



Tropical Inferno (Inferno #4)

Author: Kat Mizera

Category: Sport

Description: She's a rising star in the world of fashion. He's the guy who got dumped live on national TV.

Their meet cute rom com is going to take New York Fashion Week by storm.

Three years ago Camille Royal packed her bags and fled her family's home in Paris. She has worked hard in New York City and is now considered a hot new talent. The one thing she needs to seal her arrival in the cutthroat world of high fashion is a coveted spot at New York Fashion Week.

But her bright future is thrown into jeopardy when her PA suddenly quits, leaving Camille having to organize a full fashion show on her own.

Ryan Collins was once the hot favorite to win the romance reality show Bachelors on the Beach, but the second the bachelorette chose the other guy, Ryan became yesterday's news.

When Ryan and Camille accidentally collide on a busy Manhattan street, piles of fabric samples tumble to the sidewalk. After hurried apologies, Camille decides to take a chance on the handsome stranger.

Some teasing banter and more than a few stolen glances, soon has their work relationship evolving into something else. Days spent creating a stunning fashion collection are followed by nights tangled up in one another's arms.

After a major newspaper runs a cruel story about the runaway daughter of a French billionaire and her so-called toy boy lover Camille and Ryan find themselves at the center of a social media frenzy.

But if there is one thing these two share it's a determination to rise above the drama and write their own happily ever after.

Total Pages (Source): 21

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:03 am

1

Worst. Vacation. Ever .

Listening to the couple in the motel room next door having sex for the last two hours had Madison Teller ready to jump out of her skin .

“Harder, baby! Harder !”

This nonsense had been going on for too long and Maddie pulled the pillow over her head in frustration .

“Oh, yeah, that’s it !”

B-bang! Bang! B- bang !

The headboard of the bed in the adjoining room was either going to become the next drummer of some sadistic-sounding techno-rock band or bust through the walls in an explosion of wood, metal and body parts. Maddie hugged the pillow tighter over her ears, but there was no escaping the sound .

B-bang! Bang-bang-bang! Bang !

“Shut up!” she yelled, finally sitting up and pounding on the wall in frustration.

“Enough already !”

“Piss off, you old prude!” someone yelled back .

With a sigh of resignation, Maddie looked at the time. 5:05. Way too early to get up on vacation, but absolutely nothing had gone right so far, making this par for the course. She'd just arrived in Hawaii yesterday, but she already wanted to go home. Her best friend had bailed on their trip, she'd missed the connection on her flight, her suitcase was floating around in airline limbo somewhere, she'd managed to lose two hundred dollars cash, and this hotel was definitely not "clean and safe," as the website noted .

Padding into the bathroom, she quickly washed up and pulled on a pair of clean shorts and a T-shirt, grateful her mother had instilled the importance of putting a change of clothes in your carry-on bag. She slid her feet into flip-flops, threw everything in her backpack and took a cursory look around. It didn't appear she'd left anything behind, so she gripped the keys to her rental car in her hand and stomped out the door. She was so done with this vacation .

Garrett "Hawk" Hawkins stared up at the filthy, mottled ceiling in disgust. This place was a pimple on the asshole of society and just being here gave him the heebie-jeebies. What the hell was he doing in Hawaii, by himself, in the middle of hockey season? Well, technically the season had just started a couple weeks ago, and here he was cooling his jets with a five-game suspension, a \$10,000 fine and too much time to think. He'd never been good at playing the role of boy scout, but this time it had fallen into his lap and somehow it had just been easier to take the punishment than fight for the truth. Then his coach had told him to get out of town, go somewhere to recharge, think about his life—and his choices. Like an idiot, he'd gone to see his parents in San Diego. When that turned into an epic mistake, he'd headed for Oahu. Somehow, he wound up at this fleabag hotel just outside of Honolulu. He'd been to the island many times before, mostly with his ex. She'd always booked them into a swanky place near Waikiki called the Blue Dolphin Resort, and though he'd been loath to go, he had to admit it was great. Clean, spacious suites, the ocean, and most importantly, discretion. As a professional athlete, he was willing to pay three or four times what other places cost if he trusted that he would have privacy .

Unfortunately, after storming out of his mom and stepdad's house and driving south, his phone died, he'd been starving and needed to get some sleep. He'd pulled into a diner and spotted this hellhole of a motel across the street. He'd figured a few hours of shut-eye, a shower and a full charge on the battery of his phone would allow him to call the resort and see if they could accommodate him for a few days until he had to get home. He'd gotten friendly with one of the owners, Jim Roarke, and planned to give him a call in the morning. It was just that morning was taking forever to get here .

He was just about to doze off when what sounded like the alarm from his rental car blasted through the air, jolting him awake. With a growl, he hauled to his feet, grabbed his keys and burst out the door in nothing but his jeans. It was only his lightning-fast reflexes that kept him from bowling over the wisp of a woman with an oversized backpack that roared past him, shrieking at the top of her lungs .

"My car! Get away from there, you no-good, filthy scum-of-the-earth pieces of—" Her voice faded as she hit the stairs and pounded down them .

Surprise made Hawk hesitate, but then he was right behind her, his long legs taking the stairs three at a time to catch her just as she reached the bottom, the string of expletives and insults getting louder and more raucous as she went. He saw the thug in the parking lot reach into his pants just as the woman stepped into the open, and he snaked out an arm to grab her by the backpack right as the first shot bounced off the concrete wall to their left. As pieces of plaster scattered and more shots were fired, Hawk instinctively pushed the woman to the ground, covering her with his larger body. She trembled against him, one hand reaching around to squeeze his bicep. She had a hell of a grip, but he barely noticed as adrenaline surged through him and he kept an eye out for anyone approaching .

As another shot resulted in more plaster showering them with dust, he looked down at the woman beneath him. Though her eyes were wide with undeniable terror, he

couldn't help but notice they were beautiful. Big and brown, with eyelashes so long they disappeared up into her eyebrows—and she wasn't wearing any makeup. She had a pert little nose above the reddest lips he'd ever seen, and he had to resist the urge to taste them. She was stunning, he thought, and the feel of soft curves beneath him wasn't bad either. He forced himself to focus on the men out in the parking lot because he wasn't sure how he would protect her if those guys came into the stairwell to find them. Fortunately, he heard scuffling footsteps and then the roar of an engine as tires skidded on the pavement and they drove away .

Neither of them moved for several minutes, their breath coming in short little puffs as the shock and excitement began to fade. Hawk was used to it; life as a professional athlete presented far too many opportunities to be in difficult situations. The young woman beneath him, however, had now started to shake, her grasp on his bicep slowly loosening and her soft voice breaking the silence .

“W-w-were...th-those...gun... shots ?”

“Yeah.” He spoke gruffly, trying to hide the fear that was now replacing his survival instinct. He managed to get to his feet, reaching out a hand to help her though he was scowling now. “What did you think you were doing ?”

“W-what?” She blinked up at him, huge brown eyes filling with tears .

“You don't just run into a parking lot full of gangbangers! What the hell were you thinking ?!”

“I...my car...I couldn't...” She blinked a few more times, those impossibly long eyelashes fluttering as tears began leaking out the sides of her eyes .

“Aw, hell,” he muttered, reaching out to hug her to his chest. Which he then realized was still bare. She must have noticed it too because he felt the exact moment her tears

started to subside and awareness began to set in. She stiffened slightly, and then gently pushed at him to extricate herself .

“Sorry,” she whispered, swiping at her eyes and taking a shaky breath. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me .”

“You ever been shot at before?” he asked, his eyes finding hers pointedly .

“No.” She shook her head. “I can’t even... This really is the worst vacation ever.” She blew out a frustrated breath as color began returning to her pale face .

“You’re on vacation... here ?” He couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his voice .

She made a face. “I was supposed to be over at the Blue Dolphin in Waikiki but my friend cancelled on me and I couldn’t afford it on my own. The flight was non-refundable, though, so I found alternative accommodations and came anyway, figuring I could drive over to Waikiki every day and at least enjoy the beach. Unfortunately, day one has been spectacularly underwhelming !”

“This is a terrible neighborhood. You shouldn’t be at a place like this .”

“I was trying to salvage my vacation and when I booked this hotel online, it didn’t seem that bad .”

“You get what you pay for, darlin’.” He shook his head. “We should go back inside .”

She shook her head. “I’m going to the airport to see if I can change my flight and go home .”

“That’s not a bad idea if this place is your only option.” He paused. “If you give me a minute to put on a shirt and shoes, I’ll walk out with you to see if they did any

damage to your car .”

She seemed ready to protest but then nodded. “Okay, yes. Thank you .”

“Walk with me,” he said gently, noting that her hands were still shaking. “What’s your name ?”

“M-Mad-Madison.” She took a deep breath. “I guess I’m more shaken up than I thought .”

“I’m H—er, Garrett. Walk with me, Madison. I won’t let anything happen to you .”

Following him back to his room, Maddie had a moment of trepidation. Yes, he’d just saved her life but now that she got a good look at him, he was kind of scary too. He needed a shave and his torn-up, faded jeans made him look like a combination of homeless and a criminal. He had a strange, modified mohawk-style haircut that was growing out and sticking up. It gave him the look of someone who should be auditioning for a 1980’s punk rock music video. Except bigger. He was huge, probably a foot taller than she was, and built like the side of a mountain. Muscles for days, she thought, watching his broad shoulders and very nice backside as she walked behind him. She could sink her teeth into a butt like that and—. She mentally rolled her eyes, chiding herself for looking at his body when he could probably turn around and snap her neck without a second thought .

He just saved your life , she reminded herself. Looks were deceiving and she shouldn’t judge him simply because he had weird hair, too many tattoos, and big muscles .

He unlocked the door and let her walk in before him. Instead of shutting and locking the door, he simply let it close on its own and grabbed a T-shirt out of a backpack strangely similar to hers. He pulled on socks and slid his feet into a pair of Converse

sneakers, before motioning to the bathroom. “I’m going to grab my stuff and we’ll get out of here, okay? I just need a minute .”

He disappeared through the small doorway and Maddie suddenly felt chilled despite the heat. It was October, but the summer heat was still raging here in Hawaii. Back home in Toronto it was fall, with crisp, cool days and nights that required a coat or jacket. She unexpectedly missed it, the urge to go home almost overwhelming. She rubbed her hands over her arms, willing away the need to burst into tears .

“You ready?” He came out of the bathroom with a small toiletry bag and paused, looking her up and down. “You okay, Madison ?”

“M-Maddie...” she whispered, fighting the wave of nausea that washed over her .

“You need to sit down!” he said abruptly, gently nudging her towards the bed .

“No, I shouldn’t...” Her eyes rolled back in her head and then there was nothing .

Hawk laid the beautiful young woman on the bed and went back into the bathroom to find a washcloth. He wet it with cold water and then sat on the edge of the bed, pressing it to her forehead and cheeks. She stirred slightly and he took a moment to take in her delicate features and those impossibly long eyelashes. Even with no makeup, they rested on her well-defined cheekbones like soft shadows that made him want to run his fingers over them. Damn, a woman who’d just been shot at was unconscious on his bed and his thoughts were about as chivalrous as a pimp’s at a hooker convention. That was low even for him, and he’d stooped pretty low over the years .

Not today, though. Madison, Maddie—whoever she was—needed to recover from their little ordeal and go back to whatever sweet small town she undoubtedly came from. Hawaii was great, but this was a bad neighborhood just outside Honolulu and

definitely no place for a girl like her. Didn't she have a boyfriend or father to tell her going on vacation by herself wasn't particularly safe? He didn't consider himself sexist, but the fact that this girl had wound up at a motel like this told him she shouldn't be traveling alone, especially not on a tight budget .

She moaned and he brushed a lock of silky dark hair out of her face. "You're okay," he said quietly. "Adrenaline crash made you pass out. Don't try to get up too quickly—chances are you'll get dizzy again ."

"Ugh." She dropped an arm over her eyes. "That's twice I've made an idiot of myself in front of you ."

"Lucky for you, I've made a much bigger idiot of myself, on a much bigger scale, on more than one occasion, so I'm the last one to judge ."

She smiled faintly. " Thanks ."

They sat in silence for a while until she finally sat up, rubbing her eyes. "I'm thinking I need to get to the airport sooner rather than later. This vacation wasn't meant to be ."

"You might be right." He smiled and held out a hand to help her up for the second time in less than half an hour. She took it hesitantly but matched his smile with one that nearly took his breath away .

"You've been very kind—thank you. You wouldn't happen to be Canadian ?"

He chuckled. "Nope. Born and raised in southern California ."

"If you wouldn't mind walking me to my car, I'm going to try to get home ."

“Where’s home ?”

“Toronto.”

He nodded. “Love Toronto. Ever eat at Habaneros? It used to be Hernando’s Hideaway .”

Her eyes widened in surprise that he was familiar with her favorite Mexican restaurant in downtown Toronto. “Of course! Probably drank too much there a time or two ...”

He laughed. “ Ditto .”

They walked down to the parking lot and Maddie groaned as soon as she saw the rental. Sure enough, those idiots had broken out the passenger side window and left a mess. There hadn’t been anything for them to take—the stereo wasn’t removable and she hadn’t left anything on the seats—but they’d made a mess and damaged the car .

“Dammit,” she muttered. “It’s a rental... Yet another disaster .”

“We’re gonna have to call the police,” he sighed. “Sorry, but if we don’t, you’ll be liable for the damage and it’s not worth it to be on the hook for that .”

Tears welled in her eyes again. “This trip is never going to end, is it ?”

He reached out to squeeze her shoulder. “One thing at a time, okay? I’ll stay with you, make sure you’re okay .”

She swallowed hard. “You don’t have to... I can, I, uh, oh hell, who am I kidding?” She looked down sadly. “I’d appreciate your help. Thank you .”

It was more than two hours before police came to the scene, took statements, wrote reports and told Maddie they would look into it, but there was very little chance they would catch the culprits. By the time the police left, the sun was rising high in the sky, it was getting hot, and Maddie was starving .

“Do you know if there’s a place I can get something to eat?” she asked Garrett, wiping beads of sweat from her forehead .

“The diner across the street isn’t bad, and you look like you’re about to drop.” He dug out his keys. “Come on, we’ll take my rental, go get some food and then we can get the situation with your car sorted .”

She paused. “You don’t even know me... Why are you being so nice ?”

He shrugged. “You look kind of overwhelmed, and I’d like to think if something like this happened to my sister, someone would be there to make sure she’s okay .”

“You’re sweet,” she said softly, meeting his eyes .

“Not that sweet,” he chuckled. “But I’m trying .”

“Are you generally not a nice guy?” she asked, following him to his rented SUV .

“I’m...” He shook his head. “Let’s just say I’m no angel .”

“And I’m getting in a car with you,” she chuckled. “Probably not my brightest move .”

“Probably not,” he agreed. “But I can give you my sister’s number and she’ll tell you I’m not as bad as I look .”

“Because your tattoos are... misleading ?”

“For sure.” He glanced over at her as he pulled out of the parking lot. “They all have meaning—they’re not just decorative .”

“Yeah?”

“My favorite is the dog tags on my shoulder, because they were my dad’s. He died in Desert Storm when I was a kid .”

“I’m sorry .”

He nodded. “Thanks. The others are all related, important for different reasons, but it would take hours to explain them .”

“The ones I see are beautiful,” she said. “My brother is getting his whole back done to cover...” Her voice trailed off. “Well, an accident .”

They pulled up to the diner and Hawk motioned her to go ahead. “I need to make a phone call. Go on and get us a table. I’ll be right in .”

She hesitated but then nodded. “Okay, thanks .”

Hawk watched her go before picking up his phone, glad he had a full battery again. He called Jim and explained the situation .

“You’re a lucky man,” Jim said. “We’re sold out except for one of the private guest houses... the Mermaid . The people staying there had to leave early this morning due to a death in the family. It’s available for five days. You want it ?”

“Do you have anything for my friend ?”

Jim paused. “I’m sorry—we’re completely sold out. This wouldn’t even be open if they hadn’t left unexpectedly .”

“Yeah, okay, no problem .”

“Listen...we can check you in under your other ID but the story about your suspension is all over the sports channels. I can’t guarantee you won’t be recognized .”

Hawk mentally gritted his teeth. “Don’t worry about that, I’m lying low. Anyway, I appreciate this. I’ll be there in a few hours. Have to help her take care of the rental car and all that .”

“Who is she?” Jim asked casually .

Hawk chuckled. “Honestly? I don’t have a clue but I think I’m going to try to figure it out .”

Jim laughed. “Good luck with that !”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:03 am

2

The ordeal at the car rental agency wasn't as bad as either of them had been expecting, and they were both grateful she'd bought the extra insurance. It only took about an hour to handle the paperwork and pay her bill. She was drained by the time they walked outside, though; it didn't seem fair for so many things to go wrong on one vacation. She still hadn't located her suitcase either .

"Look, if you want to leave, I'll take you to the airport right now," Garrett told her as they walked into the blazing sun. "If you'd like to salvage what you can of your time here, I have a proposition for you ."

She frowned, startled out of her thoughts. "Like what ?"

"I have friends over at the Blue Dolphin—I just booked one of their guest houses. You're welcome to share it with me—not a bed or a bedroom!" he added quickly as she immediately began to protest. "Your own bedroom, all the privacy you need. I plan to relax, get some sun and think about what I'm going to do next at work ."

"You work?" She arched a brow at him and he scowled .

"Well, yeah. Guys with mohawks and tattoos can have jobs." He wasn't sure why he was so affronted; he'd probably think a guy like him was a loser too .

"Sorry." She bit her lip. "I didn't mean to offend you...you just seem so ..."

"Non-corporate?" He cocked his head. "And no, I'm not an accountant or a doctor ."

“Lawyer?” she teased, grinning engagingly .

He grinned back, shaking his head. “No. Family business. That’s why I need to make some decisions. Anyway, I’ve got the place for the next five days. It’s huge, with every amenity, and I really don’t plan to do much but soak up the sun. You can use it like a hotel, come and go as you please, enjoy the water, the spa, whatever you want. I don’t want anything in return—I’m just trying to buy myself some good karma .”

She eyed him, trying to see past his incredibly sexy gray eyes, the strong chin and that perfectly sculpted ass. He had an athlete’s body, now that she looked at him carefully, and it was truly beautiful to behold. He’d also been so kind to her, it was hard to imagine him as some kind of killer or rapist. She couldn’t stay with him, though. She didn’t even know him. That had na?ve written all over it, and she’d already shown enough stupidity just by coming here. Except she was already here and it was going to cost her even more money to change her flight. He was offering her a lifeline, a way to salvage the vacation she’d been saving for—for nearly a year—and it was at the resort she’d been thinking about for months. How could she say no ?

A n hour and a half later she followed him into the Blue Dolphin Resort with a much lighter step than she’d had since leaving Toronto. This was the vacation she was supposed to have, and if fate was determined to intervene so she could have it, who was she to say no? It wasn’t supposed to be with a sexy stranger who made her feel both safe and terrified at the same time, but it was too late to turn back now .

“Hi,” Garrett said to the woman behind the desk. He handed her his ID .

“Welcome back, Mr. Raven .”

“Thank you.” He took the keys from her and nodded. “The airline should be delivering my companion’s suitcase at some point .”

“Your name?” the woman asked Madison .

“Madison. Teller.” She handed the smiling woman her passport. “They said my suitcase would be here by eight .”

“Perfect. We’ll have it delivered. Do you want to leave a credit card on file for — ”

“Everything can go on mine,” Garrett interrupted quietly .

They were quickly checked in and Hawk immediately started heading for the administrative offices where he would find Jim. He was moving at a fast clip but slowed down when he heard her hurrying after him. His gesture of kindness had just turned into his worst nightmare. Her last name was Teller ?! What were the chances? So much for trying to be a good guy—this was going to go south faster than geese in a snowstorm. He needed to get away from her and think. Except he’d just invited her to stay with him and now she was staring at him with those big brown eyes. What the hell was he supposed to do when she looked at him like that ?

“Wait up!” Her voice was filled with misgiving .

He took a deep breath before returning her gaze .

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked, frowning at him .

“No.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I just remembered something I have to do and it’s important. Why don’t you go on to the room and settle in ?”

She nodded slowly. “Um, okay. Are you sure you’re not mad ?”

“I am, but not at you.” He forced a smile. “Promise. Just have something to take care of. Go on—make yourself at home and I’ll be there in a bit .”

The look on her face made it obvious she didn't believe him, but he hadn't left her with much choice. "Okay. Um, thanks. I'll...see you in a little bit ?"

"Half hour, tops." He watched the uncertainty play across her features again as she turned away and felt like a jerk. He hadn't meant for this to happen, but how could he have known he would meet this particular woman at a miserable little hotel off the beaten path in Honolulu? If Maddie found out his full name, this would go bad quickly. First, though, he had to find out exactly who she was; if she was who he thought she was, he didn't know how he would get out of this .

M addie put a few things in the bathroom and tossed her dirty clothes in the bag hanging in the closet. Since she wasn't paying for a room, she could afford to have a few things washed. Hopefully, her suitcase would arrive tonight as promised. If not, maybe she could find a T-shirt to sleep in at one of the shops she'd passed in the hotel. Otherwise she'd be sleeping in the shirt she'd been wearing all day .

She decided to explore the guest house before Garrett got back. He was in a bad mood all of a sudden and she hoped it wasn't because of her. This place was so beautiful, and now that she'd finally convinced herself she could actually have the vacation she'd been planning, she wasn't going to let him ruin it for her. Her life the last nine months or so had been stressful to say the least. Her older brother, Jamie, had almost died back in January after a violent beating by a group of skinheads who didn't approve of the fact that Jamie was bisexual. Though he was on the mend now, the emotional scars were still impacting their entire family and she was seeing a therapist about the nightmares she'd been having for months; the memory of his broken body on that hospital bed continued to haunt her .

Her therapist had been the one to suggest she find a relaxing place to vacation. She and Monique had been talking about a girls' trip for a year but Maddie had been the one to get the ball rolling. Once she'd discovered the Blue Dolphin Resort online about six months ago, she'd convinced her this was the place they needed to stay.

Pictures of the Tuscan-themed building, beautiful guest houses, and picture-perfect beaches were exactly the escape she'd envisioned after months of stress, worry and unwanted media attention. For a while, she hadn't been able to go anywhere in Toronto without being recognized as the sister of the victim of the biggest hate crime Canadians had seen in years. Reporters had finally moved on to other news, but the whole ordeal had left her anxious, underweight and having nightmares. Maybe now that she was here in such a beautiful place, with a guy who'd inadvertently become her protector, she would find some much-needed peace .

The guest house was big, spacious and had a private pool. The pool and patio faced the Pacific Ocean and for a moment she could only stare, taking in the cerulean waters and vast expanse of sandy beach. She couldn't wait to dig her toes in it, but there was still a lot of the guest house to see. So far, she'd found everything she would need and the fact that there was a kitchen meant she could buy yogurt and fresh fruit to keep on hand. Though she'd lost a lot of weight worrying about Jamie, she was working out now and trying to find a better balance of food and exercise .

A knock on the door startled her and she wondered if Garrett had lost his key. She hurried to open it and found herself staring at a smiling woman whose name tag said " Irene ."

"Hello! Mrs. Roarke sent this, compliments of the resort." Irene handed her a shopping bag with a big blue bow on it .

"I, uh, thank you. Hang on, let me get you — "

"No need." Irene nodded and backed away. "It's taken care of. Have a wonderful stay ."

She disappeared and Maddie took the large shopping bag into her room. Inside she found a Blue Dolphin Resort T-shirt, sunscreen, a Waikiki baseball cap, an entire

plastic bag of travel-sized toiletry items that weren't already in the bathroom, and a simple, one-piece black bathing suit. When she unfolded it to check the size, a note fell out :

Hoping your vacation gets better from here. Please don't hesitate to ask if there's anything at all we can do to help .

Blue Dolphin Resort Staff

P .S. If the bathing suit and/or T-shirt don't fit, please swing by the concierge desk for a replacement .

M addie frowned but couldn't help the excitement suddenly building in her chest. There was a gorgeous pool out back and it was calling her name. It was almost 3:00, the hottest part of the day, but she didn't care. This thoughtful gift meant she could start her vacation and Operation Relaxation immediately .

Within five minutes she had the bathing suit on, sunscreen applied and her hair up in a ponytail. She grabbed a towel and walked outside. For the first time since she'd left Toronto, peace washed over her. Vacation . She was actually on vacation. She forgot about the long flight, her lost luggage, the terrible hotel, getting shot at and even her brother's horrible attack. Nope, all she was going to think about right now was the sun and the refreshing blue water. She'd deal with Mr. Sexy-But-Cranky when he got back .

I t was an hour and a half before Hawk got back. He and Jim had talked and he'd made it clear no one was to use his real name. Somehow, some way, he had to get through five days without Madison Teller finding out who he was. He was pretty sure he could keep her occupied. There was plenty to do here at the resort, from golf to tennis, snorkeling to jet-skiing and much more. If nothing else, he could rent a private cabana for them on the beach, where no one would bother them, and he could keep

her away from TVs, radios and anything sports- related .

Assuming she likes you enough to want to hang out with you , he told himself with a grunt. He just wanted to get her back home to Toronto none the wiser about whom she'd spent time with here in Hawaii. Well, now that he definitively knew who her brother was, she would most likely see his face somewhere in the hockey world and figure out she'd been duped, but that would be well after the fact. She'd never forgive him, but at least he'd make sure she remembered someone different than the man she'd hear about on TV or the sports grapevine .

He walked through the house softly calling to her, but she didn't respond. The door to the second bedroom was open and there was a shopping bag and a few items strewn on the bed, but no sign of her. Had she already left for the beach ?

He was about to make his way to the other bedroom when he saw a flash of dark hair. He paused, looking out the sliding glass doors to the pool just as she dove into the water. Her body looked strong and lithe, appearing much longer in the water than when she'd been pressed up against him in that stairwell. She was probably about five feet five or so, but very slender. However, from what he could see now that she was half-naked, she was athletic. There were muscles and toned calves in those legs as she dove off the side and he watched in fascination as she cut through the water like a pro. She made it almost to the other side of the pool without coming up, flipping around underwater and kicking at the wall before gliding another ten feet and finally breaking the surface. She did a strong, steady crawl back to the other side, dove under and did the whole routine three more times before slowing to a stop in the middle of the pool. She flipped onto her back and let her legs float out in front of her, arms at her sides, completely at ease .

She was stunning, he thought, unable to tear his eyes away. A veritable sea nymph, despite being in a pool. She was as comfortable in the water as he was on the ice, except where hockey got him worked up, being in the water seemed to erase every

trace of tension in Maddie. Sure, most people relaxed out by the pool or the ocean, but this was different. Maddie was in her own little world, unaffected by the sun, the ocean air or even the man watching her; she was completely in her element. Was she a swimmer? When he'd looked up her brother on the computer in Jim's office there'd been no mention of a sister who was an athlete. They had a brother who'd played college hockey before blowing out his knee, but Maddie had remained firmly under the radar .

Turning around, he went to his room and dug out his swim trunks. He stripped off the clothes he'd been wearing since last night and tugged the trunks on, grabbing sunscreen and his favorite baseball cap as he headed back outside. She was just getting out of the water as he stepped onto the patio and they both froze .

“Hey,” he called out. “Looks like you were enjoying yourself in there .”

She flashed a brilliant smile. “It was wonderful! Thank you so much for inviting me!” Without warning, she took three steps towards him and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. “This makes up for everything bad that happened in the last twenty-four hours .”

He nearly groaned at her closeness, all soft wet skin and toned muscles. “You’re welcome, hon.” He took an involuntary step back, unwilling to let her affect him any more than she already had .

“Are you coming in?” she asked, her wet hair making a pool of water at her feet .

“Sure.” He didn’t know how to refuse so he put down his hat and sunscreen and followed her .

M addie had almost stumbled on the steps of the pool when she'd looked up and found Garrett standing there. He was truly larger than life and it took her a second to regain her composure. Sculpted shoulders, six-pack abs and that damn V that disappeared into his swim trunks—under different circumstances she would have made the first move to seduce him. Something about Garrett was different, though; he wasn't hook-up material. Sure, he was a hot, tattooed, muscular hunk with the kind of bedroom eyes that made a girl weak in the knees, but he was a bad boy with a secret. Maybe a wife or girlfriend back home ?

She had no idea what his story was, but her women's intuition rarely steered her wrong and it was screaming that he was playing his cards close to the vest. The only reason she was comfortable staying with him was because whatever it was couldn't possibly involve her. There was no way in hell he'd known she would go running out of her room at the same time his car alarm went off, so their meeting had been accidental. With that in mind, she didn't care what his secrets were—she just wanted to enjoy this unexpected gift he'd given her. And maybe the company of the hottest man she'd ever seen .

When they'd met this morning she'd been stressed and terrified, so though she'd been aware of him, she wasn't looking at him that way. Now that she was here and about to spend some time with him, she was hyperaware of every little detail, from that crazy haircut to the body that made her mouth water. A little. Okay, a lot .

He dipped his head underwater to get wet and as he stood up straight, she watched the drops rippling off him with delight. Now that she wasn't worried about her safety,

she'd morphed into relaxation mode and enjoying the view of this hunk of a man who'd been so sweet to her was definitely a perk. She couldn't have torn her eyes away from him if her life depended on it, and in another place and time she would have licked the water off his chest just for the chance to touch him. He probably hadn't given her a second thought, but who could blame a girl for having a little fantasy ?

“What do you do in Toronto?” he asked as they relaxed in the water .

“I'm an assistant at a law firm,” she responded .

“You like it ?”

She shrugged. “It's okay. I have a degree in business but haven't been able to decide which aspect I want to focus on. I'm not interested in marketing, human resources bores me, and I don't want to do anything with numbers .”

“That leaves sales, project management ...”

“What type of business does your family have?” she asked, looking up at him with interest. She hadn't been expecting intelligent conversation about business of all things .

“It's an auto repair shop—both repairs and bodywork .”

“Are you a mechanic ?”

He smiled. “I do a lot of different things, but yeah, working on cars and motorcycles is something I enjoy. Just wish I had more time for that kind of thing instead of...business things .”

“I wish I had more time to travel,” she admitted. “Monique and I started planning this trip almost a year ago. She’s my best friend and my roommate. We started saving up but then ...”

“Why’d she cancel?” he asked, frowning .

She rolled her eyes. “Why do girls usually bail on their friends ?”

“A guy.” He grimaced. “So she met a guy and...what? He wouldn’t let her go on vacation ?”

“No. She said she would miss him too much. She’s at his place almost every night, or he’s at ours. They’re together every minute of the day outside of work and he told her she couldn’t possibly love him if she wanted to be away from him for six whole days .”

He groaned. “Damn, that’s a tired one .”

“Exactly. He was fine with it until we started showing him the brochures and stuff—he was probably afraid she’d meet someone interesting once she got on a beach .”

“He’s not interesting?” he asked, arching his brows .

She made a face. “He would be fine if he didn’t whine. I mean, like, all the time. Monique... smoochy ...” Her voice got high and nasal as she mimicked Monique’s boyfriend, Alan. “Can you get my socks? My feet are so cold with the air conditioning on... And where are my glasses? You know I can’t wear my contacts after eight hours. Love kitten, did you take your pills? We don’t want a little baby smooch before we’re ready ...”

“He called it a little baby smooch ?!” He was laughing and she started to snicker .

She covered her mouth with her hand as she giggled. “He’s such a little whiner .”

“What does she see in him ?”

She sighed. “Monique was with her high school boyfriend for years...from grade nine until two years ago. She got home one day from wedding dress shopping and caught him in bed with one of his cousins .”

“His cousin ? Like a first cousin ?!”

She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. It’s been ugly. We’re actually from Kingston, Ontario—about two hours east of Toronto—but after that she had to get out of there and we both started job-hunting in Toronto. It didn’t take long so we got an apartment together and she just dove into work—she’s a nurse. She didn’t date anyone for over a year and then she met Alan, who to be fair, is also a nurse and a really good one. But he’s the complete opposite of her ex, small and nerdy and kind of clingy... I guess she likes having all the power or something. I don’t know. I’d kill him if he was my boyfriend .”

“So...you’re single ?”

She squinted up at him. “As a matter of fact, I am. How about you? You have a girl back in California that likes motorcycle grease under a guy’s nails ?”

He glanced down at his hands, which were decidedly free of grease at the moment, and shrugged. “No one special in my life right now. Like I said, a lot going on.” He opted not to mention he didn’t live in California anymore. He actually lived and played in Ottawa, not too far from her hometown of Kingston, but he couldn’t mention that either .

“That means we can flirt.” Her eyes twinkled .

“We can.” He gave her a little nod, though she couldn’t quite read the look in his eyes. “I guess you’re in vacation mode now, huh ?”

She made a strange face. “Monique told me just over a week ago that she wasn’t coming with me—the last day we could cancel the reservation here without paying a fee. At that point, I went straight into stress mode, trying to figure out if I could afford it. Since I couldn’t get a refund on my flight, and I desperately wanted to be on a beach, I talked myself into coming alone. I had to find a more affordable hotel, which I did, although we know how that ended. Then I downgraded the car rental from a convertible to the little budget thing I had, which was lame. I took care of everything but the reality is that I’m not a great solo traveler. I mean, I’m fine with the logistics of finding my way around and all that, but it isn’t fun. Sitting on the plane, I kept turning to tell Monique something I was excited about and she wasn’t there. By the time I landed I was in a funk, and the lost suitcase just added to it. When I got to that motel and saw what a dump it was, I knew I was screwed but didn’t know what else to do .”

“Couldn’t you call home...your family or whatever? Ask for help ?”

She lowered her eyes. “I’m kind of the black sheep of the family, even though no one would actually say that. My older brother is...super successful, makes a lot of money, started a charitable organization—he’s amazing. My younger brother has been working his way up the corporate ladder since he graduated from college and is doing well too. They’re both in solid, wonderful relationships and have interesting, mostly fulfilling lives. Me? I’m a glorified secretary. Can’t find the right guy, boring job, no plan for the future—there’s nothing special about Maddie .”

He cocked his head, squinting in the bright sun. “I think there’s plenty special about Maddie,” he said slowly. “You’re beautiful, smart and resourceful. What happened

this morning wasn't your fault. You're probably a nice girl from a nice family who grew up in a suburban neighborhood, right? You ever stumble onto an armed robbery before ?”

She shook her head vehemently. “ No !”

“Exactly. So what happened this morning had nothing to do with you, and I don't even put that into the equation when I look at you. Okay, you have a mediocre job that doesn't thrill you, but what's wrong with that? Not everyone can be at the top of the corporate ladder or super wealthy. We still need secretaries and teachers—and mechanics. Being a regular person doesn't make you a black sheep, and not having met the right guy certainly doesn't! My sister isn't married either—and she's 30! How old are you ?”

“Twenty- seven .”

“I'm thirty-two and not involved with anyone. Not even dating. I'm kind of an asshole, to be honest. I don't mean to be, it just sort of happens .”

His confession showed a vulnerability she hadn't been expecting and she wondered if he was playing a game with her .

“You're really good-looking,” she responded, as if that explained everything .

“So are you,” he countered. “What does that have to do with it? Being attractive automatically means you're an asshole ?”

“No, but...” She hesitated. “It's different with guys. I don't know why. Maybe that's a sexist thing to say, but that's been my experience. The better-looking they are, the worse they behave.” She smiled. “Except my brother and brother-in- law .”

4

Hawk forced himself not to react. “Your brother and brother-in-law?”

She met his eyes. “My brother is married to a man.”

“Oh. Uh, cool.” Shit. This was absolutely not a conversation he wanted to have with her.

There was a hint of a smile on her face, but her eyes were dead serious. “Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“Noooo...” Damn, how could he answer this without burying himself in an even deeper hole than he was already in?

“But?” she prompted.

“We live in difficult times, where those types of relationships are still often frowned upon. I support people no matter what their sexuality, but I find it difficult to watch. Not the act itself—I’m talking about what they go through. The pain, the worry about being seen in public...seeing it is stressful to me. It makes me feel helpless, which is a feeling most men don’t like. So I’m not uncomfortable with the concept, but in practice I have to admit I don’t know how to behave.”

“You’re right,” she said quietly. “It is hard to watch people you love suffer simply because they fell in love with someone society doesn’t approve of. Jamie—my brother—has suffered a lot for being bisexual, more than anyone ever should for

anything. I hate it for him, but on the other hand, his husband is the greatest guy, they have a daughter and another baby on the way, and are really happy. I hope someday I find a man who loves me the way my brother-in-law loves my brother.” She paused. “How did this conversation turn into something so serious? I thought we were going to start flirting ?”

He inclined his head, grateful for the reprieve. “We can do that .”

Not a lot of flirting went on the rest of the day. They swam and soaked up the sun for a while, but after a shower and some takeout, Maddie fell asleep on the couch, the carton of shrimp fried rice still in her hand. Instead of waking her, Hawk cleaned up the food and covered her with a light throw blanket. Her suitcase didn’t get to the resort until late but he carried it into her room so it would be waiting for her when she got up in the morning. Hoping she would sleep well, he tried to do the same .

He was up first, even though it had taken him a while to fall asleep, and went for a run on the beach. He got up early to work out year-round and the last two days had messed with his schedule, so he pushed himself a little harder than usual. He ran barefoot on the shore, letting the wet sand raise the level of difficulty. When he got back to Ottawa, he had to be ready to play his ass off. The five games plus the \$10,000 fine were harsh, but the worst part was that he hadn’t done it. Telling the truth, however, meant throwing a teammate under the bus and that would be a totally different kind of hell. He would be the guy in the locker room no one trusted, and that was the equivalent of death in a team sport .

He was in an untenable situation with absolutely no resolution that would fix anything. If he told the truth, his career would probably be over in a year or two. If he didn’t, he would always be considered a terrible human being by...pretty much everyone .

Slowing to a walk, he paused to catch his breath, bending at the waist and resting his

hands on his thighs as he inhaled deeply. Damn, he'd gotten himself in trouble before, but never anything like this. He hated what people thought of him, and meeting Maddie was the kind of coincidence that made him wonder if some kind of higher power was trying to tell him something. He didn't normally believe in that kind of thing—coincidences happened—but this was different. Maddie was different. He barely knew her but he couldn't stop thinking about her. She went from pissed off little hellion to sweet and vulnerable to sexy and strong. Her staunch defense of her brother's lifestyle warmed him and he wondered how she would feel when she found out they knew each other. Jamie probably hated him now, so he'd been resisting the urge to reach out to him since he'd left Ottawa. This just wasn't the time, especially now that he'd met Maddie .

Jogging home at a light pace, he forgot all about his dark thoughts as soon as he saw her. She was singing a very off-key version of "Stronger" by Kelly Clarkson at the top of her lungs, dancing around the room as she unpacked her suitcase. He leaned against the doorway watching, enjoying the view of her legs in short shorts as she wiggled her hips and held an imaginary microphone .

Maddie jumped when she realized Garrett was standing there, her hand flying to her chest. "What the hell?!" she demanded. "Are you trying to kill me ?"

"I could ask you the same question," he chuckled. "You definitely shouldn't pursue a career as a singer ."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Oh, and I suppose you could do it better ?"

"No, but you don't hear me trying to sing either !"

She laughed. "Whatever—but guess what? I have clothes !"

"Personally, I don't think they're necessary, but I'm glad you're excited ."

She picked up something silky and black. “So...you wouldn’t want to see me in this?” She let the little black dress cascade down from where she held it by the spaghetti straps at the top, meeting his eyes flirtatiously .

He walked towards her slowly, stopping barely an inch away from her. He looked down into her big brown eyes and lifted her chin with a gentle finger. “If I see you in that dress, chances are you won’t be in it for long. Careful what you wish for, little girl, ’cause I wasn’t kidding when I said I wasn’t all that nice .”

“You’ve been very nice to me ,” she whispered .

“Someone shot at us,” he responded in a gruff voice. “I probably would have done my best to protect anyone in that situation .”

“Would you have invited some sixty-year-old school teacher from Idaho to breakfast and then to share your guest house?” she questioned, a touch of hurt in her voice .

“No.” He leaned down to make a point but instead of listening, she shut her eyes. Watching her eyelids flutter closed in anticipation of a kiss they both wanted made his gut clench with desire. He was desperate to taste her, but when this was all over she was going to hate him, and having sex with her would only exacerbate how much he hurt her. He was only human, though, and looking at those rosy, parted lips waiting for his touch was a little more than he could resist. One taste, he promised himself. Just one .

The moment their lips made contact he knew he was dead in the water. This was going to go bad and he was wholly incapable of stopping it. She was the sweetest thing he’d ever come across and when her tongue tentatively edged between his lips, he was lost. He wrapped one arm around her waist so he could draw her up against him and dug the other into the hair at the back of her neck. Her whimper only fueled the fire and he let himself devour her. They kissed and kissed, going from hungry and

urgent to curious and exploratory. It was the opposite of what he expected, but exactly what he needed to put on the brakes .

“Babe...” His voice was rough, raspy with need as he broke contact. “This is too much, too fast .”

“I’m not actually a little girl,” she whispered. “I’m a grown woman who knows what she wants and I want you .”

“I know, but...” He gently took her by the shoulders and looked down into her face. “We only met yesterday, while people were shooting at us. It was kind of crazy. I don’t want this to feel like payment or — ”

She put a finger on his lips. “That’s not what it feels like. It feels like vacation sex .”

He ran his fingers through her long, velvety hair, his eyes never leaving hers. “Let’s go back to flirting, okay? What your eyes are telling me is totally different than what your mouth is saying. I don’t think you’re a vacation sex kind of girl and I meant it when I said I was trying to be nicer. I don’t want to break hearts and jump from bed to bed anymore .”

She put her hands on either side of his face. “You’re right, I’m not really a vacation sex kind of girl, but there’s a first time for everything and one lust-fueled affair that doesn’t go anywhere isn’t going to ruin my life. And your eyes are telling me something too... You want me but you’re keeping me at a distance. Tell me the truth, Garrett—are you married or engaged or somehow involved with a woman that you’d be cheating on ?”

“Absolutely not!” He shook his head .

“Then what are you afraid of ?”

He reluctantly took a step back. “My past—and to a degree my present—is complicated. You’re too nice of a girl to get caught up in my life, and you’re definitely too nice of a girl for me to use for vacation sex .”

“Even if that’s what I want ?”

He shook his head again. “I think you want it now . In two or three weeks, when you’re back home, you’re going to regret it .”

She pursed her lips but eventually nodded. “Okay then. Back to flirting it is.” She turned to her suitcase. “I want to hit the beach today. What about you ?”

He recognized her need to put some distance between them, but letting her wander around on her own was too dangerous. If she came in contact with a television or computer, it would be all over and he didn’t want to lose her yet. She would be gone soon enough, but there was something compelling about Maddie Teller that made him want to hang on to her as long as he could—even knowing how it had to end .

“How about I rent a cabana on the beach and we just kick it ?”

She turned back, narrowing her eyes slightly. “We’re going to spend the day together half-dressed, on the beach, while keeping things simple and flirty ?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Are you saying you can’t control your sexual urges ?”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s what you’re going with? Fine. Let’s do it your way. A cabana on the beach sounds lovely. Thank you .”

She was being sarcastic, but it didn’t matter; being in a cabana on the beach with her was going to be heavenly. Even if she didn’t know he thought so .

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:04 am

5

Her first look at the Pacific Ocean up close made Maddie forget all about being annoyed with Garrett. The water was simply breathtaking...smooth as glass and so very blue. She'd never been out west before and she couldn't help a little sigh of pleasure at the thought of spending the day admiring it. Her toes hit the soft white sand and she paused, breathing in deeply and taking a moment to look around .

"It's beautiful, right?" Garrett spoke behind her and she smiled .

"Yes. Just as pretty as the pictures... I may never leave ."

He laughed. "That's how I feel every time I come ."

They continued to the cabana he'd reserved and she dropped her bag on the wooden floor. It was about ten square feet with a tented top and two chaise lounges with padded cushions. A small table rested between them with several beach towels stacked on it .

"Umbrella up or down?" Garrett asked her .

"I'm from Canada and October is basically winter," she snorted. "I need all the sun I can get !"

"You got it ."

He adjusted the tent flaps with some kind of lever that opened everything for them as

she put a towel on one of the chairs .

“And I’m officially on vacation!” She put her sunglasses on and started rubbing sunscreen into her skin. She was going to enjoy the sun, the sand, and the water she couldn’t wait to swim in. Maybe Mr. Tall-Tattooed-And-Not-Flirting would loosen up after getting a little sun .

Two hours later, Maddie was more frustrated than relaxed. How had a simple kiss gone so wrong? One minute they were all over each other, the next he was putting on the brakes so fast she could almost hear tires squealing across the tiled floors. Though it seemed like nothing on this vacation was going to go according to plan, he was pushing her away for a specific reason and she wished she knew what it was. If he was telling the truth, and he wasn't involved with someone, she couldn’t imagine what the issue was. He was definitely attracted to her, which only proceeded to confuse her further. Why was he pulling back? They had genuine chemistry—that kiss had been hot—despite the short amount of time they’d known each other .

He was extremely good-looking but not arrogant. He obviously had money but didn’t throw it around or try to impress her with it beyond helping her out of the situation she’d been in. More than that, he was down-to-earth. Even though he said he had a complicated life, he didn’t act like it; he acted like a good guy who was going through a hard time. She hadn’t seen him drink or smoke, and he’d gone for a long run this morning. He seemed fit, healthy and intelligent, with money to spare and good manners. What could possibly make him refuse no-strings vacation sex if he was single? He was right that it was out of character for her to sleep with a guy she barely knew, and that she would most likely have regrets, but she already had years of regrets about things she hadn’t done. Maybe this kind of experience would breathe new life into what had become a very stagnant existence .

With a huff, she turned onto her stomach to get some sun on her back. They’d been here for a couple of hours and hadn’t really said much of anything to each other. He’d

gone with her when she'd cooled off in the water, but even then, they'd been almost painfully polite together. Had one kiss ruined a chance for them to even forge a friendship ?

“You sound pretty sexually frustrated over there,” Garrett murmured, eyes closed and hands behind his head .

She snapped her head to the side to glare at him. “ What ?!”

“All that huffing and puffing...sounds like you're mad at me .”

“I'm not. I'm just hot .”

“That you are .”

“Is this how we go back to flirting?” she asked wryly, lifting to one elbow and looking over at him .

“Yup.”

He still hadn't looked at her and she scowled. “I'm going in the water,” she muttered, lifting to her feet. It really was hot and the water looked inviting. Besides, she was dying for a long swim. Without looking back, she walked through the sand and splashed into the glassy water. She'd never been in water so smooth and clear, without so much as a ripple. It was cool enough to be refreshing too, and she dove in as soon as she was deep enough. With strong, steady strokes she headed out towards the horizon. The weather was perfect and it was a great opportunity to test her strength and endurance. The pool at her gym was good for exercise and building her stamina, but there was no real way to test herself .

She loved to swim, but living in Toronto meant people were far more focused on

winter sports than something like swimming. It existed, of course, but with two brothers who played hockey there hadn't been time for her parents to lug her around to pools or swim meets. That was okay—it's not like she could have had a career as a professional swimmer—but she wished she'd had a chance to show how good she was at any sport. Her brothers' rooms had been lined with awards and trophies from almost every level of hockey; her achievements had all been academic. She'd played hockey too in the beginning, but playing with other girls had paled in comparison to what her brothers did, so she'd quit sports altogether and focused on school. She still swam, though, and she'd been looking forward to testing herself in the open waters of the Pacific .

By the time she stopped, she realized she'd come a long way and was pretty far out. It was strikingly beautiful, the shore lining with the tops of palm trees and the horizon an endless sheet of blue and green. She could stay out here treading water for hours, she thought, looking around. The sun would scorch her pale skin if she didn't reapply sunscreen soon, though, and she didn't want her heart rate to slow down too much, so she turned towards shore. She'd just put her face in the water when strong arms gripped her about the waist. She gasped, ready to kick out in protest when she recognized Garrett's dog tag tattoo .

“What are you doing?!” she demanded, shaking water out of her eyes .

“What the hell are you doing?!” he countered. “The lifeguard was blowing his whistle for you to turn around and everybody on the beach thinks you're on a suicide mission !”

“What are you talking about?” she yelled. “I'm an endurance swimmer—I swim at my gym at least ten hours a week and try to take one trip a year to somewhere I can test myself in an ocean! I'm not trying to commit suicide, you idiot !”

H e blinked, staring into her furious face in confusion. What the hell was an

endurance swimmer? Was that a thing? This probably wasn't a good time to ask her, though; she looked pretty mad and he was starting to feel foolish .

"I swam out to make sure you were okay but I think they were going to..." His voice trailed off as a lifeguard approached them on a jet ski .

"Miss, you're not supposed to swim beyond the buoy," he said with a frown .

"I'm sorry." She spoke in a polite tone he hadn't heard before. "I'm a strong, capable swimmer and this is how I build my endurance. I'm planning to do a triathlon next year so I swim like this any chance I get—it never occurred to me I would worry anyone ."

"You're doing a triathlon?" Hawk asked in surprise .

"Yes." Her voice was low but she gave him a dirty look. "Can I please swim back to shore? My heart rate has already dropped and if I sit out here treading water, I'm going to get sunburned ."

"Just be careful, miss," the lifeguard said. "And let someone know if you're going to come out this far ."

"Of course. I apologize for the inconvenience ."

"Need a ride back, sir?" the young man asked Hawk .

He scowled. "No, I'll swim back with her. Thanks ."

"I don't need a babysitter!" she ground out .

"You need to be kissed," he murmured, reaching out to pull her close .

“Garrett!” She let out a little squeak as his lips claimed hers. Their tongues danced together deliciously, and it wasn’t until they began to sink that she pulled free. “Kissing you is nice,” she panted. “But I’d prefer not to drown doing it .”

“Just thought I’d help you get your heart rate back up,” he laughed. “ Ready ?”

Without a word, she turned her back on him and used powerful strokes to swim towards shore. He was surprised at how hard he had to work to keep up with her. She definitely had done this before and by the time they reached the beach, he hadn’t been sure he could finish. Sheer pride had kept him going since the idea of losing to her was unacceptable, but she’d beat him by a full minute anyway and he was impressed. He wondered if she could run and bike this well too .

She didn’t wait for him, trudging back to their cabana and digging a bottle of ice-cold water out of the cooler. She drank deeply and reached for a towel, wiping her face, chest and arms. She started to reapply sunscreen and arched her brows as he sank into the lounge chair breathing hard .

“Damn, baby, you’re amazing .”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you being sarcastic ?”

He met her gaze, startled. “Uh, no. You’re really freakin’ amazing. It’s beautiful to watch the way you glide through the water like a damn fish. I’m a pro—well, I work out a lot and I couldn’t keep up. Doing a triathlon is pretty cool too. How do you train?” Her triathlon training was a safe subject and she told him about it as she lay back in the sun .

“Mostly I swim,” she admitted. “I run too, but I hate running indoors and it’s too cold a lot of the year to be outside .”

“And biking ?”

“That’s next. I think I’ve got the swimming and marathon parts down, but the biking is going to be an issue because I simply don’t have a place to do it. Especially in the winter. I did pretty well over the summer, but I was back and forth to Vegas to see my brother so not as much as I wanted. I don’t know how I’ll be ready for the race if I can’t find a place to really train .”

He ached to tell her about his buddy in L.A. who competed in bike races around the world, but that would only be another loose end he had to tie up when she found out who he was. It seemed as though everything was taking one step forward and two steps back when it came to her .

“I’m starving,” she said abruptly. “Can we get something to eat ?”

“The restaurant inside the hotel, the Golden Porpoise, is good, or we can order pizza or something. I can run up to the hotel and grab it when it arrives .”

“Sure.” She smiled over at him. “Pizza sounds great. Pepperoni okay ?”

He nodded. “A girl after my own heart .”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:04 am

6

It was a long, lazy day alternately spent baking in the sun and swimming in the calm, clear water. By late afternoon, Maddie figured she was burned to a crisp and started packing up her things .

“I’m going to head up,” she said. “You can stay longer if you want .”

“Nah, I’m pretty well-baked too.” He sat up .

“You don’t have to keep me company the whole time I’m here,” she said quietly. “I know you have something, or someone, on your mind, and I’m perfectly happy on my own. I can’t thank you enough for letting me crash in your room and interrupt your vacation... Please don’t feel obligated to entertain me too .”

He peered at her over the top of his sunglasses. “Honey, I think you’ve got it all wrong. Seeing you in a bathing suit is the entertainment .”

She couldn’t help her sputter of laughter. “You must not get out much !”

He chuckled. “I work hard so I can play hard, but when I’m working, you’re right—I don’t get out much .”

“Sounds kind of boring,” she said lightly .

He shook his head. “Nah. I love what I do. It’s just been a rough couple of weeks so my boss told me to get away and do some thinking .”

“Have you?” she asked .

He looked away, staring out at the water that was glistening in the late afternoon sun.

“So much that I don’t want to think about it anymore .”

“Okay,” she said softly. “Then how about thinking about dinner ?”

He made a face. “Didn’t we just eat ?”

“That was hours ago!” She tossed an empty water bottle at him. “And I must have swum five or six miles today !”

He got up and pulled on his T-shirt. “Then let’s get cleaned up and we can discuss dinner options .”

“And ice cream .”

“Ice cream?” He arched a brow .

“It’s hot and I’m on holiday… Sheesh, must I teach you how to properly relax ?”

“Apparently.” He followed behind her as they walked back to the guest house. It was going to be a long night if he had to sit across a table from her. It would be even longer if she wore that damn black dress .

They ate at the Golden Porpoise that night and he’d breathed a sigh of relief when she came out of the bedroom wearing an off-the-shoulder white peasant-style top with khaki shorts and white sandals that had straps that wrapped around her ankles and crisscrossed to about halfway up her calf. She was dressed casually but was no less alluring so his relief was short-lived. Her hair was long, falling in soft waves down her back, her rosy skin a glowing contrast against the white of her blouse. The

swell of her modest breasts peeked above the top of the fabric when she leaned forward and he couldn't help but think how perfectly they would fit in his hands. She was simply stunning, her eyes shining as she spoke to the waiter and waved to someone they'd met on the beach earlier .

The best thing about Maddie was that she had no idea how enchanting she was. She mesmerized him as they talked and laughed, and he noted the way every man in the room, no matter what age, noticed her. Maybe it was her smile or the way she talked with her hands, adding passion and expression to everything, but most likely it was her aura. She appeared to love life and lived it with zest, despite yesterday's setback. As soon as things had turned around she'd embraced her good fortune with enthusiasm, treating a guy she'd only known for two days like a good friend and behaving as though two stolen kisses weren't even an issue .

He really liked her. Not just because she was sexy and he wanted to sleep with her—he thought about sex all the time, especially when he met attractive women—but because she was his own personal sea nymph. He didn't know why he thought of her that way, or why she affected him like this, but he hadn't wined and dined a woman in ages. Not since his last steady girlfriend, and that had been over two years ago. Yet with Maddie, he wanted to show her everything he loved about Oahu and spend every waking moment with her. He wanted to race her in the water again, he wanted her to go running with him in the morning—he even wanted to take her shopping. Not to buy her things, but to see what made her eyes sparkle. When she talked about things that made her happy, her entire face changed and it took his breath away. He wanted to find ways to recreate that look because it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. And he only had three more days to enjoy it .

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she demanded. “I asked if I could run with you in the morning, not bear your children .”

He snorted, realizing he'd missed part of the conversation. “Sorry, momentarily got

caught up in how beautiful you are .”

She paused, setting her fork on the edge of her plate. “Why would you say that ?”

“Because you are? I’ve already said I’m not looking for sex... I wouldn’t say no to it but — ”

“You already did,” she pointed out .

“I said we should wait. I wasn’t going to take advantage of a woman who’d just been shot at, but I definitely didn’t say no .”

She met his gaze curiously. “I’ve never met anyone like you. You’re so ...”

“Cute?” he prompted with a grin .

“Yes.” She grinned back. “But I was going to say different . I don’t think I’ve ever met a guy who looks like he should be in a motorcycle gang but behaves like the CEO of a big corporation .”

He chuckled. “I am definitely not the CEO of anything! I’m an athletic mechanic who was lucky enough to make some money. Which may all be coming to an end if I don’t figure out what I want to do with my life .”

“What do you want to do?” she asked. “In your case, it should be simple. Do you want to work for your family? Do you want to open your own shop? Do you want to focus on cars, bikes or something else—okay, maybe not so simple.” She flushed. “I just mean, what does your heart want? I know what my heart wants, but I can’t have it, and that’s why I’m in limbo .”

“What does your heart want?” he deflected gently .

She looked away, staring at some imaginary point of interest on the far wall. “To be a professional athlete like my brothers. I mean, Dwight isn’t anymore, after he blew out his knee, but he was good enough and knows it was just bad luck that he got hurt, so he was able to move on. I’ll never know because I was overshadowed by two amazingly athletic brothers .”

Shit! This wasn’t the turn he’d expected the conversation to take and the last thing he wanted to do was talk about her brothers. Especially not Jamie. Yet there was no polite way out of this, and she looked so sad, he had to say something. “What sport do you play ?”

“None anymore,” she admitted. “That’s just it. I was athletic just like them growing up, but they got good so fast, at such a young age, my parents started focusing on them. I mean, scouts were looking at Jamie by the time he was fifteen. He wasn’t big, but he was super talented, always a playmaker. They whisked him away to the juniors and — ”

“Uh, what sport?” He had to ask even though he already knew everything; but if he didn’t it would give him away .

“Hockey. My older brother plays in the NHL. Well, he did.” She sighed .

“Did?” He was going to hell; there was no doubt about it now .

“He was hurt—beaten by a group of skinheads and almost killed. They don’t know if he’ll ever play again .”

“I’m sorry. That sounds terrible .”

“It was.” She took a breath. “Anyway, I’m trying not to think about it. It gives me nightmares and my therapist said I should completely detach from everything that

happened while I'm on vacation .”

“Were you with him?” he asked in surprise .

“No.” She shook her head. “But you have no idea what he looked like when we got to the hospital.” A single tear dripped down her cheek and Hawk reached out to wipe it away .

“I’m sorry—we don’t have to talk about it. Tell me about the triathlon .”

“It’s actually part of my therapy,” she said. “My doctor recommended I do something physical because it helps with anxiety, but also so I could push myself out of my comfort zone. He suggested running a marathon but that’s lame—everyone does it. I wanted to do something more, something to prove to myself, if no one else, that I’m as athletic and talented as they are. I know it sounds silly, but I can’t help it. I need to do it .”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. A triathlon is incredibly hard and would be an amazing accomplishment. You’re really going to have to get on the bike-riding part, though. You seem to have the swimming down, and we’ll see how you are when we run in the morning, but you said you don’t really have access to a bike. You need to get one .”

She nodded. “I hate asking for anything expensive, especially now, but I’m going to tell Jamie that’s what I want for Christmas. A triathlon bike .”

He was thoughtful. “What level are you doing and when is it ?”

She sighed. “I haven’t signed up yet because, duh, I don’t have a bike .”

“Your brother is a professional hockey player and you’re afraid to ask him for help to

buy a bike? Are you not close ?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, no! We’re super close. He’s less than a year older than I am, so we’re practically twins. He would do anything for me. I just don’t want to ask. I’m twenty-seven, not eighteen. Asking him for money would be embarrassing .”

He shook his head. “You’re family. It would be different if you were a lazy slob who lived on your parents’ couch and constantly wanted money to buy shoes, but this is special. This is a huge life goal and those things can be costly. You should ask him. I bet it would make him proud to help you with this .”

She smiled. “Probably. He’s a good guy .”

“Sounds like it.” Hawk watched her face; she definitely lit up when she talked about Jamie. Which meant they were close and he’d kind of been holding out hope that maybe they weren’t. He was a selfish ass and he knew it, but it almost made him sick to think about how she would react once she found out who he was and what he’d purportedly done .

“How far do you run every day?” she asked .

“At home I run about five miles, depending on my work schedule. When work is light, especially in the summer, I do more. I also lift weights and bike when I can .”

“Is it about how you look, how you feel, or something else?” she asked .

He took a breath, trying to formulate his answer carefully. He was a professional athlete, but since he couldn’t tell her that, he had to find a more generic tactic. “I like being physically strong. Not just muscles, but a whole-body approach to my health and fitness, with a small focus on how I look. I think everyone wants to look good, the way a woman colors her hair or goes on a diet. Men are the same, we just go

about it differently and we certainly don't admit it out loud .”

She chuckled .

“I have a personal trainer,” he said carefully. “So if you'd like, I can give you some tips for making the most of your endurance training .”

“That'd be great. I do a lot of research online but it's always good to hear it from a person .”

“On that note, are we having dessert ?”

She smiled. “Well, yeah .”

It was another early night because Maddie fell asleep on the couch again. She woke up in bed, fully clothed, and stretched lazily as she heard Garrett calling to her to get moving. Crap . They were going running. What time was it? She flipped over and grabbed her phone. 6:30. That was too early; she was still on vacation, dammit. She almost went back to sleep but the thought of running with him was too enticing. She liked spending time with him. Last night's dinner had been so much fun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed a date that much, even though it wasn't truly a date. While he hadn't said anything, she had a feeling he didn't plan to see her again once they left Hawaii. Part of her was cognizant of the fact she was being as ridiculous as a teenage girl, hoping she could change his mind, but deep down she sensed that when she got on that plane in three days, it would be the last she saw of him .

She pulled on shorts, a sports bra and T-shirt and was digging around for socks when he came into the room. "No socks," he said. "No shoes either. We're running barefoot on the sand ."

"Sounds like a song!" she laughed, scooping up her hair to put it in a ponytail .

He chuckled. "The truth is that it's harder. You work your legs more and it's more cardio ."

"Oh, goody," she pretended to pout. "Up at God-awful-o'clock to work extra hard ."

"You can go back to bed," he taunted .

“I’m coming,” she mumbled .

“Here.” He handed her a package of peanut butter crackers. “A little protein and some carbs for fuel. We can have a real breakfast when we get back .”

“All right.” She popped a cracker in her mouth as they walked outside. It wasn’t hot yet but there was still enough humidity to remind her they were in Hawaii .

“Ready?” he asked as they got to the edge of the sand .

She dropped into a squat and bounced on her haunches a little. “Let me just stretch out for a minute and we’ll go .”

He nodded, jogging in place as he waited .

“Okay.” She stood up and they took off down the beach. They started slow and worked up to a moderate speed; marathons weren’t about speed so much as pacing yourself. Maddie ran fairly regularly, but she’d never run any distance on the beach before and felt her calves straining after the first mile .

“You okay?” he asked, glancing over at her .

“Legs are putting up a bit of a protest,” she grunted. “But I’m good. I’ll settle in. Haven’t run in over a week and never on the beach, so I’m adjusting .”

“We can slow — ”

“No.” She picked up the pace, pushing herself to find a comfortable rhythm. He stayed at her side, barely breaking a sweat and she admired his endurance. His legs were muscular like the rest of him, but when he ran, she saw the distinct lines flexing in his calves and thighs. He had an easy gait, a fluidity in his stride that she didn’t yet

feel when she ran. Swimming came easy to her, biking was harder, but running was going to be the thing that did her in if she didn't up her game .

“Don't push so hard,” he advised softly. “You're not going to build strength and stamina the first day. Move past the initial discomfort, but when you get to the next struggle, back off. Otherwise, you'll overdo it and won't be able to run at all tomorrow .”

She nodded in agreement. “Yeah, okay. But you can go on ahead when I poop out. I don't want to ruin your workout .”

He shook his head. “I'm good. We can go for another marathon swim this afternoon, which is my weakness, and it'll balance everything out .”

Maddie slowed down at three miles, unable to keep up with Garrett's longer stride. If she pushed too much she would be sore and need a day to rest, and she didn't want to rest while she had someone who understood what she was doing and could share one small part of the journey with her .

“I wish I had someone like you in my life,” she said ruefully. “I mean, someone who understands what I'm aiming for, who would run and swim with me...who gets me.” She turned to him with a strange look on her face. “I've known you less than three days—how come you get me ?”

He slowed to a walk and fell in beside her. “I don't know. Sometimes people just... click .”

“But we're going our separate ways when I leave, right? We're not even going to be friends.” Her voice was soft, without a hint of accusation; she was merely stating a fact .

He sighed. “Maddie.” He stopped walking and reached for her hands, pulling her close to him. “You’re amazing. You’re this crazy ray of sunshine with a backpack who raced past me a few days ago like a spinning top of fire, passion and light. You blew me away and every minute I spend with you, I like you more .”

“But?” Her expression was impassive as she stared deep into his eyes .

“There’s something going on in my life that’s ugly. Anyone I get involved with is going to be caught up in a shitstorm and after the year you’ve had with your brother—the nightmares and everything else—you absolutely don’t need to be caught up in my crazy .”

“Is your name really Garrett ?”

He hesitated but nodded. “Swear to God .”

“But it’s not Garrett Raven .”

“Maddie, I already feel like a jerk...” He sighed. “Trust me when I say I’m protecting you. After you go home, you’ll figure out who I am and what I did, and you’re going to be grateful I let you go. I wish I was a big enough man to go now, to leave you here to enjoy the resort while I find a room somewhere else. And if you ask me to, I will. Say the word and I’m gone; the whole thing’s yours .”

She studied his face for a long time. The more she thought about it, he seemed vaguely familiar but she couldn’t place him. Rock star? Actor? She already sensed looking online for Garrett Raven would be a lesson in futility so she had two choices: Take him up on his offer to send him packing or spend a couple more days with the most amazing guy she’d ever met. It was likely she’d go home with a broken heart, but how could she live with herself knowing she gave up the chance to know him, even if she didn’t know his secrets? She firmly believed everything happened for a

reason .

Monique had bailed on their trip so Maddie could meet Garrett; of that she was positive. She wasn't going to miss out on this, whatever it was. Whether his sole purpose in her life was to give her the support to focus on her triathlon dream or to just be the man who made her forget her nightmares for a few days, she was going to find out. Her heart had been broken before and she'd survived. If that's what was going to happen, she'd get over it this time too .

Without a word, she leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips to his. The pressure was light, a whisper against his mouth as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "We have three days. Can you hold off your shitstorm until I get on the plane back to Toronto ?"

Something inscrutable flashed across his face as he nodded—surprise? Concern? Delight? She had no idea, but as he slid his hands around her waist and lifted her until she wrapped her legs around him, she didn't care .

"You sure, baby?" His voice was thick, portraying emotion she couldn't read .

"I don't care about your secrets, I don't care about whatever you did—wait, you didn't kill someone, did you ?"

He shook his head solemnly. "Didn't rape anyone or molest a child either. This is more... professional . Leave it at that, okay ?"

"Then I'm sure. I've never felt this way about anyone before and you know that saying about it being better to have loved and lost than to have never been loved? And I've never felt this loved... Does that make any sense at all ?"

Her words hit him like a physical blow and he almost staggered backwards. He knew

exactly what she meant, because he felt the same way, he just hadn't been able to articulate it. It wasn't true love, of course—they barely knew each other—but if love at first sight existed, this was it. It was usually short-lived, but it was always the sweetest, most exciting kind, leaving you with memories that lasted a lifetime. She wasn't playing a game or trying to change their circumstances; she recognized the special opportunity they had and was willing to risk getting hurt to experience what it would be like for them to be together. He fell a little in love with her just for that—her spunk, her huge heart, her willingness to jeopardize her soul for a man who'd already told her he would leave .

He found her mouth with passion he didn't know he had. This wasn't sex—this was a merging of destinies. Hers and his. It was a little bit ridiculous and a tiny part of him wondered if it was this good, this special, because he knew he couldn't have her. He refused to believe it because she was special and the feelings they were already sharing were different. He'd had vacation hook-ups before and that's not what this was. This was the stuff sappy romance novels were made of, except it didn't feel sappy and this wasn't fiction. He already had genuine feelings for her and he wasn't physically capable of letting her go until it was time to put her on that plane. Until then, she was his .

Her moan of pleasure told him she thought so too, but he forced himself to lower her to the ground. “Not here,” he muttered. “When I make love to you, baby, no one will be watching but me .”

She shuddered a little, nodding up at him. “Did what I said freak you out? You know, about you loving me? I didn't — ”

“Shh.” He shook his head. “Believe it or not, I know exactly what you meant and I feel it too. I don't understand it, but I feel it .”

“Thank goodness.” She rested her head against his chest. “As soon as I said it I felt

like I made a total fool of myself. Again .”

“No.” He stroked her hair. “It’s what I’ve been thinking too, but without framing it in such a thoughtful sentence .”

“But what do we do now?” she whispered. “I feel kind of silly .”

“We’re going to spend three days pretending I’m not a screw-up and that you’re going to save me from myself .”

“You already saved me from myself,” she said softly. “So it’s only fair I return the favor .”

“Damn, baby.” He pressed his lips to hers and held them there for a long time .

They spent another day at the beach, baking in the sun and going for a timed, measured swim where Maddie beat him by nearly two minutes. She tried not to gloat, but she jokingly waited for him on the shore with her hands on her hips. As he got out he splashed her and they wound up having an all-out water war. It was the most fun she'd ever had with a guy, her heart growing more and more invested as they talked, laughed and held hands. He told her funny stories about growing up working in his stepfather's repair shop and she told him all about the lawyers she worked with .

It felt like she could tell him anything, like he understood her when almost no one else did. Her most trusted confidante had always been Jamie, but there was no way she could tell her brother he was the reason she was having nightmares and losing weight. He had enough struggles right now; she refused to add to it. It had left her feeling very alone, but with Garrett she didn't feel that way anymore .

Her phone rang as she was getting out of the shower later that afternoon and she smiled when she saw Jamie's name flash on the screen .

"Hey!" she said, holding the phone between her ear and shoulder as she tried to towel-dry her hair .

"How's Hawaii?" he asked .

"Wonderful!"

"Yeah? Mom said you switched hotels and had gotten a room at that fancy resort ."

“Yup.”

He paused. “Maddie... I know you can’t afford a room there on your own. What’s going on ?”

She sighed. “Promise you won’t judge ?”

“Me?!” He burst out laughing. “You’re kidding, right ?”

“Some guys were trying to break into my rental car at the cheap motel I’d originally booked and this guy stepped in and stopped them.” She wouldn’t tell him about being shot at until they were together. If she did, he’d be on the first plane to Hawaii and she didn’t want that .

“And he just invited you to stay at the resort with him?” Jamie sounded wary .

“Kinda. It’s a long story, but I promise I’m fine. Safe, happy and truly relaxed for the first time since—” She stopped abruptly .

“Since my attack .”

Her brother knew her well .

“I thought you were going to die,” she whispered harshly. “I know you’re fine, but I’ll never forget sitting next to you and hearing the doctors say they didn’t know if you were going to make it...if your kidneys would start working again...if you were going to wake up. You’re my big brother and I’d be lost without you .”

“I love you too, kiddo,” he said quietly, a catch in his voice. “And I’m sorry my situation has impacted you so strongly. But you know I’m healthy and happier than I’ve ever been. If my hair would just grow out some, I’d be peachy !”

She giggled. “You’re such a dork .”

“Back atcha .”

“So...did you call for something specific or just to check on me ?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay, get the scoop on the hotel change and say hi .”

“Well, hi. I’m better than okay, the hotel is fantastic and I appreciate you checking on me .”

“Do you need money ?”

“I...” She paused. Jamie was her older brother, practically her twin, and her very best friend in the world. Why was she being stubborn ?

“What is it, honey? Did you run out of money? You can tell me .”

“No. I...” She took a deep breath. “I’m training for a triathlon next year and I need a bike. I realized since I’ve been here that I’m never going to be able to afford it on my own and that my big brother probably wouldn’t mind lending me the money to get what I need to keep training .”

“ Lending you the money?” He laughed. “We’ll talk about it when you get home, but I’m not lending you shit—you can have anything you need. Pick out the one you want and I’ll have it delivered. Maddie, why didn’t you tell me you were training for a triathlon? That’s amazing .”

“I wasn’t sure I could do it, you know, without a bike and all the stuff I need...but I really, really want to try .”

“Whatever you need, just ask. Don’t ever be afraid to ask me for something, Mad. What good is all this money I make if I can’t use it to make the people I love happy ?”

“You have a mortgage, a family... It’s not your job to support me .”

“I’m not supporting you—I’m helping you achieve a goal. It’s not like you sit on the couch all day and ask for beer money or something .”

She smiled, remembering what Garrett had said. “Someone else actually said that same thing .”

“Sounds like your vacation hook-up is a smart guy .”

“He’s a great guy .”

“Have fun, kiddo. Just promise me you’ll be safe .”

“Always.”

“Love you .”

“Love you too.” She hung up and turned to see Garrett standing in the doorway .

“Sorry.” He cleared his throat. “I was checking to see how much longer you need to get ready .”

“I was talking to my brother .”

“I know .”

Their eyes met for a moment before she headed towards the bathroom. “Fifteen minutes. I need to dry my hair and put on a little makeup .”

“Wear the black dress,” he said softly .

She hesitated. “Where are we going ?”

“Little gastropub I know .”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Fifteen minutes .

When she came out of her room wearing the black dress and high, strappy heels, Hawk wasn’t sure they would get out of the house. He’d had a lot of women in his day, but not a single one had ever affected him the way Madison Teller did. He wanted to be a gentleman and focus on something other than how beautiful she was, how much he wanted to be with her, inside her, all over her...but they only had two more days and he didn’t think that would be even close to enough of her .

“You look beautiful,” he said, reaching out to bring her hand to his lips .

A faint flush covered her cheeks as she smiled up at him. “Thank you. You don’t look too bad yourself .”

He’d only brought casual clothes with him on this trip, but knowing she was going to wear that dress tonight, he’d put in a call to Jim and found dress pants, a button-down shirt, socks and dress shoes hanging in a plastic bag in his closet when they’d gotten home from the beach. He rarely used his impressive salary to indulge in things like this, but today he’d been eternally grateful for the luxuries it afforded him .

He took her hand and they walked out to his SUV. He opened the door for her and smiled at her look of surprise, wondering if the guys she’d dated in the past hadn’t

been gentlemen .

“Why is a beautiful woman like you single?” he asked after a moment. “Your brother must have some nice friends, no ?”

She laughed. “He doesn’t want me to meet his teammates. He says hockey players are dogs and there’s a really high divorce rate in professional sports. They’re gone a lot, there’s a lot of opportunity to cheat... I don’t know exactly what goes on in his head with this, but he’s always kept his buddies away from me and I never thought too much about it .”

“I get it,” he laughed. “Brothers always want to protect their sisters .”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m a grown woman, remember ?”

“Oh, I remember.” His eyes traveled the length of her body before turning back to the road .

“Why are you single?” she countered. “I mean, you’re good-looking and rich. There must be tons of women out in L.A. vying for your affection .”

“I’m not actually in L.A. much anymore,” he said slowly. “My parents moved the business here to Hawaii a few years back .”

“You live here now ?”

“No. I’m in limbo at the moment .”

She eyed him. “Because of your shit-storm life ?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, you must live somewhere ?”

“I do, but not full-time and it might change again in the near future .”

“Okay.” She reached out to squeeze his hand. “I don’t care if you tell me your secrets, but sometimes it’s good to get it off your chest. Especially to someone who’s not involved .”

You’re more involved than you think , he thought miserably. “Yeah, well, it’s not always that simple,” he said aloud .

She let it go so it wouldn’t ruin their evening and they chatted casually the rest of the drive and all through dinner. The food was wonderful, the company was even better and by the time they left she couldn’t imagine never seeing him again. How had she grown so attached to a stranger after just a few days? It seemed illogical and she hated that .

“What are you thinking about with such a frown on your face?” he asked, startling her back to the present .

“That my feet are starting to hurt in these heels,” she lied with a flirty smile .

“How about we drive down to this secluded little beach on the north shore and go for a walk? We can enjoy the last of the daylight and you can take those heels off .”

“Sounds wonderful .”

“ You’re thinking again,” he said once they were in the car. “Come on, tell me what’s on your mind .”

“I’m wondering what my brother would think of you .”

Hawk's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He couldn't even imagine what Jamie thought of him right now. "He'd probably take one look and tell you to run ."

She rolled her eyes. "He'd never be that shallow. I think you two would get along great ."

They had gotten along pretty well, Hawk reflected. Jamie hadn't been on the team in Ottawa long; first because of a concussion that kept him out for two months and then the attack in late January. He hadn't come back from that and he'd actually been traded back to his previous team in Las Vegas, the Sidewinders, so Hawk hadn't seen him since he'd visited him in the hospital back in February. He'd still been in rough shape but he'd laughed and joked, his usual upbeat self, and Hawk had a hell of a lot of respect for him. As much as he regretted that he was going to have to walk away from Maddie without even giving them a chance, he regretted what Jamie probably thought of him now even more. Breaking a woman's heart was one thing; being a terrible human being was another level of hell .

"Now who's thinking?" she teased. "Come on, lighten up. Whenever you start thinking about your situation, your eyes get all squinty and a vein in your neck starts to throb. I'm not asking any more questions. All I want right now is for this really hot guy I know to take me for a walk on the beach ."

He smiled without looking at her. "I can do that ."

The beach Garrett found on the north shore was rockier than Waikiki, but still beautiful, with pristine waters and a gorgeous shoreline. As the sun got lower in the sky, they walked hand in hand along the water's edge, tiny whitecaps crawling up over their feet as the tide started to come in. The wind was blowing her hair back away from her face and he leaned over to kiss her, tasting the last remnants of the wine they'd had at dinner mixed with the salt water in the air. Her lips were soft, yielding to his without hesitation, making him yearn to be back at the resort with her. She would be his tonight, he knew this without a doubt, but he was savoring every moment. He refused to rush towards the main event because their limited time together was a main event in and of itself .

When he finally broke away he took her hand again and pulled her along. There wasn't much light left and he wanted to start heading back .

"I love the ocean," she sighed. "Not just because I swim, but because it calls to me. Someday, I want to live on a beach like this... Maybe even here in Hawaii. I really love it here ."

"With a tattooed mechanic and a bunch of little mechanics?" He wasn't sure why he said it but it felt so natural to flirt, as if this was a real relationship .

"I'm not sure about a bunch of little mechanics," she giggled. "Maybe two ."

"Do you want kids ?"

“Eventually. They scare me a little right now .”

“Me too,” he admitted. “I can barely take care of myself half the time—how the hell would I be able to take care of this helpless little baby ?”

“That’s how I feel too. I mean, I can change a diaper and rock them to sleep and whatever, but the big stuff—food and clothes and braces and college—I can’t wrap my head around it .”

“I always figured I’d make the money and their mom—my wife—would do that kind of thing. Now that I’m older, though, I realize there’s a lot more to being a dad than bringing home the paycheck. I was seven when my dad died, but I remember his bear hugs, his laugh... I want my kids to remember things like that about me .”

She smiled. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You have an idea about your future... This is probably a big part of the reason I’m single. I meet guys that are nice enough, are somewhat interesting or whatever, but they don’t...engage in the important ways. I’m not talking about immediately having a conversation about kids—I’m talking about a conceptualization of the future. It’s like this unknown entity they can’t even fathom unless it’s career-related. I’m not ready for kids, at all, but I can think about them. I know that when I have them I want them to have a hands-on father. Not just a sperm donor or a guy who pays the bills, but someone who’s involved in raising them. Yet a lot of guys I meet get a strange look like they have no idea what I’m talking about.” She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m weird .”

He looped his arm around her neck and drew her up against his side. “That’s the best speech about dating I’ve ever heard. I never thought about it like that, but you’re right. Once you get to a point where it’s at least a little bit serious, you should be cognizant of what you want as a couple, including the type of parents you want to be. I don’t know exactly what I want in that regard, but I know I’d like to be more like

my dad .”

“What about your stepdad ?”

He grunted. “He falls into the category of the guy who just pays the bills .”

“Did he and your mom have kids together ?”

He shook his head. “No. He has a son from his first marriage and he adopted Gabby and me, but we don’t really get along .”

“Well at least you know what kind of parent you don’t want to be,” she pointed out .

“This is very true .”

“So you fought with your parents, left them and wound up at the Motel from Hell ?”

He chuckled. “My plan was to just drive around until I wasn’t pissed anymore, but I was hungry, my phone died and that’s where I ended up so I didn’t fall asleep at the wheel .”

“Sounds lonely .”

“It can be. Guys are different, I think. I mean, I’d like to be closer to my parents but it is what it is. I have a pretty good life most of the time and don’t sweat it. Like you said, it’s a lesson in what I don’t want for myself when the time comes to settle down .”

“My family is wonderful,” she admitted. “My parents are still together, totally in love, and pretty supportive of anything us kids want to do. My younger brother is a little self-absorbed right now with his career and girlfriend, but he’d be there for me

in a heartbeat if I needed him. And, of course, Jamie is my favorite person in the whole world. I can't imagine what I would have done if I'd lost him ..."

"I'm really glad you didn't," he whispered, pressing a quick kiss to the side of her face .

They got back to the guest house just after ten and sank onto the couch together, hands linked between them. If it had been up to the Hawk part of Garrett, she'd already be naked and bent over the back of the couch, but that wasn't what he wanted with Maddie. She'd been a little quiet on the drive home and he sensed she was nervous. Despite her proclamations that she was okay with vacation sex , now that the moment was upon them she'd retreated emotionally. He was okay with that, but he didn't want it to be awkward either. If she wasn't comfortable, he wasn't interested, and making her happy these next couple of days was all he cared about. Sex was easy; a mating of spirits was much more complicated .

"You're quiet," he said, lifting her hand and bringing it to his chest. "Something tells me you're having second thoughts ."

"No." She leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder. "I just don't want to have sex with the wrong man ."

"Huh?" He wasn't sure what she meant .

"You promised me Garrett is your real name, but it's not Garrett Raven, so who am I having sex with tonight? Garrett Raven, who doesn't exist, or Garrett X, who's supposedly a jerk that's going to hurt me ."

He swallowed, letting his fingers trail down her face and onto her shoulders. He wasn't sure what to say because there was no easy answer to that. Garrett Raven didn't exist—it was a name he used so people couldn't find him when he stayed at

hotels—but Hawk Hawkins meant nothing to her. “I’m just Garrett,” he whispered. “Who I am the rest of the time doesn’t matter for two more days .”

“Why won’t you tell me? Whatever you did, I won’t judge you. It won’t change anything .”

He laughed but it was without humor. “Honey, what if I told you I’d killed someone? What if I said that in a fit of rage, I stabbed my stepfather and the police were looking for me. How would you feel ?”

“I wouldn’t believe it,” she responded automatically. “I don’t know what kind of man you are to the outside world, but I already know who you are in here.” She touched his chest. “The man who threw himself on top of a stranger while bullets were flying isn’t a cold-blooded killer. The man who offered to leave his super expensive room because the broke woman he so kindly offered to share it with was uncomfortable doesn’t have an ugly soul. The tattooed man with a mohawk who understands why a secretary from Toronto needs to compete in a triathlon isn’t evil. That guy isn’t my Garrett. I don’t believe it—I won’t .”

He closed his eyes and pulled her into his arms, willing himself not to let his beautiful sea nymph dig her way from under his skin—where she was already firmly settled—and work her way straight into his heart. “Baby, if circumstances were different, I’d take you home with me and never let you go .”

“Where’s home?” she whispered against his ear. “Tell me where you’d take me .”

“One of my homes is in L.A.,” he whispered back. “I don’t live in it right now because, like I told you, I’m in limbo, but I own it. It’s rented until June, and then they’re moving, so that’s where we’d go. You’d love L.A. It’s near the beach and we could swim every morning, bike in the afternoons and run late in the day when it’s not so hot. I’d make love to you on my California king with all the windows open,

moving inside of you in time to the waves crashing onto the shore. We'd run marathons together and invite friends over for dinner on the wrap-around deck. Then I'd give you two perfect little baby mechanics to take care of for me while I was out making a living, but I'd come home and love all three of you so hard you'd forget about the times I had to be away for work .”

She stared up at him in awe, her eyes wide and a little watery. She traced a finger along his perfectly chiseled chin and up around his cheekbones. She let her hand linger on his face, never breaking his gaze, as she studied his full lips and the faint stubble that had started to grow in. Without a word, she rose to her knees and straddled him, lifting her dress so it floated around their legs. He let one hand drift around to cup her backside but he was otherwise still, watching her movements as she touched every inch of his face, his throat, the side of his head. She used her fingernails to scrape against the grain of the closely cropped hair along both sides, so the short pieces brushed against the pads of her fingers. It was soft and she couldn't resist moving up to the long hair that went down the middle of his skull. This piece was long, probably four or five inches, and he'd slicked it back tonight so that it looked almost like a regular haircut .

She dug her fingers in it, rubbing until the gel he'd used gave up its hold and a piece fell over his forehead. Then she lowered her face to his and kissed him. When he tried to move she shook her head .

"No," she whispered. "Let me love you. Let me love you so hard you forget about what terrible thing you did and only remember Garrett— my Garrett ."

He moaned as he let his head fall back. She was trailing her lips across his Adam's apple, lightly nipping the skin at his throat, her fingers working the buttons of his shirt. She paused, needing to focus on the buttonholes so she could get to that wonderful skin beneath. Finally, his shirt was open and she placed her palm on his warm, rippled stomach. Without thinking, she bent her head so she could run her lips

across it. She let her tongue glide across his skin, the salty taste making her want more .

“Baby...” His voice was hoarse with longing, the erection tenting his slacks belying his reluctance to let her stay in control .

“Not yet.” She pushed the shirt off his shoulders and indulged in the first fantasy she’d had about him: Exploring every one of his tattoos with her tongue. She wanted to—needed to—and wouldn’t stop until she had. “How many are there ?”

“Tats?” he looked surprised. “Uh, seventeen ?”

She laughed. “You don’t know ?”

“There’s a few so I stopped counting .”

“Where are the ones I can’t see ?”

“Won’t it be more fun for you to discover them on your own ?”

She smiled. “Get undressed .”

He smiled back and gently pushed her off to the side so he could slide off his slacks. Standing there in his boxers, he held out his hand to her. “The first time isn’t going to be on the couch .”

She got to her feet and he hauled her against his chest .

“Take off the dress,” he whispered .

“I’m supposed to be in charge,” she whispered back .

“You are. But if I have to be in my undies, so do you .”

She flushed but slowly pulled the dress up over her head. He took it from her and paused to hold it against his face, inhaling deeply. “I love how you smell .”

“My dress probably smells like deodorant and salt water .”

“And you,” he murmured, letting the silky black fabric drop to the ground. “You smell yummy, like a tropical cocktail with coconut .”

“I use a coconut shampoo .”

He bent his head and buried his nose in her hair. “Oh yeah. God, that’s so fucking sexy .”

She paused, running her hands up his massive chest, across his broad shoulders, down those muscular arms and around his waist to rest just behind his hips. “All I ask is that when we’re together like this you give me the real Garrett .”

He covered her hands with his and looked deep into her eyes. “Honey, since the moment you zipped past me in that hallway, you’ve had nothing but the real Garrett. He’s the only one that’s good enough for you .”

“Liar.” She took a few steps towards the bedroom and turned to look over her shoulder. “Coming ?”

“Oh yeah .”

He took a moment to compose himself. Not physically—there was only one thing that would solve that problem—but emotionally. She’d done exactly what he hadn’t wanted and wormed her way not just into his heart, but right into his very being. The

things she said, the way she looked at him... How the hell would he ever be able to look at another woman after this? How would he be able to look at himself? She was it. He didn't need months of dating, talking, getting to know each other. He already knew she was the woman for him. If he could, he'd walk her down to the resort's concierge and get one of the ladies that worked there to tell them exactly what they had to do to get married immediately. It was a fleeting, completely unreasonable thought, but it hit him so hard he had to take a deep breath .

"Don't be an idiot," he muttered under his breath. "She'd divorce you so fast your head would spin ."

"Are you trying to talk yourself into or out of coming in here?" she called out to him .

"I'm trying to be a gentleman," he said softly, standing in the doorway and watching as she sprawled on the bed in nothing but black lace panties .

"You already are," she smiled. "Now come over here and let me lick you ."

He laughed, moving towards her slowly, their eyes locked as he approached. He crawled across the bed in one long, exaggerated movement but she stopped him with a finger to his chest .

"Over there," she pointed. "Stand next to the bed ."

He backed up and got to his feet again. "Like this ?"

"Don't move unless I tell you to." She slid to the edge of the bed and sat with her legs hanging over. She nudged down one side of his boxers, eyeing the ink she'd seen peeking out. It was the number "90," set just inside and below his hip bone, and had a lightning bolt through it. She bent her head and let her tongue curl over the characters, her fingers on either side of it. She glanced up, her lips parted expectantly.

“That’s one .”

He took a shaky breath, wondering how he was going to survive her doing this sixteen more times, but she’d already moved down to the outside of his hip, running that warm, wet tongue along the Chinese characters tattooed there .

“It says Nèi zài de lì liàng ,” he said quietly. “It’s the longer version of — ”

“ Inner strength ,” she whispered, her eyes wide .

“How did you know?” he frowned .

She stood up and gently pushed him back a couple of inches. She turned her back to him and slowly lowered the edge of her panties, revealing the exact same tattoo right along the edge of her tailbone .

“ Maddie .” His voice was full of wonder as he wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his head in the hollow of her shoulder .

“ My Garrett,” was all she said, letting one hand drift up and across the side of his face .

“Let me love you,” he whispered .

“Fifteen more tattoos for me to lick, and then you can do anything you want to me .”

“Fuck, baby, that’s the sexiest thing a woman’s ever said to me .”

He closed his eyes and straightened up again, emptying his mind of everything except his lovely sea nymph. She found all of his tattoos, slowly and with purpose, kissing, licking and sucking each one with almost artistic precision. She went from the left hip

up his side to the ones on his shoulders and then moved to the three on his bicep and the one on his forearm. Her next stop was his back, finding the four there and running her lips down the length of his spine to inspect the one on his left butt cheek. From there she worked her way up the right side, blowing lightly on them after she'd used her tongue, raising gooseflesh all over his body .

“Mine,” she whispered as she finished the hawk on his right forearm. “All seventeen of them. No matter where we go after we leave here, those seventeen tats are mine. You know why?” Her eyes were burning with heat, but they also twinkled with amusement .

He shook his head .

“Because I licked them .”

He chuckled at her impish smile, slowly pushing her onto the bed. “What happens when I lick you all over? Will you be mine ?”

“I already am .”

He had no words as he found her beautiful mouth and started a detailed exploration of every crevice. His lips took possession of her skin, from her mouth to the curve of her neck, the sensitive spot behind her ear and the hollow of her shoulder. She was exquisite, as delectable as he'd imagined and sweeter than anything he'd ever tasted. Her skin was golden from so much time in the sun and the faint aroma of coconut wafted over him every time he got anywhere near her hair. He wanted to inhale everything about her, but he focused on each part of her body the way she'd done with his tattoos .

When he slid down to her breasts she arched into him, nipples hardening the moment he got close to them. They were full and round, with dusky, sensitive peaks that came

alive as he took one delectable nipple between his lips. She cried out, digging her fingers into his hair .

“I was right,” he murmured, his breath hot against her skin. “They fit perfectly in my hands.” He demonstrated, holding one breast in each hand and squeezing lightly .

“All of you fits perfectly with all of me,” she said, wriggling her body so they were aligned for easy access .

“Yes,” he nodded, moving back to her breasts. “But I need to enjoy these first.” He kept at it until she was practically begging, her breath heated as she tried to bring him closer .

“Garrett!” she whimpered as he moved off of her, sliding down her stomach .

“Don’t worry, gorgeous, you’re going to love what I’m going to do next even more.” He gently spread her thighs and had to take a long, steadying breath as he took in her sweet, incredibly wet pussy. She was spread out before him, his to take, his to do anything he wanted, and all he wanted was to give her pleasure, to make sure she remembered this long after he was gone .

He dove in like a man possessed, though he kept his touch gentle because she tensed slightly .

“You okay?” he asked softly .

“I, um... I’ve done this, but I don’t think he did it right cause I never ...”

“You never what? Had an orgasm ?”

“No.”

“Let’s fix that then .”

He loved oral sex. Everything about the space between a woman's legs turned him on, from the silky skin of the inner thigh to a well-trimmed strip of hair to the musky, feminine scent. Maddie was erotic perfection, her legs lean but soft, her stomach rising and falling with excitement, and her pussy beautifully pink and quivering. He took a moment to observe, inhale and all but memorize every inch of her, until her tiny whimper of distress drew him forward .

He started with soft kisses, loving her reactions—so raw and honest—as her breath escaped in a rush .

“Easy, baby, just relax and let me make you feel good .”

Her only response was what he hoped was a happy sigh, one hand finding its way down to rest in his hair. He loved when a woman pulled his hair—probably one of the main reasons he kept part of it long—and he planned to tell her so at some point, but right now all he was thinking about was how she tasted. He'd eat pussy over ice cream any time, especially if Maddie was on the menu .

Using just the tip of his tongue, he traced a slow circle around her clit, watching as it puffed up for him. He moved lower, exploring her intimately, following her signals for what she did and didn't like. Some girls were overly sensitive and needed a lighter touch, and Maddie was obviously one of them. She squirmed ever so slightly when he increased pressure, so he kept his touch light, letting her guide the pace. He'd do this all night if she wanted him to but he'd make her come if it killed him .

He used his fingers to spread her wider and give him better access, sliding his tongue inside of her for the first time. Her responding moan came from deep in her chest and her grip on his hair increased .

“That’s right, baby... the more you like it, the harder you pull.” He increased pressure gradually, flattening his tongue to touch more of her at once and the sharp pain in his scalp told him all he needed to know. He went faster and harder, moving up to circle her clit with flicks that made her cry out. He put two fingers inside of her and spread them apart, giving him room to tongue fuck her until she was humping his face, yanking his hair and crying out his name .

The time was right and he moved in for the finale, sucking her clit while he fucked her with two fingers. Her scream of pleasure was music to his ears, even as her thighs snapped closed around his head, pulling him in closer .

“Holy fuck... oh my god, Jesus, that was amazing .”

Maddie appeared somewhat embarrassed at her reaction to what they’d just done, but Garrett had moved up her body and was kissing her now, slow and tender, sexy and hot, determined to distract her .

“You ever tasted yourself?” he asked in a throaty whisper .

“No.” She wasn’t sure she’d ever wanted to know what she tasted like, but mixed with the taste of Garrett, she didn’t care. As long as he kept kissing and touching her, she was ready to try anything and everything .

“You like?” he asked, when he finally lifted his head .

“Yes.” She met his smoldering gaze with one of her own. “I want you to make love to me like you mean it, Garrett .”

“Oh, I plan to.” He briefly moved away, digging around on the nightstand .

“What are you doing?” she asked in confusion .

“Just a second, honey—condom.” He sheathed himself quickly and was instantly back with her, skin-to-skin, fingers threaded together. He hesitated, but there was no more waiting for this; they didn’t just want it, they needed it. She edged closer, sliding one thigh up around his waist, leaving herself open and ready, voicelessly begging him to take her .

Her lips sought his yet again, sucking him into her, surrendering to him in a way no one ever had before. Without a word, he thrust his hips forward, pressing against her and gliding into her with one smooth motion. They both sighed, eyes locked together, and for a long moment neither of them moved. Time stood still and he paused, somehow sensing she needed to adjust to having him inside her .

“Mine,” she whispered after a long, sensual kiss .

“Very, very yours,” he agreed .

Fire was shooting down his spine, the need to move more than he could stand and the way she shifted restlessly beneath him told him she was equally aroused .

“Baby, tell me what you want .”

G arrett seemed to instinctively sense when she needed more .

“Just you.” She arched up to meet him. The pressure between her legs was unbearable. She’d never wanted someone inside of her so badly, needed a man’s touch so desperately, or had such an overwhelming sense of completion. Making love had never felt like this before and she kissed him, showing him everything she

couldn't possibly say. She'd already broken all the rules; told him she loved him, told him he was hers, told him she'd give him anything he wanted. Now she wanted only to show him that he could have it, and her, if only he would trust her .

Everything else disappeared as they moved together, bodies and souls linked by some invisible force that had thrown them together at a shady motel outside of Honolulu. She dug her nails into his hard, muscular backside, gripping him tighter, pulling him deeper until there was no space between them. Inside and out, they were completely immersed in each other, hearts hammering in unison as they rushed towards a release that would undoubtedly break them .

She never wanted it to end, the way it felt to be so connected to another human being, and she tried desperately to hold off, make it last longer. Her body betrayed her, though, the first ripples of her orgasm rocking her against him so hard one of his hip bones began to dig into hers. Her cries filled the room, calling out his name, over and over, until she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything except ride out waves that seemed to go on forever .

Hawk hadn't had sex like this in a long time, so good he couldn't stop himself from following her right over the edge and growling from the force of his release. She was still moving, the silky skin of her calves moving across his back. When her breath caught, he tried to memorize every nuance of her face. The way those stupidly long eyelashes fluttered on her cheeks. Those plump red lips, slightly parted as she moaned his name. The deep rosy color her skin turned as she orgasmed against him until she couldn't move anymore. He would remember it always, remember her always. He'd never experienced anything like Madison Teller and he would never, ever forget this moment .

Her wet mouth fastened greedily onto his shoulder, sucking his skin as the aftershocks kept her shuddering beneath him every few seconds. Her teeth nipped at him and he realized she was marking him. It had been years since he'd had a love

bite, a hickey , but Maddie was letting him know whom he belonged to. He was sending her away in two days, but she was leaving a piece of herself right here on his right shoulder. It would only be visible for a short time, but its meaning would remain forever ingrained in his soul. He didn't move, didn't stop her, didn't even flinch when her teeth experimentally dug in. She was on a mission and he wouldn't dream of interfering; having her mark on him was an honor .

When she was done, he flipped them over so he was on his back and she rested on him, against him, between his legs. There wasn't much of anything to say; they'd said it all with their bodies and he was confused as hell. She didn't seem to have any such issues. As she drifted off to sleep, he heard her whisper, “ Mine .”

M addie woke up first, surprised that neither of them had moved at all during the night. He was on his back and she was still draped across and against him. She slowly pulled away, tiptoeing into the bathroom to relieve her screaming bladder. Part of her wanted to slink away to her room and relive every moment of their night together in private, where no morning-after awkwardness would ruin her memories. It had been the most mind-blowing sex of her life, and she'd nearly sobbed when they finished, so unwilling to lose the intimacy. So she'd sucked on his shoulder until she'd known a big brown and purple bruise would remain for days, a constant reminder of her, of them .

She came out of the bathroom and paused, unsure whether to rejoin him or go to her own room, when his voice called to her. "Don't even think about it. Get your sweet ass back in this bed ."

Crawling into his arms, she sighed in relief as he closed them around her and kissed her temple. "Good morning, beautiful ."

"Good morning ."

"How'd you sleep ?"

"Like a rock. I don't think either of us moved ."

"Ready to run ?"

“What?” She stared at him in confusion .

“It’s morning... Isn’t this when we run? You know, that whole triathlon-training thing ?”

She flushed. “Oh, yeah. Do we have to ?”

“Yes, we do.” He lightly slapped her bottom. “We can come back and get naked in the shower when we’re done .”

She chuckled. “Can’t we just skip to the naked part ?”

“We’re already naked, and no. Time to get up. Come on, princess, this is how athletes do it .”

She arched her brow. “How would you know ?”

He shrugged. “I have a trainer, I work out a lot .”

“Fine.” She padded out of his room and into hers, turning on lights as she searched for her clothes. She was tired but in a good way, her body still humming from last night’s activities .

After getting dressed and washing up, she found Garrett in the kitchen making eggs .

“When did we get food?” she asked, moving up behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist .

“I sent the concierge a message and they took care of it .”

“I wish you’d told me—I was hoping for some yogurt .”

He leaned back to press a kiss to the tip of her nose. “I’ll have some delivered today. Any particular brand and flavor ?”

She told him what she liked as she moved away to get plates out of the cabinets. “This place is amazing—it has everything .”

He nodded. “Yeah. A bit more room than the two of us need, certainly more than if I was by myself, but it was literally the only opening they had .”

“Must be nice to have friends in high places,” she laughed .

“Yeah, it is, but it’s also nice to have the money to afford it. I’m not staying here for free.” A touch of bitterness crept into his voice and Maddie paused, cocking her head .

“What does that mean? I know that gripe wasn’t directed at me, because you made the arrangements to stay here on your own... What are you upset about? Is whatever it is that’s going on at work related to money ?”

He sighed, shaking his head as he put eggs on each plate. “The problem is the future. If I continue to do what I’m doing, the money is phenomenal, but right now I’m unhappy. If I stop, I’ll be a lot happier, but I’ll be broke. Well, okay, not broke, but I wouldn’t be able to vacation in places like this. I’d probably sell my house in L.A., move somewhere more affordable, and come up with a whole new plan for my future .”

“Are you an actor?” She squinted up at him. “No... I’d know this face. Your eyes, the way you smile... I’d remember .”

“Definitely not an actor.” He handed her a plate. “Eat. We have to get going before the beach gets busy and it gets too hot .”

“It’s not even seven,” she muttered. “Who gets up on vacation to go to the beach at seven in the morning ?”

“Eat.”

She dug in, grateful he’d made coffee and put a cup in front of her. She wasn’t a picky eater, but black coffee in the morning was a must. The silence gave her time to ponder what he’d just said. Whatever he did now was lucrative, but he wasn’t happy. Her gut told her he wanted to be a mechanic but that it probably didn’t pay very well. She didn’t care about that. If they lived in a little house somewhere and they both worked, they could have a nice life. She wouldn’t work once they had kids but—she froze. He couldn’t hear her thoughts, obviously, but that wasn’t the point. What on earth was she doing, fantasizing about them having a life together ?

He’d made it clear that wasn’t going to happen but after last night, it kind of ticked her off. Who was he to decide what she could and couldn’t live with? No matter what Garrett had done, Jamie would help; she knew he would. He cared about money less than anyone she knew. Yes, he had a family now, and another baby on the way, but he was part-owner of a nightclub and his husband still played professional hockey. They wouldn’t bat an eyelash to help her and Garrett fix whatever was going on with him .

“Can my brother help you?” she blurted out .

“What?” Garrett’s fork paused en route to his mouth. “What are you talking about ?”

“Can Jamie help you get out of whatever mess you’re in? Whether it’s with his celebrity as an athlete or money or ...”

“Jesus, Maddie.” He put down his fork and stalked out of the room .

She watched him go with a mixture of hurt and frustration. Why was he so stubborn? With a snort of annoyance, she followed him. “Don’t walk away from me like that! I was trying to help. You could just say no .”

He was standing at the sliding glass doors, staring out at the ocean. “You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he growled. “Your brother can’t help me. He wouldn’t .”

“You don’t know him .”

“It wouldn’t matter .”

“Why are you so determined to do this alone? Weren’t you the one who told me it was silly not to ask my brother for help with the bike? Why can’t people who care about you help ?”

“He’s your brother!” he spat out. “It’s not the same .”

“But if you’re mine and I’m yours, then he’s your brother now too .”

“Maddie, come on.” He wouldn’t look at her. “That romantic nonsense works in the middle of the night but in the light of day, we’ve known each other three days. Your family doesn’t give a damn about me and, frankly, neither should you .”

Her jaw clenched angrily through the tears that sprung to her eyes. “Really. So last night was romantic nonsense? I was already putting out—why the hell did we need to pretend? I seduced you ! I wanted to get laid as much as you did, so why was all of that romantic bullshit necessary ?”

“Because women like it!” he shot back, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Look, I don’t want to fight with you. I like you—I adore you—but you want something I

can't give you. This is what I was afraid of. I didn't want to hurt you, but today and tomorrow are all I have. Take it or leave it .”

She met his gaze defiantly and held out her hand. “I want your keys .”

“What?” Caught off guard, he could only stare at her in confusion .

“Keys. To your rental. Please.” She was still holding out her hand, a thunderous look on her face .

He hesitated but then moved to the counter, picked them up and handed them to her. “The rental agreement with my legal name isn't in the glove compartment .”

She laughed derisively. “I never even thought about that—my bad. No, I'm going back to that beach we went to on the north shore. I saw running trails up there and I need to be alone for a while. Can I take the car and go, please ?”

“By yourself ?”

She rolled her eyes. “Can I take the SUV or not ?”

He made an impatient gesture. “I already handed you the keys. Just take your phone and answer if I call—after what happened at the motel, I don't want to worry about you .”

“Fine.” She grabbed socks and sneakers off the floor of her room, put them on, stuck her ID and phone in an armband designed specifically for runners to hold those things and headed towards the door. On impulse, she turned back to her room, dug around for her earplugs and then walked out the door without looking back .

Watching her go, Hawk felt a moment of discomfiture. Not because of their

fight—he'd known this was coming—but because she was going off alone to a place she wasn't familiar with. He desperately wanted to follow but that would piss her off even more. He'd call Jim and ask if anyone they knew up there who could watch out for her. If she wasn't back in two hours, he'd go after her. For now, he needed to think about damage control. He'd avoided doing anything since Maddie had stumbled into his life, but he probably had an hour or two alone and needed to see what was going on with the team and his career. He loved hockey—it was all he'd ever wanted to do—but didn't know how he'd go back after this. He'd have to apologize for something he hadn't done. He'd have to publicly humiliate himself to protect a teammate he didn't even like .

The bigger problem was that the alternative was equally distasteful. If he ratted the guy out, he wouldn't have a career. This was the final year on his contract with the team, the Ottawa Generals. If he told the truth about what had happened, he'd be clear of one indiscretion but would be guilty of being disloyal, a terrible teammate, and worse. The bond guys shared in the locker room was directly linked to what they did on the ice and they would turn their back on him. Once word got out, no other team would want him either. Chances were the Generals wouldn't re-sign him either way and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it .

M addie ran until her lungs burned, her muscles screamed for mercy and sweat poured off of her like rain. When she finally collapsed on a tree stump that seemed to be calling out to her, she could barely breathe. She'd foolishly left without water and silently cursed her stubbornness. She was just so damn mad at Garrett. Or whatever his name was. Had he lied about that too, even though he'd sworn it was? Replaying their fight in her mind got her mad all over again. What was wrong with him? Could he actually be a murderer or rapist, something that as much as she cared for and believed in him, she couldn't sweep under the rug? It didn't feel that way; her gut told her he wasn't that kind of man. He wasn't capable of that kind of violence. Something unethical, maybe—but he had to have done it for a reason. Not knowing was driving her crazy. Not because she didn't trust him but because she wanted to help. Why wouldn't he let her ?

On impulse, she pulled out her phone. She stared at it a long time before pressing the button for the first number on her speed dial. Jamie .

“Maddie?” His sleepy voice startled her. “You okay ?”

“I'm fine, I just—shit! You worked late at the club last night and I woke you. I'm sorry .”

“What's wrong?” He was whispering, probably so he wouldn't wake up his husband, Viggo .

“I met a guy and...” She blurted out the whole story, including being shot at. “I need

to know who he is and what he did but I don't know how to figure it out .”

“How can I help ?”

“He said when I leave, I'm definitely going to find out about it, so that means he's some kind of celebrity .”

“Or a hockey player, if you mentioned my name .”

She cringed just thinking about it. “He swore to me his real first name is Garrett. Can you dig around online and see if you can find a celebrity or athlete in a recent scandal named Garrett ?”

Jamie hesitated for what seemed like a long time .

“Jamie?”

“I'll try,” he said quietly. “What else can you tell me about him ?”

“He's big, about 6'4”, 225, has a mohawk, lots of tattoos. He's originally from Los Angeles but I don't know where he lives now .”

“Ottawa.” Jamie sounded... sad ?

“What?”

“He lives in Ottawa. His name is Garrett Hawkins—also known as my former friend and teammate, Hawk .”

“Oh my God.” She was floored, her mouth falling open. “He never said a word .”

“Yeah, he wouldn’t. Not with what’s going on .”

“Does it have something to do with you ?”

“Not specifically, but yeah .”

“Jamie? Tell me .”

He sighed. “You’re already falling in love with him, aren’t you ?”

Tears were puddling in her eyes and she swiped at them angrily. “Just tell me !”

“Answer the question .”

“Yes, dammit! And he loves me too. I know it’s stupid, I know it’s been like 20 minutes and we’re acting like romantic idiots, but I knew the minute he threw me down to protect me from those gangbangers. It’s real, it is!” She was crying in earnest now .

“Then you need to talk to him. Find out his side of the story. If I tell you the public version, it’s ugly .”

“So you’re not going to tell me either ?”

“I...” He took a breath. “Hawk—Garrett—was my friend. I’d like to give him the benefit of the doubt because you care for him. No matter which one of us tells you, it’s going to be up to you to decide if you can live with it and if it’s something that will change how you feel. I believe it should come from him .”

“Are you mad at him ?”

“I’m disappointed in him, but not really mad. We all say and do things in the heat of the moment on the ice. My friend Dom hit a guy so hard he broke his neck sliding into the boards—Dom didn’t mean it and he’s spent every day since making sure not to lose his temper on the ice ever again. People make mistakes, but I don’t know what’s in Hawk’s heart. We weren’t that close .”

“You’re my big brother—there’s no one I trust more than you. Please tell me what to do .”

“You’re a grown woman, hon. I can’t, especially in matters of the heart .”

“Tell me what you think I should do, dammit!” she cried in frustration. “I’m all alone with this guy, living some modern-day romantic fairy tale and I’m terrified I’m going to find out he cut someone’s head off and hid it in the locker room .”

“If I thought he was dangerous, or would actually hurt you, I’d already be on my way to Hawaii .”

She was the one who sighed this time. “So you still trust him with me in spite of what he did .”

“I trust him not to physically harm you. I don’t think that’s who he is, and to be honest, I never expected this from him. I was shocked when I heard what he’d done because he was one of the few guys I spent a little time with while I was in Ottawa and he seemed like good people—the kind of guy I’d let my sister date .”

“None of this makes any sense .”

“Go back to the resort and talk to him,” he said gently. “Apparently he hasn’t even made a statement. The league handed down the suspension and he disappeared .”

“You’re not helping .”

“The thing is, if you’re in love with him, it’s too late. No matter what I say, you’re already invested. Your head will listen to reason but your heart won’t. If I tell you to dump him and walk away, you’ll always wonder—and maybe even blame me for ruining this for you. It has to be your decision. And like I said, it surprised me, so maybe something else is going on... A new medication? A death in his family? Something to make him do something he wouldn’t normally do. I’m not making excuses, I just want you to do what you have to do so you’re okay with whatever decision you make. Trust me—walking away from someone when you know that person is part of you, your other half, is the hardest thing you’ll ever do. I don’t wish it on anyone .”

“I love you, Jamie .”

“I love you too, sweetie. Call me, okay? I don’t care what time it is, I need to know you’re okay. I still have his number in my phone—if I don’t hear from you in a couple of hours I’ll call him myself .”

“Don’t worry, he won’t hurt me, not like that. Talk to you later.” She disconnected and sat there a while longer, letting the ocean breeze cool her a little. Jamie knew what Garrett had done and hadn’t told her to go running for cover; that meant something. Now she was going to find out what .

The front door to the guest house was locked and Maddie let herself in while calling to Garrett. There was no response and she looked around in surprise. Everything was very quiet and very clean. Her dress was no longer on the floor in the living room and his swim trunks weren’t on the back of one of the chaise lounges on the patio either. She hurried to his room and it was completely empty. His suitcase and backpack were gone, there were no toiletries in the bathroom and the bed was even made. He left ?!

Her heart slamming in her chest, she ran to her room and there on the bed was an envelope with her name on it. She ripped it open, sinking onto the bed as she read .

Hi beautiful ,

I know you're mad at me and I'm so, so sorry. I never should have let things go so far but I couldn't help it—I am 100% yours and for as long as you still want me, you're 100% mine. My situation is the worst kind of cluster... I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. If I defend myself, I'll lose my career, my salary, everything. If I don't, there's a 50-50 chance this will all blow over, and that's what I'm hanging on to. People get past most scandals professionally, and I have to think about my future. Maybe even OUR future. What good am I if I can't take care of you? You don't want to be with some grease monkey, living paycheck to paycheck. I want more for you. More for my future baby mechanics...if you can ever find it in your heart to forgive me .

You're going to hear ugly things about me and I can't stand to think about how it's going to disappoint you. Please know that not everything is black-and-white. Someday, I hope I'll have the chance to tell you my side of the story .

The room and anything you need at the resort is paid for. I've arranged for a car to take you to the airport the day after tomorrow. The concierge has all the details. If something comes up, ask for Jim Roarke and he'll help you .

Just for the record, last night was a hell of a lot more than romantic nonsense; I have the mark on my shoulder to prove it .

Always,

Garrett

P.S. My real name is Garrett “Hawk” Hawkins, #90, left wing for the Ottawa Generals .

She read it three times, tears splashing down her cheeks. After all this, he'd walked away and she still didn't know what was going on. She angrily ripped the letter into tiny pieces and threw them on the floor, resisting the urge to stomp on them as well. Annoyed she hadn't brought her laptop with her, she blew her nose and tramped out of the house towards the main hotel building. There had to be some sort of business center with a computer she could use. If not, she would ask for Jim and see if he would let her use one somewhere else .

She was gratified to see two computers available for guests to use, but they were both occupied and she paced restlessly, her hands fisted at her sides as she tried to relax. She had her phone but she didn't have a data plan in the U.S. and the roaming charges added up quickly so she was doing her best to wait .

"Madison?" A voice spoke behind her and she turned to see a handsome man in chinos and a polo shirt holding out his hand .

"Yes?" She took it instinctively, shaking it .

"I'm Jim Roarke. Hawk, er, Garrett asked me to make sure you were okay ."

"If I could get on a computer, I'd be able to tell you if I was okay or not," she muttered, wincing as she realized how impolite that was. "I'm sorry—it's been a stressful day already ."

He smiled. "Come with me. You can use a computer in one of the offices so you can

have some privacy as well .”

“Thank you.” She followed him curiously, dying to ask him a million questions and finally blurting out, “Have you known Garrett a long time ?”

“A couple of years. He visits fairly regularly .”

“Is he your friend? Like genuinely your friend ?”

He turned and met her eyes. “ Absolutely .”

“Still?”

He unlocked an office door and allowed her to walk in ahead of him. He turned on a computer and motioned her toward it .

“I won’t be long,” she said, sitting down. “Thank you .”

“You’re welcome. Don’t hesitate to ask for anything you need.” He strode towards the door but paused just before he walked out. “And to answer your question? Yes. Still .”

Maddie met his gaze briefly but then turned back to the screen. This was the moment of truth. She typed in his name followed by “Ottawa Generals.” Links popped up immediately and she swallowed hard, seeing a photo of him in his jersey on the screen. He didn’t have a mohawk in the picture, just a regular haircut, perhaps a little bit in need of a trim. He looked grim, as though he’d already been planning for something bad to happen when he took the profile picture for the team .

Her fingers shook as she clicked on the top link with the headline “Hawkins Gets Five-Game Suspension for Homophobic Slurs.” She had to take a deep breath before

she started to read :

Ottawa, Canada—Ottawa Generals' forward Garrett Hawkins received a 5-game suspension as well as a \$10,000 fine for his homophobic slur during Tuesday's game against Tampa Bay .

The NHL made the announcement early this morning stating it would no longer tolerate this type of behavior from players. Hawkins' only comment to the press was that he regretted the incident. He was not available for comment at the time of publication, but the Generals issued a statement that they do not condone this type of behavior and would ensure it didn't continue ...

There was more, but Maddie didn't care about the NHL's reasoning or Garrett's scoring record last season. She was having a hard time processing what she'd just read. It was unfathomable to her that Garrett was homophobic. Jamie said they'd been friends .

She hit the back button and looked at the list of articles again, searching for video. She found one that explained that Garrett's comment was most likely due to the dirty hit on his teammate Roger Culkin. The video clearly showed a player from Tampa Bay hitting Culkin in the back, shoving him face first into the boards, but the referees and linesmen had all missed it. Culkin was calling out to the nearest linesman when Garrett skated over. Maddie watched carefully—they didn't have audio—but he said something to Culkin and then turned to the linesman who was shaking his head, pointing at the tunnel, indicating that Garrett was out of the game. He'd gotten a game misconduct for unsportsmanlike behavior and the player from Tampa got away with the illegal hit .

It made no sense. Garrett hadn't been involved in the play and had just joined the conversation Culkin was having with the linesman when he was booted out. He'd barely had a second or two to say anything, much less something bad enough to get a

game misconduct and suspension. Maddie had been playing and following hockey since she was practically a baby and knew the nuances of the game almost as well as her brothers. She hit the replay button and watched it again, pausing it when Garrett skated up to Culkin. The linesman's head was turned, still focused on whatever else was happening on the ice. Culkin had been yelling, his face contorted with anger as he rubbed the back of his neck. Garrett skated up barely a second before the linesman whipped his head around, said something back and pointed to the tunnel. From this angle, Garrett's head was turned so she couldn't see his mouth, but it looked odd to her. Had he yelled something while skating over to them? And if that was the case, why hadn't the linesman turned to look at him until he got there ?

She flipped back to another page and tried searching for exactly what he'd said, but the only detail was that he'd compared the linesman to a gay player in the league and had said that the linesman should have been attacked instead .

"No, no, no," she whispered. This wasn't as horrific as she'd imagined, but on a personal level it was even worse .

Now it all made sense. He'd made a homophobic slur and then got involved with not just the sister of a gay hockey player, but specifically the one he'd supposedly referenced in his comment. She closed her eyes, remembering the look on his face every time he'd mentioned what was going on. His comments about his uncertain future. The sadness in his voice when he told her she would hate him. How sure he'd been he would hurt her. Yet what she felt now wasn't hate; the only emotion she could muster up was confusion. The man on the ice, the one who'd said something terrible, wasn't the man she knew .

She spent another twenty minutes perusing the internet, reading everything she could find about both Garrett's career and the suspension. He had no history of this type of behavior, but because he'd named a specific player and referenced Jamie's attack, the NHL had taken a hard line to send a message to all the players that this type of thing

would absolutely not be tolerated. Because he hadn't made any type of formal statement since immediately after the game, there was all kinds of speculation on his future with the Generals and in the league overall .

Her heart broke for him and for herself. She could never be with someone who felt the way he obviously did about the LGBTQ community, but she was still struggling to believe it. It was all there, in articles and video and every blog and sports site online, but until she heard the words with her own ears, she held out the tiniest bit of hope that there had been a mistake .

Not everything is black-and- white .

She'd torn up his letter, but still remembered what it said .

I hope I'll have the chance to tell you my side of the story .

She wanted to hear his side. But he'd run like a typical guy, afraid to face her, to come clean. That was the part of this that angered her the most. Why hadn't he told her? He should have admitted what he did and given his side. He should have trusted her .

Why? A little voice in her head was playing devil's advocate. If he'd said those things about her brother, there was no coming back from that, so telling her would only have ruined what little time they had .

She closed the computer and got to her feet, pulling out her phone. She needed to call Jamie anyway, to reassure him she was okay .

He answered on the first ring. "What happened ?"

"He'd packed up and left when I got back from my run ."

“Coward,” he muttered .

“I don’t get it,” she said, walking through the hallway towards the lobby. “I just can’t picture that kind of thing coming out of his mouth .”

“So you looked it up ?”

“Yeah.”

“To be honest, I feel the same way .”

“Jamie, do you know exactly what he said ?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me .”

“Why?”

“I need to know. When I talk to him, or see him, I have to have all the information .”

Jamie took a deep breath before responding. “He was yelling at Barkonov and said...a cock-sucking bastard like him needed a beatdown like the one Jamie Teller got .”

She inhaled sharply, tightness filling her chest. “I don’t believe it,” she whispered .

“It’s hard for me to listen to as well.” He paused. “What are you going to do? Are you going to stay until Saturday ?”

“I think I am,” she said softly. “He paid for the room, and frankly, swimming in the

ocean is novel for me. Besides, I'm dealing with a lot of emotions right now and being here allows me — ”

“Madison Teller !”

“Maddie, how does your brother feel that you're dating Hawk Hawkins ?”

“Is Hawk still here, Maddie? Is he going to make a statement ?”

Maddie was too shocked to respond as reporters surrounded her, throwing out questions faster than she could process them. She was frozen in place and it wasn't until she heard Jamie yelling through the phone that she realized what was happening .

“Maddie! Do you hear me? Is that the press? Say ‘no comment’! Listen to me, is there security nearby? Maddie !”

“N-no comment.” She wasn't sure anyone heard her because they were still firing questions at her as she tried to get past them .

“Maddie, don't hang up, just keep walking.” Jamie sounded a little frantic .

She wasn't sure where to go and looked around, desperate for an escape .

“Maddie!” Her brother's voice penetrated her haze .

“I'm here,” she whispered, fighting off tears. “I can't... I don't ...”

“I've got the resort on Viggo's phone—they're sending security to get you out of there. Breathe, honey, it's going to be okay .”

She saw hotel security coming and stopped, taking a shaky breath as they pulled her from the melee and guided her into a back hallway. Someone took the phone from her hand and reassured Jamie while someone else handed her a bottle of water and offered her a chair. She sank into it and burst into tears .

Hawk walked through the gate at the airport in Los Angeles with his baseball cap low on his forehead, shades on and head down. He was the worst kind of punk. He'd walked away from the best thing that had ever happened to him—leaving her with nothing but a stupid note. He was a jerk and a coward and he had no idea what he was going to do to make this right. Giving up Culkin wasn't an option, but he owed his fans, his friends, and his career some type of explanation. He hadn't said those horrible words, but everyone thought he had and if he wasn't going to tell the truth about what had happened, he still had to get in front of it. This wasn't going away—he'd realized that when he got online and saw the media storm still raging—but he wasn't giving up hockey without a fight .

He'd just gotten in his rental car when his phone rang. He looked down and froze, his chest constricting painfully as he read the name of the caller: Jamie Teller . He'd forgotten he had Jamie's number in his contacts. It rang a few times and he started to wonder if Maddie was okay. Jamie had probably heard about what he'd allegedly said minutes after he said it; if he was mad about that, he would've called sooner .

Unable to help himself, he put it in the hands-free unit and took the call on speakerphone. "Is Maddie okay ?"

"No, she's not okay," Jamie yelled. "Do you know what's happening over at the resort right now?" He didn't wait for Hawk to respond. "The press somehow saw you two together and cornered her in the lobby! What the hell were you thinking, leaving her there alone? I'm not pissed about what you said about me or even that you broke her heart, but I'm seriously considering getting on a plane to wherever you are and

knocking the shit out of you for what's going on now !”

“I don't... what?” Hawk's brain finally kicked into gear as he realized what Jamie was saying. The press had seen them together and found her at the resort? And he was more than two thousand miles away. He couldn't believe this was happening. Not to her. Not to his sweet, innocent Maddie, who hadn't had anything to do with what he'd gotten himself into .

“You heard me,” Jamie growled. “How could you leave her like that? You couldn't just put her on the plane on Saturday like you were supposed to ?”

“I had no idea they saw us. Dammit!” Hawk slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “Is she okay? Did security take care of it? Where is she ?”

“Physically she's fine. Security got her out of there pretty quick and removed the reporters from the premises. I spoke to the head of security down there and he's putting Maddie in one of their private suites or something, until she can get on a flight out. She should be okay until then, but now everyone knows who she is and where she lives. There's a very real chance they're scanning flights and will be waiting for her when she lands in Toronto .”

“I'm sorry,” Hawk sighed into the phone. “I never meant to involve her... I didn't know who she was until we got to the resort and she told them her name. There weren't any other rooms available and I couldn't let her go back to that piss-ant motel, so I just kept her with me and then I fell—” He stopped abruptly. He was rambling, trying to explain how he'd screwed over the sister of the man he'd supposedly said horrible things about .

“And you fell?” Jamie prompted quietly .

“It doesn't matter. I apologize for what's happening to Maddie. I can call over there,

make sure she's okay ...”

“Not necessary, I've taken care of it .”

Hawk hesitated. What was he supposed to do now ?

“That's it? You've got nothing to say to me?” Jamie sounded pissed and Hawk couldn't blame him .

“I have a lot I'd like to say to you, but it's not going to change anything, so what's the point ?”

“The point? The point is that you've been sleeping with my sister and you left her in the middle of a media circus that she's spectacularly unprepared to handle. After my attack, the press hounded her daily to get information about me. She and my mom had to sneak in and out of the hospital to see me because the press was there day and night. Then this summer it started all over again during the trial of my attackers. She's been having nightmares, she doesn't go out much anymore, she's lost weight—all because of me . And now, not only did you bring that whole nightmare back to light with your incredibly thoughtless comment on the ice, you dragged her right smack into the middle of it .”

“I didn't know she was your sister,” Hawk growled on a ragged breath. “You and I are friends. I would never have done that to you or to her !”

“I thought we were friends,” Jamie corrected mildly. “But we obviously have different definitions of that word .”

“What did she say?” Hawk asked quietly, ignoring Jamie's dig .

“What?”

“I’m sure you told her what I did—I need to know what she said. How angry she was. I need to hear it .”

Jamie huffed out something that sounded like a cross between a laugh and a grunt. “She said she didn’t believe it .”

“What?” Hawk’s stomach clenched so painfully he nearly gasped .

“I said, she didn’t believe it. I think her exact words were something like, ‘I can’t imagine those words coming out of his mouth.’ So my sister, whom you threw to the wolves, is still holding out hope that you’re not the homophobic prick the whole world says you are .”

Hawk couldn’t answer because he was too choked up to breathe, much less talk. “I’m sorry,” he rasped. “Tell her I’m sorry—tell her... I’m still hers .” He disconnected and pulled off the road, onto the shoulder. He put the rented SUV in park and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. She didn’t believe it. His beautiful, sweet sea nymph knew him better than he even knew himself; she’d seen and heard all the evidence and still didn’t believe it. God, he loved her. Three freakin’ days together and he was head over heels gone for a woman who was probably very hurt and confused right now. She didn’t hate him, though. That was the first ray of hope he’d had since the incident and he clung to it. He didn’t have a plan, but he was going to make one .

The nightmare woke Maddie out of a restless sleep and she sat straight up in bed, her heart hammering in her chest, breaking out in a cold sweat. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to drown out the images of her brother’s broken, bloody body, but they were so vivid, the sound of him calling to her for help so real, she knew she’d never go back to sleep .

She slid out of bed and padded over to the window. It was early but the sun would be

coming up soon. She made a cup of coffee and took it back to the window, sinking into the chair beneath it. The small, private suite the resort had moved her to was actually another guest house. It was cozy, pleasant and quiet, close to the security offices, and not available to regular guests. She'd been promised no one would bother her, and they hadn't. She'd spent the rest of yesterday sitting in front of the TV, mindlessly watching shows she'd already seen and didn't care about. Someone had been thoughtful enough to bring her dinner, but she hadn't been able to eat, merely picking at a roll until her stomach churned .

She was hungry now, though, and despite everything happening, she'd come too far to spiral again. She had to eat, had to take care of herself, had to keep moving forward. She'd be okay once she got home, but right now she felt like a prisoner. She couldn't fathom the idea of going back to work in three days, but what choice did she have? She had bills to pay and a life to continue. It wasn't the most exciting life, but it was hers and it could be a lot worse. She'd only miss Garrett for a little while; she'd be okay without him. After all, it had only been three days. Three wonderful, romantic, passionate days where she'd gotten more from him emotionally than she'd gotten from every other guy she'd ever dated put together .

She walked out the front door, coffee in hand, and stared out at the narrow, private street. One of the guys was just getting to work at the security office a few doors down and he waved. Maddie waved back, melancholy washing over her like a wet blanket. She didn't have it in her to run today, but one of the security guys had offered to go with her if she wanted to swim one last time. She was grateful for Jim; he'd done so much to help her get through yesterday. He'd thoughtfully refrained from mentioning Garrett and had kept her surrounded by resort employees who seemed to go out of their way to make her feel better. The people here were nice. If she ever had the money, she would definitely come back to Oahu and this wonderful resort .

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she pulled it out warily. A text from Jamie :

I'm awake if you want to talk. I'll be going out in about an hour. Xoxo

She smiled and texted back :

I'm okay, thanks. I'll call you from the airport tomorrow. Xoxo

Walking back inside, she rinsed her cup in the sink and pulled a carton of yogurt out of the refrigerator. This place was much smaller than the guest house Garrett had rented, but equally well-appointed. They'd moved everything for her, including the yogurt and fruit in the refrigerator, but she had almost no appetite. She was holding it together for now, but she was definitely going to break down soon .

When her phone started to ring, she let out a sigh of annoyance. She glanced down expecting to see Jamie's name but it was an unknown number. She frowned, worried it was the press, but also thinking it might be the local number to the airlines or the travel agent Jamie had used to get her on a different flight. If it turned out to be the press, she could hang up. She reluctantly hit the button to answer it .

hawk debated calling her a hundred times. He needed to, needed to explain what had really happened. Even if they couldn't be together, the idea that she'd believed in him, and was questioning everything she'd heard about him, made him love her that much more. He had to make it right with her, even if it didn't change anything for them. Her faith in him moved him in ways he didn't understand, driving him to make the call .

Her cautious greeting on the other end nearly made him cry with relief. “ Hello ?”

“Hi, baby.” His voice was gruff, unsure whether or not she would hang up .

“You probably shouldn't call me that anymore,” she whispered sadly .

“I know, but I wanted to talk to you, to say I'm sorry. I really am. I just... I needed you to know that if I'd known who you were when we first met, I never would have ...”

“Never would have what? Saved my life? You'd have let me get shot by those gang guys ?”

“Never.” His voice cracked a little. “I'd never let anything happen to you .”

“You left me here alone, dealing with your mess .”

“I'm so sorry. I had no idea we'd been seen. No one ever pays attention to me when

I'm in Hawaii. I don't know why..." His voice trailed off. "Shit. My stepfather ."

"Your stepfather ?"

"It's a long story, but he's been mad ever since I joined the NHL instead of going to college. I told you I went to my parents' house when I first got down there. Instead of support, I got a huge I-told-you-so, telling me what a horrible human being I am and how this never would have happened if I'd gone to college and joined the family business. I walked out and he was still yelling about how ungrateful I am... I guess this was his revenge, telling the press where I was ."

"Why would he do that ?"

"Like I said, he's pissed that he took me under his wing and taught me everything he knows about cars—which is a lot, I have to say—and I thumbed my nose at him to play hockey ."

"You can't play hockey forever... Couldn't you invest in his business and then join him when you retire ?"

He chuckled, loving that even in the middle of this crisis they thought alike. "Yeah, I tried to tell him that but I gave him a check for \$25,000 a couple years ago and he tore it up. Said he'd rather go bankrupt than take money from me ."

"I'm sorry, Garrett ."

"We got off track here—this phone call isn't about me. I wanted to make sure you were okay...clear up a few things ."

"Like?"

“This doesn’t change anything—we still can’t be together—but I couldn’t stand the thought of you believing I was capable of saying something so ugly .”

“I don’t know your side of the story .”

“I know .”

“Well, are you going to tell me ?”

He didn’t say anything, merely waited as she grappled with his silence .

“Is this really too much to ask? After all you’ve put me through, you can’t even be honest with me?” She sounded so sad, it hurt him to listen to the pain in her voice .

“I am,” he whispered, willing her to understand, to know his heart as well as he thought she did. He couldn’t spell it out; she needed to know instinctively that he was innocent .

“Garrett?” She sounded miserable, her voice quavering a little .

“Honey. Listen to what I’m saying. Please .”

She was silent now too, the only sound coming from her strained breathing. “You haven’t said anything... Wait, are you trying to tell me that you actually didn’t... say anything ?”

He closed his eyes, so much emotion coursing through him he wasn’t sure he could speak. Not only did she know his heart, she trusted him. She’d basically been presented with proof of his guilt and she’d still questioned it. She had his back more than even his parents did, and that meant everything to him. How the hell could he live without her now that he’d found something so special with her ?

“I don’t understand! The linesman said he heard you, that’s why you got such a harsh suspension and fine, because it was right in front of him... Garrett, tell me what happened. Please .”

“It wasn’t me who said it .”

“It was that guy next to you—I saw the video—what’s his name? Cucumber ?!”

He snorted. “Culkin. Roger Culkin .”

“Then why are you taking the blame?” she demanded. “Why are you letting this moron get off scot-free while you’re in trouble ?”

He blew out a breath. “It’s really complicated. The dynamic in the locker room is based on trust. If I give him up, no one will ever trust me. You don’t do that to a teammate. You just—ask your brother. Ask him about the locker room bond. And tell him I’m sorry, that I’d never, ever say something so hateful. I have nothing but respect for him and Viggo, and I hope he understands why I have to keep quiet .”

“ Garrett! ” Her voice broke as fresh tears were unleashed in a torrent of sobs that had her crying so hard she couldn’t speak .

“Aw, baby, don’t...” He spoke gently, his voice as filled with pain as hers. “Please don’t cry. I just needed you to know the truth—I had to make sure you knew I’m not that kind of man, that I care about your brother, that he really was my friend... Please don’t cry .”

“I need you,” she sobbed. “I need you here—I can’t do this by myself again, facing the press, hounding me at work, my apartment... I can’t! I had another nightmare last night and I’m so nauseous I can’t eat and I. NEED. YOU!” By the end she was shouting through her tears, hiccupping .

“Shh.” He dropped his voice a couple of octaves, hoping it soothed her frayed nerves.
“You’re okay. I’m going to take care of it and I’ll make sure the press leaves you alone. I can’t come back to Hawaii right now, but — ”

“You have to. Dammit, I said I need you !”

“Honey...”

“Are you mine, Garrett ?”

“Always.”

“Am I yours ?”

“You know you are .”

“Is there a really obnoxious bruise on your right shoulder ?”

He couldn’t help it; he chuckled. “Yeah. There is .”

“Then get your ass on a plane and come back to me .”

He sighed heavily, opening a new tab on his laptop and pulling up the travel site he used .

“What are you doing?” she demanded when he hadn’t answered her .

“I’m online looking for a flight .”

“Oh.” Her voice became a soft whisper .

“You have to think about this, babe... I can be on a flight first thing tomorrow morning, but I don’t know what this is going to change. I can weather the media with you, I can defend you, I can protect you—but in the end, I’m can’t throw Culkin under the bus. Publicly, I’m still going to be the guy who said that horrible stuff about your brother. The media is going to have a field day with you for dating me—not me, but you . The terrible, selfish slut of a sister who doesn’t even care about her poor brother, who almost died. I’m telling you, that’s where it’s going to go if you stay with me .”

“The only opinion that matters to me is Jamie’s, and once I tell him about Roger Cucumber, or whatever the hell his name is—none of this will matter .”

“It will matter to me. I don’t want people saying that kind of thing about the woman I love .”

She caught her breath. “Did you just say you love me ?”

“Aw, come on—all that romantic nonsense was a little too intense to be simple pillow talk, don’t you think ?”

She sniffled. “I hope so .”

“Listen, I have a call coming up with my agent, and if I’m coming back to Hawaii tomorrow, I have a bunch of stuff to do. Can you lay low until I get there, okay ?”

“I will .”

“Think about what I said, Maddie. You’re going to wind up getting hurt— again —if you choose me .”

“You don’t know me as well as I know you, I guess .”

He paused in confusion. “What does that mean? Maddie ?”

She hesitated. “You’re really coming back, right? Do you promise ?”

“I promise .”

“I’ll see you soon then .”

He hung up wondering what she'd meant. He did know her, just as she knew him. He knew she wanted them to be together, but he also knew what that would mean for her. People would always wonder what kind of woman would date a man who'd said what everyone thought he had about her brother? He had to help her get through this, though. He owed her that much after getting her involved in this. The fact that she'd had a nightmare last night—after not having them for a while—proved she needed him. He just didn't know if he would make it worse by standing at her side. He didn't care what people thought of him, but he really didn't want people to think badly of her because of him .

The problem now was that those two things were intertwined. He had to protect her, but loving her—wanting to be with her—meant clearing his name. The only way to do that meant he'd probably be out of a job at the end of the season. That left him with no way to support the woman he'd just promised he would take care of .

He owned condos in both L.A. and Ottawa, and if he sold them he'd have more than enough for them to buy a house somewhere less expensive than L.A. There would probably be enough left over for him to open a repair shop where he could work on cars all day, which was something he loved. It wasn't hockey, but he'd always enjoyed taking apart an engine and diddling with tools. The scary part was not knowing how long it would be before he started making enough money to support them. It took time to build a clientele and gain repeat customers. He didn't even know where to start in that department, and he wasn't going to begin a life with Maddie without any kind of financial security. She could, and probably would, get a job at a law firm wherever they settled and they'd be okay; he just wanted so much more for

her. He hadn't been as good with his money as he could have been, but he did own two pieces of real estate outright and had zero debt. He also had six more months of paychecks coming at his current salary, which was substantial, so there were options .

A million things were running through his mind as he thought about his conversation with his agent. He was dreading looking his coach in the eye and apologizing for something he hadn't done, but his agent had said he wouldn't have a choice if he wanted to stay on the team. No matter what he did he was going to end up looking bad. Either way, his career was going to be in shambles and the choice was really no longer about hockey because there were always choices, he realized, even if they weren't good ones .

Giving up the game he loved more than almost anything in the world meant he could have the one thing he couldn't have unless he gave it up: Maddie. And he wanted her more than absolutely anything. He would be lucky to get three or four more years out of his body for hockey; he would have his beautiful sea nymph for the rest of his life. At least he hoped so .

He didn't need to think about things much longer. He called his agent back, asking him to cancel the upcoming appointment with his coach and to tell everyone he would be making a public statement about the incident either tonight or sometime tomorrow. Then he called Jim and explained what he needed. Next, he called the airlines and changed his flight from tomorrow morning to two hours from now. Finally, he made the most important call of all, and said a silent prayer that his luck didn't run out .

M addie was in the middle of the most glorious massage. Jamie had called and told her to splurge and put it on his credit card. She'd demurred initially but he'd insisted and she'd finally acquiesced, figuring an afternoon at a spa couldn't hurt. Her feet were kind of beat up from running on the sand and a pedicure sounded heavenly. It had been ages since she'd treated herself to a manicure too, so she wouldn't turn her

nose up at one of those either. The massage hit the spot, especially since they'd worked out hard for the three days before her vacation imploded .

She lay on the table and closed her eyes, letting the stress of the last twenty-four hours drain away. After she'd hung up with Garrett, she'd called Jamie back and told him what she'd found out. Ironically, he hadn't been all that surprised and when she'd said "Cucumber," he'd known exactly who she was talking about. He had let out a string of expletives and when he was done asked her if she was certain she loved or at least was falling in love with Garrett, if three days together was enough time to know what she wanted. She'd laughed and said she'd known almost immediately. Then her big brother had told her he loved her and that everything was going to be okay .

She had one day to kill before she saw Garrett and they headed to Toronto, where an inevitable disaster was awaiting them. With Garrett at her side, she'd be okay, but she hated it for him. She didn't care what anyone said about her. She was nobody; fifteen minutes from now they'd forget all about her and would move on to a bigger, juicier scandal. Garrett's career was on the line, though, and after Jamie had explained how difficult his teammates could make things for him if they felt he'd betrayed one of them, she understood what a no-win situation he was in. Somehow, she had to make him see that the tattoo on her backside was more than just ink—it was her mantra and it was how she'd gotten through the summer .

She'd gotten it with Jamie the day he'd gone to start the first tattoo that would cover up the scars on his back from what those animals had done to him. It was her only tattoo, but it had been important to her to get it at the same time he got his. He had the same one in the same place, as did their brother Dwight and their parents, though their parents had them placed on their shoulders. It was something they lived by as a family now, and if she had anything to say about it, Garrett was going to be one of them .

“ Nèi zài de lì liàng, ” she whispered to herself as the masseuse kneaded the tension out of her. She’d have to dig deep for hers and she would do whatever it took for Garrett to find his as well .

Hawk arrived back at the resort a little after three and practically flew through the lobby and into the executive offices of the Blue Dolphin, where Jim assured him his special event coordinator would be waiting with all the information he needed. An attractive blonde looked up with a smile and got to her feet. “Mr. Hawkins? I’m Wendy Roarke, Jim’s wife .”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook her hand. “Thanks for everything you’ve done—is there anything else I need to do ?”

She smiled. “You have to propose .”

He took a deep breath. “Yeah. That .”

“She’s at the back of the property in the private suite we put her in. I’ll have someone drive you out there in a golf cart.” She reached for the phone but glanced back at him. “Good luck .”

“I’ll need it,” he muttered .

“Assuming she says yes, you’ll need to text me immediately. We have a limo standing by but the judge I spoke to about issuing the license won’t be there much longer and it’s Friday, so you’ll need to hurry .”

He nodded. “Roger that .”

Maddie was back in the chair by the window, wondering how she was going to get through the rest of the day when a soft knock on the door startled her. She got up to

answer it, fully expecting to see another resort employee. Instead, Garrett was standing there with a huge bouquet of white roses and a lopsided smile on his face. He was wearing pressed dark gray slacks and a dark teal button-down shirt that brought out the steel color of his eyes, looking about as handsome as she'd ever seen him and she was momentarily glad she'd spent all day at the spa. Then she was in his arms, eyes closed, breathing in the faint scent of his aftershave .

“You came!” she whispered, her face buried in his chest .

“I promised, didn't I?” he asked softly .

She didn't move, clinging to him so tightly he had to gently pry her arms free. “Can I come in?” he asked .

“Yes.” She cradled the flowers and took a whiff, smiling. “They're beautiful. Thank you .”

“Not as beautiful as the woman looking at me .”

She flushed. “Well, I spent the day at the spa .”

“You were beautiful before that, but you look extra nice now.” He sat on the couch and held out his arms to her .

She practically dropped the flowers on the counter and ran to him, nestling back in his arms as though he'd never left .

“We don't have a lot of time.” He glanced at his phone .

She met his gaze in confusion. “For what? I don't want to go anywhere, Garrett. Not until we leave for the airport. I think — ”

He stopped her with his mouth, his lips claiming hers as sweetly and lovingly as he knew how. He paused to rub his nose against hers, one hand cupping her cheek as he met her eyes. His lips hovered just millimeters from hers and their eyes locked the way they always did when they were this close .

“Less than a week ago I met a spitfire of a woman who was trying to chase gangbangers away from her rental car. I saved her life that morning, but five days later I’m sitting here with her in my arms trying to find the words to ask her the most important question I’ve ever asked anyone.” He pushed a lock of curled hair behind her ear and ran his thumb across her cheekbone. “I realize this is the craziest thing ever...and people are going to say we’ve lost our minds, but I don’t care .”

“Garrett?” She was looking at him strangely, her eyes big and wide, like they always were when she was scared or confused .

“We don’t have time for me to turn this into a fancy, romantic ordeal—I don’t even have a ring—but you have about five minutes to decide if you want to give forever a try. With a greasy mechanic who plays a little hockey .”

Hawk wouldn't have thought it possible, but her eyes were even wider now, staring at him in complete shock, her mouth hanging open a little .

"I inadvertently dragged you into the shitstorm of my life but now that I have you, I'll do anything to keep you. I can't imagine going back to Ottawa without you at my side and I refuse to let you go back to Toronto without me. I'm asking you to take a huge risk and marry me. Today . We have to get to the courthouse before they close. There's no waiting period but we have to get the license now because they're not open on the weekend ."

She was gaping at him now. "Just like that ?"

"I called Jamie this morning and told him everything. I told him I'd do whatever he wanted me to do in order to have his blessing. If he wanted me to out Culkin, I would, even knowing it will probably end my career. If he wanted me to publicly profess my sincerest apologies for losing my temper and saying something homophobic, to save my career so I'd have the money to take care of you, I'd do that too. I left it totally up to him ."

"What did he say?" she whispered, searching his face .

"He said it was up to you . He said he believed me and we never had to talk about it again as long as I promised to love you and protect you from the backlash ."

"I don't care about backlash," she whispered, a tear leaking out. "I only want you to

be okay .”

“Don’t cry.” He gently kissed her again. “I’m going to be fine, just tell me what you want me to do .”

She didn’t even hesitate. “I want the world to know the kind of man you are—I don’t want that jerk to get away with what he said. I don’t care about money. You can be a mechanic and I’ll be a secretary; we’ll be okay. Wasn’t it you who told me we needed teachers and secretaries and mechanics—or something like that ?”

“Is that a yes ?”

She could only nod. “How could I possibly say no to you ?”

“You marked me, baby—what else can either of us do ?”

She pressed her lips to his, letting them linger for just a second before slowly sliding off his lap, her eyes never leaving his. “You look awesome, but I can’t get married in shorts and a tank top .”

He laughed and got to his feet. “We have to be out the door in three minutes if we’re going to make it before the office closes. There’s a limo waiting to take us ...”

“Garrett, I know you already said it, but this is crazy !”

“Do you love me ?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” she muttered. “But yes, I do .”

“Go change, baby. We can talk on the way there. You have the whole drive to change your mind .”

Exactly fifty-five minutes later they walked out of the courthouse as husband and wife. Garrett hung on to her hand tightly, grateful that the chauffeur and limousine were waiting right in front, because she seemed more nervous now than before they'd done it. They slid into the back seat and Garrett pulled her close to him, his lips pressed against her temple .

“Are you okay ?”

“Just a little shell-shocked,” she admitted .

“Me too, but I'm going to make you happy, Maddie. I'll call my lawyer and have him contact the Players' Association so I can make an official statement about what really happened on the ice that night .”

“What's going to happen between you and your teammates?” she asked softly. “How awful is it going to be ?”

“Honestly? I don't know.” He looked away. “It can't get too ugly because Coach will put a stop to it, but you can bet we won't be invited to many barbeques .”

She shrugged. “That's okay. We have each other and we'll have my family, which is pretty awesome .”

He smiled. “I'm looking forward to that part, but it's going to be a long season .”

She bit her lip. “Would you rather not do this? I hate the idea of Cucumber getting away with it, but if it's going to be that hard on you, then I want what's best for you .”

“Nah. I'm not afraid of being an outcast. There will still be guys—like your brother-in-law and a few other guys around the league who'll respect me for it. I'm more

concerned about what our plan will be when the season, and my paychecks, are over .”

She frowned. “I can get a job in Ottawa .”

“I don’t think I can work in Canada if I’m cut from the team,” he said gently. “I’m American .”

“But we’re married now... that should take care of it, no ?”

“It’s really too early to think about that. The good news is, we have options. I’m making over four million this year, so if we’re careful, we could put a good amount away since I don’t have any debt .”

“But I do,” she whispered. “About three thousand on a credit card and my car isn’t paid for .”

He chuckled. “Baby, I can pay off your credit card with what’s in my checking account right now. That’s nothing. Don’t even think about it. And we’ll keep making monthly payments on your car until we figure out what’s next .”

“Okay.”

“Depending on what happens with the team, we have a while before we have to make decisions. There’s still the off-chance that the team will keep me and get rid of Culkin... After what happened to Jamie, since he was on the team at the time of the attack, they really don’t want anything to do with homophobia. I might get signed again anyway .”

“And if not ?”

“Then I might get picked up elsewhere. I could probably play in Sweden or Russia but — ”

“Russia?!” She made a face. “Can that be a last resort ?”

He laughed. “Definitely, but if I don’t get any bites, I can also tell my agent I’m willing to sign a one-year contract with anyone that’ll give me a chance for the league minimum. There’s a better than 50% chance someone will jump on that. Before this incident, I was worth nearly ten times that .”

“What’s the league minimum?” she asked .

“A respectable 575,000 .”

Her mouth fell open. “ Garrett !”

“What?”

“That’s a lot of money. I make forty. Thousand. Four-Zero. Like less than a tenth of that. That kind of money would be fantastic .”

He squeezed her hand. “But if none of those pan out, I can sell my place in L.A. for a lot more than I thought. At least 750,000. That would buy us a nice house almost anywhere else and leave enough for me to open a repair shop of my own. If business is slow, you might have to work for a year to keep us afloat but — ”

She shook her head and pressed her lips to his. “Didn’t we just get married ?”

“Yeah.”

“Could we not talk about work or money or any of that crap yet ?”

“What do you want to talk about?” he asked, pulling her onto his lap .

“I was thinking about that romantic nonsense that goes on at night... You said it didn’t fly in the light of day, but I’m about to prove you wrong .”

“We’re in a limo...” he protested, though the erection growing against her backside didn’t seem at all concerned about their current location .

She reached over and pressed the intercom button. “ Driver ?”

“Yes, ma’am ?”

“Can you please drive until we let you know to stop ?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled .

“And can you close the divider please ?”

“Yes, ma’am !”

The partition closed and Maddie reached down to pull off her little black dress. It was the same one she'd worn on their last night together because she didn't have anything else, but with the way Garrett was looking at her, he didn't care about the dress .

“Honey, I don't have a condom with me .”

She rolled her eyes. “I'm on the pill and we're married .”

He hesitated. “I'm clean and I'm sure you are too, but don't you think we'd be better off going and getting checked out first, together? So there's never a question of trust ?”

“Don't you trust me ?”

“Of course .”

“Then shut up and make love to your wife .”

A slow, mischievous grin spread across his face. “You have no idea how badly I want to do that.” He slid his hands back to cup the cheeks of her ass, holding them as perfectly as he'd held her breasts. He lifted her just enough to give him room to free his throbbing hard-on and then set her back down again .

“How often do you go braless?” he whispered, pressing his face between the sweet

round mounds and licking his way up her chest .

“Uh, not that often...” she breathed, distracted by his touch, how good it felt and how much more she wanted from him .

“I think it should be a rule that you never wear one when we’re alone,” he said, blowing on one berry-like nipple and watching it harden. “God, I’ve been dreaming about having these in my mouth again.” He sucked it between his lips and glanced up to meet her gaze as she parted her own, unable to hide her urgency. She brought her bare torso up against his chest, his mouth working her breasts with delicate strokes and gentle sucking that made her cry out .

“Garrett... please !”

“Not yet, baby.” He sat back a little and unbuttoned his shirt. “I need to be skin-to-skin, mouth-to-mouth, heart-to-heart. When we’re close enough for me to feel the blood running through your veins, that’s when you’ll have me .”

At the moment their bodies came into contact, every inch of her chest and abdomen pressed against his, electric pleasure shot through him with so much force he had to find her mouth for fear he would explode with desire. It was sharp, but so distinctly related to the way it felt when the touch was hers, he was partially paralyzed with the need to feel everything at once. He couldn’t control the way his tongue sought hers and the purr that escaped her throat almost undid him. Her mouth was simply perfect, just as he remembered it, but even better because now it was his. Completely, legally, one hundred percent his. Just as she’d promised .

“Please, please, please,” she whispered, moaning against his mouth. “Later, tonight, we’ll go slow... Right now I need all of you, every inch, deep inside me... Garrett .”

He reached between her legs and couldn’t describe the pleasure it brought him to find

the lace barrier provided by her thong completely soaked. She was so wet, so ready, but he needed her to beg just a little longer. Every time she said please he got so hard it hurt, but this kind of pain only made him want more. Nudging aside the strip of fabric, he used his finger to circle the throbbing little nub, watching her face as she got more and more flushed, closer to the edge. She was so beautiful when she got off, he wanted to see her do it over and over and over, but right now he would settle for just once. He felt her struggling not to let go, to wait for him to be inside her and he slowed down a little, keeping the pressure light as he caressed her. He knew exactly when he found her pleasure spot because she whimpered, fingers digging into his shoulders .

“Please, oh God, Garrett, please !”

He swiveled his hips and tilted his pelvis, positioning himself right where she wanted him. “All yours, baby.” He rested his hands on her beautifully curved backside and she looked at him through hooded eyes, her lashes longer than ever as she glanced down to where their bodies were about to join. She lifted her eyes back to his as she sank down, slowly, deliciously, pulling her lower lip between her teeth as she took him, letting him fill her, until there was no space between them anywhere. Not where she was rocking back and forth, not where their lips fused together, and definitely not where their heartbeats were hammering in almost perfect unison .

He loved the way she made love, passionately, hungrily, giving him her all. He felt every twitch, every pulse, every time she tightened around him...and he didn't think he'd ever get enough .

He was a little rougher than he meant to be as he guided their rhythm, holding her firmly by the hips. Her lips parted now, sultry and pouty and thoroughly kissed. She was panting as he thrust up and in, deeper and harder, until tiny mewls of pleasure escaped. She was everything men fantasized about when it came to sex with a beautiful woman, but so much more because he loved her. Making love and fucking

were all wrapped in one beautiful, brown-eyed package that made him harder and hornier than anyone ever had .

He couldn't help himself, couldn't stop the tight coiling in his balls that made everything more acute, more intense and, holy shit, pure delirium overtook him when she lost control. His climax hit just as hers was beginning to fade and he kept her with him, bringing her back up and over the edge multiple times, until she was too limp to move, to breathe, to do anything but hold on. She'd given him absolutely everything, leaving herself raw and emotionally barren, and the tiny shudder that ripped through her in the aftermath showed him a plethora of vulnerabilities .

"I-I love you, Garrett," she managed to whisper, collapsing against him, as emotionally exposed as anyone he'd ever been intimate with .

"I love you too, baby." He kept his arms around her, holding her tight, watching myriad emotions flit across her sweet features. He recognized passion, excitement and a twinge of apprehension as well. She'd had five whole days to fall in love with him and become completely immersed in his crazy life, but this was only the second time he'd made love to her, connected to her more than just mentally. She was undoubtedly having a few second thoughts and maybe a lot of insecurity, but he wasn't going to let her do that to herself—or to them. She'd put her faith in him and he wasn't going to risk losing it now that she was truly his .

"I've got you, Maddie." He stroked her hair and whispered soft endearments in her ear, until he felt the nervous tension begin to fade. "I feel you pulling away, but I'm not going anywhere ."

"Why am I so scared?" she whispered, burying her face in his shoulder .

"Because you just entrusted your soul to someone else ."

“Then why aren’t you scared?” She raised her head to look at him. “Didn’t you do the same thing ?”

He nodded slowly. “Honey, I gave you my soul the night you told me I was yours. I was terrified —why do you think I ran away from you the next morning ?”

Her mouth formed an “O” as understanding pricked at her consciousness and everything appeared to click into place .

“But you’re not going anywhere, Mrs. Hawkins. You’re going to sit right here in my arms until you’re not afraid anymore .”

She closed her eyes and snuggled closer. “ Promise ?”

“Promise.”

M addie woke up completely wrapped up in her husband. Sun was peeking through the shades and she saw the sheets and blankets in a tangled mess at the foot of the bed, one of the lamps overturned on the nightstand, three empty wine bottles on the dresser and one of Garrett's ties still wrapped around the headboard. Her cheeks grew warm as she thought about everything they'd done last night—how many times he'd made love to her, in positions she'd never even imagined, again and again until she no longer remembered to be afraid, to second-guess the leap of faith she'd taken, or to doubt the momentous decision they'd made just eighteen hours ago .

She'd just unwound her legs from his and was sliding to the ground when firm fingers grasped her ankle. "I told you yesterday, you're not going anywhere," he growled sleepily .

She leaned over to kiss his lips and run her fingers through his hair. "I need to use the bathroom and find food—I never got any dinner last night ."

He opened one eye as he pulled her astride him, his hands gripping her waist. "I thought I fed you pretty well last night ."

She giggled. "Different kind of satisfaction ."

"Were you satisfied ?"

She rolled her eyes playfully. "Yes, Hawk, I was very satisfied ."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't think I like you calling me Hawk ."

"You liked it last night..." She wiggled her eyebrows .

"We might have to talk about that ."

She laughed. "Fine, but I really have to go to the bathroom ."

He released her and she disappeared into the next room. When she came out, he was in the small kitchen making coffee and opening a basket she didn't remember seeing last night .

"Where did that come from?" she asked, moving up behind him to see what was in it .

"Someone delivered it early this morning ."

"They came in while we were..." Her voice squeaked a little as it faded .

"They came in while we were sleeping," he chuckled, kissing the tip of her nose. "It's almost eleven, sweetheart ."

"Oh my god! We're going to miss our flight!" She started heading towards the bedroom but Garrett reached out to haul her back against him .

"Honey, we're not going anywhere today. This is our honeymoon, and it's going to be a short one because no matter what happens, I have to be at practice in Ottawa on Tuesday ."

Her face paled a little and she blinked up at him. "But, I mean, what about me? Where will I be ?"

He'd been hoping he'd loved the indecision out of her last night, but apparently a few remnants still remained. That was partially his fault, because they'd done everything so quickly and still didn't have a detailed plan, but he'd take care of that today .

“Relax.” He pulled her closer to him. She reached up to wrap her arms around his neck and he pressed light kisses along her collarbone. “I thought you weren't scared anymore ?”

“I wasn't, but maybe I still am... a little .”

“How about we have some breakfast and talk? We can make all the decisions we absolutely have to make and make notes about the ones coming up or things we need to think about. As far as where you'll be on Tuesday, that's entirely up to you .”

“What do you mean ?”

“Well, you're supposed to go back to work on Monday, but as far as I'm concerned, you should quit and come to Ottawa with me. I want you with me now, tomorrow, next week... forever .”

“I, um, I can't just not go back to my job,” she said slowly. “We're in the middle of two really big cases and I'd need to get someone up to speed. And I can't walk out on Monique... She can't pay the rent on her own. We have to give thirty days' notice to the leasing company and — ”

He put two fingers over her lips. “Coffee first .”

She smiled, kissing his fingers. “ Deal .”

They ate breakfast, enjoying the variety of muffins, breads and Danish pastries that came in the basket sent by the Roarkes—there had been a note at the

bottom—followed by a shower that turned into another round of passionate, sexy lovemaking. Then they planned to spend the rest of the afternoon on the couch, talking about everything that needed to be settled sooner rather than later .

“Oh, no!” she cried, suddenly sitting up .

“What’s wrong?” He looked at her in confusion .

“I have to tell my family .”

“I guess we could drive out to Kingston on the way to Ottawa,” he said. “I’d like to be with you when you tell them.” They’d already decided she would take a few more days off so she could go to Ottawa with him on Monday when they arrived, and be there for his first day back on the ice. She’d drive back to Toronto on Wednesday and work the rest of the week. He’d be leaving on a road trip on Friday morning anyway, so she wouldn’t see him until he returned the following weekend .

That was as far as they’d gotten when someone knocked on the door. Garrett got up to answer it and was surprised to see Jim standing there holding a garment bag .

“What’s this?” Garrett asked, frowning .

“It’s a gift from my wife and I,” he responded. “You guys got married yesterday and we never saw you, so we planned a special private dinner celebration for you tonight on the beach. She figured Maddie wouldn’t have anything special to wear so she picked this up for her, as well as something for you. We think you’ll like them, but if they don’t work, just let us know .”

“Hey, thanks.” Garrett shook his hand .

“I’ll send someone with a golf cart at 6:00 so Maddie doesn’t have to walk in heels .”

Garrett shut the door and turned to his wife with a grin. “Looks like we’re having a romantic post-wedding dinner .”

“I have to wear clothes?” she pouted .

He chuckled. “Just for a little while. I’ll have you naked again before you know it. Hell, you can get naked again now...” He reached for the belt of her robe .

Promptly at six a golf cart pulled up to the house and Garrett and Maddie walked out hand in hand. She wore a sleeveless white sundress that showed off her shapely shoulders and had a swirling asymmetrical skirt that showed off her long, tan legs. High-heeled white sandals adorned her feet and she’d tucked one of the white roses he’d brought her yesterday behind her left ear, securing it with a small clip .

Garrett looked a little more casual in beige linen pants and a short-sleeved white button-down shirt that was untucked. He had boat shoes on his feet with no socks and she’d talked him into leaving his hair natural, so instead of slicked back into his normal mohawk it fell to one side over his right eyebrow. He looked like a modern-day pirate and she giggled at the thought as they rode toward the resort’s private beach. He nudged her, squeezing her hand as they pulled to a stop just before the beach. The sun was already low in the sky, almost gone, and they could see a tent set up with twinkling white lights .

“Hey, guys.” Wendy approached them with a smile. “We have a little surprise for you... This was actually set up by your—” Her voice was drowned out by Maddie’s shriek of delight .

“Jamie!” She kicked off her heels and ran across the little bridge leading to the sand, throwing herself in his arms .

“Hi, honey.” Her older brother hugged her tightly, lifting her off the ground and

spinning her around .

“What are you doing here ?!”

“Hawk and I talked night before last. Are you okay? Are you happy ?”

“Yes.” Her eyes danced as she glanced back at her husband .

“You can’t get married without a party, so I called up here yesterday and planned a little something for the two of you. I hope you don’t mind ?”

She shook her head, feeling a swell of emotion. “Thank you. I’m so happy you’re here. Did Viggo come ?”

“Of course.” He turned and whistled, his burly red-headed husband coming out of the tent and joining them .

“Hi!” Maddie ran to hug him and he scooped her up and spun her around as well .

“Hello, love.” He bent to kiss her cheek .

“What’s with all the spinning of my wife?” Garrett approached Viggo, holding out his hand. “Garrett Hawkins. I don’t think we’ve crossed paths off the ice .”

Viggo shook his hand. “I don’t think so either .”

“Honey, this is my brother-in-law, Viggo, and you know Jamie already.” Maddie took her husband’s arm .

“Welcome to the family.” Jamie met Garrett’s eyes meaningfully .

“Can I come out now?” Dwight called out .

“ Dwight?! ” Maddie shrieked again, running back into the sand to greet her other brother .

“You’ve made her day,” Garrett smiled, watching her .

“Wait till she sees everyone else,” Jamie chuckled .

A moment later more laughter came from the tent as Maddie was reunited with her family .

“So...what did you and Maddie decide?” Jamie asked Hawk carefully, hands in his pockets as he faced his ex- teammate .

Hawk sighed but didn’t look away. “She wants me to come clean .”

Jamie nodded. “How do you feel about that ?”

“No one in the NHL will want me in their locker room,” he said finally, looking away. “But she’s worth it. She knows the money could dry up at the end of the season if I do this and she doesn’t care .”

“Maddie’s not a gold- digger .”

“I know .”

“Sometimes things have a way of working out,” Viggo said, smiling as he and Jamie headed back toward the tent .

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 8:04 am

It took nearly an hour to get through introductions to Maddie's family, her friend Monique, and a handful of friends Jamie had thoughtfully flown out. Then they had a magnificent dinner while Garrett answered what felt like a thousand questions from everyone about what they were going to do, where they were going to live, what was going to happen next. He didn't mind—it was kind of fun—but it was a little overwhelming too. He'd been putting on a strong front because she needed him to, but part of him was just as scared as she was. He didn't believe they'd made a mistake, but they definitely had a rough road ahead of them. He wasn't naive enough to believe love could conquer everything, even though it came pretty close, but there would be tough days ahead. If and when his NHL career ended, he was going to lose a part of himself too, and he hoped Maddie would understand he'd need time to mourn .

Staring at her across the room where she was now sitting and laughing with Monique and her mother, he couldn't help but smile; he loved seeing her happy. She'd been right about her family too—they'd accepted him with open arms. No one had asked any uncomfortable questions except the usual silliness about when they were having kids, and the homophobic slur incident never came up. He wondered if that had been Jamie's doing or if they were giving him a break because technically this was their wedding .

“Excuse me.” Jamie stood up clinking a spoon on his wine glass. “I have a toast for the happy couple .”

A waiter carried in a small wedding cake and another walked around refilling wine and champagne glasses .

“A few days ago, I got a call from my sister. She sounded a little weird and blurted out that she needed to borrow money. To buy a bike . So she could train for a triathlon.” He paused as several people turned to stare at Maddie. “Now, in case you didn’t know, Maddie and I are close. Mom and Dad could barely wait six weeks after I was born to get knocked up again and Maddie came along about ten and a half months after me !”

“Jamie!” His mother threw a napkin at him, but she was laughing .

“So Maddie and I are almost twins—we look alike, we’re built alike, and we’re both really athletic. Somewhere along the way... I became the big hockey star and Maddie went to college. I was so wrapped up in my career that I kind of forgot that one of the reasons I have such an accurate shot is because she and I used to practice that. Together . Before school. After school. On weekends .

“When I started getting attention from scouts, she’d take a bus to wherever I was playing and take notes so I knew what to work on. Maddie would get out on the ice and show me what I was doing wrong to help me become the player I was— am .” He coughed slightly at the correction; the doctors still didn’t know if he would play again after all his injuries. “But I never thought to ask what I could help her with...and I’m sorry, Maddie.” He met his sister’s gaze. “That was wrong. I love you and think you’re amazing. Even though you’re married now, I’m still buying you that triathlon bike and I will run, swim and bike with you every moment I possibly can either until the race or when I’m back on the ice. Deal ?”

She nodded tearfully, holding up her glass .

“And then she called me again.” He paused to look at Hawk this time. “To tell me this crazy story about gangbangers shooting at her and some guy with a mohawk saving her life...and I thought, who the hell is this guy and what the hell is going on over there in freakin’ Honolulu ?!”

Everyone laughed .

“You were my teammate, Hawk, and my friend. Now you’re my brother. I’m not going to bother telling you to take care of her because you will. And in return, I have a wedding present for you.” He nodded at someone off to the side and one wall of the tent turned into a projector screen. A video came on showing a room full of reporters and an empty podium. Suddenly Roger Culkin entered the room with what looked like his lawyer. He walked to the podium and cleared his throat before he began to speak .

“My name is Roger Culkin and I’m here today to set the record straight about what happened on Thursday, the seventeenth of October, in Tampa. During the game, I was hit from behind, pushed face first into the boards by Evgeni Barkonov. Whether it was done intentionally I don’t know, but at the time I was mad. I lost my temper and said something I never should have said—something racist, homophobic and mean-spirited. The words came out in a fit of rage. I didn’t even realize I’d done it until the linesman sent my teammate Garrett Hawkins off the ice. At the time, I was only thinking about the game and myself. It didn’t occur to me that Hawk was taking the fall for me, that he would be fined by the league, suspended five games and have his reputation slung through the mud. I didn’t think about any of that until I saw some stuff online the other day. I wasn’t sure what to do, who to tell, so I didn’t say anything. Then I heard through the grapevine that his girlfriend was being hounded by the press and she was also the sister of one of our former teammates... based on the history between us, I knew I couldn’t stay quiet anymore .

“I’m here tonight to clear the air. I’m responsible for what was said—not Hawk. He didn’t even skate into the fray until I was done running my mouth. I’m asking the league to find other tapes, other angles, so they can verify that it wasn’t him. I’m taking full responsibility for what happened and I want to apologize to Hawk, his girlfriend, Madison, and to her brother, Jamie Teller. I don’t know what came over me, but it’s not what’s in my heart or what I meant ...”

Jamie made a motion and someone turned the video off. He turned to Hawk and smiled. “Welcome to the family, bro .”

Maddie was crying again, running to throw her arms around her brother and Hawk got up to join her. He waited until she’d stopped crying and then wrapped his arms around both her and his new brother-in-law .

“How the hell did you manage that?” he whispered in his ear .

Jamie just winked .

They drank and danced late into the night. Hawk had never been so in tune with a woman or so easily accepted into a family. Holding his wife in his arms as he drank and joked with her two brothers and brother-in-law was as easy as anything he’d ever done and he truly didn’t want this night to end, for these people to leave. Though they were family now, it was a special evening with special people, and nights with this kind of magic didn’t happen that often .

When Maddie moved off to sit and chat with her parents, he joined Jamie and Viggo at the bar .

“You appear to have made my sister happy,” Jamie said, grinning .

“That’s my plan,” he said, getting a beer from the bartender .

“We eloped too,” Viggo said, “but you guys wasted no time. This happened quickly. Do you actually have a plan for when you get home ?”

“We’ve got a plan for the next two weeks,” Hawk admitted. “After that, we’ll have to reassess. If it was up to me, she’d quit her job and move to Ottawa immediately, but she’s got to tie up her life in Toronto first, and I’ll be on the road quite a bit coming up .”

“Anything I can do to help,” Jamie offered. “I’m not playing right now, so if you need anything at all, just let me know .”

“I appreciate that. I can’t think of anything offhand, but if I do, we’ll ask. I want this to be as easy as possible for her and I hope... well, I hope she’s accepted into the fold back in Ottawa .”

“It’s not going to be easy for her,” Jamie said. “I never really got to know any of the wives and girlfriends when I was there, so it’s going to be up to you to help her get used to life as a hockey wife .”

“I’ll do whatever I can.” He cleared his throat. “And Jamie, seriously, I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you for what you did for me, how you got Culkin to admit the truth .”

“I didn’t do it for you.” Jamie looked at him with the same big brown eyes as his sister. “I did it for her . You get one chance with this, with us . If you hurt her, you won’t get another .”

“That’s irrelevant,” Hawk said firmly. “There’s nothing on this earth that would make me hurt her .”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” Jamie draped an arm across his shoulder. “Except how many shots we’re going to do before you head off to your wedding night .”

“No bachelor party, so we’ll have to do this the hard way,” Viggo laughed, motioning to the bartender .

“Bring it,” Hawk grinned. “Pretty sure I can drink my new brothers-in-law under the table .”

“He doesn’t know me,” Viggo chortled, shaking his head .

Much later, as Garrett and Maddie walked to their new suite on the top floor of the main building of the resort, she squeezed his hand. A breeze was blowing, bathing them in salty air and the scent of the ocean. Waves crashed lightly on the shore in the background, a romantic backdrop to one of the best nights of her life. This entire night had been perfect and she was a little sad to see it end. However, there was one thing still missing .

“I have a bone to pick with you, Mr. Hawkins.” She glanced up at him .

He looked down. “Already? Have we even been married a day yet ?”

“Yup. It’s been thirty-three hours, forty-one minutes and...” She glanced at her phone. “Aw, crap, this doesn’t tell me how many seconds .”

He laughed. “What’s up, baby ?”

She held out her left hand and wiggled her fingers. “I still do not have a wedding ring. What’s up with that ?”

“We haven’t had a whole lot of time, you know ?”

“Am I gonna get one ?”

“Absolutely. As soon as we move you out of Toronto, move you to Ottawa, the team isn’t on a road trip, and I have a day off .”

She wrinkled her nose. “So...next summer ?”

“Sooner than that. I promise.” He leaned over to kiss her. “Much sooner .”

“Garrett?”

“Yeah, babe ?”

She stopped walking and turned to face him. “Are we crazy ?”

“Absolutely. Crazy in love... Crazy about each other... What else do we need ?”

“Nothing,” she replied after a moment, looking deep into his eyes. “It’s kind of funny, but I can’t think of a single thing I need other than you .”

“Still scared ?”

She shook her head. “No. You ?”

“Nope. I got my girl, my career and a wonderful new family—that’s more than I deserve .”

“I’m really glad you saved me a week ago .”

“I’m really glad you married me yesterday.” He brought his fingers to her cheeks.
“Are you ready for forever ?”

“With you? I’m ready for anything .”

If you enjoyed TROPICAL INFERNO, please consider leaving a review at the retailer of your choice—it means the world to me .