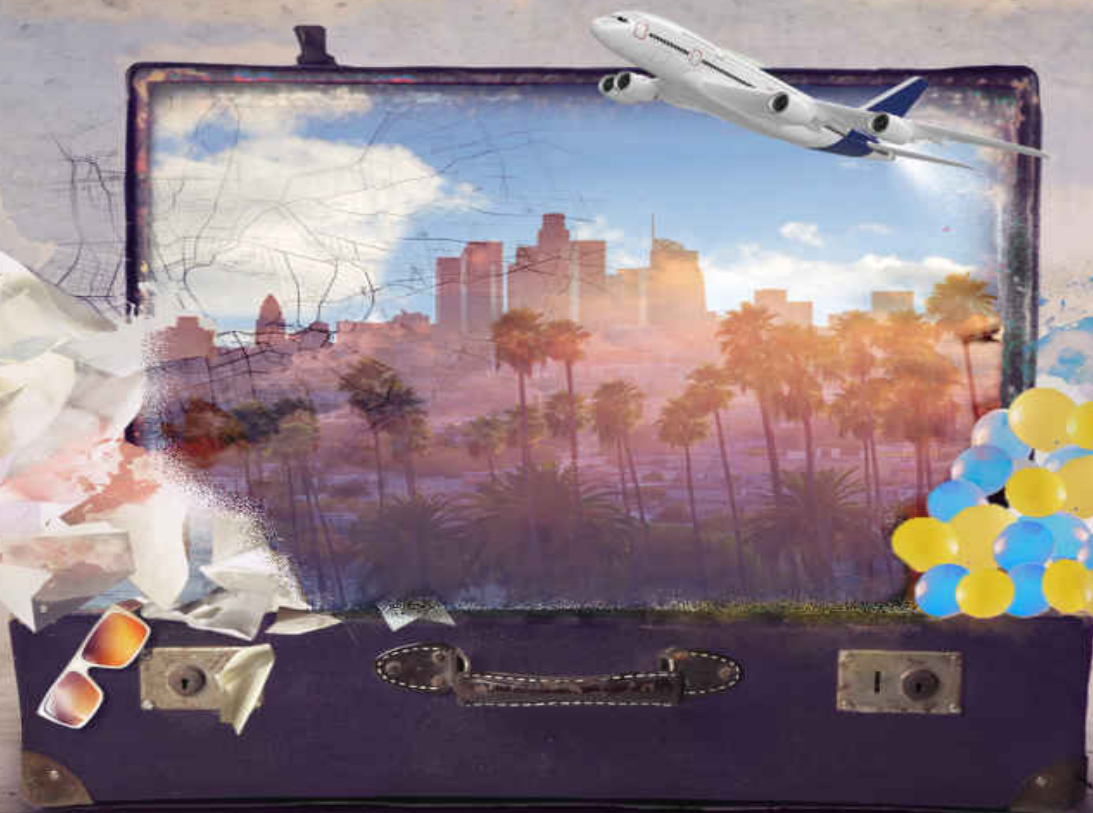




Paint Me
PERFECT

LOVE, ME & THE 303 SERIES



KAY COVE

paint me perfect

Love, Me & the 303 Series

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*For Dustin, who loves me just as I am and lets me borrow his brave every
single time I need it.*

I love our beautiful, messy, broken version of perfect.

A mother's love is patient and forgiving when all others are forsaking, it never fails or falters, even though the heart is breaking.

- Helen Steiner Rice

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chapter 1

L.A.

Noa

Mailroom manager was the last lead from the staffing agency's rolodex of temp jobs with a flexible schedule. Which means I'm officially out of options now.

I reach the elevators at LMC Talent Agency and use my elbow to press the down arrow. The upside-down triangle lights up and I give myself full permission to sulk until the metal doors open. I grumble at the wall as if it's culpable. This is bull. I could've really used the cash. Summer's here. I promised Wes answers about the house and I have exactly squat as far as reasonable solutions go.

I hoped that a little time in Los Angeles would inspire me. I was thrilled to visit my best friend Amani for a couple weeks and take a small break from my unraveling life back home. Mani told me that Colorado and California are sister states and I'd hardly notice the difference between summer in Denver and summer in L.A. Falser words have never been spoken. Never once back home did I pay eighteen dollars for a small frozen yogurt. Never once back home was I accused of being cheap when I gifted a homeless man ten bucks. This city is way too flashy, way too expensive, and it will eat me alive if I stay much longer.

Ding!

Aaaaand time. I clear my throat and then my mind. No more sulking, move your feet forward.

I clamber into the elevator and press the “L” for lobby, again with my elbow. I am far less likely to bring home an illness if I keep my hands to myself. The doors begin to close on a visual of a man in a smart navy suit jogging down the hallway.

“Hey!” He waves his hands in the air as he hustles. My foot flies forward instinctually to catch the closing doors and they jerk back open in obedience. I quietly sigh, annoyed at my own politeness. I’d prefer to ride this elevator alone, but my people-pleasing tendencies always seem to call the shots.

“Thank you,” he huffs, out of breath, as he climbs into the metal box with me.

“Of course. Lobby?”

He nods without looking up from his phone. He’s texting furiously, grumbling under his breath. Whatever he is reading makes his jaw twitch in irritation.

I recognize him from the waiting room. Moments ago, he witnessed the kerfuffle of my nonexistent interview. And by kerfuffle, I mean me, basically on my knees, begging the receptionist to check the calendar again and again. My desperation was a touch on the side of humiliating, so I’m content to silently blend into the background of the bland elevator walls. I pray they swallow me up whole for the remainder of our twenty-two-floor descent.

The man tucks his phone away and decides against silence. Small talk? Must we?

“Was there no actual interview?” he asks, straightening his suit jacket that looks custom tailored to fit his slender frame.

“From what I gathered, there is no actual job. Maybe it was an expired listing. I’m not sure. And as you clearly witnessed, the receptionist wasn’t particularly insightful.” I keep my eyes on the door but can feel his peripherals on me.

“Yeah,” he scoffs. “Ally is not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

Ally? “Oh, do you work here?”

He shrugs noncommittally. “Used to. Why the mail room?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Mail is the industrial backbone of this great American economy. I’m trying to get in on the ground level.” A glib smile claims my face as I sneak a cursory glance at the man to my right who keeps questioning me. His flashy diamond-studded Rolex looks like it’s worth

more than my minivan. He's wearing the equivalent of a basic-trim Kia on his wrist. Incredible. And by incredible, I mean incredibly ostentatious.

A quick burst of laughter overcomes him before he collects himself. "Great American economy? Hilarious. But seriously, mail?"

"I was just looking for a temp job. The agency said LMC was willing to pay well for someone to get their mail room sorted and in order as quickly as possible. It was quick cash from a two-day gig which I desperately need right now."

He reaches out his hand. "I'm Adam Montgomery. I used to work here as a talent agent. I moved to management for my personal clients."

"Nice to meet you, Adam." I accept his handshake. "I'm Noa Shields—whoops, I mean Fallon. I'm Noa Fallon. Still getting used to that."

"Just married?" His brow pinches in concern as his eyes dart to the ring finger on my left hand. There's nothing there but a fading tan line.

"No, the opposite. Just divorced. Well not just, it's been a couple months."

"So, you're unattached?" Adam's eyes scan me head to toe. He examines me the way I do questionable apples at the grocery store. It's like he's checking for mushy spots, bruises, and bite marks. He clarifies when he notices the repulsed expression on my face. "Sorry! I'm not hitting on you. I just have a PR idea that you'd be perfect for. You said you need quick cash? Maybe we can help each other."

PR? Ehh. My art skills are far superior to my speech-writing skills, but then again, I'm not in a place to be choosy right now. At any and all costs, I have to save my home. Now's the time in my life to keep an open mind.

"What did you have in—"

The elevator doors pull apart and I try to gasp but the air is swept right from my lungs.

Every square inch of the cream-and-white-swirled marble floor is occupied by paparazzi and reporters. It's a mosh pit of aggression and angry demands that concentrates right by the front doors of the building, blocking my escape. I freeze in the middle of the elevator frame and plant my foot, unwilling to let the doors close on my only backwards retreat.

"Look here!"

"Turn this way."

"Don't block me!"

"Don't fucking touch my camera!"

It's by far the most unsettling scene I've ever witnessed but my elevator pal looks totally unnerved. I mimic his cool, or try to at least, but the raging crowd immediately raises my anxiety. It's a total zoo. Actually, that's not a fair comparison. I frequent the zoo often and it is far more peaceful, even in the summer with the screaming toddlers who are suffering from hanger and heat exhaustion. The cameramen rival the obnoxiousness of an entire herd of cranky toddlers.

I can't help but feel bad for the poor famous sap they're descending upon. This isn't fan adoration. It is a massacre of personal boundaries and privacy.

Beep, beep, beep. The error sounds coming from the elevator demand I either get back in or get the hell out.

"Hey, come on." Adam nods his head forward and ushers me out of the elevator. He wraps his hand around my arm and cuts a path directly into the paparazzi mob. He expertly scoots cameraman after cameraman out of the way with his free hand, maneuvering with Heisman-worthy skill. He squeezes me through the crowd like a running back smuggling the ball through a solid defensive line.

Adam's grip on me breaks somewhere in the chaos of flying elbows that catch my neck and chest. I quickly learn a pointed lesson: paparazzi are far too busy to bother with deodorant. Seriously, guys? Gross. Forcing my own way through the sea of sweaty bodies, I finally see the door. My freedom. Like a rat at the end of a maze, cheese finally in sight, I dart energetically. I'm inches away from escape when I'm jerked back by someone tugging on the tail of my untucked blouse.

"Excuse me!" I shriek. I assume a cameraman has mistaken me for someone important and had the gall to put his hands on my shirt. I pivot around ready to spew out an earful but I'm staring into Adam's determined eyes.

"Come on, this way. Quickly." He releases the tail of my shirt and grasps my wrist. We emerge at the front of the crowd, where a man in a baseball hat stands alone, braving the camera attention as if he's unbothered. His arms are casually crossed, looking like he's having an everyday conversation with the sea of reporters that look like hungry hyenas. I'm not sure if he's aware, but in the animal kingdom, hyenas have an even stronger bite force than lions. I feel like he should run. Why isn't he trying to run?

Adam places his hands on my shoulders and gently guides me so I'm standing right next to the man in the hat. He lowers his voice, evading the paparazzi's ears. "Noa, this is Chase. Chase, this is Noa. Your new girlfriend," Adam hisses with urgency.

"What?!" I squawk.

And just like that, Chase no longer bears the burden of the paparazzi attention, alone.

"Miss, what's your name?"

"Give us a smile!"

"How stoked are you to be fucking Chase?"

"Hey man, chill," Chase growls at the lewd cameraman. "Don't talk to her like that!"

There are paparazzi closing in from every angle. I'm hyperaware of the one who keeps snapping pictures of my ass. I scan the room for options. I spot the emergency exit sign to my left and attempt to dart, but a mammoth-sized mitt wraps over my hand, keeping me in place. Chase laces his large fingers with mine and squeezes my hand a few times. He leans down and flashes me a smile that Prince Charming should take notes on. An electric surge kicks my heart rate into hyperdrive and sends my stomach into full-on acrobatics.

"Please just go with it," he whispers from the corner of his mouth. "Adam always has a plan." He rubs his fingers tenderly over my knuckles.

Flashbulbs pop furiously. The blinding lights disorient me further with each shutter click.

Adam whispers unwelcome feedback behind us. "You guys look so awkward. You're not selling it. Chase, move in a little closer."

Chase follows orders and releases my hand. He slides his strong arm around the small of my waist. He pulls me a little closer, inviting the soft curves of my body to melt against the hard planes of his.

"Is this okay?" His tone is hushed.

"It's a little late to ask. You're already doing it," I hiss back like a perturbed wet kitten. But then why do I acquiesce? Probably because I have a sneaking suspicion that this man's body is a work of art and I am a very intrigued curator at the moment.

"Miss, can you speak up? We can't hear what you're saying." The cameraman kneeling closest to us attempts to scoot forward.

“Stop, that’s close enough.” In a panic, Chase yanks me tighter into his protective embrace which feels like being smashed against a brick wall. I wheeze. Oof! Someone please tell King Kong he has to handle his lady friends with care. Chase extends his palm to the cameraman as a warning.

I look up at the man I’m slathered against. His chiseled jawline still clenches in frustration at the crass reporter. His face is cut into sleek masculine angles, yet his sweet round chocolate eyes soften his features. His hairline is neatly edged, like he’s had a very recent haircut. Not that it matters. Chase could omit showering and shaving for a full week, park his ass under a bridge, fashion a burlap sack, and he would effectively make grunge the new sexy.

Breathe, girl, breathe!

The paparazzi’s interrogation heats up.

“Chase, is this your girlfriend? What’s her name?”

“Grab her ass!”

“Honey, what’s your name? Tell us.”

“Chase, how does she feel about you being on TMZ’s Top Ten Hollywood FuckBoys list?”

“Depends. Did I top it?” Chase smiles mischievously and I can’t help but laugh. He squeezes my waist. “My girl knows they’re all just rumors.”

My girl? How aggressively presumptuous, as if I’m okay with this odd setup. PR my ass. I’d push him away if he didn’t smell so damn good. How can he remain so calm and collected in the face of this invasive interrogation? He knows which questions to respond to, when to smile, and when to intervene to keep these vultures in line. Such confidence. So handsome. So—

Wait...

It hits me, hard.

Chase.

I recognize that smile. Those dimples.

Chase...something.

There was a poster in college. Those chocolate-colored eyes.

Ford.

I know exactly who this is! Oh my god. My best friend had a poster of this man taped to our wall for the better part of four years in the apartment we shared through college. This is not some random chump in his five minutes of fame. This is Chase Ford, A-list Hollywood action movie star

who has a reputation for seeing more panties than a Victoria Secret stockroom.

Oh no.

Immediately I know what these photographs say. I'm standing next to Chase looking like his latest conquest. What if my family sees this? What if my son sees this?

I break free of Chase's arms. The butterflies that spaz out in my stomach are now from humiliation and panic. This looks really bad and there's no taking it back. Every click of the camera is another inch deeper I fall. There is no logical excuse for why I'm still standing here.

Move. Now. Go.

"I need to get out of here." I raise my voice to speak over the loud hum of the reporters. Chase's eyes dart from the crowd of cameras back to mine. He leans down, his lips grazing my ear. His breath on my earlobe starts a ferocious tingle up from my ankles, right past my thighs, settling a little south of my navel.

"All right, I hear you. Let's get out of here together. But I need you to hang on to me or you will get trampled."

Together? Hang on to me? Trampled? Wait, please! I have some follow-up questions.

Chase looks over his shoulder at Adam. "Are we ready?"

Adam barely looks up from his phone and nods once. "Jay's pulling up."

"Okay, everybody. I think we've been generous enough!" Chase bellows over the crowd. He snatches up my hand and pulls me behind him, towing me toward the main exit. Adam falls in line, effectively creating a follow-the-leader-style barrier around me. As we move, the invisible forcefield that kept the paparazzi at bay shatters. They are hunters and we are moving big-game targets. They attempt to surround us as we exit the building. Chase urges me through the glass doors and into the glaring California sunshine.

The mob is delayed but not deterred as they funnel one by one through the narrow entrance of the building.

A blacked-out SUV hastily pulls up with timing too convenient to be coincidence. This must be their ride. The car hops the curb and cuts in front of us, nearly taking us all out like bowling pins, before it screeches to a halt.

Chase deftly jumps backwards to safety, again pulling me with him. I'm his rag doll, evidently. Where he goes, I go.

The front passenger-side window rolls down. A man with a dark brown balboa beard that blends in with his skin calls out to us from the driver's seat. "What the hell are y'all waiting for? Get your fine asses in the vehicle. Hey, honey. I'm Jay." He winks at me.

"Fuck, Jay. You could've killed us." Adam flings open the front passenger door and slides in. Chase opens the rear door and scoots to the far side of the bench seat, leaving the door wide open and an empty seat for me.

"Are you coming?"

I peer over my shoulder at the swarm of paparazzi fighting their way out of the building like angry wasps on a mission for revenge. I didn't poke the hive, but I don't think my innocence in this will dissuade them. *'My girl knows they're just rumors.'* I'm a marked target now.

Chase leans across the seat and flashes me that million-dollar smug smile. He knows exactly the effect he has on women. "Please?"

A decision must be made. Cameras are zeroing in. The clicking gets louder. I need to get in this vehicle or let them go. Pretty soon they'll be blocked in from every angle and Jay might have to scoot people out of the way...with his car.

I scramble into the back seat and secure my seat belt like I made it to home base in a high-stakes game of tag. Safe! No one touch me! I greet Chase with a dirty look and he grimaces apologetically. He pulls off his hat and runs his hand through his flattened hair which instantly springs back to life. I glue my eyes on the headrest in front of me before he notices my gawking.

We're jolted to the backs of our seats as Jay peels away from the curb and merges into traffic.

Chase reaches over to pat my knee. He really needs to be careful with the voltage in his fingertips. He's going to shock me to death. "I can't imagine you're too thrilled with us right now, but I promise, we just want to get you somewhere safe. I don't bite."

Ugh, the damsel-in-distress speech. Annoying. "But I might."

chapter 2

L.A.

Chase

I'm pretty positive we just kidnapped a girl.

Jay and Adam casually argue in the front seat about fantasy football picks as if moments ago we didn't pluck a stranger off the street, hold her hostage in front of a mob of paparazzi, and then all but force her into the back of our SUV.

Nothing about this is okay.

For the past ten minutes of the drive, Noa has been next to silent. Outside of 'no, thank you' to the piece of gum I offered her, she hasn't said a word.

Her temple is pressed against the glass window. Her long espresso-colored hair spills over her shoulders and down her back. With her head turned, the thick waves obscure my view of her face. She could be crying, laughing, or plotting my death and I'd be none the wiser.

"Are you okay?" I poke her knee.

"You know—I've seen Dateline episodes begin this way," she mumbles with her gaze glued to the L.A. cityscape zipping by.

I chuckle, nervously. Joke, right? Jokes are good. Jokes mean she's not all over social media claiming that Chase Ford is a paparazzi swindler who abducts unsuspecting women for shits and giggles. My acting career is already suffering. That would definitely be the final straw.

Adam clears his throat from the front seat. "Noa, there's a perfectly good explanation for all this."

“Oh, yeah?” She whips her head around and her eyes bore into the back of Adam’s headrest. The smell of sweet vanilla bursts and quickly dissipates. “I’m all ears.”

“I’m Chase’s best friend but also his manager. We were just leaving a meeting with his talent agents when I ran into you in the elevator. He’s on the short list for a role we really need to secure, but he comes with some er—unnecessary publicity,” Adam says, wincing.

I tug my hat a little lower to hide my annoyance. All the other single people on this planet can take home whomever they please, whenever, and it’s hardly newsworthy. My sex life is under constant scrutiny. As if there’s nothing more important or interesting going on in the world than who Chase Ford is currently fucking.

“Right. Publicity. So, what exactly do you have to do to make it onto TMZ’s list of Hollywood’s Top Ten FuckBoys? Is that list as prestigious as an Oscar? I’m not familiar with all the entertainment awards.” A teasing smile curls the corner of Noa’s lips.

“Well, aren’t you a little comedian?” I pretend to be offended.

“You can’t believe everything you read, Noa.” Adam jumps to my defense unnecessarily. Calm down, man. She’s kidding.

“Are you looking for representation with LMC Talent Agency? I could put in a good word.”

She snorts and shoots me a puzzled look. “I don’t act. I’m not from L.A., I was there interviewing for a temp job.”

As Noa turns in her seat I notice the top two buttons of her blouse have come undone. Her black bra is exposed and her lush cleavage, that I should not be gawking at, spills out of the cups. Noa has no idea. I should say something. No, I don’t want her to think I was looking. I wasn’t! I just noticed. Noticed and looking are different.

“How’d it go at LMC?” I ask her.

“Well seeing as I didn’t even make it to an interview, I probably won’t hold my breath for the job.”

Man up! Just say something. ‘Your buttons are undone’—that’s simple enough. The longer this goes on, the more she’ll be embarrassed.

“I might have an idea for a job for you,” Adam cuts in. “You said you needed quick cash, right? What if we came to some sort of agreement?” He pivots around as Jay slams on the brakes. He lunges for his ‘oh-shit’ handle.

Adam hates Jay's driving. I'm shocked he climbed into the front seat. He must be thinking that flying through the windshield due to Jay's hazardous braking is still preferable to Noa's wrath after what he just pulled at LMC.

"By the way, your tits are out," he says over his shoulder. His hand still in a death grip around the overhead passenger handle.

Dammit, Adam. I could've handled that a little more gracefully.

Noa glances down, her golden tan cheeks flushing to red as her fingers dive for the buttons. She peers at me from the corner of her eye. "You weren't going to say anything?"

"I didn't notice." I try to sound innocent.

"So, what agreement?" Noa speaks louder so her voice carries to the front seat.

"Just some publicity. Take a few more pictures with Chase that imply you're in a serious relationship. The media starts spinning a different story about Chase's dating life. Easy. You get a job and Chase gets an image makeover. Win-win."

Oh, so that's where Adam is going with all this. It makes sense. Manipulating the press is the oldest trick in the celebrity playbook. I'll admit my reputation needs some help in the dating department. Ever since my career took a nosedive three years ago, I've been painted by the media as a washed-up, Hollywood man-child who only cares about parties and pussy.

If only they knew the real story. Far more depressing, far less entertaining.

"You want to pay me to date Chase?"

"More or less."

"Mhm." Noa purses her lips and bobs her head in contemplation. "And in what way is that not borderline escorting?"

I cough into the crook of my elbow as I choke on my spit. "Pretend," I force between coughs. "Pretend to date." Cough, cough. "Definitely not actual... You wouldn't—you know—none of that." Cough.

My phone buzzes from my pocket. I check the message and lower it when I see it's from Adam.

Adam: Wow.

Me: What?

Adam: You could not be less smooth. Hilarious to watch.

Me: *middle finger emoji*

“This doesn’t make sense. Don’t you have a lot of girlfriends? Use one of them. What do you need a stranger for?”

“Not a lot...” I bite the inside of my cheek. Okay, so she’s seen the tabloids. It’s a fair question but I don’t have an opportunity to defend myself because the peanut gallery up front decides to commentate.

“You look the part. Sweet as sugar.” Jay winks into the rearview mirror. “By the way, Aloha. Am I right? Your mother or your father?” I squint in confusion but Noa’s whole face lights up.

“Aloha! My mom. My father was born and raised in the Midwest. My mother’s from The Valley Isle. How did you know?”

“Ah, Maui. My favorite right after Oahu. The women on Waikiki Beach all look like you, honey. Absolutely gorgeous. You should let Adam be your manager. He’s got a giant stick up his ass but he’s great at his job.”

Gorgeous doesn’t do her justice.

She’s a word past stunning.

“You are too sweet. Mahalo, Jay. Are you from the islands?” Noa cups her cheek with her hand like she’s getting her pants charmed right off of her. I don’t like this instant connection.

“I fell in love in Oahu. Mm, mm, mm, I’ll tell you, that woman’s body was a masterpiece.” Jay takes his hand off the wheel to trace an hourglass shape in the air. “I spent an entire summer drunk off mai tais watching her hula dance.”

“That sounds like a perfect summer. What happened?”

“Duty called. Summer ended. She wouldn’t leave the rock.” Jay pouts and Noa leans forward in her seat to squeeze his shoulder.

“Natives and the islands, Jay. It’s a tough subject. My mom’s family was not pleased when she moved inland to be with my dad.”

“Your mom sounds like a loyal woman.”

“Awww, Jay! Your girl broke your heart, huh? You know what—just for that, I won’t even consider you complicit in this hostage situation when I sing like a canary to the police.” She and Jay join in laughter.

The hell? What is going on right now? Is Jay hitting on her? And why is she smiling like that? Shit, I hope she’s kidding about the police. I’m not sure if there was anything illegal about what we just did, but as it’s always

gone, whenever I fuck up, the world is always more than eager to rip me a new one—publicly.

“Thank you, honey. I assure you I have no part in these boys’ scheme. I’m just here to drive and bodyguard in case someone gets rowdy with Chase. One chick snatched a shirt right off of him.” He takes his hands off the wheel again to pump two fists in the air.

“Jay!” Adam immediately lunges for the wheel. “For the love of all that is holy.”

Noa laughs at the commotion and holds her hands out in the universal sign of surrender. “Well, I promise to keep my hands to myself.”

I send another text to Adam. My fingers type with all the disgruntled angsty energy that’s flowing through me at the moment.

Me: Boys? I will neuter him.

Adam: Ha! You can try.

Me: Tell the old man to quit flirting.

Adam: You mad that Jay has more game than you?

Me: In case I wasn’t clear before... *middle finger emoji*

Jay’s almost ten years my senior but still looks like a young, burly Idris Elba and I’m not interested in competing with him for Noa’s attention. Jay is strong enough to hoist a guy of my size over his shoulder with ease. He once carried me like a sack of potatoes up fifteen flights of stairs after I passed out drunk at a party. All right, if I’m being honest—more than once. And it’s the reason I no longer drink Hennessy.

“So, what do you do?” I jump in during a short lull between her and Jay’s discussion on the proper way to hula.

“What do you mean?” Noa slants her head as if my question is confusing.

“Your current job?”

“Oh...I’m a mom.”

“Nice. How old?”

“Me or my kid?”

“Both?”

“I’m twenty-six. My son is four.”

“And how old is his dad?”

Adam fake coughs into his fist. “Already checked in the elevator, man. She’s divorced. And the single mom angle only makes it better. We are good to go.”

Adam is subtle...said no one—ever.

Noa’s sparkling gray eyes widen. “Good to go? Okay, hold on a second. Let me see if I’m understanding this correctly. You want to put me on a fishing line and use me as paparazzi bait because in contrast to the company Mr. Ford usually keeps, I don’t look like a live-action Hollywood blow-up doll?”

“Blow-up doll isn’t exactly the word I’d use,” I defend.

“Is it stripper? Is that the word you’d use?” Noa scrunches her face playfully. Jay and Adam are in stitches up front. They didn’t even bother putting on music for this aimless car ride. They are thoroughly enjoying the entertainment of me in the hot seat.

“I like her,” Jay says to Adam.

“Me, too,” Adam returns. “We should keep her.”

“I may have some opinions on that,” Noa huffs under her breath.

The car slows at a stoplight. We’ve been circling the city for at least forty minutes. We must’ve ditched the cameras by now.

“Where are we going, guys?” Jay asks.

“We should take Noa back to her car,” Adam answers.

“Well, that’ll be a long-ass drive for you guys seeing as my car is in Denver.” Noa glances down quickly as if she’s ensuring her buttons are behaving. “Is there any way you can just drop me off at the Elm Community on Fourteenth?”

“I know Elm, honey. I’ll head there now.” Jay flicks on the turn signal and cuts a row of protesting cars off as he forces his way into the left turn lane.

“Think about it, Noa. Okay? But either way, we can’t have this whole stunt getting leaked...so I’m just going to level with you. How much to buy your silence? I’ll write a check right now.” Adam sounds like a prick. This really is starting to feel uncomfortably close to an escort-for-hire situation. I’ve crossed a lot of lines in the past, but never that one.

“I’ll just settle for a ride home, please.” She checks her phone and her face pulls in concern. She responds quickly to a text and I divert my prying eyes. Who is she texting? Who knows about this already?

“If you’re so desperate for a job, how the hell can you afford to live at Elm Community?” Adam asks.

“Adam!” I scold. “Rude, man.”

To my great surprise, Noa laughs. “I definitely can’t. I’m just visiting my friend for a couple weeks. She can afford it. I can’t even afford fro-yo in Los Angeles. Look, guys, honestly, I’m flattered...I think. But you picked the wrong girl. I am a broke, newly divorced, suburban mom who is just trying to figure out her new life. I can barely help myself. There’s nothing I can do to help you all. I’m sorry. The answer to whatever question you’re asking, is no.”

My phone vibrates from my pocket again. This time I feel Noa’s eyes on me as I check the message.

Adam: Get her number. For damage control.

“May I roll down the window?” Her finger rests on the switch but she waits for my answer.

“You need permission?” For someone who could have us by the balls in this situation, she sure is docile.

“I’m assuming there is a reason this car is so heavily tinted. I figured I’d ask before exposing you.”

“I’ll risk it.” I roll my own window down as an invitation and let the rush of wind swell in the car. Noa follows suit. Jay halts at a traffic light and the picturesque scene of the sun setting over the cityscape of L.A. enraptures Noa. She lets out a low whistle.

“I’ll admit, Denver does not have sunsets like this. Point L.A.”

“There’s a point system?”

“Yep. But it’s hardly fair. L.A. is losing miserably.”

“Maybe you just haven’t seen the right parts of L.A.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Noa says.

We approach a massive, gated community. The packed buildings scatter as we approach the residential area. Tall palm trees, planted in the medians, line the entrance into the community. I need to act fast.

“Give me your phone number. I’ll send you a list of the best parts of L.A. that aren’t on TripAdvisor or Yelp. I bet they’ll earn a few points for my home city.” I unlock my phone and hold it out to Noa.

She shoots me a knowing smile. “That was smooth, Chase Ford. Very suave.”

I pretend to bow. There’s an odd flutter in my chest every time she looks at me with her peculiar gunmetal-gray eyes. I wish they’d stay still so I could examine them closer but they’ve been darting all over the car, out the window, on her phone. They rest anywhere except on me.

Noa punches in her phone number and taps the call button. She waits until her purse vibrates before she ends the call and hands my phone back. If I offered my phone to any other woman, they’d be subtly checking my call log as they took an obnoxiously long time to enter their contact information. It’s clear that Noa doesn’t give a rat’s ass about who I talk to.

“I’m the three-oh-three number. But don’t try and oversell the California beaches, okay? Because when it comes to the water—point Maui, every time.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Street tacos and karaoke joints only.”

“Street tacos? Nope. Point Colorado. Sorry.”

Well shit, that basically leaves me with some pretty fun dispensaries, but I’m certain Denver has those too.

We’re thrown to the left as Jay hits the roundabout like a stunt driver for Tokyo Drift. I’m hurled against the window and Noa extends her arm to catch herself. Her hand braces against my knee. I flinch at the pleasant shockwave her touch sends through my entire body. She removes her hand immediately when our eyes meet. “Sorry,” she whispers.

“Fuck, Jay! What is your problem?” Adam squawks. Jay circles the roundabout again with racecar driver finesse just to piss him off. This time Noa grips the seat to secure herself, carefully avoiding touching me. Jay pauses at the security gate the second time around. There is no attendant, just an intercom and numbered box.

“What’s the code, honey?”

“One-four-three-three-nine,” Noa calls out to Jay. He punches in the numbers and the gates creak open. Something about this feels oddly familiar, like I’ve been to this building before—at night. Oh, no. Please, please, if there is a god, please don’t let Noa’s friend be one of my drunken hookups.

The car slows, then stops at the resident clubhouse.

“Which building?” Jay asks.

Noa unbuckles, then opens her passenger door. “This is good. I’ll walk from here. Thank you. Very nice to meet you guys...well, mostly.” Noa pinches Adam’s shoulder and then Jay’s. She holds up her palm innocently at me.

“I’ll meet you outside.” I yank the passenger handle and quickly join Noa on the sidewalk. “Did you just try to high-five me as a goodbye?” My ego is wounded. I’m not used to women playing so coy. This is her chance with me...why isn’t she taking it?

She presses her lips together in a flat line, but the corners curl, seemingly against her will. “Do you have something against high-fives?”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her into my chest. She doesn’t fight me. She loops her arms underneath my shoulders and pats my back a few times before she pulls away, well before I’m ready.

“I prefer hugs.” I crinkle one eye.

She smiles so sweetly. “I’m going to add that to my victim statement. How far is the police station from here?” Very funny. I can already tell she will be making this joke until her dying breath. “All kidding aside, please tell Adam I’m not going to say anything. I promise you I’m harmless and really not into celebrity gossip.”

Hm, so you say.

“Thank you, and again, I’m sorry about everything. This was Adam’s brainchild, but I still feel responsible.”

She nods sarcastically. “Agreed. I, too, feel you’re responsible.”

Okay, sassy. “Would you reconsider it though? Maybe we can help you with your whole figuring-out-your-life situation.”

“And by help me, you actually mean help me help you, right?” She raises her brow. The toe of her flat sandal is planted while her heel lifts off the ground preparing to take a step backwards.

“That’s how a good deal works, right? Give and take?”

“I’ll tell you what—if you’re ever in Denver look me up. Especially during pepper season because then I can introduce you to real street tacos. Not this Baja Cali-style mess.” Her heel plants on the cement and before I can blink, she’s on her way down the paved path.

I wonder why she had us drop her off at the clubhouse. Does she like to walk or does she not want us to know where she’s staying?

“Don’t be a stranger, okay?” I call after her.

“Why not? That’s exactly what I am.” She casts her hand over her shoulder and wiggles her middle three fingers in a wave. “Goodbye, Chase Ford.”

I feel a ripple in the earth. The ground shifts. It’s like an earthquake stemming from the core of my chest. There is something fascinating about this woman. I’m not nearly satisfied with this interaction. I want to know more. Denver? Hawaii? A son? Divorce? Who lands a girl like Noa and lets her go?

I have too many unanswered questions.

I’m used to a little script embellishing. When the lines don’t feel natural, I tweak them so they flow. So, I’ll take her goodbye, but I tack on, for now.

That sounds much better.

Goodbye, for now.

chapter 3

L.A.

Noa

I've filled my purple cloth suitcase past max capacity. My luggage is weathered and strained. I've had it since I met my ex-husband Wes almost a decade ago. I choose not to replace it, there's no need. It still dutifully does the job and I'm not ready to give up on the ol' girl.

Embracing new things isn't a strength of mine. I prefer my paths flat and steady. I may be in what most would call my prime, but my heart is that of a grumpy old grandpa—stuck in his ways, likes what he knows.

The choice may soon be made for me. I study the precarious-looking suitcase. Is it possible for luggage to actually feel tired and worn out? I can sense the exhaustion coming through the frayed and faded fabric. The seams struggle to hold the overwhelming mass of all my stuff and it isn't even zipped shut yet. I've stuffed my suitcase to the brim with all the little presents I picked up for Jonah in L.A. and at this point I'm considering duct-tape reinforcement for my peace of mind.

"That's going to bust," Mani tells me what I already know. I tug at the stubborn zipper anyway.

"Nah, she's got a few more trips in her."

Mani flips her deep-red hair over the top of her head and coils her long mane into a topknot. She sits crisscrossed on my bed pretending to help me pack. But I'm almost certain she's just lingering to get more details about my chance encounter with megastar, Chase Ford.

“What’re the chances you’d consider moving out here with me? I could get a bigger place,” Mani says.

“Hmm, would you like your windows painted with Cheez Whiz? Would you like to tiptoe around tiny toy dinosaur land mines in the dark? Some people think plastic Stegosaurus spikes can’t puncture the bottoms of your feet—they are wrong. If that doesn’t deter you, how about we eat SpongeBob mac ’n cheese with mini pepperonis for dinner for a month straight while watching a constant loop of PJ Masks?”

“You done?” Mani crosses her arms. “Because I love my godson. I have no issue with any of that. Let me break it down for you. Windex. Band-Aids. I love me some mac ’n cheese and I think I’d very much enjoy PJ Masks after an edible. There. I just bulldozed through all your bullshit excuses in seven seconds.”

I don’t have the heart to correct her. Mani’s not actually Jonah’s godmother. Wes’s parents would get Jonah in the event of our untimely death. Or my mom and dad. Then, Wes’s sister. Among our best friends? Quinn then Adler then Reese. After that, anyone in our mommy-and-me group. Next, the mailman. Pretty much anyone other than Amani Rhodes, whose L.A. party-hard lifestyle is not conducive to raising a four-year-old.

“I miss seeing you every day but you don’t want a kid here. And also—and I mean this from the bottom of my heart—I hate L.A. Why don’t you just move back home?”

“It’s easier to build my influencer brand here. There’s always something going on in L.A.” Mani throws herself back on the neatly made bed, rustling the collection of decorative pillows that line the cloth headboard. I just made the bed, but that’s cool. She throws her arm up to shield her eyes as the morning sun bleeds in through the shade slats.

I leave my suitcase to rest momentarily as if a little time can remedy physics and the basic laws of matter. I reach my arms overhead to relieve my aching back that’s tightened from hunching over for so long. I am hyper-organized and regimented when it comes to travel. Compartments are my law and legislation. Every Ziploc baggie in my suitcase has a label to redundantly convey the contents that are already clearly visible. This kind of perfection takes a physical toll.

“You belong at home, friend. So do I.” I join Mani on the now-unmade bed. My head slumps backwards on the fluffy pillow tucked into my favorite lavender-scented satin case. “Mani?”

“Yes?”

“I’m scared I’m going to lose the house.”

She shoots up into a sit. “What? I thought you were close to raising the down payment.”

“The lender emailed me again this morning. They need another fifteen grand to buy the rate down. Otherwise, the monthly payment will be astronomical. They’re claiming I’m a loan risk because I don’t have steady income which means—well basically they said I had no business buying a house.”

“Get another lender.”

“This is the third I’ve talked to.” I smooch my head back farther into the soft feathers and blow out a deep breath. “They are all saying the same. My credit is fine, but I don’t have a real job.”

“Oh, Nono. I’m so sorry. That’s bullshit. You just painted the mural at that restaurant, right? That’s something. I’m sure there is more work to follow.”

“It’s contract work. Lenders don’t like that. They call it unreliable and they’ve marked me as unstable.” How astute. They sum up my entire life in one word: unstable.

“What about your parents? Can they help?”

“That would involve telling them Wes and I are divorced.”

“Kainoa Luana Fallon!” Mani hops off the bed and places her hands on her hips. Her green eyes bulge and the scary vein in her neck begins to throb. “Your mother is—oh my god—she is going to kill you.” She clasps her hands around her mouth like I just confessed to murder.

“Hence why I haven’t told her.” I pull a neighboring pillow over my face, asking the world to just go dark for now.

“No.” Mani sassily snaps her fingers. “Not because of the divorce. She’s going to kill you because you didn’t tell her. You tell your mom everything! Since when do you keep secrets from Lani for two whole months?”

My mother is not a scary woman. She is a strong woman. Sometimes people get those two things confused. She’s a matriarch in a Hawaiian culture where family is everything. Family is the only thing that matters in this life. I don’t know how to tell her I let my marriage slip right through my fingers and I have no idea what my next steps are.

“I don’t want her to worry about me or Jonah. My dad finally retired and they are loving being back in Hawaii. I don’t want to pull them away

from paradise because they think their only child's life is falling apart. All I need is a little time to figure it out before I tell them what's going on."

Mani stands over me and rips the pillow from my face before tossing it across the room. "What the hell are parents for if you can't rely on them when you need them most?"

"Exactly." I poke her square in the forehead. "I'm a parent and Jonah relies on me. I need to find a way to take care of my son outside of child support and alimony. Do you know I've never had my own medical insurance policy?"

"So?"

"It bothers me. I went right from my dad's insurance to Wes's. I don't have a 401k. Wes has his money in high-yield returns—I don't know what the hell that means. I can't buy a car unless someone co-signs. I spent so much time being a wife and mom I forgot to build anything else outside of it. I worked so damn hard for five years and what do I have to show for it?"

"How about an amazing, happy kid?"

I can't help but smile when I think about my little guy. "Thank you. But these days motherhood is something more. It was easier in the infancy stage. But Jonah's growing up so fast and I feel like the less he needs me, the more I don't know who I am."

Mani puckers her bottom lip, but she doesn't interrupt, so I continue with my emotional introspection.

"Look at you. You're in L.A. all on your own. You handle your bills and you make your own choices. Your day does not start and end based on when your husband goes to work and when he comes home for dinner. Wes is buying a new house, he has a new girlfriend, he's moving forward, and I can't because I didn't prepare for any other future than the one I just lost. This house is not just a house to me. It's how I prove to Jonah that I can hold it all together for him. He deserves a mom who can be strong for him."

"Okay." Mani nods slowly.

"Okay? That's it?"

"That's it. Noa, you have to go through this however you need to. I just want you to remember one thing. You're a great mom. If they made moms in a lab, you'd be the mold. But it's not the only thing you're great at. If you'd just call your mom, I think she could—"

I interrupt with a loud, drawn-out groan and shimmy off the bed. My suitcase has rested long enough.

“Come help me, please?” I beg as I crawl on the top of the cloth cover of my luggage. Mani’s eyes are glued to the ceiling in a permanent eye roll as she joins me to help make miracles happen. “I’ll sit, you zip,” I command as I cross my legs, trying to force down as much pressure as possible to flatten the heap.

Mani tugs at the zipper but it doesn’t budge. She pats my leg. “Swap.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re lighter than me.” I squeeze the top of my hip. Mani has complained since high school that she’d rather have my figure. She always felt her frame was too boxy and boy-like. Which is why she took her first big influencer check straight to a plastic surgeon’s office to demand her double Ds. But I always envied her naturally thin body and she should be grateful that she doesn’t have to live off of mixed greens and wake up at five in the morning to live-stream Pilates classes to keep her feminine curves at bay.

“I’m not lighter, but you are stronger,” she says as we exchange places and she plops her bony butt down on my suitcase. “Anyways, how does Wes feel about all this?” Mani grunts as she tries to press her weight down on the cloth top.

“His patience is running thin. He’s trying to close on his new house and he’s eager to get rid of our mortgage.” I tug with all my might and force the zipper to close a few of its teeth. Progress! “His girlfriend is really putting on the pressure for him to move out of his mom’s. Aha!” The zipper finally gives and I’m able to wrap it around the full length of the suitcase. Mission accomplished. I reach out my hands for Mani’s to relieve her as my suitcase paperweight.

“Is she moving in with him?”

I shrug. “Hell if I know. But he’s happy. Whatever they choose to do is their business. Want to hear something insane, though? She told Wes she wants a baby.”

“What?” Mani’s eyes flash in shock as she scoffs in thorough irritation. “Ridiculous. That’s not even anatomically possible until she gets her period.”

I guffaw loudly. Damn. Easy, girl. “She’s twenty-one. That’s how old I was when I got pregnant.”

“Sure, but you and Wes are two years apart. He’s seven years her senior. How are you okay with this?”

“I honestly don’t care. I’m relieved. I feel like I can finally think about something other than what Wes wants and needs. Plus, I want him to be happy. He loves the attention Mandy gives him. That girl follows him around like a little puppy. I actually call her puppy. It drives Wes nuts.”

“Oh my god. Stop! You are way too gracious. It’s driving me insane.”

“Why?”

“Because you shouldn’t be okay, you should be shoving pins into a little Wes Voodoo doll right now.”

I snort so hard I choke a bit. “Do you have one?” Cough, cough.

“You know what? I may make one. Wes is an asshole for asking you for a divorce, then trying to sell your house from under you, all while he’s banging a co-ed.”

Mani always spins this story in the worst light. It’s not that dramatic. Wes and I are amicable. We will always be a team when it comes to Jonah. We love each other, we just aren’t in love with each other. It’s as simple as that. I’m glad we both realized that before things could turn ugly.

Ping!

My phone sings with a notification. A text from an eight-one-eight number I don’t recognize slides across my screen.

818-555-0282: Hey. You still in town? I have that list.

“Mani, what area code is eight-one-eight?”

“Hollywood.” A sinful smile turns up her lips. “That’s him, isn’t it?”

“Doubtful.” I play dumb. I decide to send a very un-Noa-like response to the mystery number.

Me: Who dis?

“Do you want to grab a bite before the airport?” I ask, trying to distract Mani so she doesn’t black out from excitement at the idea of Chase Ford texting me. I thought L.A. locals had celebrity run-ins all the time. I’m not sure why she is so enamored. Outside of being hands down the sexiest man I’ve ever encountered, he’s just a person. Just another guy with an agenda.

“No! I don’t want to grab a bite.” She mimics me at the end of her sentence in a balmy drawl, clearly annoyed at my nonchalance. “I want you

to spill.” She taps her foot impatiently.

“Spill what?”

“Run me through it again. What happened at your interview?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? There was no interview. Chase Ford’s manager, or friend, or whatever Adam is, accosted me at LMC. He was friendly and we just small-talked in the elevator—”

“No,” Mani interrupts as she crosses her arms. “I know that part, I mean what happened in front of the paparazzi?”

“I thought Adam was getting me out of there, but at the last minute he pulled me right into Chase. I don’t know...the cameras were flashing in my face before I could even process what was going on. I was disoriented and I froze. And it didn’t help that Chase’s arms were...”

I trail off, remembering the way I was smattered against his muscular frame. The sweet and earthy smell of his cologne. His charming smile—halfway hidden underneath the bill of his baseball cap...

Mani’s hands are clasped together. She taps the sides of her forefingers against her lips eagerly. This is the version of the story she wanted. “What was he doing with his arms?”

“He just posed next to me pretending to be my boyfriend. The paparazzi was grilling him.”

“So you just played along and went with it? What did you say?”

“Nothing. I didn’t have to. Chase ran the whole operation. He told the paparazzi that his girl—apparently meaning me—knows all the rumors were just that—rumors. Then I recognized him, realized how the whole situation looked, and bolted for the door.”

“Then they drove you home?”

“Yep.”

“And...”

“And what? What more do you want?”

“Details! This is seriously the coolest you’ve played anything in your entire life and it’s really annoying. Give me something. It’s Chase Ford. Was he flirty? Did he ask to see you again? Tell me you at least licked him on your way out or something.”

“Yes, Mani,” I deadpan. “I did exactly that. I licked him and then he ripped off my clothes and took me right there on the hood of his car with the paparazzi watching and everything. Prepare for some scathing tabloid

covers.” I squint my eyes at her like she’s grown two heads to emphasize my sarcasm.

“Well see, because of your tone, I’m skeptical. But I hope he did. You need someone to clear out those cobwebs. There’s a fun Noa hiding in there somewhere. Where is she?”

She’s a mom. She’s tired. Leave her alone.

“Do you want his number? I’m sure it’s private, but after shoving me in front of paparazzi without so much as a warning, I feel justified in blasting his details. And you seem interested.”

Mani curls her lips. “Oh, I am. But not in Chase. I’m interested in the fact that you’ve been wearing that silly smile on your face since you met him two days ago.”

I suck in my cheeks to hide the evidence of my glee as my phone pings again. I will never admit to the butterflies in my tummy. I will never admit how eight-one-eight might be my new favorite set of numbers.

818-555-0282: Ha! You did not just ‘who dis’ me. You know who it is.

Me: Sure don’t. By the way, will you ask those psychos who kidnapped me at LMC if they want a copy of the police report? *winking emoji*

818-555-0282: I’d love a copy. Can you deliver it in person?

Oh, smooth. I knew it from the moment I saw his smoldering smile. I confirmed it when he told me that he preferred hugs. Chase is a bonafide flirt who is well-deserving of his man-whore title. Would it be fun to see him again? Sure. But I don’t need fun right now. According to the lenders, I need something Chase Ford can’t give me—stability. I have to go get that for myself.

“Hey! You know what? I actually have a good friend who works in celebrity PR. Cici. I can call her if this really starts to spiral to get you some help with damage control.”

“Damage control? I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“I don’t know.” Mani’s chirpiness is taunting. “Chase Ford pops up in celebrity gossip almost as much as the Kardashians. People love to talk about sexy Hollywood bachelors and all the women who get caught in the back spray.”

Back spray? Ew.

I hope she doesn’t mean that the way I took it.

Mani holds out her hand and I give her my phone so she can evaluate my text message conversation with Chase. I don't even flinch. My best friends and I don't hide anything from each other and we certainly don't respect boundaries. We open each other's packages and go through each other's phones. Some call us obscenely codependent. We call it sisterhood, but you know—to each their own, which is exactly what we'll say when we're all in our forties and in group counseling together.

“Nono! Change your flight. Seriously. Go get it in and take a red eye.” Mani bobs her head up and down with her mouth open wide, looking like a lunatic. “It's Chase Ford!”

“Yeah—so remind me, this is the same actor you and Addie drooled over in college? The one Addie said had a ‘spankable’ ass?”

“Like she would know,” Mani cackles. “The lid on her cookie jar is still on real tight.” Adler, or Addie to us, is still a virgin at twenty-five years old and more power to her. If it didn't mean giving up Jonah, I'd go back to being a virgin. Men do nothing but complicate life. “But, yes. He's A-list famous. Everyone knows who he is. He's fallen a little out of the limelight over the past couple months, but still! Where the hell were you in college?”

“I actually went to class.”

“No. You were just too far up Wes's butt to notice anything else going on in the world.”

“Also known as being in a relationship...”

“That's not how everybody does relationships.”

“How would you know? Your longest relationship vibrates.” I stick my tongue out at Mani but she just smiles and shrugs.

“Is that supposed to offend me? Because I have absolutely no qualms with that. Unlike with men, I don't need to train my vibrator on how I like to—”

“TMI, Mani!”

The truth is, I've been googling Chase all week. I'm human, what can I say? Curiosity got the best of me. Is that a crime? If so, aren't we tit for tat at this point? He kidnaps me. I stalk him. This seems like a very healthy start to a promising fake relationship.

Most of the pictures on the internet featured him shirtless and always wet for some reason. Whether he was dripping from a sweaty workout, or he was just on a casual walk in the rain, almost all of his images featured

liquid beads dancing over his taut tan muscles and dripping from his tousled dark brown hair. We get it! He looks good wet.

He looks like he's been carved from the hands of an expert sculptor. I felt that body pressed up against mine a couple days ago so I can confirm that the material from which he is carved is rock-hard porcelain. The number of hours he must spend in the gym for that body... Yeesh. I could repaint the Sistine Chapel with that kind of time.

"I'm going to text him back for you and say you want to see him... naked," she says as she plops back on the bed that calls to her. Mani's only awake at this hour to take me to the airport. Her life doesn't begin until about eight o'clock at night when she starts the two-hour arduous journey of getting club-ready.

"No! Don't. I'm not interested." I tidy the knickknacks on the dresser to hide my anxiety. I'm worried if I lunge for my phone right now it'll color me a bit too keen. I pretend like I'm not as spellbound by Chase Ford as every other woman in the world with eyes.

"Why?"

"Because he's...experienced. Chase's idea of hot involves a Jell-O pit and two busty oiled-up blondes wrestling. I'm a newly divorced mom who loves her minivan. He would fall asleep on top of me and my ego really can't handle that right now. I'll get back out there when I'm ready, but not with a guy like that."

Me: Sorry, I already left town.

818-555-0282: When are you coming back?

Me: I'm not.

Chase Ford will thank me one day. He doesn't want any part of my sad, messy life situation.

A loud ripping noise abruptly cuts through the room.

Crap!

I release a guttural groan from deep in my stomach. I know exactly what that sound is. The ol' girl finally had it. My suitcase spontaneously busts at the main seam and all my belongings spill out onto the floor. Hours of careful, strategic packing...gone to waste.

"Told you," Mani says.

I study the tear, trying to determine if a really solid duct-tape job can save her.

“Don’t even think about it, Noa.”

“What?”

“Using duct tape. That’s so trashy.”

“I wasn’t!” Guilty.

“Come on.” She hops off the bed, scattering pillows all over. “Leave it. You can borrow mine. I’ll take yours to the dump later.”

I gasp at her suggestion. “What are you talking about? I’m taking her home. There’s way too much history to just throw her away.”

“You’re a hoarder, you know that right? That show is saving a special episode to feature you, to be followed by an intervention.”

I shrug, unbothered. She says hoarder, I say sentimental.

“Come on, my big set can probably fit that raggedy thing inside of it, but they are going to make you pay for an extra checked bag.”

“So be it. Wait—your big set?”

“Oooh yeah, you know the one I’m talking about.” Mani flashes me a wicked grin. Great. I’m going to have to fly home with a life-sized version of Barbie’s hot-pink leopard-print bedazzled luggage.

Just freaking great.

chapter 4

L.A.

Chase

I stretch out on the oversized living room sectional. This couch is better than my bed. It more than accommodates my six-foot height. The plush leather cushions are easily large enough to cradle my head and feet. I'm restless and uncomfortable, but it's not the furniture.

I'm bored.

I hate being in L.A. between jobs. There's nothing to do except get in trouble. Since my chance encounter with Noa, I've been on lockdown per Adam's instructions. His stunt is working and he won't allow me to screw it up.

"Morning, sunshine." Adam emerges from my kitchen, beer in hand, chips in the other. He plops on the other side of the L-shaped couch and hikes his feet up on the coffee table. My condo in L.A. was a playground to my entire entourage while I was away and they aren't skittish upon my return.

Evidence of their mooching is obvious all over the apartment. I entered my kitchen this morning to find everything in *my* refrigerator labeled. I ate Keith's yogurt—but it's okay. I'm sure I paid for it. Also, I don't know who the hell Keith is.

A loud *ding ding ding, dong* sings from the door.

That's new. How have I not noticed that since I've been back? Mark, my barnacle of a best friend, has taken some liberties on upgrading the condo.

One of which is installing a glaringly loud musical doorbell.

Adam hops up as quickly as he sat down.

“Sorry in advance by the way,” he says over his shoulder before he opens the front door.

“Adam, are you expecting company, at *my* home?” I roll my eyes behind my closed lids.

The familiar *clickety-click-click* of stilettos raises the hair on the back of my neck. I hear her before I see her. There is no mistaking the overbearing smell of that perfume. It’s Cici Russell.

My publicist. My assistant. My obnoxiously bossy friend. My definitely-just-that-one-time drunken make-out buddy five years ago. We have since found the proper boundaries in each other’s lives which is no more than eight shots of tequila between the two of us.

She enters my condo, with Adam behind her, giving me a mocking thumbs-up. I glare at him. He purposely didn’t tell me she was coming over so I’d have no time to run. I am not in the mood for the lecture I’m sure I’m about to receive. I glance around the couch to see if there is anything in arm’s reach that I can throw at his head.

“Chase!” Cici snaps.

“No, thank you,” I mumble.

Why do I run from Cici?

“Are you fucking serious? It’s two in the afternoon, you lazy man-sloth. Have you done anything productive with your day? Did you even look at the response to TMZ I drafted? I don’t care if you approve, I’m sending it.”

There it is. That’s why.

She’s usually tolerable but she’s on the war path today. Adam and I are in trouble. Cici’s wearing just enough makeup to hide her ghost-white face. She’s had no time to whittle down her fangs and they look ready to draw blood. Her horns hide somewhere in the high blonde ponytail that’s so tight it’s doubling as a cost-free facelift. There’s an obvious stain on her crop-top hoodie. This look is called manically disheveled. No doubt because of our little media stunt without so much as a warning to the woman who rules my publicity.

“Cici,” I say curtly. “That’s hardly a way to say welcome home.”

“Welcome home my ass. One vacation, Chase. You said you’d keep a low profile and grant me *one* vacation. And yet, here we are. You are lucky I’m so good at my job. You should be kissing my feet, you idiots. That shit you pulled at LMC—do you know what a disaster that could’ve been?”

She's not wrong. But Noa hasn't talked, we're okay.

"And why are we kissing your feet?" Adam takes a long swig from his beer. He coughs and then pounds on his chest aggressively.

"You shotgun like a little bitch," Cici snarks at Adam.

"I guess I'm not as good at swallowing as you are." Adam coughs again. He's heaving and red-faced, but still capable of insults.

"Keep practicing. You'll get there," Cici fires right back.

"Enough! You guys are going to give me a headache. Cici, what's going on?"

She untucks the folded tabloid from under her arm and tosses it on the coffee table. A picture of Noa and me is plastered across the cover. I catch my breath. I almost forgot how pretty she is. The headline reads: *My girl knows they're just rumors.*

"Let me see that." Adam snatches up the magazine and begins to flip through pages.

The sudden sound of a buzzer makes us all jump. I bolt upright on the couch.

"For the last time, man, change your ringtone," I complain. Adam's ringtone sounds like the shot clock alarm at an NBA game. It raises my blood pressure every time it goes off. If he doesn't change it soon, his phone will be learning to swim...in the ocean.

Adam rises and ducks into a guest room to take the call. He closes the door behind him. That can't be good. He's normally obnoxious enough to answer a call in the middle of opening credits in a dark movie theater. This sudden secrecy must be bad news.

"This is good, right?" I pick up the article that Adam left open on the coffee table. I'm too distracted by Noa's picture to read any of the words.

Cici taps the article. "It's not just good, Chase. It's *great*. Your fans love her. I don't usually like to give Adam credit because of that fat head of his. It was risky, but it worked. Google yourself. People are obsessing about your secret new girlfriend that you actually introduced in public."

Typically, I keep my dalliances in the evening hours, out of the public eye as much as possible. I don't think I've made a public appearance with a girl since Kayla.

Cici leans over the tabloid picture. "She really looks all sweet and innocent here. They are calling her the 'F-Boy Tamer'."

I grunt, unamused. "Because I need to be tamed?"

“Um, yes, Chase. Yes, you do. Or at least your image needs taming. And it’s a big job. I may need to expense a whole team for this overhaul.”

Jokes aside, there’s no one more loyal to Team Chase than Cici. She may be one of the last people in this world who still believes in me. “So, when are you seeing her again? We’ll plant the pap moving forward so it isn’t so chaotic.”

“I’m not.”

Cici closes her eyes and slumps into her seat. She groans as she purses her lips and rubs her temples. “Did you seriously hump and dump the last glimmer of hope for your career?”

“Last glimmer? Isn’t that dramatic?”

“No. It’s not. Glimmer is accurate,” Adam says as he reenters the room. He clenches both fists tightly at his sides. *Controlled* frustration, he calls it. “We are so fucked. *Dynasty Man* just finalized their director. Take a guess.”

Shit.

I know who it is by the defeated look Adam’s wearing. Of course it’s her. Because Murphy’s Law is a real thing. “Elle?”

Adam nods solemnly and I intomb my face in my hands. Bury me now.

Elle Kramer: show runner, director, producer, and the woman who single-handedly tried to blacklist me from Hollywood, has just been attached to *Dynasty Man*. The tentpole movie franchise I desperately need to land. It’s my only ticket back into a reputable acting career or I’ll continue making backwoods foreign films that will never make it to a reel.

“So that’s that then.” *Over. Tanked. Cancelled. Dead.* All appropriate descriptions for my future in Hollywood. I actually feel bad for Adam. He’s worked so hard to make me the frontrunner for *Dynasty Man* and we were so close.

“Hey, it’s not over until a contract is signed, Chase. It’s been three years since *The Renegade*. Maybe she’s let it go. You still have the casting director on your side.”

“What good is being cast if she’s going to spend six months on set exacting her revenge by making my life a living hell?” I’d deserve it too. Elle’s debut project as a director took a major setback thanks to yours truly. She had to move mountains to redeem herself all because of me.

Cici’s eyes light up. She clasps her hands together. I know that face. Hope—but the Cici version of hope which is *relentless determination*.

“I am going to blow up your publicity! We work so hard to keep things on the down low.” Cici shakes her head and twirls her finger in the air. Her eyes slant devilishly as she reveals her evil plan. “Let’s flip it around. I am going to put you in the public eye so much you will be the only thing that’s trending on the internet. Everyone loves a great comeback story. With that kind of fan-based support, we’ll have enough muscle with the producers to shut Elle up.”

Adam bobbles his head supportively. “If you’re guaranteed to sell tickets, the producers will side with their leading man over their director. That’s for sure. And *Dynasty Man* isn’t just one movie. This is a franchise opportunity. This is the game changer, Chase. We need this—bad. Cici, what do you need to pull this off?”

She pulls out her phone and swipes furiously. She sends a quick text before opening her Instagram. “You have the fame, and the look. Now we just need a good story. The world thinks you had a meltdown and went dark. That’s not fun to talk about. We need to give them something they’re interested in.”

“My love life?” Why do I bother asking? Of *course* it’s my love life. Because privacy isn’t a luxury I’m afforded. “I texted Noa a couple days ago. She’s not interested in having anything to do with me. She left town. So, if you want to do this, we need to find another girl who is willing to help us.”

“And show you with a different girl less than a week after the LMC photos? That’s not the narrative we’re trying to sell. You two dodos already put us in a corner. This is only going to work with Noa. She’s perfect. It’s not just about having a girlfriend, Chase. It’s about who she is. Or more accurately...what she’s not.”

“What are you suggesting? That we *actually* kidnap Noa this time?” Adam asks. “If Chase can’t get her attention, what the hell are we supposed to do?”

Cici hands me her phone. Noa’s smiling face is in the middle of a cluster of girls but she looks younger. She has paint smudges on her cheek and her friends are all posing under a mural. “What is this?”

“You see the redhead to her right?”

I nod, still not following.

“That’s Amani Rhodes.”

“The influencer?” Adam asks. “The really hot one with the...” He cups his hands around his chest implying large tits before flinching at Cici’s icy scowl. “What? I mean she has really pretty eyes too.”

Cici holds her palm right in front of Adam’s face. “Okay, one pathetic love life at a time.” She turns her attention on me. “Amani happens to be a good friend of mine. I did a little publicity for her when she first got to L.A. She lives over in the Elm Community.”

Ah. That’s who Noa was staying with. Good. I definitely have not slept with Amani Rhodes.

“What does she have to do with all this?”

Cici’s phone buzzes and a notification flashes across her screen—new text message from Amani Rhodes. I can’t help but read it.

Amani Rhodes: You’re nuts. She’s not going to go for it. But your best bet is the house.

“What does she mean, *the house*?” I hand Cici back her phone.

“I called Amani this morning and asked her for the deets. Noa owns a house just outside of the city that she has to sell due to her divorce. She’s a freelance artist and she can’t afford it on her own. But right now, she lives there with her son. So, that’s our angle.”

I cringe. It feels sleazy. Going behind Noa’s back. Trying to find a way to push her into this. On the other hand, I haven’t had a legitimate role in three years. I need her help.

“What angle?”

Cici huffs in irritation that I can’t keep up with her crazy train of thought. “I’ll put it to you this way, Chase. Do you feel like going shopping? Because I’m going to need you to buy a house in Denver.”

“What? I’m not moving to Denver.”

“*Not for you!* Oh my god, please try to stay with me. Adam—you get what I’m saying, right?”

“Translation—buy Noa her house and she’ll pretend to be your girlfriend until you land *Dynasty Man*. Easy,” Adam chimes in.

“You want me to buy a house for a girl I met once? Are you insane? Adam. Tell her.”

Adam’s shoulders rise sheepishly. *Damn*. “It’s *Dynasty Man*. Three dedicated movies and at least three more ensembles. The first contract is

going to pay in the ballpark of fifteen million and it only climbs from there. Compare that to a house in the suburbs of Denver which'll cost roughly—” He looks to Cici for an assist.

“Half mil, tops,” she says. “Chump change for Chase.”

Chump change? It's not that I can't afford it. I've spent far more on far stupider. Adam ensured once my career took off, we not only got rich, we stayed rich. Between endorsements, deals, real estate and investments, my bank account didn't plummet when my career did three years ago. And honestly, I'd buy Noa's house as a good Samaritan, just to help a friend. What concerns me is the pressure we'll put on her. *Here's a house, now I own your ass.* And what if we offend her by even offering?

“You need to call her,” Cici says. “Whatever she wants, just make it work. She's going to want to stay with her son, but we can fly her out for appearances. The rest we can do on social media. I'll run an account for her.”

This is senseless. It's not going to work.

I grab my phone off the kitchen counter but I don't know what to say. I hand it over to Cici. “You do it. She's listed as just ‘Noa’. She should still be in recent texts.”

“You put a little red heart by her name?” Cici's eyebrows raise and she tries to swallow a teasing smile.

“Shaddup,” I say.

“Look—Adam and I will handle all the logistics after she agrees.” Cici returns my phone. “But this part you have to do yourself. She needs to hear all this from you. Isn't getting girls to say yes kind of your superpower?”

“Sure, but I usually only ask them one question.”

Adam snickers under his breath. “Yeah, Cici, be our case study. What made you say yes?” *Dammit, Adam.* He loves to throw that in her face. Cici and I don't talk about that sloppy kiss.

She glares at him like she's about to claw out his jugular. Her expression softens as she turns to me. “Just be true to you. Show her the real Chase.” She reaches out to pat my shoulder. “And keep your dick in your pants, mmk?”

“I feel like those are contradicting instructions,” Adam chides.

“I could crush you like a bug, man.”

“Maybe, but you won't because you need me.”

Isn't that the truth.

“All right, well I’ll let you know how it goes,” I say, standing up, stretching my back. I rotate my stiff shoulders, then shake out my legs. Cici and Adam watch me with robbed expressions. “What?”

“We don’t get to listen?”

“Yeah, put it on speaker.”

I extend my arm and point to the door. “Both of you leave. I don’t need an audience.” Adam and Cici grumble in protest while they shuffle out of the room. I don’t want witnesses if Noa shoots me down.

I’m nervous. My palms are sweating and my heart palpitates uncomfortably just thinking about dialing. I’ve been asking for ‘new’ in my life lately. Being nervous about a girl is definitely new.

Careful what you wish for.

chapter 5

Denver

Noa

I hate the way Wes knocks. It so ruthlessly aggressive like he intends to exercise a search warrant before I get a chance to hide the hard evidence. I'm sprinting down the stairs from my bedroom, but it's not fast enough. I'm nearly at the front door when he begins again.

Thunk, thunk, knock, knock, bang.

I fling open the door and my eyes widen to cartoon-worthy proportions. "What the fudge?" I whisper-yell when I notice Jonah's slumped little body over Wes's shoulders. Those little ears soak up every word. I have to watch my mouth around my baby.

"Sorry," Wes whispers back. "He's heavy."

Men. I swear. Wes is strong but his endurance is lacking. Personally, I can carry a sleeping thirty-seven-pound Jonah for hours in one arm while carrying a toddler backpack packed with snacks, juice boxes, extra clothes, books, toys, just-in-case pull-ups, and two packs of baby wipes. At the same time, I'll have a satchel slung across my shoulders with my belongings while balancing the plastic handles of multiple grocery bags by the tips of my fingers. I'm not trying to brag but basically, I put seasoned pack mules to shame.

"Give him here." I collect my sleeping big-boy baby and carry him up the wooden steps that my feet know by memory. I've climbed these stairs so many times in the dark when I'm trying to transfer Jonah without waking

him. By now, I trust my feet more than my vision while carrying my precious cargo.

I lay Jonah in his bed, nestling him between his favorite stuffed T-rex and Spinosaurus. They stand guard on either side of him, protecting him from all the scary nightmares of broccoli and early bedtimes.

I remove his socks and shoes successfully without disturbing him. When I tug off his teensy Levi's, his bright blue eyes pop open and instantly two soft arms are wrapped around my neck. He gives me a slobbery kiss, so I give him one right back on his nose, his forehead, both cheeks, and then blow a raspberry right on those plump little lips.

"Mama, I didn't go in." Jonah's whispering even though it's not necessary. He's already awake.

I tousle his dry hair. "I can see that, baby."

"Are you really mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"Because you told me to be brave and I wasn't brave."

I stroke Jonah's sweet cheek. Even in his dim room, lit only by his Triceratops night-light, I see the curves of his profile clear as day. They are embedded in my mommy brain. I trail my finger from his hairline over his forehead and down the bridge of his nose. I tap the very tip. *Boop*.

"Did you try anything new at lessons?"

"Ms. Libby told me to sit at the edge of the big side and I did. I looked all the way down to the bottom and saw the arrows."

I gasp dramatically. "You looked all the way down?"

"Yeah."

"You saw the bottom of the deep end?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know if I believe you, baby. That's a big step. You kept your eyes open? Are you fibbing?"

"Maamaaa, no! Fibbing is bad."

"Okay, so, what colors are the big arrows at the bottom?"

Jonah squints one eye. I see smoke coming out of his little ears as he tries to remember. "Purple."

I pull my sweet boy into a big bear hug. "That's exactly right. I'm so proud of you, baby." Jonah wipes his sniffly nose on my shoulder because of course, as his mother, I am a human napkin.

"But I didn't go in."

“But you tried something new, didn’t you? Last time you sat at the edge you had to close your eyes because it was too scary.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t so scary this time.”

“Did you know that the big manta rays like on Mommy’s side look like arrows in the water?”

Jonah gasps, his blue eyes bulging. “Oh. Like swimmy arrows?”

“Mhm. And they are the biggest sweetest swimmy arrows.”

“Daddy and Mommy were mad.”

My heart stops. Bile bubbles at the base of my throat. “Who, baby? Who is Mommy?”

Jonah giggles innocently. “You’re my mommy, silly.” *Phew.* “Mandy tells me I can call her Mommy too.”

The bile bubbles up higher until it collects and solidifies, forming a hot ball of acid in my throat. I try my best to swallow down the fiery lump.

“I bet Daddy wasn’t mad. I’ll talk to him. And Mandy can suck a... lollipop, okay? You may call her Mandy, or Daddy’s special friend. Not Mommy, do you understand, sweet boy?”

“Yeah, Mama. I got confused.”

I kiss his forehead. “No, baby, Mandy got confused. It’s okay. Go to sleep. You can skip brushing tonight, but you owe me two full minutes with those pearly whites in the morning, got it, mister?”

Jonah pulls the covers over his head and shuts his eyes. It’s a rare treat when I don’t force his sleepy butt to the bathroom to take care of those little chompers. He’s so exhausted, I’ll leave him in peace tonight. Plus, I need to get downstairs. I have a throat full of fire that needs to explode and my intended target is probably rummaging through my fridge at the precise moment.

By the time I make it back down the stairs and into the kitchen, Wes has helped himself to a beer. He sees my expression and holds his palms out as if he’s securing an invisible forcefield to protect himself.

“What the hell is that look for?”

I squint my left eye to try and control its twitchy anger. “Mandy told Jonah to call her Mommy?”

“Oh.” Wes’s cheeks puff. He blows out a guilty breath. “I told her that wasn’t going to fly with you. But you know Mandy. Always pushing.”

“Actually, I don’t, Wes. I don’t *know* Mandy all that well.” I snap my fingers like I have an inspired idea. “Maybe we’ll have more time to

connect when she's bedridden in the hospital...where she'll spend the foreseeable future if she ever pulls that shit again. *Capisce?* Go call your puppy and tell her my son has a mother and she does not want to face my wrath."

"Fine, fine. It won't happen again."

Whew, that felt good. I think there is more of my mother in me than I give myself credit for.

Wes rubs his finger against his bottom lip and raises an eyebrow. "You're always a little feistier after spending time with Amani, you know that?"

I scoff and fish out another beer from the fridge. I join Wes at the kitchen island and he holds his beer out. I twist the cap off and tap Wes's bottle with mine, accepting his truce.

"Jonah said you were upset at swim lessons, by the way."

"What? I wasn't mad. I just told him that we should probably stop paying for swim lessons if he doesn't want to get in the pool. I don't understand. He's half *you*. Your entire clan is basically a school of fish. He should love swimming."

"My entire clan?" I'm not sure if I should be offended. Wes has always felt overwhelmed by the size of my family. We've visited the big island exactly once and he damn near had an anxiety attack after meeting about fifty of my family members with difficult-to-pronounce names.

"Yeah. And speaking of clans, how is Amani?"

"Good. I guess. She seems a little lonely. L.A. is full of people who talk nonstop but don't say much, you know?"

"Remember when I almost got that transfer offer?"

"Oh *god*. Imagine if we were Californians right now."

Wes snorts. "Yeah, right. You would've made me quit my job. No way you could've dealt with the L.A. lifestyle long term. Your idea of fancy shoes is Bear Paws with the extra-thick lining."

"Hey, screw you. Those boots are getting expensive. My coupons barely cover tax these days."

Wes hops up and extracts another beer from the door of the fridge. *Another? Oh, crap.* He's not leaving anytime soon. I grimace as he pops off the metal cap, tossing it on the granite countertop. "Yeah..." he says, noticing my pained expression. "I'm sorry. We gotta have this conversation about the house. It's almost summer. You're out of time."

“Wes—”

“What do you want me to do? I close on the new house in thirty days. I have to get rid of this mortgage. I can’t afford both. I would if I could, I really mean that. Even *I’m* downsizing. There’s just enough space in my new house for me, Jonah, and Mandy.”

I stick my finger in my mouth and make a gagging sound.

“Yeah, yeah. Bitch all you want, but I picked a mouse house so I could afford child support and alimony comfortably. Okay? I’m trying to help you.”

“I just need more time, Wes. Please. Or, if your new house is that tiny, why don’t we just stay here? I’ll move into the guest room and we’ll be roommates with a kid. Easy.” I realize how ridiculous it sounds when the words leave my lips. But again, I’m desperate.

“So, basically what we’ve been doing for the past two years?”

I hang my head. And there it is. The elephant in all our rooms. Wes and I knew our marriage was over long before we divorced. We loved each other in college—before we grew up. Jonah was everything to us, but we couldn’t keep playing house when we both knew that as a couple, we were headed nowhere fast.

Wes covers my hand with his. He pats me sympathetically. “Noa, I’m sorry. I called a realtor. We have a meeting next week. I need you to come to terms with this. Even if you were to scrape together the down payment, what about the mortgage? Escrow? The HOA? Even with my job, it’s been a struggle for us. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to upgrade your piece-of-shit Kia? But we couldn’t afford it because of *this* house.”

“Wes—”

“Noa.” He looks pleadingly into my eyes. His scruff is due for a shave. His eyes are red. His silky blond hair is unkempt. He’s as exhausted as I am. “It’s just a house.”

I touch my fingertips to my temple to try and prevent the headache that’s forming. “It’s not just a house. It’s our home. It’s the nursery where my mother and I painted Jonah’s mural together. It’s the living room where we pitched that tent and slept on the floor for a month when Jonah went through his camping obsession. It’s the kitchen where I burned the Thanksgiving turkey and we had to eat turkey hot dogs instead. It’s my studio! This house is my identity. Everything that I know I am is embedded

into these walls, so sue me if I'm not ready to pawn off my life to the highest bidder."

Wes wraps his fingers around mine and squeezes affectionately. "I wish I could do something. I really do. I'll pray for a miracle, okay? But unless something changes dramatically between tonight and Thursday's meeting with the realtor, it's time to sell. Losing this house isn't going to change who you are, Noa."

I snatch my hand back and cross my arms against the cool granite. I nosedive into the dark cave my arms create.

"Pray hard," I mumble. "Please."

chapter 6

Denver

Noa

I peek into Jonah's room one more time before heading outside to my studio. He's purring like a lion cub. I turn up the volume on the baby monitor in my hand. The rumbly white noise from the speaker confirms the connection. Satisfied, I tiptoe through the sliding back door. The wineglass I'm carrying is large enough to hold an entire bottle, so the liquid sloshes safely within the confines of the cup as I hop playfully across the stone path.

My studio is a white twelve-by-twelve she-shed with navy French doors. I punch four numbers into the electronic lock and step inside to *my place*. The smell of paint and wood surrounds me. I set my wineglass down on the drafting table and look to the walls of neatly hung canvases for inspiration.

Once upon a time I had endless ideas of what to create.

These days? Not so much.

My studio is the tidiest place in my home. It's always pristine, but only because I've managed to keep Jonah and Wes out of my sanctuary all this time. Jonah used to sneak in here on occasion. It was as if a mini hurricane blew through after he helped himself to all my best acrylic paints and snapped my expensive charcoal drafting pencils in half from coloring too hard. He'd leave his sticky applesauce squeeze tubes on the floor and the next morning I'd be greeted by a picnic of ants feasting on the spoils.

I had to purchase an electronic lock for the doors. Jonah cried when I installed the lock. I felt terrible but I had to clearly explain that ‘while Mommy loves sharing, this is where she draws the line’. Now, Jonah and I do art in the living room together. No one, and I mean *no one* is allowed into my sanctuary. This is the only space in the entire world where I allow myself to be selfish. In this box, I am royalty. I am the queen of this kingless kingdom and I rule with no distractions.

I grab a fresh canvas and set it on the angled easel, determined to make my own miracle. The answers are in my fingertips. I know it. I beg my hands to cooperate. Does my art stand a chance at providing for my son? I can’t imagine working in an office like Quinn, Addie, and Reese do. I feel claustrophobic just thinking about their bland desks, but if I don’t figure out how to start making money doing what I love soon, I’ll be on my knees begging Quinn for a marketing job with a reliable salary and benefits.

I retrieve a dry brush from the drawer. Grabbing my palette, I mull over color choices. How am I supposed to know which colors to pick when I don’t know what to paint? I need guidance.

Every time I stare at a blank canvas, I’m haunted by the words of my most difficult college art instructor. Most of my professors would teach a theory and then give a clear assignment to practice a specific skill. When I asked Professor Dan what I should paint for my final project, he only gave me three ridiculously obscure commandments. *Paint me real. Paint me life. Paint me perfect.*

What the hell kind of instruction is ‘*paint me perfect*’?

The empty canvas screams at me. It’s naked, colorless, and begging to be cloaked in genius. But I have nothing. I’ve had nothing for the longest time now.

I pop in my AirPods and hope that some romantic R&B music can stimulate my creativity. My mother once told me that painting is like making love. The right song can guide your brush. I think it’s disruptive—I focus best in silence. But who am I to argue? Lani is a legend back home. She actually sells her work, so I drink up her advice like it’s water in the desert.

Unlike me, my mom puts her brush on the canvas without a second thought. She pushes the color around and it willingly conforms to her vision. Everything she touches turns into a masterpiece. She also makes a much better pineapple upside-down cake than me and has never once burnt

a Thanksgiving turkey. I never feel the summer heat because I stay quite cool in her shadow.

The music fades as a call comes in. I double tap my right headphone without looking. It's past nine o'clock, it could only be a handful of people. My girls, my mom, or Wes. I answer them all the same way.

"Yep?" I chirp.

A nervous throat clears. "Um, hey. You answer the phone with 'yep'? That's weird." My heart doesn't skip a beat. It stops and falls right down to my stomach. *I know that voice.* I wish I didn't, but it's burned into my ears like a siren's call.

Ahem. "Who is this?"

"Wow. That's starting to hurt. You don't have caller ID?"

I purposely didn't save Chase Ford's number so I wouldn't be tempted to contact him.

"What's up, eight-one-eight?" I cave to my reluctant smile and my subconscious compromises.

Fiiine! You can like him. You just can't touch him. You'll get burned.

His voice is low and smooth like a jazz-singing bear with honey coating its throat. If really good candlelight slow sex had a sound, it would be Chase Ford's voice. *Mmm.* I think I've had a little too much wine.

"I'm looking at a picture of us on *Blast Magazine*. You're trending. They don't even know your name and you're trending. You're a born superstar."

"Isn't *Blast* the same magazine that said the Princess of Wales was pregnant with an alien baby?"

Chase's breathy laugh is loud in my ear but I don't mind. *Blow on me... Wow, Noa.* I eye my glass that's half empty. Way too much wine. "That seems about right. What're you doing?"

The truth? *Nothing.* I literally can't see it. I don't know what the hell to put on this canvas. "Trying to paint with a very dry brush."

"What?"

"I'm in my studio."

"You're an artist?"

"It depends on how loosely we define that term. But yes, I do art. I mostly paint." I do art? *Oh god.* A neanderthal could've articulated that with more grace.

"That's awesome. I've always wanted to learn how to paint."

“Anyone can paint. You don’t have to learn. You just do it.”

“Okay. I meant I’ve always wanted to learn how to paint *well*.”

I smirk in response then remember Chase can’t see me. “Yeah, that’s a little bit harder. I’m still trying to figure that out myself.”

I place my brush on the desk, abandoning hopes of creating a million-dollar-worthy masterpiece tonight. I grab my glass of wine instead, ignoring how dangerously honest I become under the influence.

I take a hearty sip of the full-bodied red and climb onto my crushed-velvet sofa. As I tuck my legs under me, I have the strangest sense of déjà vu. Like all those nights in my apartment in college when Wes and I would stay up for hours talking on the phone.

“I have a confession,” Chase says.

“Nope! No thank you. I don’t want to know your secrets because I will absolutely cave under torture. If a reporter comes to my door, I will air out all your dirty laundry if it gets them to leave.”

Chase roars out a thunderous laugh. “Now I know that’s not true, because I met you over a week ago and there are no criminal accusations against me yet.”

“Well, no reporter has shown up at my door *yet*.”

He laughs again, but this time a bit softer. A nervous chortle. “I was supposed to call you yesterday, but I chickened out.”

“What? To call *me*?” *Whoa, girl. Rein it in.* That squeal was borderline flirty.

“Yeah, you make me a little nervous.” Well I’ll be damned. A flurry of excitement kicks up in my chest. I can’t do anything about it over a thousand miles away, but it’s still nice to hear. I’m alone so I smile freely without needing to explain myself. I make Chase Ford nervous and little does he know, he makes me really nervous too.

chapter 7

L.A.

Chase

For fuck's sake.

Did I just admit out loud that I was too chicken to call Noa yesterday? I groan silently at my cringeworthy confession over the phone. I sink farther into my couch and press the phone firmly to my ear waiting for her response.

Cici followed up last night to ask me how my conversation with Noa went. When I told her I was too nervous to go through with it, she mercilessly teased me. I woke up this morning to a text from her saying, *'Good morning! Please try not to be a little bitch today and actually call the girl. That is all. Good day.'*

"What's up? Kind of sounds like you need to ask me something." Noa's question is straightforward. She blazes through the small talk I planned. Normally I can anticipate a girl's next move. I have it down to a science. The nervous laughter, the hair twirling, the obvious desperation. It's boringly predictable. But Noa is comfortable around me. She isn't trying to impress me and she certainly isn't intimidated by my fame. My celebrity status is usually the ace in my pocket when it comes to women but right now I get the feeling I'm the only one starstruck in this conversation.

"I don't know how to say this but I know you're going to lose your home. I want to help you."

Silence. *Shit.* Was that too forward? I suck down my beer, killing time until she says something...*anything.*

“I have to sell it. I don’t think I have a choice. How did you know?”

“Your friend Amani knows my publicist, Cici. Word spread.”

“Dammit. *Mani*,” Noa grumbles. “Instigator.”

“If it helps, Cici basically interrogated her.”

“That makes sense. Of all my friends I think Mani would be the first to crack under torture.” Noa’s breath rustles against the phone as she giggles. “So, we’re back to the whole take-pictures-with-me-for-money request? You realize how creepy that sounds, right? What exactly do you want from me?”

“Not creepy. I mean...you definitely just made that sound creepy, but I promise it’s not. Our little rumor is catching like wildfire. My fans liked seeing us together at LMC and for the first time in a few years the buzz around my dating life is positive.”

“You need help becoming more popular?” Her tone is sarcastic, but I mean yeah—that is what this is.

“I’m at a point in my career where I really need my fans. There’s a big role I’m going after and it’s competitive. Do you know who Colt Elliott is?”

“Oooh, I love him. He starred in *The Renegade*, right? Hey, does he actually do all of his own stunts? Because that scene where he jumps from the top of—”

“Focus, Noa.” I roll my eyes. *Fucking Colt. I hate that guy.*

“Sorry. My bad. He’s your competition. You’re a way better actor than Colt.” Noa giggles into the phone, throwing me a bone.

“You’ve never seen any of my movies, have you?”

“Not a one, Chase Ford. But I rarely get to watch movies if they’re not made by Disney or Pixar.”

“But you’ve seen enough movies to love Colt Elliott?”

She clears her throat with a cute ‘*ahem*’. *Funny*. “Anyways, you were making a point?”

“Colt, myself, and a few other contenders are in the running for the lead in a superhero movie called *Dynasty Man*. I’ve been the frontrunner for a while, but the studio just hired a director who isn’t my biggest fan—which is putting it mildly. I need some public support to swing things my way. Cici and Adam think you’re the key.”

“What are you proposing?” Noa urges me to get to the point. It’s time to lay the cards on the table.

“If you help me land *Dynasty Man*, I will buy your house and gift it to you. In cash. No other strings attached.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “Are you insane? Are you actually out of your mind? It’s a four-hundred-thousand-dollar house!”

“That’s not an issue. Honestly, you’d be getting the shit end of the deal. If I’m cast as *Dynasty Man*, I will earn more than thirty times that amount. So, I consider this a well-worth-it investment.”

A new ring sounds in my ear. I check the visual on the screen. Noa’s requesting a FaceTime call. I don’t think, I just accept.

The most striking dark gray eyes bulge in surprise when the video connects. “Why are you shirtless?” Her eyes dance across the screen as she unsubtly checks me out. I smile to myself, satisfied. She’s not as immune to me as I thought.

“I’m home alone. I didn’t expect a video call. Should I put on a shirt?” I laugh.

Noa’s long wavy hair jostles as she adjusts how she’s sitting. I can almost smell the vanilla even states away. *Damn, she’s pretty.* I can’t even use the words ‘hot’ or ‘smokin’...I mean she is, but those aren’t the words for Noa. She’s beautiful. I can’t tell if she’s wearing natural-looking makeup or her skin is flawless on its own. Maybe my rose-colored glasses have a perfection lens.

“It’s fine. You wear what you want...or don’t want. I didn’t mean to catch you off guard, I just needed to be face to face for this conversation.”

“All right. What’s on your mind?” I force myself to focus on her eyes even though all I want is to watch her full pink lips.

“What if I agree to help you and it doesn’t work? What if I play along and you still don’t get the part?”

I cave. My undisciplined eyes fall to her mouth. She rubs the back of her thumbnail against her bottom lip. It’s mesmerizing. The hairs on my neck rise as a nervous jolt shoots down my stomach. My knee jiggles below the screen but I hold the phone steady in my hand hoping she can’t see how anxious I am.

“Then we tried. It’s the entertainment industry. There are never guarantees.”

“You can really afford to buy a house like this in cash? Won’t that set you back?” Her forehead wrinkles in concern for my finances. Endearing.

“Don’t think I’m an ass for saying this, but it’s like buying a pair of pants for me. It won’t set me back.”

“And you won’t think less of me if I agree to this?”

I reel at the ridiculous notion. “Why would I think less of you? I’m begging you to help me.” She nods slowly. Her eyes close and she becomes so still I double-check the connection. “You still there?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I’m just considering whether or not *I’ll* think less of me for doing this.”

“It’s a job. Think of it like that.”

“A job that ridiculously overpays and has a very questionable list of duties.” She calls bullshit. *Smart girl*. This is not a job. It’s a hustle and it’ll take two con artists to pull off fake love.

“If it makes you feel better, my job ridiculously overpays. And my past jobs have had a lot of questionable duties.”

I earn a big smile for that one. She throws her head back in amusement as her full lips spread across her face.

“What about the fact that I’m not in L.A.? I have my son two weeks on, two weeks off. I’m a mom first. If that’s an issue then—”

“It’s not an issue. We’ll plan around whatever you need us to. Stay in Denver and we’ll fly you out whenever necessary. The rest Cici can do online. She’s a master at social media manipulation.”

Noa’s eyes scan left to right. It looks like she’s still checking me out so I strategically tilt the camera downwards. My entire abdomen is in view to acquiesce her unspoken request. I get chills knowing her eyes are inspecting my body. I’d like to return the favor.

“Yeah.” Noa’s head moves like she’s shaking off a daze. “I’m going to need you to put on a shirt if you want me to focus.”

A haughty smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. “Noa, are you flirting with me?” She touches a glass of wine to her lips and takes the slowest sip. She avoids answering. “Be careful with that,” I say as I raise my brows. “I might flirt back.”

“That’s kind of what I’m afraid of... What about a loan?”

“A loan?”

“Buy my house as an investment. I’ll pay you rent until I can afford to buy you out.”

“What? I already told you I can more than afford it.”

She touches two fingers to her temple and shuts her eyes. “It’s not about what you can afford, it’s about what I can live with.”

“If it’s just a loan how is that a fair exchange to ask you for...everything I’m asking you for?” I don’t know what *everything* entails yet or I’d clarify. I’m as much of a bystander in this as she is. I don’t make the decisions in my life. I just let Adam, Cici, and my agents at LMC boss me around and tell me what to want.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m still expecting an interest-free loan. And”—Noa winces—“I may need to postpone my first couple months of rent, just until I can find a steady job out here.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if I—”

“These are my terms, Chase. This is the only way I can still look myself in the mirror. Take it or leave it.”

“Then I’ll take it. Whatever you want.”

“Okay.”

“So, you’re saying yes?”

“Yes.”

My heart pounds in excitement. If I’m going to pretend to be Noa’s boyfriend for appearances, I’ll get to see her again. It’s necessary. Now for more than one reason.

“I’ll have my realty team handle everything.”

She screws up her nose like she smells something sour. “You have a whole dedicated realty *team*?”

“Yeah...is that weird?”

“Very.”

“I own a lot of property. No way I can keep up with it all. I have a place in Maui if you ever want to use it. You said your mom is from there, right?”

“Chase, I have about one hundred cousins, aunts, uncles, second cousins, and friends who I call cousins scattered across Maui and the big island. I think I’m covered on a place to stay when we go to the rock. Plus, my parents live there. Family stays with family. Those are the rules.”

“All right. But I have a great view...” I say as Noa flashes me the sweetest smile. *I have a great view right now, too.*

“Okay so, what now?”

“How long until you can be back in L.A.?”

“I have my son right now.”

“I’m having a birthday party on the twenty-second. If that falls into the right window, do you want to come? You can meet everyone and we can go over everything then?”

Her face softens and she smiles again. “Happy early birthday. How old are you turning?”

“You don’t know?”

She cocks her head to the side in confusion. “Did you already mention it? I think I missed it.”

“It’s probably the first thing that comes up on Google. Everything about me including my pants size is online.”

Noa combs her fingers through her hair, roots to tips. Her thick waves end somewhere well below the FaceTime screen. “Do you honestly think I just sit around and google you all day like a desperate fangirl?”

I roar in laughter at her candidness. “You can. I googled you.”

“No, you didn’t.”

I nod emphatically. “Oh yes, I did. I completed a thorough internet search.”

Her mouth falls open. I only found her tagged in a few pictures from other people’s pages. Noa’s social media profiles have presidential-level privacy settings. I couldn’t see anything outside of a profile picture. I found an old article from her alma mater that listed college graduates. Last year she was named as a generous donor for a local animal shelter. Noa is innocent, but it’s way too much fun to mess with her.

“What did you find?” Her brows pinch in concern.

“Oh... You’re worried about all the nudes? Don’t be, I found them to be tasteful.”

She rolls her eyes as she laughs me off but her arm flies protectively across her breasts anyway, pushing them up. The bill of my hat shadows my face so she can’t see my eyes land on her plump chest.

“So, the party. Will you come? It’ll be a social media picture gold mine for Cici.”

“Sure.” Noa nods. “Thank you for the invitation. May I bring my friend?”

“Of course. My girlfriend can bring whomever she wants...except another guy.” I wink at Noa and I swear I see her blush. “I’ll have Adam’s assistant get in touch to book your flight and take care of all the travel

arrangements. Would you rather stay at a hotel or here with me? I have guest rooms.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. *Well, shit.* There’s no way to make this not awkward. *Be my fake girlfriend. I’ll buy your house. I’ll arrange your travel. Stay in my guest room.* Damn. Her kidnapping jokes are fully justified.

Noa looks at me quizzically as if I’m missing something obvious. “I’ll stay with Mani.”

“Do you need to ask her first?”

“Oh, that’s cute,” Noa scoffs. The screen jerks as she gets up. I get a background view of her insanely tidy studio. There are so many art supplies neatly lined on the shelves it looks more like a freshly stocked aisle at Hobby Lobby. I hear her tinkering with something I can’t see. “How long will you need me in L.A.?”

“A couple days, maybe. Is that okay? There’s a baseball game and I’m throwing the first pitch. Do you like baseball?”

Noa teeters her head back and forth. “Meh. It’s not my favorite sport. I find it mostly slow and boring. I like sports that are more contact heavy. Keeps the energy alive, you know? But I do get excited when they slide into home in the nick of time.”

My eyes bulge at the surprise opportunity. A wide juvenile smile overtakes my face.

“Just home base? You don’t get excited for first through third?” I flash her my teeth.

My immature humor flies right over her head. “I mean home base is where you score so it’s usually more exciting.”

“I could not agree more.”

Noa catches on and unsuccessfully tries to stop the reluctant laugh that escapes her mouth. She covers her eyes so I can’t make out more of her reaction. Although I *know* she’s blushing now. “Chase Ford, you are a child. That’s not what I meant.”

My shoulders bounce as I continue to laugh. “Suuure that’s not what you meant. First nudes, now sliding into home. And here we thought you were such a good girl.”

“Well that’s what happens when you kidnap strangers. First impressions of your victim can be deceiving.” She uncovers her eyes and scrunches her face adorably. Her gaze darts away from the screen. “My little man is

stirring. Must be a nightmare. I'm going to go check on him. But before I forget—thank you.”

“What're you thanking me for? You're doing me a favor.”

“You're doing me a favor too. Have a good night.” She kisses her hand and blows me a friendly kiss before she ends the call.

She said yes. *She's coming to L.A.*

The prospect of seeing Noa again is quickly becoming more interesting than saving my career. I pull out my phone and fire off two texts before I resign to an evening in.

To: Noa Fallon

In case I forgot to say it. Thank YOU. Sweet dreams.

To: Cici Russell, Adam Montgomery

I got the yes, suckers. Noa's coming to L.A.

chapter 8

L.A.

Chase

My skin burns under the hot water. Dex, my personal trainer, was especially ruthless this morning. Two hours of HIIT training should be considered cruel and unusual torture. I let the hot shower ease the ache of my beaten-to-shit muscles.

The mid-level spa nozzles bore into my back like a deep-tissue massage. The cost to upgrade this luxury shower was ridiculous, but tonight it serves its purpose. The overhead nozzle creates the effect of a rain shower. The beads of water pour over my head and shoulders. I close my eyes and see gunmetal-gray eyes. I've been obsessing all week and I have a few more days to go until I can catch that Noa high again. My conversations with women don't usually end with us clothed sleeping in different beds, but somehow my phone calls with Noa are more satisfying than sex. *Almost*. Almost more satisfying.

Cici calls me every day warning me with less-than-savory euphemisms about keeping it in my pants. She can't afford a scandalous photo of me with some skirt ruining her master publicity stunt. Little does she know, I don't need the warning. I'm laser focused on one woman right now.

I've talked to Noa almost every day. I text her incessantly. I'm a very needy fake boyfriend but I can't get enough of the banter. The conversation. I can't stop smiling. We even speckle our pretend courtship with deep confessions. I told her sometimes I hate acting, she told me she doesn't feel like her art will ever amount to anything. We're able to comfort each other

from worlds away. I can't wait to wrap my arms around her. To tell her in person that even though I haven't seen her work, I know she's exceptional. I can sense it.

I start feeling lightheaded underneath the steaming shower. It's too much heat mixed with too much muscle fatigue. I turn off all the nozzles and wrap a towel around my waist. Dex warned me not to mess with that new creatine that was, in his words, radioactive. I didn't listen and now I'm paying the price. I stumble from the wooziness.

I need cold water, *now*.

I get to the fridge, pull out an icy bottle of water, and drain the entire thing before I see her. Sitting on the loveseat, in her underwear and a see-through robe. Watching me.

Holy fucking shit. It startles me so much I nearly throw the water right back up.

"Kayla." I gulp. I blink a few times to make sure I'm not experiencing some sort of delusional heat spell.

"Hi, babe. Miss me?"

My blood pressure rises the way it always does around my ex-girlfriend. Getting back together with her would ensure an early heart attack. "Are you seriously breaking into my home now?"

"Don't forget who picked out this home." She meets my gaze and must see my agitation skyrocketing, so she drops her attitude. "I didn't break in. You left it open." She nods toward the front door. "I knocked. I rang the doorbell. I was out there forever."

"I was in the shower."

She glances at the towel around my waist. "Obviously."

"Why are you here?"

She mocks me in a low baritone. "Why are you here?" Her eyes hit the ceiling and she tugs on the string of her robe. "You know why I'm here."

"Did anyone see you come in?"

"No." Kayla shoots me a dirty look. "Why? You embarrassed of me or something?"

I groan and walk past her back to my bedroom. I need to get dressed immediately. Kayla's light footsteps trail behind. She's making a very incorrect assumption if she thinks I'm headed to the bedroom for anything other than clothes. I stand in front of my dresser but hold the towel around my waist as I feel Kayla's gaze on me from the doorway.

“Can I get some privacy?”

She lets out a shrill laugh. “Oh please, Chase. I know that dick better than you do.”

“Kayla, please?”

She throws her hands in the air and spins around, but I don’t trust her. I grab a pair of briefs and some sweatpants and head into the bathroom to change. I lock the door behind me. When I emerge, dressed, Kayla has shed another layer. She’s shamelessly sprawled on my bed in her underwear. “Do you want to go out after?” she asks. “There’s a party in the Hills tonight.”

I blow out a distressed breath as I glance over her exposed body. She’s so tiny. She looks like she hasn’t had a good meal in days. All she eats is pills, all she drinks is vodka. The skinny white lines she snorts are almost as skinny as her legs. The only part of her body that doesn’t look on the verge of malnourishment are her tits. But I paid for those. Plastic doesn’t starve.

“Do you want me to go to a party with you? Or do you need me to get in?”

She winks at me while she reaches for the front clasp of her bra.

“Whoa, wait. Kayla—no. This can’t happen.”

She eyes my crotch and smirks. “I think it can.”

Shit. Sue me. It’s a physical response no man can control when a half-naked woman is lying in his bed. I quickly turn around and picture Kayla, near death, vomiting into a back-alley dumpster as I hold her hair and call nine-one-one. I visualize her high out of her mind, sleeping on the bar at a crowded club. I remember the time I caught her red-handed with her legs in the air, slumped over the shoulder of one of my castmates.

And that does it. We no longer have liftoff.

“I can’t anymore. I’m sorry,” I say as I turn around. I find her discarded robe on the ground and hand it to her. “You need to leave.”

“You can’t?”

“It’s not personal.” *Why am I lying? It’s very personal.*

“You were into it a couple weeks ago. You called me the minute you landed. You couldn’t even wait to leave the airport, Chase! I’m not complaining or anything.”

“It was the last time. I mean it.”

I called her in a moment of weakness when I got back into town. I only intended to talk to her. Kayla met me in the VIP celebrity wing of the airport that most people don’t seem to know exists. We hung out in the

private lounge like we'd done a million times before. She was supposed to just give me a ride home but one thing led to another. I wanted to see if that connection was still there. I'd wondered if we took out all the drinking, the partying, the drugs, the money—was there anything left between us? I fucked her right there with her back against the locked door and I hated myself for it. After all the progress I'd made at the retreat, after all the time I spent focusing on what I wanted to change in my life, I took a huge step back that day. I led Kayla on. I disappointed myself. In that moment it was clear as crystal that there was nothing left for us.

I met Noa at LMC the very next day. If only I'd met her one day sooner. I saw those sweet gray eyes for the first time and in them—a shot at redemption. I'm not risking it for a meaningless bust right now. Not only would Cici kill me, but fake girlfriend or not, I can't imagine Noa would be too thrilled. There's something happening between Noa and me. I know it. I *know* it.

Kayla snatches her robe from my outreached hand, slips it on, and secures the tie. The sheer material does nothing to cover her body. "You'll be back, Chase. You always come back."

"Do you need me to call you a ride?" I nod toward the door.

Kayla grumbles. She climbs off the bed and finds her shoes in the living room as I follow her. She storms her way to the front door.

"Kayla, wait," I call out. She spins around, looking at me expectantly. "Did you bring a coat?"

"It's basically summer," she snaps.

"You're going to leave in your underwear and see-through robe?"

Kayla whips back around and stretches her arm over her head and then her middle finger. Then she slams the door hard behind her. I don't fear her pissy mood. She doesn't have a lot of subtle qualities, but the one thing I've appreciated over the years is that she stays out of the media. She doesn't talk. After our breakup, she didn't start a social media war. She didn't trash me on any talk shows or magazines. Hell, I don't even know how an interview like that would go.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Kayla Guerrero onstage. The first woman Chase Ford ever loved. The woman who tanked his career and sent him into depression. His coping antics have been the source of our entertainment and constant criticism for the past two years!

I can almost hear the audience roar in applause.

chapter 9

Denver

Noa

Adler Haley, one of my best friends, sits at my dining table munching noisily on tortilla chips. Her piercing blue eyes are frozen in wide circles. She flinches at the whirring of the tattoo gun every single time it starts up. We've been at this for over an hour and she's only watching, it's not like she's taking the needle herself.

"Addie," I say calmly from the couch. "You have got to calm down."

My tattoo artist, Koa, is undeterred. He sits on the edge of his chair and hovers over my ribcage. He expertly deposits ink into the patchy areas of my fading tribal designs. It's a blessing he's willing to do this from the comfort of my home. I don't like parlors. They feel too assembly-line. My tattoos are far too personal. My mother's culture—and mine—is woven into every single design. Who can I trust with this tall task, but family?

It's not ideal to have my ribs and hips scraped to shit before sitting on a plane tomorrow, but Koa is in town for one week only, so I had to jump at the opportunity. He's the one person in the world I'd trust with my ink and he only leaves the rock once a year.

Addie cringes from the table for me, but I'm not in any pain. Koa's worked his way from the top of my ribs all the way down to my bikini line and I'd call the intrusion mildly uncomfortable at most. I could sleep through it after all these years of practice.

"Nono, this is a weird dinner you've invited me to," Addie says as she squints one eye. My main floor is open concept so I can see her worried

face from my living room couch as Koa wipes the little drops of blood away with a special cloth.

“Addie, I did not invite you to dinner. You texted me and said, ‘hey what’re you doing for dinner?’, and then I responded, ‘nothing, getting my tats touched up’, then you responded with, ‘I’ll bring chips’...and here we are.”

“How’s the ink on your...” Koa whistles high then low as he points to my underwear.

“Fading,” I admit.

“All right, cuz, well take a break. I need to grab more color from the van and we’ll get it sorted. How much ointment do you have?”

“None.”

Koa rolls his eyes. “Kai? You lolo? You’re not taking care of my art. How many times have I told you—ointment every other day. I have some in the van you can use.”

I don’t argue with my cousin. He’s tatted head to toe—a walking canvas. All his ink looks perfectly fresh. Mine faded so fast because over the past few years I’ve barely had time to brush my teeth let alone massage myself in A+D every other day.

Koa is still complaining about me ruining his masterpiece as he heads toward the front door. I stand and stretch. My arm is asleep from holding my chest so tightly. My tattoo starts where the underwire of my bra normally rests. I can’t wear it while Koa’s working, so my hand becomes my makeshift brassiere sparing me from total exposure.

I slip on my robe when I notice Addie eyeing my red and swollen side. “I have some questions,” she says as she pops another chip in her mouth.

“Of course you do, chatty patty. What’s up?”

Addie holds her finger out as she swallows her bite. She sticks a clear tongue out at me. “Mmk—rude. True, but rude.”

“Sorry.” I tousle her hair like I do Jonah’s. I can’t help it, she’s the baby of our friend group. I still remember meeting her on her campus tour when she was seventeen. Even after eight years, Addie still has her baby face. A doll.

She rubs her hands together, clearing them of tortilla chip dust. “You’re going to let your cousin tattoo your hoohah?” She makes a face.

I join Addie at the table and she holds up the bag, offering it to me. I shake my head. “Don’t fill up on chips. Don’t you want to go eat for real

after this?”

“Okay, *Mom*. Speaking of Mom—where’s Jonah?”

“I dropped him off this morning. He and Wes are going on a Buddy Scout’s camping trip with the entire troop. Good luck Wes, huh?”

Addie laughs. “Are you kidding? Good luck, Jonah. Camping with Wes sounds terrible.”

“It is, I know this for a fact, but why do *you* think so?”

“Wes is an indoor cat. You’ve domesticated him and now he can’t take care of himself, let alone a bunch of four-year-olds while in the wilderness. Why do you think he got another girlfriend so fast?”

I laugh heartily. Addie is spot on. I catch her eyeing my side again as her forehead crinkles with worry. “You have to chill, girl. I promise you, I’m fine. To answer your earlier question Koa is my cousin, but he’s not really my *cousin*. He’s my mom’s best friend’s stepson’s half-brother.” Her face twists in confusion as she tries to follow that winding trail of relation. “And don’t say hoohah. You sound like you’re five.”

Addie types something on her phone and then shows me her internet search of dirty Hawaiian words. “Is this what your people call it?”

I scowl at her. “Uh-uh. No ma’am. Don’t say that either.”

“Okay, *Mom*.”

“And it’s not my hoohah,” I mimic her. “It’s just an inch or so below my bikini line. It’s not like I’m spreading my legs. I saw you checking Koa out though. He’s single. Want his number?”

Koa and I are the textbook definition of platonic. I waxed his armpits once when we were kids and he cried like a little girl. You really can’t come back from that. But to someone outside of our family circle he’s handsome, I suppose. Also, he’s a sweetheart and a very talented tattoo artist. Maybe Addie can marry him and I can collect more cousins.

“He tattoos lady bits. I might as well date my gynecologist.” She grits her teeth in dismay. “But while we’re on the subject of dating—are you seriously not going to say anything about Chase Ford? I’ve been really patient for the past hour while you’ve been getting sewn through like a quilt.”

Geez. “Mani?” I ask. Always ratting me out.

“Um, yes. And by the way...*what the hell?* Since when are we keeping secrets?”

I grumble to myself as I grab a water and a beer out of the fridge. I hand Addie the Coors and untwist the top of the cold plastic water bottle. Koa has a no-alcohol rule while he's working.

"It's not a secret. I'm just not making a big deal out of it. Chase and I have a deal, that's all."

"It's a very big deal. Mani says you're smitten."

"Really? Mani used the word—*smitten*?"

"No, she said you guys were so hard up for each other that when you finally get into the same room, you're going to smash so hard, you'll topple buildings...that's my version anyways. Mani used more *colorful* language."

Yeah, that sounds about right. "Well, we are not. Chase is surprisingly decent. I mean he's flirty but we mostly talk about life. He asks about Jonah and you guys. We talk about movies and food. He seems pretty down to earth, like he could be a good friend."

She snorts so hard she chokes. "You can't be friends with walking sex on a stick. Sorry, girl. But you're due for some fun! You're single. He's single. Why not?"

"Would you still be my best friend if I was splattered all over the tabloids as Chase Ford's newest sex kitten?"

"Indubitably. Aren't you already?"

"I don't know...I'm too scared to look. No one's said anything as of yet." The front door opens and shuts. Koa returns with an armful of ointment tubes that he dumps on my kitchen island. "Is that really necessary?"

He scowls. "Yes."

I resume my position on the couch and this time Addie follows. She sits in the sofa chair across from me and tucks her knees to her chest like she's getting ready to watch a horror film.

"Is she going to watch this? You okay with that?" Koa asks me, half amused, half concerned.

"She's ohana. She was in the delivery room when I had Jonah."

"Yikes, cuz."

"Oh, don't worry, I'm closing my eyes," Addie says, her lids clamping shut. He hasn't even loaded the ink yet. "But I want to finish this conversation. Do you like him? Does Chase Ford like you?"

Koa stills and watches me from the corner of his eye. "Kai, what the hell? You *are* lolo. You're cheating on Wes with that actor?"

Why? Why do tattoo sessions always turn into confessionals?

“Addie—it’s just in his nature to flirt. He doesn’t actually like me like that. And I am not looking for a guy like Chase Ford. Koa—Wes and I got divorced two months ago. Do *not* tell my mother when you get home.”

An expression I can only describe as petrified glee crosses Koa’s face. “Oh, Kai. Oh, oh, oh. Lani’s going to flip her shit.” *I’m aware! Thank you.* He examines the needle he’s carefully prepared. “All right, cuz, drop ’em. Let’s see how much you’ve let the punani go.”

Addie, eyes still closed, throws her hands up in the air in frustration. “What the hell, Nono? *He* can say it?!”

The loud whirring of the tattoo gun fills the room. I close my eyes hoping the sound can drown out my fantastical thoughts of Chase Ford... pretending to be mine.

chapter 10

L.A.

Noa

Mani's emerald eyes are so wide with excitement her face looks disproportionate—like an anime character. “I am loving every single thing about this plan. Literally, all of it.”

Great, as long as you're comfortable!

“Noa? What do you think?” Cici Russell, Chase's publicist, blinks at me expectantly as if I'm supposed to praise her for her genius. I've never seen anyone so powerful, so desperate for my approval.

Less than an hour after my flight landed this afternoon, I'm sitting in Mani's living room, enduring a debrief on Chase Ford's new girlfriend. I'm playing the part, but she's definitely nothing like me.

The general gist of the narrative Cici is spinning goes like—*see Chase's new sweetheart girlfriend? She's regular and boring, just like us. Isn't he such a nice person to perform this charitable act of dating a plain person? Look how cute she is. Completely harmless.*

Despite this awkward conversation of how I need to act, what conversations I need to avoid, and the public and personal ramifications of leaking any of these details to the media—I actually like Cici. She's a firecracker. Just like Mani. They are twin dragons and I have a feeling a little alcohol at Chase's birthday party tonight is all it'll take to shoot them off. I try hard not to be jealous of their natural chemistry, but it's there. This is a side of my best friend I could never really keep up with.

“So basically, I just have to be where Chase is occasionally, pose for a few pictures, keep my mouth shut until the end of summer when the cast for *Dynasty Man* should be announced, and then this whole shebang is over?” My eyes dart between the two of them, sitting opposite of me on the bright green pleather sofa. “That sounds easy enough.”

Cici rumples her platinum-blond bangs before she clasps her hands together and brings them to her chest. “It is! I will handle everything. We’ll put you and Chase in the public eye whenever we can, and when you’re back home in Denver the media will just assume you lovebirds are shackled up somewhere. Your two weeks on, two weeks off with your son is actually the perfect setup. You are a saint, Noa. *A saint*. I can’t tell you how bad he needs a social facelift right now.”

“And what about Jonah? How can I make sure he’s safe?” This is my biggest concern with the whole ordeal. I faced the angry swarm of paparazzi at LMC the day I met Chase. I’ll be damned if I ever let my son fall victim to that kind of chaos.

“We’ll mention you have a child, but we’ll keep everything genderless and nameless. The media tends to be pretty respectful when it comes to children. Mostly because our lawyers are ruthless when reporters even consider harassing children.”

I nod. “And what about all the travel? We’ll have to keep the visits somewhat minimal because I really can’t afford to fly back and forth every other weekend...”

Cici pulls a black card out of her cream-colored Fendi purse nestled by her feet. “Chase had this set up for you. You use this card for anything and everything you need...and want.” She winks as she hands the credit card over. *Ugh*. I know I’m helping Chase too, but I feel like I’m some sort of kept woman. This is not the independence I’m supposed to be working toward. I don’t want to have this conversation with his publicist. I want to talk to Chase. I want to see that sweet smile and watch his shoulders hop as he laughs in that deep hum. I need to see him...so I know he’s a real person—not just a façade I’ve been hired to promote.

“Where is Chase anyways?” I ask Cici. I glare at Mani when I see her suggestive smile and bouncing eyebrows. “Shut it,” I tell her.

“He’s in meetings at LMC with his agents and lawyers all day, but he’ll meet us at his birthday party tonight.” Cici pulls a face as if she has a question she’s holding back. I mean to ask but Mani beats me to it.

“What is it?”

“There’s just one more thing. It’s probably better if you keep your real dating life on the low until this is all over. I already told Chase to keep it locked up until *Dynasty Man* is secured. We don’t want a scandal on our hands.”

My best friend nearly drops on the floor in laughter and I seriously debate throwing my shoe at her. “Dating life? Yeah...that’s not going to be a problem for Nono,” she forces between short inhales. My eyes hit the ceiling as I calmly explain to Cici that I’m not really dating right now.

“Good! That makes things less complicated. It’s only for the summer and then you can get back to your life.”

Okay. I can do that. One summer. Three months to get my shit together, to help Chase get *his* shit together, and to hopefully avoid this all blowing up in my face.

“Should we start getting ready to go?” I ask.

“Where?” they ask in unison. Am I in the twilight zone? What the hell is the whole point of tonight?

“To the birthday party?” I look at them both like they’ve lost their minds. “It’s seven o’clock.”

“Oh, honey,” Cici says with a condescending undertone. “It’s seven o’clock meaning we still have time to get drunk, sober up, eat dinner, take a shower and a nap before we even think about getting ready.”

Mani stands and heads to her kitchen, patting my knee on the way. “You’re going to have to stay up past your grandma bedtime if you want to keep up with Chase Ford.”

Ohhh no. I don’t think so. I don’t remember that being in the job description.



It’s nearly eleven o’clock by the time we head to Chase’s party. Cici eyes me from the driver’s seat through the rearview mirror with an amused expression. She catches me trying to stifle a yawn.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s been a long day with your flight and everything else. Just make a quick appearance and then I’ll take you home.”

“When Noa leaves, I’ll leave too,” Mani adds, in solidarity.

“Thank you,” I respond, relieved. But I have a suspicion that the minute I see Chase I might catch a wave of energy.

We have to pass two security checkpoints before we’re in the private community. We drive at least another mile down the beach where we reach a strip of luxurious houses right on the water. All three houses are lit up. Loud rap music is playing. There are shadows of bodies everywhere. I feel like I’m in a time machine that’s taking me right back to Wes’s frat house and all the football team ragers. How is it possible that all three residents of this secluded beach are having a party on the same night?

“Which one is Chase’s?”

Cici finds my eyes again through the rearview mirror. “All of them.” She parks her SUV on the side of the road behind a long row of vehicles. “Sorry,” she says as she hops out of the car. “But if we park down here, we won’t get blocked in.”

“No problem.” I don’t mind the walk. The night air is warm and I can taste the saltiness from the beach that’s so close. It’s a perfect night for a stroll. What we’re walking toward, however, is a bit daunting. I nudge Mani’s shoulder with mine as we trudge forward, side by side.

“Does this remind you of college?”

“Yeah, girl. Celebrity parties are exactly like college parties except the drugs are way more expensive.” I glare at her. “What?” she exclaims. “It’s an observation. I don’t partake in the hard stuff. Just the green.”

I admit, on more than one occasion in our tiny college apartment, Mani, Reese, Quinn, Addie, and I would lace a hookah with a little *fun* as we tuned out the world and let Snoop Dogg on the speakers take us to a different planet. But those days were long before momhood. After having a baby, sleep is the only high I chase.

We follow Cici to the largest of the three houses on the beach. It’s just shy of being a mansion. I can’t fathom how much a place like this costs. It’s not just the grandeur of the structure, it’s the fact that you can step right out onto the beach. I figured Chase was well off from his acting career, but I didn’t realize he has money like this. He probably could afford to hire Elon Musk to build him a very convincing robot girlfriend. She could be programmed to behave accordingly. Why go through the trouble of fake dating me?

“I have to go find Adam really quick to see how meetings today went. You guys go have some fun and I’ll find you in a bit,” Cici says as she

disappears into the house.

Mani pokes my arm. “I’m going to go find us a strong drink to hopefully wipe that petrified look off your face, Nono.” She fades into the crowd and I’m suddenly by myself, blending into a room full of strangers who are high, drunk, and dressed in skimpy swimwear. I’m greeted in the common area by a group of particularly friendly people. They hover over a coffee table lined with flat mirrors that are reflecting thin white lines. The group says hello with kind, jittery smiles. They are great at sharing as well. They offer me what looks like a rolled-up hundred-dollar bill. I politely decline as I dart for the rear exit.

I walk around the pool where topless women show off their perky plastic assets. Judging by the look of ecstasy on the faces of the gentlemen in the in-ground hot tub to my left, there is a woman underneath the water bobbing for...not apples.

Oh my god.

What am I doing here—in L.A.? What am I doing with my life? I am a mom. I am a wife—*was a wife*. I am not equipped to handle a party like this. I thought it was a *birthday* party...with cake—not a drug-infused orgy. I can’t even fake a lifestyle like this.

I need to leave. I should’ve never come here. How could I be desperate enough to agree to *this*?

I retreat back into the house. The music is still glaring, possibly louder now, and I can’t hear myself think. I scan the room for Mani or Cici—nothing. Heading down an empty hallway, I play duck, duck, goose with the doors. *It doesn’t matter, just pick one*. I choose the farthest door to the left and thank my lucky stars it’s empty. The door closes with a satisfying click as I lock it behind me and climb onto the fancy four-poster bed that’s neatly made. This huge room must be the master suite. Good. This is a perfect place to hide until I can put out an APB for Mani to come rescue me.

My heart rate is almost back to normal when the in-suite bathroom door opens.

Good lord.

A wet Chase Ford, naked except for the towel wrapped around his waist, emerges. The beating of my heart surges once more. My jaw drops as I watch beads of water ride the hard lines of his pecs and abs before absorbing into the fluffy towel that hangs low on his waist.

He wears the widest teasing smile. “Noa, I have to say, if this is my birthday present it is awfully forward of you.” He lets out a riotous laugh as I bury my face in my hands.

It is official. Chase and I are the absolute masters at awkward chance encounters.

How could I forget how intoxicatingly attractive he is? Chase is—simply put—a Grecian god of hotness. *Is that one?* God of War. God of Thunder. God of Sexy. That sounds about right. Sexy should be a superpower. My mouth moistens as I press my thighs tightly together to control the budding ache of suggestion. Our relationship is fake...this urge sure as hell isn't.

“I am hiding,” I confess with my face still in my hands. I peek through my fingers at his dazzling smile.

“Me too.”

Sweet relief. Chase is as bothered by this party as I am.

“What the hell is going on out there? Are all L.A. parties like this?”

“I wish I could say no. I made it clear I wanted a lowkey get-together, but low and behold...I was about to lock the door and head to bed.” He rubs the space between his eyes. “But hey, why aren't you answering your phone? I've been looking for you all night.”

“Really?” The light switch in my heart flicks on. *Up, up, up, everybody! Something important is happening.* “Sorry, I didn't hear it.” I reach into my clutch and pull out my phone. I have dozens of notifications. I do a quick review and there's nothing notable regarding Jonah and the camping trip so my attention can fully return to the sleek lines of Chase's smooth tan chest and hard abs. I gawk. It's not my fault! They are singing to me. All six of them.

“I'm sorry I couldn't pick you up from the airport. I got sucked in to so much bullshit today. I felt so bad about it. How was your flight?”

I don't fight my smile. This is exactly the version of Chase I was hoping to see. The one that's been looking for me all night. The one that felt bad he couldn't pick me up from the airport. The one that hides from this crazy party and was planning on going to bed alone.

“A little uncomfortable,” I answer honestly.

Chase takes a step toward me then stops. “Um, hang on.” He holds up a finger. “We both know how distracted you get when I'm not wearing a shirt.” He winks playfully at me before grabbing a few items from the

dresser across the room. He tucks into the bathroom and reemerges in athletic pants and a plain black t-shirt in record time. *Lucky shirt*. He joins me on the bed and my nervous embers of excitement begin to glow.

“Why was it uncomfortable?”

I pat my ribs gently. “Nothing to fuss about. I was just making conversation.” I try to brush it off but Chase stretches out and rolls toward me. He reaches for the hem of my shirt and makes deliberate eye contact with me, asking for permission. The embers are red hot—angry, eager. The tips of his fingers brush against my bare skin and the sweet hell of arousal overcomes me. I ball my hands up against the bed to keep from shaking.

“Go ahead.”

He pulls up my shirt deliciously slow. My breathing shallows. This would be hands down the most tantalizing moment of my life if the expression on Chase’s face wasn’t filled with horror when he sees the large white bandage squares lining the entire left side of my torso.

“Did you get mauled by a bear?” he jokes but he looks genuinely concerned.

Freaking Koa. He was extremely thorough. I should’ve just waited another year. I tug my shirt down and lie back against the bed. The butterflies in my stomach need more space to flap around so I stretch out giving them more room to play. “I got a touch-up yesterday. Not my smartest planning before a flight, but I was a victim of the circumstance.”

I can tell by the way his gaze is trailing all over my body he’s not hearing a word I say. That swirl of tension begins in my chest and slowly starts to fall down. It circles both breasts, dances down my sternum, tickles my belly button and then takes a nosedive for the apex of my thighs. I can’t help but wonder how it’d feel to replace the tension with Chase’s hands.

“That’s...um...” he says absentmindedly as his eyes keep searching... for something.

What is it? What do you want? Just ask. Maybe...

He licks his bottom lip and lets out a small breath. Chase’s eyes tiptoe again up and down my body one more time before he breaks his gaze and flies off the bed. He leans against his dresser and crosses his arms like I’ve offended him.

“I almost can’t believe you’re here. Thank you for coming,” he says from all the way across the room. His warm words don’t match his closed-off body language.

I groan as I sit up. I cross my legs and try to get a grip on reality but it's hard when the smell of his sweet cologne is still dancing around my head succeeding at its quest to hypnotize me.

"Of course. Happy birthday." My hand palms against my forehead with an audible smack. "Shit, Chase. I'm so sorry. I didn't get you anything. Day one and I'm already the worst fake girlfriend."

"Hey, don't worry. You're here—what else could I have wished for?"

That's strange. *You wished for me to be here and yet you're standing all the way over there.*

But no matter, the only thing stronger than my attraction in this moment is my exhaustion. I'm no match for the large yawn that forces its way through the barricade of my closed lips, so I succumb. My eyes water as I cover my mouth politely and wait for it to pass.

Chase checks his phone that's resting on the dresser. "It's getting late. Did Cici bring you?"

Yawns are wildly contagious and I catch my own. My mouth stretches open again and I cover my face in embarrassment. I am not cool enough for L.A. school. I have a geriatric bedtime and my body is protesting all the limits I'm pushing.

"Yeah, she did. She told me to find her when I'm ready to go."

"I haven't touched a drop tonight and I'm willing to bet Cici is already at the bottom of a bottle of Belvedere." He nods toward the door. "Come on. I'll take you home."

I bite my bottom lip to control my pout. "You don't want me to stay?"

"There's a bunch of idiots out there who aren't leaving any time soon and I don't like the idea of you passed out here, alone somewhere. I'll sleep better knowing you're safe at home."

I could just stay safe in here with you...no?

"Sure, thank you. I just have to find Mani."

He crosses the space between us and holds out his hand for me. I let him interlace his thick fingers with mine. We fit perfectly like the right key in the right lock. Chase pulls me down the hallway, weaving through the partygoers. A sloppy drunk partier stops us. He balks in a slur when he sees Chase leaving.

"Where ya goin', birthday boy? It's early!"

Chase glances down at me and back at the drunken mess blocking our passage through the hallway. "I'm tapping out. Gotta make sure my

girlfriend gets home safe.” He squeezes his fingers and brings the back of my hand to his lips.

Swoon.

But I know it’s just for show based on the way he winks at me as if to say, ‘play along’.

Fine. Secret swoon.

chapter 11

L.A.

Chase

My living room is trashed. A hurricane of drunken dumbasses flew through my home last night and I called a family meeting this morning to determine the culprit of all my birthday bullshit. Adam, Cici, Jay, and Mark all look guilty. They are scattered across the furniture of my beach house living room amidst the disgusting party aftermath.

I can't believe this used to be my life—*every single night*.

“Does anyone want to explain how ‘low key’ and ‘just a couple beers’ turned into a fucking rager last night?”

All fingers point to Mark who is barely coherent. His eyes are so red he looks like he's about to shoot laser beams from his eyes. I could've guessed this was Mark's doing.

“Mark—are you still high from last night or do you just wake and bake every day now?”

“Brah,” he says with a lazy laugh. “I'll be honest, I don't even know, man. I'm on Jupiter right now.” I can smell him clear across the room. His potent cologne this morning is that of a weed dispensary.

“Guys! This shit can't happen around Noa. You should've seen how petrified she looked last night. Moms and party bowls don't mix.”

“Is she here?” Adam begins collecting bottles off the floor and placing them on the table. “Did she spend the night?”

Cici shoots an icy look my way at the implication.

“No. I took her home because you lot were too wasted to help. Thank you all. I spent my thirtieth sitting in L.A. traffic. It was a freaking glorious way to ring in a new decade.”

It wasn't all that bad. Noa and I easily filled the forty-minute car ride from my beach house to Elm Community with conversation as her friend Amani dozed in the back seat.

If Noa were any other girl I probably would've made a move last night. According to the media, she's my girlfriend. According to my entourage, she's my savior. According to me? She's something more. I will not treat her like a random one-night stand. I had to jump off the bed when I saw those bandages from the bottom of her tits trailing well below her underwear. I didn't want to freak her out with the partial I was instantly sporting at the mere idea of her sexy body art.

“Sorry, Chase. But thank you for controlling yourself for once.” Cici nods at me approvingly.

“What the hell? When am I not in control?”

Four pairs of eyes lock on me. Even Mark. *Oh, come on!* I'm not that bad. I almost challenge their accusing stares but then decide against an argument I won't win.

“Anyhow, your punishment is to clean this up. Noa will be here any minute and we're heading to the beach. I expect this place in order by the time I get back.” I'm lecturing them out of spite. I'm staying at my condo in Studio City and the housekeepers are coming by to restore the beach house this afternoon. But I want to watch these hooligans squirm. Let it be known that Chase Ford's property is no longer the stomping grounds for this crap. I'm turning over a new leaf.

“I don't have any publicity planned for today. What's Noa coming over for?” Cici asks.

“We're just hanging out. She texted me something about a birthday do-over.” To be honest, I don't care. She could be coming by to borrow a pen and I'd still be on the edge of my seat. I don't think I'll ever need to party again. I could stay high on this excitement of seeing my new girl. *Whoops—fake girlfriend.*



Noa's hair flies around in the wind with a mind of its own. The girl is just all hair. The sheer volume of her thick waves seems heavy enough to drag her down but she still bounces around like she's weightless on the moon. I trail slowly behind her as she runs up and down the shoreline like a child—barefoot, her feet caked in sticky wet sand. The shoreline is her playground.

She doubles back and kicks the shallow water at my bare feet as she nears. "So, answer the next question."

"Does it matter?" I mimic her splashy footsteps half in the water, half on the packed sand.

"Chase." Noa's face grows serious. "The entire future of our fictitious relationship depends on your answer to this question. It's a pretty big deal."

I laugh under my breath. "Okay...hm...that's a lot of pressure. Let's see. I rinse and then put dishes in the dishwasher. Right away. Does that work for you?"

"Good answer. I'll keep you."

Noa insists that the more we know about each other the more convincingly we can act out our parts, but she's not fooling me. We both have the same hidden motivations right now. We want to know each other better. But I'll play along with whatever game she wants.

"Water's pretty warm, I wish I could get in." She bends down to touch the packed sand. The tide swells and briefly swallows her hand.

"How much longer are you sporting the bandages?"

"I could probably take them off today if I wanted, but Koa might make a special trip from the rock to come smack me himself."

"Koa?"

"My tattoo artist...and cousin...and childhood friend."

Jealousy seeps into my veins and saturates my mood. "How low does that tattoo go?"

She makes a popping sound with her mouth and gives me a sweet smile. "Low." *She's flirting.* I know it. Why?—is the question. What's her end game?

"And you let a random guy do it?"

"Not a *random* guy. *Koa.*"

She can say his name all she wants but some other dude was looking at a part of her body that moving forward, I want for my eyes only. She pulls her sunglasses off and makes a visor with her hand. Rotating her shoulders, she takes in a panoramic view of the beach.

“This place is gorgeous. How is it possible that you own all this?”

The sun kisses the crest of her hairline, giving her a halo of light. A perfectly timed sign from the universe.

I got it! I'm working on it.

“Adam. Long story short, when my career first took off I trusted Adam with every dime I had. I basically gave him the money from my first three movies and somehow he multiplied it by a hundred. He's really money smart.”

“Wow. That's a lot of trust. On another note, may I borrow Adam next time I go to Vegas?”

“Ha! Absolutely. He loves Vegas. My whole entourage does.”

“Entourage? Fancy,” Noa mocks in a snooty British accent. “You don't just have friends?”

“When your best friends' jobs are managing your life, they become your entourage. I like to keep my inner circle tight. Adam's been with me since the beginning—since my first audition. He was my agent at LMC for a while then became my manager, instead. Cici's been my publicist through thick and thin for oh—six years now? Jay's been around just as long. They are all I need. Sort of my adopted family.”

“Your ohana,” Noa says, nodding enthusiastically. “I get it. My best friends back home are the same. And I've known Mani since diapers.”

“That's like me and Mark.” Which is the only reason I tolerate most of his antics.

“Is Mark the blond one with a ponytail I just met who talks like that high-as-a-kite turtle from *Finding Nemo*?”

I roar in laughter. “I actually saw that one. Was that turtle *high*? It's a kid movie.”

Noa's face becomes utterly serious. “Chase, I have a four-year-old. I have seen that movie about three hundred times. That turtle is so high he might as well be swimming in outer space. You have to be completely wasted to be okay with throwing a bunch of baby turtles into a swirling underwater vortex of death and telling them to just ride the current duuude.” Noa extends her pinky and thumb and wiggles her hand, giving her best ‘surf's up’ impression.

A hearty chuckle bubbles from deep in my chest. “So you've seen *Finding Nemo* three hundred times and yet you've never seen one of my movies?”

Noa places her sunglasses back on and smirks. “Okay, name one of your movies I can watch with Jonah.”

I’m silent as I search my mind for options—nothing.

“That’s what I thought, buddy. You sir, are not intended for general audiences. But, since I’m your girlfriend now, I suppose I should make the time. Which do you recommend? Your *best* acting.”

I was not prepared for that question. “Mmmmm, well you’ve put me on the spot now.” I think I care more about Noa’s opinion of me than the general public’s. I shrug my shoulders. “I’m blanking...”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand. It’s like getting zapped with a lightning jolt every time she touches me or pierces me with those dark gray eyes. “I’m the same way with painting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well acting is a form of art, right? I imagine it feels similar. Sometimes when I’m inspired and start painting I get so into it that I think I’m creating the next big Monet. It’s like being on top of the world. There’s this feeling—like you have this unique creative force inside of you that makes you powerful and invincible.” Noa touches her chest above her heart, like she’s indicating the place she’s speaking from. “But when I come to and I’m finished with a piece, I look back at what I created and all I see are the flaws. I can’t tell you how many completed canvases I have shoved in the back of my studio that’ll never see the light of day.”

Nail, meet hammer. “That’s exactly it. I’m always my own worst critic.”

“I imagine it’s tougher for you though. My audience is a drop in the bucket compared to yours. You’re brave, Chase.”

Noa fastens a makeshift ponytail with her hands, trying to hold her hair back but several chunks fall free. I ride the wave of emotion that’s washing over me. I reach out and tuck the strays behind her ear. She leans into my hand.

“Please don’t do that,” she whispers.

“What?”

“Be all sweet. I think I’ll have an easier time resisting you if you’re just my playboy fake boyfriend. Deal?”

I gape like an open-mouthed bass at her response. “No.” I finally laugh. “No deal. Not even close. I swear I’m not the guy you think I am. Most of the stuff on the internet isn’t true.”

Noa makes a pained expression and sucks in air between her teeth as she cringes. “Well, shit. I googled you and now I’m worried about the candles for your cake.”

“Cake?”

She points to the bag she carried down here with us. I offered to help, but she insisted she had it. Now I know why she was handling it so carefully. She bought me a cake. Sweet girl. *Let’s go eat some cake off of each other. I’m all in.*

Noa unpacks the tote. She flattens out a picnic blanket, pulls out two metal forks, and then a plain white box. We both sink cross-legged onto the buffalo plaid quilt. She fishes out a number four and eight in candle form and arranges them in front of me.

“Forty-eight?”

“You said google it. I did. Forty-eight is what came up. You are aging beautifully by the way. I have half a mind to sneak a peek at the skincare products you’re using.” She bats her eyes at me.

“Haha, funny. I told you not everything about me on the internet is true.”

“Not even that you’ve plowed more fields than an ox nearing retirement? That one was my favorite. It really painted me a word picture.”

I pull my hat down over my eyes and groan. “I swear it’s not that bad.”

Her eyes fall to the blanket. *Damn.* I don’t want to have this conversation but she wants to know and I can tell she’s too polite to actually ask.

She shrugs me off. “It’s not my business, Chase. I was just making a joke. Sorry.”

I inhale and blow out a deep breath anyway. Here we go. Let’s rip off the Band-Aid. “I haven’t been with anyone since I met you.”

“You mean not since I agreed to fake date you and Cici put your ass on lockdown?”

“No. I mean since the very moment I met you at LMC and I posed for some pictures with the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

She freezes. Finally, something catches her off guard. She scrapes her teeth against her bottom lip. “You know, even though I haven’t seen any of your movies, I can tell you’re a talented actor. Really impressive stuff.”

My eyes lock on her full pink lips that are curled in a half smile. But I’m not making any jokes. “I’m not that good. I promise. Totally overrated.”

“Then you’re going to have a hell of a time landing *Dynasty Man*.”

I point to Noa with my palm facing the sky. “Why do you think I brought in a ringer?”

She snickers as she pulls out two more candles from her bag. A three and zero. She knew all along of course. I have a feeling I’m with the kind of woman who will always be one step ahead of me.

“I felt terrible after your birthday yesterday.”

“Why? I’m the one who should be apologizing. That stuff is not part of my life anymore, Noa. I didn’t want you to get the wrong impression. It just got—”

“It’s fine. I felt bad because it was *your* birthday and it didn’t seem like you were having much fun.”

“It’s just a birthday. No big deal.”

“Birthdays are a huge deal! I look forward to mine every year. My birthday falls a couple days after Christmas so it’s always lost in the holiday fray. By the twenty-eighth everyone is sick of celebrating, sick of feasting, sick of decorations. It’s such a buzzkill. So, when I was growing up, each year my mom would work really hard to make sure my big day didn’t get washed out. She’d dedicate the entire day to doing whatever I wanted. And it was always the same thing. I’d ask her to make me this cake and she’d always have it ready by the time I woke up.”

Noa opens the lid of the white box to reveal a perfectly round honey-brown cake with pineapple rings and maraschino cherries. She plants the thick three candle into the center and then the zero.

“This is all we’d eat for the entire day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Just pajamas, movies, and Lani’s cake. It makes for the perfect birthday every single time.”

“Lani? That’s your mom’s name?” I ask and Noa nods. “So, you didn’t buy this, you made it?”

“Yes. And I’m sorry, mine’s not quite as good as my mom’s. She has a secret ingredient that she still won’t share with me but mine’s a really good runner-up.”

Noa hands me a fork and then pulls out the last item from her floppy bag. She ignites the candles with a small silver lighter. The fire dances furiously against the wind and Noa cups her hand around the candles to keep our little flames from burning out.

“You should’ve had the day you wanted instead of hiding out from your own party. If you want, I’m happy to help you with a birthday do-over. We can watch one of your movies, or we can watch *Finding Nemo* and I can give you the running commentary of all the underwater drugs the sea animals are doing, because that weed-smoking turtle is just the tip of the iceberg. Wait until I tell you what that twitchy shark is on.”

“Anything I want?” I ask between short breathy laughs.

“Anything you want. It’s your day.”

I could be so lame and cliché right now. I could just ask for that kiss. And I want to. Really bad. I want to taste her lips. She could not look prettier in her low-cut flowy blue beach dress as the wind catches her hair. My heart is thumping angrily. It wants what it wants but her words from earlier circle around my mind. She can’t resist *sweet*. I can imagine the kind of man Noa wants and I’m thinking for the first time in three years I want to play the long game.

I blow out the candles and pull out the wax number three. I pop the edge into my mouth and taste the sweet fruity tang of the caramelized pineapple.

“Did I mention my favorite dessert is pineapple upside-down cake?”

“Really?”

“It is now.”

I stab my fork into the tender cake and hold out a bite for Noa but she shakes her head. “I’ve already eaten my body weight in that batter trying to get it just right for you.”

“Now who’s being too sweet?” I pop the fork into my mouth. “Delicious. You have to try the finished product.” I swivel my fork and make another hollow in the center of the cake. I hold it out to Noa but she shakes her head again. My smile curls salaciously. “Either try it...or wear it.”

“You don’t scare me, Chase Ford.”

I free a soaked cherry from the cake and let it fly. It smacks her in the middle of her chest and rolls into her cleavage, leaving a sticky red syrup trail. Not to brag, but my aim is perfect. Noa scowls but I’m far from done. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Let me get that for you.” I scoop a handful of the sticky cake and smear the top of her soft, full breasts with the wet crumbs. If this were an R-rated movie my tongue would follow. But since we’re playing PG today, I simply sit back and watch her reaction.

Her mouth falls open. “You did not—”

“Noa.” I hold out my finger still coated in her tasty dessert. “Are you going to try it now or am I about to paint you head to toe with my birthday cake?”

Her eyes dart to the water and then back at me. I lunge but she bolts half a second faster, slipping right through my fingers. She squeals all the way to the shoreline. I grab a fistful of cake and then I’m on my feet.

One...two...three.

I give her a head start but still catch her in an instant, careful to scoop her up by her thighs so I don’t agitate her bandaged side. She shrieks in laughter as I deposit cake on every inch of bare skin I can find. She runs back to our blanket for more ammo and then becomes the hunter. With two cake-filled hands she slips under my shirt, she slathers my chest down to my belly button. I pull my soiled shirt over my head and toss it to the sand.

Your move.

Noa traces my chest with her finger, circling around my nipple and then down the center of my abs. I shudder. She leaves a trail of goosebumps wherever she touches. I mentally beg her to put that finger into her mouth. I wouldn’t be able to control myself. I’d make my move right now in the middle of this beach. But she’s armed with playfulness. She pushes off my hat and uses her sticky finger to draw cakey war paint on my face.

“This is some of my best work.” She nods as she examines my crumb-filled forehead and cheeks.

“Run.”

I don’t have to tell her twice. Without sparing a second she sprints down the beach. We play like this until the sun sets. We tickle and tease all over the packed sand where the water touches earth. We relish in the world’s sweetest, sexiest food fight as the ocean rises around our feet and the tide begins to change.

chapter 12

L.A.

Noa

I normally find baseball tiresomely uneventful. But there's nothing boring about Chase on the pitcher's mound wearing a thin navy and gold jersey that traces all the ridges of his hard body. I think I finally understand why this is America's greatest pastime.

I wait with Chase's entourage in the scout seats behind the dugout watching him toss a ball back and forth with the umpire. He's preparing to throw the opening pitch of the game but I doubt he needs the practice. He's easily as athletic as any player on the team. He handles that little white ball with ease and will have no issues hurtling it across the necessary sixty feet.

Cici taps my shoulders from her seat behind me. "Okay, I have enough photos of you and Chase together in matching jerseys. I just need you guys on the kiss cam and then I'm done bothering you."

"That's it? Where are all the paparazzi? I thought we were trying to get in front of cameras today."

Jay stands at the top of the concrete stairs blocking the downward path to our seating area. He's dressed in all black even in the sweltering heat and his balboa beard is glistening with perspiration. His angry scowl must look intimidating to passersby but every time I glance his way his eyes soften and he flashes me the kindest smile before returning to playing badass bodyguard. I have no doubt Jay could take on a swarm of reporters single-handedly. He's a grizzly bear to aggressive fans and cameras, but a teddy bear with me. He loves to toe the line of flirting only when Chase is around.

We've discovered this drives him absolutely insane. Jay has a love of messing with Chase, and I have a love of watching Chase get jealous over me. *Swoonity swoon.*

"Our phones are the paparazzi. With social media these days, fans beat the tabloids to the punch. Look around. How many smartphone cameras are pointed at Chase right now?"

I scan the stands. I didn't notice until Cici mentioned it. There are hundreds of cameras pointed right at my new favorite baseball player. Chase is completely unfazed. It's astonishing how comfortable he is with all the eyes and attention that continuously attack the target on his back.

"What happened at LMC was only due to dodo over here calling the press." Cici aggressively juts her thumb to her right and nearly pokes Adam in his temple.

"For the hundredth time, I'm sorry. I thought LMC had the *Dynasty Man* offer in hand. We were going to announce it ourselves before it leaked."

"And that's why *I* handle the publicity and *you* handle—"

"Literally everything else?" Adam snarks. "But it worked out, didn't it? Met Noa in the elevator and she saved our asses."

Oh! This makes more sense now. The media swarm at LMC was planned. Chase was prepared to provide some news, he just didn't realize that instead of his new job he'd be announcing his new relationship.

Mark returns to our seats holding an armful of foil-wrapped hot dogs. He tosses one in everyone's lap and keeps about four for himself. The day we see Mark sober is the day we know Armageddon is near. He plops into the seat next to me and begins unwrapping his loot with such care you'd think he was un-swaddling a newborn baby.

"Hey, Noa." Adam leans forward to talk right into my ear. "I'm having trouble finding Amani on OnlyFans. Does she have like a secret Instagram account it's linked to?"

I grumble in annoyance. "She's not on OnlyFans. How many times are we going to go over this? Leave Mani alone."

Adam has been drooling over Mani like a lovestruck puppy since Chase's birthday party. And by drooling over Mani, I mean her breasts.

"I have it," Cici says casually. "It's w-w-w-dot-adam-go-suck-a-dick-dot-com." I look over my shoulder to see Adam pretend typing into his phone.

“Nope, tried it. That’s not it. Hey, do you want my hot dog though? I know you prefer to take your meat, one in each hand.”

I turn back around and press my lips together to stifle my laughter. Cici and Adam communicate through a constant slew of suggestive zingers and sexual insults. There is so much tension between the two, sometimes I can’t tell if they are about to kill each other or jump into bed together. I’ll say the former judging by the way Adam’s obsessing over my best friend. Little does he know, Mani and Cici share a personality. If Mani was at this baseball game, she’d be more than delighted to also direct Adam to w-w-w-dot-adam-go-suck-a-dick-dot-com.

“Do they always bicker like this?” I ask Mark under my breath.

“It’s endless,” he says with a lazy smile. “Do you want mustard?”

“Nope. I don’t even want this hot dog, but do you really need all six of those water bottles?” I point to the chair next to Mark which is doubling as a mini concession stand. He hands me a cold plastic bottle of water. “Thank you, kind sir.”

“Do you want some candy, too? I have gummy bears.”

“Candy? Or *candy*?”

Mark snorts. “Girl, you already know.”

“Hey, Noa—word of advice, never ever take candy from Mark,” Adam says. “Really never take candy from any man, but especially not Mark. He doesn’t understand normal human tolerances anymore. You’ll take a trip up so high we won’t be able to find you in outer space.” Adam plants both hands on Mark’s shoulder and whispers something I can’t hear. Mark rolls his eyes, collects his food, and reluctantly gets up. He scoots down two seats so he’s on the other side of the chair of goodies.

Rude. Of the two of us, I’m not the one who wreaks.

“We don’t want you guys to look too comfortable next to each other.” Adam nods behind him at a few crowd-goers whose cameras are pointed in our direction. Good grief, that’s a lot of unnecessary scrutiny to be under. Mark is just being my friend.

“I’ll keep you company,” Cici says as she climbs over the row to sit right next to me. “May I have your phone? I want to see if you have any photos I can use for the Instagram account I created for you.” I put in my passcode and hand my iPhone to Cici. “This is your little boy in the background? He’s so cute. Looks nothing like you though.”

“I know it. He’s one hundred percent his daddy in looks. He’s got my personality though.”

“So sweet. Are you sure you don’t want to put him on the Finsta account?”

“One thousand percent,” I respond firmly.

Cici is sparing me from any and all social media obligations by creating a fake Instagram account in which I publicly interact with Chase. Cici will be behind the curtain pulling all the strings. She’ll do all the tagging, cute captions, and responses to Chase’s photos with the little heart and fire emojis. All I have to do is let her scour my photos for usable pictures. Although, that’s not leaving her much material. Most of my photos are with my little guy.

She nudges me and lowers her voice. “By the way, what was up with you and Chase yesterday? We saw you on the beach acting all hot and bothered.”

“We were just playing around. Aren’t we supposed to be acting like we’re together?”

“Did not look like acting to me,” Cici singsongs, teasingly.

“Chase was just being Chase. He’s a flirt, right?”

A hand grips the back of my chair, and Adam props himself in the space between Cici’s seat and mine. “If Chase was being Chase, you’d be naked in his bed.”

“Adam? Shut up.” Cici growls without looking up. “Point is, we haven’t seen that side of Chase in a while. He actually seemed like he was having fun.”

“He doesn’t usually have fun with women?”

“Oh, he has fun with wom—”

“Adam!” Cici swats him on the back of his head. “Shut your mouth. Okay? For once in your life. Is that something you can do?”

“What? Look, Noa, Cici is freaking out over nothing. I’m trying to tell you that Chase is acting out of character because he *likes* you. He hasn’t liked anyone in a while.”

I squint and glance sidelong at Cici. “I feel like everything on the internet would suggest otherwise...”

Cici unwraps the foil on her hot dog. She whips her head around and gives Adam a look that even makes me cower. “If you say one word about what I’m eating for lunch, I will neuter you, clear?” Looking at me, she

softens her tone. “Noa, I’ve known Chase for an eternity. He’s only officially dated one girl—Kayla. They were together for a few years and then had a messy, drawn-out breakup.”

“What happened?”

“Well, eventually every succubus gets called back to the fiery gates of hell.” Adam forces out a shudder.

“I take it you don’t like Kayla?”

“Understatement of the year,” Cici answers on his behalf. “Let’s just say Kayla wasn’t the best influence on Chase. But he was thinking about proposing to her.”

“Whoa. So you mean, *serious* girlfriend. Why did they end it?”

“Because God heard our desperate pleas and finally intervened,” Adam chimes in again, much to Cici’s chagrin.

I can’t help my curiosity. Chase was going to propose? What woman could tame the great Chase Ford? She probably is the most beautiful creature on the planet. I’d dive into the internet but one—Cici still has my phone and two—it’s not fair to Chase. That’s not the way I want to get to know him. I’d prefer to hear his narrative. Maybe he’ll tell me when he’s ready.

Or maybe I’ll keep prodding his best friends for the dirt.

I mean to ask more clarifying questions but the crowd screams in a deafening roar as Chase takes the mound to kick off the game.



Chase’s hand claims my knee possessively. Jay is in our seating area now so Chase uses body language to tell him to back the hell off. *Ha, ha! Oh, come on.* Jay is harmless. Chase’s brooding brown eyes are only egging him on.

He nuzzles into my ear, sending tingles down my spine.

“You still smell like cake. Actually, you always smell incredible. It’s like sweet vanilla, but...warm. Is it possible for a smell to have a temperature? What the hell is that?”

“Wow.” I blink at Chase in disbelief. “What a line.”

“It’s not a line.” He flashes his most alluring smile. “But is it working?” He winks.

I don't think either of us is capable of playing coy any longer. There's something here, I feel it. I don't know what the *something* is and I definitely can't rationalize it. I just know that it's so hot at the baseball game that I'm in a haze. It's so sweltering, the crowd could just melt away. The sun is so bright, it gleams off the bead of sweat that's trickling down my spine. The pleather seat is sizzling beneath my legs and I wish Chase and I were alone right now so I could do *something* about all this heat between us.

"Okay, here it comes," Cici commands from the row behind us as the announcer mumbles something about lovebirds in the stands.

"Cici, this is about as lame as it gets," Chase complains.

"Hush. You can't ask for better publicity. And it's not lame, it's sweet. Look." She points between us to the jumbotron. The image narrows in on Chase and me while bright pink hearts dance across the screen framing our faces. The crowd begins whooping and hollering. Leaning in, Chase pecks me briefly on the cheek with his lips.

We're met with a sea of boos. Even I'm disappointed.

"Chase, quit being prude," Cici hisses. "You're ruining my whole thing. You need to be more convincing than that."

With a groan, he throws his head back. He pushes his hat backwards and places his hand tenderly against my cheek. He leans in again, but this time pauses half an inch from my lips. "Just so you know, this is not how I was planning our first kiss."

I lick my lips in eager anticipation. "What was your version?" There's no denying it anymore. I want him.

"I'll show you later."

And then his mouth is on me. His tender lips brush against mine with perfect pressure to ease the ache. His kiss is like water quenching my thirst. If anyone thinks we can stop at a quick peck they are sorely mistaken. The dam is broken. The doves released. Chase weaves his fingers through my hair and pulls me deeper into our kiss. Our tongues touch and I lose my breath. I can't describe the way he tastes other than delicious and perfect. It feels like the last kiss I'll ever want. Chase moans against my lips and for a brief moment the entire world falls away.

Ahem.

Adam clears his throat, dragging a reluctant Chase and me back down to earth. I sneak a glance at Cici who looks torn between mild horror and smug approval. "Um, that's convincing enough, guys."

The crowd is whistling and whooping like loons. They are all little wannabe paparazzi who just caught Chase and me red-handed falling into *something more*.

I blow out a deep breath trying to steady my out-of-control huffing. “That was a pretty convincing fake kiss, Chase Ford.”

He slicks his thumb across my bottom lip that is still wet from his saliva. “Nothing fake about it, Noa Fallon.” The jumbotron camera moves on to its next victims, but Chase and I stay stuck in our precious moment. “Can I take you out to dinner tonight? Just the two of us. I want to take you on a very *real* date and show you how I can do that kiss a little better.”

What’s better than the very best kiss I’ve ever had?

“I’d like that.”

The smile on Chase’s face outshines all the others I’ve seen thus far. He rights his hat and wraps his arm around my shoulders. I tuck my knees into my chest and lean against Chase’s. How did I get here in his arms? How can I stay here as long as possible?

“Noa?” asks Cici. “Your ex-husband’s name is Wes, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Does he have a talking dog?”

“What?” I turn and Cici’s holding my phone out. “‘Wes’s Puppy’ has called about six times in a row.”

Mandy. *Oh no*. There is only one reason Mandy would call me six times in a row. Trying not to black out, I snatch the phone from Cici’s hand.

Breathe. Breathe.

“Mandy.”

“Noa...*oh my god...Noa*.” Mandy is crying so hard I can barely understand a word between her hyperventilation and hiccupping.

Every cell in my body is trembling. The nerves threaten to overcome me. I plant my feet on the concrete for stability. Bending in half, I tuck my head between my legs and hold a finger over one ear, trying to concentrate on Mandy’s broken hysteric words.

“Mandy...Mandy! Listen to me. *Calm the fuck down*. Take a breath. Tell me clearly. Is Jonah okay?” I’m demanding she do what I barely can. My heart rate is so fast it’s more of a vibration than a beat.

She inhales, then exhales. “Jonah is perfectly fine. He’s with me.” *Oh dear god thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much*. The fat tears of relief fall from my eyes and hit the ground, wetting the concrete.

“Then what is wrong?”

“It’s Wes”—she snuffles—“he’s in the hospital. There was an accident on that stupid camping trip. Noa, it’s so bad. So much blood.” Mandy starts heaving again. “The doctor is asking me all these questions about Wes and I don’t know. I...I don’t know his blood type. And Wes’s parents are on that month-long cruise, I can’t get ahold of them. And I can’t...I can’t do this.”

She says all the magic words. *Hospital. Wes. Bad. Blood. Doctor.* I have to get to my family.

Chase’s hand is on my back rubbing up and down my spine. I know he means to comfort me but I don’t want to be touched right now.

“AB positive. Wes’s blood type is AB positive. Tell the doctor to call me and I will answer everything he needs. I’m heading to the airport right now. Mandy, you’re doing fine. It’s going to be okay. I’m on my way.”

I’m immediately in *go mode*. It’s a mode that all moms know well. We can cry and panic later—first we handle business. Everyone else can fall apart but moms are the rock. I’m on my feet looking for the closest stadium exit but Chase catches my hand and tugs me back.

“Hey. What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

“Family emergency. I have to get to the airport.”

“Is Jonah okay?”

I nod hurriedly, my eyes still scanning the stadium. How the hell do I get to the parking lot? Earlier there were a bunch of available rideshares waiting out front.

“Okay, okay.” Chase’s eyes search my manic face. “I’ll see if Adam’s assistant can find you a flight but it’ll probably be a minute. There’s no reason to rush to the airport and wait on standby. And we need to swing by Amani’s and pack your stuff too, right? Just stay here until we figure stuff —”

“Chase,” I stop him. “I’m going to the airport, *right now*. No stuff. No figuring anything out. It’s my family. You have to let me go.”

He drops my hand immediately. His face twists into a wounded strain. He’s disappointed but I’ll pay that piper later. There’s only one thing going through my mind. I need to get to my son and my son’s bleeding father as soon as the universe will possibly allow.

“Jay, can you take Noa to LAX?” Chase asks, but his eyes don’t leave mine. “Right now.”

Jay is on his feet. He follows me as I scurry up the concrete stairs and toward the red exit sign.

Chase doesn't follow. He does exactly as I asked and lets me go.

chapter 13

Denver

Noa

“Do you need a fresh ice pack?”

Wes is sprawled out on my living room couch, looking pitiful.

“Depends. Do you forgive me yet?”

“Not a chance. Take the ice pack. It’s all you’re getting from me.”

“Okay. Please.”

My idiot of an ex-husband decided that cliff diving off of a slippery rock into a shallow river was a fun way to reclaim his macho youth. Thirty-six stitches to the back of his head, a two-day coma, a very serious concussion, and at least four weeks of FMLA—all the result of a *freaking dare*.

I busy myself in the kitchen dumping out the slushy cold water from the double-lined reusable ice bag. I refill it with the cubes from the fridge and then take out some aggression on the blue pack with a meat tenderizer. I’ve been making Wes’s ice packs since his college football days. He likes his ice pulverized to tiny bits.

When I left Chase at the baseball stadium, I apparently stepped into a wormhole that landed me right back in the past where—once again—I’m spending my Saturday afternoon catering to Wes’s every need.

Wes is not allowed to drive for three more weeks at least, and that’s barring any sporadic episodes of blurry vision or shooting pains in his head. The doctor also gave him a journal in which he is to record any moments of memory loss. I cleverly explained back at the hospital that we’d need

several journals because Wes already has the memory of a guppy on uppers, but no one laughed. Apparently, nothing is funny when a man's head is wrapped in bloody bandages. *But come on! A dare?* If Wes wasn't already in so much pain, I'd smack him across the back of his head myself.

He can't participate in any strenuous activity. He can't cook for himself. He can barely get off the couch. So, until he's back to normal he's staying at the house with Jonah and me. Our house, that Chase Ford now owns. The same Chase that I've put on mute for two weeks now. I learned my lesson. I got caught up in some wistful fantasy that doesn't belong to me and the moment I took my eyes off the prize, the father of my child nearly died. It's time to get back to reality and remember where I'm needed and what I should be focusing on.

"Here." I toss the ice bag on Wes's lap and he groans.

"How long are you going to be mad at me? Every day you seem angrier."

"Let it go, Wes."

I'm exhausted, and hungry. Taking care of a wounded Wes and an energetic Jonah is more than a full-time job. I just put Jonah down for a nap and I'm hoping Wes shuts his trap and follows suit. I need a real meal. I want a giant plate of Cajun shrimp tacos or a chicken Caesar salad so big I could step into it, but I haven't had time to grocery shop.

To be perfectly honest, I'm scared to leave Wes alone. I make jokes so I don't risk losing my composure when I think about him in the hospital.

I made it to Wes's patient room six hours after Mandy called me. I'd never seen so much blood before in my life. I was almost certain the situation was dire. I had to be strong for everyone, but I was dying inside. Wes's parents were unreachable on their cruise. I couldn't call my parents without explaining more details than I had time to. It was just me, Mandy, and Jonah, meaning the burden was on me to keep it the heck together.

I held Mandy—I mean, I *really* held her at the hospital as she collapsed into me, violently weeping for hours. Say what you will about her age, her squeaky mouse voice, her obsession with *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and the itty-bitty miniskirts she has in every color of the rainbow—that woman loves Wes Shields with all her heart. She didn't leave his bedside for the seven straight days he was there before they released him. And now, whether I like it or not, she's part of the family. I'll be damned if

my son calls her *mommy*...but maybe we can make something along the lines of 'auntie' work.

I settle on a banana from the fruit basket. I grab a nearly empty tub of peanut butter from the pantry and settle into the counter-height stool at the kitchen island to either eat or sleep. Whichever comes first.

"Please," Wes continues to plead.

"What time will Mandy be here so we can do a shift change? I'm quite tired of you now."

"She has class this evening. Noa, just come talk to me. I want to apologize."

I shove a butter knife to the bottom of the jar. The messy sides coat my hand with peanut butter. There is more on me than on the knife. I take the tiny dallop on the butter knife and press it into my banana before shoving half of the fruit in my mouth.

"Apologize for what?" I ask with bulging cheeks.

Wes sits up, balancing the ice pack on top of his head. "For scaring you, for doing something so stupid in front of Jonah, and for ruining your date."

I wash my hands clean of the sticky peanut butter residue and join Wes on the couch. "It wasn't a real date. I already explained that whole situation to you. But thank you. And you're forgiven but only because you look *really* pathetic right now." I pat his knee and avoid eye contact. I don't want to see those blue eyes because I keep picturing his lids shut, unconscious. I keep seeing the horrified expression on Jonah's face back at the hospital as I promised him Daddy was going to be just fine. I could've been lying at the time for all I knew.

Wes rubs both of his temples with one hand. His thumb and ring finger massage tiny concentric circles on either side of his face.

"Do you need more medicine? I think you have another hour to go, but if you're hurting..."

"No, I'm fine. I was just remembering it all. I was trying to get Jonah to get in the river."

"What?" I grab the wool blanket off the back of the couch and drape it around mine and Wes's legs. I keep the house at a frosty sixty-six degrees because it helps with the nausea from his strong pain medications. We freeze our asses off so he faces a little less discomfort.

"It was the last day of the trip and all his little friends jumped out of the canoe into the river as part of the final Buddy Scouts challenge. It was for

the bravery badge. Jonah wanted to but he was scared. He had his life vest on but he couldn't do it. He told me he felt like a loser. He's *four*, Noa. What do I say to our four-year-old son who says he feels like a loser? The other troop dads were jumping off the cliff into the deep part of the river. They dared me and I told Jonah I was a little scared too. He said if I was brave enough to jump, he'd be brave enough to get in the water."

"Oh, Wes." I shake my head slowly. I thought he was being a show-off. He was just trying to step up for his son.

"I hit a patch of wet moss or something. I don't know. I don't remember much of what happened but I had this vivid image or dream, I'm not sure. But the last thing I saw before I conked out was you..."

I still. My eyes widen in panic. My heart stops and an uncomfortable surge shoots down my spine. *Oh, no*. I can't. Especially not after I kissed Chase. I may not be able to have what I want, but I'm very aware of what I don't want to go back to.

"Noa, calm down. Not like that. I love Mandy. I meant...I saw you because I felt guilty."

"Guilty?"

"Yeah..." Wes pulls the ice pack off his head and tosses it on the coffee table. He turns to face me head on. "I was lying there thinking that if it was my time to go, I knew Jonah would be okay. Because he has you. And then I felt terrible because I wondered if the roles were reversed would you feel the same? If you were bleeding out on a rock, would you feel safe knowing Jonah had me?"

Silence.

How the hell do I answer that?

I touch my wet eyes with the back of my knuckles. "Wes, you're a good dad—"

"No, it's not about that. It's about security. You gave me security in our relationship where I needed it most. I never worry about Jonah because of the kind of mother you are. But your whole world is just me and Jonah. Even now. I feel like...like I sucked up all the air in your life and I never let you breathe. I needed you too much. Jonah can need you. *I* should've been stronger. And I'm sorry." Wes sniffs. He's always been a dry crier.

"Please don't...feel this way. We're okay. You and I are *okay*. We got off easy. Our divorce isn't ugly, we're still a family."

“Because of you. You could’ve hated me. You didn’t. You could’ve tried to take Jonah from me. You would never. You could’ve gouged me in court for every penny I have. You asked for the bare minimum to survive. We mediated. Your kindness is unique, Noa. It took one really good lick to the back of the head for me to see it clearly. But I’m sorry and I owe you. Even now, you still have my back and I just want to help you as much as you’ve helped me.”

I wiggle my toes under the blanket. *How can you help me, Wes? No one can help me. I need to help myself. That’s the problem.*

“Where are you going with this?”

“One of my old coaches checked up on me after he heard about the accident. We got to talking and he happens to be good friends with the owner of Annisen Gallery. Do you know that place?”

Do I know Annisen—Seriously? That’s like asking an NFL player if he knows about the Superbowl. Annisen is among Denver’s most elite art galleries. The only way to be featured there is by becoming the reincarnated spirit of Leonardo da Vinci or Ansel Adams.

“Yes, I know Annisen. But it’s only for serious artists.”

“They are expanding and took over the building next door. They need an assistant art director to help get the gallery together for their winter showcase. I got you an interview.”

“What?” My mouth falls open and I’m standing immediately. I dig my toes into the fluffy carpet. I just vacuumed this morning but of course, I still feel crumbs. I always feel crumbs. *“Wes Shields! Don’t you dare mess with me. You got me the job?”*

His lips slant in a half smile. *“Just an interview. I couldn’t move mountains. But it’s a great salary, benefits, the whole nine. They are going to email you the interview details.”*

“I can’t believe this. I seriously can’t believe it. Do you even know what Annise—I don’t even...I could freaking kiss you right now. Thank you so much.”

“Yeah.” He grimaces. *“Please don’t do that. You and Mandy just started getting along.”*

I chuckle. *Yeah, yeah. She can have you.* *“All right. Do you think you’ll be okay for an hour?”*

“Yes, why?”

“Because I am newly energized. I’m going to run to the grocery store while Jonah’s napping and I’m going to cook you your favorite dinner tonight.”

“Hell yes. Please say huli huli chicken tacos.”

“Yes, tacos. I’ll even get that canned pineapple that your pup—I mean Mandy, likes.” I grab my purse and my keys from the front entry, but double back to Wes on the couch before I leave. I hand him his ice pack and motion toward his head. “Thank you. For more than just the interview.”

“For what?”

“For being a man who wants to keep his family together no matter what that means.”

“That’s OH-hana, right?”

Oh, Wes. After all these years together. After meeting most of my family on the Big Island and years of hearing Leilani Fallon speak in her native tongue. Even after countless screenings of *Lilo & Stitch*—he still can’t pronounce the damn word correctly!

“Yes. O-HA-na.”

“I just said that. OH-hana.”

“No, you’re putting the wrong emphasis on the wrong syllable—oh screw it. Text me if you need anything else from the store.”

With that, I’m out the front door taking in the sunny warm Colorado air as the end-of-May heat begins to rise with a hopeful June right on its heels.

chapter 14

L.A.

Chase

I spend almost every weekend at my beach house during the summer for *this* view—looking out from my deck. The soft sand on the beach is cleanly raked and the ocean stretches unobscured to the edge of the earth. The sun dips, turning the sky an orange-pink hue. Shore becomes shadow as the water darkens. The world is quiet except for the waves crashing and cresting. I'm not too much of a man's man to say I can appreciate the beauty of nature. I paid a pretty penny for this kind of perfection, and it was worth it. This view makes me feel like I don't need the pills or powder to achieve peace.

Two shadowed figures walk side by side down the shoreline. Mark and Cici are still on the beach at dusk. *Surprising.*

Mark is an avid surfer. Has been for as long as I can remember. I can stand on a board—barely—but that's the extent of it. So, he's a lone wolf when it comes to the waves.

A few years ago, Mark went out to the break at dusk, alone. He knew how dangerous it could be but the Mary Jane he was smoking told him to go be one with nature. There were rumored spottings of an eight-foot great white a little farther up the coast, but Mark wasn't deterred. He said something about the harmony in his heart and not provoking the marine life in its natural element. Or some bullshit like that.

He was out there less than thirty minutes when he was thrown from his board. The shark torpedoed him from below and the impact snapped his

board in half and sent him flying. As Mark tells it, when he hit the water he started paddling for his life. He made it to shore unscathed except for a badly twisted ankle. He didn't have a guardian angel that night, he had a goddamn guardian army. A miracle.

Since that fateful encounter, Mark respects the water at dawn and dusk feeding times and I'm shocked he's even willing to walk on the beach right now. I wonder what he and Cici could possibly be talking about. They have nothing in common.

Their silhouettes become clearer as they near the main house—*wait*.

Mark steps in front of Cici and grabs her hand. He tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear and kisses her cheek. *Oh shit*.

That's Mark's move. *No fucking way*. He's putting down the moves.

Two silhouettes become one as their faces bury into each other and I have to blink a few times to make sure I'm not imagining this. He's toying with the strings of her bikini top when I decide I've seen enough. I tuck my thumb and pointer finger in my mouth and whistle so loud they both jump. Cici looks up at me and throws her hand over her mouth. She pushes Mark away.

Yeah, that's right, chumps. I saw the whole damn thing.

Cici heads toward the sandy steps that lead off the beach. She collects a towel strewn over a plastic beach chair on the way and waves at me, indicating she's coming up. *Good*.

She has some explaining to do.



Cici and I sit around the firepit on my deck. The night is warm, but windy, so she covers herself with a light blanket. I sit across from her watching the flames. The fire cracks and pops, filling the momentary quiet. The smoke lines dance and disappear into the night.

“Before I forget, I got you and Noa into *Steam Me* magazine for their hottest summer couples spread. I think that NBA player and his girlfriend broke up because...well, she found out about his other girlfriend. Anyways, long story short it's a prime PR opportunity. I asked Noa to come out here on Wednesday for the photoshoot.”

“What'd she say?”

“Yes. But she can only be in town for twenty-four hours. She has to get back to her husband.” I flinch at Cici’s words. “Sorry, ex—husband.”

Noa and I haven’t talked much over the past couple weeks. I’ve given her space because I know her family needs her right now. I wasn’t going to stand in the way. But I’m getting frustrated. I asked her out, she bolted. I text her, she barely responds. I call, she doesn’t call me back.

Publicity-wise everything is going fine. We’re trending. The media is singing our story exactly the way Cici planned. This week’s headlines? ‘*Our favorite Hollywood F-boy, Tamed*’ and ‘*Chase Ford Finally Finds the Right Kind of “Lei”*’—hilarious. But I don’t fight because they are working. There’s already a hashtag circulating, #chasefordourdynastyman. Adam’s thrilled and says the studio is already feeling the pressure to cast.

“Don’t think that baiting me with Noa details is getting you off the hook. We’re going to circle back to you and Mark getting busy on the beach in just a moment. But has Amani said anything about why Noa is being so quiet?”

Cici growls under her breath. She doesn’t get embarrassed often but her face has been red flushed since I caught her on the beach with Mark. She found me on the deck, tucked her tail, and has been trying to strategically avoid the conversation. “Amani told me the accident was really bad. Wes fell off a cliff and busted the back of his head open. I guess as soon as he hit the water the river turned red. He was unconscious for like two days. They didn’t know if he’d make it.”

“Holy shit.”

“She didn’t tell you any of this?”

“No. She just keeps saying it’s been really busy.”

“That’s probably because her husband moved back in with her.”

“*What?*” The beer slides from my hand and bounces off the composite wood planks. It doesn’t shatter but cold lager sloshes all over our feet.

“Geez, Chase! Ex! Ex-husband. Shit, sorry.”

I grab the rolling bottle and slam it upright on the metal lip of the firepit. “Word choice is not the issue, Cici. They’re shacking up together?”

“Dude—be a human being. It’s her son’s father. He almost *died*. She’s helping to take care of him until he’s back on his feet.”

“All I’m hearing right now is that they are sleeping under the same roof in the house I bought and she’s probably playing sexy nurse to his conniving ass right now.”

Grumbling, I rip off my hat and chuck it across the deck. No wonder she's been so quiet. She's ghosting me to go back to her ex. This really was just a business agreement to her.

"Really?" Cici takes a long sip of her beer but keeps her mocking eyes on me. "So you think Wes faked a near-death accident to get his ex-wife back after he's the one who asked for a divorce?"

"Wes asked for the divorce?"

"According to Amani."

I fetch another beer from the cooler. Footsteps approach. The other guilty party arrives. Mark looks freshly showered and for once he doesn't wreak of the green.

"You want one?" I fish two bottles out of the ice.

"Please." He sits shamelessly right next to Cici and hoists his arms around her shoulders. Cici reels and attempts to wriggle away from his intimate hug. "What? He already knows, babe."

"*Babe?* Okay," I say as I shake up one bottle and toss it in Mark's lap. I raise my brow, daring him to open it. "I'm going to ask a few questions and let me be perfectly clear that I don't want a lot of details because quite frankly this feels incestuous."

Mark laughs with a spacey drawl. "Fire away, brah."

"How long?"

"Few weeks." He shrugs.

"How serious?"

"We're not getting married anytime soon but we're not seeing other people. Somewhere in between there." Cici looks questioningly at Mark. He nods his head in approval at her response.

"Have you guys fooled around in any of my homes?"

"Um—"

"Er—"

"Never mind. I don't want to know. Also, I want both of your sets of keys back, like yesterday."

"Not happening." Mark shakes his head and Cici follows suit.

"Last question—if this goes to shit, are you guys going to be able to recover as friends? Because I'm not willing to lose either of you if you start hating each other. We're a family."

"Chase..." Cici snuggles into Mark's chest. He kisses her on the head. *Gross. Weird. No.* "Please understand that I know in my heart even if Mark

and I end with a messy breakup, I will be able to be around him every day and still do my job—even if we hate each other.”

“How do you know you’re capable of that level of maturity?”

“I’ve already proved I’m capable of it by the mere fact that Adam Montgomery is still alive and well.”

Touché, Cici. Touché.

“All right, fine. But don’t kiss around me. I need some boundaries.”

They respond to my request by locking lips immediately. *Blech.* It’s like watching a brother and sister kiss. Disgusting.

“Keys,” I mumble as I head back inside the house. “I want your damn keys.”

chapter 15

L.A.

Chase

My palms are sweating. I shouldn't be this anxious to knock on the door of my own guest room, at my own beach house, but here we are. I feel like a stranger in this moment about to enter new territory. I flatten my palm against my board shorts trying to sop up my liquid nerves.

Knock, knock. My knuckles lightly rake against the door.

"Chase?" Noa's voice rings like the sweetest song through the door.

"Yeah, it's me. You okay? The photographer is waiting."

Noa has spent the last hour sitting through hair and makeup for the *Steam Me* photoshoot which I find crazy. First of all, we're taking pictures in the water. All that careful attention to her hair and makeup is about to be washed away by ocean water. Second of all, my girl is so gorgeous there's nothing on her that needs to be primed and primed to that degree. She could roll out of bed after a terrible night of sleep and still look like a centerfold in my humble opinion.

"Can you come in? I'm having a wardrobe issue."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Are you dressed?"

"Sorta."

"If it's a wardrobe problem, are you sure you don't want me to get the stylist or Cici?"

"Chase, get your ass in here please."

I turn the handle and peek my head through the door. Noa is sitting on the edge of the bed with a large beach towel wrapped tightly around her body, pinned underneath her arms.

“What’s wrong?” I shut the door behind me and lean against it. In case she’s naked underneath that towel, it’s best I keep my distance. Not that I particularly want to, but she’s looking mighty vulnerable right now with worry lines all over her face. This is not the time to push ulterior agendas.

Noa nods to her luggage in the corner of the room. It’s a small leopard-print hardcase with hot-pink lining. It doesn’t suit her in the slightest. It looks like she pulled it right out of Malibu Barbie’s closet.

“That’s your luggage?” I ask.

Jay grabbed it so quick when Noa arrived at the airport this morning, I didn’t notice. My eyes were fixed on one thing and one thing only as she descended from the terminal looking like an angel from heaven. I typically don’t risk public outings to avoid being accosted by cameras, but I had to be there for my girl. Fake or not, she deserves a boyfriend who waits by the gate for her.

“It’s Mani’s. I’m just borrowing it for the summer.”

“You don’t have luggage?”

“I did. It busted and I haven’t had the time or means to go buy a new set.”

“We can go get you some new luggage. I gave you that card if it’s a money—”

“Chase. Can we focus? We have a serious problem.” Noa pads lightly across the wooden floor and unzips the suitcase. She pulls out two one-piece bathing suits. “Cici told me it’d be a beach shoot, but she told me I could bring the swimsuits I feel most comfortable in.” Noa holds up a navy one-piece with a gold clasp. In her other hand, a red one-piece with a bow between the cups.

“I like both of those. Either works. You’ll look great.”

She groans and rolls her eyes. “That’s not the issue.” She walks into the bathroom and returns with two hangers, each holding a bikini. One black, one white. It makes sense seeing as my board shorts are a black and white geometric pattern. We’ll match no matter what she chooses.

“The stylist said no to my swimsuits. She said I have to pick one of these.”

“Um, the black one?” They both look identical to me outside of the color. Not much of a choice. “Or the white? I don’t know. Do you want me to get Cici?”

“You guys are trying so hard to paint me as this innocent sweetheart girlfriend.” Noa drops the hangers on the bed and crosses her arms. “I strategically choose my swimsuits so they are appropriate for Wes’s work retreats and Jonah’s toddler birthday pool parties. The swimsuits I brought cover my tattoos. These bikinis aren’t going to hide anything.”

“What exactly are you trying to hide? Do you have ‘thug life’ tattooed across your side with skulls and bones or something?”

Noa holds her towel as she laughs to keep it from slipping. “Out of curiosity, if I did, would you keep me?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re sweet, Chase Ford.”

I’m trying. You can’t resist sweet, remember?

“Noa, I don’t give a crap about what the stylist says. If you’re not comfortable in those bikinis don’t wear them. And if they have a problem with it, I’ll tell them to shove their magazine where the sun don’t shine and kick them off my property right now. But personally, I don’t think you should be ashamed of being exactly who you are.”

Noa squints her eye, trying to hold her smile from spreading too wide. “Is that a line from one of your movies?”

“Nope, that’s a Chase Ford original.”

Noa crosses the room and wraps her hand around my neck. She stands on her tippy-toes while pulling me downwards so she can plant a quick kiss on my cheek. “Thank you. I really needed that. Bikini it is.” My senses crave that vanilla swirl that wraps around us every time she’s near. I catch her hand and bring it to my lips. I kiss her fingertips one by one.

“I appreciate you doing all this. I know it’s hard to leave home right now. I’ll try to keep Cici’s publicity requests to a minimum.”

“I wanted to be here. I wanted to see you. It’s just—”

“Still complicated?”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe we can talk before you leave tonight?”

I weave my hand in Noa’s hair. She leans into my touch the same way she did on my birthday do-over at the beach. This is her tell. She’s feeling this as much as I am and I don’t want to let this moment slip away.

“About what exactly—”

Pound, pound, pound. I feel three hard knocks against my back through the door.

“Guys! We’re burning sunlight. We need you now!”

Noa rises to her toes again and finds my lips. Our mouths are closed but somehow she still steals my breath. “Let’s get this over with. We can talk after.”

The pounding sounds again and I quickly silence it by ripping the door open. “We’re coming,” I bark at the photographer’s assistant. “Hey, Noa?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you mix and match them? Black for the top, white for the bottom? Or vice versa?”

She clasps her hands together and points them at me. “Yes, perfect. I love that idea!”

Noa looks far more relaxed than when I first entered. Excited even. She shakes out her long glossy locks. The sparkly eyeshadow they glued on her eyelids make her steel-gray eyes dance. She’s glowing, like a bright start, full of shiny new beginnings.



Gemma, the photographer for *Steam Me* magazine, clicks furiously through her laptop on my kitchen island, reviewing proofs of the hundreds of photos she just took of Noa and me. She grumbles under her breath, displeased.

She asked me for a private word, so I stepped inside with her, but my eyes are still on Noa through the glass doors standing on the deck talking to Gemma’s assistant. She slipped on a robe so for the moment the spell is broken, but holy shit that woman’s body is a phenomenon.

Her curves are soft in all the right places and yet she still looks athletic enough to hop on a surfboard alongside Mark. I asked Noa what she does to keep her body looking like a dream. She said for stress relief—yoga and Pilates. For cardio—she hikes with her best friend Addie. For strength—nonstop farmer carries with a thirty-plus-pound child and lifting grocery bags. I may need to change up my workout regime, because groceries are working in all the right ways.

“Chase, look at this.” Gemma points to her laptop as she clicks her mouse. The picture on the screen shows Noa in my arms, the ocean as our backdrop. It’s a nice setting but even I’ll admit we look awkward. “She’s not a natural at a photoshoot, huh?” It’s not that Noa doesn’t look beautiful, she’s just painfully aware of the camera. Almost defensive. “I can’t use any of these. She looks petrified and it doesn’t help that you’re drooling at her boobs or ass in pretty much every picture.”

Whoops. I’d argue, but Gemma has the evidence right in front of her. I shrug.

“We need to try this again and we’ve got to get her to relax. You live in front of the camera, what do you usually do?”

I’m not sure how to explain it. I’ve been acting for a decade. I’ve dealt with paparazzi and photoshoots since as long as I can remember and by now it’s second nature. The best advice I can give Noa is to forget the lenses are on her and get lost in the moment.

“I’ll talk to her. You want us to get back in the water?”

“Yeah, I think we have about thirty minutes before the sun starts setting and I need the daylight. Let’s just get back out there and see what happens.”

“Okay, give me a minute with her.”

Noa’s eyes are on me the moment I slip through the sliding-glass doors. I close it behind me so Gemma is out of earshot.

“I suck at this, don’t I?”

I glance at the assistant and he takes a hint. “I’m going to go check the water and where the sun is hitting.” Even he knows we’re going to need a second take. He scuttles off the deck and down the stairs toward the beach.

“Hey now.” I grab Noa’s hands. “You don’t suck, we just look a little unnatural. She wants to try again.”

Noa scoffs, frustrated. “I don’t know how you do this for a living. She’s telling me how to bend my body in all these awkward angles yet says to be natural. Contradictory! Mani has a couple decent pictures of me from our senior trip to Panama City. Maybe the magazine can just photoshop me in.” Noa gives me a hopeful smile as if that’s a real option.

“Panama City—for college spring break?”

“High school senior trip. I was knocked up during my senior year of college. Believe me I was not in a bikini during those days.”

“You missed your college spring break with your friends because you were pregnant?”

“I didn’t miss it. They stayed home with me. We spent the whole break drinking virgin margaritas and picking out baby names.”

“You have really good friends. My college friends would’ve ditched my ass so fast.”

Noa tilts her chin and the sun bobs and weaves through her long hair as her head shifts. “They aren’t just my friends. They are my family.”

“Speaking of family, tell me more about Jonah.”

The look on Noa’s face whenever she talks about her boy is full of pride and unparalleled joy. It’s her biggest and brightest smile. The one that takes over her entire face. The kind of smile that has me thinking that someday I want to be a parent, too.

“What about Jonah?”

“What kind of kid is he?”

“Hmmm, Jonah has the best kind of soul. He’s so tender-hearted. He’s the kind of kid who won’t pick a favorite color because he’s worried all the other colors will feel left out. He worries about everybody more than himself. You can’t teach that kind of empathy. He was just born with it.”

“Ah. So just like you.”

Noa pokes me in the chest. “There you go again. Being sweet.”

Get used to it.

Gemma taps on the glass to get our attention. She holds her hand up and mouths, ‘*five minutes.*’ She points to the water, telling us to get our asses in gear. Noa grumbles.

“Hey, so she asked me how we met.” I entwine my hand with Noa’s and we trudge toward the hot sand.

“I thought Cici already handled all the interview stuff.”

“Yeah, but all that was scripted. Gemma was personally curious.”

“Did you tell her the truth?”

“Absolutely.”

Noa sneaks a glance at me and half smiles in disbelief. “You actually told her what you and Adam did at LMC?”

I belt out a throaty laugh. “No, of course not. I told her that you were a longtime fangirl and that you Instagram stalked me for months. I explained after incessant private DMs of begging and pleading you wore me down. I finally caved, met you for coffee, you slipped me a love potion, and the rest is history.”

Noa rips her hand from mine. It lands on her hip and she positions herself into the quintessential mom-scold pose. “Chase Ford, you’re the worst.” But she can’t hide the humor on her face.

I tap her nose and rub my fingers against the worry lines across her forehead. “Just relax and have fun out here, okay? Talk to me. Pretend the cameras aren’t on.”

We reach the beach and I peel my shirt off. Her eyes soak me up greedily. After hours of basking in the visual of each other’s bodies, it’s still not enough. “Are you checking me out?”

“Hell yes.” Noa winks and clicks her jaw. “I’m your fangirl and all, right?”

I pull on the tie of her robe and she shrugs out of the sleeves. It falls to the ground and gets swallowed up by the granules of sand. She kicks it aside as the tide washes up around our feet.

I was speechless the very moment I saw her in a bikini. Not just because I wanted to lick every inch of her perfect body, but her tattoo might be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. It starts at the undercurve of her left breast, runs down her ribs, then sprawls across her hips dipping below her panty line. At first glance it looks like an intricate tribal design with delicate wispy lines. When I studied it closer, I noticed the symbols subtly embedded in the patterns. The ocean is drawn on her side and the current is flowing downwards.

I tug on her elbow to pull her into the shade of my body. To pull her closer. Rubbing my thumb over her rib cage, I inspect the pictures on her skin. “Are these stingrays?”

“No. Manta rays. In Hawaiian they are called hahaluas.”

I trace my fingers down to the curve of her hip. There is one ray at the top of her ribs and another on the dip beneath her stomach. “There are two?”

She shoots me a knowing look. “Three.”

Dear god. I tug at the bottom of my board shorts to adjust them as they become uncomfortably snug in the crotch. I’d really like to meet that third ray—soon—to relieve the tension that’s building between us. The way she’s dragging her fingers across my bare chest says she’s wanting the same.

“Is there a difference between manta rays and stingrays?”

“A big difference. Hmm, where to start? Unlike lupe—that’s stingrays—hahaluas don’t fight. They don’t have stingers or barbs. They run from

danger even though they are the giants of the ocean.”

“So you have these because you’re not a fighter?”

She snorts. “Oh Chasey Chase. I’m feisty when I need to be. That’s not why I’ve claimed them as my spirit animal.”

“*Your spirit animal?*”

Noa steps into me and presses her bare skin against mine. I instinctively wrap my arms around her and we stumble right into intimacy. Her soft skin and taut body warm mine. Her heart beats against my chest. The friction between our bodies sends a glorious tremor across my back. I’m becoming more familiar with the sensation when she touches me like this, but it’s not getting old, it’s just getting better.

“Manta rays don’t sleep. Did you know that?” Her breath tickles my pec as she talks. “They have to stay in perpetual motion or they’ll suffocate and die. They can live up to eighty years and have to swim the entire time. *The Entire Time*. They spend their whole lives gliding across the ocean and it makes me think they are one of the only animals that gets to really see everything down there. Just think about what you’d experience in your lifetime if you never closed your eyes to sleep.”

I tilt her chin up so I can stare into the iron-gray of her eyes. They look lighter in the sunlight. Like the pigment’s leaking. “What if they get tired?”

“They don’t. They never feel worn out. They are full of graceful endurance. Some people believe that mantas are tapped into the ocean’s spiritual energy, which is why they never get lost. The right path kinetically courses through their body giving them constant energy—guiding them—so they always know where to go.”

I’m in a daze. She’s deep...introspective. It’s alluring and comforting at the same time. Like our souls could talk. “That’s hauntingly beautiful. You are—”

Click, click, click, click.

“Got it. That’s a wrap, folks.” Gemma is squatting a few feet from us with her camera pointed at Noa who is still cradled in my arms. I’ve no clue when she got here. I was so enraptured with Noa’s story that the world fell away.

Gemma shows the thumbnail preview on her camera to her assistant. He nods in approval. “That’s gold.”

“Money shot, right? Just had to sneak up on them.”

Noa's eyes widen in clear relief. She looks to Gemma. "Thank god. We're done?"

"Yup! Great job, guys. I'll pack up and get out of here. Chase—thanks for letting us use your beach house."

Gemma and her assistant collect their gear and head back to the house but Noa doesn't leave my arms and I don't move a muscle. I hold her on the beach as her back warms under the sinking sun. I trace the divot of her spine with my fingertips while thinking about manta rays.

Eighty years and no sleep. How is that even possible? Noa sees the beauty in it but I see a harrowing life sentence. They can never rest. They can never stop moving or they'll die. It's tragic. Before the summer started...before I met Noa, that was me.

I was a manta ray.

chapter 16

L.A.

Noa

The sizzle of the grill erupts as the grease from shrinking burgers drips into the open flame. Jay works the spatula with expert finesse. He layers burgers with flat squares of cheese.

“American or cheddar, honey?”

“No cheese for me, please.”

His eyes widen as he points to his chest. “Me neither!”

“Right? It’s all about the mayo and pickle.”

“Couldn’t agree more.”

Cici put together a little barbeque in my honor, much to Chase’s surprise and annoyance. I think he wanted me alone tonight. But since I am in town for a very short time, a little get-together is a nice way to get some face time with all my new friends.

I hand a cup to Jay when he’s finished topping burgers over the hot grill. I settle into a patio chair nearby, right next to Chase and his pouty scowl. He places his hand on my knee and I feel the tension in his twitchy pinky.

“It’s the best I can do with the ingredients on hand.” I smile apologetically in Jay’s direction. “It’s not authentic.”

Jay takes a sip of the mai tai I made for him and groans appreciatively. “Still good to me, honey. What makes a mai tai authentic?”

“Less juice, more syrup, a touch of Tahitian vanilla, and don’t mix your rums. You layer them between a heavy splash of lime. But—that’s

according to my makuahine. My aunty will tell you the opposite. So...in summary, I guess I really don't know."

"Your pronunciation is perfect," Jay says, squeezing my shoulder. "Hey tell me something. My Hawaiian girl always called me *kuipo*. What's that?"

"Depends on the context, but anything from sweetheart to lover."

"*Lover* you say? Hmmm. I like the sound of that. *Kuipo*."

Ahem. Chase clears his throat loudly. "Are you two done?" He wraps his hand around mine. "Can I borrow you for a moment?" He pulls me up from my seat and toward the house.

"We need to leave for the airport in one hour, you two. Stay close!" Jay calls after us.

Chase ignores him as he tows me down the hallway of his main floor. I'm almost sure he's taking me to his bedroom, but then we bank right. He leads me into what looks like a game room with a ping pong table centered square in the middle. Leather couches line the back wall.

"Must you flirt shamelessly with Jay?" he grumbles and finally releases my hand. Taking a seat on the couch, he pats the cushion next to him.

"Oh stop. We're not flirting. We just like to mess with you." I slide into the seat, lining my thigh with his.

"Consider me messed with."

I've become so comfortable around Chase sometimes I forget how good looking he is. A soft knock sounds from south of my navel and I really want to answer. My mouth begins to water as I think about his hard muscled body pressed against mine. It's been so long. I forgot how good the wanting part can feel. It's like a sultry ice cream swirl of sweet anticipation and desire.

"I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you?" My fingers tiptoe up his thigh. I wet my lips and give him my best sex eyes. I haven't used them for a very long time and I sincerely hope I'm coming off wildly aroused instead of psychotically deranged.

Chase intercepts my hand with urgency. *Ah, dammit. Crazy. I must look crazy*. I'm going to have to practice these eyes in the mirror a bit. I might've lost my touch.

"I thought we were going to talk. What're you doing?" Chase asks.

"Um. Well, I'm trying to give you the green light. Not sure what you're doing."

“Really, green light, right before you leave? I didn’t take you for a quickie kind of girl.”

I thought he’d be jumping up and down in glee? Actually, I thought we’d be naked by now. I’m swallowing down whatever insecurities I had about being with a guy like Chase. There are no real stakes here. Whatever happens between us...the summer will eventually end. This will end...

“Quick is fine if you know what you’re doing.” I press my thighs together to combat the pressure building between them.

Sweet puffs of air escape his lips as he chuckles. “I’m tempted. But no, Noa. I’m sorry, we’re not going to have sex right now.”

I don’t bother trying to hide my disappointment. “So, you don’t know what you’re doing? Hm, the legend falls short.”

Chase places his catcher mitt of a hand gently on my cheek. He holds my head securely as if it’s about to fall off. It will. If he keeps staring at me with that blazing fire in his eyes, my head might fall right off. “Noa, I know how to fuck. I could make you come so hard, you’d see stars. Believe me when I say I know where *all* the buttons are.”

I shrug as if it isn’t the single most arousing sentence anyone has ever uttered to me in my life. “Promises, promises, Chase Ford. You’re all talk.”

“Stay and I’ll prove it to you.” Chase nuzzles my nose. He smells like his spicy cologne mixed with a little smoke from the firepit. My new favorite smell in the world. I’m going to make a candle out of this scent... and maybe bring it to the bath with me on occasion.

“Stay where? I’m here, right now, with that aforementioned green light.”

Chase places a swift kiss on my forehead. His lips are warm and smooth and I want them back on me but he’s too poised and in control. “Noa, I like you. I *really* like you. I’m not going to slide it in for a quickie. Stay. Why would you book a trip for only one day?”

“Because real life awaits.”

“This isn’t real life? What’s real to you?”

I hang my head forward, letting my hair veil my face. Chase pries the curtain of my locks aside and looks at me askingly. The smooth masculine lines of his jaw tremor just slightly, like he’s holding back.

“Chase, I have an ex-husband who is sleeping in my guest room because he nearly died two weeks ago from a head wound and still needs a chaperone to walk down the stairs. I have a four-year-old who witnessed the

whole debacle and has since regressed to bedwetting and nightmares. I have an interview tomorrow for a dream job that I am absolutely not qualified for but I desperately want. Actually, I *need* the job to start paying rent to the Hollywood movie star I'm fake dating in exchange for a loan that I'm still not sure how I'm going to pay back. Top it all off with the fact that I can't call the one person who can really hold me down through this shitstorm because I'm hiding the fact that I'm divorced and sharing custody of my son."

I pump my eyebrows at Chase, but he doesn't look deterred. I continue.

"So—that's my real life. I'm exhausted, I'm run down, I'm constantly needed by everyone and I'm one more unexpected big life event away from crawling permanently into a dark hole with raggedy sweatpants and enough Snickers bars to fill my entire pantry."

Chase traces his thumb softly against my lips. I feel the compassion in his touch and I cringe. "I'm so sorry."

Stop. Please. I don't have the time nor energy to fall for you right now.

"My life is not fun and sexy. I am not like your L.A. girls. I booked a trip for just one day because that's all I'm allotted. Just one small moment away from breaking my back trying to hold all the pieces together and praying that everything will work out okay. And you want the truth? It's been a very long time since any one has touched *my buttons* and I was really hoping I could just enjoy a hot, uncomplicated, reckless moment with you."

Chase grabs my hand and brings my knuckles to his lips. "How can I help?" He kisses my hand between his words.

"Well, I thought you said you knew what you were doing. Stars and all that..." My desperate eyes plead with him as I rake over my bottom lip with my teeth.

"No, not with that—with the life stuff. Who are you hiding your divorce from?"

"My mom. Well, my parents, but mostly my mom."

"Why?"

"Because she raised me to be a lot stronger and smarter than I turned out to be. I don't want her to know what a mess her daughter is right now."

"You're not a mess. Not to me. And I'm an expert when it comes to being a mess, trust me."

I pat the side of his smooth cheek as I peel myself off the leather that sticks to my bare thighs. The room is nice and cool and I can only blame nerves for the light beads of sweat that glue me to the couch. “Well thank you for listening. If we’re done here, why don’t we go back out to the barbeque?”

“Hey, you know what? I think you need a little fun.” Chase stands and taps the ping pong table. “Do you play?”

“Ping pong?”

“Nope. Beer pong.” The table makes a little more sense now seeing as there is no net in the center, there are permanent cup ring stains on the short end of each table, and it’s sticky from leftover beer.

I hope that’s why it’s sticky.

“I was a quarterback’s girlfriend all through college which makes me a leading expert at baking giant trays of banquet brownies, homemade puffy-paint t-shirts, and beer pong. Not trying to brag but there is a plaque that still hangs at Wes’s frat house naming me beer pong queen of campus. Just saying.”

Chase laughs and pulls on the bill of his hat, rubbing his forehead with the back of the cloth. “How about a little wager?”

“Bring it on.”

“If you win, we’ll do it your way. Just uncomplicated hot sex as you so delicately put it. I’ll pin your ass against that door and make it so good you really will become my fangirl.”

I snort at the notion out loud but I touch the back of my hand to the corners of my mouth to make sure I’m not physically drooling. *Oh, good. Dry. Just mentally then.*

“And if you win?”

“If I win, you miss your flight. You stay with me tonight. Forget that interview, I’ll give you a job. That’s not a double entendre by the way, I legitimately mean I’ll find you a job...in L.A. Stay here with me and we can see where things go.”

I have never lost a game of beer pong. Not against boozy college football hunks, not against wasted frat boys, not against lucky first timers. This is hardly a wager—zero risk.

“Deal. I’m in.”

Chase retrieves a fresh stack of Solo cups from the bar cart at the far end of the room. This entire room actually looks like a frat house except

with high-end finishings and nothing smells like vomit. But still, patches of the floor are sticky with spills and I can almost guarantee someone has screwed on this blue table. It bears an unsettling resemblance to the beer pong tables at all the parties Wes used to drag me to.

When Chase is finished lining up the neat pyramids with red plastic cups he points to the far side of the table, indicating where I should go. He clearly has a favorite side. He retrieves a large bottle of tequila from one of the bar-cart shelves.

“Let me introduce you to the house rules. At casa de Ford we play a little differently.”

“What’re the house rules?”

“Make it, take it. No bouncing—air shots only. No beer, we use tequila. And most importantly, it’s drink, truth, or strip. Winner’s choice.”

“Shot pong?”

Chase dangles the bottle of tequila in the air teasingly. “You talked a big game. You can’t bail on me now. I already set up the table.” Chase begins filling cups with glugs of clear liquor.

“I can’t get drunk. I have a big interview tomorrow morning.” I’m confident. No way I’m losing. I’m going to be at Annisen Gallery in the morning begging that art director to take me under his tutelage.

A sexy smile crosses Chase’s face before he clenches his jaw and sucks a breath in between his teeth. “*Oof*, well then, I guess you’ll be sharing secrets or getting naked.” He holds a little white ball that seems to have apparated from thin air. Chase positions himself on his chosen end of the table. He lobs the ball in the air and it bounces right off the top of my breasts. The second ball follows, hitting the exact same spot. His aim is perfect and I cringe because I might’ve just met my match.

“Your turn, Noa. Ladies first.”

chapter 17

L.A.

Chase

I underestimated Noa. She wasn't exaggerating when she said she had a knack for this game. I spent the last decade of my life in what felt like a never-ending afterparty, so I thought I'd easily own this game but here I am barefoot, hatless, shirtless, and very close to losing my pants.

"That's make it, take it. Give the balls back," Noa says with a competitive edge in her voice. I stand on my side of the table and watch her eyes devour me. This is a new side of Noa. It is clear she doesn't want to talk. She wants to play with the sexual pull between us and see where it takes us before the clock runs out. "You still owe me one."

"Fine, what'll it be?" I pretend like losing wounds me. I haven't even had a chance to toss a ball yet. But truthfully, I'm loving watching Noa's sexy ass dominate the game.

"This time—truth."

I bounce the little white balls back to Noa across the table. "All right, ask your question."

"How many women have you actually slept with?"

"Three—wait, you mean like at once, right?"

Noa flinches and shortstops on her follow-through. The ball banks off the rim of a cup on the edge of the pyramid and plummets to the floor. She misses for the first time. "What?"

"Kidding. Made you miss."

"I'm pretty sure that's a penalty."

“I’m pretty sure I wrote the house rules and it’s not.”

“Well, I’m still going to need an actual number,” Noa says as she prepares to throw the second ball.

“I told you I don’t keep a running tally. So, what do you want to know?”

“A general ballpark. Like on a scale from virgin to the women’s clinic having a wanted poster of you—where do you fall?”

“Fine. Hmmm. Metaphors. More than a baseball team but less than an NFL roster. Satisfied?”

Noa’s wrist flops as she sloppily flings the second ball, missing again. Smoke is coming from her ears as she wracks her brain trying to remember how many players are on an NFL team.

“Fifty-three is the number you’re looking for.”

She pulls a disgusted face. “I sincerely hope you get tested.”

“Routinely. And I said *less than*. Anyway—my turn.” I fetch the little white balls that rolled off the table. “You’re not getting these back by the way.”

Noa’s good, but I have a definite height advantage. I have at least seven inches on her and the span of my reach alone gives me the competitive edge. I easily plop two balls, one right after the other, in the same cup on her side of the table.

“That’s worth three,” I say. “And give the balls back.”

Noa sends them back with a pout on her face. *Yeah, yeah, honey. You’ve met your match.* “What’s your pick?”

“You already know. Strip, strip, and then strip.”

She kicks off her flip flops. She peels off her tank top and pulls her hair free of the tie around it. Her thick dark hair falls across her shoulders covering most of her chest.

“You can’t seriously think I’m going to accept a hair tie as an article of clothing.”

“I accepted your hat.”

“That’s totally different. A hat covers something. A hair tie just holds something.”

“You’re cute when you’re whining, Chase Ford.”

Mhm. We’ll see. I lob both balls in quick succession and they splash into separate cups. “Truths this time. And I still feel like you need to make good on that prior strip by the way and take off your bra.”

She holds her palms in the air. “Wouldn’t my shorts be next to go?”

“Not if I have it my way.” Sue me. The eyes want what the eyes want. I really want to see what her full perky tits look like. They’ve been jiggling around every time she throws the ball and I’d like to see if they match the mental image I’ve vividly drawn.

“Ask your damn questions.”

“Same one as you. How many guys?”

Noa’s cheeks fill before she blows out a deep breath, delaying her response. “One.”

“No, I mean overall. Lifetime.”

She doesn’t repeat herself. She gives me an affirming look and I can’t hide my surprise.

“You lost your virginity to your ex-husband?”

“What is so shocking about that? I met him when I was eighteen. We dated, got pregnant, and got married. We *just* got divorced in March. It’s not like men have been lining up at my door since then.”

“But you were separated for a while, right? Doesn’t he have a serious girlfriend now?”

Her eyes narrow. “Are you still getting details from Mani?”

“Well, you’re a closed book. I had to suggest a game of beer pong to get you to talk.”

“I thought you suggested a game of beer pong to get me naked.”

“Could’ve done that without the game, baby.” I flash her a cocky smile. “Send the balls back and I have a revised question—when’s the last time you had sex?”

Her shoulders slump and her gaze drops to the floor. Noa fishes out the hollow plastic balls from the Solo cups and shakes them free of the remnants of hard liquor. She forcefully tosses them at me and I have to catch them against my chest.

“A little while.”

“Too vague.”

“How about I give you a ballpark answer like yours? Last time I had sex, dinosaurs were roaming.”

“Be serious. I earned the question fair and square.”

She groans in anguish. “Why do you want to know? It’s embarrassing. When’s the last time *you* had sex?”

Shit. I could lie...but that’s not the relationship I want with Noa. “The day before I met you. But it was a one-time thing.”

“It’s been...a little longer than that for me.”

“All right, I’ll ask a different way.” I lob the ping pong balls one by one back over to her side of the table, sinking each in succession to the same Solo cup. She reaches for the string on her tan shorts.

“Whoa, hold up. Just truths this time. That’s a total of three.” I can’t get her naked—yet. I won’t be able to focus and get the answers I need from her tonight.

“That’s a lot of talk, but all right, let’s hear them.”

“I know Wes is living with you again. Have you guys slept together recently?”

“What?”

“Is there any chance you guys are getting back together?” Noa looks like a surprised owl with charcoal gems for eyes. “I’m not mad. I just want to know where we stand.”

She holds up one finger. “First of all, I’d like you to stop interrogating Mani for details about my life. Second of all, no. Not a chance. Wes is sleeping in the guest room most nights *with his girlfriend*. And I haven’t had sex in two years, Chase.”

Oh, thank god. Wait—what? Two years?

“I interrogated Cici. She forced it out of Amani.” I laugh. My mood lifts knowing that Noa is unattached to her ex. “And I wouldn’t have to do that if you weren’t so secretive. Speaking of which, second question—why didn’t you tell me how bad Wes’s accident was? You texted me and said things were just busy. You didn’t tell me he was in a coma for two days.”

“Because divorced or not, he’s Jonah’s dad. It’s personal. Are we even supposed to cross those lines?”

“Cross what lines?”

“The lines of our actual lives.” Noa’s face clouds with confusion. “Are you forgetting why we’re doing this?”

“Are you saying you want to sleep with me, but you’re not interested in anything past that?” Maybe it’s a hypocritical question. Unattached sex is how I’ve operated my life for the better part of three years, but this time is different. Noa and I have chemistry, but I’m getting the impression that our end goals are very different.

“Is that your second question?” she asks. My head ducks slightly in a single nod. “Chase, I like you. In every possible way. You’re sexy, you’re fun, you’re so kind and sweet. I fill all the tiny moments of time I get to

myself with thoughts about you. But we have responsibilities yanking us in very different directions and I don't want things to get complicated. I hate wanting what I can't have. It's the worst feeling."

Noa rolls the balls back across the barren table between the scattered cups.

"Re-rack," I say, simply. My chest knocks heavily as disappointment washes over me. Her words gave me hope. Then she took them right back. What does she mean she can't have me? I am right—here.

Noa tightens the cups into a diamond shape on her side of the table. "Do you have a third question?"

"What job is the interview for?"

"That's your third question? All right. Um, it's an assistant director position at this really upscale art gallery in LoDo—sorry, lower downtown Denver. Basically, it's the *crème de la crème* of galleries and I have an opportunity to help organize their expansion."

"It's an assistant job? Why is that your dream job? Are they going to sell your art or something?"

Noa lets out a bewildered laugh and slaps the table with her hand so hard the tequila in the cups tremble. "Oh my god. No, no. No. They only feature artists that are in a league so far beyond my own I might as well be fingerpainting stick figures with Crayola. But just the chance to be part of a gallery like Annisen in any way...well, it's dream worthy."

"You know, there are galleries in L.A. Probably a lot fancier and far more elite than in Denver."

"What do art galleries in L.A. have to do with me?" She raises her eyebrows as she mouths *'nothing'* at me.

"You don't have to live here to have your art featured here."

"Chase, if Annisen in Denver is out of my league, we can forget about L.A. and Manhattan and Prague and Venice," she scoffs as she throws her hands in the air to indicate how ridiculous I'm being. "You haven't even seen my work. How can you assume I'm any good?"

"Do you know what they tell every wannabe actor in Hollywood?"

"To diet?" Noa cocks her head to the side in jest. She sticks her tongue out.

"No, sassy." Well, actually yeah—but not the point right now. "They tell you to go home, you're not good enough, you'd have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than having a successful acting career. The

market is too saturated, there's always someone better looking, better suited, younger, someone who can do exactly what you can but for less. You'll never make it. It's a pipe dream."

"Well, that's depressing."

"It's a pep talk."

"Not a good one."

"They tell you all that to weed out the faint-hearted. Because the entertainment industry is hardcore and ruthless. There are some people who run from the thought of rejection and there are some people who will face the dragon because they were born to. It's their quest. They have to slay it or die trying. Those are the people who have a real chance at making it. Their odds are a lot higher because they are not afraid to face the beast, even if they get their ass kicked."

"Is that another Chase Ford original?"

"Oh no, that I stole from one of my directors, but it's always resonated with me," I say with a low, rumbly chuckle. "My point is—if art is your quest, face your dragon. Why do you want an assistant position? Sell your art if that's what you want. Hell, sell it here. I'll help you. I know a lot of people who are into that whole fancy art thing. I can help you make that dream come true."

"Thank you...truly. But I'm okay where I am. I can figure it out. Just take your shot, buddy."

"Buddy?" I launch the balls effortlessly across the table and that satisfying splash brings me two cups closer to keeping Noa all to myself.

"Go on, ask your questions."

"No. Not this time. But just wait. Let me finish the game really quick and then you can go ahead and take everything off."

"Chase—"

"Noa. Shush. A deal's a deal. I make this shot—you stay."

She reluctantly sends the balls back over for the final time. I could probably do this with my eyes closed. I realize it's not fair. *Make it, take it* is a very purposeful house rule. I never miss. I never intended to play fair. Not when it comes to something I can't afford to lose.

Plop. Plop. It's a straight shot right into the center of the final red cups.

"Game over. Pay up, sweetheart." I throw back a shot of tequila and settle in on the couch. I curl my finger, summoning Noa to follow before I

tuck my hands behind my head. The cool leather is frigid against my back, but I welcome it to calm the anticipatory flame.

Noa stands in front of me between my legs. She frowns at me like she's put off by my victory but then the way she licks her bottom lip tells a different story. I place my hands on the small of her waist and pull her into me. I kiss her soft tan skin from her belly button up to the cups of her bra. She moans as I bury my tongue between her cleavage. She crawls on top of me and straddles my lap, pressing the heat between her legs onto my rapidly growing hardon.

"You are so beautiful." I tap my fingers against the back clasp of her bra. "May I?" She reaches around her back and frees the band for me. I pull the straps off her shoulders and toss the thing aside.

Fuck, her tits are perfect. Seriously perfect. I'll be honest, I've seen enough racks to know that hers is by far the best. I could wake up next to these curves every single day and they'd never lose their luster. I engulf her hard tips in my mouth. I suck harder and she whimpers, begging for more pressure. She bucks against me as I gently tug on her nipples with my teeth.

"*Oh god. I like that,*" she mewls as she throws her head back, forcing more of her chest into my face. We've been painting her so innocently in the media, but there's a wanton side of the sweet, kindhearted, clever beauty in my arms that makes her the entire package. We could make love, then make babies and I know she's great at raising them too.

She's everything.

I groan with my mouth still full. My lips find hers, then her cheek, her neck, back to her hard peaks. I can't get enough. The way she's grinding against me, she can't get there fast enough. She weaves her hands through my hair and yanks my head backwards so she can caress my lips again with hers.

A growing song of windchimes sings from the table. Soft at first, like it's just a whisper in my head but before I know it, it's blaring. Noa stills.

"My alarm," she grumbles, annoyed. "It's time to go."

"What?" Taking her hips, I draw her farther onto my lap so her wanting heat is smashed up against my rock-hard approval. "You're not leaving. I won fair and square, baby. You're mine—*all night.*"

"Chase, it was just a game. Come on, you know that. I can't miss that interview. I just can't. I'm sorry. This job opportunity is my *Dynasty Man.*"

“I told you I’d help you here. With your art. If you get a full-time job back home, between everything else you have going on, and Jonah—when are you going to find the time to be here?”

She places her hands on my shoulders and firmly pushes me back. “Be here for what?”

“Um, for me? For us?”

“You mean to pad your publicity and entertain you between your jobs and your meetings? How can you ask that of me?”

“What are you talking about? If you moved here, we could really start something. Think about it. I could take care of you here. And Jonah too.”

“Jonah? *What?* You haven’t even met—*Ughhh*. No. Stop.” She shimmies off my lap and holds her arm around her chest to cover her nakedness. “I thought this was simple. I thought all your sweet gestures were just how you run game. Look, it worked, okay? I’m all about it. I’m throwing myself at you and you can have me right now. Just don’t make this complicated.”

“You sound crazy right now. This isn’t you.”

Oh shit. Oh, no. I should not have said crazy. Poor choice. The expression on Noa’s face right now could make Godzilla seek shelter.

“You don’t even *know* me! You only know the version of me you guys are plastering all over the internet. You can’t collect people, Chase. Just because you have money and means doesn’t mean every woman wants to drop her life to be your accessory.” She grips her head with both of her hands like she’s trying to hold her thoughts together by force. “Look, we have about five minutes before that alarm goes off again and if you want to fill it with something a little more fun than this *crazy* argument about the insanity that’s going on in your head, then take your pants off.”

Who the hell does she think I am? She’s soaking up the tabloids as if they are the blueprint to my life. I have worked so damn hard over the past few months to be a better man and make better choices. I’m not perfect, but I thought the universe understood my intentions, which is why it brought me a girl like Noa. I’m not squandering this on a quick fuck. What does that say about what she means to me?

And just as concerning right now, what the fuck do I mean to her?

“If that’s how you feel, you should go. Jay will take you to the airport.”

“Just to be crystal clear, I’m half naked in front of you and you’re asking me to leave?”

“I’m saying if you want to leave, you should.”

“So, it’s your way or the highway?”

My shoulders lurch in an aggravated shrug.

“Fine.” Noa’s eyes glisten as they scan the ceiling and then fall to the floor. She pulls on her bra and fastens the clasp, finds her tank top discarded by the table, and yanks it over her head. I can feel her rage from across the room. Hell hath no fury...like a gorgeous topless woman who I probably should’ve just obliged and now she looks like she’s about to cry.

I hate the awkward tension that’s now between us. Going to her, I plant a quick kiss on the top of her head, inhaling the sweet warmth of vanilla sugar one more time, but Noa withdraws.

“Have a safe flight home,” I mumble before I let her go and head toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To take a very cold shower.”

chapter 18

L.A.

Chase

“You have got to chill out.” I look at my manager and best friend having an obvious meltdown before our meeting at LMC. My agents called and asked Adam and me to attend an urgent meeting. Normally they call about booking roles, so Adam is convinced this meeting is bad news. Maybe I didn’t get *Dynasty Man*. Maybe I’m getting dropped from representation. Maybe I tanked so hard with Noa last night she’s been ignoring my calls and texts.

That last part isn’t a maybe, it’s a definite.

Adam snatches another bear claw from the cornucopia of baked goods in the center of the long boardroom table. He pinches pieces apart nervously but puts nothing in his mouth. He’s just making a mess. He *looks* like a mess.

“No, Chase. You need to start freaking the fuck out. This can’t be good. Elle Kramer is here. That’s probably what the holdup is.”

“Elle is here? Isn’t that a good thing? Why would a film’s director show up at an actor’s agency other than to talk about the role?”

“Maybe to gloat. Word is she’s been fighting the producers on casting you. Maybe she won.”

I tug on the bill of my hat and cover my eyes. I’m going to take a moment and go to my happy place, or at least somewhere other than here. The clock on the wall echoes as it ticks. Second by second passes in the drafty arid room. The giant windowpanes show off the skyscrapers and

bustling energy of Studio City. But I close my eyes and see the ocean, instead. I hear the waves crashing against the shore. I picture Noa's wild thick hair flying behind her as she runs from me, covered in pineapple cake. I hear her melodic laugh, punctuated with those cute little snorts. She smells like cake and tropical fruit and the salty spray of the ocean.

That day was paradise.

"You know what, Adam?" I keep my eyes closed as I lean back into the plush executive chair. "What if I don't land *Dynasty Man*? No one's going to die. There are other roles. And there are more important things in life. Maybe I'll take some more time off and—"

Bang. The bear claw crumbs jump as Adam's fist slams on the table, startling me right out of my Noa fantasy. "Chase, I say this out of love, but wake the hell up. Seriously. I get it, you went away to your dude ranch and reached out from the mountaintops and touched nirvana or whatever that shit was. You're healthier, stronger, and I'm truly happy for you. But you can't give up on your career because it's hard right now. Cici and I have been busting our asses to make sure that just because you fell—hard I might add—doesn't mean it's over. So can you please be nervous with me right now? Like it or not, this matters."

"How does being nervous solve anything?"

"If nothing else it tells the people who work tirelessly for you, who care about you, who *believe* in you, that you actually give two shits. How 'bout that?"

This happens almost monthly. Adam reads me the riot act and reminds me that I can't quit, even when it feels like hell. He reminds me that the life I endure is still a privilege and I'm only allotted a certain amount of wallowing and self-pity. He's aggressive when it comes to pushing me in my career—it's why I need him more than anyone. Adam doesn't let me give up.

I pat him on the back reassuringly but I don't have time to respond with a thank-you. My agents pile through the office door one by one, with Elle Kramer in tow.



My eyes glaze over as Adam goes toe to toe with every suit in this room. My agents remind him that he's my manager and to let them do their jobs. Adam reminds my agents that they can shove it up their asses. He tells them to fight the offer harder. We're not trying to be greedy. We're trying to get what we deserve.

All I want is to get out of this room. I'm sure as hell not interested in the contract logistics. This is Adam's Olympics, not mine.

The general gist is that I got the part, they are going to pay me a lot of money, we start filming early next year. It should be simple but Adam has about six pages of red lines he wants to talk through with the agency.

Elle and I are wearing matching scowls. I'm not impressed with this meeting. She's not impressed I've been cast in her movie.

"Elle," I say over the lull of overlapping voices in the room. "May I have a word, in private?"

Adam shoots me a nervous side glance. Elle slicks back her neat red bob and rises from her seat. She doesn't say a word to me as she exits the meeting room. Her cold shoulder is a clear command. *You have exactly two minutes of my time, motherfucker.*

We duck into an empty meeting room down the hall. It's far cozier than the monstrous Viking hall we were just occupying. I grab a seat in an executive chair but Elle doesn't join me. She leans against the wall and glowers. Her professional navy pants with the pinstripes are intentionally intimidating. She's a power player and she never misses an opportunity to convey that she's winning at a man's game. There aren't many women directors that are trusted to film a Hollywood blockbuster like *Dynasty Man*. Elle clawed tooth and nail to get where she is, even though I set up some steep hurdles for her. But the past is the past. It's time to bury that hatchet. It's time to explain myself.

"We're all really thrilled at the studio's decision to cast you, Chase," she hisses sarcastically.

"Really? You may need to tell your face."

"My face is fine."

"Whatever you need to say, Elle, go ahead. I'm listening."

"You're going to regret that."

I already do.

"Go for it. I can take it."

“You want the truth? You’re a fucking spoiled, careless, mediocre Hollywood asshole who blazes a trail of destruction and doesn’t bother to turn around to see who he’s left to burn.”

That could’ve been worse. Wait—she’s not done.

“And the little publicity stunt you and your lackeys pulled off? Pathetic. I mean props, it worked. And believe me, I fought relentlessly to keep you off *Dynasty Man* but you’ve been trending for weeks. The producers eat that publicity shit right up. You’ve got the whole world fooled with your crap—per usual—but I see right through it. How much did you pay that girl to pretend to like you?”

“The truth? I helped her with her house.”

Elle can’t out me now. I’m officially part of her project and no way she can afford any negative publicity around *Dynasty Man*. Nor does she want to start a pissing contest with a newly redeemed Hollywood A-lister.

“Are you going to dump her immediately now that you have the part? Or are you going to buy her a new pair of tits and entertain yourself for a while?”

Wow. She’s a piece of work. “It’s not like that.”

“What self-respecting woman would stoop that low? I will never understand these dick-hungry Hollywood fangirls who will spread their legs wide open for even five minutes in the—”

“*Elle!*” I roar so loud she flinches. “Too fucking far. Say what you want about me but leave Noa out of it. She’s innocent in this. Clear?”

She rolls her eyes and makes her move for the door.

“I’m sorry.” That catches her attention and she whirls around.

“What?”

“I never apologized to you after I left *The Renegade*. I was only thinking about what I was going through and I didn’t stop to think about how it would affect you. The producers. The studio. My friends...I am really sorry.”

She crosses her arms but her face relaxes. “It took three years for that.”

“I know. Long overdue.”

Elle slumps into a chair at the far side of the table. “You know the shit I took when you bailed? The timing setbacks and reshoots...Colt gouged the producers for a raise. The film barely broke even. They blamed me. That I couldn’t keep you in line. As if I wasn’t a director, but a babysitter.”

“I know.”

“What happened, Chase? I know Colt was creeping around with your girl and he’s scum, but why bail on a movie like *The Renegade* because of that? You think you’re the first actor to get cheated on?”

“It wasn’t just about Kayla cheating. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I’d been struggling for a while. It took a long time for me to see it, but I finally went and got help earlier this year.”

“Addiction?”

“No. Depression, anxiety, burnout, fatigue. You name it.”

“I saw you every day for six weeks while we were shooting. You never seemed depressed.”

“Yeah, that’s part of it. Overcompensating so you don’t have to deal with what’s really going on.”

She smooths back her hair, tucking the short crimson strands neatly behind her ears. “What help did you get?”

“After I left the movie, I didn’t work. I couldn’t book a decent job. Everyone thought I was too unstable to follow through with a big project. I’m sure you had a lot to do with that.” Elle raises her shoulders as a torturous smile curls her lips. “Anyhow, I spent the next few years lost in a haze of drinking, drugs, partying, and women. I got so sick of myself I asked for help. I found out about a wellness retreat. It was a two-month program. Really discreet.

“No internet, no phones, no women, no alcohol, no drugs. All we did was ride horses, fish, sit around a campfire, meditate, and talk. I ate chili and cornbread every night for like a month straight. I had to face some really tough truths about myself and my life.”

“Why didn’t you ask for help sooner? If you were burnt out or cracking under the pressure of this industry, I could’ve...I would’ve helped you. You didn’t have to blow everything up.”

“Pride,” I offer, simply. “When you play a superhero all the time you start thinking you are one.”

Elle’s forehead relaxes. The pinched frustration on her face disappears. She looks human again, kind of. “And how are you now? Are you sure you can handle a project like *Dynasty Man*?”

“I’m much better. I’m making better decisions. I’m trying to keep my family close and I’m surrounding myself with the right kinds of people.”

“I saw your ex at a party the other week. Are you guys still—”

“No.”

“She looked rough, Chase. Like *opioids* rough.”

Why am I not surprised? Kayla is the queen at taking things two steps beyond too far. I nearly threw away my life and everyone I care about trying to save her. I can’t go back down that road.

“There’s nothing I can do for her anymore.”

“Good. Cut the crap loose. Focus on your acting.”

“My mediocre acting?”

“Sorry—I was mad. The truth is, you’re perfect for *Dynasty Man*. Who else could better play a tortured time-traveling hero whose only weakness is he can’t find love?”

Wow, thanks, Elle.

“So you’re really in this, one hundred percent? I can count on you?” she asks, clicking her acrylic nails against the table.

“I’m in. I promise, I am going to put my heart into this. Let’s film a classic and get you that director’s award you deserve, okay?”

“Hmm. Okay.” Elle rises. She clutches my shoulder from behind. *Truce?* I pat her hand. *Truce.* “I need you to tell me whatever you’re going through from now on, yes? *Dynasty Man* is the biggest movie I’ll ever direct. Which means that if you’re my leading guy, you’re my priority, too. Next time shit hits the fan—ask for help.”

“Will do, Elle.”

I release a deep breath of relief. My apology was genuine but holy shit that was nerve-wracking. Maybe a little honesty and opening up is all it takes for redemption. If I could cool Elle’s raging fire, the possibilities are endless.

One apology down, one to go.

chapter 19

Denver

Noa

I'm not sick. Moms don't get sick.

I mean, sure—my body feels as if a life-sized Tonka truck rolled right over it, then backed up over me again, just for good measure. And yes, the beads of sweat running down my forehead and spine are leaving a damp trail of evidence as my fever spikes. Also, I'll admit, there is a tiny woodpecker living in my head, determined to hollow out my temporal lobe. But it's fine.

I'm fine!

I'm grateful the house is quiet. If I were sick—which I'm not—it's far simpler to succumb to the symptoms when Jonah isn't here.

The day after my interview, Wes suggested that he and Jonah get out of the house and head down to Colorado Springs to spend a week with his parents. We were both a little iffy about returning to our normal custody agreement with Wes still on the mend, but a week with Grandma and Grandpa Shields is the perfect solution. Wes can watch Jonah and Wes's parents can watch...well, Wes—just in case his brain decides to go fuzzy.

Mama Thea and Papa Drew recently returned from their month-long European cruise. They were shocked and horrified to learn about Wes's accident. I'm so glad they are seeing him now—weeks after. The color has returned to his cheeks, he's able to stay awake for more than three hours at a time, and he's able to eat full meals without vomiting from all the pain

medication. If I ever saw Jonah in that state, I think my heart would break apart and the pieces would drift away, like Pangea.

Thea loves me. She is not a fan of the divorce. She adamantly fought us for nearly a year leading up to the mediation. Even during our separation when Wes and I were sleeping in separate bedrooms, Thea would make random trips to Denver with her best friend Leanne, who just *happened* to be a licensed marriage counselor. *Subtle!* Thea was only slightly deterred once the ink was dry on our divorce papers. She's still convinced Wes and I belong together. But I suspect it's more about what she doesn't want than what she does.

The only thing Thea detests more than Wes and I breaking up, is Wes's new girlfriend. Mandy has a very long road to hoe with Thea. On the surface I am in full support of Wes's new relationship. My inner snarky 'biatch' is settled in her theater chair with the largest bowl of buttery popcorn waiting to watch the *Monster-in-Law* sequel starring Thea Shields and Mandy Jacobsen. *Oooh, it's going to be good.*

Needless to say, Wes and Jonah made the trip to Colorado Springs without his college-aged beau. Thea has promised me to return my little boy in a week with a giant plate of her chocolate chip cookies *with* walnuts. She'll have to make an entirely separate batch because I'm apparently the only nut who prefers her cookies with nuts. I will teach a seminar one day about how nuts complete the perfect cookie bite. It's all in the complexity of the texture. A little sweet, a little substance, the buttery crumble. If you're going straight chocolate chip you're missing out on the full experience. It takes the perfect nut-to-chocolate ratio but if you get it just right—like Thea does, every time—it's poetry. It's art.

Also, I think I'm starving right now which is why I'm obsessing about cookies. My appetite has been off today. I'd blame being ill—but *I'm not!*

Ping, ping.

I gasp and my hands fly to my mouth to hold my breath in.

The soft chirp of my email notification sounds like a whirring fire alarm from across the living room. The nervous energy saturates every cell of my body. That's the one. I know it. It's the chirp I've been dying to hear for two days since my interview on Thursday morning.

I pop up off the couch like a meerkat that senses danger. I immediately regret it. My eagerness bests my common sense and I press my palms

against my temples in anguish. *Arrrrghhh. Must get up slowly from now on.* I trudge to the kitchen island where my phone taunts me with my future.

My fingers anxiously dance against the cool granite, teasing the space around the phone that dares me to flip it over. *Yes. No.* I can't look. The nervous spasms shoot up and down my forearms to the tips of my fingers, rendering my fine motor skills useless.

Breathe. Breathe. It's not that big of a deal.

It's a huge freaking deal!

Blame it on the heavy dose of Nyquil but a mental argument between my sound logic and my drama-prone emotions ensues. They are the devil and angel on my shoulders and they both have important points to make at the moment.

'If you don't get the job Noa, there will be others.'

Nope! There are no other jobs in Denver, or America. You will surely die inside if this is rejection.

'Quinn would easily hire you at her dad's tech conglomerate. You will not go without a paycheck. One way or another you'll figure this out.'

It's not the same! Annisen is the dream! This is as close to real art as you'll ever be able to work.

'There are other galleries in Denver.'

Not as prestigious. All the greats are featured at Annisen. This is your in!

'You'd be working for Professor Dan—killer of your GPA.'

Because he's brilliant. Think about what he could teach you! And he offered to check out your portfolio...and let's just go ahead and put it out there, he's kind of sexy.

'You can't. You have a boyfriend...sort of.'

Oh, come on! A fake boyfriend.

‘Ahem. You were pressed right up against it. What he was packin’ was definitely not fake.’

Yeah, he was super into it until he got you half naked and essentially kicked you out of his home. Go with the professor!

‘I thought this was about your career. We’re not supposed to be thinking about sex.’

It’s been two years...we’re always thinking about sex.

My hands close with an audible *clap!* to interrupt the conversation in my head before logic and emotion continue traipsing down an unnecessary tangent. *Focus, girls!* I flip my phone over and the banner notification confirms the email is indeed from Daniel R. Coleman.

I nearly choked in surprise when I showed up for my interview at Annisen and learned that Professor Dan, my college theory of art instructor—*Mr. Paint Me Perfect*—is the gallery art director. He now teaches part time. He recognized me instantly. We spent most of the interview reminiscing about the awful university cafeteria food and how even six months’ pregnant I still insisted on lugging around all my art gear by myself because I was way too uncoordinated with that rolling art cart.

The assistant director title Wes mentioned was a little misleading. The position is actually an assistant *to* the director. I didn’t need to be so worried about the white space on my resume and lack of experience in curating and sales. Most of what the job entails is ‘task-rabbiting’ for Dan and it doesn’t take a degree in rocket science to understand how to jot down missed messages, schedule artist interviews, and occasionally pick up lunch.

I don’t mind paying my dues. The privilege of walking the Annisen Gallery halls and calling it ‘work’ is more than enough for now. The medical benefits and bi-weekly paycheck are the big juicy cherries on top.

Okay. Just do it. Just look. You can do this.

I tap on the unread email.

From: daniel.r.coleman@annisen.art
Email Subject: Re: Job

Noa,

It was a pleasure meeting with you the other day. I can't tell you what a joy it is to run into my students post-graduation and see they are still passionate about art. I'm happy to offer you the position as my assistant.

The flexible schedule is perfectly fine for the summer and when your son begins kindergarten in the fall, we can discuss moving you to a more permanent position.

If this all sounds good to you, I'll have your official offer letter and onboarding information sent over early next week.

Cheers!
Dan

P.S. Bring your portfolio next time we meet. I'm curious to see what you've been working on over the past few years.

It's probably a good thing I'm alone. Between the Smeagol-style conversation I just had in my head and the ear-splitting screech of glee I just belted out, even Jonah would consider committing me.

Things seem like they are falling into place. *Finally*. For the first time since I signed those divorce papers, I feel like I know what I'm supposed to do.

I don't even attempt to play it cool. I respond to Professor Dan immediately with "YES" in all caps.

I wish I could call my mom. She'd be thrilled for me. We'd be screeching together over the phone. But to tell my mom why I so desperately needed this job, I would also have to explain to her why I sold the house, why Wes no longer lives with me, and while we're at it, I'd

probably need to explain why she may or may not have seen her daughter front and center on a celebrity gossip tabloid.

Instead, I dive back under my fluffy throw blanket on the couch. I nestle so deeply into the cushion I become one with the corduroy fabric. I un-pause my nature special on manta rays. The British narrator lulls me to sleep as he describes the giant graceful birds of the ocean. Sorry, pals, you may not sleep but I do. Especially when I'm in serious denial about the fact that I most definitely have the flu.

My eyes fall to half-mast as I begin to dream of giant floating arrows that guide me through a clear path across the open sea.

chapter 20

Denver

Chase

Jay drives us through a quaint suburban neighborhood that is so quiet, I could probably hear a ghost sneeze. The streetlamps are on, the roads are empty. The cars we do see are parked in driveways or tightly line the curb. This community is a ghost town. Jay and I coast slowly down the street, narrowing in on house number two-four-three-eight on Montecrest Lane.

I peer out the tinted windows to see the basketball hoops mounted above driveways. The pictures of suns and rainbows in colorful chalk are smeared from footsteps on the sidewalk. Abandoned bikes lie sloppily on front lawns. It's like the opening scene of *Left Behind*. "Where are all the kids?"

"It's nine o'clock. All the kiddos are in bed."

"Oh, right."

"This is it, my man." Jay points to a good-sized two-story to our left. "That's her home. You sure it's a good idea to surprise her like this?"

"No, I'm not sure. This could be disastrous. But we already surprise-shoved her in front of the paparazzi. I hired her to be in a fake a relationship before I even knew her last name. It makes sense I show up at her door and tell her I'm falling in love with her before I take her on our first date. I'm crazy but at least I'm consistent."

"Are you laughing to keep from freaking out right now?"

I let out a breathy chortle. "Exactly."

Jay throws the car in park across the street from Noa's house. "Remind me what happened—at the barbeque?"

"We snuck into the game room and she was being all sexy and whatnot but she kept implying it was a one-and-done kind of thing. I freaked. I asked her to stay and skip her interview so we could have more time together and she got mad. I told her she should leave if that's how she felt and she's been dodging my texts and calls since. Did she say anything to you when you dropped her off at the airport?"

"Just bye and take care. She wasn't planning on coming back any time soon."

That sounds about right. I scared her off. "You know what's weird? If I asked any other girl who I've been with over the past few years to drop what they're doing and just be with me it wouldn't be a question. They would've gone home, packed a bag, and taken up permanent residence in my home, more than eager to start a real relationship."

"Which is probably why you never wanted any of those girls. Look, man—Noa's a very dedicated mother. You can't approach this like you normally do. Her culture is so big on family and loyalty. You're dealing with a mama bear."

"Meaning what?" I look through the driver's side window, past Jay's burly frame that blocks my view. Noa's house is dark except for the faint blue flickers that bounce against the closed blinds. The television must be on.

"Meaning if you're serious about her, there's only one way this can go. Are you ready for a family? Are you ready to put all your wants and needs last? Because that's what she does all day, every day. She wakes up thinking about what her kid needs, and she falls asleep dreaming about giving him all the things he wants. Are you ready for that kind of commitment?"

Jay comes from a very tight family. Even at thirty-nine he still calls his mom every single day. I can barely tolerate mine during holidays. My family dynamic could not be more opposite of Noa's. The wisdom-bomb he's dropping on me right now is an important wake-up call.

"I think I'm ready. I want Noa to be the one. Everything about her is good for me. I was thinking about it for the past couple days. I loved Kayla, but she pulled at all the loose strings in me, you know? Loving her meant unraveling. But somehow, Noa brings out the good parts in me. The parts I'm proud of. That's what I want."

“Well, then you gotta do the same for her. If you bring out the best in her too, then maybe you guys can work.”

A bright light from the house suddenly turns on. I see a brisk shadow of movement through the door. It has to be her. Cici did a little recon for me and I know that Noa’s home alone this weekend.

I wish it was daytime. Jay and I caught the earliest flight my schedule would allow, but I don’t want Noa to think I’m just here to pick up where we left off in the game room. I’m here to tell her how head-over-heels I am for her. To apologize for my ill attempt at romance by trying to trap her a few nights ago. I want to tell her that I’m all in. If she needs me in Denver, I’ll be here, as often as I can. I’m ready for it all. And then, if the stars align and she agrees to be my girl—sure, we’ll circle right back to her museum-worthy tits.

“All right, man. Go. You need to get out of this car because we officially look like we’re casing the place. I’ll wait here until I hear from you.”

I rub my hands together like I’m trying to warm them...on a hot June evening in Colorado. It’s not the cold, it’s the nerves. “I bet you never thought as my bodyguard you’d have to be my emotional support buddy, too.”

“Are you kidding? When it comes to you, dude, bodyguarding is just my part-time gig. You being a hot mess is job security.” Jay smacks my back with his giant paw so hard I think he jostles my spleen. “Now get out of here. Go get your girl.”

I walk up the concrete stairs to the entry of Noa’s home. The porch is fenced in by a short iron rail. In the corner, a swinging bench with bright purple cushions sways lightly in the evening breeze. It’s so charmingly picturesque with its sweet suburban vibe.

I read the welcome mat in front of my feet.

Go Ahead, Wipe Your Feet
(I like it dirty)

Ha ha! This must be a residual of Wes's belongings. Definitely man humor.

I ring the doorbell and flinch at the loud *ding-dong* that imposes on the peaceful evening. After a few moments, I ring the doorbell again. My foot nervously taps on top of the funny welcome mat.

The hallway light turns on and shines through the glass half-moon at the top of the black front door. Hurried footsteps approach and the door swings open.

"Chase?" Noa croaks and then coughs. Her normally plush pink lips reluctantly spread as she speaks. They look dry enough to crack at the smallest smile.

She's ghost white—a startling contrast from her normal honey-colored tan. Her damp hair is caked against her forehead and the sides of her face. She's still hazy and I'm almost certain I woke her. The large puffy blanket she's wrapped in doesn't stop her shivers.

"Are you sick?"

"No." She lets out an incredulous gasp. "It's just seasonal allergies. I took some Benadryl. I'm fine. What are you doing here?"

Her nose is an angry red. There is a dark purple hue under each eye. I reach through the threshold of the door and feel her forehead.

"I could fry an egg on your head, Noa. This isn't allergies."

"Listen here, Judgey Mcjudgerson, I am perfectly fine. Nothing some Motrin and a nap can't solve. So again, what are you doing here?"

"I'm apparently here to take care of you because a nap is not going to fix this. You're shivering and it's over eighty degrees outside."

"I can take care of me. I'm fine."

"That would be more convincing if you didn't look like you just crawled out of a crypt." Her face twists. She theatrically feigns offense. "Are you going to let me in?"

Noa extends her arm, blocking the doorframe and my way in. "Okay... I'm *not* sick or anything, but I may be contagious. I don't want you to catch my...allergies."

My poor girl. Here by herself. Too stubborn to bother anyone when she needs help the most. A stick of dynamite could not remove me from this porch right now. This is better than sexy Noa. This is a Noa who needs me and I get to ride in like the calvary and show her I can be the man she needs. She doesn't have to do any of this alone.

I grab the blanket wrapped around her and draw her close. I kiss her hot, chapped lips. The heat exudes off every inch of her skin. “There. Too late. Damage is done. Now I have allergies. May I come in now?”

I release the blanket and she steps aside, making space for me. She shuts the door behind us.

“Nice welcome mat by the way.” I smirk.

“I couldn’t help myself.”

“You picked it out?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, I’m also a fan of a good ‘that’s what she said’ joke.” Noa’s smile is weak, but cheeky. She giggles and it sends her into a violent coughing fit. “Ow.” She grabs her throat with both hands. “Okay. Confession—I think I might be sick.”

“No!” I gasp. “It can’t be true.”

She scowls at me while scratching the tip of her Rudolph-red nose. “Your sarcasm is not welcome in my house, Chase Ford.”

I push the blanket off her shoulders and wrap her in my arms instead. I rub her sweaty back that feels like the inside of a warming oven.

“It’s actually *my* house and sarcasm *is* allowed.”

“Shit.” Noa’s voice cracks. “I forgot about that for a minute.”

“That’s right. My house. Which means I make the rules and first order of business—” Her eyes narrow, daring me to bring up something unsavory. “Tea with honey and lemon.” I make myself at home and grab the kettle sitting on her gas range and fill it in the sink. “What else do you like when you’re sick?”

She raises her hands in the air and then drops them in surrender. “Cuddles.”

“Well, that’s adorable. Come here.” I abandon the kettle and pull Noa back into my embrace. Her tired body melts into mine as she slumps so I’m fully supporting her.

“How’d you know I was sick?”

“I didn’t. I just came to see you.”

She coughs again into my chest. “Oh gross. Sorry, Chase. Bet you regret coming now.”

I hold her tighter. “Not even for one second.”

chapter 21

Denver

Noa

Everything is blurry. My eyes strain to make sense of the indistinct outlines of shapes in my bedroom. I blink repeatedly but it procures no moisture to my eyeballs. They sting miserably from the dryness. Even the small action of opening and closing my lids causes my whole body to ache. I let this get out of hand. *Allergies, my ass.*

A giant palm flattens across my forehead.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Chase hovers over me and judging by the pitying look on his face, I must look as terrible as I feel—if that’s possible.

“Hi.” My mouth moves but I don’t think any sound is coming out.

“It’s been over an hour since the medicine, and your fever is getting worse. So, I ran you a cool bath in your big tub.”

My corner built-in tub with the jets. It was how Wes talked me into this big house we couldn’t afford. He promised me a sacred mommy retreat in our master bathroom when I was at my most vulnerable in pregnancy—when my tummy was roughly the size of Jupiter. He baited me with the seductive dream of relaxation under bubbling jets. I love hot baths. I was swiftly cut off when I got pregnant. Elevated body heat is not good for babies in utero.

No wine, no sushi, no hot tubs, no soft cheeses, no deli meats, and if you’re one of the chosen few—like me—who have a high-risk pregnancy, even sex is off the table. Basically, anything enjoyable that mitigates the woes of pregnancy is not good for a little bun in the oven.

To all you pregnancy unicorns out there who loved nine months of relentless physical strain, who only gained weight in your bellies, who are stretch-mark free, who never spent three months straight with your head in the toilet reacquainting yourself with the saltine crackers you forced down—it's best you stay quiet at the support group meetings. Your chipper stories just piss off the rest of us pregnancy survivors.

Chase is sweet, but he picked the wrong adjective. He had me at *bath*. He lost me with *cool*.

“No, thank you.”

“Noa,” he says sternly. “I wasn't asking.”

“Go. Away,” I mumble under my breath. I pull the covers back over my head making his handsome face disappear from my view. *Poof. Magic.*

“You're going to hate me for this.” Grimacing, he pulls the covers off the bed in one quick swipe.

Holy mother of pearl. I am a word beyond cold. I'm facing the Andes and not the delicious chocolatey-mint ones. I'm referring to that rocky, icy peak that people freeze to death trying to conquer. The only thing icier than the unwelcome breeze that encircles my body is the death look I'm giving Chase.

Damn you, Chase, for stealing my covers. Damn you, for looking like *that*, while I'm sure I look like I spent a few days under a particularly drippy, disgusting bridge.

He scoops me up and walks the ten paces from my bed to the en-suite master bathroom. The water looks deceptively inviting. Thick, fluffy bubbles pop at the top of the fully filled tub. Everything smells like lavender and citrus. Chase must've rummaged in my essential oils.

“I even put bubbles in there.” He sets me down on my feet.

“Cold bubbles,” I respond with a pout.

He dips his finger in the tub. “It's not that bad, I promise. Come on, arms up.”

I'm so exhausted, barely able to hold up my own weight so in my defeated and delirious state I raise my arms overhead and let Chase remove my university sweatshirt. I hold his shoulders as I step out of my matching sweatpants and kick them to the side. It's right around the time Chase is unclasping my bra that I realize I'm stripping in front of my Hollywood megastar sorta-kinda boyfriend and he's about two seconds from seeing me topless again.

Chase unclasps the band easily with one hand. I remind myself to be annoyed later at how expertly he navigates around a bra. I quickly press my arm against the cups to prevent it from dropping to the floor.

“Oh, come on.” He rolls his eyes dramatically. “I’ve seen them before.”

“Stop.”

“Sucked on them.”

“Enough.”

“Even nibbled them which you seemed to *really* like by the way.”

“Yeah, and then right after, you kicked me out of your house.”

He hangs his head. “That’s not what happened. You know that. I wanted to...I just didn’t want to treat you like I’ve treated so many girls before.”

So many? Seriously? Why did he have to say so many? I keep forgetting he is a god among men and could pull the panties off any swimsuit supermodel he wanted to. All he’d need to do is ask.

“Regardless why you rejected me, you did. Now, close your eyes,” I demand. I make sure Chase’s lids are clamped shut before I let my bra fall and slide off my underwear. I hoist myself into the water. “Ah!”

He opens his eyes in alarm and I immediately drop with a splash underneath the blanket of bubbles to conceal my naked body. “*Shiiiiit!*” I whine again. I might as well go ice-fishing naked and then dive headfirst into that hole.

“Is it really that cold?” he asks.

“Yes, you monster.” I can’t stop my cheeks from chattering.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but it’s meant to cool you down. Your temperature is out of control. It’s either this or urgent care.” Chase speaks like he’s soothing a child post-tantrum. I wish I could say I wasn’t melting under the attention, but I’m a puddle at his words. *Sweetheart? I’m his sweetheart.*

“No to urgent care.” There is nothing that irritates me more than wasting hours in a waiting room.

“That’s what I thought. So, how can I make this better? You want some duckies in there or something?”

I’m in no mood for jokes. “How about you leave me to freeze in this ice tub alone and stop watching me like some pervert?”

Chase clutches his chest as if he’s wounded, but his boyish grin stays firmly intact. He stands and I instantly regret my sassy comment. *Don’t go.*

He makes his way into the walk-in shower and retrieves the teak bench sitting against the back wall. He picks it up with one hand as if it's weightless. That heavy stool takes me two hands and a whole lot of effort to move, even on my healthiest of days.

Chase sets the bench in front of the tub and plants his ass. He rests his bare feet on the ledge of the tub. *Good lord, even the man's toes are sexy.* "I checked the rules and boyfriends are allowed to watch their girlfriends take baths without being considered perverts."

"But fake boyfriends—"

"Noa, I got *Dynasty Man*."

"*What?!*" I fly upright, sloshing water out the side of the tub. My dry eyes bulge in surprise.

"I found out yesterday."

I push around the bubbles across the top of the water, left then right, not sure which direction I want them to go. *Already?* We were supposed to have all summer.

"Wow! I'm really happy for you," I say as I clear my throat. My voice is cracking because I'm sick...not because of the painful reality that it's time to let Chase go. "Congratulations. You're...I can't...just, wow." I take a controlled breath. "You're going to be so good. And I'll definitely watch this one. I promise." I pat his bare knee reassuringly, smearing it with bubbles.

"Thank you." He spins his hat around so it's backwards. His sweet chocolate-colored eyes beam at me. "Do you know why I came here?"

"Actually, no. Cici could've handled our breakup on Instagram."

"I don't care about any of that. And I don't want to break up. I'm here for you."

"For me to what?"

"I want a real relationship, Noa. The ruse is over. All that's left are my very real feelings for you."

Of all the answers I expected, that response didn't even make the top one hundred. "You want to be with *me*?"

"That's why I didn't want a quickie. I want something different in my life right now. Intimacy. Stability. Permanence. Love. To name a few."

I open my mouth but my word factory is closed. Chase hops into my deepest secret fantasy movie and steals the script. I don't know what to say. Where did that partying man-whore go? Maybe he never really existed.

This man in the bathroom with me is sweet and thoughtful. I'm naked in this tub but his eyes are glued on mine. Looking deeper. He's saying all the magic words that my heart swallows whole.

I try to speak but my sputtering coughs take over. These coughing fits need to cease and desist. My throat is stripped raw. I grab at my neck in agony. Chase is on his feet.

"Sweetheart, that sounds terrible. I bought a cough suppressant. It's downstairs, I'll get it."

"You went shopping?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Jay and I went while you were sleeping." Chase told me that Jay traveled with him for security purposes. I insisted that Jay stay at the house with us, but Chase shut that idea down immediately under the guise of Jay's health and well-being. *Ha! Please.* Chase wants me all to himself and not distracted with Hawaii musings with Jay. "Denver's great. I walked right into a grocery store and no one recognized me. We cleared out the cold and flu aisle and I didn't get asked for even one autograph. Point-Denver."

Chase Ford. In *my* city. Walking around my house looking like God's gift to mankind. Point-Denver indeed.

The minute Chase is out of the bathroom I tug on the hot water handle with my toe. The fresh scalding water warms my bath. *Aaaahhh, yes.*

"Hey, hey, hey," Chase scolds as he returns with a bottle of dark purple liquid and a little clear measuring cup. He hastily twists the hot water handle back to the off position. "We're supposed to be cooling you down."

"I'm freezing. Just a little warmer, please," I simper with my words, pout with my eyes, I even mope with my lips. He's not moved. I bat my lashes suggestively as a desperate hail Mary. Chase shakes his head firmly.

"Noa. You're being a child. It's not that cold."

I scoop a handful of water and drench Chase's shirt. "See? Chilly." He doesn't even flinch.

"See? Child. You're not helping your case."

I cup my fingers and make a small pool of water in my palm. I look at him threateningly. "You're about to get wet. Call me a child one more time."

"I don't mind getting wet." I'd throw my water grenade, but he pulls off his hat and tosses it behind him on the bathroom counter. He rubs his head and his dark flattened hair springs back to life. I rarely see Chase without a

hat. His closet must be home to about a hundred different baseball caps that he likes to wear as a disguise. I don't care if that hat is glued on, if those perfect pecs and abs are on display, every woman in America could easily pick him out of a lineup.

Chase peels off his wet t-shirt. *Drool. I want to lick his chest.* He tugs down his gym shorts. *Geez, his thighs are muscular. And tan—does he tan his legs?* He pulls off his briefs. *For the love of all that is holy.* My mouth falls open and I lose the ability to blink. He grins smugly as he watches me admire his manhood. Chase is proudly showing off his epic proportions. The cocky bastard knows we could dock the Titanic on that thing.

“Ahem. Pervert.” Chase winks. “Will you scoot forward, please?”

“Sure,” I squeak. Water slops around me as I wiggle half a foot forward allowing Chase to climb in behind me. The water line rises significantly as he slides into the tub with his legs on either side of me. Chase pulls me backwards so my shoulders rest against his muscled chest. He nuzzles the crook between my neck and shoulders with his chin.

“It's not that cold. This feels fine to me.” He plants sweet kisses down my shoulder. “And to answer the question that's on your mind—no, we're not going to have sex right now.” *Really? Because your boat is loose in the water.* He slides my ass forward so I can't touch anything he doesn't want me touching at the moment.

“Why n—” I begin to ask but the tickle in my throat sets off yet another coughing attack. *Good grief, that does it. Screw you, flu. Officially.*

“*That's why.* And to be clear, this is not me rejecting you. You're too sick to enjoy it right now.” His fingers trail lightly up and down my arms, sending a tickle straight to my soul. “Mmm, this is nice, right? This is what I wanted the other night.”

“Sex in the tub?” My hoarse voice cracks again. I may need a whiteboard and some markers soon.

“No. Intimacy.”

“You're kidding. *You?*”

Chase flicks his hand in the water, splashing my face. “Hey, sassy. Actors have feelings.”

“Actors, yes. Fuckboys—umm?”

“You still think that about me?” I can't see his face from behind, but his tone is solemn.

“No. I’m sorry. Bad joke. We probably could’ve hooked up that first night at your birthday party. I wanted to. And then again after the photoshoot. But you wanted to wait. Very gentlemanly of you. Why, though?”

“I’ll tell you, but promise me you won’t make fun of me, because I’m about to get vulnerable here.” We’re naked and wet, how much more vulnerable can this get?

“Okay.”

“Over the past few years, my lifestyle got a little out of control and I wasn’t happy, so I decided to go on a mental health and wellness retreat. Long story short it put everything in perspective for me. When I finished the program, I made a deal with the universe that I was going to be a better man, and do good things for myself and the people I care about. I want to live a life I can be proud of.”

“That’s incredible,” I whisper. His fingers stray from my arms and brush tenderly across my collarbones. I curl my toes so hard, they cramp. “Wait, you said a deal—what did you ask for in exchange?”

“It’s a little sappy and embarrassing.”

“Would it help if I even the score? Want me to tell you something embarrassing about me?”

“So, so much.” His chuckle prickles the back of my neck.

“Sometimes I play with Jonah’s toys when he’s not here.”

“What?”

“Yep. He’s got this Jurassic Park Hot Wheels track thing...I’ve never confessed this to anyone—I’m the one who broke the ramp.”

“I’m ratting you out.”

“They will be the last words you utter, Chase Ford.”

“That’s not embarrassing. I think that makes me like you even more. I’ll play Hot Wheels with you.”

“Is that a euphemism?”

“No—I actually will push little finger-sized cars around a track with you...as long as we’re naked.”

“Hush.” Especially if you’re not going to do something about *us* right now. “Okay, your turn. What did you ask the universe for?”

“This...I think. You. I asked for a shot at real love.”

My stomach swoops and my heart thumps audibly. I can’t cover my tracks this time. Chase holds his hand over my chest and my heart pumps

heavily against his palm.

“Is that too much?” he asks.

“Do you have any idea what you’re asking for?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you can have whatever girl you want. I’m not the only woman in the world who doesn’t party or sleep around. There are women out there who can start a fresh journey with you. My baggage could fill an entire airport carousel. How is that fair for you? I’m never leaving Denver. I’m not uprooting my son. My family will always come first. How do our worlds fit together? We don’t even know how to navigate the physical part.”

He scoffs. “I think we’re going to be fine in that regard.”

“Maybe *you* feel that way, but you’ve slept with a porn star. I promise you I have no tricks up my sleeve. You’re not going to be impressed. I was okay with one quick night we’d leave behind us, but a relationship? I don’t know.”

“First of all, where did you hear that? And she was a long-since retired porn st—okay that’s not the point. The point is I love your baggage. I love that you have priorities that matter. You don’t need to dissect why I feel the way I do. I’m telling you I am crazy about you and there is nothing about you or your life that’ll make me not want to be with you.”

Is this happening? Is this real? Do I actually get to keep him?

“So, you’ll visit here? Denver?”

“Yes. I’ll have to fly back and forth to work, but I’ll be here with you whenever I’m not required to be somewhere else.”

The people-pleasing urge that runs my life claws its way to the forefront of my mind. How is this fair? How can I expect Chase to do what I’m not willing to? I should meet him halfway. But I can’t get swallowed up by a relationship again. Feelings change. Love fades. I experienced that firsthand. I have to lay the foundation for my life, not fill in the cracks of someone else’s.

“I realize I’m coming on a little strong, and maybe I shouldn’t pressure you, but I’m trying to be all the good things you deserve. I’ve wasted so much time on stuff that doesn’t matter. You matter, Noa. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Okay.” I resist the urge to pinch myself. “Yes.” It’s an easy answer. Because who could say no to a line like that flowing from Chase Ford’s

lips? Flowing from anyone's lips. I feel the ache—not from between his legs, but from his heart.

“For real? Yes? You'll be my girlfriend?”

“Under one condition.” My toe pops out of the water and touches the hot water handle.

“Seriously?”

“Those are my terms, Chase. Take 'em or leave 'em.”

I yank the handle forward as the hot water permeates around us. *Mmm soothing warmth. Sultry man. Exciting promises. Perfect moment.*

Chase kisses the top of my head. “I'll take 'em, baby. I'll take them all.”

chapter 22

Denver

Chase

When I first decided to visit Noa in Denver I hoped that we'd spend days on end in bed. I wanted her all sweaty and spent, moaning in my arms. The universe had a twisted way of granting my wish.

For the past few days, Noa has been sick. I'm not talking about cute sniffles with slightly flushed cheeks. On Sunday night, when her fever was at its highest, she went through this fun little phase of delirium. And by fun, I mean freaking terrifying. She'd reach out from her side of the bed and poke me in the cheek like she couldn't tell if I was a hallucination.

"I'm real. I'm really here."

"Okay," she'd mumble. "And are we—"

"Yes, sweetheart, we're really dating. It's not a dream."

"Okay."

Twenty minutes later we'd take it from the top and rehearse the same scene.

"Noa, careful please. That was pretty close to my eye."

"Sorry. Are you—"

"Yes, I'm really here. Yes, we're really dating."

What if I hadn't come here? Who would take care of her? I know she has close friends in the city, but would they drop everything to be with her? Would they force-feed her chicken noodle soup so she didn't waste away? Would they put her cold medicine on a timer so she never missed a dose? Would they hold her all night and watch an endless loop of Disney movies?

I would...I did. Noa slept through most of it. I watched Jonah's Disney lineup start to finish. I like that movie with the rat that cooks. Seriously entertaining stuff.

It's been the best few days outside of worrying about Noa. No cameras, no schedules, no forced interactions. I told Jay to go home. I'm not in a rush to get back to L.A. because I am too caught up exploring the beautiful simplicity of being with the person I want to be with. It's that easy. Just be here.

By Wednesday evening, Noa is back to normal. She wants to cook dinner and tidy up the house, but I told her to take it easy and enjoy a hot bath. She's not feverish anymore so I won't fight her if she wants to soak in a steaming pot. I'm downstairs patiently waiting for my world's best boyfriend award.

I cleaned her entire main floor, top to bottom. Noa's a bit of a neat freak, so there wasn't much work to do, but still— 'A' for effort, right? I ran the dishwasher and then unloaded it, I swept and vacuumed the floors. I collected some straggling action figure toys that Jonah must've left out. I even wiped down the counters with that scented Clorox that I will be stocking up on when I get home. Killing germs while enjoying the smell of Tahitian paradise? *Yes, thank you.*

"Oh my god, Chase. What did you do?"

Noa enters the kitchen with an expression of horror instead of the look of glee and delight I was expecting for my domestic efforts. She's wearing my shirt and the sexiest little black shorts that flatter her curvy ass. She's feeling better now so I give myself full permission to devour her with my eyes. Sick gloves are off. Her body is fair game.

"What?"

"The Joes?" She glances at the heap of military action figures I've piled on the granite kitchen island.

"Oh, yeah, I collected them as I was cleaning. They were set up in hilariously random places by the way. Jonah is quite the jokester. I can't wait to meet the little guy. I might have bought him a lot of presents to get him to like me by the way."

Noa grimaces and crosses her arms, pushing her cleavage to the top of my button-down shirt. The growing bulge in my briefs twitches. *Oh, sue me.* I spent three days in bed with this gorgeous woman while keeping my

hands to myself. I even took a naked bath with her and was still on my best behavior. At this point, I'm salivating.

"Is it too fast? You don't want me to meet Jonah yet?"

"Oh, my gosh. No, that's not it." She crosses the room and curls her arms around my waist. "I can't wait for you to meet Jonah. It's just—well never mind." She rises on her toes to kiss my cheek. "It's not important."

Noa turns toward the fridge but I hold her by the tail of my shirt and pull her back. "Baby, what is it? I did something wrong."

"Not wrong! Nothing wrong. You've been so wonderful to me. Beyond wonderful. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Tell me."

"I don't want to."

"Now."

"It's embarrassing."

"Noa," I growl.

A reluctant gargle bubbles low in her throat. "Okay, okay, fine. Um, those G.I. Joes were strategically placed around the house."

"Oh I...wait—what?"

"Jonah didn't put them everywhere. I did."

"Um...okay. Why?"

"Please don't make me say it." Her cheeks flush as she sucks in her lips. Her expression is caught between a laugh and cringe.

But now I have to know. Do these things have cameras in them or something?

"Say it."

"Jonah has a *lot* of toy dinosaurs. Like, a lot. Last time I counted we were well into the triple digits. If *Toy Story* or *Indian in the Cupboard* are an actual thing—and I'm not saying they are because I am a sane adult—just in case...I take precautions. And well...shit, Chase! You just took out all my snipers! They run perimeter safety around the entire living room."

I am literally speechless. No words. And it takes a lot to impress me. I have to grip the edge of the kitchen counter, I'm laughing so hard. "You're. Not. Serious."

Noa places her hands on her hips, looking unamused. "Mhm—you pleased with yourself over there? Make fun, but if the toys ever do rise up, I've got a loyal band of specialized military badasses to protect my toes from getting chomped right off."

Someone is going to ask me one day about the moment I knew I wanted to make Noa Fallon my wife and the mother of my children. This is that moment. Right now.

“Baby...baby,” I say between huffs of laughter. “I’m sorry. I’ll help you put them back. But this time properly. Because your snipers can’t see anything from inside the kitchen cabinet. Your Joes aren’t packing that kind of tactical equipment.”

“It’s called stealth and the element of surprise. And they are *my* Joes—they can do whatever I want them to.”

Ha, ha, ha. She’s going to swing at me if I don’t stop laughing soon. But I can’t help it. Look at that pouty scowl.

“You’ve got an artist’s imagination and I think it’s adorable. I’m slightly concerned you think plastic comes to life at night—”

“*You don’t know.* They wait until you’re sleeping—”

“As does Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy—”

Noa shakes her head at me in pretend disgust. “Oh, Chase Ford. Who ruined you? Where’s your sense of wonder?”

I scoop Noa up and place her on the kitchen counter. She flinches when her bare thighs touch the granite. “Sorry—cold?” She grits her teeth and nods. I stand between her legs that wrap around me, locking me in place. I tug free the elastic band that can barely contain her thick hair. “You look good in my shirt.”

“You look good in everything.” She puts her lips on mine. They’re plump and soft. Comforting. Coaxing. All evidence of her illness has washed away. I slide my tongue over hers and groan in satisfaction. Her hair is freshly washed and the smell of vanilla is concentrated. Delectable.

“That vanilla scent—it’s your shampoo?”

“Yes.”

“Never stop using that shampoo.” My hand rides up her thigh, underneath her shorts. I massage her hip, savoring her soft skin in my hands. These shorts are in my way. They should come off.

“I could just buy you some. It’s ten bucks at the grocery store.” She giggles.

“I think I just love that smell on you,” I say against her mouth. My lips go searching. They dive down her neck. They scurry across her clavicles. They nibble on her earlobes. “You’re feeling all better, right?”

“Mhm, but can you give me like half an hour?”

No. I checked my pants and they say no. “Of course. Why?”

Noa hops off the island top. Her feet plant with a firm *thud* against the hardwood floor. “I have to go to work tomorrow and bring my portfolio. I need to go dust it off and make sure my good stuff is in there. Then you’ll have my full attention.”

She plants a sweet smooch on my lips before she heads toward the back sliding doors. I follow across the stone pathway in the grass that leads to her studio. She pauses at the front doors and I get a visual of the tidy shelves and neatly organized art supplies through the windows.

Noa spins to face me and bobs her head like she’s contemplating. “I normally don’t let anyone in my studio.”

“When I bought this house, I’m almost certain this studio was listed under assets. I’m pretty sure this shed is mine. You’re late on rent by the way. Time to pay up.” Noa’s cheeks flush crimson. I mean it as a sexy joke, but she panics. “Baby, I’m kidding. I’m sorry. Joke! Just a joke. In fact, if you ever send me a rent check, I’m ripping it up.”

“I’m going to pay you for this house, eventually.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me.”

It’s not the first time we’ve had the house argument. Somehow Noa weaves her worth into her ability to be financially independent. She doesn’t want help—she only wants to give it.

“Do you want some space? How about I go order us dinner?” I turn back on the stone path but Noa catches my hand.

“No, come on. I want to show you.”

She flicks on a switch and the studio explodes under fluorescent lighting. I reflexively cover my eyes. “Holy shit, that’s bright.”

“Sorry, the dimmers are by the door,” she mumbles as she flips through a drawer in the back. She pulls out a large leatherbound book and tucks it under her arm as she heads to the giant paint-stained desk taking up the entire back wall of her studio. Grabbing a handle that subtly blends with the wood, she angles the tabletop. “It’s an artist’s desk,” Noa explains when she sees my brows raise. *Impressive*. “They all do that. Mostly for sketching and drafting. I use the easel for my small canvases and I mount anything over five feet to that wall.” She points her thumb over her shoulder, then settles onto a black metal stool.

Noa places the leather binder on the slanted desk and begins flipping through the pages.

“Whoa, whoa, wait.” I lean over her shoulder to investigate. There are rows and rows of neatly lined images on each page. “These are little pictures of your art?”

“Yep.”

“Noa! You’re fucking incredible.”

Art is a vague concept. I’ve seen homeless people on the streets of L.A. glue pennies on brick walls and call it inspired, so you never know what you’re going to get when someone says they’re an *artist*. But Noa is phenomenal. Her paintings are so detailed they look like real photographs. How much time does it take to paint so intricately?

“These are something else.” I beam with pride. My girlfriend is a boss. I suspected it, but now I can confirm. Talented. Amazing. Sexy. Kind. Gracious. Everything I wanted. *Thank you, universe.*

“Ah, if only.” She flips through a few more pages as her brows furrow. “None of these are going to work for Professor ‘Paint Me Perfect,’” she mocks in a low mumble.

“I don’t understand—these are *literally* perfect.”

Noa swivels on her stool to face me. “I mostly paint landscapes and portraits. I like oil paint in particular, not just because it’s glossy, but it’s better for detail. The drying time is longer, so you have more time to really perfect the image before it’s set in stone. Most of my professors praised my nitpicky attention to detail. My new boss happens to be the only professor that tore apart my art in college.”

“What?”

“Yeah—he taught all the concepts that I sucked at. Symbolism. Abstract. Romanticism. He always said my work was way too methodical. I sketch out all my paintings first, to make sure they are exactly to scale. He never liked that. I wanted to be Monet. Professor Dan wanted Picasso. He always pushed me to use acrylic because it’s not as forgiving. The pace is faster. You have to really commit and adapt to what you put on the canvas, because by the time you change your mind, it’s too late.”

“You should paint how you like. Screw that professor. What makes him the expert?”

Noa’s eyes bulge. “He’s the ultimate expert. Plus, the teacher that tells you you’re lacking, is the one who makes you better. I’ll always make room

to learn.”

Seriously? And she’s humble, too? I groan.

“What?” Noa asks. Her eyes fill with concern.

“I keep waiting for your big flaw, but I think you might be a perfect person.”

She exaggerates her scoff. “So far from it, Chase. I have so many flaws. I just don’t have a camera following me around to call them all out and remind me every day of where I fall short in my life.”

“I give the media a lot of material.” My laugh-grunt is lined with bitterness.

“Let me assure you of something—of the two of us? You’re the brave one. You said in the tub the other night you wanted to be more like me? Well, I want to be more like you.”

Noa looks into my eyes like she can see through them. Like she sees something so much better than what I am. “You don’t want to be like me.”

“Why? What are you trying to atone for, Chase? Because the version that I’ve seen...well, it’d be really hard not to fall for that guy.”

“You’re falling for me?” I can’t help my grin.

“Depends. What skeletons in your closet make you cringe every time I compliment you?”

“Google me. Pull up some old entertainment gossip. You’ll see.”

“I will never do that to get to know you. We’re together now, which means your side of the story is the only side that matters to me. So, tell me.” Noa interlocks her fingers and rotates her thumbs around each other. “Are you afraid the truth will push me away?”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“Try me.”

I touch her soft cheek. I brush my lips against hers like it might be the last time. “Landing a big role in Hollywood is just the beginning of it. Hopeful actors stay so focused on making it...well they never tell you what’s on the other side. You have to work twice as hard to maintain it. I worked nineteen-hour days and in my off time, instead of sleeping, I’d hit the cardio machines, all the while living solely off protein drinks. But I’d still get questioned if I wasn’t energetic enough on set. I’d rehearse my lines religiously, but I still got barked at all day, because I wasn’t delivering them the way the director wanted. They’re words. There’s only so many ways

you can say them, you know? I rarely got to see my friends or family, the travel was so nightmarish. The pressure was—well you get the point.”

“Oh, Chase. That sounds awful. I’m sorry.”

“It was at times, but I couldn’t complain. You’re the biggest ass in the world if you complain about living out a dream that so many other people would kill for.”

“You need a mommy circle.” Noa wiggles her nose. Her sweet smile somewhat soothes the agonizing memories.

“Mommy circle?”

“It’s where once a month all the moms on the block get together, drink wine coolers, and call their kids buttholes because we slave for hours over pot roasts or from-scratch Bolognese and then our children refuse to touch it. They dump their plates on the floor and throw tantrums when they find out there’s no Domino’s pizza coming for dinner.”

I arch one brow. “You call Jonah a butthole? I find that hard to believe.”

“Oh my god, no! Our language is far more colorful than that.” She pinches one eye shut. “My point is everyone needs a pressure release valve. A little complaining can be healthy from time to time.”

“Well, I didn’t have a mommy circle. I had liquor, and weed, and coke, and one-night stands.”

“Oh.” I expect her face to fall, but it doesn’t. “What about Kayla? I’m sure you didn’t have one-night stands while you were dating, right?” She sees my surprised expression and nods her head teasingly. “Mhm, I know who Kayla is. Cici talks just as much as Mani.”

“When we were dating, Kayla and I partied together. Then she cheated on me and when we broke up, what was already bad became much worse for me. That’s when the tabloid vultures started swarming.”

“Oh, Chase. My poor guy.” It’s soothing the way she glides the pad of her forefinger across my open palm. Her touch is full of empathy.

It’s okay. You’re here now. “I spent the last few months really focused on making changes, but I’m not going to lie, I’m worried something from my past is going to come back and haunt us. I wanted you to hear all this from me. I haven’t always been a good guy. But I want to be a good guy for you.”

A low hum sneaks past Noa’s lips. “Take your shirt off,” she suddenly commands. *What? Does she find my guilty admissions sexy?*

“I thought your studio was your sanctuary.”

“You goof. Not for *that*. Here.” She stands and pats her stool. “Sit here and take off your shirt. I want to show you something.”

Noa pulls a paintbrush from a cup and begins searching through the drawers of neatly lined paints. She returns with a small black tube and holds it up. “This is water-based. Non-toxic.”

I slip off my t-shirt as Noa pulls up a folding chair next to me. She makes a meal out of studying my chest. I normally don’t like being looked at like a piece of meat—but I love Noa’s wanting eyes on me. She holds her palm to my chest right above my heart. “I’m going to paint here. Is that okay?”

“Sure. What are you going to paint?”

Noa squirts a healthy dallop of black paint on her left wrist. She dips the thin tip of the paintbrush in the black color then drags it across my chest. I try to stay still underneath the cool tickling sensation.

“The men in my family, back in Hawaii, get tatted head to toe. But it takes years. Sometimes decades.”

“That long?”

Noa’s fingers dance across the left side of my chest and shoulder with the brush in her hand. She toggles between short jabs and long strokes. “Their tattoos tell their life stories. So they have to keep adding as they go. Lift your arm?”

I oblige. She sweeps her brush across the top of my ribs, giving me goosebumps.

“The point is everyone’s story changes and evolves. You have to have the beginning to build upon. And, in the end”—she dots the tip of her brush around my nipple sending, icy jolts across my chest—“it’s all part of the overall picture. You might not love certain parts on their own, but it interweaves beautifully in the finished design.”

Noa licks the tip of her finger and wipes against the lines, smudging the paint in certain areas. The touch of her warm wet finger sends an alarm right to my cock. I’m trying to control myself because she’s being sweet and pensive. But she has no idea how arousing this is. I blow out a shaky breath.

Or maybe she does.

She blows on my chest and the smell of sweet mint and paint circulates. “This will dry quick. Now you just need to pick your spirit animal.”

“I get to pick? What are my options?”

“You can pick a manta ray—like me. Meaning grace and wisdom.”

“That’s perfect for you.”

“Not for you? Okay, there’s the turtle—that’s honu, which is for longevity and peace. The lizard which is good luck. The stingray which can be for cunning and stealth. There’s the shark which is strength and protection.”

“What do you think—for me? What do you think *of* me?” A dauntingly heavy question for the woman who holds my heart, but I need to know.

Noa rubs her bottom lip slowly. She’s lost in thought for a moment. “Don’t be offended, but I see the moray eel for you.”

“An eel?” Oh, come on!

“No, no, listen. They are wildly misjudged. My mom taught me since I was little that moray eels represent introspection and endurance. If you’re going through troubled waters, the moray eel will show up in your dreams and help guide you through the storm. They are clever, stealthy, and have better survivor instincts than any other fish. Basically, they know how to go through hell and come out even stronger.”

Noa trails her fingers down my abdomen and the blood in my body follows the downward trail she’s carving. I hold my breath as she nears the waistline of my pants. But she stops. She swirls her finger around my belly button, tiptoes right back up, and resumes painting.

She’s teasing me.

She flips around the brush, using the hard tip to clean up the lines she painted.

“An eel, huh?”

“Mhm.”

“Are you making all this up to make a point?”

“Mmmm, it’s like fifty-fifty. The moray also means you’re introverted and don’t like the spotlight so maybe it’s not entirely for you.” Noa teeters her pinky and thumb. *Actually, that’s accurate. My life is a job. The real Chase just wants to be with you.* “But the point is you have a good heart. I think it’s pretty incredible you’ve been working so hard on being a better you. And outside of you annihilating my dinosaur-protection militia, you’re pretty amazing in my eyes.”

I chuckle. “Maybe we need to go buy you a few toy tanks and better ammo for your Joes. I’ll be honest, they don’t stand a chance against a herd of T-rexes right now.”

“Fair.”

“I think I’ll pick the shark though. I like the idea of protecting you.”

Noa’s cheeks bunch. “You sure? Want to know what else a moray eel tattoo represents?”

“Sure.”

She points right to my pants and widens her hands. ‘*Huuuuuge*,’ she mouths at me.

I burst out laughing. “Okay, I definitely want to be an eel.”

She leans back in her chair, tossing the paintbrush aside. It clatters against the desk, interrupting the silent anticipation between us. Noa examines my chest, admiring her work. “All right, we’ll worry about your spirit animal later. This is pretty much dry. So, what do you think?”

“It’s beautiful.”

She pokes my chest as she stands. “You didn’t even look.”

I stare into her gray gems that twinkle under the bright studio lights. “I’m looking. And she’s beautiful.”

I pull her closer, between my knees, and pop the top button of my shirt free. She bites her bottom lip. Then I pop another. The creamy top bumps of her chest are in view. I kiss each before I pull another button free.

“Is that green light still on?” My voice is low and needy. I’ve been patient and it’s time.

“Very on.”

“How sturdy is this desk?”

“Very sturdy.”

chapter 23

Denver

Noa

Chase's eyes are burning. I was purposely toying with that line. I kept touching him thinking he was going to rip my clothes off at any second, but he was sweet and patient instead. He let me paint him a pretend tattoo and listened to every word as I recited the ocean fables my mom told me as a child. He didn't interrupt me once, even though his eyes were fixed on my breasts.

I won't make him wait a moment longer.

He catches my chin and tilts it upwards, then urgently finds my lips. His fingers trail over the remaining buttons. He unfastens them slowly—one by one. His touch is calculated, rehearsed. I have a suspicion he's been fantasizing about this almost as much as I have. My shirt—Chase's shirt—falls from my shoulders, hitting the ground. My bra drops next and he engulfs my nipples one at a time. Taking turns, switching back and forth, like he's one hunter deciding between two equally desirable prey.

I run my fingers through his hair and grip as I'm overcome with need. There's a pull. An ache. A tantalizing energy that dances between us. I'm a mom, I was a wife, I thought I knew everything about closeness and intimacy, but I was wrong. This is new. It all feels new with Chase.

"Are you sure we're okay to do this in here?" Chase asks as he trails kisses down my belly. His tongue dives into my bellybutton and I nearly keel over from the teasingly invasive feeling of his tongue piercing my navel. I grip his shoulders that bounce as he chuckles.

“Yes, I’m sure.” My chest rises as I suck in a deep breath of air, but it’s not satiating my breathlessness. There’s only one remedy for this enchanting agony and it’s Chase’s body. His hands are already riding every curve of mine, there’s no way we can stop. The waves of lust carry me right into open water—I’m stranded. There’s no going back. Here and now is how it’s going to be. In the place I feel most passionate.

“I want you,” I murmur.

Chase owns the room. Right now, I’m not the ruler of this studio. His hands are steady. Mine shake. His voice is strong. Mine squeaks and cracks. I try not to get too hung up on how much practice he’s had to approach sex with such confidence, I just try to enjoy his sensual bravado. *All man. All mine.* He grabs my hand and runs it across the smooth nylon of his sweatpants so I can feel the full length of his elephantine erection.

He growls in my ear. “I’ve never been this hard in my life. It’s because you’re so beautiful inside and out, Noa. We’re not going to fuck. We’re going to make love.”

I could cry from the anticipation. I feel the heat pooling between my legs and I clamp my thighs together to combat the swell. I’m too hot. I’m too sensitive. I’m shivering with excruciating need.

“Remember those stars you mentioned last week? I think I’m ready to see them.”

Chase’s lips touch my ear and he lets out a guttural moan. “I’m going to do it so right, baby, you’re going to see the whole damn galaxy.”

Yes. Please.

The world slows, and I’m operating at the speed of light. I can see everything before it happens. I can feel it all between the slow beats of my heart.

Puh, pump.

Chase’s hands glide over my hips, pulling my shorts and panties down in one fluid movement. He hoists me onto the angled top of my desk. I’m pinned naked against the hard cold surface that mashes against my back. I don’t care. *Harder.*

Puh, pump.

He’s on his knees. My thighs rest on his shoulders. His wet tongue dances across my drenched slit. “Fuck, you’re so wet. You taste so good,” he drones against me. I wail recklessly as if I don’t have neighbors. I quickly cover my mouth.

Puh, pump.

Chase reaches up and yanks my arm down. “No, baby. I want to hear it. Scream.” The vibration of his voice against my clit nearly sends me over the edge.

Puh, pump.

I cry. I whimper. I thrash, but he holds me steady.

Puh, pump. Puh, pump.

His finger joins his mouth. He fills me with one, then two. *Wait!* I scream in my head. Not yet, I don’t want it to be over.

Puh, pump. Puh, pump. Puh, pump.

He flicks his tongue and latches on to my little button and I’m immediately overcome. There’s no time to beg for mercy. I explode against his lips. My back arches as I scream. Chase elbows my thighs apart so they don’t reflexively clamp shut on him. My shaking body jostles the whole desk and I grip the edge for stability. I close my eyes and see those stars dance right across my eyelids, just as he promised.

He holds me there patiently, letting me ride the last mile of my high. When my heart rate returns to normal, he releases me. My feet hit the floor with a soft thud. I groan miserably.

“What’s wrong?” Chase says as he kisses me. I taste myself on his breath and it’s sinfully sexy. Is this allowed? Wes was always such a hygiene freak it killed the mood every time. We’d both be in the shower with sudsy toothbrushes by now, like our bodies were something to be ashamed of.

“I wanted to hold out a little longer.” I bury my face in my hands to hide my heated cheeks.

He grabs my wrists and uncovers my sheepish expression. “Baby, it’s my job to last. Not yours.”

“No, I meant I was just really enjoying it. I didn’t want it to be over.”

“Ah. I see.” He lifts me by my hips and pins me right back on the desk. My thighs rest against his shoulders once more. He buries his head between my legs. “How about I do it again?”

Is this selfish? I don’t care right now. It’s my studio. I’m selfish here.

My head is too fuzzy and I’m too weak to combat the hunger in me for this pleasure. I lie against the cold hard desk and just enjoy the Adonis between my thighs who is savoring me like I’m delicious. I close my eyes as I soar right back into celestial space.



Chase

Noa's eyes are wide in anguish. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even think about it."

I blow out short, controlled breaths and pull her hand out of my pants and as far away from my rock-hard cock as possible. "Don't apologize. It's not your fault. It's fine."

My beautiful girlfriend and I have been engaged in what seems like a marathon of foreplay. It suddenly dawned on us that we don't have condoms. She graciously offered to take care of me via other means, but I'd rather not. Noa teasing me with her mouth is only going to make me want what I can't have even more.

"Chase, I feel so bad. You look like you're going to be sick."

I sink backwards into her velvet couch. "I'm fine. I promise...um—are you sure though? Not even a chance that there's one leftover in the bedroom or something? Maybe we should check."

"I know for a fact there are no condoms anywhere in my house, because I've never bought or used one in my entire life."

"What?"

"I've been monogamous since I was eighteen! Condoms always seemed so...uncomfortable."

"They can be..." I blow out another controlled breath but my adamant arousal won't let up.

"How do *you* not have one on hand?"

I shrug. "I have a serious girlfriend now." The last time I was at the store, I was solely focused on medicine for Noa. I was worried about her getting better, not about getting laid. Now I'm kicking myself for not having more forethought.

"You've had a serious girlfriend for about four days, Chase."

"Yeah, but I told you. I haven't even thought about another woman since I laid eyes on you." Noa runs her soft hand across my bare chest. "No—stop it! Don't you bat those eyelashes at me like that while you're naked. You're not helping the situation."

She straddles me anyway, but there's not a trace of humor on her face. "Why me?"

“What?”

“Why does the guy who can have anyone, choose me?”

“It’s this.” I tap her chest where I can feel her heart racing out of control. “I want my heart to be more like yours.”

She nips at my neck and then tugs on my earlobe. “It’s like you have a secret panty-dropping playbook. Your sweet words...*mmmm*.”

“No plays, Noa. From here on out, all my words are genuine and they are only for you.”

“I’m okay without the condom. I trust you. Do you trust me? I’m on birth control, and you already know it’s been years since the last time I—”

“Hey.” I really don’t want her marital play-by-play. “I already trust you. The condom was for your peace of mind.”

“Okay, I don’t need it. I know I’m safe with you.” Noa nods in affirmation.

“And you want this—just you and me, nothing between us?”

She nods again, confidently.

Noa’s hand plunges into my pants and pulls free my eager hardon. She shimmies down to let me kick off my pants and then like a magnet she’s right back on top of me. Bare thighs pressed against bare thighs. She rises as she positions my tip at her hot, wet entrance. I want to grip her hips, squeeze her ass, feel her soft skin underneath my fingertips but I stay still as a statue. I dare not rush her.

She sinks on top of me until I’m fully sheathed in her walls. Her pussy grips me like it’s holding on for dear life and my toes curl so hard I swear they could break. *Fuck, she feels literally perfect. Made for me.* I couldn’t dream up this feeling if I tried.

“You are a masterpiece, baby. You feel so damn good.” I busy my hands in her hair. Then I stroke her back. I pinch her nipples. I squeeze her firm ass. I tug, I tease, I rub. I touch every part of her.

I could spend hours singing her body’s praises. Her perfect tits, her smooth skin, her soaked-for-me slit. I clutch her hips so I can control the pace of her riding. *Slow. Savor.* We have time.

It feels like a heavy weighted plate is sitting on my chest, grounding me. I’m not high, I’m not drunk. I’m sober, vividly experiencing every single moment of clear, synthetic-less ecstasy. This is so much better.

Noa slows her gyrating hips and wraps her arms around my neck, finding my ear with her lips. She just has one raspy command. “Harder.” I

thrust into her demandingly.

“Oh my god, yes. Like that. Please don’t stop,” she begs.

“Trade places, baby. I want to bury into you and make you come.” I try to scoot to the edge of her velvet couch but she pushes me backwards with a little more angst than I’d expect from my sweet girl. She wants the control.

“No. Like this. I want to take care of you too.” Noa bears down on me, taking every inch. Our bodies talk without saying a damn word. *Yes. More. Like this.* We are made for each other. Puzzle pieces. Key and lock. She’s my home. I breathe the air right from her lungs. This is more igniting than the raunchiest fucking any man could fantasize about. So much better. This is love. *We’re making love.*

I hold her tight to my chest as she wiggles on top of me trying to touch the right pressure point. She uses me as a tool to get her fix. A bead of sweat rides the divot in her back and drops to my thigh. It joins the others. Her sweat or mine? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Our bodies are so tightly wound we’re sharing everything.

“Baby,” I groan. I can’t find any other words. She whimpers between her raspy pants. Noa rocks her hips furiously and drives us both closer to the edge.

“I need you.”

“You have me,” I rumble against her ear. “You have me, always.”

As if on command, she clenches around me. She digs her fingernails into my shoulder gripping me tightly as she rides her climax. I grapple at her ass and try to lift her off of me as I feel the tension build to peak in my balls.

“No, stay with me.” She holds my arms. We’re locked in place. I don’t have time to argue. I spill into her, filling her with my release. My mind empties too. I try to kiss her but even my lips are limp with euphoria. We slump. Our bodies relax and Noa melts into me, forcing us backwards to the couch for support. Her still-hard nipples poke against me as she barricades into my chest. Her naked skin is on fire, warming me, giving me life.

I wrap her up in my arms, encouraging her to cuddle into me. I cover her, I protect her. Maybe I’m the eel, maybe the shark. I don’t care, as long as I’m hers.

She wiggles her hips, teasing my softening cock, still nestled inside her. She’s in no hurry to release me. Noa nuzzles into my neck and plants tender kisses.

“Mmmm, that was so good, Chase. I was nervous and I didn’t need to be.”

“You were nervous? Why?”

“I kind of thought you’d be into kinky stuff. Like you’d want to do it in front of the mirror or have me lick stuff off of you.”

“*Really?*”

She rolls her eyes. “Stuff as in whipped cream and chocolate, you goof.”

I’m going to spring right back to life inside of her if she keeps talking like that.

I laugh. “Not for our first time, anyway. We can take round two to the kitchen if you want.”

“Chase—I eat at that countertop.”

“So can I.”

“Naughty.”

“I’m naughty? I’m literally still inside you and I know you’re moving your hips like that on purpose.”

“I’m still on cloud nine. Not ready to come down yet. How are you? Do you see stars too?”

“No, baby.” I kiss her forehead. “I just see you.” Then her lips. “You’re way better than stars.”

chapter 24

Denver

Noa

As I suspected, Professor Dan is not impressed with my portfolio.

“Noa, will you stop calling me Professor? I’m not your professor anymore.”

“Once a prof, always a prof.” I smile cheekily and wiggle my toes under the desk. I’m sitting, my weight is off my feet, and I’m still in searing pain. Why the hell did I wear these shoes? I wanted to look sophisticated on my first day of work at the fancy-pants gallery but these Louboutins—an over-the-top gift from Mani last year—are little vampires feasting on the blood from my feet.

“Do you need a coffee? That’s about your sixth yawn.” Dan’s eyes narrow in concern as he leans against the gallery’s front desk.

Professor Dan is handsome. His sandy-brown hair and high cheekbones give him a certain regal charm. The neat scruff that lines his face suits him well. And his light-colored frames scream intelligence and sophistication. He’s not even *that* much older than me. But it’s a moot point. I’m yawning so much because the sexiest man on the planet, who I happen to be head-over-heels for, owned my body all night last night. I barely slept. I can hardly focus. I can still taste Chase Ford on my lips.

“I was in my studio all night. I didn’t get too much sleep.” I flash Dan an earnest smile.

“Ah, well what are you working on? Because I glanced at your portfolio and you are a very talented artist, but the exhibition is a bit more abstract.

We need pieces that aren't so obvious. We want the kind of art that makes people ask questions—that makes them feel a connection.”

“My art doesn't do that?” I pop my shoulders nonchalantly as if I'm not dying inside.

“You want the truth?” Yes, but let's coat it in a lot of sugar because I'm a little sensitive about it right now. “I can give you some guidance. Maybe introduce you to a few of the artists I know who've really mastered symbolism. I bet with a little coaching you could put together a piece before the exhibition. What do you think?”

I think it's Annisen. My art doesn't belong here amongst the greats.

“I'm honestly a little wary. It'll be kind of embarrassing if my art sells for twenty bucks when it's next-door neighbor is listed over fifty grand.”

“If it sells.”

‘Heey,’ I mouth with a scandalized expression. Dan chuckles. “This is Annisen. We've never sold anything here for less than five figures. I will price your work accordingly, you just have to bring me something that can work. Deal?”

I swivel in my chair and wince from the stinging ache in my feet. “Dan, you have a lot of faith in a student that you gave countless Cs to in school. Do you remember that?”

“Uh-oh.”

I nod emphatically as I widen my eyes in horror. “Oh, yes. Sooo many Cs. For my midterm junior year, you told me to paint you perfection so I worked on an oil-based sunset landscape portrait of the jungles of Kenya. I bombed the midterm. I think you said something along the lines of ‘pretty but boring’ or maybe ‘pretty boring’ I don't quite remember.” *I do. I do remember. He said, ‘pretty boring’.*

“Ah! The paint-me-perfect lesson. I do remember that.” He pauses. Then, “I'm going to confess something to you, but...try not to think less of me.”

Don't hold your breath.

“The paint-me-perfect speech is the one I'd give when I was too lazy or hungover to deliver an actual lesson plan. But it works like a charm. I still use it. It brings out the best work in my students.”

Are you freaking kidding me? My entire collegiate career obsessed about a concept that was born from a hangover?

“All your students, except me!”

“It’s because you’re very literal with your art, Noa. And perfection is subjective,” Dan says as he straightens up and brushes off his slacks. “Perfect isn’t a universal truth. Everyone defines it differently. I never meant for you to paint a perfect picture. It doesn’t exist. Just create something that’s perfect in your eyes, despite all of its flaws, and *that’s* how you speak to your audience.”

The gallery phone rings and Dan turns on his heel to answer it. “Contractors,” he mumbles as he walks away from the heavy philosophic truth he just dropped on my head. *Subjective*. That would’ve been very helpful to know about six years ago.

“Do you want to grab a bite tonight after work? We can talk more about some ideas,” Dan calls over his shoulder. I look at the pile of portfolios on the desk from local artists that I’m to flag and organize for interviews. This is going to take me all night.

“I can’t. My boyfriend and I have plans,” I mumble.

“Oh, okay. Good for you. A night out might spark some creativity,” Dan says quickly before he scoops up the receiver. I haven’t seen a wall-mounted phone in years. How strange. I thought it was art when I walked in this morning, but it actually rings and functions.

Worry lines crinkle on Dan’s forehead as he starts arguing on the phone. “How many more delays? The foundation for the expansion was supposed to be poured weeks ago!”

He sounds flustered, so I opt not to correct him and tell him that Chase and I have no intention of going out tonight. It’s probably best. My recently revived sex life seems like an over-share with my new boss, especially on my first day of work.



“Aaaaahhhh,” I moan in relief. I yank my heels off and place them on the shoe rack in my master closet.

“Why do you wear them if they make you uncomfortable?” Chase hovers around me, basically wagging his tail. He wants everything off and I’m taking too long with my shoes.

“Because they are pretty.”

“That makes no sense, baby. You look most beautiful when you’re comfortable.”

“Careful. You’re poking at the foundation of the beauty and fashion industry.”

“Why are you home so late?” Chase tugs at the tie around my very sophisticated business jumpsuit.

“My professor.” He immediately drops his hands and deadpans. “Work! Chase. My goodness. We were talking through some ideas about the piece he wants me to paint for the exhibit. You’re cute when you’re jealous.”

“Haven’t you and Jay tested me enough?”

I shrug innocently. “Maybe. But I don’t flirt with my prof—my boss. Honestly, I would never be able to approach a gallery like Annisen with my work. You have no idea what a bone he’s throwing me right now.”

Chase spins me around searching the back of my jumpsuit. “How did you even get into this thing? There’s got to be a zipper somewhere.” He pats me down like we’re stopped at airport security as I pull out my earrings and unclasp the dainty silver chain around my neck. He groans. “Over it. I’m ripping it.” He bunches his fists around the fabric.

“Chase Ford. No! Stop it!” I scold him like a bad puppy. “This is a three-hundred-dollar garment and it’s borrowed.”

“From who?”

“Quinn. She’s an executive at Sabin Technologies. She’s got the best office clothes. My entire closet is basically borrowed stuff from Quinny.”

Chase tugs at my sleeve suggestively. “I can afford a three-hundred-dollar jumpsuit. What I can’t afford is to leave your body alone right now.” I twirl around to face him. I unfasten the hidden buttons in the front of the V-neck.

“See? You cave man. There are buttons.” I step out of the jumpsuit and hang it up neatly in the closet. I make a mental note—dry clean only...or face Quinny’s wrath. Chase follows me room to room until I reach the bed and pause to give him attention.

He steps back to examine me in my panties and bra. “I sincerely hope this lacy getup is for me and *not* your new boss.”

Chase’s chest puffs a bit. It’s like watching a lion compete against a defenseless tabby cat. *Calm down, baby. You win. You’re bigger...probably. I wouldn’t know and I won’t find out.*

I touch his cheek. His normally clean-shaven face is scruffy. He is fully embracing his new staycation look. I thought he'd be bored by now but he actually looks relaxed and rejuvenated. Chase must've been through hell over the past few years. The constant commentary on his life. The endless scrutiny and judgment. I just want to hold him up and help him bear that enormous burden.

"Chase, I want to be with you. I only have eyes for you. Me and about a million other women in the world want only *your* body." I click my jaw. Funny that he so easily gets jealous when I'm the one with the fiercest competition.

Chase wraps his hands around my waist. He pulls me in close. "None of them can have it. Only you. I love that you only want me, too." He slides his hand down the front of my black lacy panties which are of course, for him. "I love that you're always so wet for me too." He pulls his hand out and the evidence of my arousal glistens on his finger. His eyes are on fire again and he's about to get his way until my phone rings from downstairs.

My eyes dart to the door.

"Don't you dare," Chase growls. "You came home two hours past when you were supposed to. Calls can wait."

"It could be Jonah."

"You said goodnight ten minutes ago. It's not Jonah. He's sleeping."

I take a step back and grab a t-shirt off the ottoman beneath the bed.

"Noa..."

"Chase..."

The ringing ceases, then starts again. Chase lunges with his arms stretched but I narrowly evade him. I sprint through the door and barrel down the stairs.

"Woman!" he shouts behind me.

"Sorry!" I squeal from the living room where my phone is screaming on the coffee table. It's a FaceTime call from Addie. I slip on the white t-shirt over my bra and answer the video call from my living room couch.

Quinn, Addie, and Reese smooch together on the couch to fit on the screen. They are all in loungewear with their hair thrown into buns, but Addie looks far worse for wear. Her big blue eyes look buggy, like she hasn't slept for days.

"What the hell is wrong with Addie?"

“Right?” Reese, aka Reese’s Pieces or Addie’s nickname to our nickname—‘Pieces’—asks in agreement. Her nonsensical nickname is proof that drunken nomenclature is sticky. She points to Addie and swirls her finger. “Bear is straight cuckoo for cocoa puffs over here.” In line with our senseless nicknames, Reese calls Adler, Bear. Because ‘Addie-bear’ is apparently too much work. Don’t even get me started on ‘Nono’. It makes me sound like a character from *Fraggle Rock* but again—don’t drive drunk...and don’t nickname, drunk. I’d need a giant whiteboard and a thick stack of sticky notes to explain our friendship idiosyncrasies that originated from endless rounds of quarters and flippy cup from our college days.

“She’s not eating,” Quinn adds. Her dark hair is coiled into a perfect top knot with chopsticks stabbing her bun in neat angles. Quinn is neat in a way that moms of toddlers can never be. Her sienna-colored foundation never cakes because she has the time to airbrush it on every morning. *Sigh. Magical.*

“Addie, why aren’t you eating?”

Addie reaches forward to something off the screen I can’t see and then resurfaces with a handful of candy. She pops a gummy bear in her mouth. “I’m eating.”

“It’s that damn book she’s writing. She’s obsessed.” Reese rolls her eyes. “Anyways, why are you at home?” She glances over my shoulder at the giant iron clock décor that fills up the entire back living room wall.

“It’s not Friday...right?” *Am I losing my mind?* I thought it was Thursday. Has Chase actually screwed my brains out?

“We moved girls’ night to Thursday this week because we’re all busy tomorrow night,” Quinn explains as she pries the handful of gummy bears from Addie’s death grip. “You need real food,” she demands at Addie.

“We moved it? Since when?”

“Are you not reading the group texts?” Reese asks as she picks up the freed gummy bears from the coffee table. Quinn scowls and mumbles something about a bad influence.

“Where are you going this weekend, Reese?”

“Visiting my dad upstate. They are cracking down on family weekends. Down to one a month.”

“I thought it was a low-security prison?”

“It is. I don’t know. I don’t make the rules.” She twists her hand in the air like she’s doing a weird magic trick.

“What about you, Quinny?”

“I’m taking Sawyer on his first campus visit to that school that’s scouting him.”

Sawyer is Quinn’s younger brother that she’s basically adopted as her own. He’s twelve years her junior and she acts like his mother in every way, from the lectures to the nurturing, to the ensuring he gets a balanced diet. She fusses over him the same way she fusses over all of us.

“And I’m assuming Addie will be in her cave—writing?”

Addie just taps her nose and pounces for more gummy bears.

“Reese, take those,” Quinn instructs. “She’s like a gummy bear crack addict over here.”

Chase tiptoes down the stairs. He’s mouthing all sorts of dirty things to me as he descends. He adds in lewd gestures. He pulls his shirt off and tosses it over the railing in a funny strip tease. He sticks his tongue out and then traces his top lip. ‘*Stop*,’ I mouth at him. But the familiar swirl at the apex of my thighs is dancing on high alert.

“Anyway, what time will you be here? I thought we were celebrating your first day of work. How did it go?”

A heavy body slumps next to me on the couch. Chase’s bare arm snakes around my shoulders. I see his muscular bicep on the thumbnail image of my screen. He pulls me into his chest, territorially. Addie, Quinn, and Reese all freeze on the screen and blink at the bare torso sandwiched next to me. Warmth crawls up my cheeks.

“Hi, ladies,” Chase says, pressing his cheek against mine to get on camera. He wiggles his fingers in a wave. “I’m Chase. I can’t wait to meet you guys. Soon. If you don’t mind though, may I steal my girlfriend back for the evening?” His hand slinks between my thighs beneath the camera’s view. I bite my lip at the intrusion.

“*Hi, Chase Ford.*” Reese’s singsong tone is annoyingly suggestive. “Yeahhhh...you’re not coming to girls’ night are you, Nono?”

“We can make an exception. Let her bring her friend. Hi, Chase!” Addie says cluelessly. Reese nudges her.

“Bear, they’re trying to bone. Hang up.”

“*Ooh.* Okay, bye Nono!”

The screen goes black as the call ends. My eyes narrow as I turn to Chase. “Not the way I wanted my best friends to learn you are in town or that we’re actually dating.”

“Amani already knows.”

“Cici?”

“Mhm,” Chase says as he pries open my knees and plants his torso between my legs. He pulls me down so I’m lying underneath him on the couch and slithers down my body. He rakes his teeth over the lace of my panties. “Am I in trouble?”

“Yes.”

He hooks his finger in the crotch of my underwear and yanks them aside. He blows against my heat that begins to sweat with his mouth so close. “How about now?”

“Yes.”

“How about now?” Chase asks with his tongue fully occupied.

Aaaahhhhhh. “Yeeesssss, you’re in so much—”

“Trouble? You want me to stop?” His head pops up and he makes a pouty face. He dares me not to love this.

I let my head bounce off the back of the couch cushion and groan in reluctant delight. “No. Let’s just fight about it later.” I flex my toes in sweet anticipation.

He mumbles something about ‘our time’ as he proceeds to peel off my panties.

chapter 25

Denver

Chase

On Saturday morning, I had to kick Noa out of the house. I all but carried her out of the front door and placed her in the car. I gave her clear instructions. Go get a coffee. Go get your nails done. Go take a day, because Jonah and I need some time together, bro to little bro.

I don't usually get nervous around little kids. I *love* kids. But Jonah is more than just a kid. Little does he know, my world now revolves around his mother, and hers around him. So, he's quickly become the center of my solar system as well.

Meeting Wes and Mandy yesterday went surprisingly well when they dropped Jonah off. I sort of anticipated a pissing contest, but they just smiled and shook hands. It felt normal. Truthfully, the lack of drama was almost unnerving. The man just got out of a coma not too long ago. Even if he was a prick, I promised myself I'd play nice. But it wasn't necessary, he was genuinely pleasant. I even offered to help move boxes into his new house. *Bizarre, I know.* It just slipped out of my mouth. I think I was just excited about the idea that Wes would no longer be living in Noa's guest room. *My guest room.*

Everything here with Noa in Denver is so comfortable and easy. The mountains are gorgeous, the air is clean. No paparazzi. No publicity stunts. We have the best sex—every day, twice a day. Noa loves it sweet and tender in the evenings but fast and hard before work. I can't get enough of her. Even if we can't keep up this pace, the way Noa caters to me and I try to

spoil her right back is enough of a fantasy. I could live like this for the rest of my life and die a happy man. There's just the pesky problem of my multi-million-dollar acting career to address. How can I be in two places at once?

Jonah and I sit at the kitchen island with the breakfast that Noa prepared before her reluctant exit. "Okay, little man. Your mom may make the best pancakes, but I'm the master of toppings." I pull out a jar of marshmallow fluff, Nutella, peanut butter, three different types of syrups, sprinkles, and chocolate chips. "The way a man tops his pancakes says a lot about who he is."

"Mama's gonna freak cuz the sugar." Jonah's wide eyes scour the row of goodies with glee.

"Is freak a swear word?" Noa told me the list and I can't remember. I know she doesn't allow 'damn' or 'heck'.

"Nooooo. Freak is okay, we can't say fu—"

"Whooooaaaa, buddy."

Uh, oh. Noa is going to kill Wes when she finds out Jonah knows that word. She's so careful not to cuss when she's around her son. I heard her yelling at Wes over the phone last week when Jonah scraped his knee riding a bike that was apparently too big for him. She was on speakerphone as she tore into him. It was like watching an Orbit gum commercial.

"What the flappity-jack is wrong with you, Wes? Get your shizzle-fritz together, he could've broken his leg. What the French toast was going through your head? I swear I will kick your a-star-star myself if my little boy falls off a grown man's bike again. What's next, a mother-fluffing Harley?"

"Are you Mama's friend or her special friend?" Jonah blinks his big blues at me. He is the spitting image of Wes. There's not a drop of his mama's gorgeous island features in him. But when they smile, they wear the same expression. I recognize that smile.

"What's the difference?" *Tread carefully, Chase, or Noa will be cussing you out with weird kid-friendly substitution words, next.*

"Mandy is Daddy's special friend so even if I don't like her, I have to be nice. If she was just a friend, I wouldn't have to always be so nice."

"You don't like Mandy?"

"I like Mandy. But I like Mama better."

“Yeah.” I tousle Jonah’s thin sandy-blond hair and he giggles and bats my hand away. “Your mama is the best.”

“Are you mad if I like Daddy more than you?”

“Oh! Buddy—hey, no. Not at all. Your dad’s a cool cat and you should like him best. I’ll be happy just to be your friend if that sounds good to you?”

“Okay. Do you like dinosaurs?”

“I sure do.”

“Mommy and Daddy are throwing a dinosaur birthday party for me when I turn five and you can come.”

“Cool, little dude. I’d love to. When’s your birthday?”

“You have to ask Mama, because I don’t know calendars yet.”

“Okay, I’ll do that. What do you want for your birthday?”

Jonah runs his little fingers against his hands. He and Noa have the same nervous mannerisms. They both bite their lips, they fidget with their hands, and their eyes get red and watery when they are really embarrassed about something.

“What is it? Something wrong?” I ask when Jonah falls silent.

“I wanted a pool party for my birthday, but I can’t swim so Mama and Daddy said a dinosaur party is less scary.”

Oh. I know it’s not my place, but he’s tugging at the heart strings. Noa mentioned at some point that Jonah is terrified of the water. They put a deposit down on a pool clubhouse months ago thinking Jonah would be over his fear by now, but he still won’t go in the water. But, come on! What is money good for if not moments like these?

“Jonah, how about I talk to your mom? Maybe we can figure something out with a pool party.”

“Okay!” His little eyes light up. *Oh, man, I’m so fucked.* This little kid is going to run my life. He’s going to own every single electronic that Best Buy sells. Noa and Wes are going to come for my jugular.

“All right, little dude, back to these pancakes. What’ll it be?”

Jonah holds up his fingers one at a time as he lists his choices. “Umm peanut butter, syrup, and chocolate chips. And whipped cream!”

I hold out my fist and Jonah bumps it eagerly. “Great choices.” I unscrew the peanut butter jar and slide it over to Jonah. I fetch the miniature butter knife that his small hand can easily maneuver. He spreads more peanut butter on his arms than his pancakes. He drenches his plate and then

the counter in syrup. The chocolate chips dip into the sticky sauce before they bounce off the cloth chairs and plummet to the floor, leaving a messy trail of evidence behind.

Noa's going to flip out on me for this mess.

"Hey, Chase?"

"Yeah bud?"

"You're a really good friend."

Worth it.

chapter 26

Denver

Noa

Chase and I have been playing house for the past month. Although, it's more than just house. I'm so happy, it feels more like fantasy dream vacation house, except I still have to do laundry. It's been weeks and we're still riding the honeymoon phase high. We stay up most nights talking... mostly talking...some talking. Okay, fine. I've been making up for my two-year dry spell but I could have Chase between my legs a thousand more times and it still wouldn't be enough. I need more time. Like forever.

He slid right into my world like he's always belonged. Chase is accommodating with Wes. He helped him move into his new house. He never gets tired of playing with Jonah. He has even more endurance for Tonka trucks and kinetic sand than I do. Chase sucks at cooking, but it's adorable. He really tries. After a near-miss with undercooked chicken he's officially on tableware and drinks duty when it comes to dinner time. He asks me about work every day. There's no way he's as interested in art curation as he pretends to be but he's a fantastic actor.

He's filling in all the cracks and closing up the loose seams making me feel like he and I together, makes my life complete. Somehow in the shortest span I could've imagined, I've collected every single thing I've ever wanted. The only scary part is now, I have everything to lose.

I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. Chase has got to be cracking underneath the boring redundancy of suburban life. How does a Hollywood megastar who is used to jet setting across continents just for fun, find

contentment with a life like mine? I need to know. Desperately. Because if he's cracking, I can't keep him. I can't ask him to give up his life for me, not when I'll never be able to do the same.

Chase and I are in my bed, sitting side by side. His hand is on my thigh underneath the covers. His hands are always on me in some form or another—claiming me, keeping me. What's he so worried about? Where would I go?

I'm flipping through Annisen's website on my iPad, perusing their most successful-selling pieces. The art that Dan claims makes people connect. I'm trying to find the recipe for passion that I clearly haven't been cooking with. Chase is watching *Ratatouille* for what has to be at least the third time.

I grab the remote sitting between us on top of the covers and pause the television. The lanky redhead boy with the rodent sitting on his head freezes on the screen and Chase raises his brow at me. I raise mine right back.

"You're insatiable." He laughs. "But no. I'm spent. I need rest and electrolytes. I'll take care of you tomorrow. Let me watch my movie."

Hehe. Okay, perhaps I've been abusing the privilege of dating the sexiest man on the planet just a little bit.

"I have a question." I cross my eyes and poke out my tongue in a silly gesture. *See? There's nothing sexy going on here.* "Are you bored?"

"No, I'm watching a movie."

I press the inside corners of my eyes with my fingertips. *Men.* "First of all, this isn't even a classic. Why don't you pull something out of the Disney vault?"

"That stuff is too heavy and depressing. I can't watch a lion dad die and feel good about that. I'm happy. I want to watch this fancy little rat cook and have a happy ending. Okay with you?" He plants a sloppy smooch on my temple.

"*Lion King* has a happy ending," I argue.

"But look at the crap he has to go through to get there. He loses his dad. He has to eat bugs in solitary confinement, he gets his heart broken, he has to off his uncle. Exhausting."

What the hell? Wrong, wrong, wrong. He completely missed the point of Hakuna Matata.

"I think you're watching Disney movies wrong."

His face twists in indignation. “Um, I think I know what I’m doing, baby. Movies are kind of my thing.”

“The messy journey is part of life.” I realize as I say the words that I’m calling the kettle black. But I embrace my mess. *I do!* I just didn’t want to drag anyone else through the mud alongside me.

“I know,” he sighs. “But let’s stay in the bubble while we can, okay? I’m happy. Let me be happy.”

I shift on the bed and cross my legs. I grab his hands in mine like I have something very important to say—because I do. “This bubble that we’re in? This is it. What we’re doing right now isn’t the intermission. This is the whole play—my real life. Dishes, cooking, grocery shopping, drop-off and pick-ups, Disney movies. The wildest thing I do is drive thirty minutes into LoDo on Friday nights that I don’t have Jonah to sit on Addie’s lumpy couch and watch *Sex and the City* with my best friends. It’s boring. *I’m boring.* I don’t want to hold you back from all the extravagant magnificence of your real life.”

Chase squeezes my hands tightly. He looks like he has something very important to say right back. “You call it boring. I call it peace. And all I want is peace.”

My lips fall apart in surprise. I guess I need to get used to my movie-star boyfriend’s masterful one-liners, but that one took me off guard. He delivered that line, perfectly. My heart was hungry—now it’s full.

“Okay,” I say as I reach for the remote. “Then that’s all I needed. You can watch your movie now.” Chase pulls the remote from my hands and tosses it back onto my fluffy comforter. He traces my jawline with his thumb.

“Are you ready?” he asks in a whisper.

“Ready for what?”

“Noa, I’ve backed you into a corner since the day I met you. You were my girlfriend before I even knew your name. We shoved our relationship down the internet’s throat before we even had one. I’ve put the cart before the horse this entire time and I never stopped to ask if you’re ready for this. If you’ve had enough time since your divorce. If you want the same things I want. My life tends to move fast and when I find something I really want, I just go for it. All in. Does that scare you?”

“Does what scare me?”

“That I love you.”

My heart was full when he said ‘peace’.

It’s exploding as he says ‘love’.

If this were a movie the music would swell, we’d embrace, the camera would fade out as Lana Del Rey sings all about how Chase Ford will still love me when I’m no longer *Young and Beautiful*. But Chase’s life is a movie, not mine. I just sit here, stuck on a flat canvas, trying very hard not to choke as I attempt to swallow the growing lump of emotion in my throat.

We sit with the quiet for a moment. It’s silent in our bubble.

Chase’s broad shoulders rise and fall as he heavily breathes. He sucks in more air in one breath than I’ve managed to since he said *love*. “Noa Fallon, I love you. I’ve never been so sure about anything before. I want this boring, peaceful life—with you.”

“Kainoa.” My voice cracks.

“What?”

“Noa is my short name. My full given name is Kainoa Luana Fallon. We probably should’ve started with proper introductions from the beginning when we first met.”

A smile flashes like lightning across his face. “Ah, I see. Like a re-do?” He clears his throat. “I’m Chase Alan Ford. I don’t know if you’re familiar, but I’ve been in a couple movies.” He holds out his hand to shake mine. “It’s really nice to meet you, Kainoa.”

I don’t shake. I interlock my fingers with his and bring his knuckles to my lips. “It’s nice to meet you, Chase. I’ve never seen any of your movies...and I love you, too.”



Chase

The room is dark. The house quiet. I own this house. But Noa protects this home. It’s ours together now. *She loves me*. She said it. Just hours ago. I heard it with my own two ears.

Noa’s lying on her side as I hold her from behind. Her silhouette rises and falls. Her patterned breathing means she’s lost in her dreams. Maybe dreaming of me. I trace her curves beneath the cream-colored comforter. My fingers ride the lines of her body like a roller coaster. I trace from her

shoulder to the dip in her waist, over the curvature of her hips, straight down the angle of her thighs. *She loves me too.*

I told her I was too spent to get twisted up in the sheets, but once we announced our love, we had to succumb to it too. We took our time. I kissed every inch of her skin. All those manta rays tattooed on her body swam on top of me like I was the ocean.

Ring, ring, ring!

My phone hollers from downstairs. It bellows through the open foyer and I fly out of bed. Jonah is sleeping just a couple doors down. My damn phone is going to wake up the entire house. I race quietly down the stairs to the kitchen countertop where I left it to charge. I just missed the call, but it starts right back up again. I don't recognize the number, but I recognize the area code. Who is calling me from Santa Barbara at eleven o'clock Pacific time? Curiosity gets the best of me.

"Hello?"

A throat clears on the line. "May I please speak to Mr. Ford?"

I'd make a joke about waiting one minute while I get my father, but I don't know who this is on the other line. And at any rate, I hardly know my dad. I carry my mother's last name.

"Um...this is Chase...Ford."

"Mr. Ford, this is Doctor Hulley from East University General Hospital. I have you listed as the emergency contact for Kayla Guerrero. Would you mind confirming your full name and date of birth for our records?"

Hospital? "I'm sorry—what?"

The doctor won't proceed until I confirm the information he's requesting. Then it's Pandora's box. Apparently, Kayla signed a form that says this doctor can tell me every intricate medical detail of her life.

Dr. Hulley explains that Kayla was admitted as an in-patient after an emergency resuscitation. She spent a night in the ER. She overdosed.

I've gotten this call once before about Kayla. I hoped I'd never receive it again. It is a big part of the reason she and I can't be together. We both needed help. We both needed an escape. I chose clarity, I wanted love. Kayla chose oaks and powder. I don't know why I'm still listed as her emergency contact. Her family is not exactly a wealth of support, but there's nothing I can do for her anymore. Except—oh, wait. *Geez, that's why he's telling me this...*

“Whatever she needs, please do it. I don’t think she has good insurance. You can send me the hospital bill. I have accountants who will handle it. You said she’ll go home tomorrow?”

The doctor clears his throat, again. He talks too fast and he’s distracted. I have a hard time understanding what he’s saying. I have an even harder time understanding if he should be having this conversation with me at all.

“Look, Mr. Ford, um...she’s pretty scared. I’m not supposed to be telling you this part, but the police plan on questioning her tomorrow. My understanding is that she was found unresponsive among several folks who are already in custody being questioned about distribution to minors. She’d be in jail herself if she didn’t need immediate medical attention. I wouldn’t put it past the police to take her into custody tomorrow unless someone is here to receive her.”

“Receive her?”

“Again, Mr. Ford—it’s really not my place.” He pauses. “This young lady needs rehab. I see this too often with my patients. She needs help, not time behind bars.”

“I agree.”

“There are special programs that are really effective for women in her predicament. It’s a long road to sobriety, but the next few months are crucial for development.”

“Hm? Sorry, what special programs?”

“For pregnant women who are dependent on substances. There are programs to help them get to full term—sober. She has you listed as the father which is why I’m sharing this. You are aware of her circumstance, right?”

Air. I need air. *I can’t get the air to my lungs.* The room starts to spin and I feel woozy.

I. Need. Air.

I crack the window above Noa’s kitchen sink. The warm swell of the evening floods through the screen, but it does nothing to calm my nerves.

“Um...can we just...wait. Sorry. Um...Kayla is pregnant?” My hand shakes uncontrollably so I close my fist. But my entire arm starts vibrating instead.

“Yes. And using any type of illicit drug at this stage of fetal development could be detrimental. At this stage the baby’s organs are starting to mature—”

“Sorry, can we...um...” I blow out a deep breath, trying to compose myself. “How far along is she?”

There’s no way. There’s absolutely no way. It was one time.

“Roughly ten weeks according to her HCG levels. We did an ultrasound and I want to assure you the baby is doing well...” The rest of his rambling trails off. I can’t hear anything through the fog thickening in my head.

We used a condom. Right? I don’t...I don’t remember.

“Where would ten weeks put conception?”

“Rough estimate off the top of my head—early May?”

Fuck. My legs go boneless. I grab the countertop for support. *No, no. My flight was when? May third, I think? Shit.*

“Okay, um—I’m not in town right now, but I’m on the way. I’ll um... I’ll find a way to be there.”

“Okay, Mr. Ford. I think that’s the right choice,” the doctor says. “She’s resting, but I’m sure she’ll call you when she’s awake. Like I said, she’s pretty scared.” The line goes silent.

How could I be so stupid thinking I could walk right out of my messy past and into my fairytale with Noa? *Oh, god. Noa.* I’m going to lose her.

Kayla’s scared? So am I. *I’m fucking terrified.*

chapter 27

Denver

Noa

“I’m not eating that.” I stare at the ‘cake’ that Addie unboxes and places in front of me at our high-top table.

Even the dim, colorful mood lighting of this sexy-swanky downtown tapas bar can’t make Addie’s cake look appealing. It’s concaving under the weight of cement-like frosting and it’s topped with the stale cereal leftovers from a neglected pantry. This restaurant is one of our favorites. It has amazing desserts. Their rum-soaked dulce de leche cake happens to be my favorite. Unlike the cake in front of me, it doesn’t look like a child’s art project.

We opted to spend girls’ night out for once. We’ve all had a tough few weeks and needed a change of scenery. Addie finished her (secret) book and is feeling more lost than Peter Pan at a corporate interview. Quinny is worried sick about her brother, Sawyer, who had a major panic attack when they stepped on to a Division One college football field and is now re-thinking his life purpose. Reese drove two hours to visit her dad in prison who was allowed to see her for all of sixteen minutes before a fight broke out and all inmates had to return to their dorms. Even Mani has been going through it. She was dropped from two endorsements because she refused to release topless photos. Last time we talked on the phone she was in tears.

As for me? Work is fine. Jonah is great. Wes has recovered beautifully. We’re back to our normal two weeks on, two weeks off. I caught up with my parents recently. My dad says he learned to surf, finally. My mom says

she enjoys watching my dad *try* to surf and eat foam all day. Everyone is okay, everything is fine, everything is great—and I’m miserable. My whirlwind staycation romance with Chase came to a very abrupt end about two weeks ago. A family emergency arose and he’s been in L.A. ever since.

I’m learning the annoying nuances of a long-distance relationship. My bedside nightstand has become a Snickers wrapper graveyard. My phone works overtime. Every time I turn around it has a less than ten percent charge. It’s really awkward trying to have a FaceTime movie night date.

I finally watched one of Chase’s movies. It’s about an MMA fighter who prevailed against the odds and ended up winning the ultimate championship. Chase is a brilliant actor. I know I’m bias, but that movie should have an Oscar. The only problem? I liked it so much that movie night was ruined.

“Baby, you’re so sexy. Take your top off.”

“Shush, I’m watching this.”

“I miss you.”

“Hush. Now I missed what he just said.”

“Come on. I want to see you. Pause the movie, Noa.”

“Shhhhh.”

“He dies at the end.”

“Chase Alan Ford, you did NOT just ruin this movie for me.”

“I did. Now take off your top.”

Our endless text message threads of ‘thinking of you’, ‘love you’, and ‘miss you’ have become redundant. I could basically copy and paste our texts at this point. We have the exact same conversation every day.

“Nono, this is your—admittedly, very delayed—congratulations cake. You sure as hell will eat a piece.” Addie tries to keep a straight face. Even she knows what a Frankenstein monster she created.

“Quinny?” I ask.

“Hm?” She pecks at her phone aggressively.

“Quinn!”

“Sorry, work.” She tucks her phone into her fancy Chanel clutch.

“Tell her I’m not eating this.”

“Addie worked really hard on that. Try it.” Quinn’s lips curl in a taunting smile. I can’t help but hear Chase’s voice echo in my head where

the very best memories are stored. *Either try it...or wear it.*

“Did you sprinkle the top of this with Rice Krispies and Cocoa Puffs? Who the hell let Addie into a kitchen and allowed her to—and I use this term loosely—bake?”

“Hey!” Addie protests.

“Justified. There are gummy bears inside of that cake,” Reese adds as she returns from the bar with a tray of way too many shots for the four of us. Quinn gives her a disapproving glare through the corner of her eyes. I forget who is on counting duty for Reese tonight. Addie holds up two fingers. *Oh good.* It’s not me. I wasn’t keeping track.

“Reese, we have a server,” Quinn hisses.

“Not fast enough. Wanna see a magic trick?” Reese grabs two shot glasses, one in each hand, and throws them back faster than you can say ‘abracadabra’. Addie adds two more fingers to her prior peace sign. Reese could drink a three-hundred-pound Irishman under the table with ease. We only need to worry when we run out of fingers on both hands.

“Okay, you guys can check the ’tudes and quit counting my drinks. We’re celebrating tonight. Nono, congratulations on your new job and for taking down that sexy piece of Hollywood ass.”

I’m seated with my legs crossed, but I half bow anyways.

“So, what’s Chase workin’ with?” Reese outstretches her arms, palms facing each other, and slowly pulls her hands apart. “Just tell me when to stop.”

I glower at her. I refuse to give her the details, because I’m a lady and I don’t engage in locker room talk. And also, I don’t want to make all my friends green-eyed with jealousy. God really gave with both hands when it comes to Chase Ford.

“Where is hunky anyways?” Addie asks.

“Still in L.A. He flew back a few weeks ago. Something came up. His friend was in the hospital and he had to go help. He didn’t give me a lot of details but I think it involved an overdose. He seems so frazzled when it comes up. I just get the feeling I shouldn’t ask too much about it.”

“So how is this going to work?” Reese reaches for another shot, but Quinn scoots the tray out of her reach. Quinn lectures Reese to slow down and Reese blows her a kiss—with her middle finger. “Is Chase moving here?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t actually know. He’s supposed to be here whenever he can, I guess?”

We were in the bubble. There’s no room for planning and logistics in the love bubble. Just cuddling, laughing, sexing, and I-love-yous. He said he’d be here...and, well...he’s not here.

“But he’ll fly back for Jonah’s birthday party?” Quinn asks.

I nod. I’m counting the days. Two weeks to go. Chase *has* to come back for Jonah’s birthday party. He’s hosting it.

Chase talked Wes and I into a birthday pool party at the local indoor water park. And by ‘talked’ I mean he had his people rent out the entire facility for a massive nonrefundable fee. I only didn’t fight because A—there is a lot more to do at a water park than just swim. Jonah loves a good splash fountain and water gun fight, and B—watching Chase get manipulated by a soon-to-be-five-year-old is wildly entertaining. He’s going to have to learn the word, no. Quickly. Or I will end up owning a Shetland pony—Jonah’s newest obsession. And let me make myself crystal clear, I am not cleaning up after a Shetland pony.

“Mani’s flying in too, so you can yell at her in person for how much of a ghost she’s been lately.” I flash her a toothy grin.

“Oooh.” Reese rubs her hands together like a character from *Wicked*. “You’ll love that, Quinny. Your point really comes across clear when that spit spray is flying and everyone can see that little vein right here—” Reese reaches out her hand to poke Quinn’s forehead but she slaps her hand away. “And you won’t even have to wait for the lodge this year to do it.”

The lodge is our annual tradition. Quinn’s father owns a prime piece of luxury real estate in the heart of Estes Park, right up against the Rocky Mountain National Forest. Every year, we carve out four sacred days to honor our friendships. All college friends claim they’ll stay close, but most can’t accomplish the level of commitment we have. We’re more than friends, we’re family. And you don’t miss family time. Especially not Mani who was brave enough to commit the serious sin of moving away. Quinny still hasn’t forgiven her.

“I’m just saying! What the hell is in L.A.? She could do all that picture posting from home. We have a pact. We stay together. Mani is just chasing trouble in Los Angeles. She belongs *here*,” Quinn says, poking the table. “With us.”

If Mani were here, between her and Reese, this tray of too many shots would suddenly be not enough. Quinn continues to grumble from on top of her soap box. *We get it! You're talking to the wrong ducklings. We all behaved. We're all right here in a row behind you!*

Quinn's actual nightmare is the five of us living in separate states. Screw that scary spider demon clown or that ghost girl climbing out of the television and warping your face before she murders you. All Quinn is scared of, is geography.

Speaking of Chase and geography...my phone buzzes right on time. He texts me in the morning, mid-afternoon, and evening like clockwork. I secretly suspect he has Noa alarms set on his phone. He is fully committed to being the perfect long-distance boyfriend.

Chase: Hi baby. What're you doing?

Me: Out with the girls. You?

Chase: In with the fam.

Me: Miss you.

Chase: Miss you most.

Chase always jumps right to 'most' so I can't compete in a miss-you contest. Nothing trumps 'most'.

Me: I miss your perfect rock-hard body.

Mmm, just kidding. Just topped it. I win.

Chase: I miss your beautiful heart.

Aw, dammit. Point-Chase.

Me: Why do you have to be the hero and be all sweet when I'm trying to be sexy?

Chase: Your heart is sexy. It matches your soul which is also beautiful by the way.

Me: You just did it again.

Chase: Call me when you get home. From the tub, with your video on. No bubbles, so I can see everything.

Me: There ya go.



It's nearly midnight by the time I get home from dinner and drinks with the girls. I'm walking up the porch steps and fishing out my keys when I notice my door is barricaded by Amazon packages. My silly welcome mat is buried. There are at least fifteen little boxes stacked so neatly it looks like someone was trying to win a brown-package game of Tetris.

I'm almost positive these were delivered by mistake. I check the labels—they are all addressed to Noa Fallon. *Ugh.* I swear on all that is holy that if these are glitter bombs from any of my friends, heads will roll.

I bring the boxes in two by two. After making a neat pile in the corner of the living room I choose my first victim and slash the security tape with the box cutter I store on top of the fridge—well out of reach from Jonah's curious hands.

I peek into the package. It's a desert-sand-colored toy tank. It's a little heavy like it's made from real metal. I check the description: US M1A2—Abrams Army Battle Tank. *Oh my god.*

Ooooooh my god. Joes! Joooooeeeeessss! Don't worry! Backup has arrived.

I dive into the other boxes. A UH-60 Black Hawk. A BB-63 US Navy Battleship. Mini tactical army vests, binoculars, even a survival pack with tiny little MREs. Every single thing my Joes need for dinosaur warfare. My eyes well and fat happy tears crest at my water line. I wish he was here.

The phone barely rings before Chase picks up.

"Well this is not a video call, and I'm going to assume you're not naked?" Mm, I love the smooth masculine baritone of his voice.

"Hi," I croak.

"Baby, are you crying? What's wrong?"

"I'm so mad at you." I sniffle.

"Okay, well first of all—I'm so sorry. Second of all—what did I do?"

"I got the packages."

“Those were supposed to be funny. They were not to make you cry...or mad at me.”

“I love them all. Thank you.”

“Then why are you upset?”

I let the tears fall. I sniff, I gasp. I ugly-cry. I’m so grateful this isn’t a video call. No matter—Chase can probably paint a pretty vivid mental picture of my hysterics judging by the gross sounds I’m making over the phone.

“I didn’t want to need anyone. And now I *need* you. I miss you. I want this to work so much. How can we be together?”

“Noa, it’s okay. We work. We’re going to work. I told you, I’m just dealing with some stuff with my friend. Then I have screen tests and table reads for *Dynasty Man*, but then I’ll be there, okay? We’ll figure it out.”

“What about after? What about when you start filming?”

He pauses. “It’d be easier if you were in L.A., but I won’t ask that of you.”

“Do you think I’m being selfish?”

“No. I think you’re standing up for what you want. I respect that. I’m going to make this work for us. I love you.”

Okay. It’s going to be okay. Chase makes this okay.

“Hey, Chase?”

“Yes?”

I open another box and squint in confusion. “Why did you send more dinosaurs?” I pull out a ferocious-looking toy velociraptor that is painted in blue and white tribal war paint.

“Because the Joes are packin’ now! It’s not fair to the dinosaurs. I had to buy their team a few ringers to even out the playing field.”

“You want to give the dinosaurs an opportunity to win?”

“Baby, have you ever seen *Toy Soldiers*? Hear me out—what if the dinosaurs are actually the good guys and the Joes are evil? I’m just saying, we don’t know. We have to let nature run its course.”

He gets it. He gets me.

I hear shuffling from his line as if he’s getting up and moving to a new location. “Now go get your sexy ass in the tub and FaceTime me.”

“Um...I just need a few minutes then I’ll call you back.”

He laughs. “Mhm. A few minutes to set up your new toys or to clean up all the boxes you just unpacked?”

Whaaaaat? Nooooo. Neither. I'm not that obsessive and compulsive.
But I think I'm going to put the Black Hawk on the mantel. And set up ground support right below. I'm going to need a mini campfire so they can warm their MREs. Those nasty things are only tolerable if they are warm.

"I love you, Chase Ford."

"I love you too, Noa Fallon."

chapter 28

L.A.

Chase

It's sweltering this afternoon. I watch the beach from my deck and soak up the familiar view that I love. But the water looks different lately. It looks disturbed, and angry. I know my conscience isn't right. I've been dreaming of moray eels. It's just like Noa told me in her studio. They are telling me to get my shit together and make a decision.

I hate liars.

And now I am a liar.

Everyone knows omitting is still lying. Loyalty is very important to Noa which makes my predicament extremely complicated. I'm being loyal right now—just not to the right girl.

Kayla is in her second trimester. This week's fun fact? The baby now has unique fingerprints. There is an actual baby, that by some miracle, is growing safe and sound in Kayla's belly. The main objective is to make sure Kayla doesn't relapse. She's a borderline addict which loosely translates into Kayla needing real help but still disguising her substance obsession under phrases like 'just cutting loose' and 'having a little fun'. If Kayla were at a facility, it'd make this situation so much easier. They have around-the-clock help and support to make sure that especially while our baby is growing, she's not tempted to touch alcohol or drugs.

But we visited the facilities. The dorms looked like closets. The television still had boxes in the back. They served cafeteria meals that made

prison food look tasty. I couldn't do that to Kayla, or my baby. I knew I could take better care of them myself.

I moved Kayla into the beach house as soon as she was released from the hospital. Detox was rough the first few days home. The pregnancy on top of it made it far scarier. Mark, Cici, and Jay stayed at the house and helped me keep her company through the worst parts. We watched her like a hawk. Even Adam dropped off some food and a few cases of water, but he still tiptoed around Kayla like she was a crocodile with a short fuse. He was afraid she'd snap at any minute. We were all afraid.

The worst is now over. Kayla's eating. She's off the lines. She hasn't touched a drop. All in all, she's trying and I'm proud of her. We even got a doppler to listen to the baby's heartbeat. It's become our morning ritual. Black coffee (just one cup), bagels, baby heartbeats.

I made it clear that I'm her friend and nothing more. I'm shocked to admit that she's respecting boundaries. We know where we stand. It's not a bad place—just a different place. I'm still crazy in love with Noa. Now I have to find a way to balance my long-distance relationship and being a dad...and my Hollywood acting career. It's doable...probably.

If Noa has taught me anything it's that there are no limits when it comes to parenthood. There isn't anything a good parent wouldn't do, endure, forgive for their child. About a month ago I couldn't fathom choosing anything over being with Noa. But then, just because the universe likes to fuck with me—enter: my daughter.

Kayla has to get more blood work done than any pregnant patient should have to, all to confirm her sobriety. The nurse let it slip that we're having a little girl after the last round of lab results. I assumed when I had a daughter she'd have Noa's gunmetal-gray eyes. That's not going to happen now.

"Chase? Everyone's here." Cici pokes her head through the back sliding-glass door.

"Coming." I've made a decision and I called a family meeting for some reassurance.

Mark, Jay, Cici, and Adam all help themselves to a round of drinks and they nervously tap their toes while fidgeting in their seats in the living room. I plant myself on a kitchen stool so I can see all their faces.

"Oh, fuck it! I'm just going to ask. Is it even yours?" Adam blurts out. Jay smacks him on the back of his head.

“Adam!” Cici scolds.

“Kayla and I hooked up when I first got back from the wellness retreat. The day before I met Noa. The timing lines up.”

“Yeah, but do you have concrete proof?”

“Who is going to help her, Adam? Kayla’s parents do more blow than she does. She’s an only child. Her friends are only friends when she’s partying. Who is going to get her through this?”

“You’re a good guy,” Cici says with an empathetic smile. Then the lines of her lips turn down in a frown. My heroic gesture is not without consequences. “What does Noa say about all this?”

“She doesn’t know yet.”

Four pairs of eyes lock on me. Their mouths fall open. Cici shakes her head in disgust. *I know. I know!*

“Brah, not good. Noa’s going to flip,” Mark offers helpfully.

“Dammit, Chase. You should’ve told her. It’s not like you cheated on her. You didn’t even know she existed yet. She’s going to freak because you’re lying to her. How long have you kept her in the dark? A month, now?” Cici buries her face in her hands.

“Look, I had to iron some things out first. I didn’t even know if it was safe for Kayla to keep the baby. I didn’t even know if she wanted to. I...I needed time to figure out what to tell Noa.”

“Chase.” Jay sucks down his beer and points it at me. “Noa comes from a culture of family—”

“I know—”

“No, you don’t know. Ohana doesn’t mean family by blood. It means family by choice. You need to come clean to her and if she really loves you, she’ll help you help Kayla.”

Noa is not a jealous woman. I’m not worried about her reaction to the baby. What happened with Kayla was before our universes collided.

I’m worried about geography. I can’t trust Kayla to raise this baby alone. Her sobriety is still so new. And she has clear motivation right now. What happens when she’s not pregnant anymore? I have to keep my daughter with me.

I could bounce back and forth with an infant between L.A. and Denver to visit my girlfriend, but that’s not sustainable. I could ask Noa to uproot Jonah and move to L.A. to be with me, but she’d shoot me down before the words were off my lips. I could move to Denver and take the baby, leaving

Kayla in the dust or dragging her with me. But what kind of house would that be? Me, Noa, Jonah, Kayla, and my daughter? What—are we all supposed to share a roof? Should we have a guest room just in case Wes has another serious medical mishap? What if he and Mandy have children? How the hell can this work?

I've been obsessing about this for a month now and I've only come up with one solution.

"Guys, I've thought about this long and hard. I've thought about what I can and can't lose. I don't know what Noa and I are going to do, all I know is I want to figure it out together."

"What are you saying?" Cici asks. Lines of confusion sculpt her face.

"I need your guys' help with Kayla this weekend. I'm flying to Denver for Jonah's birthday party. I'm going to come clean to Noa—about everything."

"Good. I think that's a good plan." Cici nods.

"And then I'm going to ask her to marry me."

chapter 29

Denver

Noa

On the morning of Jonah's birthday and birthday party, Mani wakes up before me. It may not seem like a big deal, but Mani is nocturnal. Spotting her before noon is like seeing a lion in the Serengeti. It's magnificent and all but don't get too close unless you know it's already eaten.

"Good morning, sunshine." Her smile is mischievous.

An empty foil pastry wrapper sits on the kitchen island beside her. "Are you traveling with Pop-Tarts? I don't buy those. Jonah would refuse to eat anything else if there were Pop-Tarts in the house." I help myself to a cup of joe from the pot she's brewed.

"Hence why I have to travel with my own. I have another pack in my suitcase—wild berry. Want it? I bet you're hungry this morning." She winks at me with an open mouth.

Mani and Chase flew in together last night. I had every intention of spending time with both of the people in my life that I dearly love and missed, but my best friend is a gracious angel. She feigned jet lag and exhaustion and retired to the guest room by eight o'clock. She wasn't sleepy...she just knew Chase and I wanted to get naked.

"Sorry we didn't get to spend much time together last night."

"Suuure you are. I bet your room smells like a monkey cage."

"You're the worst."

She laughs. "What? It's a compliment. I'm impressed, actually. Usually with couples only one person is loud, but you both sounded like grizzly

bears fighting over the same fish last night.”

I take a sip of my coffee.

“You know that song, ‘What Does the Fox Say?’...It’s you...underneath Chase Ford after abstaining for a month. There were some seriously scary sounds coming from your room last night. If Jonah were here I would’ve packed him up and ran.”

She’s exaggerating. *I hope.* She just loves to see me humiliated. Chase and I made love at a very normal decibel last night. Sure, in my head it was like the finale of a fourth of July fireworks show, but we were very aware we had a house guest and acted accordingly. *Thank you very much.*

“You done? Any other running commentary you’d like to provide about my private sex life?”

She purses her lips. “Give me a minute.” She sips from her mug slowly as she contemplates. “I’ll think of something.”

I tinker around the kitchen trying to decide on breakfast. I will not admit it to Mani but I’m starving and really do need sustenance. Chase and I may have been quiet last night, but we certainly weren’t tame. Granola isn’t going to cut it. I need protein.

“So why aren’t you freaking out right now?”

“Hm?” I ask distractedly, weighing food options.

“It’s Jonah’s birthday party today. Normally you’re freaking out right now trying to get through a massive list of to-dos. I usually get a meltdown call from you by about ten in the morning. Remember that year you cried for twenty minutes straight because Dairy Queen put the daddy shark on the cake instead of the baby shark?”

My fury still rises at that memory. “It was a big deal! The baby shark is yellow and the dadd—okay, you know what? Not important. This year I am calm, I am zen, and I have nothing to do because Chase already handled everything. Well, his people did, but I still give him all the credit. There is a crew of decorators turning that water park into a jungle island retreat equipped with ‘not-too-scary’-looking T-rexes as we speak.”

“Wow.”

“Mhm. Goodie bags are already prepped. All of Jonah’s guests have access badges at the front check-in. The cupcake tower is being delivered precisely at two o’clock and there will be a face painter there that is *not* me—thank goodness. This year I get to enjoy Jonah’s birthday party. Stress free. And it’s all thanks to Chase.”

She clicks her jaw. “That’s some hero-status boyfriend shit. You realize you’re going to have to blow him for like an hour straight tonight?”

“Mani!”

“No arguments here.” Chase’s heavy footsteps thud on the stairs. I shake my head. How long has he been listening? *Eavesdropper*. “Good morning, Mani-maker.”

One plane ride. They took *one* plane ride together and he nicknamed her. Chase will be meeting all my friends today, which I’m dreading. It’s like walking into a den of over-protective lionesses with zero boundaries and a lot of interest in how their best friend ended up in love with a celebrity. “Good morning, baby.” He kisses my cheek sweetly and I try not to swoon. I fail. Hard. *Swoon, swoon, swoon*. Damn, he smells so good.

“Where is the birthday boy?” Chase asks as he pours himself a cup of coffee, finishing off the pot. He rinses the carafe in the sink and collects the coffee grinds from the fridge to start a new pot. I forgot how comfortable he is here. He lived here for almost a month. I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Umm...” I check my phone. “Wes hasn’t called yet. He’s probably still sleeping. I actually need to get ready for his birthday breakfast.”

“What time do we need to leave?”

I groan. I wrap my arms around Chase’s waist and pull his chiseled wall of a body close to me. I press my heart against his abdomen. “Please don’t hate me. Every year Wes and I take Jonah to a late breakfast on his birthday. Just the three of us. We wanted to make sure he knows our divorce doesn’t change our tradition.”

“Just Mommy and Daddy? Okay, I get it.” A flicker of strain crosses Chase’s face. It’s so brief and then he purposely overcompensates with a forced smile. *Weird. What was that?*

“Are you mad?”

“Of course not. Go enjoy breakfast. I’m going to go take a shower.” He smacks my butt and I let out a girly yelp.

“No thanks, Chase. I’ll just settle for a high-five.” Mani holds out her hand and Chase chuckles.

He smacks her hand. “And a high-five for the Mani-maker.” I watch him walk away, admiring his perfect hard glutes.

Mani takes another slurpy sip of her coffee. I flinch. I hate that noise. “That man literally defies nature. He looks like he does and plans your son’s birthday party? He’s a unicorn. My last date texted me prior to

picking me up and told me to bring tip money...for the strip club he was taking us to. Un-fucking-believable.”

“Would you get off Tinder already?” She shrugs noncommittally. “Don’t let Adam find out you’re on Tinder. He will live in your inbox.”

Mani rolls her eyes and sticks her finger so far down her throat I worry she’ll choke. “He already does. Gross! I mean I love his tan, and his curly hair. His dimples are so deep I could just stick my tongue in there. And his profile pic is with his shirt off. He must work out with Chase because everything is real”—she double clicks her jaw—“tight.” She sees my blank expression. “But yeah...no gross. Totally not happening.”

“You already slept with him, didn’t you?”

“*Nooooo!*” *Guilty.* I know my best friend—she’s guilty. “Anyways—before I forget, can I borrow my suitcase from you when I go back? I need to grab some clothes from Quinn’s. You can take it back next time you’re in L.A.”

“You want to borrow the suitcase that I borrowed from you? Do you mean you need it back for good?”

“No, cheapo. I know you don’t want to buy a new one, you can use it for as long as you need.”

“I don’t need to.” I snuggle my cup against my lips. I let the warmth from the mug tease my upper lip. *Mmmmm.* It’s real Kona coffee. I normally like my coffee with a splash of cream but real Kona coffee beans don’t need any help. Chase on the other hand takes his cream with just a light drizzle of coffee. We’re opposites. That attracted hard. “I’m not going back to California. Chase said he wants to talk about something later tonight. I think he’s going to officially move in with me.”

Her brows arch so high they may not come back down. “How the hell does that work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you can paint in L.A., Chase can’t act in Denver. Unless he’s going to take a step down and start doing toothpaste commercials.”

Hmm. Chase could make toothpaste look good.

“Jonah has his family here. I have the girls here. I’m not moving. Why are you looking at me like that?”

Mani doesn’t answer. Instead, she gives me that look that makes my stomach churn, like I’m missing something obvious.

“Spill,” I demand. “Say what you want.”

“Nono, just make sure if you’re not willing to compromise, it’s for the right reasons. For Jonah. For you. Not because you’re scared. Because I spent two hours on a flight with a Hollywood movie star and instead of getting the juicy deets on all my favorite actors that I *know* he knows...we talked about you. He grilled me for stories the entire plane ride—”

“Oh my god, you didn’t—”

“Oh, yes I did. I told him about the time you split your painting shorts and had to walk back to our apartment in your underwear. I also told him about the time we dared you to take the beer bath. And oh, yes, he also knows about the dozens of fan letters you mailed to Ed Sheeran.”

“Mani—I am going to sneak into your apartment and start a bonfire with your Louboutins. Are you hearing me?”

“My point is—the man loves you. Like *really* loves you. He’s all in, Nono. Are you? If the answer is yes, what relationship do you know that works without compromise?”

Well, this is uncomfortable. Mani is starting to sound more and more like the come-to-Jesus moment of a Lifetime movie. I don’t know if the planets are shifting and earth is aligning with some alien force, but this new dynamic doesn’t sit well with me. I don’t know if I can live in a world where Amani Rhodes is more emotionally mature than me.

chapter 30

Denver

Noa

My friends and I sit around a small glass table holding our mocktails. A giant umbrella is pinioned in the center and even though we're inside, we have the blue and white striped sunshade opened wide. It's shielding us from the ceiling in this temperature-controlled indoor water park. We're pretending we're watching a peaceful ocean instead of a gruesome battlefield. There are screaming toddlers in every direction and seeing as we're at a water park their movements are easy to predict. Cry, sprint, slip, fall, cry. Repeat.

There is shrapnel flying everywhere in the form of half-empty juice boxes and discarded pizza crusts. I can feel the anxiety coming off the tired moms chasing their kids trying to prevent them from accidentally teetering off a ledge into a pool.

And this is why, Chase. This is why we initially said no to a five-year-old's pool party.

"I really wish these had alcohol," Addie murmurs as she stares in horror at the mass of children running amuck. We invited everyone. The entire mommy-and-me group. All the Buddy Scouts. Every co-worker Wes has with a child under the age of ten.

"Nono, I'm going to be honest," Reese says as she pulls a pair of sunglasses off her hazel eyes. She's really taking this pretending thing to the next level. There's no sun coming through the dome above us. "This whole thing makes me want to triple up on my birth control. Like...I want to get

my IUD checked, I want to take a daily pill, and I'll carry around my own box of rubbers if it prevents more of *this*." She waves her hand all around in circles.

La, la, la. I can't hear you. I'm on a beach. This mojito has real rum. Instead of chlorine I smell saltwater. Chase is kissing on my neck and telling me he loves me. Mmmm paradise.

"You guys have permission to leave whenever you'd like. But if I check those presents on the table and any of you spent more than ten dollars, we will have words."

"Nah, I'm staying," Quinn says as she settles deeper in her lawn chair. "I'll take toddler meltdowns over dealing with my dad any day."

"Noa?"

Ah, damn. Taryn Richter.

The jean shorts she's wearing over her one-piece bathing suit are soaked. My friends didn't get the memo, but most people wear one-pieces to kid birthday parties. Then again, I didn't either. Chase picked out my swimsuit for today and my manta rays—except one—are swimming freely for everyone to see.

"Hi!" I say, popping to my feet and greeting one of the fellow Buddy Scout's moms. *Ugh.* Taryn is likable enough...it's just I'm still on my beach. "Thanks so much for bringing Dex today."

"Are you kidding? We wouldn't miss it. When can we get the boys together?"

"Very soon. I have Jonah two weeks on and then off, and I've been working part time so my schedule is a little off. But I'll text you and we'll plan something."

Taryn nods as she gently tugs on my elbow, leading me a few steps away from the girls and our table. She lowers her voice as her eyes shift. "Did you know the actor Chase Ford is here?"

I laugh lightly. "Yes. He's here with me." Taryn's eyes bulge. I thought I was all over the internet, no? Maybe I'm only cool in L.A.—*oh my, that's a scary thought.*

Taryn runs her hands through her sandy shoulder-length hair. "I'm sorry, *what?*" She's suddenly uncomfortable.

"Yeah, we started out kind of weird at the beginning of summer but then things blossomed. He's the one who threw this whole party for Jonah."

"You mean you've been dating all summer? Like exclusively?"

“Pretty much.” My heart starts to pound uneasily at the pained expression on her face. *Will you please tell me why it looks like you’re about to throw up?*

“Um...Noa, just wow! You’re a really understanding woman. I know it’s not my business, but may I ask how you feel about it?”

“About Chase’s reputation?” Yes, I know my man partied hard, topped the fuckboys list, banged every model in L.A., but that was all before we were in love. *Bring it on, Taryn! I’m ready.*

“No, not that. I would freak out if my boyfriend was having a baby with another woman.”

I was not ready for that.

I suck in a breath but it doesn’t come out. I can feel the pressure in my chest cavity.

Where are you, breath?

Come back out.

Noa! It’s time to breathe!

“What did you just say?”

Taryn’s face flushes not pink, not red, not crimson—she’s purple. “Oh my god, Noa. I’m sorry. I know that’s not public information, but I assumed you knew.”

No. There’s no freaking way. She’s nuts. “Why do you think Chase is having a baby?”

“My cousin is an OB’s assistant out in Santa Barbara. Her boss has been making house calls to Chase Ford’s beach house, like weekly. I actually didn’t believe her but she snapped a picture behind the doctor’s back.” Taryn hurriedly pulls her phone out of the waterproof case that hangs around her neck on a lanyard. She notices my expression. “Oh, don’t worry, it’s not full-frontal. It’s just on top of the tummy.”

Taryn tilts her phone my way, discreetly.

Please don’t be Chase. Please.

A petite woman with dark hair lies on the bed. The doctor runs a transducer over the slight curve of her belly. The brunette is smiling at the man I can only see from behind. But I know that silhouette. So well. I know that baseball hat, it’s Chase’s favorite, he brought it with him on this trip. I know that bedroom. I’ve laid with him on that bed. And I get the strangest feeling I know who that pregnant woman is.

It has to be.

Because there is no such fucking thing as fairytales.
He got me good. *Really* good.

I scour the details I can make out on the ultrasound screen in Taryn's picture. I check the date. Less than two weeks ago. This is not something from the past. This is not a misunderstanding. This is my very real boyfriend, with I'm assuming his very real ex-girlfriend Kayla, and their very real baby on an ultrasound.



Chase

“What do you think of your birthday, little man?” Jonah’s wearing his dinosaur birthday swim trunks but they are still dry. I wade in the big pool as he stands on the ledge smiling at me like a little loon.

“I love it, Chase! I love it. Mama told me to come say thank you.”

“You’re so welcome, kid. But this was your mommy and daddy’s idea.”

“Mama says no fibbing.”

“How do you know I’m fibbing?”

“Um...because Mama and Daddy told me over pancakes today that I only got my party because you’re my new best friend.”

Huh? Kid logic, but sure I’ll roll with it.

“You know what would make this pool party a little more fun?”

Jonah tilts his head to the side. He puts his finger to the corner of his mouth. “I dunno.”

“If you got in the pool, buddy.” He immediately takes a step back as if I’m going to leap out of the water and grab him. “Only if you want.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not brave enough.” He points to the scattered little heads bobbing up and down in the shallow parts of the pool. “My friends are brave, but I’m not.”

“You know, sometimes before I do something scary, I try a little trick.”

“What trick?”

“If I’m not brave enough, I borrow someone else’s brave. Does that make sense?” Jonah is just like his mother. He looks like his dad, but he has

his mother's heart. Which means he may not be brave enough for himself, but he'll be brave enough for the people he loves.

"No... I dunno."

"Okay, so think of the bravest person you know. Close your eyes and picture them. Make sure they aren't doing something super scary right now and they don't need all their brave for themselves. Then just ask them, in your head, if you can borrow some of their brave. You'll give it right back, you just need it for now."

Jonah shuts his eyes and nods his head.

"Are you asking?" He nods again. "Did they say yes?" His eyes pop open.

"I think so."

"Do you have enough brave now?"

"Yeah."

"Then are you ready? Jump! I swear I'll catch you, buddy."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Splash.

Before I can blink, Jonah's in my arms. I barely catch him in time to keep his head from dipping under water. *Shit, that was close.* I didn't actually think he was going to jump. He shrieks with glee. He smacks my shoulders screaming that he did it.

"Good job, Jonah!"

"Chase, I'm swimming!" *Well actually no, buddy. I'm kind of just holding you in the water.* But who am I to burst his bubble? This is a huge moment.

"You're amazing, kid! Whose brave did you borrow?"

Jonah wipes the water from his face. "Mama's. She has the most. Look," he says as he points to the edge of the pool. "There she is."

My girl is a knockout in that sexy purple string bikini. No more mom one-pieces for her. Not while she's with me. I have the most beautiful woman in the world, and I want to show her off. Most of her—the third manta ray beneath her bikini line is for my eyes only. I may need to become a tattoo artist because that Koa guy she mentioned is not coming anywhere near that ray ever again.

Noa reaches us and she's nearly in tears.

“Jonah! Baby, you’re in the water?” She takes him from me and holds her son tight. They spin in circles.

“I had to borrow your brave, Mama. But you can have it back now. I like the water. I’ll do swimming with Ms. Libby next time, okay?”

“Oh, *Jonah, Jonah, Jonah*. Baby, I’m so proud of you.” She nuzzles into his neck and kisses every inch of his face. I want to be part of this. This moment. All of the moments. I wrap them both in my arms as Jonah sings about being a big boy.

“Do you want to go tell Daddy?” Noa says. “He’s going to be so proud of you.”

We make our way to the edge of the pool. Jonah’s feet plant on the hard surface, a changed little man.

Noa keeps Jonah in her peripherals until he reaches Wes by the present table. She turns her attention to me and crosses her arms, shielding the view of her tits that were made for a bikini.

“How’d you do it?” I flinch at the coolness of her tone. “What does ‘borrow my brave’ mean?”

“I wish I could say it was my idea, but it’s a trick one of my directors would use with kids who were nervous on set. I told him to picture the bravest person he knew and ask for their help. He picked you, of course.”

“That’s impressive.” *Really? You don’t look impressed.* I try to wrap my arm around her waist but she dodges me. My kiss falls flat in the space between us.

“Thank you for all of this, Chase. For Jonah. This is a pretty spectacular day for him.” Her gray eyes that should be sparkling, are matte. Her lips are pressed in a straight line. Am I overthinking this? Is she tired? Overwhelmed? Does a guilty man always feel this paranoid?

“Are you okay?”

“I *know*, Chase.”

My stomach drops ten floors. Based on the look in her eyes, I already know what she knows. But I still ask like a fool. “Know what?”

A humorless laugh harshens against her lips. It’s more like an angry scoff. Her smile is twisted and tortured. “That’s how we’re going to play this? It’s poetic justice at least. We started with a lie, let’s end with one too.”

End? We’re ending? “It’s not what you think—”

“Stop.” Noa’s voice cracks. “Don’t lie to me anymore.”

We're frozen. The world still moves around us. There's shouting. Kids zip by, their parents in tow, screaming at them to stop!—but everything is muffled. No, garbled. My ears are ringing. Noa and I step into our private bubble so the world can continue moving without affecting us. It's just her and I in here, and it's frigid.

"Noa, please." I reach for her again but she takes another step back. "Not here. Let's get dressed. Let's go talk in private."

"No, Chase. Here. Right now. Please tell me I'm crazy...is your ex-girlfriend pregnant with your baby?"

I hang my head. "Yes."

"Is she living with you?"

"No...yes. Sort of. She's staying at the beach house. I go back and forth to the condo."

"Was she the one in the hospital when you left Denver in such a hurry?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'm not done. Are you having sex with her?"

"No." I shake my head firmly. "Noa, I'm not. I love you."

"I love you too, Chase." A flicker of hope dances in my heart but the way Noa's eyes stay cold, I know it's false hope. "I love you so much that while you've been tending to the mother of your child—behind my back—I've been home missing you, thinking about you, worried that I'm being selfish for not uprooting my life to come be part of yours. But I don't even really know you, do I?" Noa clasps her hand over her mouth to catch her deranged chuckles. "I'm so stupid."

Her tears flow down her cheeks and the heavy droplets splash and blend into the already wet ground. Her legs begin to shake from the cold or maybe from the tension of the conversation. Either way, I'm getting her out of here. I grab her hand demandingly and pull her to the entrance. I snag my shirt and a towel from the lounge chair on our way out.

The hallway entrance is much quieter. I can hear myself think. I wrap Noa tightly in a towel and rub her shoulders. I pull my shirt on quickly and then my arms are wrapped right back around her. I brace her against my chest so she can't collapse or flee. I whisper everything I need to say against her ear before the clock runs out and I lose her.

"This is not a game to me. I did not play you. I did not cheat on you. I love you. You have my entire heart, all to yourself. I slept with Kayla the day before I met you. Before I even knew you existed. She got pregnant,

and I'm sorry. Kayla is only living with me because she won't make it through this pregnancy sober without my help. I'm only trying to protect my daughter."

"Oh my god." Noa's whisper crackles against my chest.

"I'm so sorry I didn't tell you before. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what Kayla wanted or what she was capable of doing. I've been taking this day by day and it's been killing me not to talk to you about it. But I didn't want you to bear the weight of this. This is my burden, not yours."

Noa heaves against my chest. My shirt dampens in patches from her tears.

No, no, no. Not like this. It wasn't supposed to go like this. The ring is in the car. I've been carrying it with me everywhere in case the moment is right. In case she can get past this.

"Chase, I—are you..."

"I'm just trying to do right by my kid, Noa. I'm trying to be like you. I'm trying to be worthy of you."

"My son is here. And now your daughter is there. There's no way—"

I love you and I will make this work. I will get help with the baby. I will fly back and forth. We'll figure it out."

She steps away and shakes her head. "I can't ask you to do what I'm not willing to. How is that fair? Especially now when we have the same stakes." She takes another step back. "The same responsibilities." One more step. There's too much distance between us. She's almost out of our bubble. Noa holds her towel protectively around her.

"Please, don't give up on this. I know it's only been one summer, but I meant everything I said to you. I'll make this work. I'll do all the work. I said I'll be here, I will find a way to be."

"So you can run yourself into the ground, exhaust yourself, crack under everyone's demands, and end up right back in the hole you fought so hard to climb out of? I can't...I won't do that to you." She locks her fingers as if she's about to beg the heavens for help. "Chase, listen to me. The first time you look into your baby's eyes you're going to know love like you've never known it before. You think you love me? Just wait. It's going to swallow you up like a fifty-foot wave. It will consume you, in the best way."

"Noa, I—"

"You have no idea how much this is going to change you."

“It won’t change us.” I’m losing this argument. I’m losing her. I don’t have the upper hand here. When it comes to family and parenthood, Noa’s so far out of my league. She’s making this decision for us. How can I fight the expert?

“It already has.” *Please, no.* “You’re going to be a wonderful dad.” Noa’s smile is genuine but the tears still flow. “I wish...” *Don’t say it. Don’t wish we never met.* “I wish we were selfish. Either of us. I wish we didn’t know in our hearts what the right thing to do is.”

I will not cry.

I take a deep steadying breath. *I won’t.*

“What’s the right thing? Because you and me together is all that makes sense to me.”

“Wait until that baby girl gets here and you hold her for the first time—it’ll all make perfect sense.”

The pressure builds in my chest. *I will not fucking cry.*

“I would’ve walked away from everything for you. Even *Dynasty Man*. Do you know that? I was considering dropping the role to be here with you. And I would’ve done it with no regrets.” Noa presses her hand to her chest above her heart. She clasps the other on top. “But my kid. It’s the one thing I can’t leave behind.”

“And I think I love you more for it.”

“Now what?” I ask and Noa grabs my hand. She squeezes tenderly, but it feels different. Like a sendoff.

“Now, we get back in there.” Noa nods to the entrance of the water park. “We enjoy the party and when it’s over you go back home to your family. I stay with mine. We say goodbye.”

No. Not like this. Maybe I should go grab the ring. Would it change anything? Can a diamond move the miles between us? Can it bridge that giant gap? Can I keep her if I promise forever? Is that fair for either of us? What about my daughter?

“You go ahead, I need a minute.”

Noa strolls back to the party leaving me behind in the hallway. Once I’m alone, I let the tears fall.

chapter 31

Denver

Noa

Four months later

Moms don't break. We're like diamonds—the hardest substance on earth. We can chip, we have flaws, our color fades. We're judged by our brilliance, our size, our shape. We're in display cases every day, praying to be picked. Sometimes we are picked, but then we're tossed aside into a dusty dark box when it's time for an upgrade. *Been there.* We're worth so much, but we're still just ornaments. We are jewelry, made to accessorize. The diamond highlights the hand, the neck, the ears. But the funny thing is...when a body goes into the ground after hundreds of years, it'll turn to dust, but that diamond that's buried with it will lie unscathed. It'll just sit there with nothing to do because its only purpose has decayed.

Don't be alarmed at my diamond musings. I wouldn't say I'm depressed—I'm just *really* going through hell right now.



August was easy. Because I don't remember much of it. When Jonah was safe in bed, I drank. When I didn't have Jonah I drank—a lot. I drank and I painted and I sobered up and I did it again. Rinse and repeat.

Right after Chase and I broke up, I gave my hungry-with-worry lioness friends one question each.

“Are you okay?” Addie asked.

No. “Yes, Addie, I’m fine.”

“Do you want to stay with me when you don’t have Jonah? So, you’re not alone?” Quinn asked.

“No, thank you, Quinny. I appreciate it though.” I want to be alone.

“Should you call your mom, Nono?” Of course Mani wanted to call in the ringer. Go directly to jail. Don’t pass go. No two hundred dollars. Just go straight to the cell where you have to face your feelings.

“Nope.” I’m more of a mess now than ever. My mom can’t see me like this.

“Do you want to set something on fire? Just a little bit? Like a very safe and controlled fire?” Reese for the win.

“Yes. That sounds good, Pieces. I have some toy artillery that I can’t look at anymore.”

After that, my instructions were clear. Lock it up, move it forward. There’s nothing to see here. Nothing to worry about.

I did the best I could to make sure that everyone around me felt okay with my breakup with Chase. Everyone was recovering quite well that month. Lives moved on. Believe it or not, the sun rose every single damn day. I went to bed every night convinced it wouldn’t. As if perpetual darkness was only one night’s sleep away. But I was always wrong. The sun rose every morning...for everyone else.



September was a little more difficult. I had to fake a lot of smiles that month at several celebration events. Addie’s book was kicking ass and taking names. Reese’s dad finally got an appeal date scheduled. He was one step closer to overturning his unjust sentence. Quinn’s brother Sawyer was already approached by two big-name football universities and Quinny was beaming like a proud mama bear.

Mani even popped into town for a surprise visit—aka to check up on me. It was for just two days. She didn’t ask about Chase, and I didn’t offer.

I love all my friends, but Mani is my oldest friend. She knows what I need, I don't have to explain.

She knew I needed to stay really still and really quiet so this dinosaur of a heartbreak couldn't see me and then rip me to shreds. She bought me a brand-new set of Michael Kors luggage. It was beautiful, black, and sleek. A hardtop this time so it wouldn't bust. It sits in my closet on display—with the tags still on—because where the hell am I going?

I buried myself in work in September. Professor Dan and I shared several meals that month. I'm just going to come right out and say it. He flirts with me. Daily. Not in a pervy take-advantage type of way. Just in a, 'you're single now and cute and maybe you can be my muse' kind of way. He's justified. At that point I'd been single for nearly two months. Almost as long as my relationship with Chase.

Dan's only ten years my senior. He's great with kids. And he is kind and handsome. In fact, he's brilliant. The new pieces I painted for the exhibit still weren't really landing for him, but he didn't give up on me. He kept coaching me, praising me but also challenging me.

He probably is exactly what my heart needs. It's just too bad that part of my heart doesn't seem to be working anymore.



October was the real bitch. It was sneaky. My overall plan for self-denial and squashing down my pain was going swimmingly. I was surviving off of frozen Snickers bars and sugar-free Gatorade. All jokes aside...I was trying. Hard. I asked Chase to move on. I was trying to do the same.

The week before Halloween, I stumbled across a tabloid on accident. I'd been so careful. In grocery store check-outs I kept my eyes on the conveyer belt. I studied the gum. I noticed all the weird flavor combinations. Like lemon-seed and dragon's milk. How is that gum? *Gross.* I refused to look. At that point, I'd ghosted social media. I didn't tweet, I didn't gram, I didn't post, I was living on no one's walls. I was reading—books with paper pages.

I got to work one day in October and Annisen's mail had been delivered right on my desk. There was a stack so high the front monitor was hidden.

Right on top—*The Public's* magazine. The cover read—*Our Favorite F-Boy Made a Baby! Sweet pregnancy photos inside!*

It was like a punch to the gut...with the front of a car. It didn't help that I received a text message from Chase hours later warning me about the article.

Chase: *There's a tabloid that blasted Kayla's pregnancy. I wanted to warn you.*

Me: *Thank you. I saw it. She looks healthy. Happy for you guys.*

Chase: *How are you?*

Me: *Dandy. You?*

Chase: *I miss you. So much. Every single day.*

Me: *Don't.*

Chase: *How are you, really?*

Me: *I'm sorry but you can't text me, Chase. That's how I'm doing. Bye.*

Right after those text messages is when the insomnia started.



November taught me that at rock bottom, there is quicksand. Once you scoot the rocks and gravel around you can sink right through ground another few feet. I looked like hell that month. I couldn't even stomach Snickers anymore. I wasn't sleeping so I had a lot of time to wonder why after four full months I still couldn't stop thinking about Chase constantly. We were together for less than four months. According to relationship recovery math, I should be feeling better by now. Not worse.

It was roughly the week before Thanksgiving that, in an anguished fury, I trashed my studio. It started with me dropping my palette and wrecking my jumbo clean canvas. Then I let the fury take over.

How is this fair? I was patient. I was gracious. I accepted my divorce. I'm loyal to my family and I fought to keep us together. The universe dumped Chase in my lap. Then, just as quickly, took him away. Why? What the hell is the point of all this?

I scattered my paintbrushes on the floor. *Why?* I threw the scattered pages of my sketches on the ground. *What did I do to deserve this hell?* I

opened drawers and emptied the contents. *Make it stop.* I even turned over my couch. *I need sleep.*

I'd thoroughly destroyed my sanctuary. I upheaved the only place left in my life that still felt put together. I was broken. I was tired. I was ready. I picked up the phone in the middle of the wreckage and I made the call.

"Baby?"

"I need you."

"You want me to fly out?"

"Yes. Please."

"I'm coming as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Mom."



When I mentioned moms not breaking earlier, I left out an asterisk. Moms are allowed to break in the presence of their own mom. It's the loophole. Which brings us to now.

December is better. My mom is here. I get her for an entire month. My dad will join at Christmas and I get to spend the holidays, and my birthday as a divorcee, with family.

In the past few days my mom has watched every cartoon dinosaur movie known to man with Jonah. She's washed my hair and cooked all my favorite Hawaiian comfort foods. She even cleaned up my studio which I had left to rot after my meltdown a few weeks ago. Bit by bit, piece by piece, Leilani Fallon put me back together. I should've made the damn call months ago.

It turns out she knew everything all along. Koa has a big mouth. But she respected my space. She knew I'd come to her when I was ready.

"Kai, come here, baby," Mom calls me from the backyard. Her voice really carries when she wants it to.

I join my mom in my tidy-again art studio. To this day, my mom's still got it. She's gorgeous. Her dark wavy hair is even longer than mine. Her lean body is athletic and strong. Her tan skin is radiant. How can I be *this* in twenty-five more years?

"What're you doing with this six-by-six canvas?"

She examines the jumbo canvas that I stretched by hand and mounted on the wall. The same canvas I wrecked with a temper-tantrum-style meltdown.

“I ruined it. I dropped my pallet and now it’s stained with the wrong colors.” I blow a raspberry and point my thumb downwards.

“What’s it for?”

“The art gallery I work at has an exhibit on symbolism in a few weeks. My boss offered me a spot but nothing I’ve painted really screams symbolism. I’ve shown him about thirty different pieces. Nothing fits with his vision.”

My mom runs her hands against the mounted canvas. “What kind of symbolism?”

“I don’t know. Remember that professor that tortured me in college? The one who kept saying ‘paint me perfect’ was the assignment and I could never figure it out? Well, he’s my new boss. He says perfect is subjective and it’s all about the lens. He said he needs art that people can connect to. But I still don’t know what that means.”

My mom rummages in a drawer and pulls out a small tin of matte white acrylic paint. She grabs a large brush and starts whitewashing the color stains on the canvas.

“You don’t have to waste this. That’s the beauty of paint. You can always add layers especially if you’re using texture.”

Her brush dabs at the canvas with little *shushes* as she forces the white paint to saturate into the fabric.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Why didn’t you call me, Kai? You never even told me that you and Wes separated. Let alone, divorced.”

I sit on my velvet couch and watch her clean up the mess I made on the canvas. There are ghosts among us. Ghosts of me and Chase. We made love on this couch, on the desk, on the ground. We promised each other everything and I didn’t follow through with anything.

“I felt like I failed in my marriage and as a mom. I didn’t want you to think less of me. Looking back...I don’t know. I thought I did everything right with Wes. I have no idea why he fell out of love with me and why my feelings faded too.”

She dips her brush in the paint tin again, tapping it on the metal edge. It’s about balance. Not too much paint, but not too dry. “Kai, you and Wes

were babies who had a baby. You got married because you needed each other in that way, at that time. You have a wonderful family, but that doesn't mean family is all you need."

I nearly choke on my spit. "This coming from Lani Fallon? Family isn't all you need?" The sky must be falling.

"Family is important. But you also need identity. That's why you're struggling. Does the puhi visit you?" Ah, the eel story. I think I dropped that one on Chase once. "Because you're in cloudy waters."

"Mom, I'm fine. I really am."

"You can lie to everyone, even yourself. But not your mother." She turns around quickly and points the brush in my direction. "Not your makuahine. I grew you. We are connected, always. I know you, and you're still hurting."

"I'm not hurt over Wes."

"Chase?"

I nod. I'm weary. I don't have the strength to lie to my mom. "He haunts me every day. *I haunt me*. I screwed up. I either did the right thing for the wrong reasons or I did the wrong thing for the right reasons. I'm not sure anymore."

"Why don't you call him, baby? Why not try?"

"It's too late. He and his ex-girlfriend are having a baby together. Chase is in her pregnancy photos. He looks so happy. They need each other and I need Jonah. I need Denver. I need to focus on piecing my life together, because I'm so lost right now. I thought stability and security would fix it but I found a way to keep the house and yet I'm still lost." My voice trembles. "I don't know why I'm not okay. I haven't finished a painting in months. I lost myself over a man...again. And I hate myself for it."

"Kai, you're not lost because of Chase. It's because of Jonah."

I reel in indignation. "What? Jonah is the only thing I'm sure about in my life right now." I tuck my knees to my chest and curl myself into a ball. My mom sets the brush down and joins me on the couch.

"The newborn phase of motherhood suited you. All the things that new moms struggle with came so naturally to you. You never complained about the sleep deprivation. Your nipples were cracked and raw and you still nursed that baby twelve times a day without a second thought. You made all his baby food. You only used organic products to clean his clothes and toys.

You did every night waking, every diaper change, you carried the whole load on your back. That's what you're good at, baby."

Only a fool would think Lani Fallon is done. She always starts with the compliment. Then, it's time for the truth.

"But martyrdom is not the only part of motherhood. Jonah doesn't need you like he used to and that terrifies you. That's why you're lost. You're scared to let him grow up and accept things are changing. It was never about a house, money, or stability. It was never about Wes. It's not about Chase. You gave up your whole identity to be a part of Jonah's, but he doesn't need you to breathe for him anymore."

She wraps her arms around me. She kisses my head.

"What does Jonah need, Mom?"

"For you to be happy."

And then the tears pour. Followed by the snot. Follow by the short painful heaves. But this time I'm not alone. My mother holds me tight. "I was happy. And I blew it. I pushed Chase away without even trying. I was scared...of the messiness."

"Shhh, baby. Shhh."

She holds me for what feels like hours. Until I've expended every single tear my body can produce. I stretch my stiff legs. I blink my puffy eyes.

"What do I do now?"

"Well, when you're feeling raw like this, it's a good time to paint."

"Paint what?"

"How did Chase make you feel?"

I relive the memories I've been trying so hard to push away. "Full."

"Huh?" We laugh. It's such a complete but senseless answer.

"Chase loved all the things about me. He showed me that even though I'm a mom first, I'm also a friend, a lover, passionate, powerful, playful. He made me feel so full of love and hope and excitement. At times it was too much...like I could just burst right op—"

Oh.

Oh! Oh!

"I got it," I murmur. Lani Fallon does it again. Art whisperer. Fixer of all things. *Mom.* "I know what to paint."

"Yeah, baby?"

"I think I got it. I *really* think I got it. Stay here, I'll be right back. I need to go grab something from the closet."

chapter 32

L.A.

Chase

Heartbreak sucks when you let yourself feel it—sober.

I can sum up the past few months of life without Noa in one word—desolate. It's empty. It's cold and dull. It's as simple as that. How have I been doing? *I'm surviving*. What choice do I have? *None*. Noa asked me to move on. *Let her go*.

I sit on a yoga mat on my deck at the beach house and watch the sun rise. The air is chilly. The summer is long gone. The ocean spray is frigid in December so I stay near the firepit as I try to meditate. I do sunrise meditation now—every morning. Most of the time I just nap sitting up, but I'm trying not to resort to old habits.

The last big breakup I had, I threw away a movie, my reputation, my sanity, and my self-respect. I refuse to go down that path again. I'm letting myself feel all the hurt, all the pain. I'm not muting anything with substances and somehow, I'm still here. Plus, this heartbreak isn't the same. It's confusing. How do two people who love each other like we did just walk away? Which one of us should've fought harder?

I can't stop thinking about the first night we were together, when she told me about the ocean spirit guides. I had the strangest dream the other night. An eel and a manta ray were swimming together. The eel rose from the depths and the ray descended from the surface. They met in the middle of the ocean and were playing or dancing—something like that. I don't know if aquatic life can smile, but they were smiling in my dream. Out of

nowhere a great white shark appeared. Even asleep, I physically felt the fear when I saw the beady eyes. It was so big. So angry. It was hunting for a meal. The manta ray was brave. It fought. It sacrificed itself and was annihilated by the shark, allowing the eel to swim away to safety. I woke up in a sweat and vowed that was the last time I take melatonin to help me sleep.

Fucking nightmares.

“Chase?” Kayla stands by the back doorway wrapped in two blankets. Her full, round belly looks unbalanced on her petite frame.

“Hey. Want me to come in?”

“No, I’ll come to you.” She waddles over and sits cross-legged on the other side of my yoga mat. Not a great idea. These days it’s an extreme struggle for her to get up from the floor. Kayla’s due date isn’t for four more weeks but she looks ready to pop. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Okay. Did you eat breakfast today? And take your vitamins?”

“Yes, Doctor,” she mocks me with a roll of her eyes. “Eggs and some dry toast. And all the prenats.”

“How much water have y—”

“Chase! Leave me alone.”

“Sorry.” I pat her knee. Kayla’s hollow cheeks look skeletal. It’s so hard not to pity her. First it was the drugs stealing her appetite, now the baby. “You’re doing a really good job, Kayla. I’m proud of you. I know this isn’t easy.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why haven’t you asked me for a DNA test?”

I thought about this for a while, but after seeing Kayla’s face when I picked her up from the hospital that night...who else had the means to take care of her like she needed?

“Are you saying there’s a chance...she’s not mine?” My jaw twitches.

“She’s yours. There was no one else. I’m just saying, you’re Chase Ford. I can’t imagine this is your first pregnancy allegation. Don’t you want proof?”

“No. I’m choosing to trust you. And what would I do, anyway? Tell you to leave? I’ve bonded with her.” I gently poke Kayla’s big belly. “Everyone has. Cici wants to name her Bella.”

Kayla pats her belly, tenderly. “She sure as hell is not a Bella.”

“Regardless whether or not she’s *mine*, she’s mine.”

Kayla’s voice softens, barely audible against the wind. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about...I just—I don’t feel like she’s mine.”

I pull a face. “Explain.” She can’t think this pregnancy came from divine intervention. I was there. I know how we made this baby.

“Please, try to hear me out. I’m glad I went through with this pregnancy, and you got me through it. I’m grateful. But...I can’t...I can’t do the next part. I think I was meant to bring her into this world, but she deserves better. At least until I can figure out how to get better. I was thinking maybe I should get into a real program, outside of L.A. and then maybe go back and finish school. I want to let Hollywood go—let my acting dreams go. They aren’t even really my dreams anymore. I lost them somewhere along the way.”

“What are you saying right now?”

Kayla shifts uncomfortably. She leans back on her hands and widens her legs, making room for her swollen tummy. “I spoke to an adoption agency —”

“*What?*”

“I wanted to know the options in case you felt the same. They were really kind and we could do an open adoption if we wanted to. Cici started asking me what we needed for the nursery and I just couldn’t shake this feeling that this isn’t her home.”

The lump in my throat rises. The tension pulls across my chest, making my muscles cramp. “Kayla, I have given up a lot of things that I really love because of you. But I’m not giving up my child. So, if you won’t do this with me, I’ll do it by myself.”

“You’re going to raise a baby all by yourself?”

“I have Jay, Mark, and Cici, hell even Adam.” Kayla snorts loudly and then winces. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she says, but she rubs the top of her belly as she grimaces. “I was just picturing Adam holding a baby. Hilarious. A burrito—sure. But a baby?”

“He’s not your biggest fan either, hate to tell you.”

She shrugs, unbothered. Their war has cooled, but it’s not exactly over. Kayla is the dinosaur. Adam is the G.I. Joe.

“I don’t understand. Seriously? How can you give your baby up?”

Kayla's face is composed. I thought she'd be teary-eyed and on the verge of a meltdown having this conversation, but she's steady. It's clear she's been thinking about this for a while. She must've brought this up long after she made up her mind. "I have a theory as to why you made it in L.A. while I fell on my face."

"We know it's not a fair industry. It's luck. You were a good actress. You still are."

"No—it's because deep down you were always a good guy. You played the party boy for a while, but you were always a good guy."

"You're a good person too—"

"No. I want to be. But right now, I'm not. My mom taught me by example that when life gets too tough, alcohol can fix your problems. And then I got to L.A. and found out a whole lot more than alcohol can numb the rejection and soothe the gnawing feeling of inadequacy. I still crave a high every day." Kayla lies back on the hard deck and cradles her belly. "I don't because she's in me, but once she's out—this little one deserves better." She winces as she rolls to her side. It takes me a moment to realize this isn't an emotional reaction to our conversation.

She's in physical agony.

"Hey. Kayla. What's wrong?" I lean to my right to hover over her.

Kayla's eyes grow wide right before she vomits. She clutches her stomach and groans in misery as she tries to tuck in her knees.

"Are you okay?"

She holds her midsection protectively. I scoop her head up under the crook of my elbow and put my other hand beside hers. Her stomach is as hard as a rock.

"Is that a contraction? I don't understand. You're not due until January."

"Chase. Hospital. Now." Her eyes close as she groans from the pain.

Hospital. Now. They are the last two words I hear before I mentally black out from the panic.

chapter 33

Denver

Noa

I'm just going to admit it. It's really freaking awkward to have Professor Dan in my home. *Sorry—I mean Dan.* It's even more awkward if I keep calling him Professor. But I am not about to pay for a small U-Haul to tote this canvas over to Annisen if my masterpiece won't be making the final cut for the exhibit.

I painted my heart out for three days straight. My mom watched from afar. She fed me, made me shower, entertained Jonah, cleaned my house. She handled everything and let me work. I asked for her input, but she wouldn't give it. She'd just tell me to keep painting. This had to be *my* perfect and all other opinions be damned. I'd barely signed 'Kainoa' at the bottom right corner before I called Dan.

I physically guide him to my studio because I made him close his eyes. I need him to take in the full effect all at once. I can't risk a sneak peek through the windows of the French doors.

"Hey, your mom's dumpling thingies might be the best thing I've ever eaten in my life—Ow! Noa!"

"Shoot! Sorry, watch that rock."

"I can't! My eyes are closed."

I open the studio doors, usher Dan in, and position him in front of the mounted canvas that takes up almost an entire wall of my studio. "They are called pork hash, by the way. But yes, they are delicious. Okay riiiiight here please. Aaaaand open them. Tada!"

Professor Dan's eyes open...then *really* open. They bulge.
Ladies and gentlemen...nailed it! Finally.

"Noa, this is...wow." He takes two steps forward and scours every inch of the canvas. I give my mom, who is watching us protectively from the back door of the house, a goofy two thumbs-up. "Wow."

"You already said that." I'm beaming. I'm so relieved. There is no greater satisfaction like finally pulling off a daunting win you thought you were doomed to fail. "But, let me have it. I'm ready. I know the strokes on the outer corner could've blended better, but I used acrylic, so...you know, once it's dry, it's dry. And you'll be proud to know I mapped nothing out. I just popped my headphones in and got sloppy. It probably could use more highlighting coming from here"—I point to the top left corner—"and the contents are a bit disproportionate, but I had too much to fill in. I was playing with thick lines and a little texture to make it dynamic. Again, it's not perfectly even, and I'd say that if I could do it again I'd—"

"*Noa.*" Dan widens his big eyes underneath his glasses and puts his fingers to his lips. "Give me a minute."

"Okay, but I just—"

"Bup, bup, bup."

"I'm just saying—"

"Shush."

"Oh my god! What do you think?"

He rolls his eyes and pulls a green sticky note off of my desk. He scrambles for anything to write with. He scribbles something on the sticky note and then places it on the bottom right corner of my painting. It reads: 'A'.

"A?" I clasp my hands against my heart to keep it from falling right out of my chest.

"You did it. In fact, you *really* did it. This canvas is large enough to be the feature."

Gasp. No. No way. Not a chance. The feature in an Annisen Gallery exhibit? *Can't. Nope. No.*

"Shut the front door, Dan! Feature?"

His face twists and his lips curl in a puzzled smirk. "Shut the front door?"

"My kid is running around here somewhere—anyways..." I can't find the words so I just wrap my arms around him in a half hug, half tackle. I'm

relieved when there are no sparks. No tingles.

“Can I confess something to you?” He shifts his feet nervously. “Your other painting, the ocean scene, I loved that one. I would’ve put your art in the exhibit either way. I was trying to see if I could coax something like *this* out of you and low and behold.” He gestures toward my—*okay, I’m just going to be bold and call it—*masterpiece. “I don’t want to say that I’m the best professor in the world but...”

I roll my eyes. “You’re the best professor in the world, Dan.”

“Am I a creepy professor if I ask you to coffee sometime?”

“Yes. Super creepy. But you’re not my professor anymore.”

Dan raises his brows, appearing hopeful. “So, is that a yes?”

I point to my canvas. “If I’m being honest, I painted this because it’s how I feel right now. Messy, broken, busted...and still very much in love. You don’t want to date someone who still has history with their ex—believe me, I’ve been there and it—”

“Makes for honest paintings?” Dan smiles.

“Exactly. I’m not in a good place to start anything right now. But I’m flattered. Maybe ask me again in a few months.” By then relationship recovery math should be on my side.

“Well I—”

“Kainoa!” my mom shouts from the back door of the house, waving my phone.

“Sorry, one second. That’s probably Jonah’s dad on his way to pick him up.” I jog across the stone path. As I near, I see my mom’s face is pulled in worry.

“Kai, he called six times in a row, so I answered.” She holds the phone out to me.

“Who is it?” *But I know.* “Hello?”

“Noa?” Chase’s breath is strained. He’s panting. Or crying?

“What’s wrong?”

“I know I’m not supposed to call—”

“It’s okay. What’s wrong?”

The line is full of static. His words are garbled but I understand enough. I hear the important words. *Hospital. Baby. It’s bad. Scared. I need you.* My blood tingles. My bones twinge. I’m sick with worry and for once it’s not over Jonah. I hang up the phone and look at my mom.

“What is it, baby?”

“Can you make sure Jonah gets to Wes today? Can you pack his bag and handle things here for a few days?”

“Of course. Why? Where are you going?”

“To grab my suitcase. I have to get to L.A.—now.”

chapter 34

L.A.

Noa

Four hours. Even I'm impressed.

It takes me four hours from the moment I hung up with Chase to the moment Jay is dropping me off at one of Los Angeles's largest public hospitals. Even with Jay's racecar-style driving, it's a forty-minute commute from the airport to the hospital. Jay and I fill our time by ignoring the elephant in the car. We catch up on Hawaii. I tell him about all the goodies my mom packed from her home. I promise to send him a bag of the chocolate macadamia nuts we both love and can only find on the big island.

He screeches into the hospital drop-off, right in front of the sliding doors. He throws the car in park and catches my hand before I can grab the passenger latch.

"That bad?" I ask when I see the panicked expression on his face. His brows are furrowed. He looks so tired. When is the last time he slept?

"It's not that...Noa, just don't make any promises you can't keep, okay?"

"What?"

"Chase has been trying to respect what you want. But it's eating him alive. He's going to see you and..." He shrugs one shoulder. "You know?"

My eyes fall to the floormats. My heart aches as the shame washes over me. All this time, I've been worrying about *my* healing. Chase is still hurting, and it's my fault.

“Just so you know,” Jay continues. “I’ve basically been living at the beach house for the past four months. Chase and Kayla are just a mother and a father to the same baby. There’s nothing else between them, so you can’t go in there and give him hope unless you mean it, okay? He won’t survive it.”

“He called me because of the baby. I’m here for Kayla and the baby. That’s all. I promise.” I pat his hand on top of mine before I wriggle free. I slam the car door behind me in haste. Jay rolls down the window and shouts.

“Fourth floor! Room two-eight-four!”

I don’t bother stopping at the front desk. Taking the emergency stairs, I prepare myself mentally. Don’t picture his smile. Don’t remember how his body feels against yours. Don’t dwell on the smell of his cologne. Don’t pray for those three little words to leave his lips. That’s not why you’re here.

I burst through the door and right past Cici, Mark, and Adam in the waiting area. I’m moving so fast I nearly pass them entirely. I have to backpedal to greet them all.

“Oh thank god,” Adam says as he stands and wraps me up in a rib-cracking hug. “The calvary is here. Did you bring armor? You’re going to need it.”

Thanks, Adam, that’s comforting.

Cici wraps her skinny arms around me next. She looks like a pretty, blonde zombie that hasn’t got her brain fix today. “I can’t believe you came. We told Chase he shouldn’t, but he called anyways. Where’s Jonah?”

“With my mom and his dad. I made arrangements. How long have you guys been here? None of you look like you’ve eaten or slept. Mark—are you sober?”

He pulls me in for a quick side-hug. The faint smell of weed that always hangs on Mark is nowhere to be found. “It’s that serious, Noa. Plus, Cici says I can’t light up in a hospital.”

“That’s common knowledge, babe.” She pinches playfully at his side.

“How’s Chase?” I ask. No one has a chance to respond. A door in the hallway flies open and a huffy doctor emerges, throwing his clipboard on the top of the nurses’ station. He mumbles in irritation under his breath. A rundown, exhausted-looking Chase follows, closing the door behind him. He puts his face in his hands. He pulls off his hat and chucks it down the

hallway as he roars in frustration. I fear for the nearby medical equipment sitting innocently in the hallway that looks in danger of taking a tumble at Chase's hands.

But then he sees me.

His face immediately changes. He doesn't walk, he runs.

I don't even have time to greet him before I'm wrapped in his big bear arms. My feet come off the floor. The faint smell of his spicy cologne wraps around me and fills me with warmth. *Oh, screw it.* I let the memories flood through me. I nuzzle into his embrace.

"Thank you so much for coming." Chase sets me down and I hold his scruff-filled face. He hasn't shaved in days. He looks even more worn than his raggedy-looking entourage.

"What's going on?"

"The doctor's pissed. He wants to book an O.R. now. Kayla has eclampsia." *Oh god.*

"Are the seizures under control?"

His eyes pop in surprise before he nods. "For now. But the doctor wants to deliver right now. She's four weeks early and is trying to hold out but it's getting so much worse. No one can get through to her. The baby is in danger. It's not her choice anymore," he grunts with aggression. For his baby, Chase is willing to go to war. The anguished lines on his face deepen. I reach up to stroke his cheek reassuringly.

"Did you ask her why she wants to wait?"

"Some bullshit about what's best for the baby, but the doctor explained the risks. This isn't safe for her or the baby." Chase is flustered. His words come out in angry rasps.

"Chase, no offense but I can almost guarantee your—let's call it *energy*—right now is not helping. I'll go talk to her."

He rubs the small of my back. I flinch, remembering Jay's words. I'm just here for support, but I can't help but feel the intimacy blazing through Chase's fingers like lightning shocks. He zaps me everywhere he touches.

"Okay, thank you. Let's go."

"No, you stay here, okay? She needs to talk to another mom. Alone."

I don't give Chase a chance to argue. I hurry down the hallway, slip into Kayla's room, and lock the door behind me. She pops up from the bed in surprise. She's swimming in her hospital gown. The fabric is stretched thin over her round tummy but dramatically lags everywhere else.

“Hey, Kayla, I’m—”

“Noa. I know. Chase said you might be coming.”

I pull up a chair next to her bed. We both cringe at the scraping sound against the tile floor. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you’re here. There’s too much male energy in this room. They’re all being assholes.”

Maybe I should envy her. She gets to share in this monumental moment with Chase. I should wish we could switch places, but for some reason all I feel is relief that I get to be part of this in some small way. Chase’s baby. Chase’s whole world is inside that tummy.

“All men look like assholes when it’s time to expel a human being from your body,” I say, seriously. Kayla chuckles but her smile is strained.

“Did they tell you to talk me into delivering today?”

“Sort of. I don’t know if you know, but I’ve been in that hospital bed before. It’s not a good time to tell a woman what she should or shouldn’t be doing. So I basically told them they can shove it.”

She sighs. “You are like an angel. And you’re really pretty too. I mean, I saw pictures, but...you’re really pretty in person. I look like death right now.”

“You look stunning. You have the baby glow.” I push her sweaty bangs out of her forehead. “I mean it’s a sweaty glow, but it’s there.” Here I am laughing with the woman who I should blame for my broken heart. *Except it’s not her fault.* If only Mani could see me now...she’d call me batshit crazy.

“I’m not just trying to be stubborn by the way and I’m not an idiot. I know what’s at stake. But no one thought I could do this.”

“Do what?”

“Stay sober through the pregnancy. Keep this baby healthy. It was fucking hell. But no one really cared how I felt, as long as I was clean and the baby was okay.”

“May I?” I hold my hand over Kayla’s belly. She nods and I run my hand across her tight round tummy. “Hi, baby,” I whisper. I look up at Kayla. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, but welcome to motherhood. Looked over, left behind, washed out—it sometimes comes with the job description. We work twenty-four-hour shifts that pay exactly zero dollars an hour. But don’t worry, you can join the support group and if it’s any

consolation there's cool shwag. Like birth control pamphlets, stale cookies, and 'I survived' buttons."

Her laugh is hearty this time. *Good. Laughing is good. Less stress for the baby.* "There are all sorts of complications for preemies. I tortured myself to make sure she got the fairest start to life possible and I can't blow it now because everyone is impatient. I screwed up really bad in the beginning and I've worked really hard to make up for it. I want her to be okay."

"Even four weeks early, your baby is strong. I can feel her rolling in here. She's got quite the kick on her. She's thriving, Kayla. You did that for her."

"I don't want to see her hooked up to tubes and in that little glass case. She doesn't weigh enough yet. What if she doesn't make it? Who forces their baby out four weeks early just because of a little high blood pressure?" The room falls silent. We both know it's far more serious than high blood pressure. Eclampsia can be fatal for mom and baby.

"I did. Well, sort of. Jonah, my son, was five weeks early."

"What?"

"Yeah. I don't know what happened. I had a high-risk pregnancy for a number of factors. I was going to be induced at thirty-seven weeks, but then one day my water broke. It wasn't a trickle. I soaked the floor of my husband's new truck. It was disgustingly hilarious—to me. I think he still resents me for it a little. Anyways we got to the hospital and I literally clamped my legs shut. I told them to pump me full of water, fill that bag back up, and we were headed home because my baby boy was not done cooking."

"What happened?"

"Oh, they did exactly that. I never actually had him. I'm still pregnant." I wink at her and she rolls her eyes.

"Seriously, he was okay?"

"I think I was more scared of the aftermath than the delivery. Jonah was ready when he was ready. My body told me so. I was the one who didn't feel prepared."

"That's exactly how I feel."

"You're going to feel that way no matter what. Whether you have your baby today or in four weeks, you're not going to feel set for what's next."

Kayla's head sinks back against her pillow as she digests my words. I busy myself with the ceiling, trying to give her a moment of privacy. The light over her head flickers and buzzes and I have the urge to chuck something at it to knock that bulb out.

“What do I do? I'm not brave like you.”

I scoff. “Oh, I'm not brave. I'm the queen of a brave face. I am stumbling through life, just surviving what comes my way, barely dodging each curveball. I'm just really motivated and you will be too. She'll be your motivation for all your best decisions.” I tap my fingers against her belly. “But you have to meet her face to face, first. When those little eyes look at you—” I let out a low whistle. “That's where you draw your strength and bravery.”

“Do you swear?”

“Girl, I will pull out the pinky right now.” And I do. I ball a fist and lift my pinky finger at Kayla. “See how sure this little finger is? I *promise* you. You can do this, Kayla, you are strong enough for this.”

“Okay,” Kayla breathes and locks her pinky with mine. Mine is strong, hers is shaking, but our fingers lock tightly anyway. “Can you go get that asshole of a doctor? I'm ready.”

chapter 35

L.A.

Chase

I trusted my gut, and it paid off. I don't know what Noa said or did in that room, but she got through to Kayla. My daughter is here safe and sound. My sweet little baby girl who is no bigger than a beer bottle (*sorry baby—I didn't mean to compare you to beer*) is currently being rocked in the recovery room by my saving-grace angel. Noa plays finger tag with my little girl's hands.

"You're strong, baby girl. *Itty-bitty*, but *strong*," Noa coos at the swaddled bundle. "Look at you, breaking out of your blankie. Sweet powerful little thing. You don't want to go back in the incubator with those tubes, do you? No, no, baby girl. That's okay. I'll hold you while you sleep. And we won't tell *anybody* will we?"

It's like I'm not even in the room. Noa is in baby land.

For the past two days Noa has worked tirelessly to save all our asses. Kayla did wonderfully. She's doing so much better. Mom and baby made it through a safe cesarean. *Thank you to every single higher power that may possibly exist. My girls are safe. All of them.* Kayla still really needs the rest. We've barely talked. I want to ask her how she feels about adoption after meeting our daughter, but she can barely keep her eyes open. I table the conversation for when her strength returns.

Meanwhile, Noa barely sleeps. She sent my friends home to rest, shower, and eat. She pops in and out of the hospital to pick up Kayla's favorite meals. She went to the beach house and collected an extra pair of

clothes and my toiletries so I could freshen up at the hospital. She always volunteers for the diaper changes and does most of the feedings.

We're bottle feeding her because Kayla has been through hell and she didn't feel she had the strength to nurse. I tried to protest because I hear it's so good for the baby but Noa shot me a look so scary it sent shivers down my spine. *"Her choice, Chase. Don't pressure her."*

I blink my heavy eyelids. I haven't slept in what feels like days. Baby girl begins to cry and I force my eyes open. Noa stands, unnerved. She bounces, she sways, always with enthusiasm, always with the biggest smile.

"Shhh, shhh, sweet baby girl. I'm here," Noa hums.

I don't know where she gets this kind of endurance. It's awe-inspiring. I can barely keep my eyes open...



"Chase," Noa whispers as she jostles my shoulder. "Sorry to wake you, but I have to go. Jay's waiting to take me to the airport."

I blink. I force my eyes open and wipe the grogginess from my face. Where am I? Did I fall asleep in the waiting room? Last thing I remember was going to the vending machine for a drink. New parent sleep deprivation is no joke. "Where's the baby?"

"With Kayla and the nurses. They are running some tests, but she's doing great. You should go lie down in the room. I just wanted to say bye." Noa leans down and presses her cheek against mine. She makes a kissing sound with her lips, but they don't actually touch me. My favorite vanilla fragrance dances around us, jolting me to my senses. That smell. The one that now reminds me of goodbye.

I don't even bother asking her to stay. I want to. But how much more selfish can I be? I plucked Noa from her life, yet again. I asked her to save me, yet again. She's worked like a dog catering to me and my family for the past three days and now she needs to go home to hers.

"I'll walk you out." I wrap my hand around hers and we head toward the stairs. The elevator in this hospital is so damn slow. Stairs are the efficient choice. Our footsteps echo in the stairwell that smells like smoke for some reason. "We didn't really get a chance to talk."

“Oh, we were a little busy, huh?” She laughs lightly. “I’m so proud of you. You guys are doing great. But I have to ask you something.”

My heart stops. Hope surges. “What’s that?”

“I’ve held that baby for three days now, and I already miss her smell and I’m not even out of the hospital. I know we’re not supposed to be talking, but can I get picture updates? She’s so beautiful, Chase. I can’t wait to see how she grows.”

My heart pounds. My window is closing. I’ve been distracted with my little one entering the world and all the chaos of the hospital, but it’s Noa. The woman I’ve been dreaming about for months. I can’t let her go like this. I yank her back on the stair landing and grab both of her hands in mine. “Remind me why we’re not supposed to be talking?”

“Chase—”

“No, seriously. Tell me.” I walk her backwards and pin her body against the wall with mine. Her breath quickens, but mine slows. I savor the scent of warm vanilla sugar. “Have you been happy?” I wrap my hands around her waist. I whisper into her ear. “Do you miss me?”

“Of course I do.”

“I still love you, Noa. Nothing’s changed.”

She touches her forehead to my chest. “Exactly. Nothing’s changed. You’re still here and I still have to leave.”

I didn’t kiss Noa when we broke up. I kicked myself every day for it. I should’ve tasted her lips one more time. Instead, we fake smiled through Jonah’s birthday cake and presents. We went back to her home and I packed my things. She dropped me off at the airport and she hugged me and told me to take care. We had a million pounds of painful, passionate tension, and I settled for a hug when I knew I wasn’t going to see my girl anytime soon. It was a mistake.

I won’t make that mistake again.

I press my lips against hers, softly, as a question. She answers with her tongue. We smash against each other. Her purse falls to the floor from her shoulders with a loud echoing thud. We let everything fall, all our walls. I wrap her legs around me as I brace her against the wall. My hands move up her shirt. I dive under the cup of her bra and tug at her nipple that answers by hardening. She bites her lip, holding in her low groan. Our aching moans bounce off the walls.

God I missed this. So much. I press my growing hardon against her thighs. I can feel her heat through the thin yoga pants she's wearing. I slide my hand around her back, slipping beneath her pants to grab her bare ass, loving the feel of her soft flesh in my hands.

"Chase," she mewls. "I missed you. I missed you so much." She arches her back, pushing her covered mound further into my sex, and I'm reaching the point of no return. I slide my hand around her hip still beneath her stretchy yoga pants. I dive underneath her panties this time. I touch her spot, I slide my hand down further to feel her dampness. I want in. Even if just my hand for now, I want in. More. Now. I barely dip into her wet slit when the stairwell door bursts open.

Bang!

The back of the door hits the wall and Noa and I are pulled from our moment of passion. I rip my hand out of her pants and she drops to the floor. By the time the busy doctor looks up from his phone, all he sees are two people huddled up against a wall, panting like we just raced each other up the stairs.

"Good evening," he mumbles as he passes.

"Good evening," I grumble back. *I hate you.*

As soon as the coast is clear, my hands find Noa's hips again, but our moment passes. She catches my arms and holds them away from her body.

"Not into the uncomplicated quickies anymore, huh?" I chuckle to hide the hurt of rejection.

"Please. We are so far past complicated." She rises to her tippy-toes and caresses my lips with hers, but the pressure eases. "I shouldn't say this, but I still love you too. But I have to leave. If we don't find a way to let go now, we never will."

"What if I don't want to let go?"

"I'll tell you what—once your baby girl goes to college and we're both empty-nesters, let's give this a try. I might be wrinkly and gray, but if you're into it, I bet in eighteen years, I'll still love you like I do today." Her smile is haunting.

Eighteen years? I bet I'll still love you too.

"I'll be into it, baby."

"Good. I'll meet you then. Maybe right here in this stairwell because I can't think of a classier place to get it on." Noa clicks her jaw and winks, but her eyes fill with tears. She tries to laugh herself through yet another

painful goodbye. “All right, I’m going to go.” She brings my knuckles to her lips. “Pictures. Don’t forget. I want to see that baby.”

There’s a swirling ache in my gut. *Please don’t leave me again.*

“Bye, Noa. Thank you so much for everything.”

“Hey, Chase?” she asks over her shoulder.

“Yeah?” *Shut up, hope. It’s not happening. Let her go.*

“I’m so proud of you.” She blows a kiss my way before the door closes behind her. Once again, I’m alone. By myself in this chilly hollow-feeling stairwell.

This time I’m too tired to cry. I’m out of tears. I head back up the stairs to find the little person who is now my world. The only little person who means enough to me to let Noa Fallon get away, again.

chapter 36

Estes Park

Noa

The weather is particularly harsh this year at the lodge. We arrived this morning and in line with tradition, our class reunion party started as soon as we bought out the liquor stores. The property is eight bedrooms, ten baths, and about ten thousand square feet of drunken party space. We vow every year to only invite a handful of our old classmates who are back in town for the holidays and yet every year—rager. Perhaps it's because both Mani and Reese believe that Instagram reels on their public profiles are an appropriate way to announce a *private party*.

Quinn, Mani, Reese, Addie, and I all snuck up to the second-floor hot tub on the private deck of the master suite. It's so peaceful up here if you ignore the deafeningly loud music from the main floor. The shadowed silhouette of the forest shakes in the freezing evening wind. It blows the powdery snow off the tree branches in swirly whisps that are so magically beautiful I have to fight the urge to sing "Let it Go".

Actually, it's so cold up here, even Elsa from *Frozen* would be bothered. We could probably get hypothermia in our bathing suits but we're all toasty under the jacuzzi's bubbles. The steam rising from the water mixes with our icy breath making it look like we're filming a throwback Snoop Dogg music video.

"I'm just going to ask the question that I know is on everyone's mind," Addie declares. "Why the hell do we host this party at all if we always end up hiding from it? Look! Nono's already yawning."

“What?” I cover my mouth to hide the evidence of the next yawn. “I’m nooooooot.” *Dammit.*

“Noa, seriously? It’s like eight thirty. Is it your insomnia, still?” Quinn splashes me across the tub with water.

“Leave me alone,” I groan. When my mother first got to town, I was able to catch a few nights of sleep. She took such good care of me I think she lulled me to sleep with comfort and security. But ever since I made that trip to L.A., held Chase, held his sweet little baby girl that smells like lavender, graham crackers, and love, the insomnia has been in full swing. Real talk, if someone could bottle the smell of newborn baby, they’d die rich. That scent is the most amazing smell in the whole world. I miss that little girl so much and she’s not even mine.

Chase hasn’t made good on his promise of pictures. I don’t push, I know he must be exhausted. And there’s also the small matter of us getting too close in a hospital stairwell. I’m glad we were interrupted. We were so close to twisting the knife and making our inevitable goodbye that much more painful.

I am able to catch about two hours of sleep each night from sheer physical exhaustion, but outside of that my mind just races. Nonstop. I see my life in snippets and scenes that are distorted and blurry. I see every single time I pretended to be brave but I was actually too chicken to fight for what I wanted. I see so much regret and I can’t rest. If I stop and dwell, I’ll collapse. I have to keep moving to survive—just like my manta rays.

“You know what you need?” Reese says as she climbs back into the tub squeezing into a corner with Addie. She has to be careful and attentive because the deck is slippery—and she’s holding two giant bottles of tequila in her hands. “A good pounding. True story. Good D will put you right to sleep. Right, Bear?” She nudges Addie. “You’ve been sleeping pretty soundly lately.”

“Really, Addie? I kind of thought that whole situation would fizzle,” Mani says.

“Nuh-uh. I don’t want to talk about it. Can we get back to Nono, please?”

“Unsubscribe. No, thank you. I don’t want to talk about it either.” We’re not going to talk about Chase. It hurts too much when I stop to think about it. I was so close...we were so close...to happiness. I could taste it. And now it’s gone.”

“All right, so we have sleepy, drinky, horny—any other dwarves in the hot tub tonight?” Quinn asks.

“How about judgy?” Addie sticks her tongue out.

Quinn points to herself, mouthing, ‘*Moi?*’ Addie’s head bobbles fervently. “Oh, I’m changing you to angsty dwarf,” Quinn snarks back.

Mani clinks her fingernail against one of the tequila bottles she pried from Reese’s hands like she’s about to make a toast. “Guys—I’m moving home.”

Quinn’s expression flattens. Someone might confuse this as apathy, but anyone who really knows Quinn knows she immediately goes neutral when she’s about to cry. She crosses her arms. “Mani—serious?”

“Yeah, Nono, can you put me up for a while?”

“You know you don’t even have to ask.” This is our pact. The door is always open, no need to RSVP. I could use the company when I don’t have Jonah. I only get to keep my mom and my dad, who flew in a few days ago with more goodies from the rock, for a couple more weeks. Then it’ll just be me and all those feelings I’ve been ignoring.

Quinn wades across the water and wraps her arms around Mani’s neck. “Thank you. Good. Missed you.” She speaks like a cave woman so her voice doesn’t crack as she tries to compose a sentence.

“Hey! No crying in the hot tub because we’ll all start crying,” Addie scolds. “Save crying for Saturday.”

We all get a little something out of this trip. Reese and Mani get their kickoff party where they drink and dance and relive the good ol’ college days with our former classmates and friends. Addie and I get our hike through the Rocky Mountain National Forest the next day. We all strap our hiking boots on and hit our favorite (okay mine and Addie’s favorite) twelve-mile trail. It’s nothing but fresh air, crunching boots on the snowy mountain earth, and reminiscing for at least four hours. Day three of the trip is Quinn’s. We dump our phones into a bowl, stay in our pajamas, and block out the world. We spend an entire day eating nothing but popcorn and watching all our favorite movies that celebrate unbreakable female friendships. All the *Sex and the Citys*, *Mean Girls*, *Bridesmaids*, *Girls Trip*. We’re adding *Someone Great* to the lineup this year but it’s permanence on the short list is yet to be confirmed. Sunday, we grab breakfast at our favorite country diner before we hit the road and return to real life.

“You guys want to hear something a little nutty?” Mani asks to change the subject. Even she’s a little choked up at Quinn’s heartfelt reaction to her big announcement.

“Literally always,” Reese replies.

“Not *that* kind of nutty, Pieces. I saw my psychic before I came here—”

She’s interrupted by a chorus of grumbling and groaning in perfect harmony.

“Hey! Screw you guys. Psychics are a real thing—she’s brilliant. Anyways I told her about this trip and she said that by next year we’ll all be with the *one*.” Mani wiggles her fingers like she’s casting a spell. “Crazy right? I thought she was kidding at first but I never even mentioned you guys and yet she knew all these intimate details. She knew Nono has a broken heart.” *Lucky guess. Maybe she saw a tabloid.* “She knew Quinn works sixty-hour weeks.” *Yeah...but again, lucky inkling. Have you seen Quinn’s business suits and power pose? Obvious.* “She knew Reese could out-sing Mariah, Celine, and Ariana put together.” *A little more impressive. Reese keeps her shockingly amazing voice very close to the chest. Touchy subject.* “And she knew Addie is lying to her boss about her virginity.” *Oh...okay, psychics might be real.*

“What the hell, Mani? Did you give her our social security numbers and blood types too?” Addie grimaces.

Quinn pinches her brow as a look of realization washes over her. “Oh my god, she told you to move back home, didn’t she? I thought you missed us and realized where you belong, but you’re following your psychic’s advice aren’t you?”

A guilty Mani flicks at the water making a *plop, plop* sound. “You really want to pull at that thread?”

“You’re insane. You have partied all your brain cells away in California and are using witchy con artists as your life coach. This is why! This is why none of you are allowed out of my sight, ever again,” Quinn growls as she smacks the water.

“Okay, *Mom*. Say what you will, but she’s never been wrong about anything in my life so far. She literally said all five of us, wifed-up in one year. This trip will be a couples’ trip next year.”

Reese sprays a mouthful of tequila, she’s laughing so hard.

“Literally ridiculous. We are the motley crew of warped relationships. No way we *all* get our shit together in a year,” Addie says. “Noa was the

only shoe-in and even she's divorced."

And bleeding out from my heart right now, by the way. "Preach," I mumble.

"The only way that'll happen is if we pair off with each other," Quinn agrees.

"How would that go exactly?" I shut one eye trying to hold in another yawn.

"Easy," Reese jumps in. "Nono and Mani are already an old married couple. Quinn and Addie would pair off and I would be Quinny's side piece."

"So, we're just assuming in this marriage scenario I'll be okay with getting cheated on, openly?" Addie swipes the bottle from Reese's hands and takes an angry glug.

"Fine. *Secret* side piece. You're so needy, Bear."

"I'm just saying if you're going to cheat, at least have the decency to be ashamed of yourselves and keep it on the low."

"Meh, I'll make you an honest woman, Addie," Mani jokes. "Grandma over here just yawned for the fiftieth time. I may need more excitement than this ball and chain."

"Hey!" I shout. "We took vows! Leave me and I'm taking half of everything."

"Marry Quinn then. You'll fare better getting half of that empire."

"Prenup, biatches," Quinn singsongs.

Ahem. A throaty rumble cuts through the night air. We whip our heads around to see a large male figure leaning against the sliding door. The bottle of tequila Addie's holding bobs in the tub as she opens her palm in surprise. Reese lunges, rescuing the booze before we're all taking a tequila bath.

His smile is an electric shock from revival paddles. My heart pounds so heavily the percussion matches the club beats from downstairs.

Chase Ford lifts his head slightly and beneath his baseball cap is a humorous expression. I don't know how long he's been standing there but long enough to be thoroughly entertained by the marital musings of me and my four best friends. "Hi, ladies. This is an enlightening conversation."

This is a dream. I fell asleep in the hot tub and now I'm dreaming. But he looks real. He's wearing very real dark denim and a long-sleeve gray V-neck sweater that hugs all the defined muscles of his torso. He's wearing his favorite hat...

“Chase?” My voice is hoarse as if I just finished smoking an entire carton. My breath is strained, from the cold...from the heat...from the collision of both—I don’t know. *Chase? How?*

“I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I’ve been looking for you for like an hour. Someone from the party downstairs told me you’d be up here.” He nods over his shoulder. “You guys left the doors open.”

My legs are jelly, but I force them to move. I hoist myself out of the hot tub and find the nearest towel, I don’t care whose it is. I wrap myself quickly to protect my skin against the freezing night air. I’m barely within a pace of Chase before he’s rubbing my shoulders.

“You’re freezing.”

“You’re here?” I poke his chest. It’s like poking a marble wall. *Definitely not dreaming.* His throaty laugh bellows into the suddenly still and quiet night. Everything fades as Chase holds me in place.

“Are you making sure I’m real? You did that to me when you were feverish with the flu. Remember that? You thought I was a mirage and poked me in the face all night.” *Oh, yes. Back then. Back in our love bubble. I miss that bubble.*

It dawns on me why Chase would track me down at the lodge. “What’s wrong? Is the baby okay?”

“She’s fine. Better than fine. She’s amazing. She’s doing so well. Kayla too. Everyone is okay. I’m not here about that.” He glances nervously at my friends behind us who are not doing a good job of minding their business. “I’m here for you, Noa. And I don’t want this to come off as demanding, but this time, there’s no chance in hell I’m letting you go again.” Chase tightens his arms around me.

My heart spazzes at the flicker of sweet hope. *You prayed for this, Noa.* A sign. A second—okay fiftieth—chance. He’s here. He’s really here. Don’t you dare screw this up again. Be brave. Embrace the mess. This beautiful, perfect mess.

“Sorry. I’m getting you all wet.”

Chase doesn’t budge. “I don’t care. You won’t believe the day I’ve had trying to track you down, so please—just for a minute, let me hold you.” And for a moment, we slip right back into us. It’s better than a dream. We hold each other, our embrace saying everything we don’t need to right now.

Unfortunately, we’re not alone and Addie’s snarky interruption yanks us down to earth.

“Sooo, if this is going to escalate do you guys want to leave...or like should we?” I narrow my eyes at Addie, but she has backup.

“I mean, common sense speaking, that’s like four of us getting out of the hot tub, or you two just—” Reese makes a shooing motion with her hand.

Chase’s body jostles with laughter as he breathes into my neck. “Can we talk somewhere private?”

“But are you guys like actually going to *talk* or should I just plan to bunk with Pieces tonight?” Mani cuts in. “My luggage is still in our room.” This lodge has eight bedrooms, but we all bunk up just like we did in college. Quinn stays in the master. Addie and Reese share the Telluride room, and Mani and I take the Aspen room. And then usually by Saturday night we’re all squeezing in Quinn’s California king. Because as I previously mentioned—we’re codependent. But in a good way. *I think*.

I grab Chase’s hand and lead him away from the gallery commentators. “I’ll be back,” I say to the girls.

“Don’t come back! Go put yourself to sleep if you know what I mean.” *Shut up, Reese*. We leave behind an eruption of whooping and slow claps.

Chase laughs all the way through the door and down the hallway. “So, by the way—you’d end up with Mani-maker, huh? Interesting. It’s good to know who the competition is.”

“Come on, you goofball stalker.” I pull him into the Aspen room which is heinously decorated. It’s almost necessary to close your eyes. “You know when it comes to me, you have no competition.”

My heart flutters with anticipation. I missed him so much. I missed the hope of us. So many words unsaid, so many missed opportunities. So many nos that should’ve been yeses. I was near my breaking point. This surprise visit is the grain of rice that tips the scales. Passion. Heat. Yearning. Us.

If that’s what he’s here for, it’s his.

chapter 37

Estes Park

Chase

Noa can sit caked in dried saltwater all day. It doesn't bother her. I've been alongside her as she plays in and out of the ocean water all day without needing a shower. But she can't stand to leave chlorine on her skin. It freaks her out. She mentioned something about that scene in *Suicide Squad* where Harley Quinn dives into the vat of acid.

The shower hisses behind the bathroom door of this hideously decorated room. It's ugly, yet charming. The drapes are a mustard yellow. Every picture hanging in this room is of Aspen trees in various seasons. The colors clash horrendously. The carpet looks Victorian while the light fixtures are encased with branches or antlers...something like that. I'm not sure. I scour every inch of the room trying to distract myself from the nerves in my chest.

I've had the longest day. I caught a six a.m. flight where I was mobbed by paparazzi. Too exhausted to fight them, I just let them flash their cameras in my tired eyes as I grunted in response to their invasive questions. I'd already been up all night making sure my baby girl and her mom were all set up with everything they needed at the beach house. Kayla wanted private bonding time with our daughter before she said goodbye and left for rehab.

My flight was delayed. We sat on the tarmac for hours as a friendly but chatty businesswoman grilled me about every intimate detail of my life. *Yes, I just had a baby. Yes, she's beautiful. Yes, she radiates with the*

intensity of a thousand suns. Yes, it's killing me to be away from her for even a minute but I have some things I need to take care of in Denver. Yes, I'd love it if you'd shut your mouth now and let me sleep. That last part wasn't said. I'm too polite to pop off on my fans. I'm very gracious for their support.

I finally made it onto my favorite welcome mat in the world and was elated when Jonah answered the door. I pulled him into a bear hug and he squealed like a little piglet when I tickled him.

I was less elated to find out Noa wasn't home. Instead, I was greeted by her very protective mother who is all too aware of my entire saga with her daughter. From fake dating to impregnated my ex-girlfriend. I basically fell on my knees trying to explain my heart and how I intended to be the man Noa deserves. I was about two seconds from receiving her blessing when Noa's father came down the stairs and I had to start my plea all over again.

After hours of coffee table chat—I'll never drink anything other than real Kona coffee for the rest of my life—they finally told me where I could find Noa in Estes Park for her annual girls' trip. I drove the two hours and arrived at a huge mountain lodge expecting to find Mani-maker, Quinn, Adler, Reese, and Noa in face masks, painting each other's toenails. Instead I drive up to a party that looks very much like all the parties I've been avoiding back home. After endless crowd shuffling and autograph requests and a few daring lady hands groping me, someone mentioned that the hosts of the party usually tuck away upstairs when things get too wild. This lodge has three floors across two different structures. It literally took me ten minutes to find the master retreat.

And then I saw her. *Her.* Looking like a sexy angel goddess in my favorite purple string bikini. The smile on her face when she realized I'd come for her made the entire never-ending day from hell worth it. *So worth it.*

We left the world behind, latched the door behind us. Noa hopped in the shower to rinse off and left me on the bed fidgeting with the manilla envelope in my hand.

The shower shuts off and the flutter in my chest becomes a revved-up silverback gorilla, beating its fists angrily against my ribs.

Noa emerges, wrapped in a towel. She must've hurriedly rinsed off because her hair isn't wet. Her wavy tendrils cascade down her shoulders

and back when she tugs the tie free from her messy bun. She never cuts her beautiful hair. It's a blanket. One day it'll touch the floor.

"Do you want some privacy to get dressed?" I ask.

She shyly shakes her head. "No need." She sits on the edge of the bed and I tuck her hair to the side so I can see her face. I lose myself in the sparkling gray gems that I've been dreaming of for months. "Can we—"

"I think we should—"

We interrupt each other, nervously.

She lets out a calming deep breath, like she's giving herself a pep talk. "Chase, were you serious when you said you weren't leaving here without me?"

"Completely serious."

"I'm not going to make you chase me anymore. I'm here. And I will be here tomorrow and the next day and as long as you want me to be. So that being said..." She shrugs her towel off her shoulders and intoxicates me with her damp bare tits. "Can we talk tomorrow? I just want to be close to you right now."

"You promise me you'll be here in the morning?"

"Yes."

I pull my sweater and shirt over my head with one swift tug. I'll allow it. I let my cock harden at the promise of relief tonight. Finally. After...I lost count of how many months, but sex doesn't exist in my world without Noa.

I wrap my hand around her neck, pulling her lips to mine. "We are going to take this deliciously slow tonight. Because now we have time." Her lips part slightly, allowing my tongue to rake over hers. "So slow," I growl.

I push her backwards on the bed and fall between her legs. I unwrap her towel fully and she bridges her hips so I can rip it away leaving her completely exposed. Her perfect rawness. I fill my mouth with her tits. I tease. I nip. I suck. I make sure she's panting and the sweat is already beading before I work my way down past her navel to find my favorite little ray.

I trail my finger against her wet slit and she shudders as she bucks against me. She's already sopping. Always so wet for me. After all this time, the spark is only stronger.

I fill her, one finger then two. She runs her fingers through my hair, tugging lightly, then harder as she tries to fight the building intensity. But there's no mercy tonight. I clamp my mouth onto her clit and ignite her flames.

She screams but doesn't cover her mouth. She whimpers as she explodes. Her passion drips down my hand as she convulses around my fingers.

"You want another?"

"No, I want you," she pants. She reaches for my jeans button but her hands are trembling. It's as if the aftershock is just as powerful as the earthquake.

"I got it," I say, tugging off the remainder of my clothing. "Lay back. Let me take care of you." She grabs my face as I hover over her between her thighs. I position my ready cock at the very center of her hot and needy sex.

"I want that."

I pause. The look in her eyes. She's trying to tell me something. "What, baby?"

"I want to let you love me because you do it better than anyone. I'm sorry I ran."

I push against her entrance and am pulled in like a magnet. *Oh, fuck.* She's like a mold made just for me. She tenses around me, strangling my cock. I brace and force myself to move slowly. "I love you." We don't need to rush. I find her favorite rhythm and we pace. We take our time because here is the trifecta. Love, lust, trust. Let's stay here.

She grips the sheets as her head bounces against the mattress. She's biting her lip so hard she's going to puncture it. I place my lips on hers to save her from the damage. *Use my lips, baby.*

Her walls clench harder around me. She's writhing and bucking her hips as she gets closer to her release. I lick the back of my thumb and press it against her throbbing magic release button. She moans in delight. She wants to see those stars—right now.

She erupts again and her wails of pleasure are enough to cause my explosion right behind her. My balls twist up and I grip her tits as I pour into her. It's safe here. Noa is my home.

I'm home.

I slump, careful to hold my weight on my elbows so I don't crush her. I plant kisses on her forehead, and then her cheeks which are still flushed and heated with her arousal.

We lie against each other's sweaty bodies for a while before she reluctantly rolls out of bed. She busies herself in the bathroom as I pull on my briefs.

"Baby? Which of these suitcases is yours?" I look at a pink leopard-print suitcase and a sleek black hardtop.

"The black one. It's new." She smiles at something I must not understand. *Hm*. I grab Amani's suitcase and place it in the hallway, then close the door and lock it behind me.

I join Noa under the sheets and she snuggles into me, butt to front. Spooning her, I draw her sweet curves closer to my body.

"Do you miss your baby girl?" she asks.

"Yes," I mumble against her ear. "She's amazing. We named her Presley. What do you think?"

"Mmmm, I love that so much. Presley Ford. Perfect." Noa's voice is slurry like she's half caught in a dream.

"You were wrong by the way."

"It's rare but it happens." She chuckles lightly. "About what, though?"

"You implied that loving my daughter would make me love you less. Want you less."

"I was wrong?"

"I love you even more because I finally understand. Everything you do for Jonah...it's not a choice. It's like—instinct."

"And here you thought I was so brave. I'm just an animal."

"I'm an animal now, too," I say. "I wanted to let you know that—"

"Not tonight. I want to hear every single little detail. I do. But not tonight. I'm so tired."

I trace her curves with my hand then wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her closer. "Then sleep, baby. Rest."

She snuggles back into me. "Yeah. I think I finally can."

chapter 38

Denver

Noa

I stare at the thin yellow calligraphy at the bottom right corner of the canvas. My name. It's my name on this giant canvas that is mounted in the center of Annisen Gallery's main wall. The showcase is tomorrow night but Dan let me sneak in early as a birthday present so I could show Chase my baby before it's gone.

It's already been sold. After the exhibit tomorrow I'll never see her again. Dan told me he was able to up the price because of the collector's eagerness. I don't care about the price, I am just stupefied at the word *collector*. Someone wants to collect me—my work.

Chase's footsteps echo in the empty gallery. He stepped outside to take a call. I admire him as he returns to my side. He insisted we dress up tonight. I wanted to wear sweatpants and eat cake all day in line with my normal birthday tradition, but Chase took me out to the fanciest five-course fondue dinner where we spent three hours feeding each other with our hands and playing footsie under the table. He looks divine in his dark slacks and black sports coat. I match him with my long black sequin shift dress. For once he's not in a hat.

"How's Presley?" I ask as he nears.

"Good. She's all packed and ready. It's your last chance to back out of all this."

Kayla has decided to try a rehab facility in Boulder, Colorado. It's less than an hour drive from my home, where Chase and baby Presley will be

moving.

“Not a chance. I can’t wait to kiss those fat baby cheeks every single day. I was thinking though. Between Jonah, Presley, you, me, Mani, the nanny we’re going to have to hire, and I’m sure the pop-ins from all your friends and mine...we might need a bigger house. What do you think?”

Chase’s eyes double in size. “Really? I agree. But you’re open to that?”

“Yeah. You know what? I think I’m finally ready for a change. You okay with selling?”

Chase wraps his hand around mine and squeezes. “We’ll start looking, baby.” He kisses the back of my hand and turns to face my painting. “Are you sad to let this go? It’s not too late for me to outbid whatever asshole bought it.”

“Um, yes—it literally is too late. It’s sold, you goof. There’s no more bidding. And I’m glad you didn’t buy it. I didn’t want a pity purchase. I put my whole heart into this and I’m over the moon that someone thought it was...worthy.”

“It wouldn’t have been pity. It’s incredible. The colors—I don’t know, it makes me feel happy but sad and relieved at the same time. Those all seem contradictory but there’s a lot going on here. I honestly love it. You may need to paint me another one.”

“You got it.”

“What made you decide to paint a suitcase?”

I glide my hands against the bottom of the canvas and touch my yellow signature. “I painted my old suitcase that busted a couple days after I met you. I filled it to max capacity and it just came apart. And then it hit me when we were broken up, sometimes there is beauty in the breakage. Sometimes things have to bust so you can clearly see all of the wonderful things that’re inside. All the things you tried to pack away.”

I never thought the first piece of my art that would make waves would be a six-by-six-foot painting of a giant-ass, worn-out suitcase filled with all the things that bring me joy. But here we are.

“I recognize so many things on here. The Joes and their army tanks, Jonah’s pool floaties. There’s the bikini you wore to the *Steam Me* shoot.”

I point to the little objects in the back. “There’s your hat, the ice pack I filled for Wes after his accident, a little hula girl figurine for Jay. The number three candle from your birthday do-over. There’s a baseball to represent the day we had our first kiss.”

“Ah, our first fake but real kiss.”

“It was a great kiss.”

“This is incredible. I’m so proud of you. You put *your* heart into this.”

“Yeah, I really did. And look how much of you is on that canvas...look how much of you is in my heart.” I grab Chase’s hands, meet his gaze and allow myself to swim in his chocolate-colored pools. “I’m happy, Chase. I love you. Thank you for kidnapping me all those months ago.”

“You’re welcome. I’m so glad we’re still making that joke.”

“Literally, forever.” My smile is warm and full and it’s a perfect birthday. Almost. “Let’s go. My mom made my birthday cake and you’re in for a treat. Her version is way better than mine.”

“She soaks the cherries in amaretto. That’s the only difference.”

I release his hand and cross my arms. “She told *you* the secret ingredient?”

“Yeah, it was a gesture...to welcome me into the family.”

“What do you me—”

Chase sinks to his knee and reaches for my hand.

Oh my god. He said forever. Why am I surprised? I should’ve expected this but my heart is fluttering anyways. Chase will never stop giving me butterflies. Not until the end of time. I hold my other hand to my lips and let my shaky breath pour over my even shakier hands.

“I was going to ask you to marry me when I came out for Jonah’s birthday party.”

“What?” I sniffle. I can feel my face swelling.

“I thought if I gave you the ultimate commitment, I could keep you. But the moment slipped past us and four months later, I realized something. Do you remember that pact I made with the universe after the wellness retreat? What I asked for?”

“Real love?”

“Presley was conceived the day I got back. I think she was actually the universe’s gift, I just didn’t realize it at the time. She’s my...that little face.” Chase can’t help but grin every time he thinks about his little baby. “But, I think the universe was extra thorough and I met you the next day because you complete the puzzle for all of us. I was able to do the right things for Kayla and her pregnancy because you taught me what it means to be family. I know it’d be simpler if we met, fell in love, and made babies of our own,

but somehow Presley glues us all together. She saved me, she saved Kayla, and I think she'll save us too."

Chase pulls a manilla envelope from the inside of his suit jacket. I'm suddenly feeling like maybe there's no reason to cry. Is this not a proposal? He hands me the envelope.

"I thought that the way to keep you was a ring. Marriage. There's something more permanent to you though." I pull out the folded piece of paper. "That's a will between Kayla and I, naming you Presley's godmother and legal guardian if anything should happen to us. If you accept, she's your family now too."

I clasp my hand over my mouth, catching my gasp. There is no greater gesture of love than Chase trusting me with the most important thing in the world to him. I can't speak so I nod. I lean over him and wrap my arms around his neck. "Of course. Of course, I accept."

Clink.

I send something flying out of the envelope that's sideways in my hand as I hug Chase.

"Whoops," he says as he chases down the rolling...*ring*. He's back in front of me in a flash, back down on his knee. "And oh yeah, I guess we can get married too if you want." He rolls his shoulders playfully.

"Chase!"

He laughs and grabs my left hand again. "Kainoa Luana Fallon, will you do me the honor of being my wife? My forever? My home and my peace. Will you take my baggage? Will you let me help carry yours? I promise I will love you well past my very last breath."

"Yes..." I wipe at my face trying to rein in the ugly-cry. "Yeah." I wish I could conjure up a big romantic speech, but what can I say? Chase said it all.

I'll admire this beautiful diamond later, right now I want his lips. Chase rises and kisses me sweetly. His lips caress mine with slow care as if we have all the time in the world.

"Happy birthday, baby."

"Thank you," my whisper tremors. "Best birthday ever."

"Do you want to go home? Or, since your mom and dad are at the house, how about we get a nice room somewhere downtown tonight? We can go make some more babies."

I wipe away the remaining tears and giggle. “You are really underestimating the newborn phase. It’s relentless. You’ll see. And you’re already talking about more children?”

“Oh yeah. Jonah, Presley—they are just the beginning. I want a huge family.” He holds his hands wide. “A bunch of babies.”

“Really? How many?”

“Ten, at least.”

I stare in shock. “Chase, I’m not a gumball machine.”

“Seven?”

“Three, including the ones we have.”

“*What?* Five, at least.” This argument could go on all night. “All right, baby, how about we get that room and tonight we just practice expanding our family?” He shoots me the smoldering look that I will never get tired of. The smile that caught me, the same one that kept me. I lace my decorated left hand in his and pull him toward the door.

“Deal. Practice makes perfect, right?”

“I love you, Noa.”

“I love you too, Chase Ford.”

epilogue

Denver

Noa

Three months later

“You drive like such a mom.” I peripherally glance to my right. Kayla winks at me from the passenger seat. I know this drive well by now. We’ve made it at least ten times over the past few months visiting her in rehab.

“Our kiddos are in the car. Would you like me to go all *Talladega Nights* right now?”

“Not complaining. Just an observation.”

The setting sun catches Kayla’s cheek that looks full and round, filled with color. “You look great. I’m really proud of you. Ninety days sober. All on your own.” It’s actually not fair. Kayla’s been clean and sober far longer, but she doesn’t like to take credit for her pregnancy sobriety. She says *that* she did for Presley. *This*—her ninety days—she did for herself.

“I got fat.” She chuckles heartily. “Again, I’m not complaining. I feel so much better. I think I have a weird taste for cafeteria food now.”

“You’re not fat,” I mumble in support. She can’t have put on more than five pounds. She needed to put on close to fifteen. “You look alive... beautiful. Good for you. Again, we’re all so proud of you.”

“*All?*” Kayla’s groan fills the car, drowning out the sound of my right turn signal. I pause at a green light, patiently allowing the car on the opposite side of the intersection to blow past the red light. I mentally honk.

He's gone...why bother. "You're throwing me a party to celebrate, aren't you?"

"Whaaat? Nooo."

"Shit, Noa—"

"Hey! That's a cuss, Auntie Kayla!" Jonah sings from the back seat. He's become the cuss word sheriff over the past few months which has been fun...and *annoying*. "You can't cuss because Pressie hears cusses now." I glance into the rearview mirror to see Jonah carefully replacing baby Presley's binky. He's the best backseat co-pilot with his baby sister in the car. She coos from the attention. I cater to that little miss all day, all night, but Jonah is still by far her favorite person.

"Sorry, Jojo. I owe you a quarter when we get home."

"Nooo. It's a whole dollar!"

Kayla shoots me a side glance. "A dollar per cuss? Seriously?"

"Oh yeah." I nod. "He'll rob you blind. He uses the cuss money for his dinosaur collection. At the new house there are two playrooms. One was meant for Presley. I was going to do a whole princess castle theme—but Jonah just uses it for dinosaur storage now." I half smile. "It'll be a while before Presley can use that room anyways. But be warned, the nursery in your guest house looks like the inside of Tinkerbell's closet. I couldn't help myself—so enjoy that."

Kayla reaches over to pat my knee. "Are you okay with this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she's basically been your baby for the past three months and now she's moving in with me."

Rehab has made Kayla very emotionally in tune. With Chase away filming and Mani's move home delayed, it was just me, Jonah, and Presley on the giant property Chase purchased for us. One six-thousand-square-foot main house and two massive guest houses. It's way too much space, but Chase says he's thinking ahead. He's trying to save room in our home for friends and family...at least he better be. I'm still not convinced he's given up on the idea of me bearing a gazillion children. He loves being a dad. My phone's charge is constantly under ten percent. We live on FaceTime between his takes.

"You guys will be moving fifteen yards down the path."

"Come on—"

"Fine. I'll miss her terribly. I already do. But she needs her mama."

“She needs you too.”

“Well she has us both. Two for one. Lucky lil’ ducky.”

“I wrote a thank-you card for you. It was the final part of the program. We were supposed to write thank-you letters to the people who impacted our recovery the most. If it wasn’t for you Noa, I might’ve let her go. I would’ve regretted it forever.” Kayla reaches into her bag and fishes out a book I recognize all too well. She pulls out a card from the center of the paperback and places it in the glove compartment. “Read that sometime when you have a moment to yourself, okay?”

“Thank you, I will.” I nod to the book in her lap. “Are you reading these days?”

“There’s a lot of time in rehab to read. But I only like the sexy stuff.” Kayla snorts. “This one is really good.” She holds the pink paperback up for me to see. “It’s called *Pretend With Me*. It has a great story. Want to borrow it?”

“I have it. I’ve read it. I’m *in* it. One of my best friends wrote that book about the first time she fell in love.”

Kayla smacks my shoulder so hard in surprise I nearly swerve. “*Kayla!*”

“You know this author? Adler Haley? Serious? The stuff in this book is *real?*”

“Most of it.”

“The part about her virginity?”

“Real.”

“The balcony scene?”

I smirk. “Real.”

“His giant—”

“*Kayla! Kids. In. The. Car.*”

“I have so many questions. I need to pick your brain later.”

I smile to myself. Addie-bear. The baby of our group...all grown up. “I’ll introduce you to her. Addie tells the story best.” We venture down the never-ending paved path that leads us to our new residence. “I need to feed Presley first. Her bottles are still at the main house. Then I’ll help you get settled into the guest house. Sound good?”

“Great,” Kayla responds. “Hey—is that Chase?” We pull into the driveway to see Chase sitting on the porch stairs, elbows on his knees. *My man. Home.* “I thought he was in New Zealand, filming?”

My heart knocks ferociously in my chest. “So did I.” I throw the car in park. Jonah unbuckles instantly and dives out of the car, screaming Chase’s name all the way to the front door.

“Heyyy, buddy!” Chase catches him midair and kisses his cheek. *Damn, he looks good.* He looks good with our kids in his arms. After all this time, he still gives me the most furious butterflies.

I give Kayla my house keys before she frees Presley from her car seat. She pauses at the door to give Chase a moment to snuggle on his little love. Why is there nothing sexier than a man holding a baby with a smile like *that* on his face?

I stand back, taking it all in. My new life. This odd picture. My unexpected version of perfect.

Kayla calls Jonah inside the house, giving Chase and me a moment alone. He strides toward me. “Surprise,” he says with a cheeky smile.

“Surprise?” I place my hand on my hip. “That’s all you got? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home?”

“Because I have to head right back. Just two days, baby.”

He wraps me in his arms. His lips part mine and he moans.

“A fifteen-hour flight each way for only two days? Chase—you’re going to collapse. I told you we are okay.”

“You don’t miss me?” He wraps his hands around my hip and lets his grip fall. He grasps my rear and takes a handful. “I *really* missed you.”

“Of course, I miss you. All day, every day. I’m counting down the days until *Dynasty Man* wraps.”

“Me too.”

“It’s still too much. I worry about how much you’re—”

“Hush, Noa. Trip’s well worth it. I needed to see my family. You guys give me strength.” He kisses me again, desperately, like I’m the only thing on the planet that can quench his thirst.

“Want a tour of our home? I keep forgetting you’ve only seen it in pictures. I have your set of keys, too. Oh, and I want to show you how I painted the kids’ rooms.”

“I want to see, but later, baby. Right now, I have a meeting.”

What? “In Denver?”

“Yes—a very important meeting. With my favorite little ray.” Chase hoists me over his shoulders and I squeal. He marches us through the front

door. He calls down the hallway. “Kayla, you got the kids for a bit? Noa and I have to—”

“Screw?” she calls back. I flush in embarrassment, but Chase laughs, unashamed. Chase and Kayla have officially reached Noa and Wes status. Uncomfortably amicable exes. Kayla’s argument with Jonah about whether ‘screw’ is a swear word fades as Chase takes the stairs, two steps at a time.

“Where’s our bedroom?”

“Far left,” I answer, still dangling over his shoulder.

We enter the master retreat. He lays me carefully on the bed and hovers over me. He pops the buttons on my blouse free, clearing his view. “Mmm, I love you.” His lips trail down my neck. *Kiss*. “More now than ever.” *Kiss*. “I can’t wait to be home for good.” *Kiss*. “I can’t wait to marry you and make more babies with you.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that...”

“About what?” Chase tucks a wild strand of my hair behind my ear. “Is it okay if we have a real wedding first?”

He tilts his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t have a wedding with my first marriage. There wasn’t really time. I got pregnant, got married, and then just fell into motherhood—all in the same step. But with you? I want to savor everything. Cherish every moment. Just a small wedding, maybe? All I want is to walk down the aisle and find you at the end. I want us to plan our family and our future together.”

I can’t tell if the fire in Chase’s eyes is out of love or lust, but he’s burning me with the intensity of his gaze. “Of course, baby. That sounds just right. Let’s have a real wedding...how about we fly everyone to Hawaii? Lani would love that.”

Chase pulls his shirt over his head. *Power move*. He could ask me to get married under a bridge and I’d agree enthusiastically, coaxed by the visual of his bare torso.

“We could take our vows at sunset,” I suggest.

“Perfect.”

“Barefoot on the beach?”

“Absolutely.” He nuzzles his nose against mine. He wraps me in happiness—completeness. This love. Filling me to the brim. “Kainoa Ford...I like the sound of that. And you can still sign your paintings the same. ‘Kainoa F’—convenient.”

“Chase Fallon works too—just throwing that out there.”

He snorts as he trails kisses down my belly button, giving me the sweetest chills. “We’ll talk about it,” he mumbles as he yanks down my shorts. I groan in delight as he dips below my waistline and proceeds to attend his meeting.

author note

Thank you so much for reading *Paint Me Perfect*! I really hope you enjoyed spending time with Chase and Noa as much as I did. If you liked the story, please consider leaving me a review.

Stay tuned if you can't get enough of my girls from the 303! I'm excited to announce that book two in the Love, Me & the 303 Series is on the way.

[Join my newsletter](#) to stay up to date on release information.

There's a sneak peek of Adler's story, *Rewrite the Rules*, after acknowledgments!

about the author



Kay, a former HR professional (survivor), startup junkie, and former CEO of the teeniest, tiniest virtual assistant company, has been writing pretty much forever. She finally decided at age thirty to start writing the stories she loves to read and to actually share novels she poured countless hours, tears, sweat, and coffee into.

Kay writes steamy contemporary romance novels that touch on all the corners of love—family, friendship, passion, and purpose.



acknowledgments

Holy guacamole it's been a crazy journey to get *Paint Me Perfect* on the page! First and foremost, I'd like to thank all my friends and family who have opted to keep me in their lives even though I say things like 'holy guacamole' and like Noa, I do indeed cuss like I'm in an Orbit gum commercial.

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To my dad and brother, look...I'm not saying you *have* to read *Paint Me Perfect* curled up on the couch with a fuzzy throw blanket and a latte, but

thank you anyways for always having my back. Ferociously. You have defended me and supported me through all my attempts at adulting...and I'm going to get the hang of it at some point, *I swear!* Thank you so much for reminding me every day to be strong enough to just be me.

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sneak peek of rewrite the rules

Love, Me & the 303 Series

Adler Haley writes *great* sex...just not under her name. And certainly not about her experiences—or lack thereof. There's no safer place to express herself than behind the obscurity of ghostwriting romance novels. By day, Adler's perfectly content to blend in at her boring nine-to-five as an executive assistant. At least until she meets Joel—her new boss who has her wondering if love at first sight is more than just fiction.

Joel Lewis is convinced that relationships bring out the bad in people. And marriage? The worst. Ask his parents. His siblings. And his ex-girlfriend. Needing a fresh start, Joel trades the Big Apple to take the helm at a struggling venture capitalist firm in Denver. After meeting his new assistant, he has to work overtime to fight his feelings and adhere to the no-relationships policy he's instated for his life.

Armed with *The F-Buddy Rules for Survival*, a clever set of guidelines designed to keep their friendship fun and *fun only*, Adler and Joel find themselves whisked into the most entertaining 'situationship' of their lives.

But it's not long before Adler discovers a major issue with the rules—they weren't meant to protect her from falling in love. They were only ever meant to keep Joel from finding out.

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