







# Until Presley (Happily Ever Alpha World)

**Author:** *E.M. Shue*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Ham Martinez never expected a traffic confrontation to change his life.

When a sexy little blonde cuts him off and blows him a kiss, Ham assumes it's just a playful invitation. But

the moment he looks into her eyes, everything shifts. She's his. He doesn't care that her sole focus is her

doctoral studies. Ham is determined to prove that he's her future and the one she can trust with her heart.

Presley Blanchard has one goal. Earn her doctorate and finally gain her father's approval.

She also wants to avoid her cruel stepsister, who finds great joy in bullying her. But when Presley

accidentally cuts off a black lifted Jeep, she apologizes with a pucker of her lips, thinking that's the end of

it. She never expects the driver to chase after her, or for him to be a tall, sexy, alpha male who won't

leave her alone. He promises to make her his priority, something she's craved for a very long time. Giving

Ham a chance and losing her heart wasn't in her plans, but now she can't imagine a life without him.

When Presley catches the attention of a deadly enemy, Ham will stop at nothing to protect her. As the

danger surrounding Presley grows, their love will be tested by the deadly waters threatening to tear them

apart. Ham and Presley will have to fight through the darkness to dive into their BOOM, no matter what

stands in their way.

# Page 1

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## CHAPTER

## ONE

## PRESLEY

As I roll over in bed and stretch, a smile comes to my face.

The sun is just starting to crest along the beach and shine through my bedroom window.

My team has an early launch today so we can reach our research location.

Days that I get to be in the water are the best days.

It's a good thing I have a job where I can dive so much.

I check my cell phone and see a text from my stepmom asking if I'll be back in Miami before the fall semester starts.

I quickly reply, letting her know I won't.

My research will keep me here until at least October.

She responds to say she just wanted to let my stepsister, Clara, know about my plans.

I scoff and set my phone down. My father, stepmother, and little brother live in

Australia as my dad conducts his research.

Clara and I each have our own lives and places in Miami.

I have my own condo, while she stays at the townhouse our parents own.

“Hey, Siri, start Mom’s song.”

“Playing Mom’s song,” the thick Irish brogue echoes from the speaker and then the music starts.

The smile instantly returns to my face as I make my way to the bathroom to get ready. Katrina and the Waves sing about walking on sunshine, and I sing along, loud and carefree. My voice isn’t the best, but I don’t care.

A tanned, relaxed version of me stares back from the mirror.

My blue-green eyes, the color of the ocean, shine as I continue to smile and sing.

I love being on my own. I like my life here in Key West. I work at a research facility affiliated with the University of Miami, where I’m getting ready to start my second-to-last semester for my doctorate.

The song repeats, and my toothbrush becomes a microphone.

Today is my mom’s birthday, and this is how I remember her, listening to her favorite song as much as I can.

I set the toothbrush down and wash my face before applying heavy-duty sunblock.

With as much time as I spend on the water, I have to take care of my skin.

Plus, with my cool skin tone, I burn easily if I'm not careful.

I pull my long, layered blond hair into a low ponytail and twist it into a bun.

My bangs hang over my eyes, and I realize it's time to get them trimmed soon.

I dance back into the bedroom and slip on my bikini bottoms and top.

Next, I throw on a pair of shredded denim shorts that barely cover my ass cheeks and a green tank top.

The half-shirt with lace straps pairs perfectly with my green-and-white tropical bikini.

Ready, I grab my purse—something fun I bought for myself—and my backpack, then head to the fridge for a protein shake.

As I lock up the house, the song continues to play in my mind.

Mom used to play it on repeat, and we'd dance to it together around our little apartment.

She always said everyone needed a dance day to relieve the stress of life.

I try to do that now, but with how busy I am, it only seems to happen on her birthday.

After she died, I had a hard time listening to it, but not anymore. Now, it brings a smile to my face.

I slide into my pearl-colored Beetle, a graduation gift from my dad to celebrate my master's degree, and crank the song again as I wait for the top to come down.

Glancing at the clock, I realize I'll be a little earlier than the professor for our meeting at the marina, but I don't mind.

I can take my time and enjoy the sunrise over the bridges as I head into Old Key West.

Living in Key West on my own has been the best thing for me.

I love my family and miss my little brother, but I feel good, just like the song says.

My father has always been more focused on his research than on me, but at least I got to grow up traveling the world.

After my mother died, we visited so many exotic places.

You'd think things would have changed after he met my stepmother, but they didn't.

She's a research scientist too. She studies underwater plants, while my father focuses on whales and protecting them.

It was a no-brainer for me to follow in his footsteps and study marine biology, though I'm fascinated by sharks.

My little brother is showing signs of following the same path.

My stepsister, Clara, is the only one who doesn't like to be in the water.

She's more concerned about what to wear to the beach.

She still hasn't decided what she wants to focus on, and our parents are getting upset.

She's been in college for eight years and keeps changing her major.

I think she just wants to keep partying.

I have a year and a half left until I earn my doctorate.

I want to push myself to finish sooner, but my advisor suggested I take my time and work with the research team.

He said I'll learn more and enjoy myself in the process.

I've worked hard for this. All the late nights of studying.

Spring breaks missed to stay at the top of my class.

Summers spent in classes instead of lounging by the pool like my stepsister.

All of it will finally pay off. Soon, I'll be able to lead my own research teams, and I'm hoping to land a position at one of the shark conservation centers.

As I cross the Boca Chica Channel Bridge, I gaze out over the water, the sun shining down around me.

I'm so lost in the sight of the crystal-blue water that the sound of a horn honking jolts me back to reality.

I glance up and realize I've drifted into the next lane.

I throw my hand up, waving my fingers in apology.

A lifted black Jeep pulls up alongside me.



The windows are so darkly tinted I can't see inside, but I can feel the driver's gaze on me.

I turn and blow a kiss before speeding up to put some distance between us.

I switch the song, and the beat of a French tune pulses through the speakers, pulling me back into my own world.

The highway leads into the heart of Key West, skirting the city center.

I follow along, my gaze shifting to the rearview mirror when I come to a stop at a light.

All I see is a black grill bearing down on me.

I worry I might have pissed off the driver when I cut them off.

When the light turns green, I take off, forgetting the laid-back, calm vibe of island life.

I speed through the next light as it turns yellow and watch in my mirror as the Jeep comes to a stop.

I relax and replay the French song as I pass the marina lined with charter fishing boats. A guy waves at me, and I wave back as I continue down the now two-lane streets. I reach the public parking lot closest to the marina and park my car. I wait and watch as my roof closes.

I turn off the car and open the door, stepping out in my green Converse. As I bend back into the car to grab my bags, I feel someone standing there. I jerk upright so fast I hit my head on the roof and let out a cry. My hand goes to the top of my head as a

deep chuckle rumbles above me.

I glance down to see a pair of black Converse.

My eyes slowly drift up his body. His deeply tanned legs tell me he spends a lot of time in the sun, but he also has a dark complexion.

Tattoos spiral around his muscles in black ink.

When I reach his tan denim shorts, I pause on his package for a moment before moving my gaze higher.

He's wearing a white T-shirt that stretches tightly over his massive chest. I lick my lips and pull my top lip between my teeth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see his hand come toward me. I don't flinch when his soft, long fingers touch my chin. He lifts my gaze to meet his, and I swallow hard. I should be scared, but for some reason I'm not. I'm usually awkward around hot guys, but this man makes me feel calm.

A thick, trimmed beard and mustache frame his face, and his full lips are tipped up in a smile, straight white teeth flashing at me. His dark hair is wavy and long on top, trimmed close on the sides. A curl falls over his forehead as the wind from the ocean blows past us.

"Little girl, you don't blow kisses to strangers." His voice is deep and sexy. I shiver, and before I can react, he wraps a hand around my waist and pulls me toward him. "How old are you?" he asks.

I shake my head as I try to step back. The thought that he's the driver of the Jeep flashes through my mind, and I realize I'm in a vulnerable position.

He maneuvers us so that my back is against my car and he's close enough to press me into it if he wanted. But still, I don't panic. Instead, I'm curious what his beard would feel like against my skin if he kissed me.

I lick my lips, wishing I could see his eyes, but he's wearing shiny Aviator sunglasses.

I need to regain control before I make a fool of myself.

I know I'm pretty, but I'm not a stunning beauty like my stepsister.

He's not interested in me. He can't be. Can he?

The thought spins in my head as I argue with myself.

"Parles-tu francais?" he asks in French, and I realize my phone is playing the song again.

"Oui ," I respond.

"Tell me, little girl, do you blow kisses to everyone you cut off?" he asks in perfect French, and I can't help it as my lips tip up in a smile.

"No. Your Jeep was intimidating, and I thought it would be fun," I reply honestly.

"Can I take you up on the offer?" Hearing him speak to me in that language is a turn-on. His deep voice, combined with the lilting tone, is sexy.

"Um... I'm Presley," I say in English. I move my hand from his waist, where I didn't realize I was holding on to him, and extend it between us to shake.

“Ham.” He smiles as he slips his sunglasses up and takes my hand in his.

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He's a foot taller than my five-foot height.

His hand practically engulfs mine with long, tanned fingers wrapping around my pale skin.

I look up into his hazel-blue-green eyes, flecked with gold and brown, like an island in the middle of an ocean.

I push my sunglasses onto my head and try to pull my hand from his, but he won't let go.

"It was nice meeting you, Ham. I'm sorry I drifted into your lane. I was admiring the sunrise. But I have to go now."

"Where are you headed, Lee?" he asks, shortening my name. Normally, it would upset me, but my heart thumps in my chest. I actually like it.

I've been given awful nicknames through the years, mostly by my stepsister and her friends, but I push those thoughts aside.

I don't want to focus on that right now.

I have this sexy man talking to me. My head spins as he looks at me.

It's a look of pure desire and claiming.

His eyes are like a caress as they trail from my feet to the top of my head.

“I have to go,” I repeat as my alarm goes off, alerting me that I have fifteen minutes to reach the boat.

I squeeze out from between him and my car, then reach back inside to grab my bags. He laughs when he sees my purse, and I glance down at it.

“What? I like sharks,” I explain, and he steps back as I close the door and set the alarm. “See you around,” I tell him before taking off.

I walk briskly away but sense him just behind me.

Ham

When the little sprite blew me a kiss after almost hitting my Jeep, I had to find out who she was.

I’ve lived in the Keys for a couple of years and haven’t seen her before.

Now that I’ve gotten close to her, I know she would have caught my attention regardless of how we met.

A part of me knows she is vital. Something I remember Walker saying when he met his wife, Hanna.

“Presley,” I say her name in my head as I follow behind her, admiring her shapely little ass as she continues moving toward the marina where I’m meeting the guys.

The thought of my best friends makes me shake my head.

I teased Walker about his behavior when he first met Hanna, but now, I can’t say anything.

I'm determined to learn more about this little sprite.

Her toned, muscular legs are inked with tattoos in bold, bright colors. There's a shark on her calf, another shark curves around her upper thigh, and an underwater scene sprawls across her opposite leg. More tattoos snake down her arms, each one a work of art.

She's legal, but just how legal? I don't need to be attracted to someone barely of age. At thirty-five, I'm starting to feel my years, wanting what Walker has—a wife, a family. But I haven't felt that spark with anyone until this petite little thing blew me a kiss.

My best friend Walker and I met while I was still in the Navy.

He had this wild idea for us to go private, diving professionally.

After I left the service, I spent years diving all over the world with him and Otto, our other best friend.

We made more money doing treasure hunts, repairs, and underwater searches than I ever imagined.

But when Walker met his wife, Hanna, he didn't want to travel as much, and then they got pregnant.

Settling down here in the Keys was the perfect opportunity for all three of us.

We opened a dive school, teaching others what we know and taking on local jobs.

It also gave me a chance to settle my family somewhere I could be there for them.

Lately, though, I've been lonely. And now this little sprite has me thinking all kinds of thoughts I've never had before.

She turns and looks over her shoulder at me.

Her sunglasses shield those incredible eyes.

I've dived in almost every body of water you can think of, but only once, while diving off the coast of India, did I see that same color in the ocean.

They're startlingly beautiful. Her almost round face and wide, doe-like eyes pull me in.

I almost kissed her next to her little car.

"Are you following me?" she asks, her voice low and velvety. It's the kind of voice I want to hear whispering dirty things in my ear as I take her. Or as she screams my name.

"Nope, just enjoying the view." I chuckle when she blushes.

She turns back around and weaves between the businesses.

I swear she's heading toward the marina too.

I watch as she attracts the attention of other guys, and I stare them down until they turn away.

I can't blame them. Her shorts barely cover her ass, and I can see the seafoam green bikini bottoms through the holes in the front.



She hikes up her heavy backpack and slips her shark purse over her shoulder. That's it. I'm done letting her run from me. I pick up my pace. Her little legs are almost jogging to keep ahead of me. I reach for her backpack, and she pulls away.

"Sprite, let me help you. Are you heading to the marina?"

"How did you know?" She looks around at our surroundings. She doesn't completely fear me, but she's being cautious. I like that.

"I'm heading that way too. With all the shark tats and bag, I figured you must be a biologist, so that's where you're headed."

"Yes, I am."

"Can I help you?" I ask, reaching for her bag. "My mami would throw her slippers at me if she knew I wasn't being a gentleman."

She smiles, and her whole face lights up.

I take her backpack, and we continue toward the marina.

Most of the restaurants are closed, but tourists are milling around, heading to their charters.

As we climb onto the boardwalk, she veers toward the private boat area, and I realize we're heading to the same place.

But then she stops and turns to face me.

"Thank you. Tell your mami you were a gentleman, but this is where I leave you. Only owners, guests, and staff are allowed beyond this point." She points to a sign.

“Can I get your number?” I ask before letting her go.

“I have”—she looks out at the water before turning back to me—“to go. Can I have my bag?” She reaches for it, and I hand it over. She takes it, and I reach around her to unfasten the chain from the gate. She nods. “It was nice meeting you.”

She walks through, thinking she’s getting away from me.

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### CHAPTER

### TWO

### PRESLEY

I sense Ham still behind me and turn to see him inside the gate, latching the chain. I ignore him and continue down the path. I'm not security. I'm not going to stop him.

Ahead on the dock, near the slip where our research boat is moored, are two large men.

Dr. Miller mentioned he'd be bringing in a couple of professional divers today to help with the exploration.

These must be them. They're supposed to be the best in the business.

We recently found a large concentration of bull sharks and want to tag a few to understand why they're here now, where they're coming from, and where they're headed.

As I get closer, I'm struck by the size of the two men. They are just as big as Ham.

I glance back and see Ham is still following me. I pull the side of my lip between my teeth and turn forward again, careful not to walk off the edge. The men nod their heads at me, and I nod back. One of them smiles wide and starts to move toward me.

“Otto, don’t even think about it,” Ham says from behind me.

I pause and look between them all. I feel so small next to the other two. One of them is even taller than Ham. All of them are seriously hot, but only Ham does things to my body.

“I’m sorry. He followed me out here. He’s a friend.” I add the last part, hoping he doesn’t get into trouble.

Ham pulls me into his side. “Not a friend. Otto, back off,” Ham addresses the smiling guy, and I’m startled.

“Do you all know each other?”

“Presley, these are my buddies, Walker and Otto.” He turns me to look at him. “This is my stop. Where are you heading to, sprite?”

“Presley,” Dr. Miller calls. “Do you know these gentlemen?” He’s been a friend of my father’s for many years, so I know he’s pulling the protective uncle card on me.

“Kind of,” I tell him.

“You on this boat, sprite?” Ham asks me, and I look up at him.

I tip my head as far back as I can, and he looks down at me. His hand at my waist tightens, and then his other hand goes to my cheek.

“Yeah,” I stutter, breathless, lost in Ham just like before.

“Then let’s get you on board.” He lifts me up in his arms and steps onto the back of the boat.

“Put me down, Ham, now,” I order, but he just chuckles.

The other researchers are watching us. I turn to see Margo taking in Ham’s muscles, and I’m struck by a jolt of jealousy.

What the hell? I just met him. How the heck am I jealous already?

But Margo usually gets any guy she sets her sights on.

My chest constricts in pain at the thought of him falling for her.

She’s one of Clara’s friends. I couldn’t be with him if he goes for her. I just won’t do that.

He sets me down, and I hear Otto laughing. I turn to see Walker’s lips tipped up in a grin. “Told you, man.” Walker chuckles, and Otto laughs even harder.

I don’t get it and think they are making fun of me.

“I’ll have you know I’m qualified to be here. I’m not a child. I’ve worked hard. I’ve probably dived in more locations than you have and been on more research trips, so don’t make fun of me.” I poke Otto in the chest with each word. Ham pulls me back against him.

“Sprite, he’s laughing at me. But I have to say, I doubt you’ve dived as much as we have, or in some of the locations.”

“Oh really? My father has been towing me along on all his research trips since I was born. We lived in France for years while he studied the whales of the Mediterranean. I’ve had my scuba certification since I was ten.”

“Impressive,” Otto says. “But, little girl, we’ve been deep diving since before you were probably born.”

“I doubt that. I’m twenty-four.” My hand goes to my hip, and I stomp my foot.

“Presley, let’s prepare to launch.” Dr. Miller’s voice distracts me, and I turn and nod.

None of the other researchers or aides help him like I do, even though that’s exactly what Margo and her Barbie doll friend—whose name I can’t remember—are supposed to be here for.

Instead, they act like this is a party boat and don’t help.

I move to the back of the boat and climb over to the dive platform, where I jump back to the dock. I start removing the lines and glance over when I hear a thump. It’s Ham, coming to help me. I move toward the spring line next.

“Get back on board. I’ll get it,” Ham orders. I huff when he tips his head down, daring me to defy him.

I jump back on, and Walker helps me as Ham moves with the spring line, while Dr. Miller maneuvers the boat with the captain watching. Ham leaps for the boat, landing like a jungle cat on the deck. I hear one of the girls sigh, and again, that pang of jealousy hits me.

But I know how it is. I’m the nerdy girl no one is really attracted to.

Ham

I watch as my little sprite tries to avoid me. She is helping the professor while two of the other girls sit on the sofa, staring at Walker, Otto, and me like we’re on the lunch

menu.

At one point, Walker holds up his hand and flashes his wedding band, then they zero in on Otto and me.

Otto is okay with it. He's fucked every girl he could when we used to travel.

Now that we've settled in the Keys, you'd think he would slow down, but he hasn't.

He's out clubbing every chance he gets, including last night.

I went along like I always do, to keep an eye on him, but I don't mingle or hang out with the women there.

I look over to see Presley standing with her hip kicked out as she studies the laptop.

Her sunglasses are off, and she's talking to the professor.

I'm impressed by how long she's been diving, but even more so by how focused she is.

She knows exactly what she's talking about as she converses with the other scientists on board.

"Oh, it's so hot today," one of the girls says and lifts her T-shirt, revealing a tiny, flowered bikini top that barely covers her breasts.

I turn back to Presley and catch her watching me. Hurt flashes in her eyes before she quickly pulls down her sunglasses. She moves to the bow and sits down, pretending to check the scuba equipment. I know she isn't because Walker is already doing that.

I follow her.

“So you’ve been diving for years?” I hear Walker ask her.

“Yep. My dad is a marine biologist too. He studies whales and their migration patterns.”

“So you’re following in his footsteps?” Walker asks.

“Sort of. He and my stepmom are both in the field. She researches plant life. I’ve always been fascinated with sharks, though. That’s why I’m going for my doctorate.”

“You’re going for your doctorate?” I ask as I move over to sit beside her.

She looks between me and Walker before she answers. “I have a year and a half left, unless I push through next summer again like I did this year. Then I’ll only have a year.”

“Dang, so then we can call you Dr. Presley?” I joke. Her lips tip up slightly.

“That’s Dr. Blanchard to you.” She jokes back.

“I like that. Where’s your favorite place to dive?” Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Walker move to the back of the boat, leaving us alone.

“I love diving in Australia. Shark Bay is fun, but I love going near the reef and just exploring. Hawaii is beautiful too.”

“Been to all those too. Although we didn’t go into Shark Bay. We were outside it, at a wreck site.”



“You explore wreckage? Like a treasure hunter?”

She leans back, and I do too. She doesn't flinch away when I lay my arm behind her on the edge. Just a small flex, and I'll have her close to me again and in my arms. Something I want desperately.

I chuckle and shake my head. “Sometimes we would help with that, but a lot of the time, we'd also be called in to do repairs while the ships were still in the water.”

“Are you an underwater welder?”

“I can be, if necessary, but we help with support too. What do you see yourself doing after you get your doctorate?”

“I want to settle here in the Keys and help with the research on why there is such a concentration of attacks here. I want to educate people on protecting themselves before they decide to start hunting the sharks.”

I nod. “What do your parents think of you doing such a dangerous study?”

She shakes her head as she looks out over the water, and we continue to cut through it toward the dive site.

“My dad doesn't really care. My stepmom worries, but she knows I love it and won't stop me.”

“And your mom?” I ask, noticing the look of pain flash across her eyes.

“She died,” she says. I'm about to comfort her when we are interrupted.

“Hey, Elvis, the prof wants you,” one of the girls says, and I watch as she licks her

lips as she takes me in.

Presley stiffens next to me, and then moves to stand. I get to my feet and help her up. She shakes off my hand and squeezes past me. Her tight body brushing against mine makes my cock jump. She disappears inside, and I watch her the whole time.

“Elvis isn’t into guys. We think she’s asexual.” The girl laughs.

“Elvis?” I look back at her.

The girl moves closer to me. She’s in her bikini top now, just like the other girl.

“Well, yeah, that’s what her sister calls her.”

Anger hits me instantly, and I want to defend my girl. “Her name is Presley. Call her that. And just so you know”—I look her up and down—“I’m not interested.” Shaking my head, I push past her and go look for my sprite.

## Page 4

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### CHAPTER

### THREE

### PRESLEY

I enjoyed talking to Ham, but now that he's with Margo, I know he won't be around me again. Especially after she called me Elvis. At first, I was proud of the nickname when Clara gave it to me, but now I hate it. It's not nice when they say it.

Dr. Miller asked me to help at the back of the boat, getting the cage ready with another researcher and their aide. I strip off my shorts and tank top so I don't get them wet, then help George get the cage in the water.

"Sprite." A growl comes from behind me, and I'm lifted off the dive platform and over the back wall of the boat.

I'm handed to Walker, who sets me down, and Ham strips off his shirt and tosses it at me.

His massive, ripped chest is on full display, covered in tattoos.

A light dusting of chest hair trails down his abdomen, and the happy trail that dips into his shorts has me swallowing hard.

He smirks before turning to help George slowly lower the cage into the water.

My eyes linger on the tattoos across his back.

I push away from Walker and climb over the wall again to hand George some equipment he needs.

“Walker,” Ham says, and the equipment is taken from my hands and handed over.

“Hey, I can do that.” I start to argue, but then Ham’s large arms wrap around me from behind.

His cool hands, wet from the water, touch my heated abdomen, and I flinch.

My stomach twitches. I push back, and something long and hard presses into my back.

I know exactly what it is, and I tip my head back to look up at him.

“Sprite, I know you can do it. But you have us to do it, so let us. Also, please put your clothes back on,” he says softly in my ear.

Hurt and humiliation hit me fast, and tears sting my eyes.

He’s not hard for me. I’m such an idiot.

I glance over at Margo, who’s giving me a death stare.

I start to pull away, but Ham holds me fast and turns us to face the water.

I hear Walker talking, but I can’t focus on his words.

All I can think about is wishing I were invisible.

“Presley,” Ham says as his lips touch my forehead. “I—” He pauses as I struggle.

“Don’t be nice to me just because I blew you a kiss. Go take Margo up on her offer.”

“Who the fuck is Margo?”

“Her.” I try to point, but my hands are trapped in his.

“I don’t want her. I want you.”

I can’t stop the bitter laugh that escapes me. “Sure, you do. I’ve fallen for this joke before. Sorry to disappoint you, but Margo and Clara won that one too.”

“I don’t know who the fuck Clara is, and I already told Margo she’s not my type.”

“Please, this is my job. Don’t mess with me here,” I beg. I liked him, and it hurts so much that he’s just like all the other guys.

“I’ll give you some space, but we are happening.” He pulls away.

I turn to see Dr. Miller watching me, and I quickly look away to swipe a tear from my eye.

I refocus on what we’re here to do. We’re here to observe the sharks’ behavior, especially since there’s also a large population of dolphins in the area.

We haven’t seen many dolphins with scars from shark attacks, but we’ve heard it’s happened.

After the research in Australia, we wanted to keep a close eye on our pods and groups.

I slip into my full wet suit while Ham works around me, getting into his. He helps me lift my tank and watches as I test my regulator and walk back to the cage. I have my camera with me and tap my mic to make sure it's working.

When I sit on the edge of the platform, I sense Ham there, and it makes my chest constrict again. Why did he have to be just like all the rest?

I slip into the cage and focus on the world I enjoy being a part of. It's the one place where I'm truly at peace.

I expect Walker or Otto to enter the cage with me, but when I turn, I find Ham's eyes focusing on me through his mask. I look away, focusing on the calming blue water, and then I see a shadow approaching from below.

"Big one coming up from the bottom," I say into my comms.

"Another from the starboard side," Ham says, and I turn toward where he's pointing.

"Female." I clarify.

Ham hands me the spear gun with the tag and tracking device attached. I lean out, and as she passes, I push it out quickly, the tag securing to her fin. She thrashes, and I'm pulled back into the cage.

"Thank you," I tell him, looking up at him as the cage rocks. We both look down as a large male strikes the bottom at our feet. "Big male. He's at least seven."

"The female was about ten," Ham says, and I nod.

"She wasn't to full maximum weight. Dr. Miller, want me to tag the male?"

“No, let’s just do the females.” His reply crackles in my ear. “See if you can get a bigger one.”

“Yes, sir.”

The male skirts off, and we watch a bit longer as more females move into the area. When a larger female, close to thirteen feet, swims by, I reach out... and miss her. She circles back, and this time my aim is better. Again, Ham pulls me in to keep her thrashing tail from hitting me.

Another ten minutes pass when I notice a hammerhead moving through the water toward us, but it’s the tiger shark I’m focused on.

“Dr. Miller, we have a tiger coming in.”

“I see that,” he responds.

“I don’t have any more tags.”

“Not today. Come on up.”

We wait as they use the winch to move the cage back up to the boat.

When it’s time to get out, I feel Ham’s hands at my waist, helping to lift me out.

I sit on the platform to get some fresh air.

Ham emerges from the water and sits next to me, doing the same.

Walker helps me up, and my body is exhausted, even though the dive was only thirty minutes long.

After Ham gets his tank off, he helps me with mine, and I can't stop myself from smiling at him.

"Thank you," I say softly. When I turn to walk away, he stops me.

"I want to take you out for dinner," he says in his gruff voice, and I turn away.

I want to, but I must make school my focus. My doctorate is all I've ever wanted. Ever since I can remember, this has been my goal.

I move to the cabin and talk with the other researchers. We all give our insight and discuss what we found today. Next week, when we return to retrieve the satellite trackers from the sharks we tagged a month ago, it will mark the first major part of our research.

The captain and professor navigate us through the waters to the area where the dolphins are so we can track a couple of them.

This time, another doctoral student handles the tagging.

Leah wants to specialize in dolphins, but she and I work together on several projects.

She's been one of my closest friends for a long time.

I don't have many friends, so I cherish the few I do have.

My dearest best friend lives in New York and works as a firefighter on a specialty rescue squad in Brooklyn.

I'm by Leah's side as she tags the last dolphin, and we high-five before returning to the surface. We watch as several of the other researchers get into the water to dive for



a bit. Walker stays on the boat with Ham and the rest of us. I notice that Otto and Margo are getting along now.

I also notice that no matter where I go on the boat, Ham isn't far behind. He stays close. When everyone who was swimming decides to come back aboard, he helps but still moves to stay by my side.

"That man has it bad." Leah laughs, and I look up at her.

"What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "Presley, tell me you aren't so far into your books that you don't realize that man wants you."

I look her up and down. She's blond, just like me, but tall like a model.

"He hasn't looked at me once or any of the other girls. He only has eyes for you," she says.

"But he told me to get dressed earlier," I reply, stating the obvious as he helps Otto remove his tank.

"Girl, it's because George was looking you up and down." She scoffs, shaking her head again.

I'm about to argue when I turn and see Ham moving back to my side. Leah moves off, and I start to move but decide not to run from Ham yet. I know I will eventually. Men like him are never interested in me for long. I'm too smart for them.

"So, tell me about your family," I say, trying to make conversation.

“My mom lives in a pool house on my property. I have a younger brother too, who lives nearby.” He doesn’t share more, and I wonder if he’s not close to them. I understand that. I’m close to my brother but not my stepsister.

“I have a brother too.” I smile. Talking about Griff is one of my favorite subjects, other than sharks. “Griff is ten and loves to spend time with his big sister. He’s coming to hang out with me in a couple of months for a break from the parents.”

“You like kids?” he asks, and I turn to face him.

I curl up on the sofa, pulling my legs between us. “I love kids. I don’t think I’ll have any, though.” I lower my eyes, hiding the pain in them.

“Why?” His long fingers slide against my chin, lifting my gaze to meet his.

I feel exposed and vulnerable when he looks at me. It’s a new sensation I’ve never experienced with a man before.

I wave my hand around, gesturing at the life I’m building.

“I have so much to do here. I need to get my doctorate, then join a research team. I don’t want to raise a child the way I was.

I love my father, but he wasn’t always around.

He loved my mother so much, but she was the only thing that kept his attention—other than whales.”

“That sucks. But you could get on with a facility locally and not have to travel, right?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I thought I heard you bragging about how good you are.” He chuckles, and I throw my head back and laugh.

“Maybe I speak before I think sometimes. I have a couple of friends who are zoologists, and I’ve asked them about getting on with a conservation aquarium. But honestly...” I glance out over the water. “I’d miss this. I love being in the ocean.”

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“Me too.” He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and we look out across the water as the day stretches into late afternoon. I know that when we return to the docks, this will end. It has to end if I’m going to stick to my plan.

Ham

Otto helps secure the boat when we return to the docks. Presley talks to the professor and the other researchers but is avoiding me. I can almost feel the distance growing between us, and I know she’s slipping away. I’m not going to let that happen. If I have to follow her, I will.

Otto heads off with Margo and her friend, who I find out are Dr. Miller’s assistants, though they don’t seem to do much.

Leah, I learn, is Presley’s friend and also working toward her doctorate.

She and Presley talk for a moment before they both turn to look at me as I help Walker take care of the tanks and gather our equipment.

“Ready?” I ask Presley as soon as we have everything loaded onto our cart. She glances at Dr. Miller before grabbing her bags and walking toward me.

“We can walk to our cars together.” She laughs, and I smile at her. I take her hand so she won’t try to run from me.

When Hanna pulls up to the circle loading zone in Walker’s truck, I notice her watching me, and I nod at her.

“Hey, Hanna, how are the boys?”

“Napping right now, Uncle Ham. Want to babysit later?”

“No.”

Presley pushes herself behind me, but I pull her around. “Hanna, this is my girl, Presley.” I introduce them.

I know I’m going full Walker on this girl. I gave him hell when he met Hanna. He was hooked the moment he saw her, but she took a lot more convincing. I get it now. And I’ll do whatever it takes to keep this little sprite by my side.

Presley stiffens before she reaches out for Hanna’s hand. “I’m not his girl. We just met.” She tries to laugh it off, but I wrap my arm around her middle, and she melts into me.

“That’s how it works.” Hanna laughs. “I’ll be seeing you soon. We need to get the boys home and in baths before they sleep for too long.”

“Good luck with that. See you, Walker.” I wave at him as he climbs up into the driver’s side, and they take off.

Walking back to where I met her this morning, she’s quiet, and I can tell she’s going to try to deny what we both know is happening. I’ve never felt anything like this before, and I’m not going to let it go. I know what I want, and it’s her. No question.

“Ham.” I hear someone call my name as we walk toward Presley’s car.

I turn to see Julia, a nurse at my brother’s care facility. She’s asked me out a few times, but I’ve always declined. I glance down at Presley, who is staring at Julia. I

look between the two women, and there's no doubt in my mind who I'd choose every time.

"Wait here. I'll be right back." I lift her chin to meet my gaze. She nods before moving her eyes past me to where Julia is waiting. I turn and walk a row over toward Julia.

"Hello, Ham." She blushes as she reaches for me, pulling me into a hug. I try to pull back, but she manages to wrap her arms around me and tips her head back, waiting for me to kiss her.

I disengage her arms from around me. "Julia, I've told you. I like you as a friend," I say. An engine revs, and I swing around. "Fuck." Presley's little Beetle is pulling out of the parking lot. "I've gotta go."

I run for my Jeep and take off after Presley. I knew she was a flight risk, and I let her out of my control. There is only one person I can think of who can help me, and I dial his number.

"What up?" Walker's deep voice comes across the line.

"I lost her. Julia stopped me, and Presley got away."

He chuckles. "Why do you think I played dirty and took Hanna's phone?"

"I couldn't get it. Plus, I didn't want to come off creepy like that."

"Oh well, brother, I don't know what to say. Are you following her? Did you finally tell Julia enough is enough?"

"I tried. I was in the process when Presley high-tailed it out of the parking lot."

“I think Hanna has an uncle who can help if you don’t find her. You got her full name?”

“Yes,” I say, racing through the streets, but I don’t see her. Not wanting to cause an accident, I slow down and head home. “I don’t know when I’ll see her again. I could hang out at the pier until they return. Or you could give me the contact information for the professor who hired us.”

“Nope, he won’t give you her information. He was very protective of her. He asked me if you were a safe guy.”

“Shit. What the fuck am I going to do?”

“They are going out in a week without us to retrieve the tracking satellite markers from their previous expedition.”

“I can’t wait a week!”

“Guess you’re going to have to, unless you can think of another way.”

We say our goodbyes, and he hangs up as I park in front of the garage.

I walk up the path to the front door. When I enter, I notice my mom is in the kitchen, cooking dinner. I walk over and lean down to kiss her cheek.

“How was your day?” she asks, and I shrug as I head toward the stairs.

“Looks like it was a good day for you.” I point at her before heading up to my master suite.

I strip and make my way to the bathroom, dropping my clothes into the hamper. I turn

on the rainfall showerhead and stand under it for a while, letting the water sluice over me.

After my shower, I put on some basketball shorts before heading downstairs for dinner. My chest aches at the thought of not seeing Presley for at least a week.



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### CHAPTER

### FOUR

### PRESLEY

I t's been five days since I saw Ham, and I still can't stop thinking about him. Tonight, I finally gave in to Leah's begging, and we're heading out to Duval Street to hit a couple of bars and do some dancing.

I look at myself in the mirror one more time before deciding this is as good as it's going to get.

My top looks knitted and is a half-shirt bralette style.

Since I'm just a small A cup, I don't need a bra.

But I did stick on some nipple covers so I don't show when I'm chilled.

I'm not taking a jacket with me tonight.

It's not a good idea, but I don't have a jacket that would go with this outfit.

The top is a soft mauve, and I paired it with a pale pink, high-low skirt.

One leg is exposed to mid-thigh, while the other is covered by the skirt that hangs to my ankle.

The wrap style makes my hips look slimmer.

I complete the look with open-toe, strappy wrap suede heels.

When the driver honks, I grab my clutch and quickly lock up. I'm careful on the gravel to avoid twisting my heel. The back door opens, and Leah steps out in a ruched mini skirt and sleeveless crop top. I'm so glad she came for me because I would have chickened out.

"Hey, girl. Don't even think about not going out." She laughs, seeing right through me. We embrace before climbing into the back of the car. "We'll get that hottie out of your mind tonight." She wraps an arm around my shoulders.

I told her about the woman I saw hug Ham and how she gave me that look—the one that says, "he's mine."

"I ran before I could make a fool of myself."

I cried all the way home, thinking he was different.

Now, though, I feel like it's for the best. I don't need to be in a relationship right now, not when I'm entering the hardest part of my doctoral program.

I didn't tell Leah that I was already catching feelings for him, even though it was only one day with him.

But I can fake it until I make it. Tonight, I'm going to pick up a random guy and have sex, if I can.

I'm not usually good at this, but Leah says I can do it, that it'll be easy. I'm not so sure.

The car pulls up to a bar and grill where we'll start with appetizers and drinks before heading to the main bar in the area. They have a DJ we like tonight. As we make our way inside, I feel eyes on us. I'm sure it's because of Leah. I shake it off and follow the hostess to a table.

By the time we make it to the other bar, the place is packed. Leah orders us each a shot. I look out over the dance floor and see Margo and her friend. Ugh. I don't need this.

"Ignore them," Leah says, handing me my drink. We shoot back the tequila, and then she grabs my arm as a Dua Lipa song starts. "Let's go." We head out to the dance floor.

I'm shaking my hips when a pair of large hands wrap around me.

I glance down and see darkly tanned skin.

An image of Ham flashes through my mind.

I'm about to turn to see who took the bait when I look up and catch the shock in Leah's face.

I spin around and immediately drop my head, my chin hitting my chest. I stop dancing and hold up a hand to Leah, signaling that I'll be back.

Taking Ham's hand in mine, I move off the dance floor and head to the bar. Before I turn to face him, I order a shot of tequila and throw it back, needing the buzz in my system.

When I turn around, he's standing there, his eyes scanning me from head to toe. He's dressed in all black—slacks that fit him perfectly and a black short-sleeve button-

down shirt. His hair is wavy on top, and I have the sudden urge to sink my fingers into it.

“Sprite, I’m so glad we bumped into each other.”

“Was it a coincidence?” I look over to where Otto is dancing with Margo. She heard Leah and I talking about going out.

“Maybe a little bird told me you were going on the prowl tonight.”

“I’m not looking for you. You have a girlfriend, and she made it perfectly clear that I should back off.” I slap my hand over my mouth. I shouldn’t have said that to him. Maybe I’ve had a bit too much to drink.

He smirks then pulls me into his body. “Julia is a nurse I know. I’m not in a relationship with her. As a matter of fact, the only one I want to be in a relationship with is you,” he says before leaning down and taking my lips in a firm kiss.

I gasp, shocked that he’s kissing me in front of all these people. His tongue slides into my mouth, and I wrap my arms over his shoulders. He pulls me in impossibly tighter to his body.

My head is swimming. My hands clutch at his shoulders as his tongue dances with mine. When he finally pulls away, it takes me a moment to open my eyes. His are dark and filled with passion.

Okay, so I wanted a quick fuck to get over him, but maybe I can do a one-night stand. Or even a week or so of fun. I don’t need to stay with him. I can be with him until I have to return to Miami.

“Come on.” I take his hand and stomp off, dragging him behind me. When I approach

Leah, she's dancing with a guy I've seen her with before. "We're taking off," I tell her.

"Are you okay?" she asks me as she leans in close.

I glance back at Ham. I trust him, but I know it's going to hurt to walk away from him. He's everything I want in a guy.

"Probably not, but I can't not try."

"Okay. Call me tomorrow."

"I will." I turn back to Ham. "Are you ready to go?"

He looks me up and down before glancing over my head to where Margo and Otto are dancing. "Just a moment."

This time, he leads the way, not letting go of my hand. When we reach them, Margo gives me a once-over and scoffs before turning to walk over to her friend. Ham doesn't release my hand.

"I'll arrange a car to pick you up. I'm going with Presley."

"You don't need to babysit me. I got this. Have a good night." Otto chuckles then turns to look at me.

"Car service, Otto," Ham says, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Okay, Dad." He gripes but nods in agreement before Ham leads us out of the bar.

Ham walks up to the valet and hands over his ticket. I turn into his arms and press

against his chest.

Ham

I couldn't believe my luck when Otto told me he and Margo were going out this weekend.

He casually mentioned that Margo had jokingly said Presley was going out to get over some guy.

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I knew I had to be there.

If she's trying to get over an ex, I'm going to be the man she does it with.

But when I saw her walk into the bar, I was instantly pissed.

She looked sexy as fuck, and when she told me I had a girlfriend, the thought that she might be trying to get over me filled my head.

That's never happening. I'm not letting her get away again.

I don't know when I decided that she was going to be mine completely, but there is no going back now. She presses into my chest and shivers as the ocean breeze blows through the streets. I pull her in tight while we wait for my Jeep.

"I live past Saddlebunch Number Two bridge on Boulder Drive. If you want to go to a hotel, we can," she says.

I shake my head. She's too drunk if she thinks I'm taking her to a hotel. I know she's going to try to sneak out on me.

“What’s your address on Boulder?” I slide my palm against her cheek.

Her hair is down around her shoulders in soft waves.

Her full, pouty lips are stained a shimmery nude color, and her eyes are darkened, making the green stand out more.

I lean down, needing another taste of her lips.

She pulls herself up me, and I can’t wait to get her somewhere private, where I can pull her closer and really get a taste of her.

“Excuse me,” the valet says, and I pull away from my girl.

Presley clings to me as I turn her toward the passenger side of the Jeep. I lift her up into the seat and pull the seatbelt across her body. Her breath hitches when my hand brushes her breast.

“I need to get you someplace private, baby.”

“Yes,” she sighs.

I move to the driver’s side, where the valet is holding the door open. I catch him leering at her.

“Don’t look at her,” I growl, shoving a tip into his chest.

I jump up into my Jeep and reach across to rest my hand on her thigh. She opens her legs, allowing me to trail my hand up under her skirt. I’m fucking going to blow a gasket or wreck the car. I can feel the heat coming from her core.

“Please,” she begs.

I push my hand higher, encountering her wet core. I jerk the wheel. “Fuck, sprite, you’re soaked.”

“I need you, Ham. I’ve been thinking about you all week.”

“Me too.” I drag my finger against her core, and she leans back into the seat, giving me more of her.

The urge to sink a finger in her is overwhelming, but I don’t.

I need to maintain some control. She’s going for just sex and doesn’t care where we go from here.

I know she’s had several drinks. I won’t let this be a drunk fuck.

Not the first time. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to get her off.

The normally twenty-five-minute drive takes us just less than twenty.

As soon as I turn off the highway, I can’t take it anymore and slide my finger under the edge of her panties.

She’s bare, and I can’t stop myself from sinking two fingers into her as my thumb tweaks her clit.

She moans and holds my hand to her, her tiny nails digging into my skin.

She’s tight, and my cock throbs, needing to bury itself deep inside her heat.



She's so lost, ready to come, that she can't direct me to her house.

But then I spot her car and pull in next to it.

She screams as she orgasms on my fingers, and I pet her softly as she comes down from the high.

She turns to me, and with my other hand, I drag her to me and take her lips in a deep kiss.

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“Don’t you even reach for that handle,” I order when I pull away. I open my door and turn to look at her as I drag my tongue along the fingers that were just inside her. “You taste good, sprite. I need a better taste.”

She starts breathing faster, her eyes heavy-lidded from the orgasm, but hungry for more.

I step out and move around the car. I open her door and pick her up.

She wraps around me, hiking up her skirt, as I carry her to the door.

Thank goodness no one can see her. I’d have an issue if someone saw her like this. She is all mine.

When we reach the door, she enters a code into the keypad, and it unlocks.

Stepping inside, I hear the alarm warning and turn her so she can enter another code to shut it off.

I memorize both sets of numbers. I turn around and close the door, locking it before turning back to take in her little house.

“It’s a rental,” she says as she kisses my neck.

When she pulls my earlobe between her lips, I jump into gear and drop her ass on the sofa. I kneel on the floor between her legs and push up her skirt, revealing the soaked fabric of her pink thong.

“Sprite, I’m going to tear you up.” She’s so tiny.

Her hands slide up my arms as she sits up. “I want you, Ham.” She softly sighs as she tips her head back so I can kiss her again.

I kiss down her neck, inhaling her coconut and vanilla scent, she tastes like a tropical fruit salad. The musk of her orgasm lingers in the air, but I want to take this slow and appreciate her body.

I slide the straps of her little top down her arms as my lips move along her collarbone.

Her hands are in my hair, and when I reach her breasts, I stop.

She giggles as I eye the nipple covers. I push her back to the sofa and wrap my hands around her small breasts.

She moans and arches her back, giving me more.

“Sorry,” she says.

“Don’t apologize,” I tell her, noticing she says that a lot. I’ll get her over it, because she has nothing to be sorry about. “Give me a sec, and I’ll have these off you.”

I slowly peel the edges back and carefully pull the covers off as I watch her to make sure I’m not hurting her.

I drop them on the coffee table and then lean over her body to kiss her breasts.

When I take a nipple between my lips and suck it deep, her hands press my head into her, and she arches her back.

She starts to squirm and moan, letting me know she's sensitive.

She protests when I pull back, but I lift her top over her head and drop it on the floor beside me.

Next, I lean back and pull her skirt off after removing her heels.

My little sprite is a goddess. She's almost naked before me, and I just stare at her, loving that she's confident and not covering herself.

I reach for her thong next and slide it down her hips and legs, then add it to the pile of clothes.

"You're a little overdressed." She sits up and starts unbuttoning my shirt.

She pushes it off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. Her hands trace the tattoos on my chest as she leans in and licks down my neck. My head falls back as I hold her hips. She shifts to get closer, and I realize she's unbuckling my belt. I let her, but I'm not going to take her tonight.

When her little fingers slide into my boxers and wrap around my cock, I'm almost completely lost. But I hold firm. I need her to realize we're more than a quick fuck.

"Baby, who are you getting over?" I ask as I push her back to the sofa, breaking her contact with my cock.

She bites her lip and looks over my shoulder. "Where did you hear that?"

I lean over her body, making sure her focus is on me. "Presley."

"You," she says softly, and a part of me wants to fist-pump the air, excited she's that

into me. But then, I realize how much seeing Julia hurt her.

“I swear I’m not with anyone else.”

“Okay, but I can’t be in a relationship. I’ve got plans, and they don’t include being with someone.”

“How about we take it daily and see what happens? I’m not going to stop you from getting your doctorate.”

I lean down and kiss her as I hike her up my body. She wraps around me, and I stand, letting my pants fall. I step out of them and my slip-on shoes. As I glance around her small house, I spot the door to her room and make my way toward it.

I flip the light switch, and soft light fills the room, casting a warm glow on her pink-covered bed.

I walk over and fall down, making sure not to land on her.

I scoot her up higher as I slide down her body.

Wedging my shoulders between her hips, I open her up wide and kiss her bare pussy.

Her little clit is pushing out from its hood, and I tongue it as she moans and grips the comforter.

As her taste bursts on my tongue, my control snaps.

I start driving my tongue in and out of her as I use my thumbs to open her up.

I move back to her clit and push two fingers inside her.

My fingers find that soft, cushioned spot in her body, and I rub it as I suck her clit deep and slide my other hand up to pinch her nipple.

She screams as she comes, and I don't stop.

I can't stop now. I build her up again, over and over, until she's pushing back, trying to get away from me.

I pull away and lick my lips before using my hand to clean my beard.

Sliding up her body, I kiss every inch of her until I reach her full lips, and I kiss her deep.

She sighs when I pull away, and I watch as her eyes drift closed.

After I get her cleaned and settled, I make sure her house is secure and then climb into bed with her. I pull her in tight to my chest and spoon her body. She mumbles in her sleep and settles in.

### CHAPTER

### FIVE

### PRESLEY

I stretch, feeling the cool sheets glide over my naked body. I bolt upright and look around the room.

“Ham,” I call out.

I don’t hear anything, and my heart starts to ache. He didn’t even make love to me. Oh, he did a lot, but we didn’t have sex at all. I flop back in bed and get a whiff of his cologne. I pull the pillow to my face and take a deep sniff. I’m not washing this pillow for a while.

Sliding out of bed, I head to the bathroom and clean myself up. I notice the love bites all over my body. I don’t remember him biting and sucking on me like that, but I smile as I think of what he did do. It was amazing.

I grab a soft pair of gray jammies with black stars and slip them on before heading to the kitchen to make myself some tea.

After picking up my clothes from last night, I grab my cell phone and send a quick text to Leah.

When she doesn’t respond, I figure she’s still sleeping.

I click on my speaker and put on some music.

One of my favorite songs from Wednesday comes on, and I do the dance she does in the show.

I had to watch the scene over and over to nail the routine.

“What kind of dance is that?”

“Ahh!” I scream and spin around to find Ham standing in the doorway. He’s holding a takeout bag in one hand and two drinks in a carrier in the other. “How the hell did you get into my house?” I didn’t check to see if the house was armed, but I knew it was locked.

He kicks the door closed, then walks over to the coffee table to set everything down before making his way toward me. I take a step back.

“I asked you a question,” I say.

“I memorized the codes when you put them in last night.” He pulls me into him, and I push a hand against his chest.

“You didn’t want to have sex with me, so why are you back?”

He chuckles as his hands slide into my hair and tip my head back, making me look up at him. His palms are warm against my cheeks.

“Presley, don’t ignore what I’m going to tell you. I wanted to fuck you so hard and deep that you couldn’t walk today, but the first time I slide into your body, you’re going to remember it all. You’re not going to be drunk. Get it?”



I can't say anything as my mind is overcome by the image of him deep inside me. My body practically convulses with need. My core spasms, and my breath hitches. I lick my lips to moisten them before nodding my head in understanding.

"Now kiss me," he demands and leans down.

I arch up into him, and the next thing I know, I'm in his arms, wrapping around him, as he sits me on the counter.

His kiss makes me forget everything but him.

All the reasons why I shouldn't be with him float out of my head.

I trust him, and I hope he never breaks that trust. When he pulls away, his soft T-shirt is gripped in my hands.

"Tell me what kind of dance that was?" he asks again. I shake my head to focus on his words.

"I watch the Netflix show Wednesday . It's her dance."

" Wednesday . We'll have to Netflix and chill with that one.

" He looks me up and down. "But you might need to wear more clothes, or we might be pausing it a lot." He chuckles softly, and the sound is like a direct link to my clit.

He lifts me off the counter and swats my ass.

"Breakfast and tea are in the bag for you. Now go get dressed."

"Where are we going?" I look at him over my shoulder.

“Snorkeling.”

“Woohoo!” I rush to my room.

I slip on my white bikini with little pink flowers all over it.

I don’t wear this one for research trips because it’s a tie-style bikini, and that doesn’t work very well under my wetsuit.

I pull on a pair of worn-out bibs and grab my pink Converse before braiding my long hair.

I head back out to the living room, where Ham is on the phone.

“We’ll be there in about twenty minutes. See you then,” he tells the person and hangs up.

“Are we meeting people?” I glance down at what I’m wearing, wondering if I need to change.

“Just Walker and his family. Don’t worry.”

I take the offered cup and sip, realizing it’s a perfect blend of lavender and rose iced tea. The memories of my mother drinking this when I was a little girl almost stagger me. “How d-did you know?” I turn to look at him.

“I spent some time in Paris and other places around France. I know it’s a popular tea, and when I went to make you coffee, I noticed you didn’t have any, but you had plenty of tea. I thought you’d like it. Is it okay?”

I hold the cup in my hands as I take a big whiff and close my eyes. For a moment, I

let the memories wash over me. When I open my eyes, he's standing in front of me.

"My mother loved rose and lavender tea. She drank it all the time. I know it's become popular because of that television show, but I haven't had it in years. Thank you." I reach up and pull his face down to mine. Kissing his cheek, I let him feel how much this moment means to me.

We walk out to his Jeep, and he helps me up into it as I take a bite of the flaky croissant he got me. It dawns on me he's changed clothes since last night.

"Did you run home before you came back?"

"Nope. Showered at your place. I have a bag in the back," he says nonchalantly as he continues to drive into the core of Key West.

"Oh, okay." He must do this often if he keeps a packed overnight bag. Pain hits my chest, and I look out the window.

Ham

We pull up to the warehouse where Walker, Otto, and I opened the dive school two years ago.

Walker's truck is already parked outside.

Presley has been quiet ever since I mentioned the bag in the back of my Jeep.

I can imagine what's going through her head, but I'm not ready to tell her the truth just yet.

As I come around the Jeep to let her out, she's already jumping down. I move toward

her, trying to keep my anger in check. I press her body against the side of the vehicle and lift her up with one hand around her hip. My fingers almost graze her core.

“Sprite, I keep a change of clothes in my Jeep because I like to be prepared for anything. Sometimes shit happens, and I stay here, or I’m out on charters where my clothes get wet.

I love the water but hate the feel of the salt on my skin all the time.

Spent too many years with that feeling when I was in the Navy.

I don’t do one-night stands, and I haven’t been with a woman in a while. Got it?”

“Yes,” she says as she looks up at me.

Her trust is so fractured and broken, telling me it’s going to take a lot to get her to trust me more than she already does. I kiss her, and her full lips open. Our tongues duel until she gives into my dominance.

“Hey, you guys coming in?” Walker’s voice booms across the space. “By the way, brother, there’s some of my revenge.” He laughs, and I remember interrupting him and Hanna a couple of times.

I take Presley’s hand, and I can feel the excitement coming off her. Leading her into the interior of the warehouse, with the large pool in the center and equipment all around, I can’t help but smile at the surprise in her eyes. It makes my chest swell with pride to share what I’ve achieved.

“Unc Ham!” Axton toddles over, and I scoop him up as his little brother, Landon, follows, asking to be held too. I turn, hearing Presley giggling as she watches me with my nephews.

“Here let me help.” Hanna walks over and takes Landon from my arms. “Nice to see you again, Presley.” Hanna smirks at her as she moves over to where Walker is getting our equipment ready to go out.

Axton starts pushing at me, and I let him down too.

“They are cute,” Presley says.

“Yeah. Axton is two, and Landon is one. They’ve been swimming since they were tiny little monsters.”

“I bet.”

We’ve got everything ready and are about to load it into the vehicles when my phone rings. I glance down and see the facility’s number flash on my screen.

“Shit,” I mutter.

My mom is not feeling too good today, so I told her I would help.

“Hello,” I answer, expecting to hear Win in the background causing issues, but it’s quiet.

“Ham, Win is having a bad day and needs someone.”

“Julia, I’m kind of busy right now. It doesn’t sound like Win is having issues.

“Ham, you promised to be here for him. You can’t just forget about him because you’re dating now.”

Her words hit me, and I glance at Presley, who’s watching me closely. The moment I

mentioned Julia's name, Presley's body tightened, and she stopped helping. I can see the worry in her eyes over who Julia is, and it's all because I haven't been honest with her.

"I know I promised, Julia." I try to move away and get Hanna's attention to distract Presley. "How bad is it?"

"He's throwing things and acting out," she says, and I look back to see everyone watching me.

"I'll be there shortly." I hang up without saying anything else and watch as Presley's face falls.

My long legs eat up the distance between us, and I watch as she straightens, pushing her shoulders back and lifting her head.

But it's her eyes that change the most. The blue-green of them becomes still, like calm waters, devoid of emotion or recognition as I move closer.

She's closing herself off, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get her back.

But I have responsibilities, and she needs to understand that if she's going to be with me.

"Why don't you go snorkeling, and I'll catch up later?" I run my hand down her soft cheek, and she nods at me. "I have to go."

"Okay," she says so softly that if I hadn't seen her lips move, I wouldn't have known she spoke. "Julia and Win need you."

Something pulls in my chest when she says their names. I don't understand what it is.

I lean down to kiss her, but she turns her head, and I kiss her cheek.

“Not in front of the kids.” She plays it off, and I know she doesn’t want me to kiss her.

I glance over at Walker and nod before turning to Hanna, whose eyes are spitting fire at me. As I start to walk out, I hear an exchange of voices, and then Walker is beside me.

He waits until we are outside before he starts in on me. “Brother, you don’t want to walk away from her like that. Explain what’s going on. Fucking explain that Julia means nothing to you and that Win is your brother. I can imagine, from the way that phone call went, she thinks Win is a kid.”

“He is a fucking kid, for all intents and purposes.” I throw my hands up. “She needs to understand I have responsibilities.”

“Responsibilities that will take you from her?”

“Well...” I pause, weighing his words and considering where she stands in my priorities. Will I ever be able to put her first? “I don’t know.” Shaking my head, I jump into my Jeep and head to the hospital.

When I arrive, Win is lying in his bed, just like usual, watching an animal show on Disney+. I turn as Julia walks into the room.

“What the fuck?” I try to keep my voice down, but when I turn to the bed, Win is looking at me.

My heart breaks every time I see him like this.

He's trapped in his own mind, unable to break free.

His eyes scan around, and when he can't express himself, he usually acts out, throwing things and causing chaos.

But he isn't doing that now. He's just watching Julia and me.

When we aren't entertaining enough, he turns back to the television.

"You said he was throwing a fit."

"He needs company. You need to figure out your priorities," she hisses.

I look at Win, and it hits me. I know what I want my priorities to be.



### CHAPTER

### SIX

### PRESLEY

I try to hold back the hurt. I should be used to this by now. Ever since I was ten, I've known I'm no one's priority. What cuts the deepest, though, is the thought Ham might have a son with that nurse and doesn't want me to know.

"It's not what you think," Hanna says, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I can't stay here. I thought for once someone might actually want to make me a priority, but I should have known better.

"It's okay. You know, I have a headache and shouldn't snorkel. Maybe another time." I move toward the door, praying Ham has left. As I reach it, the door opens, and in walks Walker. I move past him, but he stops me.

"I can take you somewhere, if you want. It's honestly not what you're thinking. Ham is a good person, but he's got a lot of responsibilities." Walker defends his friend, but it just makes the pain worse.

"I'm fine. I have to go." I push past him and head out, but he stops me again.

He offers to give me a ride, and I figure, what's the worst that could happen? At least I won't have to pay for a service to pick me up. I'll have him drop me off at the

research center so he's not away from his family that long.

We are almost to the center when his phone rings, and I know he's talking to Ham. I can tell by Walker's responses that Ham wants him to take me back to the shop.

When we stop at a light, I turn to Walker and say, "Never mind."

Before the light turns green, I open the door and step out of the truck. I walk into the flow of tourist foot traffic so he can't follow. I make it a block away before the tears start to fall. When I dial Leah's number, it goes straight to voicemail.

"Girl, I need to talk. Please call me." I leave a message and look at my phone. She should be up and going by now. I don't understand what is happening with her.

I use my app and order a ride. I want to call Morgan, but I'm not sure of her schedule and don't want to wake her or any of her small children if they are napping.

When I get home, I change the codes so Ham can't get into my house anymore. I need a distraction to get out of my head.

I walk down to the beach and sit just out of the range of the waves.

I love the ocean, always have, but I also hate it.

I hate that it's always been the first choice over me.

I hate that it's even my priority now, just like it is for my father.

I can't hate the child who took Ham from me, but I can be angry that he chose not to tell me about them.

I would have understood. After my childhood, I know children should come first. My doctorate is my focus now, and I know someday I'll choose it over any relationship.

All because that little girl inside me wants to finally feel seen, and earning my doctorate is the only way I know how to do that.

I sit here, watching as the storm rolls across the water, heading our way.

I've been checking the weather reports for days because we need to go out tomorrow to retrieve the transmitters from the sharks and dolphins we tagged last month.

I know this is just a passing storm for the night, nothing major coming in.

Memories wash over me. With her birthday last Monday, and then Ham bringing me her favorite tea today, I've never felt closer to her.

I don't know why. It's like lately something is telling me that I'm missing something important.

She was a little younger than I am now when she had me.

I know that when I'm with Griff, I feel whole, and I was starting to feel that with Ham, even though it's only been a couple of days.

Ham

I'm pissed by the time I pull up to her house.

I can't believe she jumped out of Walker's truck when I was on my way back to her.

I stomp up the gravel walk and knock on the door, but no one answers.

I don't see anyone inside, but her car is here.

I spot her purse and cell phone on the counter.

I enter the code to her door, but it doesn't work.

It just beeps at me. I stop and glance around, trying to come up with a plan.

I'm about to walk around the deck and try the back door when I see a lone person sitting on the beach.

The wind is picking up with the incoming storm.

Her hair whips around her, coming loose from the braid it was in earlier. She's just staring out at the water. I head toward her, my feet sinking into the sand. She doesn't acknowledge me when I get close, and I slowly lower to my butt and pull her into my body.

"I'm sorry," I tell her, my anger gone. All I can think about are the tears rolling down her face. The quiet pain she's going through.

"What's wrong with me?" she says, her voice tiny, and it's like a knife to my chest. The pain is instant.

"There is nothing wrong with you, sprite." I take a deep breath, ready to tell her everything.

"Then why does everyone choose everything else over me?" She doesn't stop there, the barbs come flying.

"Every day of my life, my father has either chosen my mother, the ocean, or whales

over me. When she died, I thought things would change. He took me everywhere with him, but he didn't make me a priority.

He just made me a part of his team. I was the youngest researcher.

If I was sick, he'd leave me behind. When I broke my arm, he left me with my au pair .

" She pauses, her voice quivering. "Do you know I had au pairs and tutors? I had no idea how to interact with kids my own age. It was awful when my stepmother insisted I go to boarding school with my stepsister. I'm awkward most days, but put me amongst my peers, and I have no clue what I'm doing.

Even now, according to my stepsister, I have this weird obsession and can't interact with her or anyone else.

I hate bullies, especially when they're family.

" Her voice softens, and my heart aches for her.

"Tell me about your mother." My words are soft against the top of her head.

"She was amazing. She danced, enjoyed music, gardening, and teaching me. She loved that I was advanced for my age. Told me all the time that I was special. I could read and write before all the other kids." She takes a big breath.

"The day she died, I was so mad because my father left us again to go on a charter. I yelled at her. Told her I wished I had a different life. Different parents." Her voice grows quiet, and I know she's back there in that moment, reliving the memory, as her body shivers.

She leans her head against my chest. “I heard her fall. At first, I didn’t know what it was, but then I walked into the kitchen when she didn’t answer me.

She was lying on the floor, thrashing around.

I called for an ambulance as I begged her not to leave me, to stay in my life.

I hadn’t meant what I said. I hate the ocean some days. ”

Her sobs intensify, and I’m to blame for this too. Her father and I have both pushed her away.

“She told me that I would miss this life if I had a different one. It was so true. I regretted those words for years until I spoke to a counselor.” She continues to cry as we sit here, looking out as the storm draws closer.

“Win is short for Winslow,” I say once she quiets.

“He’s my younger brother by about five years.

I was in the military when he was hurt. He was riding his bike home from work when a drunk driver hit him.

” I swallow hard as I remember the phone call I got.

“Winslow went airborne over the car. He wasn’t expected to make it, but he survived.

Every surgery he had and every time he has a seizure, they tell us to say goodbye because they don’t expect him to live through it.

” I moisten my lips, trying to prolong getting to the reality of the situation.

“He was in a coma for so long, and then he woke up. But he wasn’t Winslow anymore.

He was a different person. He’s paralyzed from mid back down.

Most days he lies in his bed, watching television.

He can’t be in a normal wheelchair because his hips had to be fused due to his injuries.

His brain will never be the same again.”

“Oh my God,” she says and pulls away from me.

I’m afraid she’s going to run, so I keep a hold of her, but she fights until she can twist around and straddle me. She wraps her whole body around me.

“A year later, my mother was diagnosed with MS. She can’t take care of Win, so I pay to have him in a home close enough where we can go see him.

I swear I’ve never been with Julia. She wanted to go out with me, and obviously still wants to, but I’m not interested in her. I told her today I have a girlfriend.”

She tips her head back and looks up at me.

Her eyes are filled with emotion once again, and I settle.

I shift, then stand up as the first drops of rain begin to fall.

By the time we make it to the house, it’s a full-on downpour, and we’re both soaked.

She enters the code into the French doors that open into her kitchen.

I walk toward the bathroom, and together we strip off our clothes, making sure we don't let go of each other except when we have to.

With her naked body wrapped around me, I reach into the shower and flip on the water before stepping in with her.

I take the brunt of the cold spray against my back until it warms, then I turn her into it.

She softly kisses my neck, and I kiss her neck too.

I bite and gently suck, leaving a mark where others won't see unless they are too close.

She leans back and looks into my eyes. "I'll give you another chance. But you need to understand that becoming a doctor is very important to me."

"Presley, you are my priority. My mom and brother are going to have to understand. You will get all of me, because I'm going to push you to do this.

I'm not going to interfere with your doctoral studies.

I understand how important that is to you.

But I will be here, making sure we keep moving forward. I won't give up on us."

"Thank you." Her pupils dilate as she shifts against my cock. "Now, can we discuss this?" She rocks along my length, and I drop my head back.



“Sprite, you know if I get my cock inside you, I’m never letting you go, no matter what.”

“We’ll see about that.” She smirks and leans forward to kiss me.

I press her back against the shower wall and shift her up. I kiss down her neck to her breasts, where I take a nipple deep in my mouth. She starts rocking against me, and it takes everything in me not to shift and slide into her heat. I can feel it, and it’s making me lose my mind.

“Fuck this. I don’t have a condom.” I reach behind us and turn off the water. I step out of the shower and grab a towel to wrap around both of us. Then I reach for the bag I left here this morning.

“Put me down before you drop me.” Presley giggles, and I press her to my body tighter.

“Not letting you go.” I pull out several condoms and then stomp to her room.

I drop her and the towel on the bed and take her all in. Her skin is flushed from the hot shower and from desire.

“Open those sexy little legs,” I order, my voice deeper than usual, and she obliges.

Just like last night when I had her like this, her little clit is peeking out of its hood, and her bare pussy is sexy.

I drop to my knees and kiss from her knee to her core, where I dive in and don’t stop until she’s comes twice.

I stand and slide the condom around my girth.

Her hooded eyes watch me as I pump my hand up and down my cock.

I stand next to the bed at the perfect height to take her, and I slap her pussy with my cock.

“Please, Ham. Please,” she begs.

I lean over her body with my cock kissing her entrance. “When I’m balls deep inside you, you’ll call me Hamilton.” I usually hate my full name, but the thought of her calling me something no one else does makes me want to pound nails and her.

“Hamilton,” she sighs, and I slide inside her heat. She arches and throws her head back. She’s so tight, almost making me come on the spot.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so tight. I’m going to have to go slow.” I’m not a small man, and my little sprite is just that—little.

“Don’t stop,” she begs as her hands clutch at my back, pulling me into her body.

When my balls rest against her ass, I pause to let her adjust to my size. I can almost feel her cervix at the tip of my cock.

“Fuck me now, Hamilton,” she demands, and I rise up, pressing her legs wide open.

“I give the orders, Presley.” I pull out and slam back into her.

She screams as she thrashes around on the bed, her hands clutching at the blankets, tangling them into a mess. I continue to take her hard, feeling the bed move across the floor.

I need her under me completely. I need to dominate and control her. I’m going to

keep fucking her until she forgets every man before me.

As I pound into her little body, I push her further up the bed and climb up over her.

I cage her in with my elbows on the bed next to her head.

Her arms and legs wrap around me, taking me impossibly deeper.

Someday, I'm putting my baby in this beauty.

The thought crosses my mind as I slow down my thrusts.

She's looking up at me with a storm in her eyes that mirrors the one raging outside.

I roll us and sit her up so I can watch her small breasts move as I lift her off me and slam her down.

"Hamilton," she purrs my name as she shifts and starts moving around on me in circles.

My eyes cross as I tweak her clit, and she screams, coming hard.

I pump into her a couple more times and then hold her down so I can feel the tip of my cock at her cervix. I come hard in the condom. Everything feels like I'm being turned inside out. She falls to my chest, and I hold her for a moment before rolling us so I can get the condom taken care of.

### CHAPTER

### SEVEN

### HAM

S tanding in the small kitchen, I pull out the ingredients to make a quick pasta carbonara.

“Mom, I want a new nurse assigned to Win. Julia is overstepping her bounds. She made the comment that I needed to get my priorities straight when I was spending time with my girlfriend.”

“A girlfriend? Ham, are you being serious right now or just teasing my old heart?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m serious. And your heart isn’t old, so stop that. But Julia called, saying Win was having a fit when he wasn’t. She just wanted me there. I found out later that she passed the shop and saw me with Presley, so she called to interrupt our date.”

“Ham, I’m so sorry. I’ll go in tomorrow and take care of it. When do I get to meet her?”

“Soon.” I hear Presley’s soft footsteps before I smell her coconut and vanilla scent. But I also smell sex on her, and it makes me hard again. “Gotta go, Mom.”

“Does she need you?” Presley asks as she wraps around me from behind.

“Nope. I was telling her to get a new head nurse for Win.”

“Don’t fire her,” she says.

I lower the burner and turn around to face her. She’s so sweet and trusting. After everything she told me, she still cares about others.

“She overstepped today. Jealousy is dangerous, and I won’t have that touching us. Okay?”

“Okay.” She swallows and slowly nods.

“I’m making food. Do you like carbonara?”

“I love it. That’s what I was going to make, but I’ve never done it before. I’ll watch and learn.” She practically bounces with excitement. I lift her up to sit on the counter next to me as I finish the sauce.

“If we were at my place, I’d make you fresh pasta, sprite.”

“Ooh, don’t twist my arm.” She puts her arm behind her back and acts like it’s getting twisted.

I lean over and bite her shoulder. She’s in a pair of silky soft pajamas. The top is a soft pink camisole with a darker pink trim, and the shorts are loose around her legs and tie at her waist. I wonder if she has panties on underneath, but I don’t want to get distracted. I want to feed my girl.

She moans and leans toward me, but I gently push her back. “I don’t want this to pop and burn your skin.”

“Okay.” She leans back and watches me with her head tilted to the side. “Where did you learn to cook?”

“My mother. She was a line cook in a restaurant before she got sick.”

“Where is your dad?”

“He left when Win was ten.”

She shakes her head and drops her chin. “I’m so sorry. You didn’t have to tell me.”

I lift her chin to look in her eyes. “No more secrets. Now, tell me about your family.”

“I told you about my dad. He loves me, but he’s so focused.

Unless you have a doctorate or are a whale, he doesn’t talk to you.

When he couldn’t make it to my graduation for my master’s degree, he sent me the new car.

Just like he did for each of my graduations.

I try to turn them down, but he won’t take no for an answer.

I show up at the dealership, and they upgrade me to the newer model. ”

She sighs, and then a soft smile pulls at her lips.

“My stepmom is awesome. She’s just as focused as him, but she calls me to check on my schooling and to see how I’m doing. She sends care packages too.”

She pauses for a moment, the smile faltering as she continues.

“Clara, my stepsister, is two years older than me and is currently at the University of Miami.” The look that crosses her face when she talks about Clara has me wanting to question her, but before I can, she smiles that beautiful smile that brings me to my knees.

“My little brother, Griff, is ten and is with our parents in Southern Australia. He’s attending a private school there. He’ll be coming to visit me in November, but I told you that already. I offered to take him for Thanksgiving break. He’s the best little brother.”

“Is your sister going for a doctorate too?” I look at her, but she won’t meet my eyes. I give her this because I sense there is something she isn’t telling me, and I don’t want to push her too much.

“She isn’t.” She shakes her head. “She hasn’t figured out what she wants to focus on.

She’s still finding herself. She didn’t live with us when our parents first got together.

It wasn’t until they got married that she moved to be with us.

That’s when Thea, my stepmom, decided I should go to boarding school with Clara.

” She shifts on the counter. “Clara struggles to get attention from either of her parents. Her father owns a couple of clubs in Miami, and her mom travels all the time.”

“Do you two get along?” I can tell they don’t, but I want her to share.

“Not really. She hates that her mom calls and talks to me a lot or comes to visit me

more than her. I try not to allow it by saying I'm busy and such, but Thea still shows up.

It's because I'm in marine biology, just like her and my father.

Thea wishes Clara would have followed in her footsteps, but she didn't. "

"And?"

"Clara got in trouble when she was eighteen. I know she was mad that I was graduating early at sixteen. She had to do community service and pay fines. Her dad took care of the fines, and she grumbled so much at the community service that they lied to the court and let her out early. It's just like every time I get a new car for graduation, she pushes her father to get her a new one.

I think she's on a convertible Mini Cooper now. "

"What did she do?" I shake my head. "Otto is young too and sometimes doesn't always think."

"She graffitied a building on campus."

"Dang, she went big." I chuckle and shake my head again.

"Yeah, but it was worse. She tried to frame me for doing it." Presley shifts on the counter.

"She didn't think they would pull footage from the surrounding cameras.

She's a bit taller than me and has red hair.



That's what gave it away. Plus, she bragged to her crew of girlfriends, and one of them cooperated with the police.

"She looks down and continues, so softly that I barely hear her, "It was just another thing she hated about me."

"Baby, she doesn't hate you."

"She does. You don't know her. She tells me all the time that she hates me. It's why I took the internship down here. I had to get away from her and her sorority sisters. They enjoy making my life miserable."

"They won't anymore. You're here with me." I wrap my arms around her after I put the lid on the pan.

We make out while we wait for the food to get done. The need to take her again is so great, but I don't want to make her sorer than she already will be.

Presley

After the amazing dinner, we cuddle on the sofa, but I notice the time and realize I have an early morning launch. I better get some rest. I pull from his cozy embrace and sit up. I've never had a guy at my place like this, so I know my awkwardness is going to be evident.

I look toward the kitchen, wishing we hadn't done the dishes already. That would have been a perfect excuse. I didn't even think of that when we were doing them. All I thought about was how sweet he was being.

I don't face him and focus on the floor in front of us. "Well, I guess I better let you get home. I have an early morning call at the docks."

He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me back. I land on his lap with my back against his chest. I love how big he is and how we still fit together perfectly even though I'm barely five feet tall.

"Sprite, you trying to get rid of me?" He leans down, and his beard tickles my cheek as he kisses next to my ear.

"Well, I figured you'd want to go home." The last part comes out breathless as he sucks my lobe between his thick lips.

He continues to nibble, and I've had enough.

This man makes me want him just by breathing.

I shift around to straddle him and pull my shirt over my head.

He grabs my exposed breasts and tweaks my nipples.

I love that he has no problem with my smaller breasts.

My stepsister calls me the president of the Itty-Bitty Titty Committee.

It's embarrassing, especially since she has C-cup breasts.

I think they are fake, but she won't admit it to me.

I think that's what her dad got her for a graduation gift.

She used to be smaller, like me, and then all of a sudden she had them.

Ham pulls back and pinches my nipples. "Pay attention to me, baby, or I stop." His

gruff voice is huskier, and it causes an ache at my clit as I remember how he ate me out last night.

I throw my head back and moan long and loud. His lips wrap around my nipple, and I shift my hips along his thick shaft.

“Grab a condom from my pocket,” he tells me, and I reach into the front pocket of his jeans before I open his fly.

He shifts to my other breast as he moves so I can pull his long cock out and stroke him. I ache in places I’ve never before, and I know it’s because of his size, but I don’t care. I want more of him.

“Condom now,” he orders, and I continue to stroke him.

I love the feel of him in my hand and can’t wait until I can get him in my mouth. I lick my lips at the thought as he pulls his head back and takes the condom from my hand. He tears it open and slides it down his length as he moves my hands away.

“Off,” he says as he shifts me and helps me get my shorts off. I love how he acts like he can’t get enough of me.

I shift back and hold myself over his cock. He holds it as it kisses my entrance, and I slowly lower myself down onto him. I feel so full as I take him in completely.

We both groan, and he lays his head back against the edge of the sofa.

I lean forward and kiss down his neck. Gently pulling his skin between my lips, I suck for only a second, not wanting to mark him like he did me.

I shift around in circles until he hits a spot that makes my eyes cross.

He lifts me up and pulls me back down onto him, hitting that spot again.

I can't control the sounds that come from my lips.

I beg and moan as he continues to make slow love to me.

I rise up onto my knees, almost pulling him completely out of my body before I drop down hard, and this time, I cry out.

"More," I beg, and he starts moving me faster until I come screaming and crying around his length. He feels so good, and when he continues to pump through my orgasm, my legs shake, and my nails dig into his shoulders.

He rolls us, and then he's over me. One of my legs is over the back of the sofa, and the other is on the floor. He opens me wide before he starts rutting into me fast and hard.

"Yes, Hamilton. Yes. Like that. Oh God, yes. I'm going to shatter," I chant as he continues to move in and out of my body.

My breath hitches. My body locks up, and he tweaks my clit. I come screaming his name as he plants himself deep, and I can almost feel him throbbing through the condom.

"I can't wait to feel you come inside me." I sigh as my eyes drift closed.

He lies on top of me for a bit before shifting, and I feel him leave my body. I whimper until he comes back and moves us so that I'm against the back of the sofa and he's wrapped around me.

"Are you going to stay?" I ask him softly.

“I want to, but I know it’s too soon for you. I’ll get up and go in a moment. I want to hold you.”

I love that he wants to hold me, that he’s content to cuddle instead of running from me.

### CHAPTER

### EIGHT

### PRESLEY

I watch in the distance as a boat leaves the area where the tracking locator is registering. I hope they didn't mess with our sharks. Leah didn't show up today, and I left her another message, letting her know Dr. Miller wasn't happy.

I offered to help remove the transmitters from the dolphins. We've collected them and are now going to collect the ones from the sharks. They were set to remove from the sharks today automatically.

I see the floats in the distance, but there is a large group of sharks attacking something in the water before them.

Margo screams from the bow of the boat.

Rushing out of the cabin, I look down, and that's when I see a shark swim off with a human arm in their mouth. Dr. Miller pushes past us and shoots a flare gun at the group of sharks, and they disperse but not far.

Margo holds on to me as they fish the body out of the water, and I'm in shock as I look down at the dead woman. When they roll her, my legs buckle, and I fall to the deck.

Coming to, I look up from my position on the bench at George. He's smiling down at me and brushing a cool cloth against my forehead.

"There you are." He chuckles. "Dr. Miller wants to talk to you." He steps back, and I glance to where the body is lying, now covered.

I know who it is, and I wonder if anyone else has figured it out. Her face is still intact, but her abdomen is shredded. She hadn't been in the water very long.

"Oh, by the way, your phone went off a couple of times." George hands me my cell phone.

I must have dropped it when I passed out. I look at it, but I can't focus on it. I still see her eyes staring back at me. I choke and turn to find a bucket being shoved in front of me. I vomit until I'm dry heaving, and tears roll down my face.

"It's her, isn't it?" Dr. Miller asks me as he pats my back.

I look up at him, trying to focus on his face, but all I can see are her sightless blue eyes staring back at me. I see the damage to her body and pray she was dead before they attacked her.

"Presley," Dr. Miller says with a bite in his tone, and it snaps me out of my head.

"It's her," I cry, and he nods before moving away from me. I see the tears in his eyes before he turns his back.

The whole way back to the docks, I can't tear my eyes from her tarp-covered body, her blood staining the floor of the boat. My heart aches, and my chest constricts at the thought of never talking to her again. Never go out dancing with her again.

We pull into our slip, and I still don't move. I just stare as the police and coroner come to claim her body.

"I'll call her family," Dr. Miller says, and I still don't look up.

Tanned legs appear in my view, blocking her from my sight, and I'm lifted into arms I know. His smell engulfs me, and for just a moment, I'm glad I'm still alive.

"Come on, sprite." His deep voice rumbles against my cheek as I lay my head against his chest.

He steps off the boat, and that's when it hits me.

"I can't leave. She's my best friend." I start to fight him, but he holds me tight.

"They already took her, Presley." He points to a gurney being pushed up the dock to the pier.

"I didn't say goodbye," I cry, and he buries my face into his neck as clicking sounds and flashing lights explode around us.

"Stay back." I hear another voice, but I keep my face against his skin. His beard brushing against the side of my head. I cry into his neck. Holding on to him for dear life.

Leah is gone.

Ham

I couldn't wait to see her, but I never expected what I found when I arrived at the dock.



As more police officers showed up, followed by a coroner's crew, I knew something bad had happened.

Walker sent Otto to wait with me, clearly concerned after I started yelling at a police officer while I was on the phone with him.

I wasn't prepared for the overwhelming relief when I learned she was okay, but the devastation on her face was almost too much for me.

She didn't even look up at me until I had her in my arms. The professor told me it was her friend Leah who was killed.

He didn't say more, and I don't know what happened, but as I hold my girl and move us through the crowd toward my Jeep, her silent tears roll down my neck.

Her body trembles, and I hold her tighter, feeling like she's going to shatter apart in my arms.

"Baby, where are the keys for your car?" I ask when we reach our vehicles. I parked next to her.

"Hooked to my bag," she says softly, her lips pressing against my throat.

Otto unclips them from the bag in my hand.

"Take her car to the shop. I'm taking her to my house."

"No, I should go home. You don't want to be with me through this."

"Not happening, baby. The press already has your name because that bitch Margo told them. You'll be safe at my place." I pray she doesn't argue with me more.

“Okay.” She agrees.

I take a deep breath, and my nerves settle a bit. I get my Jeep door open and sit her in the seat. She doesn’t want to let me go.

“Sprite, I need to drive. I promise as soon as we get home, I’ll hold you all night.”

“Okay,” she says softly and lets me go. Her beautiful eyes, swollen and red, look up at me. I lean in to kiss her, but she quickly covers her mouth. “I threw up. I need to brush my teeth.” I press a kiss to her nose and then her forehead.

“I got a spare you can use.”

I buckle her in and then make my way to the driver’s side. As I glance back, I see the reporters still milling around. I hope I can get her home without anyone following us, but if not, I have security and a private place for her to mourn.

When I pull out of the parking lot, I check that we aren’t being followed before making my way to my place. I park the Jeep inside the garage to keep it out of view.

Presley hasn’t spoken or asked more about where we are going. She just stares ahead, and I’m beginning to worry about her. I remember when Walker went through something similar to this with Hanna and how useless he felt.

I open her door, and she turns to look at me.

Her eyes don’t have their normal green sparkle to them.

Instead, they are almost a dull greenish-gray and full of pain.

I reach over her and release the seatbelt.

She leans into me, and I lift her up into my arms. My mom is out tonight, having dinner with Win.

I move through the house and up to my bedroom.

After helping Presley strip out of her swimsuit and shorts, I slip one of my T-shirts over her head.

She pulls up the neck and inhales deeply, and I watch as a calmness settles over her.

I help her into the bathroom, where I hand her a spare toothbrush.

After she's done freshening up, I carry her to the bed and flip back the comforter before gently laying her down.

She pulls the ponytail from her hair, and I watch as her blond strands fall across my black sheets.

A small weight lifts off my chest. I thought I lost her.

I thought a shark had taken her, but then I heard it wasn't anyone on the boat.

It was her friend. My heart hurts for her.

I kick off my shoes, strip down to my boxers, and climb into bed next to her. I hold her as she rests in my arms. She falls asleep but wakes up several times, screaming and crying.

"They took her arm. Her eyes wouldn't stop staring at me," she cries as she claws at me, trying to climb into my body.

“Shh, baby, I got you. Rest, and I’ll go make us some food. You need to eat.”

“You promise you won’t leave me?” She sounds so sad and childlike.

“I’ll just be downstairs, but I won’t go until you fall asleep again.”

“Okay.”

My mother sits at the table and watches me as I move around the kitchen.

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I don’t know, but I do know I’ll help her through this.”

“Ham, it’s so sad. Her friend attacked by?—”

Presley’s phone goes off again, interrupting my mom’s thought.

I look at the screen. It’s her dad. I know he’s not going to stop calling. The police called, and I asked them to give her a day before they come to talk to her.

“Hello,” I answer her phone.

“Who is this?” Her father’s voice comes across the line.

“This is Ham.”

“I think I have the wrong number,” he says. I can just imagine he’s pulling the phone away from his ear.

“No, Dr. Blanchard, you don’t have the wrong number.” I pause, but when he doesn’t

say anything, I add, “I’m Presley’s boyfriend.”

“Presley doesn’t have a boyfriend,” a female voice with a Texan accent says.

“She does, and I’m him. We are still new. Are you her stepmother?”

The woman on the other end of the line confirms she’s Thea.

My mom starts scribbling on a sheet of paper and taps it when she’s done. She wants me to tell them she’s okay.

“Presley is resting. She’s really upset right now.”

“Thank goodness it wasn’t her.” I hear the relief in her father’s voice.

“It wasn’t, but she knew who it was. I don’t know if I’m allowed to tell you who it was yet.”

“That’s okay. Tell her to call us when she wakes up,” her stepmother says, and they say goodbye and hang up.

“Was that my parents?” I turn toward the soft voice and see my girl standing on the last step. She’s still in my shirt, and she brushes her legs together, trying to make herself smaller. “Did you answer my phone, or did you call them?”

“They called, and yes it was them. I knew he’d keep calling. The news is reporting that a marine biologist based here was killed, but they aren’t identifying her yet. Your parents were worried it was you.”

“I doubt it,” she says, and I move toward her.

“They were. He called.”

She looks up at me as I stand in front of her. Even on a step, she’s smaller than me. I wrap my arms around her body, and she leans into me.

“I made some soup for you.”

“Thank you,” she says, and I pull away, but she grabs my hand. When she sees my mom sitting at the table, she stops. “Oh god, let me go get dressed.” She tries to turn away, but I keep a hold of her.

“My shirt is longer than your shorts,” I tell her. We approach the table, and my mom stands up. “Mom, this is my Presley. Presley, this is my mom, Florence.”

Mom doesn’t disappoint. When Presley holds out her hand, my mom pulls her into her body and hugs her tight.

For a moment, Presley just stands there, and then I watch the moment she accepts the comfort my mom is offering.

She sinks into her body and wraps her arms around my mother.

I see her clutch at the back of her shirt.

My mom holds on to her just as tightly, and she starts whispering things I can’t entirely hear.

Presley’s shoulders start to shake, and they continue to hold each other.

I want to pull my girl from her arms and comfort her, but I know she needs this.

After a moment, they part, and Presley wipes at her face. I hand her some tissue, and she blows her nose before looking at my mom, who is only a few inches taller than her.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been hugged like that.”

“Mom hugs are the best, aren’t they?” My mom doesn’t know the mistake she’s made, but Presley, ever graceful, smiles at her.

“My mom’s hugs were the best. Thank you.”

“What?” My mom looks between me and Presley. “Oh, sweet girl, I’m so sorry.” She pulls her into her body again for a brief hug.

“Thank you again, Florence.” Presley turns to face me.

“Call me Mom or Flo,” my mom offers, and Presley turns back and nods at her. I see a soft smile cross her face, and I want to distract her from her loss.

“What’s the smile, babe?” I ask, and she turns to look at me.

“My best friend Morgan has a dog named Flo. She’s her protection dog that Morgan’s husband trained. She was trained as a tracking dog for the police.”

“So, she’s a good dog?” my mom asks Presley.

“She’s the best. She protected Morgan and her daughter during a home invasion.”

“Then I’m okay with you remembering my name because of a dog.”

“Thank you. It’s going to take days before the police announce Leah’s name. Her

next of kin is her brother, and he's currently with the WHO somewhere in Africa, last she told me," Presley says as she sits down, returning to the subject we were discussing before I tried to distract her.

"Where are her parents?" my mom asks, and I turn from the bowl I'm ladling soup into for her.

"Her parents died when she was a teenager. Her older brother has taken care of her since then. She, like me, traveled around the world too."

"Is that one of the reasons you were so close?" I set down the bowl in front of her. Then I sit next to her and take her hand as I wait for her to answer my question.

She takes a deep breath, and the tears pop up again. "One of them. We also went to college together. She was one of the few people who didn't look down on me because of my age."

"What?" My mother leans forward at the table.

"I'm two years younger than most of the students in the doctoral program, and I'm also doing it faster because I work through my summers and will double up my studies. I don't have anything to focus on but my schooling."

"Ah." My mother looks between the two of us, and I know what she's thinking.

I wonder how long it's going to take Presley to realize that she's putting me second, just like her father does to her. Yes, she doesn't really want this relationship, and I can see it in her eyes that she has an end date for us, but I'm going to convince her that we will never end.



### CHAPTER

### NINE

### PRESLEY

I spent a week at Ham's house just trying to forget that I won't have Leah any longer.

For another week, Ham would stay with me here at my house or we'd stay at his house together.

We are getting ready for her funeral tomorrow.

Her brother, Alan, came into town two days ago.

It took authorities over a week to get in touch with him, and then almost another week before he could get here.

I've been helping him prepare for the funeral.

We won't have a body as her death is under investigation, but he wants to honor her for now before he has to go back to Africa.

This is my first night back in my little house by myself, and I feel so uncomfortable here.

Ham wanted to stay, but I told him I needed time alone to process everything.

It's the way I've always been. But for the first time, I don't feel like being alone.

I want company. I want Ham, or even Flo.

His mother is sweet and kind. When she first hugged me, I was so lost in my head that I didn't feel the comfort, but then it hit me.

She felt like home, like the way my mom used to hug me.

I want one of those hugs right now. Flo would hug me every day that I stayed there, and now I've become addicted to the feeling.

Looking out the window toward the beach, I stare at the dark water and the moonlight shining on the waves.

Normally, this scene would calm me, but tonight, something feels off.

My skin crawls with a discomfoting sense of being watched.

There could be reporters out there, but Ham made sure to check before he left.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement and quickly turn in that direction, but there's nothing there.

I swear I saw someone moving along the property.

I walk through the house, checking that all the doors and windows are locked. I'm not sure if it's the lingering shock of finding out that Leah was murdered and her body dumped in shark-infested waters, or if it's something else entirely.

Entering my room, I leave the bedside light on and do something I've never done

before. I seek comfort from someone else. I dial Ham's cell and wait for him to pick up. He answers but as a video call, and I smile before I click the button to accept.

"Hello, sprite." He's lounging back in a chair in the sitting room off his bedroom. That was a room I sat in for hours, just staring off, thinking about Leah.

"Hey, handsome." I smile into the phone.

"You're wearing my shirt." He grins.

I glance down and notice I'm in the T-shirt I borrowed from him. I pull the collar up and inhale, his familiar scent calming me.

"Yeah, it makes me miss you less." The words slip out, and my eyes almost bulge out as he sits up in his chair.

"Do you need me, Presley?"

I want to say yes, but I don't want to be clingy. So I shake my head and bite my lip to keep from lying. I do need him.

"Baby, I'd be there if you need me. You said you needed time to mourn before tomorrow, but I'd come instantly if you wanted me."

"No." My voice is quiet as I look down, avoiding his gaze, so he won't know I'm lying to him.

"Presley, please look at me," he says, and I can hear the demand in his tone. That's something I really like about him. He doesn't let me hide myself or my feelings.

I look right at him. "Ham, I just don't feel right.

I spent days at your house with you, your mom, and her nurse.

I'm not used to being around people all the time, and I got used to it.

I think I'm just lonely. I don't want you to think I'm clingy or needy...

I'm just scared." The last part slips out barely above a whisper.

Ham stands up, and I watch as he glances around and walks toward his room. "I'm on my way, baby. You're never clingy or needy. Well, not needy like this." He chuckles at the last part, and I feel my cheeks blush instantly.

"No. Stop, Ham," I say. He does and turns to focus on me before shifting his attention back on his packing. "I like that you want to be here for me, but I need to do this. Just talk to me. Be there for me that way."

His shoulders drop, and my heart clenches in a way I've never felt before. He's disappointed. Not in me, but in not being with me. I love that.

My heartbeat quickens. Love?

I don't love him.

I can't.

"Sprite? What's going on? You look panicked."

I swallow hard and moisten my dry lips. Then I answer him as best as I can without giving too much of myself away. "I'm fine. I just realized how much it hurt me that I disappointed you. It's a little disconcerting for me. I've never felt like this before."

“I know, baby. I’ve never felt like this either. I want to be there with you. I want to make you feel safe and secure. How about I give you tonight, and tomorrow, you come over to spend the night? We can go on a date the day after.”

“How about the day after, you pick me up from here, and we’ll go on a date?” I smile at him, knowing exactly what he’s doing. Trying to talk me into staying with him. I can’t let him get too close, though. I know he’ll break my resolve... and my heart.

“I’ll give you that for now.”

He sits on the bed, leaning back against the pillows we slept on together, and I feel my eyes getting heavy.

“You fall asleep, baby. I’ll hang up after you go to sleep.”

“Okay.”

We continue talking, getting to know each other more by playing twenty questions. Eventually, I fall asleep to the sound of his deep voice, feeling a bit better than before I called him.

I bend at the waist, brushing my hair out before flipping it up and watching the loose waves fall around my shoulders.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I notice how pale I am.

I know it’s not from lack of sun, but from the funeral I’m about to attend.

I slip on my black pumps and grab my lightweight leather jacket to make the black sleeveless bodycon dress look less like something I’d wear to a club.

It's the only black dress I own. I didn't want to spend money on one I'd only wear once.

I grab my sunglasses off the table by the door and slip them on, knowing Ham will be here any minute.

True to his word, he talked to me until I fell asleep last night, then called me first thing this morning.

He wanted to come over, but I've kept him away, not wanting to be that girl.

As I open the door, his Jeep pulls into the driveway, and I can't help but smile at him as he steps out.

Sliding my glasses down my nose, I take in Ham in all his glory.

I can't believe this man wants me. He's wearing black slacks that fit his muscular frame perfectly.

His black button-down shirt is tucked in, showing off the silver buckle on his belt.

The black jacket hugs his large body seamlessly.

His shirt is open at the collar, exposing just a hint of his chest. His hair is combed back, the curls that normally fall onto his forehead now neatly swept away.

I want to mess him up to keep other women from looking at him the way I do, thinking the things I want to do to him right now.

"Damn, sprite, you look too sexy for a funeral."

“Thank you, handsome. I think you look too good too.”

He pulls me into his body and pushes my glasses up to the top of my head before leaning down and kissing me deeply. My toes curl in my shoes, and I want to pop my leg—it’s that good. He pulls back and just stares at me for a moment.

“Let’s go before I say fuck it and drag you back to bed.”

“Come on.”

We stand at the water’s edge at the small ceremony. Leah wasn’t very religious, so Alan is speaking instead. He shares stories from their childhood and talks about what he had expected for her future. He’s asked me to speak too, and I’m nervous, but I owe her this.

When Alan finishes, Ham squeezes my hand, and I smile up at him before heading to stand before the group.

Another hand touches my arm, and I turn to smile at Hanna, Walker, and Otto, who all showed up to support me during this difficult time.

I move around them and walk up to Alan. After a quick hug, I take a few calming breaths before focusing on everyone.

For a moment, I take in the small crowd.

I’m surprised to see Professor Blackman.

It’s a four-hour drive from Miami, and I didn’t know he knew Leah. But I don’t dwell on it.

I clear my throat. “Leah wasn’t only a fellow researcher, she was one of my best friends.

We’d commiserate over projects, families, and even guys.

” I glance at Ham, a smile pulling at my lips as I remember her advice about him.

“We both looked forward to working alongside each other for years to come.” The tears start to fall, and Alan steps closer to rub my back in support.

I look at Ham again, needing to draw some of his strength right now.

He mouths, “You got this.”

I nod and continue.

“The first time I met her was at orientation for my master’s program.

She was there for the same reason. A student from my Miami days had been harassing me about being so young, and Leah stood up to him.

She told him one day I’d be his boss if he wasn’t careful.

She helped me come out of my shell, and together, we pushed ourselves to complete our degree in two years instead of three.

It became a challenge we set for each other.

I’ll forever miss her.” I finish speaking and walk back to Ham, who wraps his arm around me.



I lean into his body, soaking up his comfort.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm*

By the time the small service ends, I feel like I've cried myself out.

Ham and I stand next to Alan as everyone approaches, offering their condolences.

Professor Blackman introduces himself to Alan and shares how much he admired Leah and her work.

A memory ghosts through my mind of Leah once telling me that Professor Blackman had accused her of distracting me from my studies.

That's the only time I'd ever heard her mention him.

She never had him as an instructor, so how did they know each other?

I shake my head, trying to make sense of it all. Something doesn't feel right.

Professor Blackman takes my hand and pulls me in for a hug.

I quickly raise my hand to stop him. "Sorry. I'm hugged out." I force a smile. Ham's hand flexes along my back, then slides to my waist, pulling me close to him again.

"You are?" Professor Blackman spits out, turning his attention to Ham.

"I'm Presley's boyfriend."

The professor whips his head toward me, his gaze narrowing. He's a couple inches shorter than Ham. "I didn't know you had a boyfriend." He tips his head to the side.

“Are you sure dating should be your focus right now?”

Ham’s grip tightens on my hip, and I feel the urge to push back my shoulders and stand tall.

“Thank you for attending, Professor Blackman,” I say, brushing him off, and look at the next person waiting to pay their respects.

Moments later, we stand there, everyone talking around us.

I hear Ham telling Hanna and Walker we’ll come by.

I don’t want to, but I don’t want to be alone right now either.

A chill works its way up my spine, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I glance around, and that’s when I catch Professor Blackman staring me down.

I quickly turn away, unsure of what’s going on.

He’s always been around when I’m on campus, and he did show up to my master’s graduation.

But this is the first time I’ve actually questioned why he’s always there.

“Hey, sprite, did you hear me?” Ham says as he squeezes me.

“I’m sorry. No, I didn’t.” I look up at him.

Ham

Looking across the small group that's starting to disperse, I spot the professor who was rude to Presley. As I watch him, something shifts in his expression. I realize he doesn't just care for Presley as a student—he's jealous of me.

When Presley doesn't hear me ask her about him, I repeat myself. She looks up at me, and I see the pain in her eyes. They're red-rimmed from crying and look as if a storm is brewing across the ocean. I lean down and gently kiss her lips.

"I got you, babe. Come on." I lead her away toward my Jeep, where I kiss her deeply, making sure that asshole knows who Presley belongs to.

Her cheeks are flushed when I pull away, and I press my lips to her forehead.

I love kissing her. I love touching her.

I need to talk her into staying with me tonight.

"Ms. Blanchard," a voice says, and we both turn as I help Presley into the Jeep.

"Yes?" she responds.

He flashes his badge and then points to the guy standing beside him.

"I'm Special Agent Harkness with the FBI, and this is Special Agent Brownley. We have a few questions for you, if you don't mind?"

"Um..." Presley looks at me, and I prepare to help her down.

"We can wait until later or tomorrow if you'd like," Agent Brownley offers. "We know you've already spoken with the police, but we believe this case might be connected to another investigation we're working on."

“How about you come to our place tomorrow?” I give them my address and close the door, ignoring Presley’s gasp.

When I climb into my seat, she turns to me.

“ We don’t live together.” Her hand waves back and forth between us.

I can’t hide my smile as I back out and head for Walker’s place. He lives in town, near our warehouse.

“Baby, I know we don’t.” I turn to look at her when we stop at a light.

“Yet. But we will soon enough, if I have anything to say about it, and it’s better than them coming to your place.

Furthermore”—I turn my attention back to the road—“you’re staying with me tonight so I can keep your mind off today.

” I smirk and glance at her. A blush fills her cheeks.

I love the soft color she turns when I talk sexy to her.

We pull up to Walker and Hanna’s place, and I walk around to help Presley out. She slips her jacket off and lays it across the seat before we walk to the door. I place my hand against her lower back, and I can’t wait to get her home.

Hanna’s mom opens the door and immediately pulls me in for a hug before turning toward Presley.

“Hello, I’m Liz, Hanna’s mom.” She points to her husband, who is hovering close behind her. “This is Trevor, her dad. He looks meaner than he is.”

Just like she did with my mom, Presley holds out her hand to shake, but Liz pulls her in for a hug.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Liz says, and Presley thanks her before stepping back.

“Let them in, babe,” Trevor tells her, and she steps back so we can enter the house. It has an interesting U-shaped design with a pool in the center of the home.

“That’s so cool.” Presley smiles up at me, pointing to the pool.

“Yeah, Hanna snagged this place before I could.” I chuckle.

“That’s not true, he moved into a condo at first when we moved out here.” Hanna catches my fib, and I just shrug.

“I like your place too,” Presley says, putting emphasis on “your.”

Walker hands me a beer, and we all step outside to the poolside, where a table is set up for a small lunch.

“What was that all about?” Walker asks, clearly noticing Presley’s tone when she mentioned my house.

“The FBI wants to question Presley, and I told them they could at our house. She’s trying to prove the point that it isn’t ours.”

“Going to lock that shit down?” Trevor asks, and I turn to see Presley holding Landon while she talks with Hanna and Liz.

My sprite loves children, but she’s worried she wouldn’t be able to give them the attention they deserve.

The thought of knocking her up and changing her mind fills my head.

“How long you been seeing her?” Trevor asks, and I turn back to focus on him.

“Since the moment I saw her for the first time three weeks ago, but she’ll tell you only two weeks.”

Walker chuckles, and Trevor tips his beer to me.

“What?” I look between them.

“Does she know you’re never letting her go?” Walker asks. “Because she told Hanna that you were seeing where it was going.”

“That’s what she thinks. I told her, and I keep telling her. She keeps thinking I’m going to interfere with her doctoral studies. I won’t.”

“What do you want with her?” Trevor asks, and I turn back to look at her as she moves side to side, rocking Landon. His head is resting on her shoulder, and his thumb is in his mouth.

“Everything,” I say, and look back to see Trevor and Walker nodding at each other.

“Okay, what now?” I take a deep swallow of my beer.

“Boom,” Trevor says, and Walker chuckles.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll figure it out,” Walker says and tips his chin toward the women. “I think we’re ready.”

Presley walks right to me, and I slide out my chair so she can sit on my knee. Landon is still in her arms.

“Who was the guy at the funeral today who walked up to give his condolences? You seemed pissed off by something he said,” Hanna asks, and I wait to see if Presley offers an explanation.

“He’s a professor I met my freshman year. He advised me several times, but that’s all. I was honestly shocked to see him there. Leah really didn’t care for him.” Presley stands up to hand Landon off to Liz, who takes him inside.

“What happened to make him mad? I noticed him staring you both down.”

Presley turns to Hanna. “He told me I should focus on my studies instead of having a boyfriend. It’s none of his concern.

Besides, other than the time off I’m taking while the lab is closed due to Leah’s death, I haven’t had a break at all.

I haven’t been to Australia to see my parents in six years.

My stepmom came to Florida last year for a visit, and my dad came up the Christmas before that. ”

“You haven’t seen your dad in a year and a half?” Trevor asks, and she nods.

“Does your family have a place to stay when they are up here?” Walker asks, and I already know the answer. It was one of the things we talked about last night when we played twenty questions. I avoided asking her the question I really wanted to, though, about being bullied.



“Yeah, they have a townhouse in Miami. My stepsister stays there,” she says, not offering any further details.

“You have a sister? I always wanted one, but I have a lot of girl cousins to make up for it. My brother, Cobi, is amazing, but he’s not a girl.” Hanna looks pointedly at her father.

“Don’t give me that look. You’re lucky I let you and Walker get together. You promised me when you were little that you wouldn’t ever get married, that I was the only man you needed.”

“Trevor, that was when she was three.” Liz walks out, rejoining us.

“I have a stepsister. Clara. We aren’t very close. She lived with her father until she was sixteen, then came to live with us. When she came to live with us, her mother talked my father into sending me to boarding school with her. I always had tutors before that.”

“Boarding school?” Liz asks as she moves to a chair next to Trevor, but he pulls her onto his lap.

“Yep, my father travels all over the world for his research. Thea, my stepmom, thought I needed more stability during my teens. I had just turned fourteen and had been moved up to the same grade as Clara. My stepsister hated that because everyone compared us.” She pauses.

“I have a little brother. Thea and my dad had Griff ten years ago. He’s my little buddy. ”

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*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm*

Her phone rings, and she looks down at it before sending the call to voicemail. I didn't catch who was calling, but when it rings again, she picks it up and turns it off.

"Sorry, I'm just tired of hearing how everyone is so sorry for my loss. I'll miss Leah, but it's more Alan's loss than mine."

"You lost her too," Hanna says as she reaches across the table and pats her hand.

"Thank you." She takes a small sip from her wine glass.

We spend the next couple of hours just visiting and eating. When we finally leave, Hanna, Liz, and Presley have arranged to go shopping on Saturday. I like that she's got Hanna and Liz to help her through this. I noticed Margo came to the service today, but I know that they aren't very close.

When we pull through the gates of my property, she doesn't say anything but smiles softly.

I walk around the Jeep and help her out.

She laces her fingers with mine, and I lead her around the back of the house to the pool.

We stand here for a moment, looking at the water.

Her back is to my chest, and she takes a deep breath.

“Is your mom here tonight?” Presley asks as she steps out of my embrace.

“No. It’s her bunco night. She won’t be home for a couple of hours.” I watch her closely, wondering what she has planned.

Presley walks over to one of the chaise loungers and drops her jacket, purse, and cell phone down.

She then reaches for the hem of her dress and lifts it up, slowly revealing her barely-there thong.

Her breasts are exposed next, and I remain still, watching her.

She pulls off the nipple covers and turns.

My sprite is a goddess as she bends and slides her panties down her legs, presenting me her perfect ass that I want to sink my teeth into.

She looks over her shoulder at me. “Come get me, handsome,” she purrs before diving into the pool and swimming across to the waterfall.

I’m naked and jumping in after her before she can swipe the water from her eyes. I pull her into my arms and kiss her deeply, sucking her tongue into my mouth. She starts moving against me, and I wrap an arm up her back, holding her by the shoulder to stop her from moving too much.

“Baby, I’m going to give you my cock, hard and deep, but right now, I need to mark you up.” The need for others to see she’s taken is so great that I leave a little hickey behind her ear. When her hair is up at work tomorrow, that little shitass researcher George will get the point.

“Ham, I need you deep inside me. I need to feel alive.” She’s wrapped around me, and I flex my hips, causing my cock to slide between her folds and against her clit. She moans as she leans in to kiss my neck.

I move us toward the edge so I can get some leverage. Then I make slow love to her against the wall of the pool. She cries out as she comes, and I know I need to take her deeper and harder. I have to imprint myself more on her, inside and out.

As she comes down for her orgasm, I move us to the stairs and get out of the pool.

I head toward the outdoor shower on the wall of the house.

She unhooks her heels, and I slide her down my body as the water hits us.

I kiss her, then lean down to suck her nipples before taking a bite of each one.

I mark her skin again. Depending on which bikini she wears, people will notice them.

“Turn around, baby, and brace against the wall.”

I pop her ass out as I kneel behind her. I bite each of her butt cheeks, leaving an imprint, before standing up and sliding back into her heat. It’s then I realize we didn’t use a condom.

“Baby, I’m bare,” I let her know, but I don’t stop pumping in and out of her. When she doesn’t answer me, I smack her ass. “Did you hear me?”

“I did. I’m on birth control; we’re good. I just had my shot last month.”

“Okay,” I respond. She’ll be lucky if I ever put a condom on again. I can feel every ripple better now.

She squeezes my cock, and I almost drop to my knees. I smack her other ass cheek, loving the pink handprint I leave behind.

“Don’t do that unless you want me to fuck you harder.”

She does it again, and I pull out and slam back into her body. She cries out.

“Hamilton, yes,” she screams. I love hearing my name on her lips.

I don’t stop the forceful thrusts, taking her deep, until she cries out a couple more times. My balls are tingling, along with my back. I reach around her body and thum her clit. She screams as I come deep inside her. I lift her up and hold her to my chest as we both come down from the high.

“Ham, are you out there?” my mom calls, and Presley tries to pull away.

“Mom, stay there. Don’t come out,” I holler and then slowly pull from Presley’s body. I turn her toward the entrance to the bathroom, and we step inside and towel off.

“I can’t believe your mom almost walked out on us?” Presley drops her head, and I chuckle.

“Come on, sprite.” I take her hand and lead her out to the main room, where my mom is in the kitchen. “Head upstairs. There are some clothes for you still up there.” I swat Presley’s ass, and she gasps as she runs for the stairs.

“Stop embarrassing that girl.”

“I can’t help myself. You’re home early.”

“Yeah, Stella wasn’t feeling good, so it wasn’t any fun. Sorry I interrupted things.”

“It’s okay. I’m off to spend time with my girl.”

I grab a wine glass and head upstairs, where I find Presley in my T-shirt and her hair up in a messy bun.

I walk over to her and cage her against the counter she’s standing next to.

There is a bar with a small fridge here.

She leans her head back as I tip mine down.

I kiss her softly, but it quickly turns hot.

I make love to her on the counter before we cuddle and watch TV.

She got me hooked on her show, Wednesday.

We settle in with a glass of wine for her and a beer for me.

### CHAPTER

### TEN

### PRESLEY

It's been a couple of days since the funeral.

The FBI agents called and said they would meet us at Ham's place this evening.

I'm nervous because I have no clue what is going on, but Alan told me it would be good for me to talk to them.

He did and learned a lot of information.

He won't tell me because he said they asked him not to.

I haven't been home except to get my car and pack a bag. Ham wants me to stay with him, and honestly, I'm fine with that. I don't want to be alone right now, and I love waking up in his arms.

I'm currently looking over the dolphin data we collected the day we found Leah's body.

We are supposed to go out again tomorrow to collect the shark tags.

The police want to check if any of our tagged sharks might have attacked Leah.

For the first time in my life, I don't want to go out on the ocean.

I want to stay in the lab and hide away from the reality that an animal I have so much respect for aided in the death of my best friend.

I know she was dead before she went into the water, but it still freaks me out.

I've woken up several nights from nightmares, picturing her screaming for help, and no one was there to save her from the attack.

My phone beeps next to me, and I look at the screen.

Ham

Sprite, I'll be there in about fifteen minutes to pick you up. Thought you'd like to be distracted for a little bit before we head home.

Something in my chest warms at the thought of "home." It's turning into that in only a matter of weeks.

When my phone beeps again, I expect it to be Ham.

Professor Blackman

I've spoken to your advisor about your distractions. Are you sure this is the course of action you want to take?

I tip my head back and roll my eyes. I've ignored his numerous phone calls, starting right after the funeral when we were at Walker and Hanna's. I had to turn off my phone because he wouldn't stop calling that day. And now, here he is, messing with my career.



Me

Sir, I've already spoken to my advisor. He has told me I'm still on track to graduate in a year and a half. If I buckle down, as I plan to, I can even do it by next December. Thank you for your concern, but I'll be fine.

I take a moment to collect myself before heading out with my backpack and purse over my arm. As I pass Margo, she whispers something to her friend, and I do everything I can to ignore them.

Ham pulls up as I reach the parking lot, and I wait for him to jump out and get my door like he likes.

He leans down for a kiss before helping me into the Jeep.

I know I'm falling for him, but I need to make sure I don't fall too hard.

When my research is finished here and I have to return to Miami, it will kill me to leave him behind.

I'm going to have to start staying at my house again to put a bit of space between us.

"Where are we going?" I ask when he gets into the driver's seat.

"It's a surprise."

"You know I like surprises?"

"I'm learning that."

We drive through town and pull up to a facility I've passed before but didn't realize

until now was an assisted living center. I turn to Ham, who is smiling at me, before he gets out and comes around to help me out of the Jeep.

Ham laces our fingers together, and I start to get nervous for a different reason.

I don't want to see Julia, and I hope his brother likes me.

I've tried to forget that Julia has a crush on Ham and used Win against us.

But I also know if it came down to it, I'd let Ham go for Win.

His brother might be a grown man, but he's also a child in his mind.

I've learned more and more about him from Flo.

She told me he's non-communicative, and when he can't get things across, he gets upset.

We step through the doors, and several people turn to look at us.

Ham says hello and keeps walking, leading me further into the building.

We pass through another set of doors into a section of the facility designated for bedridden individuals.

I spot Julia at the nurses' station, and she quickly turns away when she meets my gaze.

I'm relieved she isn't going to cause a scene in front of everyone, but it's a bit unsettling knowing I'm the reason she was taken off Win's care.

Ham stops in front of a door and knocks once before opening it.

Lying in bed, wearing a T-shirt and shorts, is a man, not a boy like I imagined.

He has a bit of a dark, scruffy beard and the same curly hair as Ham, though his sides aren't shaved, so he has waves everywhere.

He's quite handsome. He doesn't show any expression as his dark brown eyes watch us.

His gaze briefly shifts to our hands before settling on Ham.

"Hey, little brother. How is it hanging today?" Of course, Win doesn't answer him. He looks at our hands again. "This is my girlfriend, Presley. I thought I'd bring her by to meet you."

"Hello, Winslow. Sorry, I just came from work." I apologize for my attire. "If I had known he was bringing me here, I'd have dressed up more. How is your day?" I ask, even though I know he won't respond. Still, I want to include him in the conversation.

I let go of Ham's hand and glance around the room, which is decorated in a combination of underwater scenes and comic book images.

"Oh, I've dived here," I say, pointing to an image of a popular night dive in Hawaii with manta rays.

I spin around when I hear a grunt, my gaze shifting between Ham and Win.

"Yeah, buddy, she's probably dived in more exotic places than I have."

It's as if I can see the questions in his eyes as they focus on me again. I walk over to the bed and sit in the chair beside it. Ham leans against the chair and rests his hand on my shoulder.

I tell Win about my father, then I talk about what I do and my diving. He stares at me the whole time, taking in everything I say. A part of me is sure he's still in there. He's not the child I was led to believe. He's a man with the urge to learn more.

"I could bring you some pictures of dives and sharks, if you'd like?"

He nods his head, and Ham squeezes my shoulder.

We visit with him for another hour before Ham says we have to go. I pat Win's hand before we leave, and he squeezes my fingers.

"It was lovely to meet you. May I come back and visit with you again?"

He squeezes my hand again, and I smile at him before I take Ham's hand.

"Don't be making moves on my girl, little brother." Ham jokes before he bumps his fist against Win's open palm.

I wave as we walk out. When we return to the Jeep, Ham turns me and lifts my chin up.

"You're amazing, sprite. He's never nodded before. His new nurse has been working with him more on physical therapy, hoping he'll get more motion out of his upper body. Maybe someday his mind will unlock, and he'll talk too." He kisses me softly and then helps me into the Jeep.

"He wants to learn and do more than just lie in bed. Have his new nurse start him on

some water therapy. I know there's a way we can get him into a swim with dolphins, if you'd like?" I'm excited and want to help, because I can see Win is still in there.

"Baby, you better stop, or I'm taking you to Vegas and marrying your ass right now. You're wonderful."

"Don't tease a girl like that." I laugh. "Besides, I've always dreamed of an elaborate proposal on the water," I tell him jokingly, but the look in his eyes isn't playful. It's serious.

I swallow and quickly turn away, trying to focus on anything but the warmth spreading through my chest at his declaration. I do want to hear him say he loves me. Holy shit! Did I just think that? Panic starts to rise, and when his hand lands on my thigh, I jump.

"Relax, sprite. When I propose, you'll know it. You'll also be ready for it," he says in his deep voice, calm and determined.

As we pull through the gate into his driveway, I'm overcome by a sense of dread when I see the unmarked car parked in front of his house. The special agents walk through the gate, and Ham presses a button, closing us all in before leading us up the path to the front door.

I don't say anything because I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say. I don't even know why they are here. I already told the police the last time I saw Leah was that Saturday night at the club. I told them who she was with and that I'd left her messages, but she never responded.

Ham guides us to the living room and sits beside me. He puts his arm around me against the back of the sofa, but I can tell he's just as worried about this as I am. His body is tight, and he's not as relaxed as he wants them to think.

“Miss Blanchard, we know you told the police that you last saw Leah on the Saturday night before her body was discovered. We’ve also spoken to the man you identified she was dancing with. But can you tell us if you know of any of these women?”

The agent lays out four pictures of blond women. My throat tightens, and my stomach churns. I stare down at the pictures and then jump up and run for the bathroom. I barely make it to the toilet before I’m vomiting everything in my system.

The door clicks shut behind me, but I can’t stop long enough to look. Then Ham’s strong arms wrap around me, and I break down. Sobs rip from me as I start dry heaving.

I feel the cool washcloth against my face and finally manage to look up. Ham is wrapped around me, holding me together, while Flo stands at the sink, rinsing the cloth under the water. I choke and turn back to the toilet.

“I know them all,” I cry, my voice breaking as I continue to dry heave, my stomach empty.

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*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm*

I don't know how long I sit there, but when the nausea finally subsides and I can breathe without the ache in my chest, Ham lifts me into his arms and carries me out to the living room.

The agents are still here, and I try to speak, but my throat hurts too much.

I rinsed my mouth, but I didn't brush my teeth.

Ham keeps me cradled on his lap as he sits back down on the sofa.

"What does this mean?" Ham asks the agents.

"We don't know. How do you know these women?" Agent Brownley asks me. He's tall with gray hair, a bit on the skinny side, and wears glasses. Like Agent Harkness, he's dressed in a black suit, but Harkness is blond.

Agent Harkness hands the photos to Ham, and I can't stop the fresh set of tears from falling. I take the pictures from him and riffle through them. Memories flash through my mind.

"This one used to hang out with my stepsister, Clara, when we were freshman," I say, holding up her picture.

"She left midterm. Everyone thought she flunked out because she partied more than studied." She was curvy and tall.

I don't mention the time she cornered me in the commons and punched me when I

tried to stand up to her.

“These two went to boarding school with Clara and me. They came to visit her in Miami during our senior year, after running into her in Ft. Lauderdale over spring break.”

My gut clenches when I look at the last picture. This girl hurt me worse than the others.

“This one wasn’t a friend of mine.” I shift off Ham’s lap, but he holds me tight to his side. He can sense that I’m in pain. “This one slept with my boyfriend when I was at NSU Guy Harvey. She also assaulted me.”

Ham’s arms flex around me, and I look up, thinking these men must think I had something to do with this.

“I would never hurt her, though,” I say quietly. “I filed a restraining order against her. When she was expelled, I never saw her again. I did run into my ex once in Miami before I moved here, but we don’t talk anymore.”

“Tell us about the assault?” the agents ask, and I take a deep breath.

Several times, Ham has asked me about the scar, but I haven’t told him exactly what happened. He felt it once while tracing my tattoo. I had the scar covered with a large shark, swimming through an underwater scene. It matched the one Leah had, but hers had dolphins instead. That’s when it hits me.

“Oh my God. Someone killed all these women and then killed Leah.”

The pain in my heart is almost too much. I lean forward and start to hyperventilate. A bag is pushed into my hand, and I breathe in and out of it.



“May I call you Presley?” one of the agents asks me, but I can’t look up to see which one. My mind is racing, trying to understand what this all means.

Ham

As I watch Presley lose her shit, I’m doing everything I can to control the rage boiling through my blood.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. What have you done to stop this person? How did he get Leah? Is Presley in danger?” I spew out all the questions in one breath.

Presley turns to me with wild eyes before they roll back, and she passes out.

I hold her to me and look at my mom. “Call an ambulance. Call Walker too, please.”

“I’ll take care of it.” She rushes out of the room.

“This interview is over until we get Presley taken care of.” I don’t even want to think about the amount of danger she’s in.

When the EMTs arrive, they decide to take her in, and I ride in the back of the ambulance with her. I’m not leaving her side, especially if she’s in danger.

The short ride over to Stock Island, where the hospital is located, takes no time at all. As we rush inside, a nurse blocks me and directs me to wait in the lobby.

“I’m not fucking leaving her.” I start to argue, but Walker holds me back.

I’m so glad he got here as fast as he did, or I’d be dealing with security right now. The special agents walk in and flash their badges at the nurse.

“He’s with her, and we want him in there as soon as you stabilize her.”

An hour later, after lots of pacing, they finally call me back.

A nurse leads me to her room. Presley is lying on the bed, looking so small.

Her shoulders shake as she cries. I walk right over and climb into bed with her, wrapping my body around hers.

The nurse tries to tell me to get out of the bed, but I hold a hand up to stop her.

“You want her calm. Look.” I point at Presley, who turns and wraps around me too.

“Okay.” The nurse leaves, and we lie there for a while before a doctor walks in.

“Miss Blanchard,” he starts but stops when he sees me.

“You can talk in front of him,” she says against my chest, not pulling away.

“You’re free to go. I have a prescription for you for some sleeping pills, and I gave you a shot to help with the anxiety.

If you have another attack, I’d go see a specialist. I’ll give you some referrals.

” He turns to look at me. “She’ll need to take one pill to help her stay calm and let her sleep. ”

“Okay.”

The doctor excuses himself, and we wait for the nurse to come back with the discharge papers.

Thirty minutes later, I carry her out to the lobby, where the agents are waiting with Walker.

“Presley, we aren’t sure if you are in danger, but we’d like you to keep an eye out. We’d like to talk to you more, if you are up to it.”

“She’s not up to it,” I answer for her, and she holds me tighter, letting me know she agrees. “Let’s go, Walker.”

I follow behind him as he leads us to his truck. I climb into the back with her and buckle her into the seat. She clings to me. By the time we get home, she’s asleep against my chest.

“Should I ask?”

“Not right now. I don’t know everything. When I do, I’ll tell you. Presley isn’t ready for us to go over everything again, but needless to say, there are several bodies around my girl.”

“Fuck,” Walker says as he pulls away.

### CHAPTER

### ELEVEN

### HAM

Presley has kept the agents away, not wanting to go over everything again. It's been a couple of weeks, and all I can think about is keeping her close. She's staying with me all the time now.

Her parents called right after the hospital visit and weren't happy that we didn't call them right away. When I tried to talk her father into hiring her some security, he told me there is no evidence that she's being watched or followed.

I'm going to reach out to a friend of mine to see if he can help me out.

For now, I drive her around wherever she needs to go.

I have the shared location function on her phone turned on.

I also have her call me throughout the day when we're apart.

She still needs to work, and so do I. Otto is getting frustrated with me, but Walker understands after everything he went through with Hanna.

I've decided to gather everyone together today for a snorkeling trip. Presley has taken over my office to work on her studies. She's currently in there studying for an exam,

so I give her a couple of hours before interrupting her.

“Okay, baby, time to stretch. You’ve been sitting too long.”

“Oh, thank goodness. My back is killing me.”

She stands up and stretches before walking over to me. I lift her up, and she wraps around me as we kiss. I press her into the wall and contemplate cancelling so I can finish what we’ve started, but I don’t want to let my friends down, and she needs this.

The only time Presley has been in or around the water, other than pools, has been when her team heads out to retrieve the satellite trackers from the sharks or dolphins.

She has decided to continue Leah’s studies, and she’s had more focus on dolphins than on sharks.

But I know she’ll miss her sharks if she changes her area of research.

“Come on.” I pull away from her neck, stopping myself, and let her go. “Go put on a swimsuit. I have a surprise for you.”

“Are we leaving the house?”

“Yep, so some kind of cover-up or shorts are needed too.”

“Okay.”

She rushes off, and it’s good to see her happy and not stressing out.

When she comes back down, she’s in a green tropical print one-piece with shorts on. She turns, and I about swallow my tongue. The back hooks at the top of her shoulder

blades, then laces up from the bra strap to down under her shorts.

I walk over to her, and sure enough, hanging out the bottom of her shorts is the yellow string tying her suit together.

“You’re really trying to kill me here, babe. I’m already contemplating cancelling, but I don’t want to. Then you come down in this scrap of fabric that’s going to have me hard as fuck the rest of the day.”

She dances away from me and smiles as she bends over, showing me her ass as she slips on her green Converse. I’m fucking lost for this girl.

I move up behind her and press my hard cock into her backside, and she moans.

“Save it for later, big boy,” she coos before wiggling her hips and moving away from me.

I grab the bag I packed for us, and we head out to the Jeep.

We make it to the marina where Walker chartered a boat.

“Where are we going?” She looks at me, and for the first time, I see trepidation in her eyes.

Her arms are folded across her chest, shielding herself. Her leg bounces anxiously, and I know she’s moments away from an anxiety attack. We saw a specialist, who she’s talking to and working through some issues with.

I reach into my bag for a piece of sour candy and hand it to her. She opens it immediately and takes a quick bite. It’s one of the tools she uses to refocus her thoughts.

“Baby, we’re going snorkeling out at the lighthouse. You love the water, and I hate that you fear it now. Come on.” I get out of the Jeep and grab my bag. By the time I reach her side, she’s calmer and takes my hand.

“Thank you,” she says as I lead her to the slip where the boat is. Otto, Walker, Hanna, and her parents are all waiting for us. Walker and Hanna’s boys have life jackets on and are bouncing with excitement.

We set off. Once we reach our destination, the captain puts up the dive flag, and everyone gears up.

I stand with Presley, holding her hand, as she jumps off the dive platform. When she comes up, she’s got a smile on her face, and her eyes are bright.

I was right about her suit, it’s worse than I thought. Her hip is exposed through the ties, and I’m seriously considering taking her away from the boat to have my way with her.

She dives under, and her ass comes up. I follow along behind her. She points out different fish, and we both wear ourselves out before swimming back to the boat where the others are waiting for us.

We enjoy a late lunch together and then head back to Key West. Presley hasn’t stopped smiling. When she tips her head back, letting the wind blow across her face, I lean over and kiss her cheek. She squeezes my hand, and I know in this moment, I’m falling in love with this woman.

Presley

My body feels light, and I’m calm for what feels like the first time in weeks. I look over to Ham as he drives us back home. Today was perfect.

“Thank you so much for not giving up on me. Today was exactly what I needed.” I reach over and touch his thigh. He turns to look at me.

“Baby, I’m never giving up on you. Ever,” he says, looking me directly in the eye, his chin lowered a bit and his tone firm.

I can feel words I don’t want to say yet right there at the surface.

I’m about to say something when Ham’s whole demeanor changes.

His fists clench around the steering wheel, and the leather lets out a small groan.

His muscles flex, and I follow his gaze.

Sitting in front of his house are the agents I’ve been avoiding for two weeks.

“Stay here, babe,” Ham orders as he pulls into the driveway.

I reach across and hold on to his arm. “It’s okay, honey. I need to talk to them. I can’t hide away from the truth.”

“Okay, but we do this together.”

“Yes.”

The agents meet us at the back of the Jeep.

“I guess you needed to talk.” Ham grits out.

“There was another body.”



I close my eyes and feel Ham press a sour rope into my hand. I open it and take a bite before walking toward the house. Part of me worries this woman is dead because I didn't talk to them, but I know that's not true. This can't have anything to do with me.

This time, when we sit down around the coffee table, I'm prepared and ready. I wait to see what they are going to say before I offer any information. My father was upset I spoke to the police without counsel, but I know they don't think I'm involved.

"How are you doing, Presley?" Special Agent Brownley asks me, and I shrug.

"I'm still dealing with the reality that several women I knew—and my best friend—are all dead."

"We did some digging and found the police report and restraining order regarding your attack. You don't need to explain."

I look at Ham, who I just told a few nights ago how I got the scar. I'm lucky she had no clue the femoral artery is on the inside of the leg, or I'd be dead. That had been her intent. I didn't tell Ham I know who instigated the attack. My parents have no clue what happened. I kept it to myself.

"Like we said, there was another victim. She was found in a canal in Miami. Just like the others were found in waterways too. And like the others, she was injected with tetrodotoxin."

"Puffer fish poisoning?" I stand up and pace over to the sliding glass doors that look out at the pool.

The reality of the situation isn't lost on me.

If anything, this is more serious than they know.

I turn back around. “You know that only a handful of marine biologists would remove tetrodotoxin from a puffer fish. You have to kill the fish in order to extract the toxin. It’s against everything we believe in.

Everything I believe in. Plus, that biologist would have to know how to centrifuge.

” I pause, trying to think if anyone I know would do this.

“We know. That’s why we came to you. Do you know anyone that could do that?”

“A marine biologist that isn’t just that but a chemist too.” I shake my head. “I honestly can’t think of anyone right now.” I think of what Leah went through. The poison is so dangerous; there are no countermeasures for it.

“Was it a lethal dose? Is that what killed them?” Ham asks as he stands up and moves to my side. I lean into his body, scared.

“We think that’s how he gets them under his control.

Leah had the highest amount in her system.

She died within moments of the injection.

She still had undigested food in her system from what you claimed she ate on Saturday night.

Her friend from that night said she went to the restroom and never returned.

He thought she just decided to leave on her own. ”

“Wait.” I push away from Ham and shake my head. If I hadn’t left her, she could still be alive. “I don’t understand. I thought you were inferring I was a target, but I was there too. I could have been poisoned too.”

“No. She disappeared about an hour after you left.” Harkness stands up and faces us. “I’m with the BAU. We think the guy responsible is obsessed with you.”

My body locks up, and I can feel the panic rising again. “No.” I shake my head as fear sets in. “That’s not possible. I’ve never done anything to attract anyone this dangerous. Wouldn’t I notice a stranger following me?”

“We don’t think this is a stranger. Think about it carefully. He’s going to be in his forties or fifties. He is overly kind to you, almost to the point of familiar. He’ll probably be highly educated.”

“Do you know how many men that describes? My father could be on that list. No, it isn’t a marine biologist. Not at all.” I turn away from them, not wanting to listen anymore.

“Please look at this photo and try to deny this,” Harkness says, and Ham gasps. I turn back to look and can’t believe what I’m looking at.

“I don’t know her.” I turn away again to face the pool. Trying to get the image out of my mind.

“No, you don’t. She’s not from around here. She’s from Seattle. She was here on vacation at Disney when she was kidnapped. There is only one reason for him to kill her.”

“No. I didn’t do this. I don’t know anyone that crazy.” I wave my hand toward the picture of the woman who could be my twin. The resemblance is so striking I can’t

get it out of my mind.

“Presley, please understand we aren’t blaming you for this. We need your help. We have to leave the Keys for a bit and will be back in a few weeks. If you need us, we’ll leave you our cards.”

I hear them talking quietly to Ham as I stand there wanting to deny what I just heard and saw. I try to shake the images from my mind. Someone is killing people who hurt me or look like me. What could I have done to attract such a sick individual?

Ham wraps his arms around me, and I lean into his embrace. He leans down and kisses my neck. I turn and try to use his body to forget everything I just learned, and he lets me.

### CHAPTER

### TWELVE

### PRESLEY

I spin and check myself out in the mirror again. My body is slimmer than it was a month ago. The stress of learning that I'm not only the target of a serial killer but that my best friend's death might be my fault has made it hard to eat.

The pale pink, almost shell-colored skirt contrasts against my darker, tanned skin.

I spend every day working hard or out in the sunshine.

Even with the cooler November air, I'm still out in it as much as I can.

I've been focused on work, Ham, and school.

Tonight, Ham is taking me out to dinner on our first real, official date.

I teased him that we went from working together to sleeping together without really dating. It was only a joke. I love how our relationship has progressed. Tomorrow, he gets to meet my second favorite male, Griff. My little brother is flying in to spend two weeks with us.

Ham wanted me to stay at his house for the two weeks that Griff is here, but I didn't want to do that.

Plus, my father asked me not to. He said that Griff would be confused when Ham and I broke up, and he didn't want Griff to become attached.

I didn't tell my father that I wasn't planning on breaking up with Ham.

I'm sure I can manage to get my doctorate and still be with him.

I don't have to travel around the world with research teams; I can stay right here and work with Dr. Miller.

He's already asked me to join his research team permanently.

He can become my advisor and help me get my doctoral from here in the Keys. I won't have to return to Miami.

I grab my lightweight jacket as I head out of my bedroom toward the front door, knowing Ham will be waiting. As I round the corner, he's opening it but stops. I watch his eyes move up and down my body.

My light heather-gray top is sleeveless with a mock turtleneck.

"I have a jacket," I say, holding it up.

He's been telling me all day to prepare for the rain that is coming.

The meteorologists say the amount of rain heading our way could set some records.

We're no longer in hurricane season, but that doesn't mean we're in the clear yet.

He walks over to me and pulls me into his body. I lean into him, needing his comfort. I missed him all day. Coming back to this little place wasn't the same as returning

home to him and his house. When I finally look up at him, he leans down and kisses me, making me forget everything but him.

“I missed you today, sprite,” he says, his deep voice rumbling as he pulls away.

“Missed you too.” I sigh as I slip my jacket over my outfit. When I reach for my clutch, Ham is right there behind me.

“Baby, we could still have Griff stay at our place. He’d have his own room. It will be fine. You don’t have to stay here. It might be safer for you at home too.”

We’ve had this discussion over and over ever since I decided to come back here. I didn’t tell Ham about the argument I had with my father over staying with Ham and Griff coming. He threatened not to let my brother visit if we didn’t stay here.

“We’ve discussed this. Griff will be more comfortable here. He doesn’t know you yet, and I don’t want to cause him any stress.”

After Ham helps me into the Jeep, I lean back against the headrest, my mind drifting back to the conversation with my father.

“I cannot believe, after all your studies, you’re going to jeopardize your degree by flaking out in your last year. We have made so many sacrifices for you over the years, and this is how you’re going to repay your family?”

I struggle to understand what sacrifices they’ve made. I’m paying for this with my own money. My inheritance from my mother and her parents is what covers my tuition and everyday expenses.

“Dad—”

“Don’t you Daddy me. I won’t let you ruin your life this way. If you’re not careful, you’ll have to make a choice between him and your future.”

“Baby,” Ham says, breaking me from my thoughts.

“Yeah?” I turn to look at him. As always, I wonder what he sees in me. I’ve been told most of my life that I’m not beautiful, just cute.

“You were thinking hard. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lie, not wanting him to worry. He already has enough to worry about with the serial killer still on the loose, who, all of a sudden, has gone quiet for the last month and a half.

I turn toward the window, watching the boats out on the water making their way into the harbor, seeking shelter from the incoming storm.

“Okay.” He doesn’t push.

A few moments later, we pull up to the steak house and stop at the valet.

My door opens, but I’ve learned over the last few months that Ham likes to help me out.

When he comes around, I reach for his hand, and he takes it.

Once my feet are firmly planted in my heels, I let him lead me inside.

Women check him out, and it makes me again question what he sees in me.

I glance over at him once we’re settled in our seats. He orders a glass of wine for me



and a beer for himself, then places the order for appetizers and our meals. He knows exactly what I like and what I'll want.

“Why?” I ask him, curiosity finally getting the best of me.

“Why what, sprite?” He reaches across the table for my hand.

“Why me?” I tip my head to the side and raise an eyebrow.

“Baby, is that what's wrong? Are you doubting things because I didn't fight harder to keep you under my roof?”

I shake my head. “No, but now that you mention it, that does bring up things.”

He releases my hand, and I feel like I just screwed up everything. My heart pounds hard in my chest as my eyes start to tear up. I did it. I pushed him away.

Ham stands up and moves his chair right next to me. He sits down and wraps an arm around me before leaning toward my ear.

“Baby, first of all, I want you in our home. I want you in my bed every night.” He leans closer.

“I'm going to miss waking you up with my tongue and cock.

” I shiver at his words and feel a blush warm my cheeks.

“But I'm not going to push you. I'll just be staying at your house from now on.

Your little brother is going to have to get used to us.

I'm not going anywhere." He kisses my cheek.

"As for your other question, from the moment you looked into my eyes after blowing me a kiss, I realized you were mine. I want every day with you."

I sigh and lean into him as the server returns with our drinks.

I try to relax and enjoy our date. We talk about our day and come up with a plan for picking up Griff in the morning. As we sit there, we look up and see Otto approaching our table. He's with a girl, and from the looks of it, he's been drinking. He's not drunk, but he's loud and happy.

He pulls a chair from another table and sits down with us.

"We're going dancing. Ham thought you wouldn't want to go out with us. I think you'd like it. You haven't been out since you first started dating. Come on." He pressures us.

"Okay," I offer, knowing Ham wants to keep an eye on him but also wants to spend time with me.

I don't want him to feel torn between us.

Ham told me that he's always made sure that Otto has someone with him when he goes out because Otto isn't always responsible.

He can act out in dangerous situations. It's part of their former life.

Every dive could have been their last, but Otto took it to the extreme and Ham never wanted Otto to have to face the fact that he hurt someone.

That he wouldn't have to live with what the driver who hurt Win has to.

Such as prison or ruining a young man's life.

So, for tonight I'll suck up my feelings and help Ham with Otto.

"Yes! You better show up. We'll see you there." Otto and the girl leave, and I turn to Ham.

"I was hoping to take you home and maybe go for a swim." He chuckles, and I blush again.

"I know how you worry about Otto. I thought it would be better to take the decision out of your hands. We can go and hang out for a bit and make sure he's okay."

"You say the sweetest things." He leans down and kisses the side of my neck.

Ham

Watching my girl as she sleeps has become one of my favorite things to do.

She was amazing last night. She knew I'm not really keen on Otto going out by himself.

He still acts the same way he did when we were diving all the time, before we quit to open the dive school.

On the islands, it's easier for him to walk or get a ride share instead of getting behind the wheel, but I still worry.

I don't want him to hurt himself or someone else. I finally told him my brother's

story, but he just shook it off and said he doesn't drive when he drinks. Someday, he'll learn that partying and irresponsibility can lead to other consequences besides driving drunk.

I shake off those thoughts as I drag my fingers up Presley's soft back and lean down to kiss her.

She sighs and wiggles her sexy hips. I brought her home last night.

I couldn't stand the fact that she wanted to stay at her place.

I don't understand why, and I think it's time to get the truth out of her.

I grin wickedly as I continue to kiss down her spine until I reach the top of her ass.

"Mmm... I love waking up like this." She sighs sleepily.

"You could do this every day."

I drag the sheet down her body, revealing her ass cheeks.

Leaning over them, I bite each one, and Presley pushes closer to me.

I don't disappoint. I move behind her and pull her up onto her knees, spreading her a bit before burying my face into her pussy from behind.

She moans again and starts moving around.

"Baby, don't you want to wake up like this every morning," I say against her folds.

"Yes," she moans.

“Yes, you do, or yes, keep doing that?” I dive back in and thrust my tongue into her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm*

“Hamilton,” she purrs, and I keep up until her body starts to tighten with the pending orgasm. I pull away and wipe my hand along my lips and beard. “Why’d you stop?” She looks over her shoulder at me.

“Tell me why you don’t want to stay here.”

She huffs and starts to roll over, but I hold her in position. She growls and groans at me. I lean over her body and slide my cock against her sex from behind.

“Please, Ham. I need you,” she begs, and I want to give in, but I hold fast.

“Tell me, baby,” I say in her ear before biting the lobe.

“Ugh, okay.” She pops her ass back, and I hit her entrance a bit. “My dad said if I stay here, it will confuse Griff, and he won’t let him come.”

“What the fuck?” I brace up on my hands over her but keep our cores tight. “I thought your dad liked me.” I didn’t really, but I don’t want her to know that every time I’ve spoken to him, he’s been gruff and rude with me. He acts like I’m beneath her, and it bothers me.

“He thinks you’re distracting me from my studies. I told him that’s not true and that you gave up an office. He also said it’s too soon for us to be living together. I told him about the serial killer, but he said I was overreacting. That Thea spoke to Clara, and she said it’s no big deal.”

She buries her face in the pillow, and I decide we’ll finish what we are doing, then

I'm going to do my job and take care of my girl by calling her father myself.

"You'll stay here. There is a spare room for Griff. He needs to get used to me being a part of your life. I don't want to hide us. Plus, I'll be staying at your place if you're there."

"Okay."

I pull back and angle her hips perfectly as I slide deeply into her heat.

My eyes cross from the overwhelming sensation.

She cries out into her pillow when I'm fully inside her.

I work in and out of her before I slip one of my hands around her body and rub tight circles around her clit.

She cries out and comes, and it takes everything in me not to follow.

I continue thrusting into her, over and over, through her orgasm and up to another.

This time, when she screams my name, her hands clutching for purchase on the sheets, I come deep inside her.

The thought of knocking her up enters my mind, but I won't do that to her.

She has plans, and I want her to accomplish them.

An hour later, we're standing in my kitchen, and my mother walks in.

"Would you like me to make something special for your brother tonight?" She turns

to Presley.

I watch my sprite for a moment to see if she's going to deny what we discussed earlier.

"His favorite food is beef stroganoff. I was going to learn how to make it, but I haven't yet."

"I'll teach you. Do you want to run to the market with me? We can walk around and pick out some veggies to go with dinner. And some fresh bread."

"That sounds wonderful." Presley smiles.

I know she likes staying here with my mom. My mom loves it; she always wanted a daughter to teach. Win and I learned to cook from her, but having a girl is different.

We finish our breakfast, then load up in my mom's car for the farmers' market.

I follow behind them, pulling the folding wagon Mom uses when she visits the two markets around Key West. Watching my sprite and my mom brings a warmth to my chest. My mom points out a booth for them to check out, and Presley laughs at something she says.

When she turns to look for me, I smile back at her.

This right here is a moment I want forever.

The two most important women in my life, happy and together.

A couple of hours later, Presley fidgets with the leg of her jeans as I park at the airport. The plane is due to land in fifteen minutes, and since Griff is flying alone, she



has to go get him from the gate.

We walk in together, our hands laced together. “It will be okay, baby. I think he’ll like staying at my place. I have game systems, and Otto said he’d come over and hang out a couple of days too.”

“I just don’t know what to do. He’s only ten years old. My father said he’ll be confused when we break up.”

I stop in the middle of the airport and turn her into my body. “Do you plan to break up with me?” I ask the question I dreaded the answer to a couple of months ago. I knew then she had an expiration date for us. Now, I don’t think so. I’m not going to let her get away from me.

She moistens her lips, and I want to kiss her, but we don’t have time for me to get lost in her.

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t plan on it.

If we have to do distance, I think it will be okay.

But Dr. Miller already said he’s putting in the paperwork to become my advisor, and with my focus changing to dolphins, it should go through.

” She reaches up and presses her palm against my cheek.

“I don’t see myself ending this, but what about you? ”

“Never happening.”

This time, I can’t stop myself and lean down to press my lips to hers. We break apart

and continue to the desk. Presley hands her ID to the airline representative, and she receives the documentation she needs to pass through security to get to Griff's gate.

### CHAPTER

### THIRTEEN

### PRESLEY

Standing in the kitchen with Flo, I watch my brother and Ham playing video games.

But that's not the reason I'm fidgety and hiding in the kitchen.

Clara is here. After Ham called my father and told him we were going to stay with him and that he better get used to him, my father informed him that Clara would be here for Thanksgiving.

I couldn't figure out why she would leave Miami and all her droves of friends to come down—until now.

She's been mooning over Ham all day since she arrived.

She keeps touching him, and I really want to rip her hands off.

Even now, as they sit on the sofa, she's practically on his lap. She didn't come to spend time with Griff. She came to try to steal my boyfriend.

I reach out and grab another carrot off the veggie platter and snap it between my fingers.

“Oh, Ham, that’s so funny. You’re so good at this,” Clara coos and touches him again.

“He doesn’t even care about her. Watch him,” Flo says next to me, and I look up at her in shock. But she points, and I watch as Ham moves. He stands up and moves to the other side of Griff, putting him between them.

“Here, buddy, sit with your sister,” Ham says, and when he turns to look at me, I smile softly.

“I’ll be right back.” Ham stalks to me and pulls me into his arms. “How much longer?” he whispers in my ear as he nibbles my neck.

I’m so glad he’s not taken with her at all.

Most guys fall at Clara’s feet with her beautiful red hair and curvy body. He pulls back and kisses me deeply.

“Ugh, you guys, stop, there’s a kid present,” Clara says as she stomps over to the counter.

“It’s okay. He’s always kissing Leylee.” Griff walks over to the counter just as the doorbell rings.

Flo walks to the door and opens it up for Walker, Hanna, and her family. Her parents came back down for the holiday. Otto walks in behind them. I help Liz with the tray she’s carrying.

Ham introduces everyone, and we proceed to have a wonderful dinner.

I love the feeling of family with everyone around.

This is what I missed growing up. Even before my mother died, we never had friends over for dinner like this or spent time together.

My father was always busy working over the holidays.

He'd say that whales don't know it's Christmas—or whatever holiday it was.

As I walk out of Flo's pool house with the medication she forgot, I'm stopped when I see Clara sitting on one of the loungers.

“How long do you think you can keep him from realizing you're a clingy bitch, Elvis?”

I didn't always hate that nickname, now I do. I have for a long time, but she makes it worse.

“I'm not clingy.” My voice doesn't sound as confident as I wish it did.

“Yes, you are. You're staying here to make sure no other girl is coming home with him.”

“No, she's staying here because this is her home.

She is staying here because I want her here.

And, Clara, don't ever call her Elvis again.

She's not the clingy one; I am.” Ham's voice comes from the darkness, and I see him step out of the bathroom by the outdoor shower.

He walks right over to me and pulls me into his body.

“Walker, Hanna, and their crew are getting ready to leave.”

“Okay.” I tip my head up to look at him, and he leans down to kiss me. He turns to walk into the house. “Give me a moment,” I tell him and watch as Clara walks toward me. I hold up my hand to stop her. “Clara, please don’t mess this up for me,” I beg her.

“You’re such a spoiled bitch.” She pushes past me, and I decide to let it go.

We say goodbye to everyone, and I head for the kitchen to help Flo clean up. I notice my phone sitting on the counter near Clara, and she’s looking at stuff on her phone.

“I was wondering where I left that.” I pick up the phone and slip it into my back pocket.

“Well, I’m going to bed,” Clara announces and heads for the spare room Ham said she could stay in.

Part of me hates that she’s staying here. She’s already cornered me once after Ham got mad at her. She squeezed the crap out of my arm and told me she’s pissed I made her look like an idiot. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her she didn’t need my help to do that.

I need to learn to stand up to her, but I can’t.

It’s just so hard. Even after all these years and all the pain she’s caused me, I still can’t do it.

Besides, I don’t want to upset my parents, not when they already are mad that Griff is staying here with us.

I want to point out that they got pregnant with Griff before they got married, so they can't judge me.

But again, I don't want to rock the boat more than it already is swaying.

Ham

Having Griff stay with us for the two weeks was a lot of fun. He's a cute kid and loves his big sister a lot. I noticed at Thanksgiving he's not as close to Clara as he is with Presley.

I pull Presley into my side as we wave goodbye to Griff. He takes the flight attendant's hand, and we watch them walk down the jetway toward the plane.

"He'll be back for another visit after his second term." I kiss the top of her head as she looks up at me.

"I'm going to miss him."

"Yeah, me too."

We took him to my dive school and started scuba lessons with him.

He's a natural, like his sister, and loves to be in the water.

He also went with us to visit Winslow after Thanksgiving.

The kid just craves being around family.

I wonder if after Presley gets her doctorate, she'd like him to come stay with us on a more regular basis.

We return to the Jeep, and I kiss her long and deep after getting her into her seat. We head home, where I proceed to lead her upstairs and make love to her before we head over to Walker and Hanna's for dinner.



### CHAPTER

### FOURTEEN

### PRESLEY

I look down at the most perfect gift he could have gotten me.

I've been collecting unique compasses for years, and this beautiful box, with an old nautical map etched into the top, is a perfect addition.

The compass inside resembles an old pocket watch.

When I push the latch and the top opens, there is a picture of Ham and me from one of our many day trips snorkeling.

"It's so you always find your way home to me," he says before kissing me.

Between the compass and the beautiful compass necklace with "I'd be lost without you" engraved on the back, I'm worried what I got him isn't as personal. He smiles and begins to unwrap the gift I got for him.

I had to contact an antiques dealer on the island to search for it, but I thought it was a good gift.

He opens the wooden box, similar to the one with my compass, and looks inside.

Nestled inside is an antique sextant. Just like I collect compasses, he collects sextants and other antique nautical items. I watch his long fingers brush over the surface, and he looks over his shoulder at me.

He sets it down and pulls me into his lap.

“I love it, sprite. It’s the best thing ever. I can’t believe you found it.”

“It’s a replica of an original J. Scott London. I tried to get you an original.”

“I don’t care; it’s the only one I don’t have.”

“I know.” I smile before he leans down and takes my lips in a deep kiss.

“Hello, kids, I’m still here.” Flo laughs, and we pull apart. “What time are your parents calling, Presley?” she asks me, and I look down at my watch and cringe. My father has been mad at me for weeks now.

My application to change my advisor was denied, and the university declared that I must return to Miami.

My father wants me to go, but I don’t. I’m tired of arguing with him.

Professor Blackman and he have been talking, trying to get me to focus completely on my studies.

I’m doing well and am still on track to graduate a year from May, exactly when I’m supposed to.

But my father wants me to push to graduate earlier because he’s got a research team in Australia that wants me to come down there. I don’t want to.

I called Morgan in New York to wish her a Merry Christmas. She and I discussed what's going on with my dad. She's mad at him and said he better come around or she'll kick his butt.

"They should be calling in about thirty minutes." I move off Ham's lap, and he tries to grab for me again. I giggle and start cleaning up the living room.

Our small tree is lit up, and there are even twinkle lights over the pool. We are going to Walker and Hanna's later for Christmas dinner. Not only did her parents come down, but so did her brother, his wife, and their daughter.

When my phone rings exactly twenty minutes later, I answer it and move outside.

"Hello, Dad, Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Presley," he says, but his voice is tight.

"Merry Christmas, Thea," I say, hearing her in the background.

"Merry Christmas, sweetie," she says, and I hear her move away from the line.

"Did you call Griff and your sister?" he asks, and I bite my lip.

"I called Griff as soon as I woke up. He's missing everyone."

"He'll be okay. These are the sacrifices he'll have to learn to make for a career. Sacrifices you don't seem to understand anymore." His tone is bitter, and I want to argue, but what's the point? Instead, I defend my little brother.

"He's only ten, Dad. Give him a break. Let him be a kid. Please. He doesn't need to be raised like Clara and I were."

“I’m his father, just like I’m yours. I know what’s best for you kids. Speaking of which, I have an update for you.”

“Sean, we discussed this.” I hear Thea again. “This isn’t the time, and it’s her choice.”

“Thea, she’s my daughter. I’ll tell her what’s best for her.”

I hear a huff, followed by a door slamming in the background.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“Professor Blackman and I have spoken to the doctoral board. Your request to change advisors and your path of study has been denied. However, if you return to Miami and take over teaching a class for one of the professors, your doctoral hours can be accelerated so you can graduate in December of next year, instead of a year and a half from now. There’s an Introduction to Marine Biology class starting in January that would be perfect for you.

Professor Blackman is looking forward to working with you on this course. ”

“No, Dad. I’m appealing the decision. I think Dr. Miller would be a better advisor.

He looks out for what’s in my best interest, not yours.

” I defend myself for the first time ever.

“Besides, Dad, I don’t want to go back to Miami.

I just got a call from the FBI agents; another body was found.

This one was petite and looked like me, but they dyed her hair blond. I don't want to risk myself or others."

"Clara told Thea there isn't a serial killer.

She said you're making it up for attention.

Darling, what do I need to prove to you to show that you don't need attention like that?

"His words hurt because it's not true. The only thing I've ever wanted from him is his time and complete attention, even if for just a moment. That's all, just a short moment.

"Someday you'll believe me. Just look it up." I'm about to hang up, but he stops me.

"Presley, think about what your mother would want you to do. You only have until the January term starts to make this decision. Merry Christmas." He hangs up, and I just sit there, staring at the phone.

I can't believe he just said that to me.

He hasn't mentioned my mother in years, and this is when he does it.

Ham

I step out through the sliding glass doors and see Presley sitting on the lounge.

She's staring at her phone, and tears are rolling down her face.

I don't know why her father is so against us being in a relationship.

I overheard her arguing with him recently, saying I'm not keeping her from her studies.

"Presley."

She startles when I say her name. I walk over, slide onto the chaise behind her, and pull her into my chest. She is stiff at first, but then softens and leans back into me.

"I don't understand. I've always done what I'm asked. I've never gotten into trouble, but he acts like I'm a disappointment to him."

"Baby, you aren't a disappointment."

"I was denied my doctoral advisor change because my father and Professor Blackman told the doctoral board not to approve it. They are demanding I come back to Miami."

"We can do that, babe. It's only a four-hour drive. I'm not worried about distance. Are you?"

She tips her head back and looks up at me.

I twist her around so she's facing me and we're lying back on the lounge.

Presley rests her chin on her hands on my chest. "I'm not afraid of the distance.

I trust you. It's just going to be hard to be without you all the time.

I also hate that my father says I'm being overly dramatic about the serial killer. "

"On that, I will have a talk with him."

I brush my hand through her hair. I really just want to take her upstairs and make love to her, but I know we have to leave soon.

I hate that she's going through this with her father.

He won't believe her about the serial killer because her stepsister is saying it's a lie.

Why he won't look it up for himself is beyond me.

I'm going to contact one of the Special Agents and have them get ahold of her father.

They can confirm they are looking at her being the object of this psycho.

"Please don't. I need to do this. I need to stand up to him." I don't tell her about my plan to contact the FBI.

"Okay, baby." I'll give her this chance, but one more time, and I'll be interfering.

We sit here, just her cuddled on my chest, and I feel complete with her in my arms and in our space.

"Merry Christmas, Ham," she coos as she slides up my body.

Her lips connect with mine, and I kiss her deeply.

My tongue dances with hers, and my body comes alive.

Every time I kiss her, my skin tingles with awareness.

She's mine, and I know it to my core. This woman is my forever. I'll do everything I can to keep her.

### CHAPTER

### FIFTEEN

### PRESLEY

My phone rings on the counter next to me, and I glance at it before ignoring the call.

I'm in the lab, studying the stomach contents of a shark that was found dead.

The necropsy revealed that he, along with a few others, was killed by several bullets to his body.

Damn poachers! Coast Guard officials arrested the man and his crew responsible for the act before turning the shark bodies over to us.

Now, I'm inspecting this one to determine what it possibly ate.

My phone rings again. I don't bother looking at the screen; I know who it is.

I don't want to talk to them. Ham and I are doing so well, and I'm finding it hard not to tell him how I feel.

He's so attentive and makes me a priority.

Only in the last few nights has he been busy at the dive school with the guys, doing extra lessons for clients.



When my phone rings for a third time, I decide to answer. I notice it's not my dad but Thea this time.

"Hello."

After our fight at Christmas, I've only texted my dad. I haven't called him. I didn't even call him for New Year's because I didn't want to talk to him after what he said about my mother.

"Hello, darling." Thea's voice comes across the line. "I know you don't want to speak to your father, but he has something important to show you."

"I don't want to fight anymore, Thea. I'm an adult, and I make my own decisions. I care a lot about Ham. I can see a future with him."

"Darling, we just don't want to see you hurt. Please just look."

My phone pings in my ear, and I pull it away. I see a picture of Ham with a brunette sitting on his lap, and the jealousy hits hard. My heart shatters, and the tears come instantly.

"I need to go." I hang up and secure my data, along with the samples I was working on, before heading out to my car.

I lean my head against the steering wheel and cry until my shoulders shake. This can't be happening to me again. A voice deep inside me says, "All men cheat." But it can't be true.

I pull up the picture and look at it again. I can't tell where it was taken, but the woman has her arms wrapped around his neck, and he's smiling up at her. He's smiled at me like that so many times.

I wipe my face and make the decision I should have months ago. My studies are more important.

When I pull out of the parking lot, I only have one thought. I'd already closed out the lease on my house. So all my stuff is already packed. Ham is working late at the dive school again, so I won't expect to see anyone at all.

I have my clothes packed and set a note on the counter for him to see when he comes in.

"Hey, sweet girl, what should we do this evening?" Flo asks from the sliding glass door. She takes one look at me and rushes over. "What's the matter? What happened?"

"I can't do this. Please give him this letter. I have to go. Thank you." She reaches for me, but I step back and rush out the door.

This changes everything. She'll call him, and he'll be here before I can get anything packed into my car. I don't know if I'm strong enough to face him yet. I know my heart will cave, and I'll listen to his lies, just like I did before.

In the end, I call a service to arrange for my things to be picked up as I head to Miami.

The four-hour drive takes me longer than expected because I have to pull over several times to dry my eyes.

I shut my phone off thirty minutes into the drive.

I couldn't handle the constant ringing and text message notifications going off.

I have a small studio condo I bought when I was a junior in college because I hated staying in the dorms. I call my service to let them know I'll be in later so they can get the condo ready for me. I had actually been contemplating selling it, but now I won't need to.

By the time I pull into my designated parking spot, I'm not just physically exhausted, but emotionally drained as well.

I grab the bag I packed at Ham's and slowly stumble my way up to my condo.

The loneliness hits me the moment I open the door, and the tears start flowing again.

I lock myself in and walk past the small kitchenette to the main living space where my bed and desk are.

I collapse onto the bed and wrap around one of the pillows as I cry myself to sleep.

There's a pounding on the door, and I blink my scratchy eyes. I walk over and peek through the peephole. Clara is standing there, huffing. I only open the door as far as the chain allows.

"Turn your phone on, drama queen. The parents have been trying to reach you."

"Fine." I try to close the door, but she sticks her hand out to stop me.

"Told you, you couldn't keep his eye for long." She sneers at me, and I slam the door closed.

I look around but don't see my phone. Then I remember the last place I saw it was on the passenger seat of my car. I wait a bit longer, hoping Clara is gone before I make my way down to the parking lot. Sure enough, there's my phone, exactly where I left

it.

I turn it on, and it instantly blows up. I text my father first.

Me

Got your wish. I'm in Miami. I'll call you on Sunday.

My phone rings, and I don't bother looking at it before answering, sure it's my father calling to gloat.

"Presley, where are you?" Ham's voice breaks through the line. He doesn't sound angry, just worried. My heart clenches for a moment before I can respond. "Sprite, please talk to me. I've been so worried about you."

"Why? Why didn't you just break up with me instead of cheating?" I cry, breaking down before I can lock myself back in my condo.

"What are you talking about, baby? I would never cheat on you. I'm in love with you. Don't you get it?"

"No. Don't taint those words with this. I can't talk to you right now. I need time." I hang up. I send him the picture as proof of his lies, and when he responds back, I'm not prepared.

My Man

That's fake.

My Man

I didn't do that.

My Man

I would never.

I block his number, not putting up with his lies. I have to prepare for classes to start—and to be around Clara again.

Ham

The relief of hearing her voice doesn't ease the worry.

She's out there alone, and someone sent her a doctored photo of me.

I look at the image over and over, scrutinizing it for flaws.

I'd never let another woman sit on my lap.

Presley is it for me. She's been it since the moment she blew me a kiss.

The house seems so empty without her. I sit on the sofa, staring at the touches of her around the room. One of her backpacks with the sharks from Finding Nemo is hanging from the hooks by the garage entrance.

“Hijo, don't sit here. Go get our girl back.”

“She asked for time, Mom. I need to give her the time to realize I'd never cheat on her. If I don't, she'll always wonder, and I never want her to doubt my love.”

“Let me see it,” she says, and I flip my phone around to show her.

“That’s good. Whoever is messing with you wanted her not to doubt it. I’d believe it.”

“Look here.” I point out where the image has been altered. “That was Presley sitting on my lap. They removed the background and changed it. Then they added someone else to it.”

“But, honey, you have to understand that she’s been stressed out because of her father and school, not to mention the serial killer.” Mom shakes her head. “Then there is also something about her sister I haven’t been able to put my finger on.”

“I think her bully was her stepsister,” I say and slouch back into the sofa. Part of me wants to run to her, but I know she needs to figure it out on her own.

My phone buzzes with an alert from the driveway camera. I open the app and answer. When they announce who they are, I come up off the sofa and rush out the door, meeting them at the gate.

“Hello, sir, we were hired to collect the boxes and belongings for Ms. Blanchard,” the mover says, and I’m pissed. She’s not even going to let the dust settle.

I dial her number, but it goes straight to voicemail. When I text, I notice that it doesn’t show as being delivered. She fucking blocked my number.

“Leave,” I order the man. “If she wants her stuff, she’ll face me.”

This should get her to call me back. I head back inside and resume my spot on the sofa, not wanting to go upstairs again. When I went up there after my mother called, every trace of her was gone except her scent on my sheets and pillows.

I’m not giving up on us.

I don't know how long I've been sitting here, but when Walker sits down in the chair next to me, I look over at him.

"Brother, this isn't how you get her back."

"What am I supposed to do?" I throw my hands up. "I can't go to her. We have this dive we have to do. She told me to give her time."

"You can go. Otto and I got the dive. Go get your girl."

"I'll leave tomorrow after I go to Winslow's. It's his birthday."

"Okay, keep me posted. If you need help, I'll be there. Just don't get yourself arrested."

"Why would I get arrested?"

I sit up, and he leans forward, handing me his phone. There, on social media for all to see, is my girl in her bikini glory, blowing a kiss. It was a picture she sent to me, and I'm pissed because it was something special between us. And now, it's posted for all to see.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

PRESLEY

As I make my way across campus, I'm beside myself as people point and stare.

I can't believe this is happening to me.

My first week of classes were awful. Clara is in the class I'm teaching.

I had to tell Professor Blackman that I'd need a TA to grade the class, or at least her papers, to avoid any conflicts of interest. Since then, she's doubled down on her efforts to embarrass me.

I know it's her. The latest act is a picture meant for just Ham and me that she posted on the school's social feeds.

It got taken down, but then it showed up on several other social media platforms.

It got me thinking, and I examined the image of Ham.

I now realize my mistake. When I couldn't find my phone at Thanksgiving, she must have gotten into it.

She somehow figured out my password and accessed my photos.



It scares me because I don't know what else she stole from my phone.

I need to figure this out. It's time I stood up to her.

My class sucked today. The students whispered behind my back, passing yet another photo of me around.

As I weave through the buildings, heading toward my car, my arm is grabbed, and I'm yanked into an alcove.

I scream, but it's cut off when the person slaps me hard.

Pain bursts across my face, and I feel blood dripping from my lip.

"Listen here, Elvis. I won't have you failing me." Clara holds up her paper, and I see the bright red "D" marked on it.

I hold my cheek. I can't stop the tears from rolling down my face. "I didn't grade it."

"You're the fucking teacher. Pass me, or I'll really make you sorry. I have more pictures, and I know how to find Ham. I can really fuck with you more than I already have."

It all makes sense now. It was all her. I'm here in Miami, miserable because of Clara. I should have trusted Ham.

"You did it. You broke us up." It's not a question, because I know.

"Bitch, I told you I'd make you sorry. You took my mom from me." She swings at me again, but this time I raise my arm and stop her.

My first year in college here in Miami, I met Morgan, who has a lot of martial arts training. She talked me into taking a self-defense class. All that training kicks in now, even after all these years.

Clara screams from the pain of hitting my forearm and advances on me. I'm in heels, slacks, and a blouse, while she's in shorts and a tank top. I remember Morgan telling me to use everything at my disposal as a weapon—clothing, shoes, and whatever I could get my hands on.

Using my heel, I stomp her foot when she advances on me. I punch, but she blocks it and hits me again. When she goes for a third hit, I grab her arm and twist her around.

“I'm done being your whipping girl. I'll be calling the police.

I never took your mom from you.” I push her against the wall and step out from the alcove.

“You're nothing but a spoiled bitch.” I back up until I'm far enough away that I've attracted attention, then turn and run for my car.

I call the police and ask them to meet me at my condo.

She's bullied me enough. I cry all the way home, knowing our parents are going to be pissed.

I park and get out of the car. My shirt is torn, and there's blood on it from my split lip. One of my eyes is swelling, making it hard to see.

“Presley,” Ham shouts, his voice is higher pitched than I've ever heard it, and he rushes to my side. I collapse into his arms. “What the fuck happened to you?”

I cry and hold on to him. “I’m sorry. It was Clara. She did it all.”

“She beat you up?”

I’m about to answer his questions when the parking lot suddenly flashes with red and blue lights. Ham helps me to my condo with the police following closely behind us. At this point, I don’t care who sees me like this.

I want to change, but the officer insists on taking pictures of me first. I stand there, trying not to tremble and shake with the fear that I’m going to lose everything and everyone now.

I need to talk to Ham, but I can’t with the police here.

When they finally let me go clean up, I make my way toward the bathroom.

Ham pushes his way in and helps me. I strip out of my clothes and grab the sweatpants and T-shirt from the back of the door.

Ham’s lips tip up in a soft smile when he sees the Navy shirt I stole from him. I couldn’t completely walk away.

“Baby, I’m so pissed this happened to you. But we have a lot to talk about. Come on, the police are going to want to question you some more.” He leans down and presses a gentle kiss to my forehead. I want him to kiss my lips; I’ve missed his kisses.

He opens the door and takes my hand. We return to the small sitting area. I’ve already told the police about the attack, and they sent officers to pick her up. What more do they want to know?

“Miss Blanchard, can you tell us why she attacked you today?”

“I’m her teacher for the Intro to Marine Biology class,” I begin, “but because she’s my stepsister, I asked the TA for the professor overseeing the class to grade the students’ assignments.

That way, it avoids any conflict of interest. The first paper was returned to the students today, and hers got a D. She demanded I pass her.”

“She’s also been posting photos of Presley online,” Ham adds and shows the officers his phone. The latest image is one that Ham took of me when we were out on a surfing date. He captured me lying on the beach, watching him.

“Oh my God! That’s the picture she posted today?” The caption says I’ll pass all the students if one will come give me a good time.

“This is dangerous for her,” Ham states, pointing at me, and I’m beside myself with worry. I can’t believe she did this to me.

“Your address is posted in the comments. Do you have another place to stay?” one of the officers says.

“I don’t know. I can get a hotel. I can’t leave the area until I clear it with my advisor.”

“I suggest you do that. Clara will more than likely make bail right away because of who her father is,” the officer says, and he’s right. Her father always gets her out of trouble.

“We are getting an attorney. I want a restraining order filed right away,” Ham says.

Ham

I walk the police to the door. I need to get her somewhere safe, but I also need to get

us back on solid ground. I know she missed me; my shirt is proof of that. But it's been three weeks since I've kissed her or spoken to her.

Her phone rings, and I turn around as she answers the call.

"Yes, Dad. Yes, I did that. She attacked me."

I can hear him yelling at the other end, his voice getting louder with each question she answers. I walk over and sit next to her. I reach for the phone and hit the video button so he can see her. When he sees me, he sputters and blusters for a moment.

"What are you doing with her? You're a cheater," he yells, and she leans into my body. I wrap my arm around her, pulling her closer as we look into the screen. "Oh, dear God, what happened to your face?"

"Clara. I haven't told you, but for years she's been bullying me. This isn't the first time she's beat me up. But this time, I stood up to her."

"What the hell?" Thea says from behind her husband. "We are getting on a plane."

"We'll be there as soon as we can," her father says before hanging up.

There is a pounding on the door, and I check the peephole before swinging the door open. A young college punk is standing there.

"Don't even think about it. She's spoken for, and if you come back, I'll pound you into the ground. Spread the word, fucker," I growl, and he rushes off.

"Ham, what are we going to do?"

"I'm taking you to a hotel. Pack up. Then we are going home after you meet with

your advisor tomorrow.”

“Okay. I have a class tomorrow too.”

“You aren’t going. Sorry, babe, but I’m not letting you get hurt any further. Come on. I’m going to take you to a clinic to get you checked over.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t argue; she just does as I say, and that’s when I know how close to the edge she really is. She needs a hot bath and to relax.

I help her get packed, and we head down to her car. She follows me to a hotel close by, and we get a room. She calls her advisor and asks for a meeting tomorrow. Then she calls Professor Blackman to tell him she can’t teach the class because she was injured.

As soon as she’s done getting everything taken care of, I draw a bath in the large tub and help her climb inside.

I strip down and slide in behind her. She settles against my body, and I know now is the time to have the conversation we need to.

I’m glad I asked for a suite with a large two-person tub.

Now I have her exactly where I want her.

She’ll have no choice but to listen to me.

“Presley, we need to talk. I know what you did for Win for his birthday.”

“I know we need to talk. I’m sorry I ran without confronting you. But after my last two boyfriends cheated on me, I just reacted.” She pauses and smiles up at me. “It

wasn't Win's fault that I ran. I promised him I would get him shark pictures for his room. So I had them sent."

"Thank you. He loved them. You only told me about the one boyfriend in college."

"I had another. He was just a summer boyfriend when I was in high school. He cheated with Clara."

"Jeez. They were idiots, and as far as I'm concerned, boys . I'm a man. I love you. I want forever with you. After this time apart, I know what it's like to lose you, and I'm never going to let that happen again."

She twists around in the tub so she's facing me. I pull her up my body, and she straddles me. "I love you too, Ham. I was scared."

"I won't ever do that to you. As soon as you get your doctorate, I'm knocking your ass up and we're getting married."

She giggles. "Shouldn't we get married first."

"I don't care in which order it happens, but it's happening."

"Okay. What about school?"

"We can make this work. I'm hoping, with everything going on, they will let you come back to Key West. But if they don't, we will get you a new condo, and then we'll make it work."

"Okay. I'm scheduled to go up to Chattanooga in March to work with the aquarium up there. It's part of the new path my advisor is stressing I complete so I can get my doctorate by Christmas."

“Then let’s do it. How long will you be up there?”

“A week. I have a friend who wants me to come to her wedding too.”

“Babe, I want to support your dreams. Because you are my dream.”

She leans up, and I gently kiss her lips. My hand goes to her hair, and I angle her head so I can kiss her deeper, mindful of her split lip.

“I like the new haircut.” I smile at her before kissing down her neck.

She trimmed a bit of her length and added thick, full bangs that frame her forehead perfectly. Her lips tip up before she bites on the corner of her bottom lip. I can’t take it and lean back in to kiss her long and deep. I’ve missed kissing her and need to make up for time lost.

“I missed your lips so much, baby. I missed you.”

“Me too. I knew the moment I saw you again, I would forgive you because missing you was worse than anything. I spent the first couple of days in my condo hiding out until I had to go back to campus.”

I kiss down her neck, pulling her slippery body up mine so I can get to her beautiful breasts. The moment I get one into my mouth, she starts moving her hips, teasing herself with the head of my cock.

“Put me in, baby,” I order when I switch breasts, and she moves her hand to wrap around my girth.

She starts pumping her small fist up and down my length, making my eyes cross.



“Now,” I growl, and my cock kisses her entrance.

I push her down my length with my hands around her waist, and we both sigh at the feeling of completeness.

“I’m not going to be gentle.” I start moving her up and down on me.

Water sloshes over the tub. I need deeper and pull her off me and flip her around.

“Hold on.” She grabs the edge of the tub, and I rise up on my knees to take her from behind.

When I slide back into her body, she throws her head back. Presley and I might look different in size but where it counts; she’s perfect for me. Her heat, tightness, and the way she takes me, all combine to make our sex off the charts.

As she starts moaning louder and saying my full name, I slam a bit harder into her, my hands gripping her hips tighter. She screams my name when she comes, and a couple of thrusts later, I’m coming deep inside her body.

### CHAPTER

### SEVENTEEN

### HAM

As we drive onto campus to meet with her advisor, I can tell she's stressed out by her fidgeting. I reach for her hand and pull it to my lips.

"It will be okay, baby," I say before pressing a kiss to the back of her hand.

"My parents are going to be so mad at me for pressing charges against Clara."

"She needs to get help, and this is the only way."

"I know, but I've never turned her in before.

When we were in boarding school, she and all her friends bullied me.

I thought things would get better in college, but they didn't.

She had her sorority sisters and their boyfriends harass me.

That's how I met Morgan. I was walking across campus, and this jerk ran into me, knocking me over on purpose.

Morgan laid him out. She literally had him flat on his back, gasping for air, and she'd

barely touched him.

She insisted I take a self-defense course, but I never used it against Clara until yesterday.

” Presley turns to watch me as I drive, her head resting against the seat as she looks at me.

I turn to give her my eyes when we come to a light. “Did you ever tell them she was bullying you?” I can almost imagine what she’s going to say, but instead, what she says pisses me off.

“I did once. They confronted her, but she told them I was being overdramatic. They believed her and not me. I never brought it up again.”

“Jeezus, why?” My grip on the steering wheel tightens, and the leather groans.

“I don’t know. But it’s always been that way.”

“Well, sprite, you have me now, and I’ll always believe you.”

Her lips tip up in a soft smile. “Thank you, honey. I love you.”

I will never tire of hearing those words pass her lips, and I’ll do everything I can to keep her safe. I need to figure this all out. This meeting is our first step in the process.

She directs me to a parking lot outside the sciences building, and I help her out of the Jeep. I give her a quick kiss and wish her luck as we walk into the building together with our hands laced. She leads the way up to the fourth floor, where she knocks on a door.

“Enter,” a voice says from the other side.

I open the door, and we step inside. There is an older gentleman sitting at a desk, and Professor Blackman is seated in a chair opposite.

“Why are you here?” His question is directed at me, but Presley answers, thinking he’s talking to her.

“I have an appointment with Dr. Rivers to discuss my doctoral studies. I also have to change my schedule.”

“Why?” Professor Blackman stands and he takes in her appearance. He turns on me. “Have you hurt her? I’ll call the police.” He pulls out his phone, but again, before I can answer him, Presley does.

“No, Ham would never hurt me. I was attacked by a student yesterday afternoon. I’ve filed a restraining order, but she’s in the class you are having me teach.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would a student attack you?” Professor Dickhead, as I’m going to refer to him from now on, asks. “Besides, you’ve been distracted since the beginning of the term. I think you need to focus on your schooling and less on boys.”

Before Presley can respond, I interject.

“She was attacked because the student got a D on her paper. She’s attacked Presley in the past, but this time, Presley fought back and defended herself.

” I defend my girl. “And as for her being distracted by me, that’s not true.

She’s been focused and determined to finish early.

I support that for her.” I don’t know why we have to explain ourselves to this dick.

Her meeting is with Dr. Rivers, who is already aware of the issue with Clara.

“I don’t believe you are a part of this meeting.”

“Excuse me, Professor Blackman, I’d like to hear more about this. And you are?” Dr. Rivers stands from his desk and waves us forward. Presley takes the remaining seat, and I stand at her side.

“I’m Ham Martinez. I’m Presley’s boyfriend.

There is more than just an attack going on here.

The same student posted a picture of my girlfriend online and left a suggestive comment.

We’ve already had to move to a hotel because a student showed up in hopes of getting good grades.

” I pull out my phone and open the screenshot of the post. He looks it over.

“We’ve already removed one image from school’s social media page.

We can’t control what others post outside of that.

But I agree, this is a serious situation.

How about this? I’ll give you until the end of March, after your fellowship up in Chattanooga, then we’ll decide what to do.

Sound good? Until then Clara will be removed from your class.

You'll be able to start grading on your own," Dr. Rivers proposes.

"Okay," Presley says softly. I know she's not happy. I'm not either, but I know why she's doing this. She feels it's the only way.

After we leave campus, I take her to the condo my realtor found for us earlier. It's a short-term lease of only three months. Which gives us time if she has to stay past March.

We hire movers to pack up her condo. Then she puts it on the market. She insists on helping me pay for our place here. I give in, but I'm not going to use it. I'll put it into an account. I have plenty of money in the bank and invested, so she doesn't need to help.

When I fall asleep for the night, I have my girl in my arms again, and I feel a little bit at peace.

Presley

Sitting on the sofa in our nineteenth-floor condo that Ham insisted that we needed, I start to fidget.

My hand twists in my lap as I think of him leaving later today.

Clara is out on bail and living at her father's place.

She's been removed from campus for my protection and for violating the school's no-violence policy.

“Baby.” Ham sits down next to me and takes my hand in his. “I’ll be a phone call away and be back on the weekend. We don’t have anything booked for Saturday or Sunday yet.”

“But it’s coming. Are you sure you want to do long distance?” I look down at my lap, where my other hand plays with the hem of my sleep shorts. “I know we said those words to each other, but I’d understand if you wanted to walk away. I’m pretty difficult and needy right now.”

His warm fingers brush against my chin before he lifts my gaze up to his. I want to hide, but I need to give him this out.

“You are not needy, Presley. I wish your family would stop saying you are. You are the furthest thing from that. And those words mean everything to me. Do they to you? Because I will love you for the rest of my life.”

Tears spring to my eyes, and I nod my head. “I love you too.”

I lean into him, and he takes my lips in a deep kiss. Before I know it, I’m on his lap, straddling him. His hands are in my hair, tilting my head where he wants it. I can’t stop myself from rubbing against his hard erection.

He moves me to the side, laying me on my stomach. Ham props up my hips and pulls my sleep shorts to my knees. “I’m going to fuck this hot, sweet pussy one more time before I leave.”

He fucks me until I’m screaming his name and he’s groaning mine. I kiss him at the door and watch as he walks to the elevator. Ham turns as the doors open and blows me a kiss.

“Close the door, baby,” Ham says as he holds the elevator.

I step into the condo and lock the door. Resting my head against the heavy wood, tears blur my vision before I stand up straight and decide that I'm not going to be this weak girl anymore.

I have one month to prove I'm worthy of them extending me the chance to return to Key West to finish my doctorate under Dr. Miller.

I'm still in shock that Professor Blackman tried to say I was distracted and not focused on school.

That man has it out for me, and I'm getting frustrated with him myself.

Walking back to the kitchen table where my laptop is set up, I sit down and focus on tomorrow's lesson for my class.

My father messaged me and said it would be two weeks before he and my stepmother could make it here.

I knew they weren't going to push harder to get here.

He doesn't care that Clara is not allowed to take classes on campus so long as I'm there.

She's been extended online learning, but I doubt she'll be focused to do that.

As the evening winds down, I make myself a plate of food and move to the sofa, where I can watch Supernatural . Ham texted to say he was home and would call me later. I fall asleep until my phone goes off, and I sit up.

"Ham?" I answer, not looking at the caller ID.



“No, it’s George. I heard about the attack and wanted to check on you.”

“Oh, hello, George.”

I look at the clock and realize it’s almost midnight. Ham was going to visit with Win. He must have fallen asleep like I did. We didn’t get much sleep over the last few days. We kept waking each other up, wanting to make up for lost time.

“Did you hear me, Presley? I can drive up if you need a friend.”

“Oh, no, I’m okay. Besides, I’m waiting for my boyfriend to call me to say good night.”

“Boyfriend?” George’s voice takes on a different edge, and I’m about to hang up when a beep comes across the line.

“That’s him now. Talk to you soon.”

I hang up and click over to Ham. “Sweetie, did you fall asleep?”

“I did, baby. Sorry. I’m heading up to bed now. I wanted to call and tell you I love you and I’ll see you this weekend.”

“Love you too. I fell asleep also. I’m heading to bed now.”

We talk for a few more minutes before we say goodnight and hang up. I fall asleep thinking about Ham’s declaration that he wants to get me pregnant. I dream of beautiful, tanned-skinned, wavy-haired babies with his eyes.

### CHAPTER

### EIGHTEEN

### PRESLEY

I 've been in Chattanooga for a week, working at the aquarium with the staff and visitors regarding the sandbar shark and the sand tiger sharks in their exhibit.

I've been teaching visitors that sharks aren't always the killers they're portrayed to be in the movies, and that they're actually more scared of us than we are of them.

When I work with the staff, it's focused on conservation issues with sharks in the wild and how their observations help our research.

I'm building relationships with the staff that I'll be able to cultivate when I'm doing my own research.

It's been a refreshing week for me, just being away from Miami and everything going on there.

Clara's father hired a cutthroat attorney, who claims I initiated the attack and Clara stopped me.

I'm so angry. She even has our parents convinced she's innocent.

The police and district attorney have footage of her grabbing me and pulling me into

the alcove, but there are no cameras in there to prove what really happened.

The cameras show me stepping out and her coming at me, but it's not enough.

I'm devastated that she might get away with this, just like she's gotten away with her treatment of me through the years.

Clara continues to harass me, saying I'm the reason she isn't going to graduate.

She Snapchats me messages, but I can't take a screenshot of them without her knowing.

Ham said he's going to bring me another phone so I can take pictures.

Plus, it will give me a new phone number so she can't contact me.

Our parents still haven't shown up, but they're supposed to be in Miami this weekend.

I have a meeting with my advisor when I get back on Monday.

I'm worried they are going to make me stay there.

I'm ready to wake up with Ham every day again, not just on the weekends or when we can meet up.

I'm ready to move on with my life with a family and friends who actually care about me.

I have a friend I met through the zoo and aquarium community, Lydia Rorke, who invited me to her wedding here in Chattanooga.

Ham is flying in this evening so we can attend together, and we can spend the weekend with each other.

Lydia works for the Nashville Zoo, and we became friends when I was studying for my master's degree.

I had to explore other marine life in zoos and aquariums. I was interested in the stingrays that are also a part of the shark family.

Her zoo has two types, and I was communicating with her via email and Zoom.

We've never met in person until tonight.

I'm kind of excited to meet her, but her friend Sydney is someone I really want to meet.

Sydney was a field researcher and animal photographer before she came to the Nashville Zoo.

She studied rhinos and elephants in Southern Africa.

I can't wait to talk to her. Yes, I've traveled a lot, even went to South Africa, but I never had the chance to go inland for safaris or other tours to see the land animals.

My father was always too busy to take me, and my tutors couldn't without his permission.

Lydia wanted Ham and me to come to her rehearsal dinner tonight so we could meet in a little more relaxed situation and a smaller group.

I'm dancing around the hotel room as I get ready, waiting for Ham to show up.

I'm in my bra and panties, swinging my hips to a new song.

It's about a girl wanting her boyfriend to knock her up.

It's fun, and I like it, but it aligns with the thoughts I've been having lately that brought on listening to it.

The number of dreams I've been having about getting pregnant is crazy. Hanna and I were talking yesterday, and she told me she got pregnant before she and Walker got married. She told me she doesn't regret it. I talked to her about my dreams and thoughts, and she laughed, saying maybe it was fate.

I know I might not finish my doctorate this year like I wanted, but I'm getting tired of putting my life on hold.

For the longest time, I thought this was the only way my father would pay attention to me, but now I know there is nothing that will make up for the way he's treated me lately.

After everything that happened at Christmas and when he found out I was with Ham, it's been abundantly clear that his focus is only on himself.

Me getting my doctorate reflects on him; it's not an accomplishment for me.

I twist around as the song continues, dancing provocatively.

"Baby," is growled from behind me, and Ham kicks the door closed before he's on me and has me bent over the bed. I moan and claw at the covers as he rips my thong from my body. "You want my baby?" he growls against my core.

"Maybe," I moan. "I don't know, but it's been in my thoughts since you mentioned it

last month.”

Ham has made sure that every chance he can, he’s in Miami with me. He is proving that I’m his focus, and it makes me love him even more.

Ham’s tongue slips inside me, and I hum at the feeling.

He gets me to the edge before he stands up.

His buckle hits the floor, then he’s pushing his thick cock inside me.

I throw my head back and cry out at the intrusion but love it at the same time.

Ham grips my hips and holds me tight as he works in and out of my body.

As my body climbs higher and higher, I moan and tell him my feelings.

“I love you so much. Please. Harder,” I beg, and he doesn’t disappoint.

His fingers dig into my hips and his thrusts are harder. My body tightens, and then I feel it all let go as I cry out. He groans as he comes deep inside me.

I want to crawl up onto the bed and take a nap, but I still have to get ready so we can go to the party.

Ham

Hearing that song playing and my girl dancing to it was more than I could take.

All I could think about was her pregnant with my baby.

Her belly round with my child and proof that she's mine.

I want that so bad I can taste it. I know she wants to finish her doctorate first, and I'll wait, but hearing that she's even been thinking about it was a turn-on. I want to support Presley, always.

Carefully, I lift her off the bed and carry her to the bathroom, where I shower with her and we get ready to head to her friend's rehearsal dinner. If I knew it wouldn't make us late, I'd have taken her again in the shower. I want to make love to her all weekend long.

I've missed her being in our home in Key West. My mom and Hanna miss her too.

When I go to visit my brother, he's always looking for her.

She's been sending him pictures and decorations for his room.

The most recent thing she sent him were images she took while swimming with a bowmouth guitarfish.

It looks like a shark and ray got together.

She left him a note that I read to him, telling him that she saw it when she was on a dive in Papua New Guinea.

It's just another reason I love her so much.

She loves my family and loves to do things I like to do.

I know we will never get bored with each other.

Walking through the doors of the restaurant, I stop at the hostess booth and hold Presley's hand.

When I give her the name, she directs us to a private room.

People mingle around, and I notice a petite, dark-haired woman standing beside a tall, bald guy.

He's hovering over her, and as soon as she sees us walk in, she is making her way toward us.

"Presley?" the woman says in a Southern accent. The man is behind her with his hand against her back, similar to how I am with my girl. The woman is a couple of inches taller than Presley.

"Hello, Lydia." Presley smiles, and then she's pulled away from me and engulfed in a hug.

"I'm so glad you made it."

"Maverick," the man says and extends his hand.

"Ham." We shake hands as the girls pull away and start talking.

"I heard about your week at the aquarium. You need to come to the zoo and talk about our rays. Or just come for a visit," Lydia tells Presley.

"I'd love to, but I'm still working on my doctoral studies. They want me to do education right now on my primary focus, sharks."

"If we had the room, I'd consider adding sharks, but currently we are working on



other exhibits. If you ever think about going zoo, talk to me first, you hear me?"

"I do."

We move across the room, and we are introduced to more people. Sydney works at the zoo with Lydia, and my girl starts bombarding her with questions about her prior research exhibitions in Zimbabwe. As she questions Sydney, I notice her husband, Tucker, move up behind her and start rubbing her back.

"Sorry, I don't really talk about my exhibition in Zimbabwe very much." Sydney apologizes. "But I'll tell you that Botswana and Zimbabwe normally are amazing trips."

"I don't need details. I'm so sorry. I've read the story. I was just wondering what it's like working with such large animals." Presley reaches out and touches Sydney's hand.

"Come on, let's get some drinks and let these guys visit." She takes Presley's hand, but before they walk off, Presley looks at me, and I nod. I love that she makes sure I'm okay before she leaves me. I watch them walk off, talking away about each of their trips and travels.

"I don't know the story of your wife," I tell her husband. Tucker is a bit taller than me, but we are both bulky. Just his stance and the way he looks around the room projects his military background.

"Sydney witnessed a slaughter of not just a rhino but of several of her associates. She was left for dead. It's a miracle she and our daughter survived. She had no identification and had to get across the borders to where her mother was in South Africa."

“Dang.” I look at her then back to him. “She’s tough.”

“She’s one of the strongest women I know. That and her love for our child was what made me fall for her. You served in the Navy?” Tucker asks me, and I turn to look at him.

“Yeah, I did,” I say hesitantly and raise my eyebrow.

“Cobi was telling us.” He nods behind me.

I turn as Hanna’s brother walks over to us with his wife alongside him.

“Cobi, when you coming down to the Keys again?” I reach out, we smack hands, and pull each other in for a half hug, giving a friendly thump on the back. I haven’t seen them since Thanksgiving. I turn back to Tucker. “Yeah, I was with the Mobile Diving Salvage Unit. You?”

“Seal team, Camp Coronado,” he says, and we start talking about common ships we were on.

“I think you were on our ship at one point.”

“Yeah, we were doing some maneuvers. I remember seeing you guys. Cobi says you work with Walker?”

“Yeah, we own the dive school together along with Otto.”

“That sounds cool. We should make a trip down and check it out. Just with two little ones under three, we get so busy.” Tucker chuckles. I’d heard him say his wife was pregnant when she was attacked.

“You have kids?” Presley smiles at him when she walks back over, handing me a beer. I want to lift her over my shoulder and take her out of here so I can give her a baby too.

“We have a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and a three-month-old son,” Sydney says. “You’ll see them tomorrow, along with Lydia’s kids. We got babysitters for this evening. My mom loves her grandbabies. Do you have kids?” She points at us. “You’d make beautiful babies, I bet.”

“No, we’re waiting until after Presley finishes her doctorate.

” I squeeze my girl into my side, and she looks up at me.

I see the love she feels looking back at me, but I also see something else.

I’m going to have to question her when we get back to the hotel.

I don’t know what’s on her mind, but if she’s having doubts, I need to nip it in the bud.

By the time we get back to the hotel, I can’t wait to strip my woman bare and have my way with her. I make love to her over and over throughout the night, and we barely make it to the wedding on time.

My girl watches with stars in her eyes as Maverick finds out Lydia has been hiding that she’s pregnant.

It’s a good thing that I’ve already got her ring ordered, because it’s going on her finger as soon as I get it.

She can finish her studies while we are engaged.

We can even get married before she gets her doctorate. I don't care, as long as she's mine.

### CHAPTER

### NINETEEN

### PRESLEY

I t's been four weeks since my trip to Chattanooga.

I'm frustrated, but we are making the best of it.

My parents got here last week, and so far, they haven't tried to contact me.

They are dealing with Clara. Before my father arrived, he told me he wouldn't speak to me until I withdrew the charges against my stepsister.

I tried to explain to him that it's no longer in my hands but in the prosecutors.

It's only a misdemeanor, but it's time Clara faced the repercussions of her actions. My dad doesn't understand that.

My advisor has asked me to finish out the term since there have been no further issues with Clara, as far as he's concerned. I'm upset but know that I have to do this. There are only a few more weeks left of the semester.

On last night's news, they reported another body was found near campus and is related to the other killings.

It freaks me out that they still haven't caught the killer, and the FBI hasn't talked to me in a while.

The worst part is I'm fairly certain the latest victim is one of my students because she's missed class all week.

I'm hoping I'm wrong. Authorities won't identify the victim until the next of kin has been notified.

If it's my student, she's from out of state.

"Baby, I'm done with my gear and getting ready to jump into my Jeep. I'll be there in a few hours." Ham's voice breaks across the phone line.

He called me as soon as I walked out of Victoria's Secret, where I bought something special for this weekend.

He's still supporting me by coming up every chance he can, but it's been two weeks since I've seen him.

He was busy with several dives and trainings.

I've also been sick, and I told him I didn't want him to catch it, but he said he was coming this weekend no matter what, even if it's to take care of me.

I wanted to make him feel special, so I decided to get myself out of the condo and go shopping.

I picked up some lingerie and another bikini for the beach when Morgan comes to visit in June.

I'm excited that my best friend will be here.

She said she needed to approve Ham in person, even though they've talked on the phone.

Since she's in dive rescue with FDNY, she had a lot to talk to Ham about.

"I can't wait for you to get here. I bought something special for this weekend," I say.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" He chuckles.

"Well, how about I just say baby doll?" I laugh as I enter the parking garage and move toward my car.

"Fuck, you can't tell me that. I'm going to have a hard-on for the whole fucking drive, sprite," he growls into the phone, and I feel my core spasm with desire.

"I can't wait—" I stop when Clara steps out of the shadows. "What are you doing here? I have a restraining order. You can't be close to me." I remove the phone from my ear as Ham starts shouting, trying to figure out what's going on.

"You need to stop what you're doing. I can't go to prison." Clara is frantic as she grips my arm tight and starts shaking me.

My bags fall, and it takes everything in me to hold onto the phone. I know Ham can hear me and will get me help. He can also track my phone.

"Clara, I can't stop it. You attacked me. You can't do that. It's not right."

"I'm tired of you winning everything, even my mother. I had to stop you. I hate you."

“I don’t have your mother, and I’m sorry you hate me. You need to let me go. Right now.” I stand up to her. I straighten my back and try to pull my arm from her grip.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she screams and starts shaking me. My stomach revolts and my vision blurs. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my eyes start to roll back.

“Stop, please,” I beg, but I can hear the weakness in my small voice.

I feel myself falling and hear Clara yelling at me before I don’t hear anything else.

Ham

As soon as I heard Presley say restraining order, I knew it was Clara.

I hit record on my phone and rushed back into the dive school.

I can hear my girl as she stands up for herself, but I know with her not feeling well, she’s weak.

She’s been sick to her stomach so much lately, and I’m worried about her.

“I need to get to Miami, now,” I bark at the guys, and they both turn to look at me.

“I have a friend with a helicopter,” Otto offers. “What’s going on?”

“Clara is attacking Presley.” I hold up my phone and press the speaker button so they can hear.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Clara screams, and we can hear movement on the other end of the line.



“Stop, please,” Presley begs. Her tone tells me something isn’t right. Then the phone clatters to the ground. The call remains connected, and I’m glad, because the next thing we hear has my heart in my throat.

“Oh my God, wake up, Presley. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I hear Clara’s voice but don’t hear my girl at all.

“Clara, what’s going on?” I yell into the phone, but she doesn’t answer me.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just get so upset that you’re so perfect, and my mother is always telling me to be more like you.

Please, Presley. I can’t go to jail.” She pauses, and then the next thing I hear makes my knees start to buckle.

“Someone call an ambulance. My sister is hurt. She won’t wake up. ”

I bellow my anger in a long, loud cry of pain.

I’m being pulled and pushed around as the phone disconnects. I call back over and over, but there’s no answer.

“Call us when you hear something.” Walker’s voice breaks through the fog of worry, and I glance down to see I’m sitting in the passenger seat of a helicopter. I don’t know how I got here, but I’m glad my friends are there for me.

“I’ll have you in Miami in about thirty-five minutes,” the pilot says. “Otto said to tell you he arranged for a car to pick you up at the landing pad.”

“I don’t know which hospital they took her to.” I turn to him, and I must startle the guy because he leans away from me.

“Don’t take it out on me, man, I’m just trying to help.”

“I’m sorry. My girl was attacked and collapsed. I need to get to her. I can’t lose her.”

“Okay.”

I try her number again, and this time someone picks up.

“She told me she broke up with you.” Her father’s voice comes across the line. It’s only been about twenty minutes since her phone dropped the call. She told me her parents were in Miami, but them being at the hospital with her shocks me at first.

“I’m her family. I should have been notified, and no, we didn’t break up. Put Presley on the phone. Now,” I bark, and he hangs up on me. I swear I’m going to punch the fucker in the face when I see him.

I use the Find My app and find out which hospital she’s at.

By the time we land, I’m going crazy. Her father turned off the phone, but I’m glad I was able to get her location beforehand. The car service drops me off at the entrance to the emergency room, and I jump out and rush inside.

“Ham Martinez for Presley Blanchard,” I tell the admissions representative, who looks on her computer.

“You can’t go back there. They won’t let us, so you can’t either.”

I swing around at the sound of his voice.

There stands her father, Sean. He’s shorter than me, his receding hairline still brown at the sides, with no gray in sight. Behind him, his wife and son stand up, but it’s the

red-haired young woman next to them I advance on.

“I recorded what you said. You can’t get out of this now. If she’s really hurt, you won’t be able to hide from the justice that will find you.” I stop short of threatening to kill her.

“I don’t care anymore. I’ll take whatever punishment I deserve. I’ll plead guilty. I shouldn’t have attacked her before, but she has always been so weak and meek. She took my mother from me,” Clara cries, and I’m only taken aback for a moment.

“Your tears won’t save you. You’ve had it out for Presley for years.

It’s because of you that she was stabbed.

I’m not going to allow you around her anymore.

” I turn toward her father. “And you, you’ll be lucky if I ever allow you around her or our future children.

You’ve never been there for her, and that’s all she’s wanted. ”

“Mr. Martinez, your fiancée is waiting for you,” a nurse says, and her family gasps.

I can’t ignore the rush of emotion through my system. Presley listed me as her fiancé. As soon as the nurse opens the door to the private room, I rush to her side. She turns to look at me, and I see the tears in her eyes.

“What’s the matter, bride to be?” I smile at her, hoping it stops the tears. I hate to see my girl crying. “Come on, sprite, you know what your tears do to me.”

I lean down onto the bed and take her in my arms. She wraps around me, holding on

tightly, as if she's afraid I'm going to leave her.

"Ham, I love you so much. I'm so sorry." Her voice is muffled against my shirt.

"I know you do, baby. But there is nothing to be sorry about. You're safe, and I recorded everything. Clara isn't going to bother you at all. She said she was going to plead guilty."

"I know that. I don't care about that right now.

I'm sorry for that." She dislodges her arm from around my body and waves to the bedside.

I glance around, checking all the monitors attached to her.

A machine I don't recognize has a tape running, with cords leading under the blanket to Presley's body.

It takes a moment for everything to register.

"That's why you stated I'm your fiancé, isn't it? "

"I told them I didn't want my parents in here and that I only wanted you.

I didn't want you to find out any other way but through me.

I'm so sorry. I know we wanted to wait, but I forgot to go get the shot again last month.

The doctor said this could happen sometimes.

” She talks really fast and has a tight grip on my shirt.

All I care about is that she is alive. “Is the baby okay?” I choke on the words. “Clara didn’t hurt it when you fell? She didn’t kick you?” My voice gets tight as I imagine everything that could have happened.

“I fainted because she was shaking me so much. They are getting a room ready upstairs so they can monitor us. They want to do an ultrasound to confirm we’re okay. But, yes, the baby is fine. I’m fine. Clara didn’t hurt me. She actually didn’t let me fall.”

“Thank God.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the ring I’ve been holding onto since it came in two weeks ago. “My fiancée needs her ring. We are getting married as soon as possible, and you are coming home, baby.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Fuck no, I’m not mad. I told you I wanted you pregnant. Are you mad?” I grip the back of her neck and pull her up in the bed toward me.

“I’m not mad. I don’t know if I really want my doctorate anymore. I only wanted it because I thought my father would pay more attention to me. But I love you and want our lives to begin.”

“Thank fuck.” I lean down and slide my lips across hers, feeling her tears roll down the side of her head into my hand. “Don’t cry, baby. We’ll make everything work out. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

When she’s moved upstairs, we finally let her family come see her.

Clara freaks out and apologizes for hurting her and almost hurting the baby.

Sean and Thea just stand there for a moment when they see the ring on her finger and realize the floor she's on.

Thea is the first to break and walks to Presley's side.

I remain on the other side, watching over everything.

I don't want them to upset her again. I won't have them hurting my family.

"Is this what you want, Presley?" Thea asks her as she takes her hand.

"This is what I want more than anything. I want a family, and I love Ham."

"But what about all your schooling? Are you going to throw that away?" Her father spits the questions out as he walks to her side.

My body tightens, my muscles flexing, as I contemplate dragging him out of the room by the back of his neck and kicking his ass.

As if she knows what I'm thinking, Presley's hand reaches for my side and rubs down my rib cage, trying to soothe me. To calm my anger. I lean over and kiss the top of her head.

"I can still get my doctorate. It will take me a bit longer, but I can do it. Dr. Miller has said I can lead his research team, and he'll be happy to become my advisor. I just need to get my advisor here in Miami to allow it."

"But this wasn't the plan." Her father waves his hand at her body.

“No, but surprises can be blessings, and that’s what this is. If you can’t be happy for us, then you don’t need to be a part of it.”

Sean pauses and looks at me, then at Presley, and finally at her stomach.

He shakes his head as he steps between Thea and Presley.

“You’re my daughter. I want what’s best for you, always.

I thought getting your doctorate was what you wanted.

But if this is what you want, then I’m okay with that.

I’m here for you. I love you,” Sean says the words he’s needed to say all along.

“Your mother would be so proud of you.”

Again, my girl tears up, and I know she’s going to be emotional during this pregnancy. It’s going to drive me crazy over the next few months.

“I only wanted my doctorate because of you,” Presley confesses to her father. He leans over the bed and kisses her forehead.

“I’ve screwed up so much. I’m sorry. Forgive me, and let me at least give you away, even though he didn’t ask for your hand.”

I clear my throat. “In my defense, I told you months ago she was going to be mine. You didn’t understand.”

Sean and I both chuckle. Thea squeezes close to Presley and cries with her as she tells her how excited she is to be a grandma.

### CHAPTER

### TWENTY

### PRESLEY

I t's been seven and a half weeks since we found out we are expecting, and in that time, Ham and I got married, I moved back to Key West, and my father and Thea are getting a place near us.

Clara ended up getting no jail time since it was her first offense, but she was given lots of community service.

She is attending counseling and calls me to talk when she can. Like me, she has put school on hold.

I'm working with Dr. Miller and slowly gathering my hours for my doctorate and working on my final dissertation.

I've decided to finalize Leah's studies.

My dissertation will be on sharks and dolphins.

I'm excited to work on it and feel like I'll be able to get it completed shortly after the baby is born.

Right now, my focus is my small family and friends.



Looking at myself in the mirror, I'm shocked to finally see the baby belly I was worried was never going to come.

The doctor said to give it time. I'm only fourteen weeks along, but it feels like it just popped out overnight.

The bikini sits low on my pelvis with my little belly over the top.

My boobs have gotten bigger, and so my top has more coverage.

I move out of the bathroom off the pool to see my friends lounged on the chaises.

Morgan and Madison showed up with their husbands, Jack and Tyler.

Currently, the guys took Zinnia and JJ to the store with them while us girls all rest. Madison has her six-month-old, Phoenix, lying on her chest under a thin blanket.

She's relaxing under an umbrella. I never thought I would see her with a baby.

I'm so glad she and Tyler met, and he had the patience to wait for her to heal.

"Girl, that bump is getting bigger every day." Morgan chuckles as I slip onto the chaise between her and Hanna. Tonight, we are heading down to the beach for a bonfire dinner with the kids and to relax.

My phone rings, and I look at the caller ID before picking it up.

My dad and Thea are supposed to be picking up Griff from the airport.

He'll be attending a school nearby and will stay with Ham and me whenever my parents are traveling.

Although my dad is excited to work here locally on his research.

“Hello, George.” I smile as I answer the phone, hoping my greeting comes across as friendly.

“Hey, Presley, can you come in and help me with the information on this tracker we picked up last week?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? I’m on vacation this week.”

“I know, but it’s got some weird anomalies. I thought you’d want to see them. It will only be about an hour. Please.”

I try not to huff but can’t stop it. Since I came back to Key West and George found out I was married to Ham, he’s been a pain to deal with. It’s why I’ve tried to hide my pregnancy. Dr. Miller knows, but no one else on the research team does.

“I have company right now.”

“I wouldn’t ask, but this is part of your dissertation. It looks like there was a shark and dolphin encounter.”

I bolt upright. “Really? You’re serious?” It’s been months since we had an encounter. They’ve primarily avoided each other, but this could be just what I’ve been waiting for. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Ugh, really, Leylee? You promised no work.” Morgan covers her eyes.

“It’s a shark and dolphin encounter.”

“Okay. Come on.” She stands up.

“No, you stay here.” I stand and move toward the house to put on some clothes.

“No, if I don’t go with you, you’ll get stuck in a microscope or something.”

Madison chuckles at Morgan’s joke.

“Fine. Give me a sec.” I rush to my bedroom.

I pull on a pair of coverall shorts over my bikini and slip on some tennis shoes. When I come down the stairs, Morgan is wearing a sundress over her bikini. I grab my shark purse, and we head out the door.

Ham took the SUV he bought me after we got married.

We traded in my little car for a more family-friendly vehicle.

I walk over to his Jeep and use the step and row bar to pull myself up into it.

He’s taken the top off for a bit. When Morgan climbs into the passenger seat, I set my purse in the back seat.

Another thing that’s changed is that Ham took me to the range and got me trained to conceal and carry. He makes me take my purse everywhere I go, just in case.

When we pull up to the research facility, I turn to Morgan, who is glancing around. There are only a couple of cars in the parking lot, and something just doesn’t feel right. It’s got to be because I’m usually here when there are more people.

“Call Ham and Jack and tell them where we are,” Morgan says as she reaches down to check her bag. “Something feels off. Where is everyone? It’s a weekday.”

“Oh man, I think they are out collecting trackers.”

“Then why did he call you to come by?”

“Because I made him do it,” a deep, dark voice says from behind us.

I look into the rearview mirror and see Professor Blackman aiming a gun at Morgan. My blood runs cold.

“Don’t hurt her.” I dial Ham and slip my phone under the seat as I slide out of the Jeep. Morgan watches me and gets out on her side.

“Come on. Leave your bags.” He waves the gun around, and we start moving toward the building.

We step inside the doors. I’m starting to worry as I hear another set of footsteps. I turn to see George walking toward us. He also has a gun.

“Why did you bring the other woman?” George asks Professor Blackman.

“I couldn’t leave her out there to call the authorities. Use the poison on her, and we’ll deal with Presley as we planned.” Professor Blackman’s voice is void of emotion.

Poison? Oh my God. I look between the two of them.

“You are both the killers?”

“Wait, there are two of them?” Morgan exclaims as she steps closer to me.

I know she’s prepared to fight, but there are two of them, and they have guns. Carefully, I step back, closer to the classroom behind us. The doors are bulletproof. A

lot of universities and colleges are converting to them. Morgan must understand my intent.

“Presley, why did you marry him? If you’d just stayed true to us, I wouldn’t have had to do the things I did,” George confesses. But I don’t get a chance to answer him.

“Oh, shut up, you whiner. I should have killed you when you balked about Leah.” Professor Blackman raises his voice as he moves closer, and my foot grazes a tank someone left in the hall.

The mention of Leah’s name stops me in my tracks. I knew the serial killer was responsible for her death. But the fact that these two men, who I knew, are the killers still shocks me.

“Leah trusted you. She liked you and counted you as a friend.” I turn on George. “We worked together almost every day. How could you let him kill her?”

“I didn’t want to kill her.” George looks directly at me.

His words shock me. I thought Professor Blackman killed her, but George just confessed he did it. He turns to the professor.

“You told me it would be easy. It took forever for her to die. She screamed in pain.” Tears start rolling down his face.

“It almost hurt Presley too much. She ran right to him . You said she’d come to me.

She didn’t, though. That’s why I told them.

” He pauses, and I don’t know what he means by “them.”

“I don’t care. I only cared about showing Presley our prizes.”

Prizes?

Blackman turns to me, and I feel Morgan shift behind me. I don’t want to draw attention to her, so I keep focused on him.

“Ever since the first moment I saw you, when you were still a young girl, I knew you were meant to be mine,” the professor says.

“I’d been taking care of the street walkers for years already, but it all changed with you.

I started protecting you, by getting rid of your enemies. ” He reaches for me, and I cringe back.

“Don’t touch me,” I scream as I smack his hand away from me.

“Leave her be,” George says as he aims his gun toward Professor Blackman. He moves to stand in front of me. “Let her go. She’s moved on. The FBI is on their way. I told them everything.” He stands taller, but his heroic actions are obviously too little too late.

“Then you must die, and like the others, they will die next.”

Professor Blackman fires his gun, and I scream as Morgan yanks my body away.

We fall backward, and I land on her and roll as she rushes for the door, slamming it closed.

She pushes the bolt into place, and I stand up.

Looking out the window, I see George on the ground, bleeding out, but he's still moving around.

I watch in horror as Professor Blackman raises his gun to the window and fires.

Both Morgan and I cringe back, but the glass holds.

We watch as Professor Blackman starts arguing with George and leans over him.

"You're going to die now too," George yells, and Professor Blackman rears back with a syringe in his chest, the plunger pushed down. The puffer fish poison.

He yanks the syringe free and tosses it down before shooting George several more times.

"Come on." Morgan grabs my hand, and we run across the room.

We exit out the back of the room and into a hallway. As we run toward the emergency exit, more gunshots ring out, and I scream when a bullet hits the wall near us.

"Freeze," is yelled, and then more gunfire erupts. Morgan and I scream as the bullets hit the walls near us.

Ham

As soon as I see my girl calling, I answer, but there's nothing. I hear muffled voices, then clear as day, I hear a man say to leave their purses. I turn to Jackson and Tyler.

"Track your wives' phones," I tell them as I put mine on speaker phone. The voices are growing more muffled and quieter, as if they are walking away.

I open the Find My app and search for Presley's location. She's at the research facility and university.

"My wife is at the house still," Tyler says and calls her.

"Mine is showing she's across town."

I look at it, and sure enough, she's at the facility too.

"Goddammit. Come on."

"Madi said Presley was called into work, and Morgan went with her to make sure she didn't stay too long."

As I'm about to jump into our new SUV, my phone pings with another incoming call. I recognize the number, so I merge the calls.

"Special Agent Harkness, you better tell me that you have the serial killer in your hands, because my wife was just called to the research facility, and something weird is going on. I heard a man tell her and her friend to leave their purses in the car. That's where their guns are."

"There are two of them, and we just pulled up here. One of them called, turning himself in and turning on the other. We are going in," Harkness says, huffing and puffing, as I hear footfalls on pavement.

"Gunshot," Special Agent Brownley yells, and I'm in motion.

"I'll stay with the kids and call Walker to help," Tyler says, but I don't acknowledge him. I'm worried about my wife and Jack's.



I take off fast and make it across the island in less than ten minutes. I don't care if I get a ticket. I care about my wife and child. Jackson is in the passenger seat calling Morgan, but the phone keeps going to voicemail. Finally, she picks up.

"Jack." Her voice comes across the line in huffs. "Get us some help. Professor Blackman and George are the serial killers."

"Where is Presley? We are pulling up now." I slam the car into park and jump out without turning it off. As I run for the entrance, I hear gunshots and pull the gun I've been carrying at my back.

I enter the building, spotting the FBI agents and a body on the ground.

"Freeze," they both yell, and then their guns are discharging. My girl and Morgan are screaming. I rush around the corner and see the girls covering their bodies while the agents are standing over the professor.

I move toward my wife and lift her into my arms. I hold her to me, thanking everything above that she's okay. She clutches at me and cries. I turn to see Jack has his wife in his arms too.

I'm never letting her out of my sight again if I can help it.

An hour later, we're sitting in a hospital room, getting Presley and the baby checked over. Both are fine, but I don't want to leave until the doctor thoroughly checks her over.

"I'm okay, Ham." Presley leans back in the bed. She has a few scrapes and bruises, but she didn't get shot.

Both Professor Blackman and George are dead. Blackman died laughing that he

would be famous. I wanted to kick him in the face, but I needed to get my wife out of there.

“Sprite, I’m not going to believe you’re okay until they’ve run every test to confirm it.

I can’t lose you or our baby.” I lean over her and kiss her forehead, trying to keep my emotions in check.

I thought the worst we would deal with was her sister, but to have a pair of serial killers come after her...

George left behind a detailed journal that explained everything.

It described how Professor Blackman had caught him in a compromising position with a sedated female student.

Rather than reporting the incident, Blackman used it as leverage, shaping George into the ideal partner—someone he could share his skills and knowledge with.

My gut churns at the thought of what they had in mind for my wife. The sick fucks considered her their ultimate prize. They’d planned to continue targeting and killing women who resembled Presley. Her marrying me accelerated their plans to go after her.

“Okay.” The doctor walks in, and I shake off my thoughts. “After looking over the ultrasound and checking all the other tests, Mrs. Martinez, I’m happy to tell you that both you and your baby are in good health.”

“Thank God.” I breathe a sigh of relief.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm*

PRESLEY

OVER A YEAR LATER

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Mathias, happy birthday.” Everyone sings as I hold my son on my lap.

His chubby little hands grab for the cake, and he giggles.

My heart soars as I look up at my husband, who is standing over the top of us.

He leans down and kisses the top of my head and then Mathias.

Glancing around the room, I can't believe how far we've come.

Everyone we love is here. Walker, Hanna, and their kids.

Flo and all my family too. I smile at Clara, who is doing really well and trying to move on with her life.

She finally completed her college degree and is working on becoming a counselor.

She wants to help people to stop bullying.

“Can I hold my grandson?” my father asks, and I hand him his little buddy. My father and Thea are permanent residents of Key West, just like I am.

I completed my doctorate in May, and I'm working at the research facility full time with my own undergrad students as assistants.

I still focus on sharks and dolphins, but lately, I've been studying the effects of climate change on bull shark breeding.

My family is my priority, though. I make sure my son knows I'll always be there for him.

I watch my husband as he moves around the room, keeping an eye on our son and then the rest of us.

It took a long time for Ham to relax his diligence in watching over me and our family.

Even to this day, he has me message him several times a day.

I finally got tired of it, and we are both seeing a counselor to process everything we went through.

I've been working on standing up for myself and letting my father know how I feel.

Ham stops what he's doing and turns to look at me as if he knows I'm watching him. Until Ham, I didn't trust and didn't know what I needed in my life. I was dancing through life without any attachments.

He walks over to me and pulls me into his arms, holding me close to his heart.

"Love you, sprite," he says against the top of my head.

When he leans down a bit more to my ear, he kisses me just below it.

“I’m going to fuck my next baby into you tonight.

You told me when Matty turned one, you’d consider having another baby. ”

My whole body shivers, and I press my thighs together. On a sigh, I lean up and whisper in his ear. “I want another one of your babies, Hamilton.” He groans and pulls my back to his chest, where I can feel his erection pressing into me. I chuckle and lean back into him.

“I love you, husband.” I look up, and he leans down to kiss me softly on the lips. Nothing prepared me for him, but I’m so glad I blew him a kiss that day.

HAM

SIX YEARS LATER

Sitting in my beach chair, with my mom on one side of me and my brother in his wheelchair on the other, I watch my wife and children. Win has a special wheelchair that keeps him in a primarily supine position, with his head and legs at a different level so he's comfortable.

A couple of years ago we walked into Win's room, and it was as if he just woke up.

He was communicating a bit and recalled events.

The doctors were excited and said he could go out for short day trips.

We take him home and to the beach every chance we can.

Today is another beach excursion. The kids love the water and are little fish on their own.

I watch as my wife plays in the water with our two sons and baby girl.

The boys, Mathias, who is six now, and Rhodes, who is four, both are protective of their little sister, who is just over one.

Hali is my little princess. She is petite like her mother, with blond hair and ocean-blue green eyes.

She's the perfect little miniature of Presley.

After the attacks on my wife and my overprotectiveness, Walker pulled me aside and told me some of the stories from the Mayson family and the curse.

I realized that I might have faced that curse, but what I gained from it was so much better than I could have ever dreamed of. My family is everything to me.

Before I met Presley, I was just going through the motions of life.

I would go out with Otto and watch over him.

I would visit Win and work all the time.

I didn't realize what I was missing until my wife blew me a kiss.

I don't care about the curse. What I like is the Boom that was created the moment she looked at me.

Presley lifts Hali in her arms, and the boys walk with her up to where we are sitting.

"Uncle Win, I got you a shell." Rhodes holds up a small shell and puts it in Winslow's hand.

Spending time with the kids has been good for Win. His room is now decorated with pictures of the kids and drawings they've done for him.

"Thank. You," Win says with a smile on his face.

I stand from my chair and lift my son up so Win can cuddle him for a moment. I wrap my arm around my wife when I put Rhodes down, and Hali leans into me.

“I’ll take her,” mom says, stepping forward to lift Hali into her arms.

“She’s ready for her nap, Mom. Are you sure you want to hold her?” Presley questions her, and my mom beams.

Shortly after we got married, Presley started calling her Mom instead of Flo, and it brought a lot of joy to my mom.

My little family has healed the pain of my brother and mother.

Every day we have with Mom is a blessing.

Her MS still gives her issues, but she wants to spend as much time with her grandbabies as she can, and it seems to have healed her morale a lot.

I take my wife’s hand and lead her to the beach, where I take her deeper into the water. The boys are playing in the sand with my mother watching. I pull Presley into my arms, kissing her deeply as she wraps around me.

“So, I have something to tell you, honey,” she purrs against my neck, and I feel her little tongue slide against my skin. I want her but can’t take her on this public beach. When I get home, I’ll be all over her.

“What you got, baby?” I ask and pull on her braid to tip her head back to look at me.

“You did it again.” She smiles wide, her beautiful eyes shine in the sunshine.

“I did what again?” I lean my head down and nibble her neck.

“Got me pregnant.” She moans, and I pull back from her.

“Really?”



“Yep.”

I wrap her around me and kiss her deep and hard. Until Presley, I had no clue what real love was.