yacht like this, but discover that it has been gutted and converted into an enormous cargo bay. “What the fuck? Only smugglers would do this.”

Using my phone’s flashlight—also handy for recording videos to upload to the team—we search around the dim lit space until we stumble on a startling find in one

corner: the fin of a large fish, as if someone had carelessly lobbed it off.

“Are you seeing this?” I confirm with the team. “Can you identify what kind of fish?”

Within a minute, they reply that it’s a sandbar tiger fish—and it’s illegal to catch. They add, “Our computers show that Ybarra and Jailbird have frequented the same locations over the past year.”

While Gigi continues to inspect the hold near me, she almost trips on something. Holding it up, she cries, “Is this a gun magazine?”

A sinking feeling hits me as I rush over, snatching it from her hands to examine and photograph it for the team. I cannot believe what I’m seeing. I swallow hard at the full reality of what we’re dealing with. Everything tonight is connecting, and through gritted teeth, I say, “This isn’t just a fishing operation. I think they’ve been using this yacht to transport weapons, too.”

“What does that mean?”

I know I have to come clean to her, otherwise her nose for news will hound me. “G, I’ve been tracking gunrunners from Central America to here, and you’ve been chasing fishermen. Looks like we’re after the same story.”

She pales, at first. “Gunrunners? That sounds a hell of a lot more dangerous than catching sharks illegally.”

“Yeah. It is. Hold on.” I have intel coming in from my command. They tell me that there’s a report coming out of South America where a smuggler group layered their products. In our case, guns would have been stored on the bottom, ice over that, illegal fish in the middle then more ice, and then cover it all with something legal, like tuna and more ice. Only to make the cargo appear normal in case anyone were to

take a look inside, like inspectors, the ones they hadn't paid off at least. The guns are the real story here, the fish are only decoys.

"Well, G, thanks to you, we've just cracked a major federal weapons case wide open." I shake my head at the irony of it all—how our two paths have converged.

She folds her arms, smirking. "You're welcome."

"Now, who is being cocky?" I tease with a sly grin. "Feels good to be the hero, doesn't it?"

She lifts a shoulder toward her ear. "Only if we catch these guys. It won't mean a thing if we don't succeed."

We? A new worry forms as we make our way back up. I jump off the boat and lift her down, too, steadying her until her heels are safely on the dock.

"Negative, G. Now that I know what this is, you're out," I command.

"What? It's my story, you can't?—"

"It's my mission and these are dangerous criminals." My tone rises in pitch, matching her defiance.

"So? I can handle myself. I took self-defense classes and I kick box a couple of times a week at the gym."

I snort. "Yeah, but do you carry a gun? Because these assholes sure do."

She shifts on her heels. "Well, no. Should I? Can you teach me to use one?"

“Fuck no. You with a gun? That’s a lethal combination.” Although I silently resolve to get her a taser or pepper spray—after all, Gigi’s knack for sticking her nose into dangerous situations might soon land her in real trouble. And what if I’m thousands of miles away and can’t protect her?

She shoves past me and gets no more than a few feet away when my team informs me of a guard coming our direction. I pull her back to me and...

I intend only a tease of the lips, a brush, just enough to derail the guard passing by into thinking we weren’t just snooping on a boat, but two lovers on a romantic stroll under the stars on this moonless night. But the urge to claim her kissable lips has been so strong since the moment she woke up in the hospital, my brain short circuits. I land fully, covering hers with mine—and surprisingly, she doesn’t slap me for it.

She grasps my lapel in her hands, kissing back, a moan escaping her throat. Fuck yes. I greedily take more and weave my fingers through her wild curls, pulling her head closer and intensifying our connection. Her lips hold a tantalizing hint of berries I devour with every passionate second, poisoning me against ever wanting another pair of lips. Just hers.

It’s always been her I want.

She presses into the kiss, gripping me like a lifeline, tethering herself to me. Our teeth clash in an electrifying spark, only to retreat and collide once more, opening a fierce dance of tongues. A deep, primal moan erupts from my chest, charging the air between us, and she answers with a bold hum, drawing even nearer.

It’s a damn fine kiss, but I know it can’t last. We have to part at some point, and I dread it. Because then comes the questioning, and I know Gigi well. There’ll be plenty of it. But I won’t have answers because all I can think about is when we can repeat this and how can I get her body next to mine with no clothes on so I can kiss

every inch of her supple skin.

Smell the sweet spot at the apex of of her thighs.

Taste her. Hear her cry out my name as she shatters all around me.

Dive into her depths with my cock. And repeat. Again and again.

Until I have to leave Love Beach...

Reality sucks.

Clear of the guard, our kiss passes into a few softer ones, lingering on each as if we both desire to savor this fantastical moment we've slipped into in order to put off the inevitable.

My crew—who didn't give me crap while I held Gigi—alerts me through my earpiece about a fight between two men on the next dock. They suspect one is Mike, but the other is unidentifiable because of a black ski mask. The distant sound of splashing water confirms their next update—man down. Man down!

In a flash, I let go of Gigi and sprint, following my team's directions. I'm torn between the moment I just left, my lips still tingling from hers, and the urgency of the situation ahead.

Gigi's heels clatter on the dock as she chases after me, shouting, "Wh-what's happening?"

I arrive at the location my crew pinpointed and scan the dark water until I spot a body floating. "Damn!" Without a second thought, I dive in, desperately hoping there's still time to save him.

TEN

THE MIDDLEMAN

JACKSON

“If it hadn’t been for you administering CPR, Mike wouldn’t be here,” the doctor tells me as he steps away from the hospital room and catches sight of me standing in the hallway. His eyes drift to Gigi at my side and then back. “That’s two lives you’ve saved, Jackson. Quite the hero. Love Beach is fortunate to have you.”

I offer a single nod as he departs before turning back to the window. Next to Mike’s bed, his wife clutches his hand while he hangs his head in guilt, and Davis is there probing for details about the attack.

Everything that happened at the dock is a blur now. I’m not normally rattled, but tonight when I dove in to retrieve Mike, the water was pitch black. For a split second, fear gripped me. Never before has that happened to me.

I recovered quickly, got him out of the water, and after I coaxed Mike’s breathing back to life with CPR, we waited for the ambulance. He cried like a baby and confessed his role—with Gigi as a witness. I guess knocking on death’s door was a sign for him to admit everything. In truth, he’s merely a middleman among figures who hide in the shadows.

When certain club members discreetly inquire, he passes their details on with a burner phone to an anonymous number. He leaves his message, and a day later,

someone wires funds into his offshore account. Initially approached in secret, this arrangement has been fattening his bank account for years. It was a clever setup—until now. The sight of Mike’s heartbroken wife makes it clear that his actions have nearly destroyed his family.

“What will happen to him?” Gigi asks, tightening her coat around her, while my clothes, dry now, reek of fish.

“He may have played a small part in all this, yet someone intended for him to be silenced.” First Gigi, now Mike? These people will stop at nothing. “They might still come after him and his family. But now he’s a key witness. It’s up to Davis and the local authorities if they will give his family full protection. He’ll have to answer for his involvement, but his cooperation could earn him a lighter sentence.”

Davis steps out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“Anything new?” I ask, hoping he might offer a name or any detail that could further the investigation.

He shakes his head and begins. “Mike mentioned that you two scared him when you spoke at the bar, so he left a message from the burner phone. He got an anonymous text telling him to meet someone at the dock. When he did, an attacker ambushed him from behind, putting him in a sleeper hold, and attempted to drag him toward a waiting truck. He struggled free briefly, and heard people approaching. Like you, Gigi, his assailant hit him on the head with the butt of a gun, knocking him out. We figure the attacker must have shoved him into the water.” He finishes, but then adds, “Oh, he also mentioned an odd detail. While he struggled with the attacker, he felt a prominent scar on one wrist.”

“A scar...” Gigi whispers, her brows stitched together.

Davis gives me a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Thanks to you being there when you were, he’s still alive, Jackson.”

I sigh and glance once more through the window at Mike, suddenly exhausted. Being a hero, saving lives, drains my energy. “You’ll have men posted here all night until my people arrive to take him?”

“Already handled. Go home and get some rest and a shower. You’ve earned it. We’ll talk more in the morning.” He cocks his head and arches a brow at Gigi. “Do you want to stay the night with me and Belle or...?”

A silent look passes between Gigi and me, filled with unspoken questions. Her eyes beckon me down a very tempting path. After one taste of her lips, if she stays with me, I won’t be able to resist her.

“I-I think I’ll stay with Jackson and make sure he’s okay overnight. After all, I owe him for watching over me.” The curve of her lips might bring about my ruin.

“Okay then. You two are adults, so I guess you know what you’re doing.” He adds, “Although Belle will be jumping to conclusions if I tell her. Or should I keep this quiet for now?”

“Oh, it’s not like that,” she stammers. “It’s um?—”

Before she can finish, I press my lips to hers, holding them for a few seconds before whispering, “It is what it is, G.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll keep this to myself, for now. Otherwise Belle could get so excited about the two of you together, she could go into early labor. See you in the morning.” He chuckles as he heads down the hall.

“You kissed me again.” Gigi bites her lip, and there are all those questions in her eyes I figured would be there.

“Yeah. I did. Can I do it again?” I lean in, but she stops me, landing both her hands on my chest.

“The first one by the boat took me by surprise. And as much as I liked it, it was less, well, fishy. You really need a shower.” She wrinkles her nose, then reality washes over her face. “Besides, Jackson, we shouldn’t start something we can’t finish.”

“Who says I can’t finish? Darlin’, I could have you screaming my name in a dozen languages by morning.” Even in my exhaustion, the thought of taking her to bed sends a fresh jolt of adrenaline coursing through me.

“You know what I mean.” She shakes her head. “I can’t be one of those women you leave behind when you go off on a new mission to God knows where. I’m sorry. Now let’s get you home and into the shower, soldier.”

“And by getting me into the shower, you mean just me. Alone.” I shove my hands into my back pockets to stop myself from carrying her off in my arms in classic hero fashion, begging her with my eyes.

“Don’t look at me that way,” she protests, raising a hand to hide the effect of my gaze. “I’ll make dinner for you while you shower, if it’s any conciliation?”

While I’d give anything for her to join me in that shower, her message comes through loud and clear. For now.

I yearn for her more than ever. To hold her in my arms. To sleep with her. To feel a sense of normalcy compared to my military lifestyle. I returned to Love Beach because of this mission, but something has clicked between us. I’ve grown to care

deeply for her.

My entire identity until now has been built on being able to leave at a moment's notice, to immerse myself in whatever my command needs of me... and to be expendable if a mission fails. I've handled it all bravely—until tonight.

Something gripped me when I jumped in to retrieve Mike. Submerged in the black inky water at the Yacht Club on the moonless night, for a moment, I lost it when fear got a hold of me with one thought—what if I don't make it back to Gigi on the dock? I almost left Mike behind to return to her, scuttling my mission.

That's what having someone to care for does, and it scares the crap out of me. A real future together with Gigi is a possibility. She brings out the best and worst in me. She challenges me like no other woman. Makes me feel things I don't want to feel but long to. This possessive side of me yearns to have her, needy and greedy—and leaves me vulnerable to attack.

Over dinner, I work hard at being a good boy, keeping my hands off of her. She fries up some steaks and manages to make a nice meal of it with what little I have in the fridge.

To make things worse, we actually talk without arguing, and I laugh until my face hurts from smiling at her so much. It only adds to my fantasies about her, which usually consist of angry fucking her against a door, but now include taking her to my bed and making love to her all night long. Or forever.

My throat constricts. Too many feelings tackle me at once. Torn between my usual badass life of undercover work or revealing myself as a man who'd like to stay put for a while. But guys on the task force have to be careful. Real attachments get in the way of our work. Which is why many have no one waiting for us at home. And those that do, lose a part of their recklessness, worried about getting home safely in one

piece instead of going full throttle to do their job.

I haven't had that worry. I haven't had anyone. Until now.

I'm compromised. My commander's words float back to me about my pending contract extension. I need to figure out what the hell it is I want, and fast.

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ELEVEN

GREAT DEBATE

JACKSON

I can't sleep. The phone says three in the morning and there's no use trying with so much on my mind between the mission details and Gigi sleeping in the next room.

"Fuck," I grumble, knowing exactly what's wrong. Prior to Gigi staying here, my evening wind down routine usually consisted of a dip in the hot tub with a beer in one hand, and a cigar in the other. The cigar habit I'd picked up thanks to the military and access to exquisite cigars from various locations I'm not at liberty to divulge.

She's interrupted my life in more ways than I can count. But I start counting anyway.

One, she's a beautiful woman to gaze upon twenty-four hours a day.

Two, she's a walking contradiction, between fierce determination to get her story and a layer of vulnerability underneath. Both sides do everything for me.

Three—my hard cock yearning for her.

I'm driving myself crazy.

I kick off the covers. Quickly, I undress and wrap my plush bathrobe around me. As quiet as can be, I tread through the house, grabbing my drink and my smoke supplies

along the way. The cool spring night air hits me like a cold shower and I stand there and take it for as long as I can. I needed that. As soon as I get a chill, though, I settle into the hot, bubbling water.

A few sips and puffs of smoke are all it takes to finally release the tension riding in my shoulders. With my arms spread wide on the ledge of the tub, I lean back, blow smoke rings, and look up at the stars through the slats of the pergola, clearing my head—until the sound of the sliding glass door opens behind me.

That has to be her.

I shouldn't want her intrusion on my time, trying to relax and wind down. Trying to ignore all the thoughts about her that have been building inside of me like a storm of gigantic proportions. But I want her so fucking bad.

The corner of my mouth lifts.

Maybe I wouldn't mind the intrusion if I could tempt her into this hot tub with me. I've had plenty of women over to the house before, never had a problem with getting them to dip in. But I have one rule. I don't fuck in the hot tub. For Gigi, I could make an exception. And sex would be a great way for me to relax if we could keep it just about sex and nothing more. But I know she wouldn't go for it; she's already said that with her arguments against us.

She leans her arms on the ledge to my right, over my shoulder. "Can't sleep? Oh!" She covers her eyes. "Sorry, I didn't realize you'd be naked."

I make no effort to cover up. What's the point? She's seen all my glory now. I arch a brow. "Nice view?"

"Jackson!"

I chuckle and put down the beer and grab my junk. “Fine, look, my hand is concealing my deadliest weapon. Happy?”

She peeks through her fingers and realizes I’m telling the truth, then drops her hands. Looking everywhere else but at me in the tub, she observes, “Nice night.” She has on another of my sweatshirts I gave her to wear to bed.

The fourth reason she’s disrupted my life—she can wear everything I have, especially if she’s naked underneath, and leaves her seabreeze scent on every piece of it.

“Chilly though,” she shivers, her teeth almost chattering.

“Get in. This is a perfect night for hot tubbing.” I scoot over on the bench and pat the seat beside me.

“No suit.”

“Birthday suit is fine, like me.” I wink and chuckle, feeling my hair fall into my eyes. Then she surprises me by reaching over and gently threading her fingers through it, pushing it back into place. As quick as she does that, she retreats.

“I just heard you moving about and wanted to make sure you’re okay. I’ll leave you be.” Before she can move away, I grab her hand. Electricity passes between us, sharp currents sizzling that, if measured, could probably power up the entire grid covering Love Beach. The tension returns to my shoulders, wound tight again and in need of a release.

Inside of her.

I want her.

I shouldn't, considering what this could do to me when undercover, compromising my ability to act fearlessly when faced with danger. But I'm powerless to stop it when I'm electrified by one touch.

"Stay. Just to talk and help me relax. Dip your feet in at least, or get in wearing my sweatshirt. I have more you can change into when we're done. And you can steal them all. But just stay." I'm not too proud to beg for what I want if it comes down to it.

"Fine. If it'll help you to relax," she says, but to my ears her tone comes across as a purr. She moves to the steps, takes the three of them one at a time, then pauses on the top watery landing. Standing there, she shocks me, removing the sweatshirt entirely.

Every ounce of oxygen leaves my body. My nuts gather tight, eyes bulging. There she is, standing before me in white cotton panties and a bra of the same. No lace, no thong, no satin. Nothing too skimpy. Just the simplicity of white cotton, and I'd expect nothing less from Gigi. White cotton on her is sexy as hell. The color significant, as if she's pure, angelic... and she's all fucking mine even if she doesn't want to admit it.

My cock roars to life, twitching by its own power. He could part the sea between us as she lowers her body into the water, he's so determined right now. Praise be to her trainer or running group or whatever she's doing to ready herself for the Love Beach marathon. Her short frame is honed, curvy and soft where it counts, solid and plenty strong to withstand a man with stamina to go the distance.

I'm that man. I want to be her man. How can I be her man? I need answers from the universe.

I need her. And that's how I know I'm screwed. I can never go back into the field and be that daring hero guy again, because every time I leave for a mission, I'll leave a

part of myself with her.

“Damn, G. You tempt me with a view like that and expect me to keep hands off? Cruel.” I set the cigar down in the ashtray. My fingers grip the ledge, ready to pounce if unleashed.

She laughs it off, sitting opposite me. “You’ve seen me in bikinis at the beach plenty of times over the years.”

“You were a girl back then. Not like this.”

“Like what?”

“I see the strong, confident woman you’ve become, walking around with purpose and passion and poise, and I’m fucking here for it to support you all I can. But while a part of me wants to fall at your feet and worship the ground you stand on, the other part of me wants to carry you to my cave and do things to you no other man has. Absolutely no part of me wants to watch you leave this hot tub until I’ve kissed you senseless.”

“Jackson, you take my breath away,” she croaks, her chest rising and falling. “But we’ve talked about this?—”

“No. You’ve stated your position, that you don’t want to be just another woman I leave behind. But I’ve had time to think about it and I’m ready to debate the subject.”

Her lips twitch, taking the bait. After School Debate Club used to be one of our hot spots for battling against each other. And now I can’t stop myself from pursuing this with her. Even if my commander suddenly appeared with an army to hold me back, I’d charge ahead.

“If memory serves, we finished with an even record of wins and losses between us. Care to see who can win tonight and break the tie?” I dare, with a gleam in my eyes.

“How drunk are you?” She giggles.

“Nah, darlin’. I’m clear headed, barely a few sips into this beer. Plenty sober to rise to the challenge.” I can’t help but glance down at my rock hard rod, bulging beyond the boundaries of my hand. He’s proving more than ready to win, and fuck it. I don’t bother covering up that fact anymore.

“Darlin’. That’s new. Maybe if you’d have called me that in high school, I’d have given you a shot. The cigar, too. New.” She points to my beer. “Can I have a sip?”

“Go for it. Does the smoke bother you?” I watch her slice through the water, ending a few feet away. The graceful lines of her neck tease me as her throat works, downing half of the bottle.

“Nope. And as far as debating. Let’s go, hotshot. I’m ready.” She eases back into her seat across from me, arms on the ledge mirroring me, crossing her legs with confidence as if the beer has given her liquid courage.

“Perfect.” I smile ear to ear. “If I win, you come sit on my lap and let my lips do whatever I want to you.” I guzzle the rest of the beer.

“And if I win, you apologize for putting a spit wad into my flute during seventh grade band practice.” She arches a brow.

I snort and crack up so hard, beer comes out my nose. “Uh, yeah, okay. That was monumental kid behavior for me.” Her face shows she’s not amused. “Fine. Deal. May the best debater win.”

“So the debate is this. I don’t believe we should get intimately involved, because you’ll leave Love Beach as soon as your mission is done, and I don’t want to be just another notch on your bedpost.” With a nod of her head, she gestures as if giving me the floor to speak.

I clear my throat to make way for my official debating voice. “The facts are simple, Baymont: You and I have chemistry. We want each other and we should go for it. Just have fun. Debate over.” I regard her jaw falling to her chest. “Oh, in case you didn’t realize, I’m pro-intimacy.” I end with a wink and take a cocky puff of my cigar. This is more fun than I’ve had with a woman—ever.

She huffs and crosses her arms. Too bad her nipples are underwater because I’d love to see them poking out of her cotton bralette.

“Bold, I’ll give you that, soldier. But just because you want something, doesn’t mean you should have it. Especially when there are consequences involved.”

“Like what?” I scowl and break protocol, demanding. Getting overheated, I lift out of the water and perch on the edge. A good strategic move for me, given how her eyes tour my muscles.

“M-my arguments against go like this. You were assigned to be my babysitter. You’re supposed to protect me. And we have a case to solve. But emotions can compromise judgement, so we shouldn’t get involved. You have your mission to finish. And I have important... journalism-ing to do,” she stutters at the end.

I raise a brow at ‘journalism-ing’. Is she flustered by our debate? I feel a win coming on.

“And let’s not forget how you drive me insane,” she finishes quickly.

I lace my fingers and twist them out in front of me to crack my knuckles. “Here we go. My rebuttal. You drive me crazy too, G, which is half the fun. And conflict of interest? Then we could eliminate the interest by getting it on in bed and over with as soon as possible. And as for emotions compromising judgment, what if sleeping together is the best damn decision we ever make in our entire lives?” I stand in the water and take a step closer. Her breath hitches. I take another step. Her chest heaves. “Where’s your counterarguments, G?”

“I-it’s weak to give in.”

“No. We’re not weak. We’re inevitable.” One final step and I’m in front of her, tucking a curl behind her ear, careful not to touch the wound she’s still healing from.

“But-but we have to catch these guys.” She trembles as I run a thumb beneath her lower lip.

“Told you before, there’s no we in this mission anymore. I can’t afford for you to get hurt.” I pull her chin up and lower myself, hovering over her lips.

“Distracting me is against the rules.”

“Not if you concede,” I remind her.

“Never,” she whispers, our breaths mingling. “Besides. My position still stands. You’ll be gone again soon, and I refuse to be another notch on your bedpost. And you have yet to argue against that. So, I think I win.”

I smirk and back up, taking my seat again, then my mood turns somber. “Actually, I only have a few months left on my current contract. When this mission wraps up in Love Beach, I’ll leave and finish out my time in another country until it ends. And while my command has sent me papers to renew, I haven’t signed yet because

another great debate about it has been going on in my head. What if I come back here to Love Beach this summer—and stay?”

“What? I-I mean, is that what you want?” She leans forward like this news intrigues her, and I can see the wheels turning in her head. “What would you do? Could you really be happy here?”

“I could talk to Davis about joining the police force. Shouldn’t be a problem. And, yeah, I’ve always liked Love Beach with the sand and surf. I could be happy here.”

“Jackson, are you sure? It seems to me like you enjoy your life of heroics too much.”

I squirm a little, because she’s right, and I lean over, settling my weight on my elbows over my knees. “But the thing is, I’ve been lucky so far. I’m only human and bound to get hurt one of these missions, because I wouldn’t be able to take chances with my life anymore, knowing someone is here in Love Beach waiting for me.”

“Who?” Her eyes start to turn green.

“ You, G. I care about you, but to do my job properly, I can’t. But I also can’t quit you. So I’m compromised, see? You’ve done that to me, G.”

“Jackson... I don’t want to be another notch on your bedpost, but I also cannot be the one who forces you to leave behind a job you thrive in.”

“Welcome to the great debate in my head.” I sigh and take one more puff of the cigar. “Time for closing arguments, G. So help me out here. I need you to admit you want me or you don’t. Because that’s the only question in my head keeping me from making a decision either way. But let me end with this. We could be so fucking good together. You and me in Love Beach. I believe it. But I need to know if you do.”

She chews her cheek far too long, making me nervous. “And you’ll come back here and stay?”

“I promise with everything I am, darlin’.”

She lets out an exasperated breath, and launches herself into my lap, surprising me. I drop the cigar.

“Then yes. Screw it. You win, Jackson.”

Our lips crash together, tongues tasting and exploring like we can’t get enough of the best buffet ever. I match the crescendo of her moans like they’re wordless promises for a future we could pin hopes on.

Now that I know where she stands, I have some decisions to make. But first, I need to kiss her senseless, then carry her off to my bed and satisfy her all night long.

TWELVE

TAKING AND GIVING

Gigi

As the type of woman who knows what she desires once she finally figures it out—I cannot resist Jackson any longer. Not with the taste of his lips like cherry tobacco, and his mouth a tempting blend of beer and smoke. Surprisingly, it all works for me. I know I want him.

My fingers weave through his hair, the long chocolate strands slipping through them like silk. I tug and grasp his locks to match the rhythm of our kisses, sometimes gentle, sometimes feverish. With the door now open between us, everything is possible.

Our tongues vie for dominance as he holds me across his lap, kissing me until I'm breathless. "Yes," I cry out into the night, gasping for air, while his lips continue their charge down my neck and chest.

I pull down the cotton, revealing my breasts, giving him full access to pleasure me. He moans in response, directing those full lips and powerful tongue on them, experimenting with pressure to discover with I like.

"Oh Jackson. Like that. Suck my nipples hard," I implore, panting and writhing in his arms.

“Damn, G. Nothing sexier than a woman who knows what she wants, takes charge,” he growls.

“And I won’t settle for anything less, soldier.” Every instinct tells me Jackson is different from any other. He’s built to satisfy. He’s trained to seek and conquer, and I willingly surrender my body to him.

Jackson

There’s a fierceness in the way God crafted Gigi: supple skin, rounded curves, toned muscles. A perfect blend of hard and soft, strength and vulnerability. Born to drive me wild—and I’d fight any other man to claim to her as mine.

She arches her breasts up, inviting my mouth to enjoy. I cradle the heavy underside of one sweet mound and knead her nipple. My mouth lavishes attention on the other, teasing it to a perfect peak.

Her breath is a series of soft pants, her back arching against my arm, hair floating on the surface of the water. Her thighs shift in the hot tub, seeking friction. When her hand slides into her panties to pleasure herself, I’m gone.

“Fuck, G, you’re flawless. But save some fun for me.” I reach my hand down and place my hand over hers, letting her take the lead. Our fingers explore through her slit together until she finds her clit. I slide lower, and slip a finger into her sweet pussy. Then another, and squeeze in yet another, filling her.

Her hand quickens—mine pumps at the same pace. We sync, working in tandem, two hands as one. We’re so hot, the water temperature spikes. I take her nipple again, sucking hard, unrelenting in my pursuit. Her hand fists my hair, holding me to her breast, as if I’m her captive. My body is her agent, and I’ll fight for her release.

“More. Harder. Yes!” she commands, and I don’t hesitate to follow orders.

“Use me, Gigi. I’ll do whatever you want. I only have one request—scream my name when you come.”

Gigi

I guide his hand and mine together, bucking against them while clinging fiercely to his head. The tingling sensations build and pulse through me until I yield completely to the overwhelming intensity, water splashing all around us.

“Jackson!” I cry out into the night as an explosion of tension shatters my control. My whole body shudders in a release so powerful it leaves me utterly spent in his arms. Waves of pleasure radiate through me—I’ve never experienced an orgasm with another man on such a level.

He shifts our position until I find myself straddling him, allowing me to rest my head on his shoulder and regain my breath, even as my fingertips continue their exploration along the ridges of his bicep, chest, and abs.

“Tell me you haven’t had another woman in this hot tub,” I demand, needing reassurance that I am the only one for him—the sole harbor into which he will ever dock.

“God’s honest truth, darlin’, I never had sex in this tub. It was a rule, until now, with you.” He smirks at my twisted face. “I know for a fact you’ve had other men, so let’s not do this, G. We’re not virgins, and we’re old enough to know better. But our first kiss is ours. My first time making you come in this tub is mine. The first time I stretch your pussy and make you come on my cock is yours. And so many other firsts to come between us—is the only thing that matters now.”

His words are perfect, especially with the undeniable evidence of his arousal lying in his lap. I bite my lip and grind against him, my desire intensifying as I appreciate how well-endowed he is. “I’m ready for that part—stretch me, soldier,” I whisper.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replies with a mischievous grin, “but not here. I need you in my bed.”

Cradling me in his arms, he rises and carefully steps out of the tub. Once he places my feet on a mat covering the cold tiles, he drapes the softest, largest towel over my shoulders, wrapping me as tenderly as if I were a swaddled baby.

He turns me so I’m facing away from him. His big hands work the towel expertly, pressing it against my skin in a manner that feels more like a soothing massage than merely drying me off. My muscles and skin respond eagerly to his touch, and I find myself moaning, already tempted by the sensation. Then his hands drift artfully downward, shimmying my wet panties down to my ankles and off.

His touch climbs back up my sides, hands gripping my hips, drawing me close once more. There, a firm presence meets me, pressing insistently into my back. He nuzzles my neck, his kisses trailing up to my ear, and in a low, guttural growl he murmurs, “Feel what you do to me?”

Jackson

My cock strains for release, but I ignore it until I can get her in bed. I lift her towel-clad body and carry her back into the house.

Only briefly do I set her down to shut and lock the door. When I turn back toward her, the towel has slipped to my feet, and she dashes through the living room.

I watch her enticing backside and perfectly shaped curves disappear into the dim

hallway as she giggles all the while.

A wide grin plays across my face. “A little chase and hide and seek? I’m game.” I swipe the towel and dry myself off. “Ready or not, here I come for you,” I taunt, stealthily making my way to the hall.

Forget the mission that brought me to Love Beach; now, finding her is the only mission that matters.

I peep into the shadows along the hall that stretches through half the house. Two doors to the right lead to larger bedrooms—one of which is mine—while three doors on the left open to smaller rooms and a bathroom. She’s been staying in one of these, but not tonight. She’ll be in my bed every night for as long as I’m here.

I step softly, passing the first door on the left, wondering if she might be inside. No sooner do I reach for the handle than she comes charging out, pushing me against the wall. She links her fingers with mine, pressing them above my head while smothering me with kisses.

Not to be outdone, I roll her another step down the hall, forcing her back against the wall without breaking our kiss. My knee drives between her thighs, igniting her center. Her hips take over, moving faster and faster, the friction bringing out her soft mewls.

“Get yourself wet again, G, because the minute your back is on my bed, I’m going to slide myself into you so deep, stretching you perfectly for me.”

“You’re a dirty soldier,” she purrs in a sultry tone.

“You like it.”

“I know.”

I release her hands and cup her rounded ass, lifting her so that her ankles cross behind me. I slam her back into the wall a few feet further down the hall, right outside my room, and bury my face between her breasts.

Everything about her is better than I ever imagined. The whole sexy journey down the hall has been a playful game of give and take—a test of who wins. But hasn’t it always been that way between us?

Gigi

His sheer maleness keeps me humming. His hands are like hot brands on the globes of my rump, pressing me against him, keeping us humping until slick noises reach our ears.

“Now, soldier. I’m wet and ready. Take me.” I’m hot for him and burning for the first feel of him.

He carries me into his room and sets me on his bed. “Be a good girl and spread your thighs for me. I want to see your wet center.”

I stretch to entice him and let my hands roam my body until they push my legs wide for him.

He retrieves a condom from his drawer, his bold eyes growing darker. “I’m raging hard for you.”

“Let me see.” My gaze is hazy with lust, fixated on the way his hand moves up and down. Like the rest of Jackson, his manhood is as striking as he is—thick, long, and yearning for me. If I wasn’t already aroused, the sight of him would ensure it.

He kneels between my legs, holding the condom in his teeth. But using a surprise move I picked up in defense class, I wrap my legs around him and flip him onto the bed. I quickly maneuver to sit on top, laughing at the surprise on his face. “Got you.”

“Yeah, you do.” His hips thrust upward. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Jackson

With a sparkle in her eyes, she lowers herself, crawling down my body, leaving a trail of kisses. Confidence thickens me even more. Her delicate hand grips my base, and my erection strains toward her mouth, eager for release.

As her tongue circles my tip and tastes the moisture gathered there, I struggle to maintain control, trying not to climax prematurely. I take deep breaths to steady myself.

Her mouth licks and sucks up and down my length like I’m male candy. Happy to be so, for her.

My fingers tangle in her curls, guiding her head along my shaft. With each motion, she opens wider, relaxing her throat, taking me so well, I’m nearly?—

“Stop. I’m close,” I hiss.

Gigi

“Let’s see how much control you have left,” I dare him, straddling on top and teasing him at my entrance.

His hands grip my hips firmly. “Gigi, I swear, if you get on me, I’m done.”

I chuckle at his warning and tease, “Be a good soldier while I test if you’re enough for me.” I grab the condom from the bed, tear it open with my teeth, and quickly roll it onto him. Slowly, I lower myself, savoring the way he stretches me so good.

Emboldened by my desire for him, I lock eyes with him and don’t stop until he’s fully inside me. I moan, seated completely, and pause to memorize the feeling—the blissful connection of our bodies united. My head falls back, eyes closed, as I breathe into the tight fit.

He growls. “See that, G. Test over. We just fit, nice and snug. Don’t try to argue with me.” He pulses his hips upward, tiny movements that penetrate my walls.

“No arguments here,” I reply breathlessly. Our bodies move in sync, hips meeting in a rhythm like our souls have longed for this moment for years.

I put on a show, touching myself as I pick up speed. His intense gaze follows every motion, igniting my desire. His hands roam, caressing my thighs, gripping my hips, cupping my breasts. I’m lost in the moment, yelping in surprise when he suddenly flips us so he’s on top.

“You’ve had your fun. My turn to take control,” he says, his voice edged with urgency.

Jackson

Her passage clenches around my throbbing shaft as I plunge into her warm, inviting depths, almost pushing me over the edge. “Fuck yes,” I murmur against her neck, pausing, stationary, as I try to regain my composure and sanity.

I knew it’d be like this between us,

Which brings all my previous thoughts rushing back. I'm captivated. This first encounter will be my downfall when I leave Love Beach for my next mission. I'll be in the midst of a crucial task, think of her, and fall to my peril. But there's no stopping what we've begun. From here on, my life can't revert to what it was—an isolated hero wandering the globe.

“Jackson, so good with you.” Her fingers slide under my hair, caressing the nape of my neck. One of my most sensitive spots. “But I need you to move. I want us to climax together,” she implores, kissing across my face until our lips meet.

She's perfect, mesmerizing, irresistible in bed. My tongue sweeps into her mouth, driven by a fierce desire to fill her.

I lift slightly and circle my hands around her wrists, holding them above her head. With a primal intensity, I thrust into her. “You want it like this, my good girl?”

She responds by raising her hips to meet each thrust, her muscles tightening around me. We move in sync, or not at all.

My movements start slow, deliberate, and possessive, then build into passionate thrusts. Each one threatens to be the final, yet I hold on, caught between agony and ecstasy.

She drags her nails down my back. I nip at her nipple. We push and pull, neither of us willing to surrender first, like a game of chicken—the first to falter loses. But it's too late; I'm barely hanging on until she shudders and cries out, lost in her climax. I thrust once more and still, every muscle taut as I release.

Gigi

I rest in his arms while he sleeps, and think about the path that led us here. From kids

to adults. From enemies to lovers.

The past few days in Love Beach have been a whirlwind. I never expected to see Jackson again, let alone kindle something more than friendship. These newfound feelings for him scare me. But here we are, naked and entwined in each other's arms, after discovering a passionate connection that I never knew was possible between two people.

His heart beats steady against my ear, the most soothing sound I've ever heard. This safety in his arms can't last forever, and we both know it. Our time together has an expiration date. The knowledge makes my heart ache and I choke back a sob. I commit to memory every moment, every touch, every heated look we shared, because tomorrow isn't promised.

"Are you alright?" He stirs, gently tilting my face up with his thumb.

"It's hard to believe we're together like this after all this time."

"I have something hard that will convince you..." He presses me back onto the bed, his desire rekindled.

"Again?" I laugh, and spread my legs, inviting him in for more.

THIRTEEN

LIKE EQUALS

GIGI

The bed shifts beside me, rustling me from sleep, as Jackson gets in. “Hey, sleepyhead. Good morning, although in about five minutes it’ll be good afternoon.” He chuckles and gathers me into his arms. “I got up a little bit ago and checked in with my team and Davis.”

“You let me sleep in?” I groan. I’m not usually a late sleeper on a Saturday, but after our hot tub debate he kept me up. One time wasn’t enough, no. He burned through my body twice more like a man on fire. No wonder I must have needed the rest and slept in. I’m not mad, although I’ll bet I have dozens of messages and emails from work needing my attention.

“I wore you out after our debate.” He laughs. “Losing takes a lot out of you.”

“Why do you always have to win, Jackson?” I croak, my mouth dry, my body well-used but completely sated, and my eyelids yet to open.

“I don’t always, but I’m glad I did last night. And, as a bonus, I truly am sorry about the spit wad and fifty other things I probably did to irritate you in school and shouldn’t have. Is it possible that I can just issue a blanket apology for all the things and start over now? You and me from this point forward, darlin’?” He nuzzles into my neck, lightly sucking my pulse point, begging me to forgive. From his sweet

apology to his kisses, I want all that his “from this point forward” implies.

“Maybe...” I tease and finally open my eyelids halfway, gazing at the most handsome man the world has ever produced. My fingers explore the ridges of his pecs as I admire how his hair falls perfectly, even after the night we’ve had in bed together, while I’m sure my curly hair is a frizzy mess. With his fingers in it though, he must not mind it—or he can’t stand it and is trying to fix it. “Then again, I might want you to grovel a little more.” In his arms, I stretch like a kitten, my hands reaching up to the headboard.

“My pleasure. Mind if I start now?” His gravely voice hits good while he shifts me onto my back and hovers over me, kissing down my neck, inhaling a nipple, a hand heading to the apex of my thighs.

My body hums alive again, even after being so well-used. I’m about to give a confirmation with a moan of his name from my lips, when his phone dings on the beside table.

He sighs, releasing my nipple. “I better get that.” Once he settles on his back again, he announces, “It’s Beau texting. He says he and Addie are throwing a spring break party for all of us today. It starts in an hour.”

“I forgot about it, what with everything that’s happened.” I sit upright, but he pulls me back to him.

“We can tell them we’re busy. Which wouldn’t be a total lie because I could keep you busy here all day.” His mischievous smile and his hand squeezing my ass almost have me convinced.

I feel torn in multiple directions. I should go into the office and work. And I should check-in with Dad. But I really do want to see all of our friends today. Then there’s

Jackson. How much longer will he be here before he has to go again? I can feel myself desiring nothing but time with him. That's how far down the road I've gone toward falling head over heels for him. If only the world would stop turning and slow down the hands of time.

"Everything has happened so fast the past few days. It would do us good to relax on the beach and catch up and get some sun." I love when Addie and Beau have us all over to party because they built a dream home on beachfront property and it's perfect for our friendly get-togethers. "Besides, I bought a new yellow thong bikini for this season that I've been itching to wear and had planned to show it off today."

"Yeah?" That got him, judging by the way his eyes bulge.

"Hm-hmm. So why don't you carry me into the shower, soldier. We'll have a little fun washing each other up and get ready together, and then we can swing by my house on the way to pick up my suit."

"Can't argue with that logic. You're not only a good girl, but a smart one, too. Let's go." He wastes no time hoisting me over his strong shoulders. I yelp and laugh and take full advantage of having a military hotshot hero at my disposal by resting my hands on his tight glutes. I could get used to this. And, after what he told me last night, it's a possibility that I could get used to seeing more of him really soon, as long as he follows through with the decision to not renew his contract.

It's worrisome. He'd still have to leave Love Beach for a little while until he finishes out this contract. But what-ifs scare me... Something bad could happen to him out there in the field while he's gone and I could lose him forever. I wouldn't dare bring that up to him, though.

Jackson groans the minute I remove my white hand-crocheted cover-up at the truck when we park in the beach lot by Addie and Beau's place. "Jesus, G. If you're trying

to prove how in shape you are now, point taken. You're a breathtakingly beautiful woman in that skimpy yellow string. Now cover up, please."

With only my daisy duke shorts on, flip-flops, and my barely there yellow bikini, I love showing off how hard I've worked on my body while training for the marathon. Let the suntanning begin today. I live for days like this in our cozy beach town.

"I like my body in this strappy little thing and I fully intend to show it off all day," I stand my ground.

"I like it, too. But I'd rather no one else saw," he mutters.

Beau passes us by, carrying his toddler son, Brayden, on his hip. He does a double take before covering the toddler's eyes with his hand. "Gigi? My God. I thought this was a family outing today." He rushes away toward our group, who are beginning to gather on the sand.

Jackson quickly whips off his t-shirt over his head—quite the sexy move—and tosses it at my chest. "Put it on before another man sees you. I'd hate to gouge anyone's eyes out today, especially my brother's."

"Possessive much?" I toss the shirt back at him.

"Maybe. Sue me."

"How do you think I'd feel seeing other women ogle that washboard of yours without a t-shirt on? How's that fair? And I'm not getting into a catfight with another woman over you."

"Why not? Don't tell me I'm not worth it?" One sly corner of his lips turns up.

My eye twitches, and neither of us budes for a minute. Instead, we work together to unload a cooler of food and drinks, folding chairs, an umbrella, towels, and my bag that I'd stuffed various things in it at my house, I figured we'd need in order to enjoy this day at the beach. Then he grabs me from behind and tickles me, cutting the tension between us. He has me giggling nonstop when Noah Dawson and his four younger brothers run by heading to the party.

"Hey you two, get a room already," Dawson jokes. Among his brothers that he's single-handedly raised for the past five years are a set of twins, Danny and Cooper, who are seniors in high school, both in sports hoping for full-ride scholarships for college. And the two younger ones, Josh and Wes, are both freshmen, Wes having been held back a year in kindergarten. All of them take a prolonged, drooling-adolescent-boy stare at my body more than they should, earning a growl from Jackson.

"Yeah, why haven't you two slept together yet?" Parker comes up and adds to Dawson's wisecrack. Apparently, our friends have been talking about us. But as he passes us, pushing his sister in her wheelchair, I put that out of my head at her bright smile.

"Gigi, you look so good," Kelsea calls out to me and waves as her brother takes her down the wooden slatted path through the sand. There's a point further in where the wood stops and he'll have to park the chair and carry her the rest of the way.

"You do too. We'll talk later." I miss her. In school, she was not only my debate partner, but the one girl who was smart, like me, that I could talk with about more than makeup and boys. Then, she went on to become a lawyer. Sadly, she's now confined to the wheelchair and has delicate kidney issues, often in and out of the hospital. By looks of it, she's too pale. I should try to visit her more often.

When I turn my attention back to Jackson, he stands there holding his t-shirt out to

me.

“No. Deal with it, buddy,” I say, and grab a handful of our stuff. It’s getting warmer as the sun graces Love Beach with perfect weather today for spring. I’d hate to be at the public beaches or down on the boardwalk on a day like this that would bring out the swell of crowds, locals and spring break visitors alike. “I have every intention of gaining some new tan lines today.”

“Fine,” he grumbles. Then he changes up with a sly smile. “And yeah, nice suit. You look... fucking amazing in it, G. I have a feeling I won’t be able to stop staring all day.”

“Good. Because I wouldn’t expect anything less from a man of mine. Now let’s go.”

“Wait.” He reaches down and adjusts himself in his shorts. I snort-laugh, loving this effect I’m having on him. “Yep, laugh now, darlin’. But if I go ballistic on some asswipe who stares a little too hard, the consequences are all on you.”

While I surprise myself by enjoying his possessive side, this is new. Everything with Jackson is new. Treading the waters of what is budding between us keeps nervous energy flowing through me.

I’ve dated plenty before, but somehow always managed to attract men weaker than me. I can’t help it if I’m a strong woman who loves her career, an entrepreneur with my own newspaper now, and expect a guy to man up. With Jackson, he is all man. More than that, he’s a take charge hero. I tend to see us more like equals, which means we butt heads for power now and then. Only I feel like we respect the hell out of each other, too, and a foundation like that could carry us far, far into the future.

FOURTEEN

FROM THE SIDELINES

GIGI

Jackson and I make our way to where everyone is congregating on the beach and setting up umbrellas. I decide to sit by Kelsea to keep her company, so I park my things by her and spread out my towel. I adjust the umbrella shade so the sun doesn't burn us, especially her, with that almost translucent skin. She was always petite, but in the chair she appears smaller, like her health issues have shrunk her.

Under a canopy next to us, Belle and Addie sit in chairs and talk nonstop about baby stuff, and I'm not quite ready for those conversations.

I want kids, but I want a man first—Jackson—and he would do nicely. Mm, a flush reaches my cheeks not from the heat, but from the idea of him filling me with his seed, putting a baby Jackson inside of me. Doesn't help that we share secret heated glances while he tosses a football around with the Dawson boys. I'm grateful he has no idea the fantasies playing in my head. But if we're going to spend the day like this, I'll be dripping wet by the time he gets me back to bed.

"You're staring at him." Kelsea chuckles.

"Yeah." Only that comes out like a dreamy and corny sigh at first. "Oh, I mean... it's Jackson. What's not to appreciate? He has to have the best body here, and there are plenty of women on the beach who apparently think so." Don't get jealous. Don't.

Get. Jealous.

“There’s something more to this you’re not saying. Come on, you can tell me. Parker is always so busy he doesn’t share much with me.” She elbows my shoulder. I know I should see her more often, but I don’t know what to say about my current... situation-ship for lack of a better word. Jackson and I were too busy pleasing each other in the shower earlier to stop and think about how to tell our friends we’re together or whatever. So I bite my lip and shake my head. “It’s okay. You don’t have to say a thing. I always knew you two would end up together.”

“Who wants a hot dog?” Beau shouts from the grill next to us, saving me from that conversation. I jump up and prepare a plate for both of us.

Beau has cooking duty, plus making sure the two pregnant women are happy “duty”, while the rest of the guys scarf down dogs and choose teams for a volleyball match. Davis, Dawson, Cooper, and Wes make up one team, challenging Jackson, Parker, Josh, and Danny. Because Dawson and Parker are known around town as Officer Dawson and Officer Parker, and arguably the most popular on the force besides Davis, their last names are used more frequently than their first.

Parker runs over to us and checks his phone, then puts it in his backpack. “Are you comfy, sweetie? Can I get you a drink or something? Your doctor said to keep hydrated.”

“I’m fine. Thanks.” Kelsea shakes her head, her shoulder length, straight, and dirty-blond hair swishing against her t-shirt. She used to highlight and curl it so nicely back before the incident that pulled the life out from under her.

“I’m here and happy to help,” I offer.

“Go play and have fun, Parker,” she insists.

“Fine. Here’s the sunscreen if you need more. Yell if you need me,” he instructs, a stern look on his face. He runs back into place on the sandy court.

“Hey, Kelsea. Don’t break my heart. Tell me you’ll be cheering for my team,” Dawson yells with a grin.

Parker kicks sand at him from the other side of the net, chiding, “She’s cheering for her brother, idiot.”

“I have two hands. One for each of you.” She laughs and I join in, like we’re back to those days of being giggly school girls again.

“For as long as I can remember, Dawson’s had a thing for you,” I say, gathering my knees to my chest with one arm, while my other hand mindlessly sifts through the sand to my left.

I also recall how Dawson was broken-hearted after graduation when Kelsea broke up with him. She left to follow her dream, making off for college in New York a semester early, getting a jump on freshman law classes for the summer. He stayed here and became an officer of the law. Maybe things worked out the way they were supposed to.

“Dawson was always so sweet. I can’t believe after all this time some woman hasn’t claimed him yet. My word, that boy could kiss. Whew.” She fans herself at the memory.

“Well, you live here now and he’s unattached...” I suggest, my eyes watching Jackson’s every move—with his shirt off, of course.

“Oh, no. No. I-I have too much going on now, health-wise. I mean, look at me in this chair. And, well, you probably know I can’t have children.” She shocks me by how

she can say all of that and not break down into tears. How strong she must be to get through a day?

I'd heard about the extent of Kelsea's condition through Parker lamenting one night drunk at Davis and Belle's not long before he moved her here from New York. "Yeah, but Dawson's already had to raise his brothers on his own. Maybe he doesn't want kids. Have you asked?"

She shakes her head, but waves as Dawson blows her a kiss after he scores a point as if he scored it just for her. Parker scowls, spitting words at him. "It took a while for the two of them to come around at first when Dawson wanted to date me in high school, remember?"

I do. "They almost erupted into a fistfight over you in the hallway between second and third period. Two best friends willing to duke it out right there and risk getting suspended." At the time, I thought how lucky she was to have two guys who care so much for her to fight over her.

"They're still friends, but I think the subject of me is a little touchy. All I want is for the two of them to find good women who can love them like they deserve. Until then, I'll be here cheering for them from the sidelines. Oh, don't be sad for me, Gigi." Kelsea squeezes my arm. I realize I'm frowning, nearly crying, and try to stop. It's only that her situation makes me so sad. "Really, I'm fine. I've resigned myself to the fact I'll be alone the rest of my life. I have my books and my crafts, and keep myself busy, outside of doctor's appointments and hospital stays, of course."

I cock my head. "Couldn't you practice law again? You had such passion for it." I don't see why she couldn't.

She inhales and leans over, lowering her voice. "Don't tell Parker, but I've been studying to take the bar exam here in South Carolina."

My eyes double in size. “That’s amazing. You can do it. In fact, I’ll help you, whatever you need. A study buddy? Research? Name it.”

“Thanks for the support. I’ll let you know, but for now, let’s keep it between us.”

My eyebrows stitch together. “Why? Wouldn’t Parker be happy for you?”

“He’s just always so stressed. Between work, my needs, and stressing over the medical bills, I don’t want to add to his pressure. I’m the first to admit that taking care of me is like a full-time job on top of his full-time job, even though everyday I try to learn new ways of taking care of myself. I tell him it isn’t fair to him; he needs a life, too. But he won’t listen. I think he feels too much grief over the loss of our parents, so he can’t let me go.”

A vivid memory comes at me how, in elementary school, they were both out for a week after their parents were killed in a freak accident. Every kid in the building drew a card to try to cheer them up when they returned. But I doubt now that the cards made a difference.

A hundred questions are on the tip of my tongue about their situation, about insurance, her medical needs, and more, but, men being men, Parker’s team scores the winning point, and a roar of hollers comes from the sand court. Kelsea puts her fingers into her mouth and whistles for them.

Jackson stares me down expectantly, with a smile cocky and wide, like he’s just slayed the dragon for the maiden, the hero once again, and expects a celebration. I scramble to my feet and jump up and down and cheer, obviously letting my breasts bounce with the motion, all for his benefit, and luckily they don’t spill out. He licks his lips, eyeing me too hard, too long; it feels amazing to have his eyes only on me.

Parker runs over then, and pulls out his phone, checking things. He shields the screen

from his sister's eyes.

"Is everything okay?" She asks.

"Yeah. Definitely." He pockets the phone, then focuses on her. "Okay. Enough sitting around, sweetie. Time for that dip in the ocean I promised you today." He squats down so she can climb on his back, and with my help, we make it work. When he reaches his hands back to adjust her weight and position on his shoulders, something grabs my attention.

A scar is visible on his wrist—small enough not to be noticed by most, even though it's raised off the surface of his skin. Since it's right in front of my face, I ask. "Interesting scar there, in the shape of a crescent moon. How'd you get that, Parker?"

"Ah, it was no big deal. We were called in to break up a fight last summer in one of the bars. A drunk guy hit me with a broken bottle. Ready, sweetie?" He takes off with her quickly, leaving me behind to gape after them.

A shiver runs down my spine. In the hospital, when Mike said he'd felt a scar on his attacker's wrist, it had triggered the exact memory for me. I'd felt the same before I was knocked out. I haven't told Jackson yet, but I should.

He happens to approach me then, volleying the ball from one hand to the next. "How about it, G? Want to take me on in a little scrimmage? Think you can score on me first before I score on you?" He winks.

"Sure," I say, halfheartedly, still stuck in my head about the scar. I want to tell him, so he can assure me my instinct is wrong. This is Parker. Not some criminal. But I don't say anything, shaking it off. There's no way he could have anything to do with the attacks or criminal activity at the docks.

I shift gears fast and put it out of my mind. Once we enter the sandy court, I decide to give myself a competitive advantage by removing my denim cutoff shorts. I shake my ass in front of him as I shimmy them down my legs.

Coughing noises come from Jackson, standing behind me. “Uh. What do you think you are doing, flashing that beautiful ass at me and every other man out here?”

“Leveling the playing field, hotshot. Let’s go, or are you going to stand there and gawk all day?” I dare and chuckle. And proceed to beat him five to zero before he concedes. I whoop and holler when I win, making a huge deal of it.

He growls, glaring at me through the net where we’re standing face to face. “Now cover up before my cock busts through the seams of my board shorts.”

“And if I don’t?” I tilt my head, biting my bottom lip, and glance down at his ever-growing bulge.

“I’ll take you over my shoulder and dunk you in the ocean.”

“You wouldn’t dare. Jackson, do you have any idea what that water would do to my hair? It’s frizzy enough as it is today. Besides, the doctor said to be careful getting my stitches wet until about seven days, remember?”

“Are you going to cover up that sexy body of yours then?” His lips twitch and curve into a sinful grin.

“Nope.”

“You’ve been warned.” He ducks under the net, but I’m fast and evade, dashing off down the beach with a yelp, half scared, half laughing. I’m proud of myself for giving him a run for his money, at least until he catches me fifty yards or so away from our

friends. Powerful arms scoop me up, and he heads straight for the water.

“Jackson, so help me, I’ll smother you in your sleep if my head gets wet.” My screech is only met with his howl. I have visions of the next headline in my newspaper. The Buzz Owner Suffocates Local Hero.

As his feet splash in the water, I’m rethinking this entire situation-ship. What did I see in him? Would we always be at odds, drive each other to the absolute brink of insanity, and would we survive it?

Finally, he comes to a halt. “Relax, darlin’ . I only wanted to get you alone at last.” He slides me down his body until my feet land in between his in the sand and an inch of water. He pulls my body tight against him, his hands cupping the globes of my ass and says, “At last, I can do this.”

Our lips crash together like a tsunami. The beach activity, the families with their shouting kids and yapping dogs, the entire town washes away leaving the two of us alone to explore this tide of lust. Caught in his intoxicating embrace, he’s my lifeline. I lose myself in the storm of his passion, and I’m perfectly content to stay there, adrift with him forever.

When he moans and separates our lips at last, he says, “Don’t move.”

I feel why; a hard rod twitches against my tummy.

I chuckle. “I like having this effect on you. But if you wanted a kiss so badly, why didn’t you just say so back there and kiss me? Or... are you not ready yet to tell our friends about us?”

“I don’t care when our friends find out.” He shrugs. “Call me selfish, but I guess I just want you to myself a little longer.”

“Selfish.” I grin and kiss him again. “That makes two of us.”

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FIFTEEN

CLOCK TICKS

GIGI

For the second time this afternoon, Parker excuses himself to take a phone call. I can't help but watch him as he steps away from us toward the water, out of our hearing range. He speaks with great animation, his arms moving as he speaks.

When he must be done with the call, he pockets his phone. Dawson comes up to him then, and I'm way too invested now to look away. The two of them appear to discuss something intensely, both crossing arms as if taking battled positions. Things heat, judging by their faces, and Parker storms off, but not before ramming his shoulder against Dawson as he brushes past. I'm skeptical about the situation, wanting to read so much into their actions.

Jackson is busy playing football with the boys. He's like a kid himself when he's among them, and it's obvious the teens admire him. He has a natural charm that wins over everyone he meets.

"Hi ladies, mind if I sit?" Dawson interrupts by dragging a chair over to Kelsea, setting it beside her at an angle so he can see her face while he visits. He shows no sign of the previous altercation with Parker. Thinking back, it's always been something between the two of them. Best of friends, but butting heads, too. I'd always thought it was because of Dawson's crush on Kelsea, but there might be more to it.

“Hi Dawson,” Kelsea greets him with a broad smile. “Enjoying the day?”

“I am now,” he replies with a wink. He’s tanned, well-built, and almost as attractive as Jackson, but his demeanor is warmer and more playful compared to my more intense military man.

While Belle and I are playing with little Brayden on a nearby blanket—giving Beau and Addie a break—I notice that for the first time today, Kelsea’s cheeks are flush with color, as if Dawson’s attention tints them pink. I can’t help but think he suits her, though it appears Parker’s old grudges keep them apart. Dawson then lifts a paper plate holding a generous slice of rich chocolate cake.

“Gotta have my sweets for the day, and Addie makes the best. Have you had a piece yet? Come on, try a bite,” he offers, holding the fork near her lips. However, she pulls away.

“I’d love to, but I need to watch my figure. I don’t get much exercise, and if I eat too much, I’ll end up looking like a beached whale in this wheelchair,” she giggles nervously.

“Not possible. You’ll always look beautiful, Kels.” A heated stare passes between them, and I quickly glance at Belle to confirm I’m not imagining the chemistry. Belle raises her eyebrows at me. “Come on. One bite won’t hurt. Besides, it makes my day to see you smile,” he pleads, and brings the fork to her mouth again.

This time, she opens and slowly accepts it, her eyes sultry. The tension between them is palpable; the air charges with unspoken desires and dreams left unfulfilled. I look away, disheartened by witnessing two people who might be meant for each other, never realizing their full potential.

My eyes drift to Jackson like he’s the only man on the beach—we could have been

like them, never opening ourselves up to find out if we were meant to be.

“I was disappointed when Parker told me you didn’t want to try those special classes down at the YMCA. I was hoping to see you there,” Dawson remarks, stuffing a big bite into his mouth.

“What classes?” Kelsea asks, wrinkling her forehead.

“Didn’t he mention? Cooper’s been working at the Y after school and on weekends. They really appreciate his hard work; the management even lets me and the other three boys work out there for free. On the pool bulletin board, I saw there’s a rehabilitation clinic twice a week for wheelchair-bound patients, always with a one-to-one ratio of students to teachers. I thought you might enjoy something different like that,” he explains with a shrug.

“That sounds wonderful, Kelsea,” I encourage.

“Oh, I would—but... Parker probably looked into it. The membership must be expensive; otherwise, I’m sure he’d have mentioned it. Or maybe he just forgot,” she offers, trying to brush it off, though it only deepens my curiosity about their situation. “Things haven’t been easy financially. After I fought with my old insurance company in New York, to no avail, we’ve had to pay all the bills ourselves since I moved here. Anyway, I’m sure you don’t really want to hear about our problems.”

“You can talk to me anytime. I’m a good listener,” Dawson reassures her, finishing his cake and setting the plate aside on the cooler next to me. It is only at that moment that I notice— with a gasp escaping me—a scar running along the length of his wrist.

“Dawson, how did you get that scar?” I ask immediately, pointing at it.

“Oh, that? Just a fishing accident a few months ago,” he dismisses it quickly, turning

back to Kelsea. My mind goes right there to illegal fishing accident. “I guess I got lucky when the courts granted me legal guardianship of the boys. They’re covered by my work insurance now. Still, it’s a constant paycheck-to-paycheck struggle with the way these kids eat. Every night I’m praying for scholarships so they can go to college. And now Wes wants to return to hockey. I just can’t afford it. Josh is the only one being sensible—and he rarely costs me anything extra. He wants to be a firefighter and stay here in our small town, just like I did.”

Beau chimes in, “Dawson, give me a call later this week. Some of my teammates and I can sponsor Wes, covering his equipment and expenses through our foundation.”

“Really? Man, that’d be great. Now if only I could find a grocery store to sponsor us. Got any contacts there?” Dawson chuckles, lightening the mood.

Addie squeezes Beau’s arm. “And you and your brothers are always welcome over. I keep extra food at my place because you never know when one of Beau’s old pals from the Puckers’ team is going to drop by. They just can’t get enough of Love Beach.”

“Thanks, Addie. That means a lot. I was planning to ask if Beau’s grandparents might hire the boys again this summer—maybe to mow the lawn and take care of things while they travel. The more I can get these kids working and earning a bit of money, the better,” Dawson adds.

“We could hire them too. Davis is swamped with work, and I’m constantly exhausted with this pregnancy. When this little one finally arrives, we’re going to have our hands full. Having someone look after our lawn would be perfect,” Belle offers.

Everyone around seems so supportive, yet I’m the only one overthinking—about friends, scars, and even officers who have endless opportunities to cross legal lines and cover things up.

While I admire Dawson relentlessly doing his best to keep his family fed, clothed, and sheltered, and I respect Parker for everything he does for his sister, it's clear these people are grappling with real financial issues. How easily could they be tempted into criminal activity, lured by money in desperate times?

And yet, could they ever go so far as to attack me? These are men I've known forever—supposedly my friends.

As Dawson continues chatting with Kelsea and the others, Belle turns toward me. "Are you okay? I haven't had a chance to talk with you all day," she says, gently trying to tame my unruly curls with a sweep near my ear.

"Fine. Yeah," I reply, dismissing the turmoil in my mind. "You mama bears were busy in the cave chatting about your babies, so I stayed out of it—it's like a different world to me." I watch how her belly grows week after week; seeing it only fuels the fantasy of being Jackson's baby mama.

As usual, she reads my thoughts. "If you play your cards right, you could end up with one of these with someone special," she hints, not so subtly, twisting her head toward Jackson.

I catch his eye from across the way for what feels like the umpteenth time today. After he's finished playing with the guys, he lands on his back on the blanket beside me. Gently, he scoops up little Brayden and pretends to fly him like an airplane. "Hey little man, it's Uncle Jackson time now," he says. The kid giggles at him, though I groan inwardly. Just as I think I'm not ready for kids, an internal clock starts ticking louder.

"Hey Gigi, why don't you and I take this kid for a walk down to the pier and back?" he suggests. I can't say no, and I'm actually glad for some alone time with him. A few minutes later, I'm wearing my cover-up and a backpack filled with anything we

might need for the short half-hour away from Addie, while Jackson proudly pushes the cutie pie in the stroller.

We head down the private beach that eventually merges with the public one and the pier. Along the way, Tawny bounds up, slobbery ball in mouth. With every throw, Brayden giggles as the furry dog retrieves it. I take photos and videos, sending them back to Addie.

By the time we reach the pier, the crowd has thinned, and a sleepy Brayden has closed his eyes for a nap. A gentle breeze stirs around us. The sun will soon begin its descent, and off in the distance, clouds have started to gather, threatening to obscure our view of the stars tonight if they move inland.

“I love this pier. Always have,” Jackson murmurs as we wander to its end, where he gazes out into the distance. “When I was growing up, I used to stand here, staring out at the Atlantic, wishing I could go explore what lay beyond.”

“Did you get enough exploring while serving in the military?” I tease.

He shrugs. “Sort of.”

“Oh.” What in the world would keep a man like him here at Love Beach, when his spirit yearns to roam the vast unknown? Add in my worries about Parker and Dawson, and I’m left in a complete tizzy.

“Want to tell me what’s going on, G?” He turns his back on the view, resting his elbows on the rail of the pier. Two young women give him a once-over—checking out both him and the adorable baby in the stroller—as they pass by, but he pays them no mind; his gaze is fixed on mine. “Talk to me.”

“You think you know me that well?”

“Gigi, I feel like I’ve been unraveling your mysteries my entire life. You just never realized it.” His fingertips brush against my arm, eliciting a shiver that travels down my spine.

“You’re right. I’m questioning a lot of things.”

Without missing a beat, he moves closer, his hand settling on the small of my back. “Questioning us? Do you know why I brought you up here? I wanted to steal a kiss under that old legend.”

I know what he refers to. “That supposedly when lovers kiss for the very first time at the end of the pier, it’s supposed to bring them good luck?”

“Yeah. That one.” He leans in.

“This wouldn’t be our first time, though,” I feel the need to point out.

“Then darlin’, we’ll forge our own luck.” His lips melt into mine. My heart races, having craved him all day. I grip his shoulders tightly, as if I could keep him locked in place, never letting him leave. But I know that’s beyond my control. He’s committed to finishing his military duty—loyal to a fault—and I respect that deeply.

“Hey. When I get out of the military, let’s make a list together of all the places we want to visit. We can pick one and plan our first vacation and explore someplace new together.”

I gape at him, incredulous. “How did you know one of my biggest fears is not being enough to keep you here?”

“Like I said. I think I know you pretty well. When I talk about wanting to see places, you don’t think I’m going without you, do you? Better make sure your passport is up

to date, darlin’.” He punctuates his words with a playful kiss on my nose.

I beam with possibility—so many adventures waiting for us. Sure, there were countries I once dreamed of visiting, but I’d never been passionate about travelling until now. With Jackson, I’d be up for anything, and every journey with him would promise to be an exhilarating adventure. The last few days have certainly felt that way.

“We should bring Brayden back before it gets too dark. Come on.” He takes my hand, our tender moment on the pier fades into a sweet memory, and we stroll back down the beach. “You’re still quiet. There’s more you’re not saying.”

I let out a small laugh. “Am I never going to be able to keep things from you?”

“I’d hope not.” He gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. And so I confess about the scars.

“In the hospital, when Mike said he felt a scar on his attacker’s wrist, it triggered a memory of my attack. I felt one, too.”

He stops mid-step, dropping my hand and sharply turning toward me. “You’re just now telling me—” His raised voice briefly wakes the baby, but soon enough, the little one drifts off again. Lowering his voice, he continues, “Between the blows to both your and Mike’s heads, and now the scars, both attackers must be the same person.

“Yeah, but...”

“What did the scar look like? How raised was it? How big?” His barrage of questions catches me off guard, and I can’t answer them.

“I didn’t see it; I felt it during the struggle, like Mike did.” I mimic the frantic

motions of that night, my hands circling my neck as if trying to peel off an arm around me. A tear escapes, and I confess, “Jackson, I’m freaking out because today I noticed something—both Parker and Dawson have scars on their wrists.”

He blinks and recoils as if I had swung a punch at him. “You’re kidding me. These are our friends, G. They have nothing to do with my mission.” His irritated tone takes me aback.

I narrow my eyes. “Trust me, I’ve been telling myself the same thing all afternoon, but my intuition keeps?—”

“It’s wrong,” he seethes.

“But you’re the one who told me to trust it more.”

“Then I must have been wrong.” He scoffs. “I’ve known these guys a long time. They’re like brothers to me, and to Davis and Beau. You’re like family to them. There’s no way in hell either of them would attack you. No way!”

He marches back toward our friends, and I trail a few steps behind, dejected and doubting everything between us.

SIXTEEN

OVERTHINKING

JACKSON

The idea that Gigi thinks Parker and Dawson are involved in the attacks and the smuggling ring is ridiculous.

We're talking about guys I played football with, chased girls with—friends who grew up together in our hometown. They're not hardened criminals like Lorenzo Ybarra. Then again, after tracking him for the past year, I've come to realize that a smuggling ring needs people from all walks of life, including everyday individuals like the CEO at the Yacht Club and local police officers.

Dammit, I refuse to let Gigi make me question everything. It's bad enough she watches their every move as we all start packing up for the night.

While the women chat, say their goodbyes, and plan their next get-together, Parker's phone rings again as he gathers Kelsea's things to take to his car. He's been glued to that device almost non-stop throughout the day.

"You've been pretty popular today, Parker," I note casually. I'm not ready to admit that maybe Gigi has a point.

"He met a spring break chick last week while we were on patrol at the Arts in the Park Spring Festival," Dawson fills us in. "Now she's been blowing up his phone all

week.”

Parker pauses and runs a hand behind his neck. “She wants to meet tonight since she’s leaving Love Beach in the morning, but I have to take Kelsea home and?—”

“Is she cute and sexy?” Dawson cuts in with a sly smile spreading across his face.

“Yeah, though I admit my judgment might be off. It’s been a while since I’ve been with anyone. You all know the dry spell I’ve been in since Kelsea moved in with me.”

“Go out then. The boys and I will help Kelsea get home and stay with her until you return, even if it’s in the morning,” Dawson winks. “Gotta seize the moment, man.”

“I don’t know. It’s not easy getting her settled at night with all her medication and stuff.”

“But Kelsea can walk me through it, can’t she?” Dawson asks just as the women quiet down and everyone becomes aware of the conversation.

“Walk you through what?” Gigi inquires sharply, not missing a beat.

“Parker’s got a hot date tonight.” I slap him on the back like a proud dad saying, “Atta boy!”

Kelsea raises an eyebrow. “Really? You haven’t mentioned anything about her to me. That’s great, though.”

“Because I wasn’t planning on meeting her. I have to get you home and settled.”

Dawson jumps in, “But I offered to take you home. Of course, as usual, every time I

offer to help, this dickhead locks you up and won't let me near you."

"Is that true, Park? He offered, yet you keep us apart on purpose?"

With everyone listening now, Parker's face turns red. "I'm only trying to protect you. Look at everything you've been through."

"But what if this woman is the one for you, while I'm the one keeping you from happiness?" Kelsea shoots a glance at Dawson. "Don't we all deserve to be happy, Park?"

Parker's phone buzzes again, but he still hesitates.

"Go on, dude. Take the girl out and have a great time," I urge. "Dawson will be fine. If he needs anything, he can reach out to me or any of us—because that's what friends do, right? They help each other in times of need." There's an extra layer of meaning in my words, influenced by the ideas Gigi planted in my head.

If Parker or Dawson had been really struggling over these past few years, surely they'd have reached out to us. Maybe we should have stepped in more often—something we could start doing now. But resorting to smuggling? That's still a leap I can hardly wrap my head around.

Parker gives in. Kelsea brightens as if happy at the prospect of a night away from him, and before long, we all make our way back to the parking lot. Once Parker gets Kelsea comfortably settled in the passenger seat, Gigi pulls her into a protective hug, her arms tightly wrapped around the petite woman's neck.

"Make sure you've got Jackson's and Belle's numbers saved on your phone, okay? Ugh, why haven't I gotten a new phone yet? Reach out to one of them if needed tonight," she reminds, ending the embrace with a sharp glare directed at Dawson.

“Jesus, Gigi, what do you think I’m gonna do? Attack her or something? The boys will be with us,” Dawson snaps. Then, with his usual flair for comedy, he winks and adds, “But I’ll attack her next time I have her alone.”

I’m certain he’s making a joke, but I can see Gigi’s face go pale, not amused at all. I pull her back to me by the arm and we wait until everyone has left. Parker drives off in Dawson’s old truck while the boys pile into Parker’s van.

“Get ready, Kelsea. The boys and I promise to pull every trick in the book to make sure you laugh and have a fantastic time tonight,” Dawson declares.

“I’m looking forward to it. Bye Gigi,” she calls out with a giggle, waving from the window as they leave the parking lot.

“You’re overthinking those scars, G. There’s no way it’s them,” I say as I head to my truck.

“And you’re not thinking enough,” she fires back.

I grit my teeth, frustrated by her reckless instincts—even as I care about her deeply. The ride back to my place is quiet, which gives me time to process the day. Once home, I hate how she locks herself in the guest bathroom and showers before we can really talk.

I can’t let things go unresolved until morning, so I wait until she finishes and has settled into the guest bedroom for a while. Just as I’m about to knock on her door, eager to coax her into my bed for a talk—and more—my phone buzzes. It’s my commander.

“Ybarra is on the move,” his voice comes through with urgent clarity. “Our task force monitoring him picked up chatter via satellite. He’s scheduled to meet his buyers at a

new location south of Love Beach sometime before tomorrow night. You're to leave immediately to set up capture and coordinate with the team already en route. More details will follow."

"Yes, sir." My heart races as the familiar adrenaline surges through me. I grab my go bag and double-check that I have everything I need.

But what about Gigi? I know full well that if this mission wraps up by tomorrow, the task force will shuttle me away to Central America without warning or a proper goodbye. I call Davis to make some arrangements before approaching her, then I knock on her door.

"G? Are you awake? I have to leave."

The door parts enough, revealing her wet hair and a face that's no longer angry but upset. "Leave? Where? When?"

"Now. The mission's heating up."

"Then I'm coming with," she insists, flinging the door wide open. I catch a glimpse of the T-shirt she's wearing and wonder if there's nothing beneath it, but I can't afford a distraction.

"No way. This is the final push, and it's far too dangerous for you. You need to stay here. Do you understand?" I give her a stern, icy look that means business. "Davis has arranged for an officer to watch over you all night, and a fresh shift will take over in the morning."

I start down the hallway toward the garage, but then I hear her footsteps rushing after me. I turn just in time to catch her as she wraps her arms around me, ankles crossed behind my back.

“Jackson... what if it’s too dangerous for you? ” She whispers into my ear, and I can hear a crack in her voice.

“Don’t worry about me. No matter what happens, I’ll always find my way back to you. That’s a promise.” I gently place her on the kitchen island and cup her face in my hands. “Listen closely—I have to go. I hate we fought over our friends. You have every right to trust your instincts, even if I don’t completely agree. Don’t ever lose sight of that, okay?”

She nods, a tear glistening at the corner of her eye. “Are you sure I can’t come? I could hide in the truck or?”

I kiss her to hush her. “I’d be in too much trouble if I brought you along. This is a classified mission, darlin’. Trust me, you’ve already done more than enough to help push this investigation forward. Now let me do my job and see it through.”

“I need you, Jackson, so don’t you even think about not coming back, do you hear me, soldier?” She kisses me, with more than her usual intensity, as if pouring her strength into me. I do the same back, because without me to protect her, she’ll be in the hands of an officer who only sees her as his obligation, nothing more. She’ll need to be strong, too. With any luck, her attacker is with Ybarra, though, which eases my mind, because he should be getting set to meet with his buyers, according to my intel.

I lift her off the counter and carry her to my bed. “I want you to sleep here naked. While I’m fighting to complete this mission, I’ll have the vision of you keeping the light on for me and my bed warm.”

“Yes. I’ll be waiting here,” she says, stripping off the t-shirt, revealing her beautiful, bare skin just for me.

I moan as I slowly pull the covers over her, taking in every inch of her, noting every

new tan line she got today. I kiss her skin, pausing to breathe in her scent at the apex of her thighs. It's so tempting when she whimpers and arches her back, silently pleading for more, but I resist and continue up her body, teasing each nipple with my tongue. Finally, I tuck the covers under her chin and kiss her lips repeatedly. I'm tempted for a quick moment of passion, but I know I must fucking leave.

"I'll see you soon, darlin'." I tear myself away from her and exit the house as quickly as possible.

Driving my truck to the rendezvous point where a helicopter awaits, I think about her lying in my bed. "I'll be back," I whisper as a promise. My command wants me to re-enlist, but I have different plans now.

By the time I reach the helicopter, I've managed to compartmentalize my thoughts. On the way, I read through the briefing, concentrating on the mission as if my life depends on it. Because I have to return to Gigi in one piece, no matter what.

SEVENTEEN

ABDUCTION

GIGI

Twelve hours without Jackson in our bed has me feeling restless, his scent lingering in every corner of the house. The silence in his absence is deafening—every little sound sets off my nerves.

I finally get up before sunrise. After brushing my teeth and gathering my curls into a messy bun, I slip into one of his oversized cozy sweaters paired with my leggings.

I make coffee, then take my mug and wrap in a blanket.

Settling into a chair on his patio, I sip the hot drink while watching the sunrise. It's Sunday, and the neighborhood is as quiet as ever—out here, on the town's edge, the houses are spread far apart.

As tranquil as it all is, my stomach ties in knots from what a week it's been. I replay every detail of recent events while the morning sun warms the air and the lingering clouds gradually burn away.

I'm missing something,

And I can't shake the feeling. We know Mike acted as the middleman, but who exactly was he liaising with? We also know The Jailbird yacht was used to transport

both fish and guns. I suspect Jackson is holding back clues, given that he'd been tracking this Ybarra criminal for a while.

Despite my desire for a meaty story here, I may not get one given the government is involved. I'm sure some details I'll never know. And all of this is unfolding in Love Beach—a quaint little town, according to Jackson. Right.

I head back inside and grab my laptop. My inbox is overflowing and my messages are piling up; ever since I took over the Buzz, my employees must think I vanished. Fortunately, I helped Dad build an excellent team, so the Buzz can handle itself if needed. Still, I'm eager to dive back into my work.

As I settle in at the dining table and scan through the accumulated emails, a new email pops up from Anon—my anonymous informant. For the past few years, I've been receiving mysterious messages with no hint of who this person is or how they originally found me.

At first, I dismissed the initial messages as a joke or a wrong number, but then more kept coming. Eventually, I followed one that tipped me off to a county controller who might be embezzling funds.

I went to Dad with the tip, and it turned into a newsworthy story. We dug deeper, reported it, and the controller was eventually arrested. Since then, I've listened closely to every anonymous message I've received.

Today's message reads:

Anon: Meet at the Buzz office for answers into the smuggling ring.

“What?” I mutter as I read, then quickly hit reply to the email, demanding more details.

The text I had gotten the night of my attack at the warehouse had directed me there saying a truck would show up, a meeting of buyers and sellers to take place, then I'd have proof of an illegal fishing ring—which apparently never happened, because of my attack. I almost regret that I was there because if I hadn't been, Jackson's mission would have gone off without a hitch. He'd be the hero and sent away by now. And we might not have ever had a chance to be intimate with each other.

After several minutes with no email in reply, I glance at the time. Eight o'clock.

A knock at the front door startles the hell out of me, and I edge slowly toward the window to take a peek. There's Officer Allison Grant, punctual as ever, knocking again.

"Hey, Allison," I say as I open the door, and instantly, a new plan begins to form in my mind.

"Morning. I just wanted to let you know I'm taking the shift now. I'll be right out front," she announces, gesturing toward her patrol car. Though she was a few years ahead of me in school, we've become friendly as adults. I often bump into her while she patrols Love Beach, keeping the town safe.

I'm counting on her to look out for me today, too.

"Actually, I need to head to the Buzz office to work for a while. Can you drive me there and wait for a few hours?" I ask with a sweet smile, hoping not to sound like I'm begging.

"Hmm. My orders were only to keep watch," she replies, cocking her head.

"But why would it matter if you kept watch at my office instead? I really need some time to catch up after this crazy week. Please?"

“Okay. But I’ll call it in to the station just to be safe.”

“Great. Thank you so much.”

About thirty minutes later, I leave her in her patrol car outside and step into the Buzz. I lock the door behind me and lean against it, inhaling the familiar scents of paper, ink, and the old, mechanical aroma of the printing presses—a reminder of my home away from home.

Years ago, Dad had acquired and renovated the original brick firehouse. The upper floor now houses offices, the middle is filled with the printing press, and the daylight basement serves as the archives.

While I wait for more word from my source, I make my way straight to the archive room. There, we keep a computer and equipment I’m well familiar with, having spent several summers in school compiling a digital database of every single issue of the Buzz—even though, as a teen, I barely paid attention to or read all the articles from the past thirty years.

I switch on the computer and wait, thinking about the message in my email again. Meet at the Buzz office... answers... Will my source finally reveal themselves here?

Once the computer is running, I dive into what I do best—research.

I start by looking up Ybarra’s name; nothing shows up in our paper about him.

Next, I search for The Jailbird and, again, nothing appears. Just as I expected.

I then type in “Illegal fishing,” and several old articles written by my dad come up—although he hadn’t reported on the topic for about ten years. I scan through them; the reports consist of various citizens’ accounts about sightings or rumors

concerning different boats and catches, with no consistent details about the boats, times of year, or types of fish caught.

I understand why Dad stopped reporting on this—he'd said at the time how people just wanted to see their names in print. He dismissed illegal fishing as little more than a myth, similar to Sasquatch or the Loch Ness Monster—legends that are fun to joke about rather than take seriously.

I search for smuggling, but a few older articles appear about boats seized from Cuba, carrying cigars and other goods. No mention of any guns.

On a whim, I type in Officer Alden Parker's name. Dozens of articles populate the screen: details of his awards, his exemplary safety record, and the various cases he's worked on over the years. He's been a model officer for so long—a hometown guy who grew up right.

Then one of them briefly mentions the tragic accident that took the Parker's parents' lives when Alden and Kelsea were in their early twenties, an event that hit them both incredibly hard. Kelsea nearly quit law school that year, but Parker had convinced her to soldier on.

Another article, covering the time Kelsea was attacked in New York, appears—such a heartbreaking story. I recall how gutted Parker was. We all were, Dawson as well. Since high school, all of us have been as close as a found family. It's no wonder Jackson couldn't believe me when I mentioned the scars and my theory that Parker and Dawson might be connected to all this chaos.

I type Noah Dawson into the search bar, and chew my cheek when the article about his mother comes up. Like Addie and Davis' family, the Dawsons came from nothing—dirt poor. They moved here from Mississippi at the start of freshman year, and almost immediately, his father abandoned his mother and five boys. As an adult,

Dawson has always tried to support his mom and brothers, even having to endure his mother's trial and subsequent imprisonment in Charleston for drunk driving and causing a fatal accident. That period was rough on him, and we all rallied around during that difficult time.

I sift through a few articles that list his awards and accolades, though not nearly as many as Parker's, and another article Dad wrote several years ago which admonished his less than stellar handling of a certain investigation, which is odd. In my mind, by association, I always assumed that both he and Parker were equally highly decorated cops in the area.

Something nudges me to check the archives of the high school yearbooks, which I'd scanned, and digitized, too. Parker and Dawson were both a year behind Jackson, while Davis and Beau were two years behind.

Sifting through all four years of Dawson's class books, one fact becomes apparent: Parker always seemed to win, with Dawson coming in either second or last. Whether it was the MVP in sports, club presidencies, or even prom king, Parker consistently came out on top. It was surprising since Parker and Dawson had always been best friends—I'd assumed they were equally high achievers.

Dawson's photos from year-to-year show him as a scrawny kid in freshman year, slowly growing into his body and filling out with muscles through senior year. I'd almost forgotten how the guys used to share stories about him being relentlessly picked on by bullies when he first arrived at school, and how they'd taken him under their wing and looked out for him.

Now, anyone meeting Dawson with his impressive physique and cocky, jovial manner would never guess the struggles he's endured.

So absorbed I've been in my research that I gasp when suddenly the lights in the

archive room go out. I'm sure our electric bill is always paid on auto—so what's going on? I step cautiously through the dim room and pause at the door. Without the hum of the lights, I can hear footsteps creaking on the floor above.

Could it be an employee? They'd have a key. Or perhaps my anonymous source? But how would they manage to enter the building?

The footsteps, slow and deliberate, pass directly above me. I force down my rising panic. Damn, why haven't I gotten a new phone yet? Tomorrow morning, I swear I'll buy one. And where is Allison—shouldn't she be on the lookout for anyone sneaking into the building? Unless, of course, they came in through one of the side or back windows where she couldn't see.

Now I'm scared out of my wits.

At the top of the stairwell, the door creaks open slowly, and all I see are heavy boots on the landing. Instinct tells me to hide and observe before revealing myself.

The room is packed with towering bookshelves, so I quietly make my way to the farthest one at the end and crouch behind it. Thankfully, we'd replaced the old tile with short, office-style carpet last year, letting me tiptoe without drawing attention—even if it makes it hard to pinpoint the intruder's exact location once they reach the bottom of the stairs.

My pulse pounds, every beat echoing in my ears. This situation feels completely wrong. Shutting my eyes for a moment, I work to steady my breathing. Jackson would want me to be strong now.

I concentrate, listening for any sound—the rustle of clothes, or a soft brush against a bookshelf near the front of the room. Then I hear a book crash at the end of that row. I swiftly move to the opposite end and hide around a corner, pressing myself flat

against the end cap.

This is insane. I need to know. Who. This. Is.

“Who’s there?” I call out, my voice barely more than a croak.

All I get in response is a maniacal laugh—a laugh that sounds unmistakably male. That kind of laughter isn’t a good sign. It seems to come from behind me, perhaps a few rows away. I’m trapped now, unless I can make a dash for the stairs.

“Stop it. This isn’t funny. Reveal yourself now!” I demand, raising my voice.

The laugh echoes again, this time from the row where I’m hiding. It’s now or never, so I take a deep breath and bolt. My footsteps pound loudly on the floor as the carpet betrays my heavy steps. I’m almost to the stairs when suddenly a hand grabs my arm, yanking me to the floor. A body covers me and quickly pins me down.

“No! Please, stop!” I scream, hoping Allison hears me from her car, though I know she wouldn’t—especially not down here with these thick, soundproof cement walls.

I hit, scream, arch, bite—anything I can do to break free. I refuse to give up. All I can think about is Jackson—my protector. But he isn’t here. My mind races with desperate “what ifs”: What if he never makes it home to me? What if I don’t make it out of this alive? What if I never see him again?

During the struggle, I manage to grab a wrist. That familiar scar sends a shock through me, though I can’t tell who it belongs to.

“Parker? Dawson? Why are you doing this?” I scream in disbelief.

“Stop struggling,” the man growls in a low, deep tone, his voice still unfamiliar or

perhaps deliberately concealed. Suddenly, his other hand covers my mouth with a cloth.

Trapped, I inhale a sweet scent on the material and realize—through the haze of panic—that it must be chloroform. I fight with all my strength, determined not to give in, but eventually, as everything begins to fade to darkness, the attacker pulls off his ski mask. The image is blurry, and I can hardly believe who it is. The revelation is like a puzzle piece. If only my world wasn't going dark so I could see how it fits.

EIGHTEEN

THE TAKEDOWN

JACKSON

Our team is in position around a remote airfield, lying in wait and monitoring the supposed rendezvous point between Ybarra and the smugglers. We're roughly thirty clicks south of Love Beach, with the midday sun beating down warmly. I'm sweating like crazy—more than usual—and I can only blame it on the thoughts of Gigi's irresistible body waiting for me at home.

At least she's safe and not here. Who knows what kind of mess awaits with Ybarra and his crew during this transaction? I adjust my bulletproof vest and run my sweaty hands along my thighs to ensure my gun won't slip.

Suddenly, the comm crackles with a female voice: "We got incoming. Two dark SUVs from the West. Over."

"Buyers have arrived. Over," I reply. I'm hidden inside the air hangar, crouched behind some cargo and ready for any scenario. Dozens of other men are concealed like me, and a sniper lurks on the roof with his rifle aimed through one of the vents on standby.

As the sound of parking cars and slamming doors reaches my ears, my pulse races. Peeking through a narrow gap between two cargo boxes, I spot the buyer in this deal—Ybarra himself, accompanied by about six of his men. He does not know the

ambush awaiting him.

In the helicopter earlier, ops HQ had briefed me: after the thwarted deal at the docks in Love Beach, the smugglers are running scared. They managed to set up another meeting with Ybarra at this airfield, where he's expected to complete the purchase and board the plane back to his homeland. But we're here, waiting.

Our team also discovered illegally caught fish dumped in a river two hours inland from Love Beach. The fish would have spoiled within days, meaning the smugglers are on the hook since Ybarra refuses to pay top dollar for subpar product.

Our mission is clear: capture Ybarra and his men, seize the smugglers along with their illegal goods, and finally shut this operation down for good. With one less arms-dealing ring in the world, Gigi can sleep easier knowing the ocean's fish are safer.

With any luck, I can make it back to Gigi by nightfall, cozying my cock deep inside of her like I'm home.

"One truck incoming from the North. Over," another voice calls into my earpiece.

"This is it, team. Wait for my mark," I order, a ripple of adrenaline spiking through my veins.

"I have a perfect shot on Ybarra. Over," the sharpshooter confirms.

"Stand down. We're taking Ybarra alive after the transaction concludes. Over." I know these ops guys are itching to end this quickly, but patience is key here.

The cargo truck slows and then executes a three-point turn as it backs into the hangar. The driver turns off the engine, and a man steps out, followed by two more on the passenger side. From the briefing, I recognize them as the gun smugglers.

Ybarra's men immediately draw their weapons, forcing the three smugglers to raise their hands in surrender.

I hear Ybarra ordering in Spanish for them to open the truck doors slowly so he can inspect the cargo. His men remain alert for any tricks.

They follow orders and—holy shit—alongside cases of guns, stands Dawson holding Gigi bound and gagged in front of him. Her eyes widen in terror, and my heart nearly stops.

“See. It's Dawson. What'd I tell you? Now do you believe me?” Parker whispers, hiding behind me.

“But did you know he'd have Gigi?” I growl, clenching my jaw.

“No. He must have thought he needed insurance in case you showed up.”

Parker had called me last night when I was driving in my truck to rendezvous with the helo, and confessed to his role plus ratting out Dawson in this all this fuckery. I couldn't believe his story at first. Just like I couldn't believe Gigi when she suspected the two of them.

Much like Mike at the Yacht club, Dawson had been a middleman, making a modest profit on illegal fish until other opportunities emerged—like partnering with the gun smugglers to ship their product to the East Coast via Love Beach.

That's when he pushed Parker to help. Initially, Parker's role was simply to fix his ordinary police reports about activity at the docks. For covering up, he got his slice of the money. But he hated every second.

Parker had always been a good guy, willing to do anything for his sister, but the

mounting pressure of the medical bills made the money too tempting.

It caused havoc in his relationship with Dawson along the way, especially when he refused to let him have anything to do with Kelsea. Whenever Parker considered backing out, Dawson threatened to expose him.

Finally, Parker reached his limit and called me to put an end to it. He's prepared to be a witness and informant for leniency—unbeknownst to Dawson, he kept duplicate copies of every report detailing what really happened at the docks each time Dawson brought in a new shipment.

Dawson's screwed himself over getting in so deep, and who knows what repercussions his actions will have on his brothers once we take him into custody. But right now, he's holding Gigi, and I can't let anything happen to her.

"What is this with the woman?" Ybarra shouts.

"Insurance," Dawson yells back, shifting with Gigi beside a crate. "Send one of your men up here to inspect."

Ybarra gestures, and the nearest man lowers his gun and jumps into the truck, opening the crates to check their contents.

"He was going to take the money and run, wasn't he? That's his only move. He can't return to Love Beach, not after kidnapping Gigi. But what about his brothers?" I whisper to Parker, incredulous at the unfolding events.

"All I know is, Dawson forced me to get rid of the fish and wanted one night with Kelsea. He threatened again to expose me if I didn't comply. So after our fake story at the beach about my date, I took off to dump the fish in the river. The entire time, I worried if I'd come home and find her dead. But when I arrived, he and his brothers

and Kelsea were having a nice time eating pizza and playing board games, laughing and carrying on like one big happy family.”

Parker shook his head. I look away from Gigi for a split second, noticing his inner turmoil.

“After they left, I broke down and told Kels everything I’d been holding back. Of course, she’s furious with both me and Dawson, but she’s a lawyer. She knows that once I’m arrested and put on trial, things will get ugly. That’s why she urged me to call you and turn myself in. She called Davis, too, and he’s keeping her safe at his place with Belle for now. I know she’ll be fine while I face what’s coming to me. Believe me, I never expected to be one of those officers to turn a blind eye to what’s right. The guilt of it nearly killed me, and the lies were multiplying too fast. I wanted out, and I’m just glad I am now, no matter what happens.”

My teeth grind as I struggle to accept it all, but my focus remains on Gigi. In this room, any man could become trigger-happy in an instant.

Ybarra’s man jumps down from the truck and nods. Another man approaches, holding a tablet for Dawson to see. He taps a few buttons, and it’s done—a multimillion-dollar transfer, no doubt, to an offshore account in Dawson’s name.

Now I face a hard decision. I need to capture Dawson and Ybarra, but I can’t let Gigi be caught in the crossfire. I swallow hard, wrestling with the choice.

“Keys!” Dawson yells.

One of Ybarra’s men and one of Dawson’s trade keys, looking like Dawson intends to get away in one of the SUVs while Ybarra’s men can load the guns off the truck into the airplane.

Dawson fumbles awkwardly, trying to lower both himself and Gigi out of the truck to the ground—a glaring oversight in his plan.

“If you have a shot to wound Dawson, not kill him, take it. Same goes for Ybarra and the others,” I command my team as I prepare to launch from behind the crate and secure Gigi.

Before I know it, chaos erupts. A shot hits Dawson’s shoulder, sending him stumbling backward into the truck and causing Gigi to drop to the floor. Quickly and smartly, she rolls under the truck toward the front.

The sharpshooter strikes Ybarra in both legs, taking him down, while Dawson’s men and Ybarra’s exchange open fire, taking each other out almost instantly.

I sprint forward, desperate to find Gigi, as my team moves in to apprehend suspects, process evidence, and secure arrests. “Gigi!” I yell as I reach the truck and find her on the driver’s side, hiding behind the front wheels with muffled sounds coming from her taped mouth.

I fall to my knees and pull her out and into the safety of my arms.

There’s no time to breathe—gunshots ring out. My head snaps to the far end of the truck, where I see Dawson making a final, defiant stand, slipping away from our ops guys and pointing a gun directly at us.

Everything seems to slow down. My hand fumbles along the ground for my gun. I hear a shot ring out—but Parker suddenly jumps in front of us, taking the hit. Behind him, my team tackles Dawson to the ground.

NINETEEN

AFTERMATH

GIGI

An entire floor of the hospital is swarming with special agents, officers, and other personnel. One room holds doctors carefully monitoring Parker after his operation—he took Dawson’s bullet while saving us, the projectile having shredded through his elbow so severely that he might lose the use of his arm forever.

Dawson is receiving treatment for his shoulder wound in another room. He refuses to answer any questions until he has a lawyer present.

Two special ops men are assigned to guard each room.

Jackson and I answer all the questions his team and Davis have for us. We’re slowly piecing things together. I share about the things I found in my research at the Buzz, and about my anonymous source. It helps the agents create a profile on Dawson. They believe he must have been my source and carried a huge chip on his shoulder for many years, seeing his friend Parker constantly being the overachiever.

They’d searched his locker and desk at the police station and found copies in a folder of various articles I’d written over the years based on the source’s leads. In a sick way, he must have gotten off on his tips turning into exposés in the Buzz. Like that would prove he was better than Parker.

The night of Jackson's stakeout with Davis and the officers at the docks, Parker said Dawson was expecting his biggest shipment of arms yet. But when Davis corralled the two of them into assisting on Jackson's stakeout at the last minute, Dawson panicked knowing the smugglers' truck was en route.

We believe he'd directed me through the anonymous text to snoop at the warehouse to create a diversion. Something to distract Jackson so that Dawson could wave off the truck when it arrived. Dawson was never in his radio position, but instead in the warehouse waiting for me so he could attack, then ran to the truck when it arrived.

He'd threatened to expose Parker's role in everything unless he kept his mouth shut. As for Mike, after we'd questioned him at the club, he'd placed a nervous call to his usual number from the burner phone to tell them about us. We believe it was also Dawson who met him and made that attack, trying to prevent him talking if we or anyone else came at him with questions again.

As the agents and officers continue to sort through evidence and interviews, no doubt, more will come to light. Right now, concern fills me as I watch Jackson crack.

"Are you okay?" I side up to him, desperate to be there for him.

His jaw clenches as he grits his teeth. "No. I'm absolutely not okay. Those are our friends, Parker and Dawson. How can this be happening? I feel so betrayed, like I knew them and trusted them, when in reality I didn't know them at all. None of us did." He presses his hand flat against the window of Parker's room, as if yearning for the joyful past our group once shared.

I cover his hand with mine and squeeze it. "I know this hurts."

"Yeah. See Gigi, I don't always win. Being the hero sucks sometimes, because this feels far, far from a win... knowing what the two of them have gone through?

Learning of the bad decisions they made instead of turning to any of us for help? Seeing them about to be ripped apart from their families as they face the consequences of their actions?”

“Jackson...”

“I-I need to go for a walk down on the beach and clear my head.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, please. I need to be alone. I’ll find you later.” He brushes my hand away, pushing my heart away in the process. I let him be, as I’m convinced we’ll be together tonight to talk and heal. I’ll be the hero for him then—consoling him, listening to him, loving him however he needs.

I remain longer, holding Kelsea’s hand until Addie takes her home with her. Beau has Dawson’s brothers already there with them, too.

There’s a lot we all need to unravel about their situations. For now, we cling to one another as friends, as a chosen family, to get through this.

Returning to Jackson’s house, everything weighs me down. I should be happily at work, typing furiously away on my article about the illegal fishing ring, but I can’t even start. It hurts too much, recalling the somber faces of everyone tonight. I played a small role in tearing apart families by chasing this story to begin with, and I can’t reconcile that with the long years of friendship we shared.

Over the years, Dad would kill stories he didn’t want the people of Love Beach to know about. I haven’t always agreed with him—even though there have been times when I did the same. Knowing when to stop, when a story isn’t good for our town, is an art form. Yet, as a journalist, I always believed our duty was to set out the facts so

people could debate and grow.

This story might never see the light of day for so many reasons. Perhaps it's because of how devastated Parker's sister is. How Dawson's brothers are lost without him. Or how close Jackson and I have become—even how close to death I came. But that's a decision for tomorrow whether to write the article.

I spend some time cleaning up for Jackson—doing the dishes, scrubbing down bathrooms—anything to keep my worry at bay. When it's almost sunset, I decide to scour the beaches for him. Only I hear a phone ring, an actual land line somewhere in the house.

I rush toward the noise and discover it hidden on a bookshelf: a red phone. Do I answer it? What if it's a top-secret message from his command? Or what if it's him, injured on the beach, trying to reach me because I still haven't replaced my smartphone?

Tentatively, I reach out and answer. "Hello?"

"Gigi! Thank God. Come to the end of the pier now. As fast as you can. Hurry!" Jackson's urgent, panicked tone jolts me.

My heart skips a beat. "Coming!"

I hang up and make a mad dash to my car, my mind racing with thoughts that more threats might be on the way—that someone could be about to strike Jackson's house. It would be just like him to warn me and keep me safe if he couldn't be there in person.

A few blocks later, I dismiss those fears: Ybarra has been captured. The mission is over, although it wouldn't surprise me if Jackson has people here sweeping the town

to protect it, just in case. Davis, too, had called in every available officer and volunteer to patrol. Nothing left to chance.

So why did Jackson call? Fear grips me as I speed through town and reach the boardwalk with lightning speed. I don't even know if I turn off the car, as I launch out and run as fast as my legs can carry me. Even after missing some training sessions recently, I manage the sprint, although I've had plenty of opportunities to do so over the past several days with Jackson.

Rounding the pier and stepping onto the long row of whitewashed wooden slats, the crash of the ocean waves below mirrors my pounding heart. I spot him at the far end—he flings his hands in the air as soon as our eyes meet, beckoning me on, even though the pier seems to stretch endlessly between us.

I push myself harder, legs pumping, lungs burning, when I pass a boy excitedly pointing up to the sky. “Look, Mommy, a helicopter!” he shouts. A quick glance upward nearly makes me stumble onto the boards, but I regain my balance. I'm almost there—just a moment longer.

As I near, Jackson's arms are outstretched, and before I know it, I launch into him. I wrap my arms around him in a tight embrace, and the impact sends us spinning until we finally come to a stop, our lips colliding in a desperate kiss. He overwhelms me with the intensity of his mouth until I must pull back, gasping for air, my chest heaving from the run.

“What is it, Jackson? You have me scared out of my mind.” I search his eyes, as they probe into mine, like fighting to find my soul.

“I have to go.” His gaze flits toward the approaching helicopter, and my world crumbles at his feet.

“Wha—?” I lose all control of my body, going limp in his arms, a stream of tears pouring out of my eyes. “No. No. Stay another night, please.”

He clutches me to him, lifting me off my feet, holding me so tight our bodies meld together. “I wish I could, darlin’.” His voice cracks, and he sniffles—yes, the strong, fearless hero is crying, too.

“How could this be? So soon?” I whimper into his ear.

“Mission over. On to the next. They called me right before I called you. I only prayed you’d make here in time for me to say good?—”

“Don’t say it. Nope.” I pull away sharply from him, pressing my hand over his mouth. “We won’t say it. We can’t. Oh, God, we just got together and now...”

Tears spill out as the helicopter blades grow louder. I know we have only minutes—maybe seconds.

“Hey, soldier,” he says, his voice stern but still breaking, as he sets my feet on the pier. He takes my wet cheeks in his hands, forcing my eyes to his. “I need you to do one thing for me. Do you think you can promise me something? Promise me.”

I nod, my voice catching and my nose running. “Yes. Anything.”

“I’m going to need you to be strong for me, G. Because I can’t leave here seeing you crying. That would break me. We don’t have any control over this, okay? So, at least for now, see me off with all the strength you can muster. Promise?”

My throat is too tight to speak, so I nod, my promise clear in my eyes.

“Good girl.” He pulls me into another fierce embrace. Our bodies press together as

the helicopter hovers above, its blades threatening to blow us away. But that's fine with me—as long as we're together, no matter where the wind takes us.

I find my voice. “Now you promise me something, soldier. Promise me you'll come back. No matter what, find your way back to me, and I'll be waiting—right here in Love Beach, forever, for as long as it takes.”

He kisses me tenderly, as if not wanting to break me with too forceful a parting kiss, but I'm already shattered. The promise to be strong is all that keeps me from collapsing on the pier and screaming at the approaching helicopter, No! You can't have him! He's my hero and I need him!

“I fucking love you, G,” he swears, and then the warmth of his body leaves me, breaking me in two. I gasp as, in true hero fashion, he leaps off the pier and lands on a rope ladder that, by some miracle, has descended from the copter just in time. He clings to it with one hand while saluting me with the other, shouting, “I promise. Be strong until I return, darlin’.”

It's the ultimate hero's exit, vanishing into the dark night like the climax of a Hollywood spy film. I hold back my tears for the moment, though I know they'll come later—I'll drown my sorrow at home on my couch until I find a way to live without him.

For now, I wave my hands until I can no longer see or hear the helicopter, then continue waving, hoping if he has high-powered binoculars, he can see me.

Then my heart jumps into my throat—I didn't say I love him back.

“I love you, Jackson. I love you,” I whisper, praying the gentle sea breeze carries my words to him. And then it all breaks—the dam of my emotions surges, tears streaming down my face. Exhausted and on the verge of collapse, I nearly fall off the

pier when two arms wrap around me, holding me upright—it's Belle.

"I've got you, baby. I'm here, so lean on me," she says.

"H-how did you know I'd be here?" I ask with my voice pitiful and weak.

"Jackson called me after he called you. He told me he was leaving and exactly where to find you—he knew you'd need someone to hold you after he was gone."

I cry even harder now, salty tears mixing with the ocean waves. Jackson knows me so well. Had I known, things between us might have been different over the years—maybe we'd have been together long before now and had more time together. Now he's off to an undisclosed location, battling dangerous forces, and my tears fall freely as I tremble in my sister's embrace.

"I know, honey. Let it all out. Standing by, watching you both say goodbye broke my heart—I can only imagine how you feel," she comforts me, gently rubbing my back.

"No. It's not goodbye. He'll be back, Belle. This isn't the end. We just began... God, my heart aches. How can it hurt this much? I never knew a heart could hurt so deeply. Is that what you felt all along while fighting for Davis's love? And I was so cruel when I said I was tired of you pining for him. I'm such a terrible sister."

"Not entirely," she laughs softly. "For years, I wondered if the day would come when you'd open up enough to let someone in. And now you have—with Jackson, just as I always hoped."

"Oh God, how am I going to survive this?"

"You will," she assures me.

“Take me to his place, Belle. I need his scent, his space, and I want to steal his clothes and wear them every day. I just. Need. Him.” I sob between each word.

“Yes, let’s go. My dear sister, I’ve got you. We’ll get through this together. Want to stop for ice cream for me and alcohol for you on the way?”

I sputter, unable to form a coherent reply, but I know she’ll dash to the store for supplies. Leave it to Jackson to know that I’d need my sister to comfort me after he left. My hero saves the day, once again.

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GIGI

It's the Fourth of July and the heat is stifling. A fan relentlessly blows cool air over my desk in the office as I put the final touches on the latest Buzz issue, getting it ready to print the next day.

Just as I'm about to leave the office, my phone buzzes with a message from Belle.

Belle: Are you coming or not?

Lately, she's been in one of her moods, dealing with the final days of being heavily pregnant and on the verge of giving birth.

Gigi: Locking up the office now.

Belle: Good. Hurry.

Gigi: Why? Are you going to melt before I get there?

She doesn't reply, and I brace myself for her irritability on the drive to Beau and Jackson's grandparents' stunning old southern mansion, perched on cliffs that overlook Passion Cove.

As always, my thoughts wander back to the events of this past spring—especially my brief time with Jackson. I haven't heard from him since the day he left me on the pier. My worry for him has been overwhelming, and I've even shed a few tears. Waiting for him to return, as he promised, has been the most excruciating experience of my

life.

Work keeps me occupied, and gradually, I sense that the people of Love Beach have started to respect me more. The Buzz now prints twice as many pages as before and covers a broader mix of county and national news than it did back when Dad was at the helm. This growth fills me with pride. And Dad admits he likes the changes, too.

I even got an offer from a major publication in Georgia—but I could never leave Love Beach. This is my home. I cherish its ups and downs, the celebrations of local festivals, the lively community, and even the occasional big news story. Yet, the only thing that would truly complete my happiness is Jackson.

Today, friends and family are gathering for our beloved Independence Day tradition, watching fireworks from the cliffs. Beau is in his element orchestrating the perfect party, complete with a roasting pig in the ground. He's in his off-season with the Charleston hockey team, so he has nothing but time right now to tend to it and his family.

Pulling up the long driveway to the mansion and parking, I notice the celebration taking place on the expansive front lawn beneath a large tent providing shade. The Dawson boys are tossing a football around, and the twins, who just secured full-ride football scholarships at two different colleges, are here with their girlfriends. Beau and Addie are currently fostering these four boys, so their house is buzzing with energy—and Addie has made sure there's a generous spread of food at all times. Those boys will never go hungry as long as they are with them, but I can tell their hearts are still processing what Dawson did. Hopefully time will heal all wounds.

Kelsea, in her wheelchair and cared for by Jackson's grandmother, is also here. The two have grown close, and everyone in the group stops by to check on her regularly. Every week, without fail, she visits both Parker and Dawson as they await their hearings. She's also slated to take the bar exam in the fall and spends several hours studying each day. I regret how circumstances drove her and Parker apart, but her

determination and strength now inspire me.

I'm uncertain if she will ever forgive Dawson. Who knows if the rest of us can either. Yet he remains a friend—and we'll have to work on mending broken trust. But it'll take time.

Belle waves at me from a distance, one hand keeping a fan aloft as she braces herself for her upcoming labor; I doubt her stomach can expand further. I expect a twenty-pound baby from her any minute now. Davis, ever the caring husband, brings her a cold glass of iced lemonade.

I take in the scene: everyone laughing and celebrating the day, while an ache lingers in my heart for Jackson.

Sighing, I slip off my sandals and stroll barefoot through the warm grass until I reach the tent. Beau and Addie are huddled together in conversation with someone. They break apart, revealing?—

A handsome man with his arm in a cast.

“Jackson?” I whisper, blinking to make sure I'm seeing clearly.

He beams at me. “I'm home, darlin'.”

I rush toward him, nearly toppling him over as I burst into tears.

“Oof. Careful, G. I'm home, but I'm hurt.”

“Oh my God,” I exclaim as I examine him closely—realizing he's also leaning on a cane.

“Broken ribs, arm, a twisted ankle, and a mild concussion. Don't ask how it

happened—though I suppose I should tell you because I see fifty questions in your eyes anyway. I fell out of a tree while surveilling some smugglers. Out of all the ways I could have gotten injured, that was it. Not very heroic. And it happened just a few days before I was discharged. But none of that matters now. I’m here, and I could certainly use a good-looking woman to take care of me—none of the VA nurses quite appealed to me,” he adds with a wink.

“Good thing, soldier. If anyone’s going to care for you, it’ll be me,” I retort, pressing a thumb to my chest before wiping away my tears. “Do your lips work at least?”

“Hell yes, they do. Come here.” He opens his arm wide and pulls me in. Our bodies meet and lips reconnect in a long, passionate kiss.

“Damn, darlin’, you’re a sight for my sore eyes. I’m done with the military. I’m never leaving again, Gigi. I’m home—you’re my home,” he declares, leaving me breathless.

We spend the entire day like that—clinging to each other, hardly speaking to anyone else, completely content in our own new world, talking about everything and sharing a million kisses.

The following spring, during our annual friends’ spring break party, Jackson and I slip away for a quiet walk down to the pier. Halfway there, he stops, draws me into his arms, and sways as if a melody plays only for us—the rhythm perfectly matching the gentle lapping of the waves.

“This is sweet,” I murmur, savoring how each day with Jackson only gets better. We had just returned from our first vacation together in Bora Bora, a truly fabulous escape. But come Monday, it’s back to our routines—me at the Buzz, him at the police station.

Our life together is better than I ever imagined. Sure, we bicker and tease each other

relentlessly at times, but we always reconcile—and that’s what matters.

Suddenly, he pulls away. “Oh, wow. Is that a message in a bottle floating toward shore?” he asks, pointing behind me.

I follow his gaze. “It is!” I exclaim, dashing over to retrieve it. I flip it over in my hand until I spot a name. “Gigi?”

Jackson takes it, and curiously pulls out the cork with surprising ease, along with the paper scroll that comes with it.

“Read it, G.” He plants a kiss on my forehead.

I unroll the note, read the question there, and gasp. “It’s a marriage proposal?”

“Gigi Baymont, would you honor me by being my wife and staying with me here in Love Beach forever?”

I laugh, smile, and cry all at once, answering him by taking the bottle and drawing a huge YES in the sand.