



My

Big,

Fat, Fake

~~Honeymoon~~

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MY BIG FAT FAKE HONEYMOON

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PROLOGUE



Weddings. Both the joy and bane of my existence.

Stressed doesn't begin to describe the level of tightness working its way through my body on a daily basis right now. My shoulders are constantly knotted, sometimes to the point of seizing up. My stomach revolts at the idea of food, mostly because there's not enough time to eat and stay caught up. My mind spins with orders, ideas, and replayed conversations with customers so much that I haven't slept in weeks.

I've always been a hard worker, but it's literally become all I do. While everyone around me is partnering off and finding the love of their life—with a little help from me, if I do say so myself—I'm going home to an empty apartment, reheating leftovers from the Chinese place that delivered beef with broccoli two nights ago, and curling up on the couch alone. At ten p.m. after working a fourteen-hour day.

That's why I even considered my current course of action tonight. Weddings are about meeting people, right? And that tall, dark, and fuckable bad boy over by the buffet is someone I need to meet.

Am I really going to fuck him? Of course not.

But does pointedly mentioning him and then working my way across the room toward him keep everyone else from worrying about poor, lonely Abigail who can't find a man? Yes, it does. I can feel their eyes on my back, my whole family fretting about me, but I forget about their concern as I focus on my next mission.

He's like a delicious reward for all the blood, sweat, and tears I put into making sure the flowers for this wedding were perfect. Nothing but the best for my sister, Courtney Andrews. She deserves it, and I made sure I delivered.

I let my eyes drink him in from head to toe as I swerve this way and that through the crowd. His thick black hair is perfectly flopped over in that casual way that takes skill to appear effortless, and arched dark brows frame his brown

eyes which scrutinize the food as if it has personally offended him. His olive skin is tanned and marked with tattoos at the collar of his white shirt. I want to lick along those swirling lines, tasting his skin as I follow the ink down to where it disappears behind the buttons of his tailored shirt.

This is so not like me.

I'm no saint, no innocent virgin, but I'm not exactly a one-night stand type, either. I guess I fall somewhere in between pearl-clutching 'I would never' and 'What was your name again?'. But my plan for a little fun flirting is quickly shaping into something else in my mind.

Sometimes, there are only so many ways you can scratch your own itch. Other times, you can sense that someone can rock your world and leave you a panting, sweaty pile of satisfied goo.

Lorenzo.

Violet, my bestie and sister-in-law, said he's her cousin and is new in town. Well then, call me the Welcome Wagon because I'm honestly considering rolling out some red carpet and inviting him to a private party in my pants.

God, Abi! You sound like a horny, sex-starved Desperate Housewife!

I do. There's no sense in denying it, not even to myself. But I've earned a break, a chance to cut loose and go wild. Within reason.

I have a reputation for being more than a bit crazy, but the truth is, it's only in some ways. Mouth? Zero filter. Fucks? None given. But even I have a line I won't cross. But maybe I could pretend that's not the case for just one night and then get back to the grindstone because the deadlines don't stop and the creative ideas in my head are loud and demanding taskmasters.

"Hi," I say as I sidle up next to him. My voice is breathy and too high, so I take a sip of my champagne to soothe the dryness of my throat.

"Hello." As those eyes turn on me, I see the flaring of heat ignite there and am glad this isn't one-sided. Not that I expected it to be. I know what I look like, what my assets are, and how to play them up. Though my back is already straight and my shoulders back to highlight my breasts, I turn slightly to show them off.

Come to Mama, I think as excitement courses through my veins and heat pools in my core. This bridesmaid's gown, with its chiffon sash, might not be a sexy club dress, but it's fitted impeccably. Courtney-the-perfectionist wouldn't have it any other way.

I offer a hand, expecting him to shake it. "I'm Abi Andrews, Courtney's sister and Violet's bestie."

Instead of shaking my hand, he grasps it gently, pulling my hand toward his lips. I'm mesmerized as he puckers, thick pillows becoming even more kissable.

He presses them to the back of my hand, kissing the flesh there like I'm an actual lady and not a sorority-level slut looking for a disco stick to dance on. I'm not, but I'm another step closer to pretending to be for the night.

As long I get right back to work afterward, I bargain with myself.

I'm so close to my goal of paying off my business loans for SweetPea Boutique, my flower shop. A loan I got myself, not from my dad and not because of my last name but rather because I had a good idea, a solid business plan, and a long list of clients that has grown along with my reputation.

But I need this. A few minutes of wild and crazy isn't too much to ask, is it? It can be like a bucket list thing I look back on fondly when I'm old and gray, rocking on the porch of the nursing home.

"Ah, yes. I was a wicked one in my younger days. A lover of love. Once, I even sexed up a foreign stranger at a wedding. We drove each other mad with lust and only made it as far as the janitorial closet before we were all over each other. He was something else," I'll say with a wistful sigh.

This fantasy might be a little extreme considering I've barely told him my name, but my mind's always been prone to fanciful wanderings.

"I'm Lorenzo Toscani. Violet's cousin, though I suspect you already know that." His deep voice drops to a murmur, keeping the words between the two of us. His brow rises incrementally, daring me to challenge him by disagreeing.

He's flirting, or maybe it's just the Italian way? Whatever it is, it's sending pulses of electricity to my needy nipples and clit. And he still hasn't let go of my hand.

"She said you're new to town, and I thought you might like a . . ." Words fail me because all I can think of is 'fuck buddy' and 'one-night stand', neither of which are appropriate to be tossing around at a wedding reception with a videographer sneaking around to record the festivities.

"A dance?" he suggests.

That is definitely not what I was going to suggest. Mostly because I'm a shitty dancer.

I mean, I can hold my own on a crowded club dance floor where everyone's gyrating and grinding. But actual dance moves? Like a salsa or foxtrot? No way, and that's after Mom insisted that we take cotillion classes as kids and several Zumba classes with Courtney.

"Sure."

Who said that?

Oh, shit, I think I did because Lorenzo is smiling at me, white teeth framed by those lips I'd like to feel on my skin again. Maybe on my hand. Maybe somewhere else.

My hand still in his, he leads me away from the buffet and to the center of the dance floor. The DJ seems to be on Team Get Abi Laid because he plays a slow song. It's something I haven't heard before, but the beat is deep and driving. Lorenzo holds our joined hands out and then looks me straight in the eye as he gently puts his other hand on my lower back.

Hallelujah and Praise Armani! And thank you, Courtney, for choosing this bridesmaid dress with a low back because the instant Lorenzo's warm palm touches my skin, a barely perceptible shiver works its way through every cell in my body. He notices, not that I'm trying to hide it.

Ordinarily, I'd swipe the smug tilt of his lips right off his face with a well-placed barb. Right now, it's mere confirmation that we're on the same page.

We sway with the music, the inches of proper space between us disappearing with every turn and maneuver. I wish our clothes would do the same thing, simply vanish into thin air, so that I could feel more of his warm skin along mine. I follow the line of tattoos again, wondering how far beneath his shirt they go.

Does the ink cover his chest? His arms? His back? More?

Oh, God! I wonder if there are piercings to go along with the tattoos? I've never been with a pierced guy before, but I hear exciting and naughty things. I'd be willing to check that off my bucket list too if Lorenzo's got a Prince Albert hiding behind those tailor-fit slacks.

I step a little closer with the next sway, trying to see if I can tell through the fabric. And though I feel something, I don't think it's a piercing. It's too big, too long, and too rigid against my belly to be a tiny barbell.

"Abigail," he growls, liquid velvet over grit. A warning? A plea? I'm not sure, but I feel the syllables along my skin and want him to say my name again, though it's the first word either of us has said since we began dancing. Words haven't been needed. He's that good at this.

And why does his saying my full name sound so sexy? Usually, the only time I hear that is when I'm in trouble. Oh, that's probably why. I *am* in trouble. The good kind.

His eyes burn like fire, and his hand is firm on my back as he pulls and guides me where he wants me. Our breaths pace with each other, as do our racing hearts. All from a dance on a crowded floor.

A stray thought tries to take shape in my mind, a worry that maybe a bad boy type isn't what I need, but I squash it down. This is exactly what I need. A night of freedom—from expectations, from responsibilities, from my last name, from questions about when I'm going to *finally* get married myself. As if that's all I'm good for despite creating a successful business of my own from scratch.

I'll pick up all those weights and carry them on my shoulders again tomorrow morning. But tonight, I want to pretend I can be someone else, anyone else, and give in to this electric chemistry with a guy I've never met before and probably won't see ever again. Judge me if you want, but I need this so I can keep going at my frenetic pace. A step off the straight and narrow path, a momentary walk on the wild side I used to visit regularly, and a tiny bit of crazy so that I can stay sane with everything else going on.

"Yes?" It's more air than sound, and I swear he leans in as though he wants to feel my breath along his cheek.

"Would you like to go—"

Before he can finish whatever he's trying to say, strong fingers grip my arm. "Abi, there you are. It's time for the toasts and you're second in line after the best man."

Erica, Courtney's wedding planner, doesn't give me a chance to say no or even to pause, simply hauling me toward the front of the room with surprising strength. Erica has been an amazing help planning the wedding of Courtney's very specific dreams, but right now, I could kill her without a single blip of remorse for cockblocking me.

I look over my shoulder to see Lorenzo's gaze trailing me. His eyes are heated, his look hungry.

Tink, tink, tink.

The sound of a spoon tapping on a glass quiets the room, even the DJ lowering the now classical music to something soft, keeping it as mere background noise.

Ross, my brother, stands at the front of the room looking comfortable as can be as every eye turns to him. "I've got a few things I'd like to say about the man marrying my sister and a few more about the woman marrying my best friend."

A small titter of polite laughter works its way through the crowd. And Ross does what he does best—play to his audience. His jokes are funny without being too revealing, his words are sweet and sentimental, and his advice is seemingly on point for someone who's only been married a short time himself.

As I take my place at the microphone, a hot flash of nerves spikes, washing away my previous desire in an instant. But I speak from the heart, wishing my sister a lifetime of happiness and threatening her new husband with death and dismemberment if he so much as says one mean word to her. He smiles like I'm kidding, and I slash a line across my throat with my thumb to show that I'm dead serious. Not that Kaede McWarren needs the warning. He's been in love with Courtney forever at this point.

I'm happy they finally found their way to each other—with a little help and a

push from yours truly. I love love and want everyone to find their special someone. And one day, I'll have time for that too, once I pay off the loans and get a few more special events checked off my calendar. I scan the room looking for Mr. Right Now because I don't have time for anything more. Definitely not for Mr. Right.

I find Lorenzo's eyes, dark and piercing as he looks at me, and I feel exposed, as if he's seeing into my soul. He's leaning against the back wall, arms crossed over his chest, his head tilted as though he's working at something in his mind though his gaze never wavers.

Quicker than a blink, he spins on his heel and walks out the double doors. Does he mean for me to follow him? I can't exactly leave right now, in the middle of Courtney's reception. Or maybe he wants me to follow him out to the more private hallway? Or a bathroom? My gray-haired imaginary story flashes through my mind, bringing a smile to my face.

I could be down with a little risky business as long as we don't get caught.

I make my way across the room, pausing for a split second when Aunt Gertrude grabs for my arm and offers kind words about my speech. But as I thank her, her true intentions become clear. "Hopefully, you'll be next, dear. Such a pity your younger sister beat you to the punchline."

"Mmmhmm," I say noncommittally. It doesn't bother me that Courtney is married now and I'm not. We've never been competitive like that, and I'm truly happy for her. But Aunt Gertrude is slowing me down from something more important than her instigating ways. "Excuse me."

I pop into the hallway just in time to see another door closing, the click sounding like a secret. I take a quick moment to straighten my dress, smooth any stragglers of thick hair back into my perfectly coiffed updo, and take a deep breath. Through those doors is a much-needed moment of release that will hopefully involve at least one orgasm. Hell, let's make it three. I'm feeling hungry tonight. No sense in being stingy because this memory is going to be what gets me through the next few weeks of head-down hard work.

With a smile of expectation on my face, I turn the handle of the door and step through. "Lorenzo?" I ask softly, only to be greeted by the cool chill of night air.

I guess I got turned around leaving the ballroom and didn't realize this door led outside. I wrap my arms around my body, conserving heat as I look for my knight in tattooed armor and consider how I can best have car sex in this dress without ruining it.

That's when I hear a motorcycle revving. A bright headlight catches my attention, but the silhouette is unmistakable. Of course he rides a motorcycle.

Any self-respecting bad boy wouldn't be caught dead in some sensible sedan that gets great gas mileage.

I think Lorenzo is going to stop, sweep me off my feet, and ride off into the night with me, my dress blowing in the wind dramatically. But he rides right past me without so much as a glance.

My jaw drops as his red taillight disappears into the night. I basically just grinded with him on the dance floor, thought we were going for an all-nighter with zero strings—most guys' dream proposition—only to be left high and dry, standing alone on the concrete steps.

Well, not dry since I'm most definitely wet beneath my panties.

Traitorous pussy, he left us! We don't want him!

One last clutch of my core reminds me that I want something, but it's definitely never going to be Lorenzo Toscani.

CHAPTER 1

Several weeks later . . .

“Girls just wanna have fu-un,” I sing along, not caring that I’m off-key as I tie a hand-dyed hot pink silk ribbon around a bundle of colorful garden roses while Cyndi Lauper belts her heart out over the SweetPea Boutique’s sound system. My fingers move faster as I near completion, left, right, and left, creating a fanciful bow. I’ve done this so many times my hands do the work mindlessly, leaving me to toss my head a bit as I loudly add, *“they just wanna-a-a.”*

Securing the carefully prepared loops temporarily with a pair of bobby pins before a dab of hot glue and a final knot, I spruce the flowers and then critically eye my creation. Seeing no flaw, a sense of jubilation fills me.

Perfect!

Creating beautiful flower arrangements never gets old for me, no matter how many times I do it. It’s been my passion for as long as I can remember, starting with wadded up handfuls of dandelion weeds when I was a little girl. But that changed quickly when I’d snagged some kitchen scissors and absolutely butchered the rose bushes out back.

“Look at what you’ve done! Destroyed!” our estate gardener yells at me as I cower, the bouquet falling to my side though I don’t let it go.

Mom runs in to check out the racket. Once her quick eyes figure out that no one is hurt, she asks, “Abigail, why did you cut the roses?”

Not hearing anger, I hold the bundle up again, showing it off. “They were so pretty, I wanted to bring them inside. I arranged them to show their best sides and hide the dark spots on the petals.” And with thorn-pricked and scratched hands, I hand the bouquet to her. *“For you.”*

“Oh, Abi!” Tears glisten in her eyes as she takes the flowers and holds them to her nose, inhaling deeply. *“Thank you.”*

The gardener clears his throat and Mom looks up at the reminder. “Right, of

course. Abi, Edward works very hard to grow these roses and you just chopped them down. You did a beautiful job with the arrangement, and it's very sweet of you, but you need to ask next time, okay?"

I nod, mouthing an apology to Edward.

Back in the shop, I smile. Mom's tearful happiness had been the spark that ignited my love of arrangements, of making people feel appreciated with a beautiful design with a sole purpose of being pretty. I also think back to Edward, who'd lovingly and patiently showed me how to grow and prune the gardens after that first run-in. I apologized many times over for butchering his roses once I learned exactly what it took to grow them.

And I'd promised to always treat the flowers I acquire with the proper respect and honor they deserve while showcasing their beauty for people to enjoy.

That's why I started SweetPea Boutique, as a way to do just that. And I'm good. That's not a humble brag because there's no sense in being modest. I'm not a florist who throws together a dozen red roses in a plastic wrap and calls it a day. No, we create art here. We do the best weddings, the top company affairs, and serve people who want quirky, unique, custom designs.

My little shop, which is lime green with big, bold pink bubble letters and a black- and white-striped awning, is filled with lush earthen smells, flowers you can't get anywhere else in the state, and handmade vases and ribbons of every size and color.

A lot of people don't get it. I could get by quite easily on my last name alone. I could've gone into the family business and worked side-by-side with my dad and Courtney, wearing Prada power suits and sky-high Jimmy Choo heels to board meetings where we toss around ROI and billion-dollar profit margins like they're no big deal.

But I've always been different, marched to the beat of my own drummer, or so I've been told. I wiggle my bare toes in my comfortable and sensibly waterproof Crocs, sure that's probably the case.

But I am who I am, with no interest in changing anything.

Dad worried, of course. It's who he is. He'd tried to talk me into following in his footsteps, and in a way, I had . . . by starting my own business from the ground up. Once he'd seen I had a business plan, including an accelerated payoff schedule for the loans I needed to take out, he'd understood and been proud of me.

The last few years have only solidified that. Especially when I paid those loans off.

SweetPea Boutique is mine now. All mine.

I can't believe it, but it's true. All because of floral arrangements like the one in my hand, but there's no rest for the wicked, and I won't sit around on my laurels. No, I always want to do better, be more.

Triumphant, I hold up the bouquet. "What do ya think?" I ask Janey, my right-hand woman. She's been with me since day one and is an amazing floral designer in her own right, but thankfully, she has no desire to do the business side of the business. She's happy to create and keep me from going insane with our workload.

From her workstation, a stainless-steel prep table where she has orchids and pink ginger lilies trimmed and ready to arrange, she turns a critical eye to the bouquet. I watch her face, looking for any telltale signs that something's wrong.

Janey's short, bleached white-blond hair is pushed back behind a rhinestone headband, leaving her brown eyes exposed. They scan left and right, then around, up, and down, leaving no bud unexamined. She lifts one shoulder, tilting her head as she frowns. "Meh. It's fine."

I blink, my eyes jumping to the bouquet. "What? It's gorgeous!" An instant later, I ask, "What's wrong with it?"

Her smile blooms quickly, bright and white. "Gotcha! It's gorgeous. Claire will love it."

She might've been kidding, but now, I'm looking the bouquet over again with second thoughts. "Maybe I'll add a few Swarovski crystals?"

Janey laughs, but when I don't laugh along, she sighs. "I was just fucking with you, Abs. Here, how's this instead?"

She opens her eyes wide, her hands covering her open mouth as she gasps sharply. "Oh. My. God. It's gor-ge-ous. Like nothing I've ever seen. You are an *artiste!*" She adds a polite golf clap and then her drawn-on brows lift sardonically, her overdramatized reaction turning to snark. "Is that what you were looking for?"

I shove at her shoulder with a smile. "Bitch." There's zero heat to the word, and she merely laughs in response.

"Seriously, it's great. It's exactly what Claire asked for, only better because it's got that Abi touch." She mimes sprinkling glitter around the flowers.

Ooh, that's an idea . . . maybe I could spritz floral glitter over the bouquet? I eye it, considering.

"Whatever you're thinking, stop. The only thing you're doing with it is putting it in the fridge to wait for the wedding planner to get here." She points a warning finger my way. I'm the boss, but she's bossy, and I would never risk pissing her off because she's a force in the way a tornado is a little wind. Aggressive, fierce, and destructive if challenged.

So I put the bouquet in the cooler as instructed. “Happy?”

“Exceedingly.” She beams at having gotten her way. Again.

“As long as Claire’s happy, that’s all that matters.”

Claire Johnson, my biggest client to date, is a wealthy Instagram influencer-slash-self-motivation coach. She’s what my dad would call *new money*, like us, really. Someone who’s worked their way up from the ground floor, capitalizing on a niche she carved out for herself. Alternatively, she’s marrying old money. Her fiancé, Cole Kennedy—not *those* Kennedys, but close enough—comes from generations of millionaires and has a trust fund the size of a small country’s annual gross domestic product.

I’d know because Cole went to school with Ross, and between that elite small circle of a network and my working relationship with their top-notch wedding planner, Beth, I managed to get this contract.

And I will not blow this opportunity.

Because it’s not just a wedding. Besides the big day, this is an entire Event, with a huge three-foot-tall, blinking neon, capital E, starting with tonight’s dinner. It’s being held here in the city as a way of introducing the bride and groom’s families before we all travel for the ceremony and festivities.

Yeah, *travel*. Because of course, the wedding is a destination one, taking place on Aruba’s famed coast at the famous five-star Casa Del Mario resort, with an RSVP list filled to the brim with the rich, famous, and political elite. Alongside an orchestra, a custom choreographed fireworks display, and other live entertainment, *People* magazine will also be present to film what is being called *THE* wedding of the decade.

It’s a lot of pressure, amplified by needing to ship everything to the resort and make arrangements on site daily for the various lead-up events to the big ceremony and reception.

In other words, I *can’t* fuck up tonight’s dinner. This is my last at-home opportunity to show Claire what I can do and that I have her event well in hand.

I shouldn’t worry this much. I’m excellent at what I do, I have lists of my lists to be prepared for any eventuality, and Claire has been nothing but accepting of my ideas, but anxiety rushes through me despite all those reassurances.

The shop phone rings, and I hear Samantha, my front desk assistant, answer. “SweetPea Boutique, how may I help make today beautiful?” I can hear the smile in her voice, but then, more dryly, she follows up with, “Oh. Of course. We’ll be ready.”

“Abi!” she yells a second later. Hopefully, she hung up first or whoever was on the phone is probably deaf now.

I hiss, “What?”

Samantha runs to the back, eyes wild and bouncing around the space. “Shit! Clean up, clean up! Quick!” She sounds a bit manic as she shoves cut leaves into a trash can and dumps my tumbler of water onto a nearby plant.

Whatever’s got her riled up, she still cares for the plants. She’s probably the most talented green thumb I’ve met since Edward, able to nurse plants back from near-death and make them bloom full and lush. That’s why I hired her, for her botany degree, but thankfully, she’s great with customers too and can handle watching the shop when Janey and I go to Aruba to work the wedding. But right now, she’s in a tailspin heading for a crash landing.

I step in front of her, placing my hands on her shoulders to stop her from swirling the drain. “Samantha. What’s happening?”

She blinks, coming out of her stupor, and swallows, looking back at the phone on the counter. “That was . . . that was one of Claire’s people. She’s coming. In ten minutes.”

I don’t get it. That’s totally expected. They’re supposed to be picking up the arrangements for tonight’s dinner, so why is Samantha freaking out?

“Okay. They’re picking up the flowers. We’re ready. They’re done.”

She shakes her head, her blonde hair swishing wildly. “No, no . . . *she’s* coming. Claire is coming!”

What she’s actually saying sinks in and my gut drops. “What?” I shriek. “Why?”

Don’t get me wrong, Claire is quite lovely, down to earth even, and she was perfectly kind the few times I met her in person to get approvals for the floral plan, but there’s no reason for her to be coming to a simple pick-up mere hours before a dinner where she’ll be the guest of honor and hostess with the mostest.

She should be doing a Get Ready With Me video for her followers or a meditation photo shoot with the sunset. Not picking up flowers like a courier or personal assistant.

“I don’t know,” Samantha says, answering the questions I already forgot I asked. “It was one of her people on the phone. An assistant, I guess? She said Claire is coming, in person, and has an update on the wedding that she wants to deliver in person.” She blinks and then needlessly says one more time, “In. Person. *Abi*. Claire Johnson is coming here.”

I guess Samantha is more of a fan that I realized.

“No autograph hounding. You hear me? We’ll behave like she’s any other customer.” My words have the force of an order, and she throws me a poorly formed salute. “Good. Now clean up!”

Despite my words, I start scurrying around frantically too. Samantha and

Janey follow suit, clearing off tables, gently tossing loose flowers into the buckets in the cooler, and shoving the leftover donuts from this morning into the trash. At least it smells amazing in here. No fake air fresheners needed. We've got all-natural floral scents wafting around and blending beautifully.

"Go watch out in the front and give us a warning when they get here," I tell Samantha when I realize she's hyperventilating.

She runs to the window, peeking out but ducking down to the side so she's not seen, as though she's some secret spy on a stakeout mission. I roll my eyes, huffing out a laugh at her antics because if I don't laugh, I might go a little cuckoo too.

Janey and I meet eyes. "We've got this," she says with firmness.

"We do," I say just as solidly.

Neither of us believes it. This is not the norm. Celebrity customers don't come in like this, unscheduled and with last-minute updates.

Fuck, I hope I'm not getting fired before I even get to show her the work I've done. I should've done the damn crystals on that bouquet. But it's too late.

"Ca-caw, ca-caw," Samantha screeches.

"What the hell is that?" I bark.

"That's the secret sign," she explains. "She really does drive a pink glitter Escalade! They're parking right now."

Shit.

I look down at myself. The shop might be looking better, but I'm a mess. I quickly pull my ponytail holder out and shake my head, sending my thick, dark hair tumbling down my back, swipe under my eyes to make sure yesterday's mascara hasn't run down into my undereye bags, and smooth my water-spotted T-shirt. That's as good as it can get right now, so hopefully, Claire will see that I'm putting my everything into making her flowers beautiful, even if it means I look like an advertisement for college-broke, don't-give-a-fuck chic.

A man in a black suit rushes out from the driver's seat to open the side door of the SUV, and out steps Claire Johnson in a trendy pink jumpsuit and sparkly hoop earrings. Her blonde hair is impeccable, the curls reaching down her back, and her makeup is expertly applied. She's at least partially ready for tonight's festivities, so why is she here? She's followed by another woman, slightly older, with frosty hair and wearing a tailored black designer dress.

Who is that? I wonder with a frown. I don't like surprises when it comes to my work, and that woman practically screams *SURPRISE!*

Judging by the snooty expression on her face, I can tell that whoever she is, she thinks her shit doesn't sink. I know the look. I have a lot of practice pegging her type, especially when people from our social circle hire me for their events. I

walk a line where I'm 'the help' but also on 'their level', socially speaking. People struggle with how to treat me—dismissive and holier than thou because I'm just a florist, but never able to forget my last name and the power it wields.

I do a quick search of my mental Rolodex of Claire's family, and then Cole's, but nothing matches the stranger. Claire and her companion stop for a moment outside the shop, seeming to take in the colorfulness of SweetPea, and judging by the look on the older woman's face, she's not impressed. She even seems to say something that causes Claire to frown.

But there's no time for me to process it all as they move toward the door.

"Best behavior!" I hiss to Samantha and Janey, and fine, to myself as well, before the door swings open. "Welcome to SweetPea Boutique," I say cheerily, trying to hide my anxiety. "Great to see you again, Claire."

"Abi!" Claire exclaims as she floats through the doors, smiling warmly at me and holding out her arms. "It's so good to see you!"

I can't help but smile as I come from around the counter to give Claire the usual air hug greeting. I know the designer jumpsuit she's wearing is this season's latest and retails for well into the four digits, and I'm covered in green stains, but to my surprise, she instead pulls me into a warm embrace, air kissing one cheek and then the other.

"Great to see you too. I wasn't expecting you to pick up the arrangements in person?" It should be a statement, but it's most definitely a question, and she hears the concern in my voice.

Claire waves away my worry with a manicured hand. "It's okay, I know how it is to run a business! I should've told you I was going to stop by well in advance. I just wanted to view them for myself and give you an update on a few changes I'm making to the wedding crew."

"Changes?" I ask in confusion. *Has she come here to fire me personally?*

Claire nods, motioning to the frowning woman beside her. "This is my new wedding planner who you'll be working with for the wedding and who will be in charge of basically everything, Meredith Wildemen. Meredith, this is Abi Andrews, the florist who'll be handling all the flower arrangements."

What the heck happened to Beth?

I want to ask about the woman Claire originally hired to plan her wedding, someone I've worked with many times before and who is also much nicer than this new woman seems, judging by the scowls she's flashing around.

But instead of voicing my thoughts out loud and making things awkward, I say, "Nice to meet you, Meredith," extending my hand in greeting and smiling warmly. "Looking forward to working together."

"Hmm." She hums through pressed lips, examining my dirt-lined and

chipped-polish nails. Meredith's facial expression doesn't budge as she slowly takes my hand and barely touches fingertips as though I'll contaminate her with actual filth before letting go abruptly. "So you're the *flower girl* Claire has been going on and on about? It's a pleasure to meet you." The tone of her voice sounds like it's anything but, and calling me flower girl grates my nerves, but I keep the smile on my face as she taps her watch thoughtfully. "We do need to see the arrangements. That is, if you have them ready, Miss Andrews?"

She spits out my name as if it's sour on her tongue. I can't say that's the first time that's happened, but considering I don't know her, it seems like an intense reaction.

I've played this game before, though. I laugh as though she's told a ridiculous joke. "Oh, of course, I have everything ready. Are you up to speed on everything Beth and I discussed?" The implication that she's not up to snuff is laced through the question just as bluntly as her insinuation.

Claire jumps in, defusing the polite dominance battle with her effervescent warmth. "Sorry for the ambush, but I didn't want to share Beth's story without her permission. You know how that is, I'm sure." Her acknowledgement of who I am and my family's recent drama in the media isn't said to be mean or ugly but simply the truth. Meredith, however, seems to be fighting a smile, though I'm not sure her lips would truly lift even with utter bliss.

Cut back on the Botox, maybe?

"Is Beth okay?" I ask, concerned.

Claire looks around, checking for press, though we're the only ones in the shop. She whispers so quietly that I mostly read her lips. "She's pregnant and can't travel. But everything's staying the same as we planned. My media partner suggested Meredith to handle the actual event." She gestures to Meredith, who's looking at Claire congenially, well aware that she's stepping in to save this wedding while simultaneously avoiding the fact that she's padding her own resumé.

"Well, I suppose it's good that you're available," I say sweetly to Meredith. She hears the barb as I intended. *You must not be that good if you weren't already booked and could step up last-minute.*

"Let's take a look at your work, shall we?" she clips out. I have no doubt that whatever magical floral design I've created, she'll find fault with it.

It's been only a few minutes, but I'm having a visceral reaction to Meredith, something she seems to return tenfold. I'm not for everyone, I'm aware of that, but I'm simply not sure what I could've already done to warrant her reaction to me. She, on the other hand, seems pretentious and catty, cold, and snooty.

Janey appears at my elbow, and I smell the lovely bouquet before I see it.

Claire focuses on it immediately and gasps out, “Oh, my God, it’s perfect! Exactly what we talked about—a taste of the islands, right here at home. Can I hold it?” She reaches trembling hands out, and Janey transfers the bouquet to her as though it’s a precious newborn baby.

Claire buries her nose in the roses, sniffing deeply. “Mmm. Perfect.” And then she looks at me, that happiness in her eyes and smile on her face that I live for. It’s the stamp of approval I was hoping for.

“I’m so glad you like it,” I say encouragingly.

“I love it,” Claire agrees, her eyes dropping back down to the flowers as though she can’t bear to not look at them.

Meredith taps a red nail to the screen of her tablet. “While certainly pretty, that’s only one bouquet. The contract calls for several arrangements. Are the rest ready? We are on a tight timeline.” That last bit is said to Claire, a reminder that they have somewhere to be other than my little flower shop.

“We’ve already made arrangements with Casa Del Mario,” I offer Claire and Meredith. “I don’t want them premade so that they’ll be perfectly fresh and ready. As for tonight’s, they’re already boxed and ready. I assure you, they’re each just as lovely.”

Claire shakes her head, her smile saying that’s not needed. “They’re gorgeous, Abi. Truly, thank you.” She’s slow to hand the bouquet back to Janey, who’s holding up a vase with a special vertical box to allow for transport without bruising the delicate petals. Once the flowers are out of her hands, she switches back into get-shit-done mode. “Meredith, do I have time to call Cole while we load up? We’re still working on our speeches for tonight.”

Meredith nods serenely. “Of course. Use the privacy in the car while I handle this, dear.” She sounds almost motherly, gentle even, right up until Claire waves and walks out the door. In what I’m guessing is more her true manner, Meredith snaps, “Chop, chop, girls. The flowers won’t load themselves, now will they?” Her face is stone still, but I swear I see glee dancing in her eyes.

I grit my teeth. I’m definitely not a girl, nor am I her employee to boss around. But Claire is worth dealing with Meredith’s attitude. The publicity alone for this wedding is worth dealing with a hundred Merediths.

At least that’s what I tell myself while we load white boxes into the SUV and make the driver promise to go slow and easy on the drive even though we’ve packed the flowers for safe transport.

Meredith does have us open a few of the boxes to peek at the arrangements, something I completely understand but that still irks me given the rest of our meeting. “They are rather . . . colorful, aren’t they?” *Colorful* sounds like code for ugly as sin.

“Yes, as the bride requested. Beautiful, vibrant flowers to represent the island destination and the wedding’s color palette.” It’s the description Claire herself gave me at our first meeting to discuss her wants, tastes, and floral dreams.

Meredith’s hum is loud with disapproval, even though it’s quiet in volume. “If you’re done, we do have places to go, Miss Andrews.”

Again, she says my name as though it’s physically repulsive for her to do so. What the hell?

Did Dad buy up her family’s land or something? Did Ross not call her daughter back after a hook-up? That would’ve had to be years ago because he’s been locked down with Violet for a long time now. Or is she just averse to me in general because of my family’s wealth? That happens sometimes—the same way people will want to befriend you because you come from money, other people are instantly hateful toward you, as though I have anything to do with my dad’s success.

“All done, Meredith,” I say with a well-practiced smile. I use her first name intentionally, putting us on a more even playing field and letting her know that I’m not intimidated by her.

I am. But showing weakness isn’t how the game is played. I learned that from Mom and Dad, and it’s a lesson I won’t forget. My name might come with some baggage, but no matter what, I’m an Andrews and damn proud of it.

Already turning away before Meredith can respond, I wave and offer a genuine smile to Claire through the SUV’s tinted windows. She rolls the window down, phone still pressed to her ear. “I’ll see you in Aruba, Abi. Thanks again!”

After they pull out, Janey and Samantha pepper me with questions.

“Who the hell was that?”

“What’s she got against our Abster?”

“Need me to kill her and compost her body out back?”

That one was Janey, which doesn’t surprise me. We joke that she’s my work wife, and as such, she takes care of me very well. It’s not one-sided, though. I take care of her and Samantha too. Like now.

“I have no idea what that was all about. What I do know is that we are free and clear for the night. I’m exhausted and still need to pack for this work week in Aruba. Let’s call for Chinese food and take it home. I’m ordering you both to curl up on the couch, eat dinner, and take a relaxing bath. I think we’re going to need it.”

Samantha nods, likely taking mental notes of exactly what I said and in what order because she will actually follow instructions. She’ll do well next week while Janey and I are gone, though I might have Violet stop by to check in. But

that's more about my being nervous about leaving my baby in someone else's hands than it is about Samantha's capabilities.

"So what I'm hearing is get drunk, get laid, and pack some Xanax to deal with the Wicked Witch?" Janey smiles as she ticks off her to-do list on her fingers. "And we get overtime pay for this too, right?"

"Pushing it, girl," I say in a tone that mimics Meredith's.

Janey's brows jump together and her head is a heartbeat away from circling on her neck.

"Kidding, just kidding." I sigh. "But really, let's get out of here. I have a feeling the next week is going to be long and hard."

"That's what my night had better be," Janey retorts.

I laugh, but secretly, I wish my night were going to resemble Janey's and not simply be me having a solo fashion show to pack my suitcase with acceptable options for both work and hopefully a small amount of play in Aruba.

Speaking of play, I make a note to myself—pack my purple friend because fuck knows, it's the only thing giving me a long, hard night these days.

CHAPTER 2

“*M*ove,” I bark, though the driver of the big minivan monstrosity ahead of me clearly can’t hear me. A second later, a hole opens in the traffic and I shoot the gap.

Grr. My Ducati growls between my thighs, easily overtaking the van and leaving them in my wake, and for a moment, I feel free. I consider speeding up even faster, riding until my thighs give out and I need to piss. Maybe never stopping, just continuing on forever on the open stretch of road before me.

Me, my bike, and zero plans other than exploring and seeing which way the wind will blow me. I’ve done it before, taken off to ride throughout Europe, cooking in everything from fancy hotels to food trucks and learning so much along the way. Maybe it’s been too long since I’ve done that? Perhaps I could do the same here in the States? Find new cuisines to delve into, new flavor profiles to create, and see what other opportunities the world might have for me.

My eyes glance down to my wristwatch.

Shit, I’m going to be late.

Do you even care?

The truth is, I’m not sure. I’ve been in the States for months now, lured here by the promise of running my own kitchen for an established restaurant. Sergio, the owner of *Avanti Ristorante* and my boss, had seemed excited to welcome me, assuring me that he was more than open to my culinary creativity, and living near my US-based extended family had seemed like a way to have some roots for a change.

The proposition had been one I couldn’t refuse.

The reality, as it so often is, is lackluster compared to my hopes.

Yes, it is ‘my’ kitchen, but I work side-by-side with a co-chef and kitchen manager, Roberta. We get along surprisingly well considering we’re both accustomed to being the top dog in the kitchen, but it still gives a sense of it not being wholly *mine*. And Sergio, while a good front man, has the palate of a four-

year old and shows zero appreciation for my food, actually turning up his nose at the most basic of ingredients.

“*I do not eat spices,*” he told me, and I’d been shocked. Though my English is perfect, it’d taken me too long to decipher that he’d meant he doesn’t like *spicy* food. Understandably, some people don’t like heat with their food, but to Sergio, even simple black pepper can be too spicy. Ridiculous.

And then there’s the family aspect of living here. While my cousin, Violet, has been quite welcoming, she has a new husband and baby to attend to, along with her interior design business. She simply doesn’t have time to escort me around town, and to be honest, she’s rather boring with her talk of baby milestones, and disgustingly enough, my niece’s toilet habits. Calling it ‘poopy’ doesn’t make it cute. It’s still shit, even if it’s from a baby, and the last thing I want to discuss is what its color and consistency might mean about baby Carly’s health.

Which means I’m left to invitations from the aunts. And ugh, they seem to have taken a page from Mama’s recipe book and believe that me plus any available single woman between the ages of twenty and thirty-five will result in a delicious dish of love. I’ve refused the last three dinner invitations, unwilling to be ambushed by another blind date.

Still, I have made a commitment to Sergio.

Just get through tonight, I bargain with myself.

Avanti is hosting a private dinner for a local golden boy who’s getting married. Kennedy something or other. I imagine he’ll show up in a pink polo shirt with a popped collar beneath a navy blazer, have hair sprayed blond hair, a tan from golfing, and overly white teeth. *So quintessentially American,* I think wryly.

I pull into the back lot, parking my bike in the reserved space. There’s no sign, but everyone knows where Chef parks and wouldn’t dare to infringe. I turn off the machine, and the silence is deafening. I sigh, looking up to the cloudless sky for motivation to do this again tonight. It’s not the cooking that annoys me but the set *prix-fixe* menu with zero room for creativity. A necessary evil for a dinner party like this, but I’d rather create something special for a guest, something they don’t even know they want but fall instantly in love with from the first bite.

That won’t be happening tonight.

In the kitchen, the hustle and bustle of preparation is well underway, the scents and steam combining to create a wave of delicious and comforting aroma. “Hello,” I say to the assembled white-coated crew.

“Chef!” sounds out in a chorus.

I toss Roberta a wave, which she returns with a head nod, her hands never stopping their chopping motion as she dices carrots. She makes an amazing carrot soup that tastes like rich, earthen spring in a bowl. It's a recipe I learned the first week I arrived. I haven't told her that if she increases the nutmeg to a full tablespoon, it's even better, but that's how I make it at home for myself now. And how I'll make it when I leave Avanti.

Milo and Alessandro, two Greek-American men with near identical dark hair and eyes, sidle up to me as I wash my hands and pull on my white coat. Though they resemble one another, they couldn't be more different in personality—one kind and gentle-hearted, solely devoted to his lovely wife, and the other . . . well, Milo. There's a Milo in every kitchen the world over, I've found.

"Chef, have you heard who's coming tonight?" Milo asks, his lips twisted into a hungry smile.

I shrug, not getting drawn into his lecherousness. "Kennedy? Some sort of wedding pre-game." Pre-game, an American tradition I learned about in the South, though they call it 'tailgating', a fascinating event where they grill meat in parking lots, drink an excessive amount of cheap beer, and boast loudly about their team's abilities. I'd been confused when Roberta had described tonight's dinner as such an event, but apparently, it's a broader term that just means a pre-party.

Milo snorts. "Who cares about that cunt? I mean the bride!" He cuts an eye over his shoulder, making sure Roberta is focused on her soup, and then pulls his phone out of his pocket. He clicks for a moment and then spins the phone around to show me a couple, both blonde and young and near sparkling with the glow of love. "I'd watch her do yoga all day. Self-care, indeed." He makes an obscene jerking gesture with his hand and I grin. Milo is vulgar, but he is amusing.

Before I can do much more than chuckle, Sergio comes barreling into the kitchen, the proverbial bull in a china shop. For all his eating preferences, he is a rather large man, and the space between the stove and the food line is already narrowed by the line cooks prepping for tonight.

"Lorenzo! There you are, my boy! Are you ready for tonight?" he booms, smiling widely. "Tonight, Avanti will be on everyone's lips and by morning, we'll have people begging for reservations to dine at my restaurant." He looks to the ceiling, lips moving in silent prayer.

He means reservations with me. And Roberta. Hell, even with Milo and Alessandro. All Sergio does is greet people like the consummate owner, shaking hands and kissing babies like a greasy politician. He's barely one step above a used car salesman.

I sigh, knowing that's harsher than Sergio deserves. He is good at his role,

and it's one I'm not interested in playing myself. I'm just in a mood.

At least cooking, even recipes I know by rote, is a stress relief, so I get to it.

Garlic . . . minced. Pasta . . . made from scratch. Parmesan . . . hand grated.

“Like this?” I ask, my small fingers kneading the pasta dough carefully, slowly, dutifully as Aunt Sofia supervises my awkward new movements. She intends it to be punishment, a penance for misusing her best wooden spoon as a makeshift sword to fight with my friend, Emilio. He's likely at home washing dishes as his own consequence.

But this . . . this isn't a punishment. This is magic. Blending ingredients together, working them until the result is somehow greater than the sum of its parts.

“Yes, Lorenzo. Good boy,” Aunt Sofia encourages me. “Harder. You must use your hands to squeeze. Then we will roll it out.” She's tossing a light layer of flour onto a wooden board, prepping for that step as I've seen her do hundreds of times. I never knew it was so much work just to make dinner.

That night, when she tells the family that I made the pasta, they praise my efforts and the pasta itself. I bask in their words, though I can tell the noodles are clunkier than the delicate strands Aunt Sofia usually creates.

That night was when my love affair with cooking began. For the next several years, I worked side by side with Aunt Sofia, her tutelage difficult but enlightening. By my late teens, I was creating menus beyond even what she was capable of and seeking out more. Always more flavors, experiences, textures, and blends.

Yet, it always comes back to this . . . my fettuccine alfredo, the signature dish that has been my pass into kitchens the world over. For such a seemingly simple dish, there is a refined balance to the flavors.

Alessandro steps up beside me. “Thirty minutes until apps, Chef. Guests are already in house.”

I look up to the clock on the wall. “Heard. I'm going to step out for a smoke before service starts.”

He nods, moving into my place and keeping the process of cheese grating going. We'll go through several wedges of parmesan tonight and do not want to run out mid-service.

I step into the back alley, taking a deep breath of the evening air. I haven't smoked in years, but ‘smoke breaks’ are a known habit of kitchen crews, and though I don't need the nicotine, I need the moment to center myself because once service starts, so does the madness. There will be no breaks, no pauses, no room for mistakes, and the pressure will be on.

The door opens beside me, and I look to my side, expecting to see Roberta

telling me to get my ass back to the line. Instead, it's much, much worse.

"There you are, baby," the woman purrs. Valentina is dressed to kill tonight, as usual. Her round tits spill from her silk blouse, her black skirt is painted-on tight, and her long, toned legs end in stiletto heels. She sashays up to me, her manicured nail tracing along my forearm and her smoky eyes half-lidded. "You miss me? I missed you."

I jerk my arm, flinging her touch off and spitting out, "Have you no shame? I've told you . . . not interested. Never."

I'm being cruel and crude, but it's absolutely warranted. I've tried polite, I've tried charming, I've tried blunt, but it's come to this. And still, she keeps coming back for more.

"Aw, my bad boy is scared of my husband? There's no need, baby. He need never know." Her nail finds its way to her lush cleavage, drawing a line designed to direct my attention to the mounds.

Why does she think that's a reassurance? More importantly, that she is Sergio's wife is not the reason I don't want her. She's simply not . . . her. Not the one who can capture my attention, keep me intrigued, and somehow manage to continually surprise me. No, Valentina is as transparent as a window and as shallow as a puddle in the desert.

I thought I might've met someone interesting once, but her roots were too complex and deep, and I'd run, scared. I'm still ashamed of that.

"Perhaps I'll tell Sergio how his wife behaves when his back is turned?" The threat has crossed my mind more than once when Valentina gets particularly aggressive in her pursuit of me. I've always considered it a suicide mission, though, something that, while it might get Valentina to leave me alone, would also lead to Sergio firing me over his wounded pride.

But with wanderlust growing in my gut, I find myself less concerned about Sergio's potential response.

Valentina laughs, throwing her head back to expose her neck. "You won't do that. It serves no purpose." She shrugs, her lips lifted in a red-framed smile. "He won't believe you, but on the off chance that you speak the truth, he'll never trust you. He'll make your life hell until you quit or he fires you. Either way, I'll be here by Sergio's side long after you're gone."

Her eyes flash, her smile turning predatory as she realizes she has me between a rock and a hard place. But while she thinks she holds all the cards, I'm about ready to play fifty-two pick-up and just say fuck it.

"Find me later, baby." There's a hint of an order to the words, and her heels click on the dirty concrete as she goes back inside.

I think she would've let me fuck her right up against the filthy brick of the

building, those red-soled heels stepping on cigarette butts, with anyone able to see if they came out the back door.

Sexy? Maybe once it would've been. Or maybe with someone else, it would be. Now? A shiver of disgust worms its way down my spine as my cock tries to climb back up into my body in revulsion.

The door opens again, and despite my strong spine, I startle.

Milo smirks. "Busted."

I think he's talking about Valentina and shake my head. "Fuck no."

His brows jump high on his forehead. "You're not coming in? You'll have to tell Sergio he's fucked for dinner service then."

"Oh, no . . . I'll be right there," I say, realizing he's not talking about Valentina at all but is likely thinking I'm hiding for a long 'smoke break' to get out of the prep work. He doesn't let me off that easily, holding the door open for me to pass in front of him.

I wonder if he can sense that I've got one proverbial foot out the door, ready to make a run for the city limits and the next thing.

In the kitchen, I wash my hands and dive in. Alessandro's caprese salads and antipasto platters are already going out for the first course, which means I'm up.

Fresh ingredients are the secret to my success, but there are also some tricks I've cultivated to truly take my plates a step above. I use a large spoon to help swirl the fettuccine into a neat circle, sliding it onto the center of each bowl. Once a tray is complete, Milo works behind me to add a sprinkle of fresh parmesan and a parsley sprig to each. Finally, I eye each bowl critically, giving the final approval on them all before they're taken to the guests.

And then the process begins again for the next tray. And then again and again.

Next, Roberta's soup, served in small, delicate bowls with an arancini ball, a swirl of sour cream, and freshly shaved carrot garnish, goes out. It's not the traditional progression, but we do it intentionally to offer variation of flavors based on the specific menu. Plus, it allows Roberta and me to work together on the main dish. Chicken and fresh local veggies sauteed in truffle oil is a simple but delicious recipe that lets the ingredients shine. Last but not least, the tiramisu goes out.

And service is complete. Sweaty, exhausted, but feeling good about the food I've made tonight, I start the cleaning process. We may not handle the dishes, but I take special care of my knives and my station like a chef should.

"Roberta! Lorenzo! Come, come!" Sergio's voice is excited and loud, leading us both to pop our heads out to see what he wants.

"The special guests, they would like to speak with the chefs. Come, come!"

He waves a hand for us to follow, and to my chagrin, I do, letting him show me off like a trained dog.

In the dining room which has been closed for the private party, I see the tables have been rearranged into a large square. Along one edge sits the bridal party. I recognize the bride and groom from Milo's picture, though they look different now.

Kennedy is wearing a gray suit with a bright pink tie—I was right about the color, at least—and talking to an older man at his side. Next to him, Milo's obsession, the bride is taking picture after picture of her untouched tiramisu from various angles.

Sergio walks straight up to them, interrupting Kennedy's conversation. "Here they are! I present Avanti Ristorante's chefs, Lorenzo Toscani and Roberta Esposita. Chefs, these are our special guests, Cole Kennedy and Claire Johnson."

Wait . . . did he say Cole Kennedy? Hell, I even got the guy's name wrong, thinking Kennedy was his first name. Not that it matters since they're both last names. That's a rich guy thing, right? I'm surprised there's not a junior or even some numbers after his name, like Cole Kennedy the third.

Anyway, I did the special dinner party, fed the guests, and now I'll never see him again. Still, the name tickles something in my mind. I eye the man again, trying to place him, but I come up empty.

As I've been eyeing the guy, I feel the prick of another gaze on me and realize that I've become the object of attention. Especially a lot of female attention—the bridesmaids ogling me, a few female guests getting up to come closer, and even the bride has lifted her eyes from her phone. In fact, I'm pretty sure she just took a picture of me.

I stiffen my back, ready to play the charming chef role that's required of me. I even purposefully thicken my Italian accent, knowing it makes the food somehow seem more authentic the less decipherable I become.

"*Buona sera*," I say, placing a hand on my chest and bowing my head slightly, though I keep my eyes lifted, a small flirtatious gleam in them as I meet the bride's. I don't mean anything by it, but making the guest feel special is always a slick move. "You enjoy the fettuccine? It is my family's recipe, perfected through the generations as it's passed down to the next. Now, it is my turn to create it for you."

She swoons, a blush rising on her cheeks, and my work here is done.

"Yes, it was ah-maz-ing," she says, each syllable its own word. "I don't think I've ever had anything that delicious in my mouth."

I choke on the thirteen-year-old boy laughter that automatically tries to burst

free at her phrasing, especially when she seems guilelessly unaware of her unintended double entendre.

“The pleasure was all mine,” I answer, keeping my tone level so as not to give my laughter away.

Cole takes Claire’s hand, patting it affectionately like one would a dog. It might not be a possessive, claiming, Neanderthal-type movement, but he’s warning me off all the same. “Claire Bear, didn’t you have something you wanted to ask?” he prompts.

She smiles sweetly at Cole and nods thankfully at the reminder. “Yes! Everything was so delicious tonight, and Mr. Sergio was telling us about how you’ve traveled all over the world learning how to cook—Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and finally, all over the States.”

I smile congenially while she tells me my own life story.

“And that fettuccine was . . . wow,” she says breathlessly. I swear she looks around the table for her plate too. Cole taps her hand, and her eyes flick back to me. “Will you come with us and make it for the wedding? Maybe even do one of the dinners? Whatever you want, as long as you make more of that alfredo.” To Cole, she gushes, “God, I would drink it like wine! Like cheese and wine all in one. I would be cheese drunk and carb loaded all the time.”

She beams, like any of that made sense. I look to Cole, thinking he can help translate what she’s saying. It’s not that my English is lacking, but Claire is talking fast and making little sense. But Cole is quiet, simply smiling lovingly with eyes only for Claire. Next, as much as I hate to admit it, I look to Sergio. He is good with the guests, after all, and perhaps can step in to help me figure out what the hell is going on here. But he too is silent, his cheeks flushed.

A woman in a black suit steps forward. Her hair is shellacked in place, her face stony in an expression of practiced blankness. “*Signore* Toscani, may I speak with you privately? Now.”

Not giving me a chance to answer, she turns and walks into a side hallway. “Excuse me,” I tell Claire and Cole. Sergio gives me a pointed look as I pass him that says ‘don’t fuck this up.’

In the hallway, any warmth the woman might’ve shown has chilled. She’s as frosty as an Ice Queen, a hard sculpture of a human in frozen form. “*Signore* Toscani, I am Meredith Wildeman. I’m in charge of pulling this wedding together last-minute and turning it into something worthy of the Kennedy-Johnson names.”

I think I’m supposed to be impressed by that somehow, but I give exactly zero fucks. “Yeah.”

With Claire’s effervescent friendliness, I gave formal politeness. With

Meredith's cold professionalism, I inherently want to push every button and piss her off with improper English and a lazy vibe. It's my nature, and honestly, a bit of fun.

She sniffs, unimpressed by me.

Feeling's mutual, woman.

"Yes, well. Miss Johnson seems to have taken a pretty strong liking to dinner tonight and would like to invite you to come to the wedding. Cook the fettuccine alfredo, as she said. Perhaps another meal or two, depending on the resort chef's willingness to share his kitchen. I've already got a call in to confirm that." With that, she pulls a tablet out of her bag and begins clicking around.

I hold up a hand, taking control of the conversation. I hope. "Uh, hey. What the hell are you talking about? Wedding? Resort?" I shake my head. "What?"

With a beleaguered sigh, she explains again. "Miss Johnson is the type of celebrity who gets what she wants, and she wants your fettuccine at her wedding. Name your price, your requirements, whatever. We leave on Sunday, so I'll need your information to arrange your flights."

"Let me get this straight, you want me to come to a resort in . . ." I pause and she jumps in.

"Aruba. And not me. Miss Johnson."

I nod. "So Claire Bear wants some pasta and I'm supposed to just hop on a plane, go to an island resort, be on call to make her alfredo at the drop of a hat, and do a dinner service? That about sum it up?"

"Yes, yes." She's clicking away again, and I realize she really is booking me a flight.

The ornery ass inside me rears up and I want to say no. I'm not some punk kid who can be ordered around or enticed with money. I cook for the love of it and share my food to grow that love.

But Claire loved it.

That's true, so maybe I'm not really selling out. And it would be ridiculous to turn down a trip to Aruba over foolish stubbornness, especially when I was just thinking that it might be time to hit the road. This could be a way to test that theory out. If I miss Avanti, I can return. If not, I can put out some feelers on where to go next.

"There you are, baby," Valentina purrs, coming into the hallway with me and Meredith. Valentina presses the length of her body to my side, her hands going around my neck. Giving zero thought to what she might be interrupting, she whispers loudly, "I've been looking all over for you. I thought we were going to meet when you finished service for the silly girls with their phones out." Her smile makes it seem like that's a private joke between two lovebirds, or at least

fuck buddies. We're neither.

I analyze for another second and then turn to Meredith. "I can go straight to the airport now if you want me to."

Her smirk is pure maliciousness, though I don't understand why. She's getting her way.

I shake Valentina off, hating the way her unwanted warmth has soaked into the side of my body, the skin tingling with desire for a shower to wash her play at seduction from my memory.

Valentina pouts, crossing her arms, which only serves to boost her full tits up another inch. "Baby, you're not leaving me, are you?"

I take in Valentina's pout and want to escape even more. Like run away screaming with my arms flailing crazily. Now. "I'll let Sergio know right away."

CHAPTER 3

“*A*bsolutely not,” Archie decrees from his perch on my bed. Wait, is it a perch if he’s stretched out on his side, booted feet hanging over the edge with a mimosa in his hand and a look of disbelief on his face?

“Actually, that not only won’t work for Aruba, but you need to donate it to a blind beach bum. What were you thinking with that print and that color?” He holds a flat hand above his brow as though the shirt is the brightness of the noon sun shining in his eyes.

I look in the mirror again for a new appraisal. The hot pink button-up shirt with sunglass-wearing pineapples had seemed fun and quirky when I bought it. I figured I could wear it with white cut-offs and pink heeled sandals and be vacay-ready. But maybe not?

I yank the shirt out of the waistband of my shorts despite the fact that it took me nearly five minutes to get it there. Instead, I knot it at my waist. “Better?”

The snort from Archie says quite equivocally that the answer is still no.

Violet shoots him a glare, having my back the way a bestie should. Technically, she’s Archie’s boss when they’re doing an interior design project, but the truth is, Archie does what Archie wants, and that includes saying whatever he thinks with zero filter. It’s why we love him, and occasionally, why we hate him.

“What’s wrong with pineapples? They’re cute and fun. A hospitality thing, I think.” Violet tilts her head as if trying to remember where she heard that. “Oh! And there’s the whole quote thing about them . . . be a pineapple—stand tall, wear a crown, and be sweet on the inside.” Her smile is one of encouragement to keep the shirt that Archie finds so hideously offensive.

Archie smirks. “That is not where I thought you were going with that.”

Courtney steps out from my closet with a gauzy swimsuit cover-up, innocently asking Archie, “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” I tell her. She’s grown and married, but she’s still my baby sister, and I’m not giving her sex tips and tricks. Not today, not ever.

Although she probably knows more than I do at this point. She’s definitely getting more dick than I am with her and Kaede being newlyweds.

But now, I’m going to be thinking weird sexual thoughts whenever I pull this shirt on, so off it goes. I toss it to the floor, done with it and glad my solo fashion show has been hijacked or else I would’ve been looking a mess in Aruba.

“I cannot go shopping. I don’t have time. What I have in my closet has to work.” Even as I say it, I consider hitting the mall one more time.

Archie sighs, his cattiness disappearing as he snaps his fingers and flips into work mode. “Give me the list.” This is the other reason we love him. He is the most organized person I’ve ever met, and that includes Courtney, who is a planner extraordinaire.

I hand Archie my tablet, and he reads aloud while we listen like he’s telling a bedtime story. “Day one—travel. That includes drive, flight, and check-in. Show me what you have.”

The order is sharp, and Courtney holds up soft joggers and a slim tank top, while Violet picks up a lightweight wrap for the cool airplane. I add, “I’ll wear my slip-on sneakers for TSA.”

He taps the screen. Day by day, he works through my trip agenda, from clothes that can get dirty while I create on-site, clothes that can be seen while I’m setting up, and then moving into the fun stuff for my downtime. I’m planning to make the most of this opportunity and balance work and play, so I’ll need shorts, swimsuits, and yoga clothes.

“Let me see your swimsuit.”

Violet holds it up, the straps thick and the bottoms modest. It’s my suit for the pool when I’m going to swim and don’t want anything falling out.

Even Courtney laughs this time. “Seriously, Abs. That looks like a mom-suit designed to lock and load the girls for serious mission work.” She takes it upon herself to dig through my dresser drawer for something else, but I’m fighting for this one.

“Give me that. High-rise bottoms are hot right now. I’ll show you,” I argue, grabbing the suit from Violet. Not shy in front of my sisters and not having the right parts for Archie, I strip and pull the suit on.

In the mirror, I pose as I turn left and right. “See? Adorbs!” It is, I’m certain of it. The green bottoms are high waisted, but the sides scrunch up into little ties that highlight my thighs, and the top is halter-cut to create cleavage while keeping my breasts secure.

But when I look up, I see the reflection of three sets of dubious eyes behind

me. “What?”

Archie rolls his eyes. “Imma let you two tell her because I’m not sure she can handle my degree of truth.”

Oh, shit! Is it that bad? So bad that Archie, of all people, is biting his tongue—literally, his pink tongue is poking from between his teeth—so he doesn’t hurt my feelings?

Violet comes to stand behind me, her eyes pinched with whatever she’s about to unleash on me. “I want you to understand . . . you have a great ass. It’s not you. But this suit?” She glances down to my butt sadly. “It makes you look like your ass is two feet tall. Abs, the waistband is like two inches from the tie in the middle of your back.”

I spin, trying to see what she’s talking about, but despite all my yoga classes, I can’t look at my own backside.

Violet’s not done.

She bends down, getting more up close and personal with my ass than most of my lovers have, and holds her hands up, a good two feet apart behind me. “This is the waist, and this is where your butt meets your thigh. Do you want your ass to look this big?”

Well, shit. I might not be able to see behind me, but the answer to that question is always no. “Fine. I guess I can get a suit there. If I even have time to sneak away to the beach.”

Nerves are kicking back in. This event is going to be huge, both in scale and in importance, and it’s way more serious than how my ass looks. The turn in my mood must show on my face because suddenly, my mimosa is shoved into my hand. When I don’t immediately drink, Violet lifts it for me.

“It’ll be fine, Abi. You know this. We know this. Claire Johnson knows this. It’s why she hired you, because she knows you can manage to bring your creative vision to life for her wedding.”

“Mmmhmm.” I nod robotically.

Courtney comes to my other side, boxing me in. “Tell me about the flowers. What flowers are you using?”

One friend for pep talks, one sister for logic, and one friend to refill my glass. “Thanks, Archie,” I say, lifting it myself this time for a long swallow. “Claire wants local flowers for some of the events, but I have some special ones too, like the roses for the ceremony. I’ve confirmed their arrival dates this week so they’ll be fresh, and Janey and I packed and shipped vases, floral foam, wire, and everything else we’ll need weeks ago. The resort team already confirmed that they have those.”

Courtney dips her chin, a knowing smile curling her lips. We might be very

different—her the fierce boardroom bitch and me the wild child free spirit, but we are both Andrewses. Taking care of business is in our blood, and by making me list out what I've already handled, she knows I'll find some peace.

I smile back at my cheerleaders. "I'm ready."

And I am. I can handle whatever comes my way this week because I'm ready to tackle this event and make it my bitch.

"Okay, I hate to break up the party, but I need to get home. Ross and Carly need me," Violet says wistfully. The truth is, she's jonesing for some baby snuggles of her own because Ross is likely doing just fine, probably airplane-flying my niece around their penthouse home or watching the business news to teach her all about economics. He's an amazing dad, much to everyone's surprise. Not that we thought my brother would be a bad dad, exactly, but he's matured so much and has truly become what we always hoped he would be—a great husband, a devoted father, and a role model of a man.

Violet's exit starts everyone toward the door, and after hugs and promises to not behave to a gleaming-eyed, bad influence Archie, I find myself alone in my apartment.

I pick my tablet up from the bed where Archie left it and begin my own process of checking my lists. Santa might check his twice, but I go for a solid four rounds, item by item, list by list, until I'm sure that I'm truly ready. I water my plants, telling them that Mama will be away for a few days but Aunt Courtney will come by to take care of them, and then lie down as the sun sets, setting my alarm so that I'll have time to get to the airport for my five a.m. flight.

THE ENTIRETY of Aruba spreads out below us as our plane begins to descend and my breath is taken away. It's so incredibly beautiful. Clear pristine waters rush forward to meet the sandy white beach that rings the entire island, and the water visually fades out to a line where it becomes deep azure blue skies.

It's postcard perfect, and I can definitely see why Claire chose this place to have her wedding.

The plane rattles violently as it descends, hitting a patch of turbulence. Janey, who was until that moment peacefully snoring next to me, nearly jumps out of her seat in alarm.

"I didn't do it, your honor, I swear—" Janey half yells, causing heads to turn, then catches herself as she realizes she just woke up. Playing it off, she pats her hair and stretches, letting out a loud yawn and saying, "Oof, glad that was a dream. But just in case, if anyone asks, I was with you the whole week."

I wonder exactly what she dreamed about doing. With Janey, there's no telling. She's a solid worker but whole-heartedly subscribes to the work hard-

play hard mentality, and we're going to a place designed for play. Hopefully, she'll take the dream of having to explain herself to a judge as a warning sign and behave herself.

Wiggling in her seat, she growls, "My legs are frickin' cramped and my nether region's sweating like a whore in church. Can you say 'crotch rot'?"

"Janey!" I protest, looking around and hoping no one is listening. She's right, though. It is hotter than Hades in this sardine can. I gave up on my lightweight wrap at the last airport when we had to run to catch our connecting flight, and between my thighs is feeling a little less than daisy-fresh too.

"Oh, my God, it's so beautiful!" Janey exclaims excitedly, switching the subject as she flops across my lap to peer out the window to the shore thousands of feet below us.

"I know," I agree, looking out and seeing black dots moving about on the beach and slowly realizing they're people. "I can hardly believe we're getting to stay here for a week."

"Mmmhmm," Janey murmurs dreamily. "I cannot wait to get down there and show off my new suit!"

"Just make sure you shower first," I advise.

"Oh, yes . . . hey!" Janey's gaze leaves the sand to glare at me with a suspicious scowl, "Just what are you trying to say?"

"Oh, nothing," I say with sweet innocence, but I sniff a little and she sits upright, back in her own seat.

Undeterred, she sticks her nose in her bare armpit to get a whiff. "I do not smell. I'm floral fresh, just like the deodorant says." Worse, she keeps her arm up and leans my way like she thinks I'm going to check too.

I'm definitely not doing that. I love the girl, would go to the ends of the Earth for her, but I'm not doing a pit check just to prove her point. "Floral fresh? Maybe, if it's an *Amorphophallus Titanum*."

Her eyes narrow as she thinks. I can nearly see the letters breaking apart in her mind like a Latin translation bomb. "Did you just say I smell like a giant misshapen penis plant?"

I smile, pleased that she got it. "Better known as a corpse flower, pungent nasties that bloom once every ten years and smell like rotting death. So yeah, you're totally floral fresh."

"Bitch," she deadpans.

"You're the one talking about your crotch rot!" I dig.

A moment later, we're both busting up laughing. We need this release before the work begins, a small pocket of time to just be silly and weird, telling botany jokes that only we would get. "Really, am I okay?" she asks honestly this time.

“You’re fine,” I tell her, shaking my head. “I’m sure everyone in here smells like dog farts right now.” I throw a little shade at the Karen across the aisle who’s eyeing Janey and me like we’re the only ones low-brow enough to discuss the truth of feminine hygiene odors. “And has skin that foreshadows their va-jay-jay . . . dry as fuck.” I pat my own cheek, plump with the moisturizer I put on this morning. Karen’s nose nearly hits her book as she returns to reading her latest book club bore, leaving us blessedly alone.

It’s fun and light banter talk all the way down, with Janey oohing and ahing over every landmark we see and talking about all the hot men we’re likely to meet. Although I’m sure most of our time is going to be spent planning our flower layouts for every event instead of partying, I find it refreshing to not talk about business right now, knowing the stress that this week is sure to entail. There will be more than enough time for that later.

When we finally get off the plane and into the crowded airport, my legs are screaming with relief, and it takes us at least twenty minutes to find the driver with our name on his sign.

“Aruba, we have arrived!” Janey shouts jubilantly outside before we get into the taxi.

It’s not a long drive to our destination, but Janey fills every minute talking to our accented local driver, who seems amused by her chattering questions and requests for recommendations. I, on the other hand, spend most of the time looking out the window, observing the vibrant explosion happening in the streets. Bright rainbows of color are everywhere—the clothing, the buildings, the lush florals, the people, the food—each bit of it filling me with inspiration.

We move on to a well paved road that winds along, mirroring the beach, and once again, I’m impressed by how beautiful the tropical shore is.

“Holy shit!” Janey gushes on a breathy sigh as we pull up to an estate-like building. “It’s amazing!”

Casa Del Mario.

It’s a towering resort, made of gleaming white stone and exquisitely detailed architecture, sprawling across a good-sized portion of the beach. Beautifully landscaped grounds surround the building with palm trees and green grass strategically staged for the most breathtaking view.

Simply put, the resort is out of this world.

“Wow,” I say as we exit the SUV and I look around even more. Beyond the main building, I can see the beach mere steps away, a deep blue pool filled with people, an outdoor restaurant with pristine white tablecloths and fine china, and manicured paths leading this way and that. I’d like to explore each and every one of them.

A bellhop is already unloading our bags from the back, and the driver assures us that everything will be waiting in our room before directing us to the lobby to check in.

“Sorry, girl,” Janey says, shaking her head as we walk through the doors. “I don’t think I’m going home after this wedding is over. You can run the little shop of horrors all by yourself because I’m staying in paradise!”

It’s even more opulent inside the crowded lobby, with pink marble tile flooring, practically gleaming from being freshly mopped, and soaring white stone arches that are at least fifteen feet high.

There’s an airiness flowing through the lobby, bringing with it the smell of fresh sea—salt and sun. And maybe suntan oil?

There are several lines at the front desk, and I wonder how many of these people are here for the Johnson-Kennedy wedding. Claire had mentioned ‘keeping it small and intimate’ and Cole had agreed, limiting their guest list to *only* two hundred. That number grew over the months, though, which I only know because I had to add additional centerpieces to their order. I guess that’s the price of celebrity.

I’m happily waiting in line, people watching while Janey has wandered off to scope out the bar she saw across the lobby, when I hear a voice from my past.

“Ugh! Honey, I’m beginning to think we should’ve booked our honeymoon in Paris instead of here. It’s beautiful and all, but the customer service is unacceptable!” The pouty entitlement is unmistakable, the tone irritating the small hairs at the nape of my neck.

Oh, God no. Please no.

I go rigid at the sound of the familiar voice, flashbacks assailing me.

For the love of God, please, please, please don't recognize me.

“Calm down, babe,” I hear a man’s voice say behind me. “We’re second in line. The wait is almost over.”

“Yes, but do you see how ridiculously slow they are? We’ll be here another thirty minutes and I have to pee!”

“Well, just go on. I can handle this if you need to use the bathroom.”

The woman huffs unhappily, as though that reasonable course of action is completely intolerable. “But this is our honeymoon!”

And that’s when I feel it. A tap on my shoulder. “Excuse me, we’re on our honeymoon and really can’t wait in this . . . Abi?”

I fought it as long as I could, but when Emily taps me on the shoulder and speaks directly to me, I can’t very well ignore her.

Emily Jones. My high school nemesis.

Maybe that’s too strong a word? More like my high school competition.

We'd been engaged in a battle of 'anything you can do, I can do better' for as long as I remembered. The only problem was that it was one-sided. I simply hadn't cared until she started dating my ex . . . *while* he was still my boyfriend. It didn't matter that he wasn't even all that great to start with. It'd been the straw on the proverbial camel's back. We could compete for top grades, cheerleading positions, popularity contests, and all that was hunky-dory and in good fun. But Emily had crossed a line, breaking girl code rules, and I'd pulled out all the stops from that point on.

"Abi Andrews?" She sounds shocked to see me. Unpleasantly so.

Fuck my life. Not her. Anyone but her.

I slowly turn around, gritting my teeth.

"Hello, Emily."

"Oh, my God!" Emily shrieks too loudly. *Attention whore*, I think bitchily.

She looks good, though, I can admit that. To myself. She's wearing a white sundress that swirls around her thighs and high wedge sandals that bring her up at least a few inches. And she's standing with a tall, narrow-shouldered guy with blond spiky hair and white teeth.

"It's so good to see you again, girl!" Emily exclaims, coming forward to give me a hug as if we're long lost best friends. "What's it been? Like five years? Six?"

Oh, my God, can you be more full of shit?

"At least," I say, making our hug brief before pulling back.

"Oh, this is my husband, Doug. He's a vee-pee of a boutique mutual fund index," she brags. "Dougie, this is Abi Andrews, of *those* Andrewses."

I swallow down the defensive words I want to hurl and put on a mask of serenity. Mom has taught me well, and Courtney has taken Mom's skills to a whole other level. I try to channel them and not snatch the obvious extensions off Emily's head.

"Nice to meet you," I say cordially, offering Doug a handshake.

"Likewise. If you don't mind my asking, who's your financial planner? With a name like Andrews, you have to be careful who you let in your inner circle. I'd be happy to go over some options with you if you'd like."

Doug's salesman tactics are transparent and misplaced. I don't need a financial planner. *I* am my financial planner. Got those skills and lessons firsthand from Dad, thank you very much.

"I think I'm good," I say dryly.

Emily, who's likely missing the attention of the last five-point-three seconds, jumps in. "We're on our honeymoon," she informs me, as if the entire lobby didn't hear her say that mere moments ago. She slips her arm through Doug's,

smoothly arranging hers to show off a ginormous diamond ring. I guess Doug does okay at his investing if he can lay out for that kind of rock.

“Congratulations.” I flash a fake smile.

Not getting enough of a reaction, Emily resorts to wagging her hand in front of my face, nearly scratching me with the prongs holding the diamond in place. “Doug proposed with a Tiffany princess cut, just over three carats. And then he gave me the eternity band with our vows.”

“Pretty,” I say, giving her what she wants but also *not* at the same time.

She looks down at her ring, frowning, and then to my empty hand. Feigning horror, she gasps, “Oh, Abi! I’m so sorry. I forgot that both your older brother and your younger sister got married. Can’t believe I forgot all that scandal, you know? But you never did get married, did you?”

Anger bubbles up—check that, pure murderous rage bubbles up inside me. I hate to admit it, but Emily’s whole act gets under my skin. Even after all these years, I’m sore from her constant fakeness. And we’re not even a few minutes from seeing each other for the first time in years and she’s already trying to pick at scabs.

When I don’t answer right away, Emily continues with a frown on her face as if she’s so, so sad for me. “I mean, I know you’re probably so lonely. I shouldn’t have flashed my ring in your face like that. Please accept my apology.”

Oh, my God, the nerve of this girl!

“I . . .” I began, not knowing where to go with this. I could tell her to fuck off, but I don’t want her to let her know her bullshit bothers me.

I’m still trying to figure out how I should respond when I hear another familiar voice. This deeply accented one hits me very differently, though, especially when it’s from right behind me. “There you are, *mia rosa*. I thought I’d lost you.”

What the actual fuck?

I gawk as I look up to see the flashing white smile of Lorenzo, who’s dressed in white slacks and a tropical shirt that’s unbuttoned, putting his tanned olive skin on display.

My tongue feels thick in my mouth as I count down his abs. I always hear about six-packs, but unless I’ve forgotten how to count, which is entirely possible right now, Lorenzo is sporting an eight-pack. And the cutest belly button I’ve ever seen. I’d like to lick it on my way down to somewhere even better.

I blink, lost in my daydreams, and Lorenzo smiles as he leans into me, comfortably swinging an arm around my shoulder. “Abigail? What filthy

thoughts are running through that brilliant mind of yours? I can see each and every one written in the heat of your eyes.”

What?

He’s being so nice, flirty to the *nth* degree as he looks deeply into my eyes, begging for something. But what?

I haven’t seen him since he left me at the wedding, having decisively avoided him. The only way that’s been possible is that Violet has been so busy with Carly that she hasn’t had one of her dinner parties, but it’s worked in my favor.

I have no clue why he’s here. Or *how* the hell he is here.

But he is. And he is saving me from Emily. Somehow, some way, he’s right here to step in when she cuts me down and makes it seem like I’m failing at life. It might not mean that much to him, but it does to me. I didn’t have a rescuer back in high school. Violet and I preferred to handle things ourselves, and really, Emily wasn’t that bad. Just annoying enough, and with an impressive skill to filet me and leave me with self-doubts that rear up when the shit hits the fan. It was more of *a death of a thousand cuts* than a single slice with her.

Why I’m thinking about that now, I don’t know, but it appears that my brain is spinning like a turbo wheel with ideas, thinking them up and discarding them with frightening precision.

Suddenly, a thought hits my brain with the power of a lightning bolt, an idea so incredibly outrageous and crazy that I almost dismiss it outright.

No. Don’t you do it! I scream to myself.

But looking at Emily as she stares at me with pity, the urge is overpowering to wipe that smirk off her face.

I try my best, but I can’t seem to stop the words that come rushing out of my mouth.

“Emily, meet my husband, Lorenzo.”

CHAPTER 4

*W*hat in the actual fuck did I just do? I ask myself as the room spins around me. I seriously feel like I just punched myself in the head, hard, as my heart pounds in my chest while I wait for Lorenzo's reaction. Simultaneously, I'm clutching him all the tighter, mainly to try and not faceplant on the tile.

Beside me, I can feel him go rigid, and I know he's probably thinking *what the fuck?*

Can't fault him. I'm thinking that too. Did I leave my sanity in the Miami airport when I was running for our connection? Or maybe I lost it before then, at home when I was packing extra batteries for some bonus stress relief?

When the silence stretches past ten seconds, I nudge Lorenzo with my foot, smiling up at him hopefully while silently praying.

The look in his eyes is a mystery, and I cringe, half expecting him to blow everything up, when he extends his hand to Emily and smiles. "Lorenzo Toscani. It's a pleasure."

Emily takes Lorenzo's hand like she's half in shock, gripping his fingers like she's wondering if he's for real.

Fuck it, might as well roll with it at this point.

"You see, we're here on our honeymoon too!" I gush, clasping Lorenzo's hand and squeezing hard.

Go along with this, please!

"Congratulations," Doug says with a true smile, completely oblivious to the hurricane of craziness that just swept us away and out to sea with zero life vests.

"Right . . . yes, of course," Emily says, looking us over. "Congratulations. But where's the ring?"

"Lorenzo's family offered us an antique set from his grandparents in Italy," I make up on the spot, hoping Lorenzo's still willing to play along, "but they didn't get here in time for us to get them sized right. And we certainly didn't

want to risk losing such priceless antiques in the sea.”

“We’ll pick them up back home,” Lorenzo completes for me. He’s going along with it. For now.

“So, what do you do, Lorenzo?” Doug asks, already on the prowl for another possible sales opportunity.

“I’m a chef,” he says modestly. I haven’t had Lorenzo’s food, but Violet speaks of it as if it’s an otherworldly experience.

Doug frowns. “You do okay with that? I mean, do you have your own restaurant or something?”

Something flickers across Lorenzo’s face, there and gone so quickly I could pretend I imagined it. But I know I didn’t.

“No. I’m a co-chef at an Italian restaurant.” The challenge is thick, daring Doug to say something derogatory about Lorenzo’s role.

“Ah, well . . . good for you,” Doug says lamely, apparently deeming Lorenzo unworthy of a hard sale.

Emily steps forward, effectively putting herself into the middle of our group of four. “Your husband?” She taps her lip with a manicured nail. “I can’t say I’ve heard a thing about that,” she sneers with obvious disbelief. “I mean, *everyone* heard about your brother and your best friend, and Courtney and Ross’s best friend. But I haven’t heard a thing about Abi Andrews finding a man,” she accuses, “and goodness, wouldn’t that be big news if it were true?”

“We’re keeping it quiet,” I say.

Unfortunately, at the same time, Lorenzo comes to my defense again. “It was rather quick.”

I look to Lorenzo, panicked, but he flashes me a sexy smile. “It was a fast wedding because I could not wait to make Abigail mine, but we are keeping it quiet for now. I’m sure you understand how . . . hmm, what’s the word?” He speaks perfect English and is setting Emily up for a shot, I’m certain of it. I fall a little in love with him in this moment. Okay, not love, but gleeful, spiteful friendship at least.

“Ah, yes, I’m sure you know how *nosy* some people can be. Abigail’s family is the subject of much unfortunate gossip.”

How does he know that?

Violet must have told him about how awful things were when the paparazzi found out about her wedding to my brother.

“May I help you?” the clerk behind the desk asks with a smile.

I offer her a thankful smile in return because she’s saving me too. “Yes, checking in. I have a reservation for Andrews.”

She clicks on her computer. “Of course, Miss Andrews. I have you in room

six-seventeen. Will two keys be sufficient?"

Lorenzo steps forward. "That's Mrs. Andrews. And yes, two keys will be fine." The clerk is utterly charmed by Lorenzo, her smile wavering and then going megawatt as she hands the key cards over. "Shall we, *mia rosa*?"

What is he doing?

I mean, obviously, we can't say we're staying in separate rooms because that would be ridiculously suspicious for newlyweds on their honeymoon. But he's acting like he's coming back to my suite with me and Janey.

Where is she, anyway? Still exploring the bar? Or has she snuck out to wiggle her toes in the sand?

"Andrews?" Emily questions, still looking for weaknesses in this story. I wish she'd stop poking around because there are more holes in this lie than in a spaghetti strainer.

This one's easy, though. I give her a hard glare. "Yes, Andrews." I emphasize the name, giving it all the weight of my father's money and reputation. "I certainly couldn't change my name to anything else. Lorenzo understood."

He steps in closer to me, turning my face to his with a gentle touch of his palm to my jaw. "I do not need you to wear my name or even my ring. I simply want you to wear my love tattooed on your heart, my kisses on your skin, and my . . ." He leans in, whispering into my ear, "My cock in your pussy."

I blush, instantly hot and pink. And horny for Lorenzo. For what he's promising, even if they're lies he's telling to save my ass.

My jaw drops, panting breaths passing my lips. He's so close, he must be able to feel them because he gives me a smile of victory and presses a soft kiss to my cheek. "Soon, *mia rosa*. Tell your friends goodbye so I can have you."

That was loud enough that Emily and Doug both heard.

"Uh, yeah . . . bye, guys. Nice to meet you, Doug. Good to see you, Emily," I say automatically, even though it wasn't nice or good. Mom would be proud of my manners.

"Maybe I'll see you around the resort?" Emily says quickly before I can whisk Lorenzo away.

I fucking hope not.

"Maybe."

But Emily isn't letting go of this conversation just yet. "You know what, we should all hang out! Doug and I have reservations this evening. How about you join us for dinner? We can chat, catch up, all that. I just gotta hear the story of how *you* landed this man." She looks at Lorenzo and continues, "Abs and I used to compete all the time. It's the kind of girls we used to be, but we were still

friends. I think we made each other better, you know? We have so much to talk about.”

We did not make each other better. Emily made my life hell, and if I’m honest with myself, I probably did the same to her to a much lesser degree.

Lorenzo looks at me, giving me a barely perceptible lift of his brow in question. When I don’t argue, he asks Emily, “What time?”

“Eight. We’ll stop by your room to meet you and we can walk down together. I heard that clerk say your room number. Jeez, there’s like zero consideration for privacy, you know?” Emily says nastily, as if she’s not the one using the overheard information.

Dammit. Cornered and trapped. “Well, maybe.”

“Okay!” Emily says, all fake cheeriness before smirking. “Till then . . . *babe.*”

Babe? Are you fucking serious?

I walk off, giving Emily a saccharine smile. Lorenzo follows me off to the side of the reception area before he pulls me to a stop. “You want to tell me what that was? I mean, I played along, but what was that?”

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Lorenzo,” I blurt, trying not to turn red and wondering again just where the hell Janey is. “I just . . . okay, really fast. Emily’s pretty much my high school nemesis. Major stuck-up bitch who thinks she’s better than everyone. It just came out because I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of winning when she was looking at me like some pitiful lost dog nobody wants.”

I think it took me exactly two point three seconds to say all that, and I can see that Lorenzo’s still processing all the rushed English. Taking a deep breath, I pull on my big girl pants and continue. “I’m sorry. I don’t expect you to keep this lie up. I totally blindsided you. I can tell Emily it was a joke or something.”

Yeah . . . and watch that bitch gloat for the next twenty years.

My heart seems frozen for a long moment as Lorenzo looks at me, and I can almost hear him telling me ‘no’ before walking off, probably calling me all sorts of crazy in Italian. But then he smiles, his lips tilting up on the left side of his mouth like he’s getting the biggest kick out of whatever this weird thing might be. “So . . . she’s the Inter to your AC Milano?”

“Uhh . . . maybe?” I reply, not knowing what the hell he’s talking about.

Lorenzo’s smile broadens, and he takes my hand. “Then just for you, *mia rosa*, I’ll play along. And I can already see I’ll need to teach you about *futbol* if we’re going to make this believable.”

I’m so relieved that an entirely graceless laugh barks out. Without thinking, I throw my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. “Holy shit, are you serious? I owe you big time!”

Lorenzo's hands come to my hips, and he pulls his face back, his eyes twinkling. I'm reminded of the slow dances at Courtney's wedding when I thought there might be something brewing between us as our bodies pressed together.

"Is that so?" Those words, in that accent, have me thinking all sorts of naughty things, wiping away the memory of him walking out of the wedding and replacing it with what he's willing to do now to help me save face in front of Emily.

Heat flushes me, even if he probably doesn't mean what I'm thinking, but if he wants me to 'thank him' on my hands and knees, I'm sure this hotel has some soft towels for cushions.

Trying to regain my balance and give my mind some oxygen to get my body under control, I step back, swallowing and trying to think about anything other than how those sensuous lips would feel against mine. "So, uh . . . other than saving my ass, what are you doing here, anyway?"

"Got a job offer," Lorenzo says easily with a dismissive shrug. "Just a short term gig, but I'm cooking here at the hotel."

"Really?" I ask, surprised. "I didn't know . . . I mean, Violet didn't say anything."

Lorenzo smirks and asks naughtily, "Was I supposed to tell her?"

I see his point. Violet's not his keeper, but it seems like something she'd want to know so she could worry about his wellbeing while he's halfway around the world and she can't do anything about it. That's just how Violet is, especially now that her maternal instincts have kicked in after having Carly.

I blanch, the realization of what I've done hitting me. "How did this happen?"

"Right place, right time, I guess. Lucky for us both."

What are the odds? And how is this lucky for him? Playing husband to a crazy woman to impress a bitchy one?

Before I can even respond, Janey comes up. "Hey, you get the room? I found the beach lounge where I'll be sitting every time we get a few minutes." She suddenly zeroes in on how close I'm standing to Lorenzo and his hand possessively placed on my lower back. "And hello to you too. Are you one of the resort's amenities? Because I've got a spot that could really use a massage." Her brows lift and lower quickly. She's kidding. I think.

"Janey, this is Lorenzo. We have a bit of a situation that he's going to be helping me with. We can discuss it more in private." She wants to ask more. I can see it in her eyes, can see the questions dancing on her tongue, but then she looks past me and pales.

“Oh, shit! Incoming, four o’clock. That’s my cue. Catch you in the room,” she hisses. With that, she snatches a key card out of my hand and disappears down the hallway right as a racket fills the lobby. It sounds like there’s a hockey fight going on behind me.

But when I turn to look at my four o’clock, I find it’s not an impromptu ice rink battle but Claire and Cole coming in along with their entire entourage. A photographer is walking backward in front of them, snapping away but staying out of frame for the videographer who’s doing a weird side cross step to keep the camera steady. Security guards frame them on the right and left, and two assistants with earpieces and tablets walk behind them. Then there’s the luggage—seemingly never-ending carts of pink glitter suitcases and a few gray hard side cases as well. I don’t think there could be more hubbub if the Kardashians themselves were walking in.

Leading the whole brigade is none other than Meredith Wildeman.

Shit, I need to get out of here. But a voice sounds out across the din.

“Ah, flower girl. There you are. Have you looked in on the facilities yet?” Meredith asks.

Thankfully, Claire and Cole continue on their way, bypassing the front desk and heading straight for the elevators. I’m glad because I don’t want them to hear me answer ‘no.’

“Not yet. I just arrived,” I explain, gesturing lamely to the carry-on bag over my shoulder. “I’m heading up to my room to drop everything off and then to the coolers.”

Her lips press into a thin line, her brows dropping low as she taps on her ever-present tablet. “Hmm, so I’ll leave that *unverified* on the checklist.” Her disappointment doesn’t seem real, as though she expected me to drop the ball.

She turns to Lorenzo, and I’m trying to decide if I should introduce them—and if so, how—when Meredith speaks first. “And Chef Toscani, have you been to the kitchens yet?”

His answer is slow and rolling, the charm as thickly accented as his speech. “Yes, I met with the head chef. We are good.”

Wait? What? I think we might need to talk about more than my crazy honeymoon scheme! He’s said he’s cooking here, but how does he know Meredith?

Meredith’s brow raises sharply as she returns her glare to me. “I see. Thank you, Chef, for being on top of your need to meet the bride and groom’s expectations.”

Ouch. Her words to Lorenzo are less praise to him and more of a cutting remark to me.

Bride and groom's expectations?

Small threads start to weave together. Meredith, Claire, Cole . . . and Lorenzo. How did this connection happen and why don't I know about it? I pride myself on knowing everything that's happening with my friends and family, and despite my mixed feelings about Lorenzo bailing on me at Courtney's wedding but saving me today, he's part of Violet's family, which means I should know things, like when he's working on the same event as the largest wedding I've ever done.

My own ignorance of what's going on makes me prickly, and I step away from Lorenzo a bit. It's probably the smart thing to do anyway because I don't want Meredith to find out about this crazy honeymoon scheme I've set in motion. She would most definitely disapprove.

"Miss Andrews, please have your site checks done today. I'll expect a full report at our meeting in the morning."

"What meeting?" I ask, confused. I haven't gotten a note about a meeting.

Meredith sighs, a long sound of disappointment. "The seven thirty a.m. meeting in the Serenity Lounge to go over subcontractor and vendor plans. I emailed you an updated version of the week's agenda an hour ago. Please familiarize yourself with it . . . if that's not too much trouble."

It's on the tip of my tongue to bite out that anywhere called the 'Serenity Lounge' has probably not seen many early-morning meetings, especially when I'm betting that things here run on island time, meaning they'll get to it when they get there.

But I don't say any of that.

I might not have taken the Andrews money, but I've got Dad's guts and it doesn't take much for me to dig down and find them. I straighten my spine, letting an air of class enter my entire being. Meredith might think she's dealing with someone 'lesser', a mere schlub who's lucky to be working with the likes of someone like her, but the reverse is equally true. I'm successful in my own right, a businesswoman who has negotiated countless service contracts and an artist whose creative work is massively desirable and irreplaceable.

"No problem," I tell her, smiling back in a perfect imitation of Mom's 'you're a fake ass society bitch' smile. "I'll be ready at seven thirty sharp."

Her smile is icy, her anger at my lack of cowering palpable. I can taste her desire for me to fail so she can dance around the ruins of my career. But I'm not going to mess this up. I can't. I won't. It's too important.

Meredith hums disbelievingly but then spots someone with their phone out and she goes stomping toward him, her heels clicking on the floor like someone else's death knoll. "Excuse me, did you take an unauthorized picture?" she

barks.

While Meredith is distracted, I grab Lorenzo's hand. "Come on, let's get out of here," I hiss, pulling him toward the elevators.

He could hold his ground and end this madness, but he lets me drag him along, shove him into the elevator, and board behind him, throwing a suspicious glance back to the lobby to check whether Meredith or Emily have witnessed any of it.

I press the button for the sixth floor and the doors close, leaving us alone, dangerously alone, for the first time.

All I can think about is that somehow, despite seeing it happen twice to my family already, despite vowing I don't know *how* many times that I wouldn't pull the same shit . . . I just talked my ass into a big, fat, fake marriage situation at a time when I have much higher priorities.

Why?

Am I that burned up about Emily?

Or do I just want a reason to be with Lorenzo?

Deep breath, girl. Whatever's happened, I'm going on a date with Lorenzo . . . with the oddest of circumstances. A date! A part of me is horrified and excited all at the same time.

And then, miraculously, my brain overrides my barren pussy. He's working with Meredith? That needs an explanation first and foremost.

Right after I replay him whispering that line about his cock in my pussy in my ear. I clench my thighs together.

I am so fucked. And not in the good way.

Again.

CHAPTER 5

The sea doesn't crash so much as lap and whisper in the air, kissing the atmosphere with a sense of salt and of calm enjoyment. Pausing to look out at the water, I'm reminded of the beautiful blues of the Mediterranean and home, although this Caribbean water is clearer once you get up close.

Too bad this island is so small. If I could take my bike out and really turn it loose around here, it would be paradise.

Turning away from the sea, I go back inside the spacious suite. Casa Del Mario, not the best name, in my opinion, but I don't get asked my opinion on such things. But what this resort lacks in proper naming, it more than makes up for in architecture and design. The sweeping white sandstone and stucco are a sight to behold. And this suite is interesting, though that has more to do with the two women sitting on the couches inside than the décor.

They started by whispering, trying to keep me from hearing their conversation, but the breeze swirling from the balcony has carried their words right back to my ears.

Now, they're not even trying to be quiet.

"What the fuck, Abs? This is our big shot, an opportunity that comes once in a lifetime, our chance to seize everything we've ever wanted, and you're letting it all slip away!" Janey hisses.

She is fiery. Though I've never met her before, I like Janey instantly. Her hair is short, her eyes are bright, and her skin is like cappuccino. She could easily rest on her beauty, but she seems to be the yin to Abigail's yang.

"Do not paraphrase Eminem to me and make it sound like you're some lyrical genius. I know this is all fucked up, but I didn't know what else to do!" Abigail's response is equally passionate, and the two women lock eyes in a visual battle for dominance.

I'm not surprised when Janey drops her eyes first. Abigail, for all her bubbly

free-spiritedness, is still a powerhouse.

“Okay, Lorenzo, let’s do this. You start. What are you doing here?” Abigail demands.

Not one accustomed to being ordered around, I give her only the bare minimum, knowing how it will set her off and waiting with hunger for the fireworks I know are coming. “Cooking.”

Her growl is intended to be badass. It’s adorable, like a tiny kitten thinking itself a fierce tiger. “For the Johnson-Kennedy wedding?”

There’s something fearful in her tone now, and though I typically enjoy pushing buttons and boundaries, I find myself wanting to ease her concerns.

“Yes. They had a dinner at Avanti, and the bride quite enjoyed my fettuccine alfredo. They invited me, through Meredith, to come to the festivities this week and cook for a few of the meals, including a few options for the wedding itself. Seeing as I have never been to Aruba, it seemed like an adventure I would enjoy and an opportunity to learn a new cuisine from a local chef.”

I do not answer people’s inquiries that fully, ever. But once I began telling her how I ended up here, her direct gaze never left mine, and I find myself wanting to keep sharing more just to keep her attention.

Now, though, the room is quiet, and I can almost hear her brilliant mind putting things together.

“The dinner at Avanti must’ve been the centerpieces I prepared. I only knew they were for a dinner, not the venue. So it does sound like a bit of a coincidence for us both to end up here, I guess,” Abigail gives me.

“Or fate putting me in place so that I could step in with your other situation,” I correct, knowing that the quirk of my lips will be enough to set her off-kilter once again. I like her flip-flops from rash to reasonable, finding them exciting. But though I seek out adventure and enjoy danger, Abigail is a danger I’m not sure I can afford.

She flops back on the couch morosely, her head shaking back and forth as she rolls her eyes toward the vaulted ceiling. “I cannot believe I said that. Do you have any idea what I’ve done?” she asks.

Perhaps she’s asking the ceiling, or maybe me and Janey? Maybe even herself? I’m not quite sure.

Janey jumps in before I can. “Tell me again. Who the hell is this Emily character and why do we give a single fuck what she thinks? Screw her and the broom she flew in on.”

Abigail rolls her head toward Janey as though she hasn’t the energy to even lift her head. “It’s stupid. I know that. I do. But you weren’t there. It was constant through school. Anything I would show interest in, there was Emily

doing it too. Until she was literally doing my boyfriend.”

Janey gasps indignantly.

“*Oh, mio Dio,*” I whisper. “Seriously?” Whoever this *stupido* was, he had clearly not understood what it would mean to hold Abigail in his heart. How could someone cheat on her with that . . . Emily?

“She was just a catty bitch, but we’ve always run in the same crowd, you know? So she never went away and would keep picking and poking . . . at me, at my family. And when she was all fake sorry that I’m alone, I could feel her glee at my failure, and I wanted to shove it in her face that I’m not a failure.” She sounds so sad, and surprise at the layers to this woman works its way through the steel surface of my heart. For all her strength and shine, she is battered and bruised just like the rest of us.

“You could’ve, you know, told her how you’re doing the flowers for the biggest wedding of the year. She would’ve seen that you’re not a failure then,” Janey says logically.

Abigail shakes her head. “That’s not Emily’s currency. She truly doesn’t understand the value of that. But she understands . . . you.” Abigail’s eyes, dark and hopeful, turn to me appraisingly. She might think that only Emily understands my appeal, but Abigail does as well. I can see that clearly.

“Okay, so it is settled then. We will do this charade for Emily and go to dinner and blow away the wedding guests with our combined genius. It sounds like an exciting week, an adventure waiting to unfold,” I summarize.

Truthfully, Abigail is an adventure I’d like to fold and unfold in countless positions. But she is Violet’s best friend, and Violet is not someone to upset carelessly. Nor is her entire family branch. And though Abigail might flirt and play at being a fun girl, I think her heart is fragile, easily bruised like a peach, and I do not want to be the man who destroys her for some short-lived enjoyment.

I’m an asshole, but I’m not a monster.

That’s why I left that night at the wedding. Not because she wasn’t enough but because she’s more than I deserve. More than I need right now.

Except she needs me. For now, at least.

I pick up my small bag and stride toward the bedroom Abigail set her carry-on in. That has her moving double-time off the couch, beating me to the bedroom doorway where she stands with her arms outstretched, one hand on either side of the door frame as a scowling, but cute, blockade. “Where do you think you’re going?” she balks.

“To our room, *mia rosa,*” I tell her calmly, absolutely knowing the effect it will have.

“Oh, no. That’s not part of the deal,” she argues, as if this is a negotiation. But she’s already lost this hand.

“Of course it is. Otherwise, when Emily and Doug come to meet us tonight, they will wonder why we are spending our honeymoons in different parts of the resort. Especially when your room is so luxurious and spacious and mine is a last-minute crew quarter space not much larger than a coffin. I think perhaps I have married up.” I flash a bright smile, knowing she’ll see reason.

Her arms cross and her eyes narrow, but nothing comes out of her mouth.

“Very well. Which side of the bed do you prefer, *mia rosa*?” I call out over my shoulder as I enter the bedroom, making sure to brush against her as I pass.

It’s large and bright. The king-size bed is crisp with white linens and fluffy pillows and surrounded by floor to ceiling windows. The one centered on the far wall is a slider that opens onto the same balcony as the living room. I drop my bag and take a running leap for the bed, bouncing onto its lush cushion.

“Aah, this is exquisite,” I moan.

“You can take the couch,” Abigail instructs, still standing in the doorway and pointing to a couch in the corner. “I’m not sleeping with you.”

I quirk a knowing brow and let my voice drop low and turn to gravel as I say, “I did not say anything about sleeping, Abigail.” She crosses her arms protectively again, but I see the way her thighs squeeze together. “And if I am doing this favor for you, I will not be sleeping on the couch. You can if you choose to, but I’ll be here in this bed that should not be missed.” I pat the open space beside me in invitation.

She waves a dismissive hand. “Whatever. We can figure that out later. Right now, I need to get to work. I have an email to read, apparently, and I need to get down to see the coolers and check our shipments. I’ll meet you back here at seven so we’re ready for dinner?”

Reluctantly, I hop up from the comfortable bed. “Yes. I should get down and introduce myself to the chef as well and make sure the kitchen is up to snuff.”

Abigail’s brows rise nearly to her hairline. “You told Meredith you’d already done that!”

I shrug carelessly. “I lied. I’ll take care of it, and everything will be fine. I’m a big boy, don’t need her checking up on me. There’s no need to hand her ammunition.”

I can’t decide if Abigail is impressed with me or horrified that she didn’t think of it herself first. Or maybe considering how big a ‘boy’ I am, I think with evil delight.

Testing that theory, I reach down and adjust myself.

Abigail’s mouth closes with a clack of her teeth. *Ah-ha, got you, mia rosa.*

“Kitchen. Coolers. Seven p.m. Don’t be late,” she orders, pointing a finger to me, then herself, before settling it back toward me.

“As you wish,” I reply, giving her sarcastic bow.

“Inconceivable,” she mutters. I don’t get the joke, but something about the glint in her eye tells me that’s what that was. Perhaps it’s an English language thing I’m unaware of?



I CAN’T WAIT to see what the kitchen is like. But as exciting as that prospect always is to me, my mind is still on Abigail. When I saw her distress and overheard the things that woman was saying, I couldn’t help but come to Abigail’s rescue. I swooped in to save her day like Superman, but with better hair.

I didn’t know it would get me involved in what followed. How could I have expected that I’d be declared her husband? That we’re now faking a honeymoon?

Ah, but the *spice* of it all. It’s crazy, it’s insane, and I know it’s dangerous for Abigail. Probably for me too, though for different reasons.

But that just makes it even spicier.

And Abigail? She’s an adventure herself. One I’d like to take.

Trying to distract myself, I head through the grand hall toward the kitchens. Casa Del Mario’s website talked a lot about their three full-service restaurants, multiple grill stations, and twenty-four-hour room service. But of course, other than a picture of the poolside barbecue, there were no pictures of the actual kitchens. I fear I’ll find a bank of microwaves and a freezer full of manufactured shit.

I introduce myself to the maître ’d at the main restaurant, who seems largely unhelpful until I mention Meredith’s name. With that, I am quickly led to the back. I’m pleased to see that it’s an open kitchen, with windows that overlook the dining room like a fishbowl. Sure, that means the kitchen staff are half entertainers on display and half cooks, but it also means more space and equipment that is top-notch and well-maintained.

This might not be so bad after all.

“Chef Toscani, may I present Chef Esmar Maduro. Chef, this is the chef from America I mentioned?”

“*Bon bini! Welcome!*” a huge, big-bellied and grinning man booms as he comes from behind a workstation to greet me.

His dark complexion beams with warmth, as do his bright eyes and white

teeth. I'm instantly put at ease. Some chefs would not accept an outsider into their fold, especially for a special event such as this wedding. But Chef Maduro does not seem to be one of those sorts as he shakes my hand.

"Come into my kitchen, Chef. We have much to do, yes?"

"I hope I'm not intruding," I say politely, the question laced through.

His laugh is deep, shaking his belly. "No, I look forward to tasting your work. I have not been to Italy since I was a young man, and stories of your fettuccine precede you."

Fuck, what did Claire say about my pasta? It's good, Earth-shatteringly so, but I guess I wasn't expecting this sort of reputation on an island far from my home in Positano by a fellow chef whose admiration I should have to earn.

"I would enjoy creating for you, if you do me the honor of the same, Chef Maduro," I tell him.

"*Naturalmente!*" he replies. "I want to know your soul, and the only way to do that is through the belly." He pats his round middle, smiling wide. "I have known many souls, Chef Toscani."

He laughs, and I laugh along, finding myself relaxing and at ease. "If you are agreeable, please call me Lorenzo when we're not on the line."

He dips his chin in acknowledgement and lays a hand to his chest. "Esmar."

Greetings made and friendships simmering, he takes me on a tour of his kitchen. The whole time, he's tossing out bits of information, like how he grows his own herbs for the restaurants, has a vegetable garden on the property, and sources local meats whenever possible.

We finish up our tour with an introduction to the staff, a mixed group of locals and transplants who came to the island for one reason or another and never left. "If you need anything, let Gilberto know. He will be your sous chef, one of my best."

Gilberto smiles at the praise from his chef. Gilberto is tall and thin, with what seem to be spaghetti noodles for arms and legs. I have heard jokes that one should not trust a skinny chef, but if Esmar says he is one of the best, I will trust that it is true.

"Thank you for assisting me, Gilberto. Can we sit down and go over ingredient lists for the basics? Though I'll know more after my meeting with the wedding planner tomorrow."

Esmar shivers. "The wedding planner, she is the frosty woman in black?" He pulls a face of snooty displeasure, straightening his spine and flipping non-existent hair in a perfect imitation of Meredith.

I don't hide my smile at his obvious dislike. "Yes, she's quite . . ." I pause, not finding a word in English and not speaking Esmar's native Papiamento.

“*Fighe de legno*,” I finish. “A wooden bitch.”

“Ah,” Esmar exclaims, the sentiment translating even if the words do not. “She came into my kitchen—my kitchen!—with no invitation, just waltzing in like she has the right. ‘Rank has its privileges,’ she tells me. She did not like it when I told her that the only rank in my kitchen is Chef and that’s me.” He slaps his chest proudly. “We will watch out for her, alert you if she tries to come in again. I will gladly show her what privileges she is entitled to.”

Esmar’s support, with the agreement of Gilberto’s nod and the rest of the crew’s murmurs of unity, means a lot to me. Being the new chef to come into a kitchen can be hard, and I’ve had experiences where I had to prove myself again and again with my food and my willingness to learn just to be marginally accepted. But here, they welcome me with open arms and warmth. It’s a gift I will return in exchange while I am here.

“*Mashi danki*. Thank you,” I tell the group in Papiamentu, one of the few phrases I learned on the plane ride here.

“*Di nada*,” they answer.



I MAKE my way down the hall, my key card in hand. It’s early, only six o’clock, but I want to shower before dinner tonight and I’m doing so in the lap of luxury via Abigail’s ensuite.

At the door, I stop. Perhaps I should knock? It is my suite now too, but that’s not entirely true.

The slight pause gives me a chance to hear voices on the other side of the door.

Janey’s voice is high-pitched, as if she’s repeating herself and getting more frantic with each repetition as she’s not heard. “Husband? You said he’s your husband? Do you remember what happened with your brother? Your sister?”

I wait for Abigail’s response but only hear a grunted moan as if she’s tired of the conversation.

“You should’ve said he was your boy toy,” Janey suggests. “I bet Bitch Barbie would’ve shit herself at that. Or said he’s your love slave or something.” A small giggle sounds out and then Janey says, “I would love to have that man feed me grapes, fan me with a big palm tree, and give me an oil rubdown . . . everywhere. Did you see those abs?”

There’s a gasp of shock that has to be Abi and then she laughs too. “Of course I did! Did you see his belly button? I already have fantasies of swimming in it on my way to slide down Cock Mountain. First, with my mouth and then

with my pussy.”

I blink at the picture her words paint, my cock instantly growing hard in my pants. I trace my hand over my abs and grip myself hard, willing the stiffness to subside. Instead, I involuntarily groan.

“What was that?” I hear Janey say through the wood.

Fuck. They heard me.

I hold the key card up to the door and am greeted by the green light. I open the door and walk into the suite, the outline of my hard dick obvious in my lightweight linen pants.

“Oh! Uh, hi,” Abigail stutters cutely, her cheeks going pink. She’s wearing a gauzy, waffle weave, white hotel robe and it’s gaping at the neckline. She follows my eyes, flushing further when she realizes how much cleavage she is showing. She makes a squeak of horror, and sadly, draws it tighter to cover herself from my prying eyes.

“*Buona sera*,” I reply. “I hope I am not too early? I thought we should go over some details before getting ready for dinner, to help sell the honeymoon?”

Janey points at me. “I like the way you think, mister. I’m going to leave you two to it. Abi, I’ll head back down to the storage room and start organizing the boxes into categories.”

Abigail tears her eyes from me, focusing on Janey. “Make sure to keep the silk ribbon separate from the glitter tulle or it’ll snag.”

Janey rolls her eyes and murmurs, “Duh. She acts like I’ve never done this before.” And she’s gone, leaving us alone.

I wonder what Abigail has on beneath that robe. I wonder if she can tell I’m commando beneath my pants. I consider the thread counts of the combined fabrics that separate us.

Abigail is quiet for too long, and though I’d like to do wicked things to her, I spoke the truth. We do need to talk before tonight.

“Abigail, tell me what I need to know about you.” It’s an order, but open-ended, allowing her to share what she feels is relevant. To tonight, to forever, whichever she prefers.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m an Andrews. My dad started Andrews Consolidated when he was younger and made bank. My parents have been married for decades, and somehow, are still in love. My brother, Ross, is married to Violet. They just had a baby, but you already know that. My sister, Courtney, is married . . .” She pauses, and I wonder if she’s remembering the wedding where we met the way I am. She licks her lips nervously before continuing, “She works for my dad.”

I sit down beside her on the couch, getting closer than is polite. “That’s not

what I asked and you know it. That's your family. Tell me about *you*." My voice is deeper, darker now.

She hesitates but gives in. "I'm weird, not like my family—all serious and business-y—but I am that way sometimes, if that makes sense? Like I'm a square peg that doesn't fit in a round hole, but I'm still a peg. Does that even track?" She shakes her head, leaving the metaphor behind. "I'm creative, wild, and free. Half the time, I don't even know what I'm going to do or say next until it happens. I'm just as surprised as everyone around me." She laughs like she didn't expect to say that, proving her point.

"Good," I praise her. "Tell me about your flowers."

That seems to be an easier topic because she speaks comfortably, fast and with bubbly enthusiasm. "I've loved flowers since I was little. I would help the gardener and make bouquets. One year, we watched the Tournament of Roses—do you know what that is?" she asks.

"I've heard of it. A parade, right?"

She nods. "Yeah, so we're watching that on television and I was in awe of what they could create with flowers. While Dad and Ross watched the game, I went out in the yard with my Barbie car and a pair of kitchen scissors and went to work. It was awful," she says on a horrified laugh, "but I thought it was amazing. That was when I knew, though it took me a bit longer to actually figure out how to do things well."

I see the light in her eyes, the way her voice changes. Gone is the nervousness. Gone is the worry. She loves her craft, and even though I've never seen her arrangements that I'm aware of, I admire her passion.

It's the same passion I have for cooking, I suspect.

"And this Emily? You said she was a rival of sorts?"

I can see her mind disappear into the past, her vibrancy dimming. "Yeah. I don't know what started this thing between us. It was just always there. Admittedly, as Ross's younger sister and an Andrews, I was kind of automatically popular. I never really cared about things like that, though. But Emily did. At first, she tried to copy me—her hair, her clothes, stuff like that. In hindsight, I think she was even trying to be friends. But I had Violet and we were thick as thieves, and I truly didn't even notice Emily. Until she started talking shit about me. That got my attention. And somehow, it was like 'game on' between us. She would show up at parties I went to and stand on the table, playing Queen Bee. She dated the football star from our year and then became head cheerleader. She kept climbing the ladder, like she had something to prove, and I was just doing my own thing. If I wanted to date, I did. If I wanted to cheer, I did. If I wanted to do theater, I did. I would flit from one thing to another

with the attention span of a gnat and she would follow along doing everything I did, still copying me. But it wasn't friendly then. Especially not when she slept with my boyfriend. She just sucked all the joy out of what should've been some of my best years, and though it's stupid—and believe me, I know how juvenile it sounds—I want to show her that despite all that, I still did okay.”

“That you won,” I surmise.

Abigail flops back to the couch, her arm going over her eyes. “Oh, God, I'm awful. I'm so sorry for dragging you into this. We can call the whole thing off or whatever. Tell her I lied. You don't need this drama, especially this week. Fuck, I don't need it this week.”

She's right. This week, this wedding is big for the both of us. But I sense that something even bigger is happening to Abigail. If she walks away from this thing with her tail between her legs, she might never recover. It will foundationally affect who she believes herself to be.

“No,” I say sharply. “This is a . . . how do you call it? ‘No harm, no foul’. We'll play along as newlyweds and have a little fun while you get your closure with this Emily.”

She peeks from below her arm. “Really?”

“Yes. Now, it's getting late. We should get ready because I need a shower after being in the kitchens.”

I rise, heading toward the bedroom and already dreaming of the ensuite bathroom that will surely be as luxurious as the rest of the room.

Abigail sits up. “Wait, what about you? I don't know anything about you!”

I grin. “You're welcome to shower with me if you'd like?” At her sour look, I soften the vulgar suggestion. “Come. Sit and talk to me while I get ready.”

That has her hopping up to follow me.

CHAPTER 6

*H*ell no, I'm not going to miss a Lorenzo show. I'm not stupid, just a bit crazy.

I'm going to memorize every word from his mouth, every flex of his muscles, every sound the water makes as it hits his body, and replay them later . . . when I'm alone with my buzzy little friend.

He struts through my bedroom—our bedroom?—and into the bathroom, looking around appraisingly. “Nice,” he says simply about the marble, walk-in shower, double vanities, and wall-sized mirror. It's way more than ‘nice’.

I sit in a chair just outside the bathroom, expecting him to close the door for some privacy. But I forgot how ‘no big deal’ Europeans are about nudity. Or maybe it's just Lorenzo?

He pulls his shirt off his shoulders, dropping it to the floor, and my tongue lolls out at the expanse of skin. The tattoos that line his neck and trail down his arms begin here, on the sharp ridges of his spine and smooth muscles of his back.

I watch as he reaches into the shower, turning the water on.

“What do you want to know?” Lorenzo asks, drawing my attention directly to him.

As if he timed it for my eyes to catch it, his linen slacks fall to the floor, and he kicks them off along with his flip flops. The puddle of his clothes means I can see his entire bare backside, from his shoulders to his heels and *everywhere* in between.

God, his ass is biteworthy! Butt dimples!

I must make some noise, a strangled sound of embarrassingly horny lust, probably, because he says again, “Abigail? What do you want to know?”

I want to know what your cock looks like.

I want to know if you speak English or Italian when you come.

I want to know why you're doing this.

None of those are what I ask. As he steps into the shower and out of sight, I ask, “How did you get into cooking?”

From behind the glass, he speaks, “My Aunt Sofia taught me when I was a boy. I think it was mostly a way to keep me busy and out of trouble. I was a bit of a hellion even then, and she thought keeping me by her side would be good for me. She was right.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and I think he’s done, but then he adds, “Until I wanted more. I left Positano—you should remember that. Say it.”

Dutifully, I repeat, “Positano. Where’s that?”

“West coast of Italy. That’s where I’m from.” I nod, though he can’t see me, storing the information. “I’d been cooking everything for my family for years by the time I was eighteen—made from scratch noodles, sauces and *ragu* that took all day to simmer, and growing fresh vegetables in our garden. After a while, it was . . . routine. I knew there was more out there. More flavors, more spices, more textures . . . just more. So I left. I traveled Europe, spent some time in Spain, but the flavor profiles were similar and I wanted something truly different. I made my way through Germany, then Japan, then India. I never stayed anywhere more than a few months, getting a taste of the culture and style. I even came to the States for a short while, exploring California fusion and New York’s steakhouses. But after a long while, I was homesick. I went back to Italy, to the beginning, to my roots. It was there that I got the offer for Avanti. I’ve been making Italian food for the last couple of years, honoring my Aunt Sofia’s lessons every day.”

“Wow,” I breathe, not able to imagine uprooting and moving every few months. “That sounds . . . awful.” I slap my hands over my mouth. “I mean, awesome.”

A deep chuckle echoes in the shower. “A nomadic life is not for everyone. But for others, it’s the only way.”

I lean forward, putting my elbows on my knees, and consider his words. Movement in the corner of my eye catches my attention. I look closer and realize that from here, I can see the reflection of the shower in the mirror. If the fog were wiped off the glass enclosure, I could see Lorenzo in all his naked glory.

Oh, it’s glorious. I’m sure of that just from seeing the back side.

Rapt, I watch as a haze of white suds covers the hazy blob of Lorenzo. Though it’s blurry, I can tell what’s happening as his hands massage the bubbles across his chest . . . down his abs . . . to where he takes himself in hand and gives himself a few good strokes.

Oh, God! Is he jacking himself off?

I’m mortified until his hands continue their trek, washing his thighs. It’s then

that I realize this heat is not mortification. It's disappointment. I want to watch him boldly fuck his hand right in front of me and watch him find his release while his eyes are locked on mine.

I squeeze my thighs together, honestly considering whether there's a way for me to touch myself and get off quickly without Lorenzo being the wiser. It wouldn't take but a few strokes across my clit, I'm certain of that. But even as my desperate pussy argues with my logical mind and my hands wander up my thighs, the water shuts off and I miss any opportunity I might've had.

Lorenzo steps into the bedroom, a white towel tucked around his waist. "Abigail? You okay?" he asks, his brows knit together in concern.

I must look extra crazy if he's asking so gently. I can feel the flush on my cheeks, the wetness between my thighs under this robe, and the racing of my heart. "Yep, my turn."

I get up and swish past him into the bathroom. I consider being just as bold as he was and leaving the door open as I shower, but I'm not that brave. So I push it closed with a foot, dropping my robe, and climbing into the shower. A cold shower.

It doesn't matter, though. I'm so hot, the steam is coming from me instead of the water, and a naughty thought steals through my mind. Lorenzo is on the other side of the door now, not able to see me the way I could him. If I'm quiet . . .

I bite my lip, leaning back against the cool tile of the shower wall and letting my fingers dance down my belly. No time for foreplay, not even with myself this time. This has to be fast. I swipe through the moisture gathered at my center and massage it over my clit in a small circle.

"Abigail?" Lorenzo's voice calls out from the other side of the door.

"Yes?" I say, hoping my voice sounds natural.

"What about our story? How we met? The proposal and wedding?" he says. Is it my imagination or does he sound strange? His voice is tighter than usual.

"Oh!" I say, half in answer to him and half because I tapped on my sensitive bud. I bite my bottom lip for strength and try to answer as my fingers keep moving. "Let's keep it as close to the truth as possible. We met at Courtney's wedding and hit it off."

Until he ran out.

I let the negative thought float away as pleasure begins to rise higher.

"Yeah, and then we got married on the beach. Just the two of us, because that's kind of what happened today."

His voice is definitely sounding strangled. I imagine him on the other side of the door, jacking off as I touch myself, and even the mere idea turns me on even

more.

“But it would’ve had to be sooner, not today. A fast . . . really fast . . . build-up,” I gasp out.

“To our wedding. You wearing white and saying my name.”

I don’t think we’re talking about an imaginary wedding anymore.

“And now we’re on our honeymoon, blissfully away from everything and everyone at home. Just the two of us.”

I grunt and bury my sealed lips against my shoulder to keep quiet as a wave of ecstasy washes through me. I keep tapping at my clit, prolonging the orgasm until I’m jerking with release and overstimulated.

“That sounds great. Love it, *mia rosa*,” Lorenzo says quietly. He sounds relieved too, and I wonder again.

I quickly wash off and step out of the shower to dry off. Wrapping up in a fresh towel, I walk into the bedroom to find Lorenzo.

Only, it’s empty.

“Lorenzo?” I call out.

“In here. I got dressed while you were showering. Go ahead and get ready. They’ll be here soon.” His voice is in the living room now, leaving me alone with my thoughts and spent body.

He’s right, though. I need to hurry and get ready.

I pull on a white sundress Archie picked out as a vacation option. Beneath the thin gauze, I pull on a nude thong because it’s the only thing that won’t give me panty lines. The strapless dress also doesn’t allow for a bra. Both of those reasons are why I’d called the dress ridiculous, but Archie was right, and I’m thankful to have it with me and not only work clothes. A touch of bronzer and some mascara make me glow like I’ve been kissed by the sun, and after pulling a brush through my mane of thick hair, I pull it up into a loose bun, leaving my neck exposed. It’s too warm to do much more.

Lorenzo looks up as I walk into the living room.

“*Oh mio Dio*,” he whispers. “*Bellissima, mia rosa*.”

I don’t speak Italian, but I know he just called me beautiful. I return the compliment. “You look nice too.”

Nice?

He looks good enough to eat. He’s got on beige slacks and dress shoes, with a white button-down shirt. It could be stuffy and stodgy, an outfit worthy of a boardroom, but not the way Lorenzo wears it. The collar of the shirt is unbuttoned, plus probably one more button than most American men would wear. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, showcasing the tattoos on his forearms and his watch. Only one side of the shirt front is tucked in to highlight

the supple leather of his belt and the slim cut of his trousers. It's the epitome of casual, effortless European hot.

He doesn't approach me so much as he stalks toward me like a lion. And like a stupid gazelle, I stand stock-still and let him. Lorenzo picks up my hand from my side, kissing the back the way he did that first night. "You are brighter than the sun, deeper than the moon, lovelier than the stars."

And wetter than the sea, I think. Luckily, my mouth and brain are working together for once and I manage to keep that to myself this time.

"You don't have to do that, you know? Say all that romantic stuff," I tell him, ducking my chin down. "I get it. It's fake. Been there, done that with my family, except I'm smart enough to not get caught in the 'feels' trap."

He lifts my chin with his other hand. "I'm Italian. We are romantic. I simply say what I think."

He makes it sound like he really does think those lovely things about me, but how can he when I've gotten him into this mess?

"Are you sure about this?" I ask, offering him one more chance to back out.

Before he can answer, there's a loud knock on the door. Emily and Doug are right on time.

Lorenzo steps closer, his body a breath away from mine as he whispers, "Trust me?"

I have no idea what he's asking, but I nod because what else am I gonna do? We're about to go to dinner and pretend like we're happy newlyweds with someone who could blow up my entire social circle, and likely my professional life, with a single well-placed word.

Lorenzo walks me backward until my back hits the wall. I gasp, surprised. But he's not done.

"Trust me," he orders softly.

And with that, he picks me to straddle him and slams my back against the door with a *thump*. It rattles loudly behind me.

"Fuck, Abigail. Quick, *mia rosa*. Come on my cock before your friends get here or they're going to hear me fucking you deep and hard. I want your cum on me and my cum in you while we sit at this prim and proper dinner, wife."

I gasp, both at his filthy talk and the ridge of his cock pressing against my core.

"Ungh." I can't make words, am barely making incoherent sounds, and Lorenzo lifts one hand from my thigh to hold my head still. He meets my eyes, one of his brows lifted pointedly.

If I couldn't feel his cock, I wouldn't even know what this is doing to him. For all the fire rushing through my body and turning my brain to melted goo,

he's clear-eyed and has a plan.

I blink and realize what he's doing.

Emily needs to think we're newlyweds, and what do newlyweds do non-stop? Fuck.

Now that I've caught on, he winks at me and I smile back.

He thrusts against me and I bounce on the door. "Yes, hard . . . just like that," I moan.

He grunts, finding a pace that is actually doing a lot for me even though I just came in the shower a bit ago. I'd be embarrassed at the wet heat of my core, but his cock jumps against me. I like that he's carried away too as he dry humps me, only hinting at what we're playacting.

"Take it. Take me, Abigail," he hisses through clenched teeth. Is that for effect or is he holding the reins that tightly?

"Yes, my Italian Stallion!" I cry out, clawing at his shoulders for purchase.

Confusion mars his face as he mouths, "Italian Stallion?"

I shake my head and whisper back, "I don't know, it just came out."

He grins like that's the funniest thing he's ever heard and goes back to thrusting against me with renewed furor. "That's it, *mia rosa*. Are you going to come for me?"

Oh, shit. I am.

Like I am . . . for real.

Any sane, rational, reasonable person would tilt their hips and move away from the power of his thrusts to save a little face. Do I? Absolutely not. If anything, I'm humping him back, riding him like the pony at my sixteenth birthday party. Don't laugh . . . it was an amazing blowout. Like I'm about to have . . .

"Yes, yes. Right there, Lorenz-*ohh!*" He pulls me tight against him, his cock grinding against my clit as he grunts through several short strokes and says something I don't understand in Italian.

Is he? Did he?

As I float back to Earth and realize what just happened, there's another knock on the door. This one is harder and louder. "Hey, Abi! We have reservations, you know?" Emily yells through the wood, literally inches away from where I just loudly came on Lorenzo's cock for real.

But while she'll think it's part of the newlywed thing, he doesn't need to know that my knees are knocking and my legs are Jell-O as he lowers me back to the floor.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry. One second." My voice is too high, and as I look at Lorenzo in disbelief, I can't help but giggle. He looks so . . . tense.

My giggles turn into laughs. “Oh, my God,” I mutter. “I can’t believe—” I shut up at the dark look in Lorenzo’s eyes. “Ready for dinner, Abigail?” With that, he opens the door, leading me from a dream to a nightmare.



HEAT IS the fancy dinner lounge that Emily and Doug lead us to. I have to say, they’re not lying about the name. Unless they just flat-out called it Sex with a Side of Dinner.

It’s like every romantic movie got distilled, remixed, and given a sex club twist. Along one wall is a beautiful mirrored bar complete with a shiny bar top and black leather stools that scream late-night sexual hookups, while the center of the room has been left open as a dance floor that’s certain to lead to other types of seduction.

Even the table booths are private and intimate. A couple could easily go quite a long way toward full-on sex without anyone noticing, and a more adventurous couple could probably get the whole damn thing done.

Surrounding it all is a view of the beach and sea through the wall of open doors that let the sea breeze dance through the space. Right now, we can’t see the moon, but the light’s still glimmering off the water, taking my breath away as our waitress leads the four of us over to one of the larger booths.

“This is . . . nice,” Doug says lamely, trying to find words and pretty much revealing that he’s never going to be a contestant on *Jeopardy!*

He’s trying, though he’s the consummate American on a tropical vacation. He’s wearing a tropical shirt, his hair spiked up, and khakis that walk the line of ‘yacht club’ and ‘business attire’.

Honestly, I do have to give him credit for the shirt. It’s a no-bullshit tropical shirt, right down to the orchids and toucans. And the orchids are a beautiful print. I wish I could pluck them right off his shirt and create something with them.

Hmm, I wonder if he got that here? With a little creative stitching, it might be possible to turn the fabric into ribbon strips for some of the more casual affairs I’ll be doing flowers for, I think.

“I like your shirt, Doug,” I tell him. “Where’d you get it?”

He looks down as though he has no idea what he’s wearing. “Oh, this? I think my mom got it for me. A honeymoon gift for the tropics.”

“Oh.” His mom bought his clothes. Seriously? I mean, I go shopping with my mother too, and she’s even bought me gifts for special occasions, but something about the way he said it makes it seem juvenile.

Emily clears her throat, shooting daggers at me. “Lovely dress,” I tell her as she expects. But I can’t make the smile reach my eyes because I don’t mean it in the slightest. Emily’s dress is poured on, so tight I’m questioning how the Lycra even stretched that much without ripping. I’m honestly concerned for her because if it gives way when she sits or eats or moves, we’re going to get a full Monty because it’s readily apparent that Emily is wearing the dress and nothing else, the outline of her nips clear and the shadow of the crease between her legs visible.

Maybe Honeymoon Emily is a little freakier than High School Emily?

Whatever. After what just happened in my suite, maybe I’m a little freakier too because I’m still walking on shaky legs like a newborn baby giraffe. The way Lorenzo pulled me to him, not quite slamming me against the door but definitely holding me there as he took control . . . and the way he felt, his hard body pressed against me, his muscles taut and rock hard . . . the thick, pulsing ridge of his cock through his pants rubbing against my pussy and clit. And the whole time? I wanted it. Wanted it to be real. And some of it was . . . like my orgasm.

“*Mia rosa?*” Lorenzo asks, and I blink, giving him a little smile as I snuggle in tighter next to him in the booth. The table’s big enough for us to spread out, but the fact is I’m on an actual date, with Lorenzo, who’s pretty much the sexiest man I’ve ever met, in one of the most romantic, seductive settings I could think of. He brushes a lock of hair behind my ear with a smirk, and I can tell he’s thinking that he’s the one who messed up my hair.

Sexy. So sexy.

About the only negative about this is that it’s fake.

“You know, Abi, I was surprised when I came by your room,” Emily says quietly, as though we’re girlfriends whispering silly secrets. “I didn’t think you were so . . . loud. I always thought you were the Goody Two-Shoes sort. Like a good little schoolgirl?”

The insult is supposed to be sharp, but the truth is, I wasn’t all that good in school. Oh, my grades were excellent, but Vi and I got up to some shit. We were just quiet about it. No need for people who shouldn’t know what we were doing to know, you know?

“Ooh, now there’s a fun idea,” Lorenzo says, taking charge and looking me over. “You know, *mia rosa*, I went to Catholic school. A girl’s uniform with knee socks and ponytails . . . sounds fun.”

The way he describes the fantasy role-playing sends a little thrill down my spine, and I can’t help but blush a little when he pulls a handful of my hair into a makeshift pigtail on one side. “Honey, you and those powerful appetites of

yours. You're insatiable."

Lorenzo gives me a smoldering look, again blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, it seems. "When it comes to you, *mia rosa*, too much is never enough."

The air burns between us, and my throat goes dry as Lorenzo puts a hand on my knee. Electricity runs up my thigh from where he touches, and my core starts purring again.

"Damn, Doug, why don't you . . ." Emily starts before catching herself. She snuggles in to Doug, moaning as though she's the good kind of sore. "Give me a few minutes' warning before you come after me that hard again, okay? You know, so I can hydrate and stretch out before you bend me up like a pretzel."

Doug's confused look tells me all I need to know about *that* part of their relationship, but Emily is saved from trying to cover for their obvious correction by the waitress coming over.

"If I may order a bottle for the table?" Lorenzo asks politely.

Doug holds out his hands wide and jokes, "As long as you're paying for it."

Emily grits her teeth.

Lorenzo has a quick conversation with the waitress and then turns back to me. "I selected a rose champagne, something light and bubbly to celebrate our recent vows, *mia rosa*."

"Perfect," I agree.

Doug interjects, "So, Lorenzo, why do you call Abi *mia rosa*? I mean, she's the one into flowers, right?"

"*Rosa* also means pink. And Abi's skin is the most beautiful, delicious shade of pink." Lorenzo looks deep into my eyes and suddenly squeezes my thigh, hard. I gasp and jump in surprise, and he lifts a brow, that sexy smirk returning to his face.

"Pink?" Emily asks, confused. "I always thought her face was, I don't know, a little pale."

"I wasn't talking about her face," Lorenzo says, his meaning hanging in the air until Emily's eyes go wide as she gets it.

"Oh . . . ohh," Doug adds, actually amused. "I guess, well, makes sense then, doesn't it?"

Damn, Lorenzo's good at this. At driving me crazy and rubbing Emily's nose in this mythical, magical marriage.

I jump in, worried we might be taking this too far. The last thing I need is Emily running home and telling the country club debutantes that I'm into whips and chains. Despite every woman from coast to coast singing along with Rihanna that they excite them, the truth is, our sweater-set types would judge me

harshly at the reality of that.

“Tell me how you two met,” I say to Emily, giving her the floor. I know she likes to be center-stage, the object of attention, so it’s an easy maneuver.

“Oh, it was the sweetest thing ever,” Emily says romantically, looking at Doug with stars in her eyes. “We were at school—Stanford, you know—and we were both part of the same groups. Sorority, fraternity, Young Politicians, Entrepreneur Club, things like that.”

The only thing Emily Jones would be doing at a political or entrepreneur club meeting is looking for her M-R-S Degree. Seems like she found it too.

“We just hit it off,” Doug adds. “It took me a while to be ready for such a big step, especially with a girl as amazing as Emily. I wanted to be sure I was worth her,” he says, absently touching her engagement ring which is more telling than his words, “and when we said ‘I do’, it was the happiest day of my life.” He smiles at Emily sweetly but then ruins the whole moment by turning to Lorenzo and bro-joking, “Until I make CEO. You know how it is.” His chuckle falls flat, no one else laughing along with him.

Doug clears his throat awkwardly. “Uh, how about you two?”

Lorenzo smiles, letting me tell the story.

“We met at a wedding, of all places,” I start.

Emily quickly interrupts, asking Lorenzo, “Were you the caterer?”

It’s a small dig, and Lorenzo lets it roll off his back without so much as a flinch. “No, I was a guest of my cousin, Violet.”

I can see Emily’s mind putting pieces together, so I intercept her foregone conclusions. “You see, Lorenzo had just moved to the area when Courtney and Kaede were getting married. Violet invited him to introduce him to our group, and when we started talking, it was just right.” I sigh happily, staring into Lorenzo’s eyes, and he picks up the story.

“There is an old folktale in my home of Positano. It tells that God made the heavens and Earth in six days and rested on the seventh. But sometime, while he rested, one of his angels visited the new creation, leaving behind a small trail of her beauty. And every once in a great while, that beauty takes human form in a very special woman. One of grace, purity, with the kindest heart and the sweetest soul. I was fortunate to find such a creature and make her my bride.”

Holy . . . I want this to be real. I want him to say that to me, to be truthful and honest about it, and to take my heart the way his words are asking. Because that . . . he is an artist. He is a poet. He is everything.

Silence reigns around the table, and even Emily can’t really argue with the passion in Lorenzo’s voice or the beauty of his words. Finally, Doug picks up his glass and tosses back the rest of his drink, setting the champagne glass down.

“Damn, if you ever want to stop cooking, you’d make a killing writing song lyrics or Shakespeare or something like that,” Doug says with as much honest admiration for another man as he can muster. “You’re Catholic, right? Are you going to have to go to confession for that much bullshit?”

It’s just the right amount of humor to break the tension, and Lorenzo leans back, laughing lightly. “Trust me, Abigail is worth any penance. And I’ve paid a few already. For all her angelic soul, she has a bit of the devil in her as well.”

I shiver at the way he sees me, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Not just because we’ve shared so much today, way more information than you usually dump on someone mere hours after a first real conversation, but because he seems to have taken all that insight and found something even deeper. In me.

Our food comes, pausing the verbal jousting as we dig into the food. It’s delicious, though I’m not sure what anything is. Lorenzo simply told the waitress that we would prefer a chef sampling.

“Here, try this,” Lorenzo says, holding up a flat yellow chip that’s covered in tiny diced squares of white, orange, and green. “I think you’ll enjoy it.”

I take a bite, the flavor exploding in my mouth. It’s fresh, bright, and tangy with a hint of salt . . . “Oh ma gawd,” I exclaim around the mouthful of food. “Wat is that? Isso gud!”

My moan has Emily fuming again, looking up from her braised white fish like she wants to scratch my eyes out. I can’t help but laugh—on the inside, of course. She either ordered to ‘keep her figure’ or because she’s too afraid to try new things, but the chef is sending us dishes that are symphonies of flavor.

In other words . . . who’s awesome? I’m awesome! And Lorenzo’s awesome!

And really, this chef is *awesome*.

Admittedly, it feels good to be the winner in this little reignited battle for once. It’s childish, I know, but they say the best revenge is a life well lived, and that’s exactly what I’m showing Emily. That her put-downs and judgements didn’t keep me down and my life is just fine, thank you very much.

“If you like the lobster pan bati, just wait until dessert, *mia rosa*,” Lorenzo purrs in my ear, too low for Emily to hear.

He looks me in the eye and leans in, and before I know it, we’re kissing. It’s not a deep, soulful kiss but not a polite peck on the lips, either. He kisses me in a way that makes me think he really does want me. Or that he’s as good at acting as he is cooking.

“Ahem,” Emily says when our kiss goes on too long for her liking. “So, tell me about your wedding, Abi. Like I said, I haven’t heard a thing about it and I’m dying for all the deets.”

The insult is wrapped up in the request, that my wedding was either so small or so awful that word hasn't even traveled through our social circle. The truth is, it hasn't because it never happened. But I can't let her discover that.

"It was quick, just a couple of short months after Courtney's. And with all the hoopla surrounding that," I say, acknowledging the craziness and gossip my brother and sister had to deal with for their weddings, "I didn't want the big to-do. I'm just not flashy like that."

Emily snorts, the sound quite unladylike, but then she pats her lips with her napkin daintily to cover the faux pas.

"We just snuck away and got married," I say.

Her eyes narrow, and I realize the opening I've given her a moment too late. "You eloped?" I inhale slowly and nod. "Oh, you poor thing," she says, an evil gleam in her eye. "A girl dreams of her wedding day her whole life. The dress, the flowers, the cake, walking down the aisle. And you missed out on it all, poor thing. What's the saying? Always a bridesmaid, never a bride. You're like the wedding florist with no bouquet."

She's crossed a line. Not so much with her words—she's said way worse to me before—but her tone is so falsely pitying.

We all hear it, feel it, and the tension at the table amps up.

"Babe, not everyone wants all that. And the most important part of the whole day is the bride and groom. Everything else is just gravy, right?" Doug takes Emily's hand and I truly feel for him. He's here to have a honeymoon with his bride, not get into some dick-measuring contest with Lorenzo or a melee with his wife and a flash from her past.

His tone snaps at Emily, whose face pinches. She's never been the type to take someone clapping back at her lightly, especially if she's basically being told to shut the fuck up. Even if it's done politely.

But she knows she needs Doug on her side. He is her husband, and whatever sort of little game she's playing with me now, he's going to be the one she has to go home with.

Across the table, Emily glares at me, the insults coming through loud and clear in our silent conversation.

I know what you're doing, Emily.

Doesn't matter. You can't stop me. And you know it.

Bring it on. This is my man, and there's nothing you can do about it.

A-bitch-gail Andrews.

That's what she always called me, and I can hear it as if she said it aloud.

Suddenly, a movement catches my eyes off to the side of the booth. I look closer and blanch.

It's Meredith and Claire!

Claire looks happy but tired, as though she's ready to turn in for the night. Meredith, however, looks freshly ready to crush her enemies, see them driven onto stakes before her, and hear the lamentation of their children.

Meredith can't see Lorenzo and me together. Not again. It's too suspicious. I can imagine the judgment in her steely questions already.

Are you here to work, flower girl? Or slut around with the closest man you can find who'll have you?

Not knowing what the hell to do, I duck down, practically burying my face in Lorenzo's lap.

"Are you okay?" Emily asks from above the table, confused. "What are you doing?"

"Maybe she's getting a little sausage to go with those teeny-tiny bites of lobster?" Doug suggests, and in a dim corner of my panicked mind, I wonder what it is with some men and their obsession with getting blowjobs in public.

Then again, Lorenzo's crotch is right here, and it smells sexy, feral, and manly. He's not hard but halfway there, and if I just rub my lips . . .

What the hell am I doing?

So what if Meredith sees me out on a date? I'm not a nun, and as long as I do the job I've been hired to do and do it well, the rest of my business is none of their business. But at the same time, I don't want them seeing me out the night before an important business meeting. That doesn't exactly inspire confidence in SweetPea or me.

I peek under the table, trying to ignore the whispers from above. I feel something twitch and press against my cheek, and I realize that Lorenzo's getting harder, too. Either I'm going to have to at least give him a little nuzzle or really have to explain what the hell I'm doing . . .

Phew. I see Meredith's stilettos and Claire's sandals walk out, and I sit up, brushing my hair back behind my ears. "Sorry, guys," I blurt out, grinning. "Dropped my napkin."

Lorenzo looks at me with a question in his eyes, but I shake my head imperceptibly. I'll explain later.

Taking his hand, I decide I've pressed my luck enough. "This was fun, but Lorenzo and I really should be getting to bed . . . like now."

"But it's early!" Emily protests. "We can still—"

"I didn't say go to sleep," I add, pushing Lorenzo out of the booth as Doug laughs and shoots Lorenzo a thumbs-up. "Have a fun night!"

"What about tomorrow?" Emily asks as I get to my feet, freezing me. "I mean, whatever you've got planned, it can't be all day, right?"

Shit. “Ahh . . . not really,” I reply, knowing that my schedule includes the early morning meeting with Meredith and then a bit of preparation with Janey. Then we’re taking the afternoon off to get some sun and talk through the arrangements for Tuesday’s luncheon. But really, most of my work this week is the rehearsal, the wedding, and the reception, and since I can’t put together bouquets this early, the majority of my work tomorrow will be phone calls and confirming the deliveries of our fresh materials. “You know, we’ll probably hang out some.”

“Are you kidding? You’re on your honeymoon and don’t have every moment planned?” Emily says, springing her trap. “I have an idea. Doug and I are going kayaking tomorrow afternoon to a private island just off the coast. They have private cabanas, flamingos you can feed, and the most beautiful backdrop ever. What if you guys came along?”

I really, really want to decline, and I open my mouth to say it’s impossible when Lorenzo speaks up. “What time should we meet you in the lobby?”

What is he thinking?

I look at him, shocked and a little outraged. That was totally off script. I want to be done with this pretend thing. Especially after the scare with Meredith. I mean, I got my comeuppance on Emily. Mission accomplished.

So why are we continuing this farce? I can’t keep it together like this again, that’s for sure.

And I really do need to focus on work!

“That’s great, Lorenzo. How about two o’clock? We’re doing a balcony brunch and then we’ll be ready to go.” Emily throws out one more jab, letting me know that my plan of ‘hanging out’ is grossly lacking compared to her romantic brunch overlooking the lush grounds of the resort.

I roll my eyes, but Lorenzo nods for us and Emily beams. “See you tomorrow!” Emily says as Lorenzo takes my hand and leads me . . . well, half drags me, out of Heat.

Once we’re in the elevator, I growl at him. “Why’d you agree to tomorrow?” I ask, finally able to be furious. “What are you trying to do, Lorenzo?”

I’m prepared for all sorts of answers. He likes kayaking. He thinks he and Doug can be bros. He wants to work on his tan, although that’s sort of stupid.

But I’m not prepared for what he says.

“Because I want to spend time with you,” Lorenzo says, his utter honesty flooring me as surely as a bonk on the head. “Without this fakeness, we have no excuse to be together. And all through dinner, all I could think about was that as I had you pinned to the door earlier, I never got a chance to taste your lips the way I want to. I want to taste them, feel your tongue on mine, feel your legs

wrap around my waist for real.”

Heat shoots through me, but it’s not anger any longer. Nope, we’re back to pure, unfiltered lust.

And then he says the one thing that could make this whole fiasco even better. “Besides, after really meeting Emily . . . pissing her off is pretty much the most fun I’ve had in ages. It might be the best thing I can do in Aruba, especially if it keeps me close to you. She thinks you’re beneath her and wants to remind you of that at every opportunity when the truth is, you are so far in the stratosphere above the rest of us that we shouldn’t even be able to see you.”

I’m . . . speechless. This isn’t some spiel in a fake date. This is real, authentic, and as he looks into my eyes, I feel a fuzziness in my stomach. No, not *fuzzy* . . . fizzy and sparkly and sweet, like I’m filled with rose champagne from my toes to my nose.

He sees it, sees me, and thinks I’m fine just the way I am, not lacking because I’m not what an Andrews should be. And he sees Emily for what she is too. Everyone else is fooled by her fake saccharine sweetness, but not me. And not Lorenzo.

My defenses are crumbling, and all I can do is stammer. “I . . . I don’t know the first thing about kayaking.”

Lorenzo chuckles and pulls me close. “Don’t worry. I’ll show you or at least draw attention away from you with my own lack of skill so you won’t worry about it.”

I want to lean in and kiss him, to give in and let him have me, but something stops me. “Uhm, listen, that table thing? Meredith and Claire walked in,” I explain, not wanting to fake more than I have to with Lorenzo. “Meredith could’ve seen us, and even though there’s nothing wrong with our having a relationship . . . it’s not something I can afford to have her hold over me. Especially because it’s not real.”

I’m reminding myself. I’m reminding him. We’re here for one reason only . . . to work. Even if my thoughts of flowers are more stupidly romanticized porn right now than bouquets . . .

He spreads my silky petals, tasting the sweet nectar of my pleasure.

Lorenzo chuckles and cups my cheek. “What are you thinking, *mia rosa*?”

I shake my head, losing the silly train of thought, and he acts as if I were mentally here with him the whole time. “So no pretending, except with Emily and Doug. If Claire or Meredith sees us, we’ll simply be two contractors enjoying the resort.”

“Right,” I agree.

That smirk of his is back. “Then let us go to bed.”

I realize how stupid all of my arguing about appearing to barely know each other seems when we're staying in the same room.

The same bed?

No, he's sleeping on the couch. I'm putting my foot down on that.

CHAPTER 7

The light is too bright, and I squeeze my lids shut, praying for another few minutes of sleep. Seriously, I know I'm closer to the equator, but does that mean that the sun needs to launch itself up out of the horizon to stab death lasers into my—

A soft snore has me waking up a hell of a lot faster than the glare of the sun.

I lay stock still, though, trying to pry the cobwebs out of my mind and remember.

Lorenzo.

In my bed, by my side, damn near snuggled up next to me.

I should be mad. This is not what we negotiated during our hotly contested discussion last night.

"You get the couch. This is my room." It takes all I have not to stomp my foot as I make the decree. Dinner was amazing, sexy, and romantic, and he boldly told me he wants to spend more time with me, which gets my blood racing and my pussy slick.

But I don't think I'm strong enough. That's why I'm dying on this hill . . . we are not sleeping in the same bed.

"Suit yourself. If you don't want to share, we don't have to." It's too easy, plus the quirk of his dark brow tells me he's got something up his sleeve.

Still, I'm not expecting a king-size feather pillow to fly through the air and bop me square in the face. I sputter, "What the hell?"

He shrugs, pulling off his shirt and tossing it carelessly to the floor beside his suitcase. Utterly at ease, he tells me, "You don't want to share, and I assume you'll want a pillow to sleep on the couch. No?"

I bend down to grab the pillow and throw it back. But my aim isn't as good as his and it goes sailing past him and into a lamp. "Shit!" I yell. But he catches it, righting it on the nightstand with sure hands.

"We are doing this pretending for your Emily, and I am not sleeping on a cot

in my room or on a couch in yours. We can be adults about this, Abigail. This bed is near the size of some rooms.” He sounds so damned reasonable and mature.

Good for you, asshole. You can be mature and not attack me like a sex-starved bear in the middle of the night. I can’t say the same and I’m trying to save you—and myself—from getting sprayed with bear spray.

He sits down on the edge of the bed, pulling his shoes off, and sighs at my ridiculousness.

He’s right. I know he is. I just have to manage to not impale myself on his dick for eight hours. I glance at the clock . . . make that six hours, if I’m lucky.

“Okay. But you’re sleeping on top of the blankets and I’m sleeping under them. No funny business.”

“Of course.” I think we’ve reached an accord, but he stands once again and drops his slacks to the floor, kicking them and then his underwear into the same pile as his shirt.

I screech, “What are you doing?”

He is nude. Fully nude and half hard. And not a blurry shape behind a foggy shower wall. No, he is live in Technicolor, every carved muscle and ink line, right down to his cock, which is lying down his leg.

My eyes lock on it. His hair is trimmed short and tidy, very European, and as I stare, it grows. “Uhh—”

“Abigail.” My name is soft on his lips, as though he’s in pain, and when I glance up to meet his eyes, he cups himself. “I sleep nude. I’m going to sleep as you requested, but you’re making it hard.”

“I can see that,” I murmur, wishing he’d move his hand again.

He chuckles, a deep vibration in his chest that makes his abs jump, and I come back to myself.

“Shit. Sorry. Okay, we can sleep in the same bed, but you have got to wear underwear. Briefs, boxers, tighty whiteys for all I care, but you have to cover up.” Or I’m never going to make it till sunrise.

That is my final offer. Every other line, he’s blown right past, and though I argued, I secretly wanted him to. But this one . . . I need him to do this for me.

“Very well, mia rosa. For your honor, I will respect this. This time.”

A shiver runs through me when he basically tells me tonight will be one of many nights he sleeps by my side.

Back in the morning light, he snores again, kicking a leg out of the sheet and rearranging himself. The blankets have fallen by the wayside to leave him gloriously exposed, and I’m rethinking my demand that he cover up because behind those boxer briefs, his morning wood is tall and thick, proudly greeting

the day too.

And I want to see him fully aroused. I want to touch it. I want to taste it. I want to feel it.

Maybe I could just peek a little? If I'm careful, he might even sleep through it.

“Good morning, Abigail. Every filthy thought running through your head is written on your face, *mia rosa*,” he growls out, his voice rough with sleep. “I love it, so bold and eager.”

Busted!

But I'm not one to throw my cards down and walk away from the table, even when I've lost. I double down. “I don't know what you're talking about. I was looking out the window at the beautiful sunrise.”

“Mmmhmm,” he says, not believing a word. He casually reaches down and scratches his balls, and I track the movement. Until he chuckles again. That gets me moving.

I hop out of bed, snatching up my robe to throw over my own nightclothes. *Thanks for the super-short nightgown, Archie!*

But before I can escape into the bathroom, my bedroom door opens. Janey stands there with two cups of coffee and a mouth open so wide, she could catch flies. She recovers quickly, though, her open mouth becoming a wide grin. “G'morning, Boss. G'morning, Boss's dick du jour.”

“Janey!”

She has zero shame or apology as she hands me one of the cups. Then she has the nerve to bypass me and offer the other to Lorenzo. “This one was supposed to be mine, but you can have it. It's black, and you're hard.”

“Seriously? Can you cover up?” I shriek at both of them as Lorenzo nods his thanks for the coffee.

“She's a little grumpy in the morning,” Janey stage-whispers, “but with you here, I'd think she'd be a little more chill. Unless you didn't get the job done?” she pries with narrowed eyes. “You're working with quality dick, but it's not just the equipment. You gotta put in the work too. Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work.”

“Janey! Get out!” I yell, forcibly pushing her out of the room. As I slam the door, Lorenzo laughs heartily.

“Get dressed, Abs. We need to be downstairs for the meeting in an hour. No time for hanky-panky, Romeo,” Janey says.

“Lorenzo,” he calls out to correct her.

I don't think she misspoke, though. She knows his name, and she knows me. I like love and romance, and she thinks Lorenzo might be my Romeo. But did

she forget that everyone dies in that play?

We get dressed, and the process feels intimate, a dance around the room as we take showers, brush teeth, and pull on clothes for this meeting.

“I think we need to leave a few minutes apart so we arrive separately. Less suspicious that way,” I tell Lorenzo as I slick waterproof mascara onto my lashes. The heat here is fierce, and I might cry angry tears if Meredith gets too bitchy, so the heavy-duty stuff is a necessity.

He pauses to give me a narrow-eyed glare. “Everyone will be arriving at the same time because that’s when the meeting starts.”

That sounds so reasonable but feels so risky. I’m not sure I can walk in there at his side and not be tomato-faced and obvious about where we spent the night. Even if it’s not exactly what people would think.

When I don’t answer, Janey does for me from the bedroom doorway. “Just go along with it, dude. She needs to be on her A-game, and I can’t have you fucking up this opportunity.”

He shakes his head. “Fine. I’m ready, so I’ll head down now.” But he doesn’t leave. No, he comes over to the vanity, framing me with his arms and pressing me to the cabinet. Meeting my eyes in the mirror, he says, “Go to this meeting and be *The Abigail Andrews*. Later, you will be mine.”

He passes by a starry-eyed Janey with a nod, and once the door of the suite opens and then closes, she screeches. “Ahh! Holy shit, Abs! I need to hear everything. Every. Single. Thing.”

I open my mouth to share some of what happened last night, but she holds up a hand. “Not now. As much of a greedy bitch as I am, we have to get our asses in gear. Unless Lorenzo got yours? I’ll be late this morning if you’re telling tales of anal with that particularly wow specimen of maleness.” She holds out her hands in a movement that reminds me of Carly reaching for her beloved Cheerios. *Gimme, gimme, gimme.*

“No! Nothing like that!” I claim.

“Then you, out the door. Now.” Janey’s not kidding, literally shoving me toward the door.

Downstairs, Meredith looks at her watch with a lift of her brows as Janey and I walk in, despite the fact that we’re not only on time but early. The room is full, way more people than I expected.

“Now that everyone’s here, let’s get started . . .” Meredith directs.

She starts to her left, working her way around the room. I sit through check-ins with makeup artists, hair stylists, photographers, videographers, security, drivers, a DJ, musicians, decorators, and even Meredith’s assistants. God, what an awful job that must be.

Lorenzo gives a quick rundown of meals he's doing, ending with the reception's fettuccine alfredo.

"Last and least . . . oh, pardon me! I meant, last but *not* least, of course," Meredith says, eyes dancing as she smirks at me. That was intentional, for sure. *What does she have against me?* "The flowers."

She can be petty if she wants, toss insults my way, and call me 'flower girl', but I'm on top of things. I did the checks with Janey and everything looks good. The boxes arrived and have been sorted and refrigerated.

So take that, Meredith! Check, check, checkity check.

"Excellent," Meredith says evilly. "I'll need to add a simple assignment to your daily list, then, since you're *so caught up*." She's daring me to argue, but there's no need. I can tackle whatever she's going to throw at me. "Claire and Cole have a lunch photo shoot. We'll need a centerpiece for the table, nothing obnoxious," she warns, as if that's ever a risk with my arrangements, "but rather something romantic and tropical. I'm sure you can do something that will be serviceable."

Of course, I can. And it'll be a hell of a lot more than 'serviceable'.

Meeting adjourned, Janey and I make our way to the floral cooler. But as we round the corner, I'm greeted by a horrible sight—a man in dirty coveralls with a toolbox at his feet. But he's not the awful thing.

The worse sight is the open door of the cooler and the rapidly wilting and dying flowers!

Hundreds of roses, orchids, baby's breath, daisies . . . and those are just the 'regular' flowers. There are also special-order ranunculus and dahlias that are irreplaceable.

Tears threaten to spill over, some of sadness and some of anger. Both are hotly burning my eyes.

"What happened?!" I yell as my hands fist at my sides. "It was fine yesterday!"

The old guy grins with a shrug. "That's how breakdowns work. One minute, they're fine. The next, they aren't. Cooler compressor blew." He scratches at his oily hair. "Just installed it a month ago."

"Ugh! Now what do I do?" Lamenting the situation isn't useful, but starting to figure out a solution definitely is. To the mechanic, I'm all business. "My flowers are dying or already dead. First, is there another cooler we can use?"

He shakes his head sadly.

"Move then," I tell him, helping him get the hell out of my way. When he steps out of the doorway, I slam the door shut. "Need to keep it as cool as possible inside. And I need a technician here, pronto. Like genie-poof him here

right now.” I blink hard and jerk my head like I can make help magically appear. Nothing happens.

“I’ve got a fella on the way,” the man says helpfully.

“Good. I need . . . I need . . .” My roll of sensible action falls to pieces and the tears flow over. “Damn it! I need to go back twenty-four hours and stop this from happening.” Mania is setting in, my mind swirling out of control.

No! This can’t be happening!

I imagine Claire’s tearful sadness as she cries out, ‘I trusted you, Abi!’ And Meredith’s glee as I prove her right that I can’t handle this.

Janey grabs my shoulders, shaking sense back into me. “You’re losing it, Abs. Focus! Now what?”

I point a finger at the maintenance man. “I’m going to handle this, but I need the manager here when I get back.” I point to the floor between us to indicate where I expect the manager to be.

The mechanic holds his hands up fearfully. “That’s above my paygrade, lady. I can’t just get the manager down here.” He throws his voice as though that’s a crazy suggestion.

An evil thought occurs to me, and I use it now, though I won’t actually do it. “You heard about the Kennedy-Johnson wedding? You heard about the Bitch Boss who’s planning the whole thing?” He nods and my case is made for me. “Get him here.”

“C’mon,” I tell Janey. Grabbing clippers, I growl out, “There are flowers all over this island. I’m going double-oh-seven, with a license to steal some flowers from the grounds.”

Janey’s eyes widen and then she smiles, “Doo-doo-do-do, doo-doo-do-do, dododoooo!” The *James Bond* theme song says she’s on board with my outlandish idea.

We run along the path, despite the common sense to not run with scissors. But there are too many people and the plants near the walkway are too plain. I need something more, something better.

We diverge off, heading into the thicker greenery of a garden area. A greenhouse!

Yes! There’s got to be something in here that I can use for this arrangement.

Unless it’s drugs? Oh, God, what if I go in here looking to steal a flower only to get caught up in a drug ring hothouse?

I shake my head. This is not an episode of *Law & Order*.

“Cover me,” I hiss to Janey.

“What?” she says too loudly, and I slap my hand over her mouth.

A tree rustles, and we duck down behind the greenhouse. I freeze, looking

left and right while keeping my head perfectly still and hoping the whites of my eyes don't give our position away. The lady leaving the greenhouse doesn't notice us as she walks right past our hideout to head back toward the resort.

"Almost busted!" I whisper.

"Abs, you're losing it," Janey warns. "Why don't we use the flowers in the cooler for the photo shoot today? Might as well get something good out of them before they die."

"I am not using half-dead, wilted flowers on a photo shoot for Claire Johnson's wedding," I whisper-yell as if that should be perfectly obvious. "Come on."

I might be truly losing it a little, but Janey comes with me. Ride or die, she's down for whatever I need.

We slip into the greenhouse, letting the door close quietly behind us.

"It's beautiful," I gasp. The greenhouse is a labor of love, full of plants and flowers of every kind, from tiny buds to full-grown examples. I could spend hours in here examining each and every one. But I don't have time for that. "Spread out. Find something we can use."

Janey and I work through the space with no rhyme or reason, but she whistles. I glare at her, a finger pressed to my lips. She glares right back and mouths, "I sound like a bird."

Oh. That was actually really smart. I shoot a look of apology, and she holds up her hands at the flowers beside her in a ta-da motion.

They're perfect! Birds of paradise, vibrant orange and blue, and exactly what I need to represent an island feel. I use the clippers to trim a few and then mouth, "Run for it!"

Janey and I sneak out, keeping watch for the lady of the greenhouse, but we make it back without incident. With moments to spare, we grab a clear vase and I arrange the flowers quickly and carefully so I don't damage their delicate blooms.

"What do you think?" I ask Janey. "Is it too simple?"

She walks around it to look from different angles. "No, it's perfect. The simplicity is what makes the shape and color shine."

"Let's go," I say, grabbing the vase and scurrying as fast as I can to make it to the luncheon on time.

I walk into the private dining room where Meredith directed me to bring the arrangement. "May I?" I ask the photographer.

"Oh!" she exclaims delightedly. "It's beautiful! Definitely speaks to an island love story. Set them on the table. Make any adjustments you'd like so they're angled toward the camera." She points to the tripod with a large camera

attached.

Meredith approaches the photographer and they begin talking. Meredith's lips are pressed together in a frown, her nose crinkled as if she's smelled a ripe fart. She's unimpressed with my arrangement. That much is obvious.

"You may go, Miss Andrews. The flowers are simple, to say the least. I do hope the luncheon centerpieces will be more to standards, not a whacked off flower in a vase."

Grr. Don't kill her.

Maybe kill her just a little bit.

For both of our protection, I spin in place to leave, but Claire passes me on her way in for the shoot. She's wearing a white dress, more formal than I would've expected, but she looks stunning.

I get a twisted satisfaction when I overhear Claire behind me as she sees the set, "Everything is so gorgeous! Gah, let me just do a few selfies and do a live feed before we get started with the actual shoot, 'kay?"

Such is the life of a celebrity. I can't fault her, though. She seems to really care about her followers and enjoy talking with them. She's the real deal.

"Hey, Abi!" Claire calls after me.

Thinking I'm about to get slammed for the arrangement, I turn back slowly. "Yes?"

"Do you have any more of these?" She points to the birds of paradise. "I'd love to put one in my hair for a few shots, but I wouldn't dream of messing with your work."

"I do have a few extra. Let me go grab them. I'll be right back," I promise with a no-big-deal smile.

Uh, looks like Janey and I have another *Mission Impossible* stunt to pull off.



BACK BY THE COOLER, the maintenance man is standing with another man. Based on his khaki, island-weight suit, this must be the manager. Judging by his pinched face, he's not any happier to be dealing with me than I am with him.

"Miss Andrews, I'm told you *requested* my presence."

He thinks I'm some sweet, flaky girl he can intimidate. But he couldn't be more wrong. I'm an Andrews through and through, and if I can handle Meredith and do whatever it takes to get that arrangement where it needed to be, on time, I can sure as hell deal with a manager who's majorly fucked up.

"I made sure *last week* that I'd have all the flowers I need for the Johnson-Kennedy wedding. My first morning here, and I find that your equipment failure

has caused me to lose a large portion of them. Now, I don't care if you have to call the owner, or the other resorts, or every flower shop on this island, or even get them air-flighted on a charter plane from the next island over. You are going to have those flowers replaced by the end of the day because I am not going to fuck around for the next few days trying to scrape bouquets together on the fly."

The truth is, I will likely do that too. But getting flowers to the island was a long and difficult process with customs, so what's already here is going to have to work. I just need them from their scattered locations to one central cooler so I can see what I'm working with.

"Miss, I'm sure this is stressful, but please calm down," the manager says, trying to regain control, but his condescension is heavy as he mansplains, "I assure you that we'll make this right. But by tonight is impossible. You must be reasonable." He tacks on an awkward laugh, as though my request for flowers might as well be a temper tantrum over wanting a mythical unicorn with a rainbow mane that eats sugar and shits cotton candy.

My voice goes cold as ice, my tone threatening death. Not his, but his business's, which might be even worse. "I think you'll find that I am extremely reasonable, decidedly more so than Meredith Wildeman. Currently, she has not been informed of your failure, of Casa del Mario's failure, to provide a satisfactory venue as outlined in your legally binding contract. Mr. Kennedy and Miss Johnson are also currently blissfully unaware that their pending nuptials might include none of their carefully selected flowers because of your issue. I would hate for them to lose faith in your resort, especially seeing as how high-profile this wedding is." I look to the cooler with a sad frown.

The manager knows he's backed into a corner. I am his kindest option to deal with. And to be clear, I'm not nice nor naïve. I will do whatever is necessary to make this right for my client. Even if it's taking a wheelbarrow down to that greenhouse and chopping every last bloom at the root.

Sorry, Edward! I know better now, but desperate times . . . desperate measures, you know?

He sighs. "I will get as many flowers as I possibly can." I raise my brows, silently demanding more. "They'll be here by this afternoon."

"Thank you." I nod agreement to his terms. "And the cooler repaired or I'll be taking over one of your restaurant's refrigerators."

"You can't!" he balks.

If I could shoot daggers from my eyeballs, he'd be a dead man right where he's standing.

"Very well. It will be repaired within the day."

Janey waits until we make it to the elevator before she busts up laughing.

“Oh, my God! I thought he was gonna piss himself when you went all Godzilla Rampage on his ass. Precise slice and dice!” she exclaims, slashing through the air with a flurry of sharp karate chops. “That was awesome, *Miss Andrews!*” She mimics the manager who thought he could walk all over me but got smashed in our game of chicken.

It was. But it shouldn’t have happened to begin with. And now, I’m way too busy to go kayaking with Lorenzo.

Last night, I was mad at him for saying yes to that without asking me, but once he explained, I’d gotten on board. Now, I’m disappointed to miss it, though I could definitely do without another dose of Emily.

“I’ll have to cancel on Lorenzo. We had plans this afternoon, but I have to focus on this. It’s too important.”

Janey shakes her head, determined. “Hell no, you’re not canceling. Yeah, this sucks and has the potential to be a serious clusterfuck, but you can’t do anything about it in the next few hours. The manager’s working and I’ll be working, so go and enjoy. I insist. You deserve this.”

“No way,” I argue. “Don’t be ridiculous. This is priority.”

Janey throws her arm around my shoulder and whispers in my ear.

“The highest priority you should have is knocking the rust off your pussy. It’s been a long time since you’ve gotten any or even had any fun. Go, Abs. I can handle this, and I’ll call you if I can’t. Girl Scout promise.” She holds up her hand, obviously never having been a Girl Scout. If anything, she looks like she’s about to testify in her own defense, which her next words make me worry about. “Plus, I think I’m going to visit that greenhouse again to see if I can swipe a few more blooms. If you’re with me, we might both get arrested. But if you’re out on the water with witnesses when it happens, you’ll have plausible deniability.”

“Janey.”

“Don’t worry, I got this. Just go get an alibi . . . and some dick, and let me take care of the rest.”

“If you’re sure?”

In answer, she rips the tablet from my hands and starts going down the list herself. After a second, she looks up. “You’re still here?”

Fine, I get it. I’m leaving. Just one last thing . . .

I kiss Janey’s cheek. “You’re the best, girl. Remind me to give you a raise when we get home.”

She laughs, knowing that there’s no way I can do that but perfectly willing to stay where she is with me.

CHAPTER 8

Esmar's voice rises and falls with the perfection of a trained tenor, and I shake my head in amazement. The man hasn't stopped for nearly an hour, his powerful voice belting out classic opera like he's singing pop in the shower. And he hasn't missed a single note even as he preps for tonight's dinner.

"Hey, Esmar, think we can change from cruel fate to something happier?" I ask.

"Ooh, challenge throwdown!" Gilberto cheers.

Esmar laughs. "You might be sorry, but you asked for it. You speak French?" I have no idea what he's talking about, but the entire kitchen staff is looking from Esmar to me with knowing smiles.

"A bit," I hedge. The multicultural kitchen here probably has speakers of at least fifteen languages, and though Italian is my first language, my travels through Europe have taught me the basics of a few more.

I might be in trouble. But I wouldn't want to be anywhere else than in this kitchen right now. After Meredith's meeting this morning, I contemplated how best to spend my day. I don't have any meals to cook for the wedding guests today because the resort kitchens are handling that as pre-planned, and though the beach called to me, I don't want to burn before we kayak this afternoon. I might be olive complected, but the sun here is fierce and unforgiving. So Esmar's kitchen is where I headed, wanting to watch him, learn from him, taste his food, and *learn his soul*, as he put it.

Hours later, I'm having a blast and feeling right at home. Until Esmar starts singing a new song, one created from his own imagination . . .

*Oh, pretty lady with skin so pale,
Let my work my fingers in your dough,
I won't fail. I'll knead you back and forth,
Up and down all night. And when you are perfectly*

Al dente, my sauce will set you right!

Every verse gets more hilarious, bawdier, and more explicit. Finally, I have to give up, setting down my knife before I cut myself. It's the signal for the end of the song, and everyone cheers Esmar as I hold my belly, laughing hard and trying not to pass out because I can't breathe.

"Congratulations, you lasted longer than most!" someone calls over, laughing themselves. "But those lines at the end, about her garlic knot and bathing it in butter . . . priceless!"

"How in the world did you come up with that?" I ask Esmar.

He shrugs, his knife never stopping as he cuts thin slices of jicama. "I've traveled some as well. A French chef I worked with would create lyrics to entertain us, and it became a fun way to greet new staff here."

"You mean to haze them?" I say with a smile, still chuckling inside.

"You say to-mah-to, I say to-may-to," he replies easily.

And we continue to work together through the lunch service, enjoying each other's company and showing off a bit. Though for chefs, showing off is how we teach, how we learn.

As service wraps up, Esmar dismisses me. "*Mashi danke*. Thank you, Chef, but I must kick you out of my kitchen now. You are in paradise. Go enjoy the island."

I take advantage of the offer, quickly washing up and heading back to Abigail's room. Our room.

I like the sound of that. Fuck, she was stunning this morning—her thick hair a tangled mess from tossing and turning all night, her eyes bleary with sleep, and her nightgown too thin to disguise her pearly nipples. And her blatant desire and enjoyment of my body.

I enjoyed seeing her that way, a peek behind the bluster she puts on and defenses she wears like sparkly distractions.

I find the room empty and a small worry takes root. *Is she going to stand me up?*

I get ready, not willing to fully consider it. Once I'm in swimsuit trunks and a tank top, with a healthy layer of sunscreen, I sit on the couch and stare at the clock. One thirty comes and goes, and the root turns to a small sprout of nerves mixed with a tiny leaf of anger. If I have to scour the resort, I'll find her. If nothing else, I know where she'll be sleeping tonight . . . right beside me.

At 1:45, the door flies open and she comes running in. "Sorry! Sorry! You would not believe my morning. I'm ready!"

But since she runs right past me and into the bedroom, I find that hard to believe.

Janey follows along at a more reasonable pace, shaking her head. “It really has been a super shitty day, so go easy on her.” She tilts her head, considering. “Actually, maybe go rough? She might be into that. *Bam-bam-bam.*” She fists one hand as though holding imaginary hair and open-palm smacks the empty air in front of her, painting quite the picture.

As enticing as that sounds, something else she said is of much more immediate concern. “What happened today? What’s wrong?”

Janey shakes her head. “That’s up to her to share. Actually, I’m interested to see if she does, though I don’t know if it’s more meaningful that she forgets all about it when she’s with you or that she wants to tell you things. Guess I’ll ponder that while I slave away on this to-do list so she doesn’t freak the fuck out.” The last part is whispered so Abigail doesn’t hear.

“You’re a good friend, a good partner. You take good care of her,” I say genuinely.

Janey’s shrug is easy. “We take care of each other. On that note.” Her face instantly morphs to one of pure threat. “If you so much as hurt one hair on her head or leave one tiny crack in her heart, I will destroy you. The only thing you’re allowed to do is pound her uterus into her ribs *if* she asks you to.”

I blink. “Uh . . . is that an American euphemism I don’t know? It sounds painful.”

“Just don’t hurt her,” she summarizes as the door opens and Abigail sprints out again.

“Let’s go!”

She’s wearing purple running shorts and a bright pink tank top. A turquoise swimsuit peeks out under her arms, and her hair is now piled on top of her head. She’s a riot of color and energy that I want to sample, teasing apart her layers of complexity to discover how such a delicacy was born.

But that will have to wait because we are late for our kayak date.



IN THE LOBBY, Emily and Doug are waiting on one of the low, white cushioned wicker couches.

“There you are,” Emily clips out in exasperation as she stands. But with a blink, she switches to a friendly smile, confiding, “We were late too, so caught up in each other. Right, Doug?”

He rises too, putting a hand on Emily’s lower back. “Uh, yeah. Brunch was delicious. They made these pancakes with coconut flakes in them. So good.” He groans, patting his flat belly with his other hand.

Emily sighs, and I realize she was trying to rub Abigail's nose in their newlywed sexy times the way we did. Tit for tat style. But unintentionally, Doug cluelessly didn't back her move.

"Pancakes with coconut sound delectable. I'll have to try them." I make a mental note to do so. I'm always interested to try food, especially food that others find enjoyable. But where most folks simply chew and swallow, deciding whether it tastes good or not, I enjoy figuring out what makes something appetizing.

"Let's get outside before our reservation is cancelled," Emily huffs. We dutifully follow her out onto the sand.

"Hey! You guys my two o'clock kayakers?" a man asks. He looks very much like a surfer—blond, shaggy hair that he tosses back with a flick of his head, a deep tan, and a seashell tied on a leather cord around his neck.

"Yep," Doug answers.

"Awesome, dude. I'm Dylan. I'll be your guide today for this adventure. First things first. Anybody ever punched a shark in the nose before?"

He says it deadpan, as if that's an actual life skill we might need in the next few hours.

"I have." I raise my hand like this is elementary school. All eyes turn to me in shock and I let the moment stretch. "Kidding."

"Bro!" Dylan drawls out, "You had me goin' with that. I was ready to hear you tell the tale." He holds up a fist and I pound it.

Everyone else chuckles.

"Right, so just to be clear, no shark punching except as a last resort." He's kidding, I think. "Have any of you kayaked?"

Emily raises her hand this time. "Doug and I did once on a romantic weekend getaway." She makes what should be a no-big-deal answer sound like they're taking trips for candlelit sex on the regular. But I focus on Abigail's head shake that she's never been in a kayak. That's a tidbit of information I actually want to know.

"Let me go over the basics, then, and once everyone's as comfy as a crab, we'll get in the water. Pop a squat in the sand and we'll get started," Dylan instructs us.

We all move to sit, but Dylan throws himself into a backflip, spinning through the air and landing on the soft sand in a seated position. "Nailed it!" he exclaims with a fist pump. He sounds surprised, but surely, he's not hurling himself through the air if he wasn't certain he would land safely?

"Ladies, if you'll sit between your guys' legs. No need to be shy, we all know this is your honeymoon," Dylan teases. "Get *all* up in there."

I open my legs, and Abigail scoots back into the cradle of them, her back to my chest. I wrap my arms around her belly, pulling her in tighter. Her sweet gasp of shock is sexy, and the way she slightly shifts, rubbing her ass against my cock, is surprising and hot as hell.

“*Mia rosa*,” I growl into her ear.

Dylan smirks, and I wonder how accustomed he is to seeing newlyweds maul each other under the guise of a kayak lesson.

True to his word, he goes over the basics of kayaking with us. There’s a lot about timing and paddle position and even more about working together as a team. “As in marriage, as in the kayak,” he intones sagely.

And then, despite our utter lack of confidence, we’re in the water.

Dylan takes the lead since he knows the way to the private island, with Abigail and me in one kayak and Emily and Doug in another.

It’s awkward at first, and Abigail and I wobble, in danger of tipping over. But we steady ourselves, finding a stability as we row through the calm, clear water.

It feels right, working as a team toward a common goal. As we go, Dylan tells us about the island and the resort and how he came to be here.

“Was surfing in Cali, man. Righteous waves there. But there was a girl—there’s always a girl, ya know? She took my heart when she took my dick.” He shakes his head sadly, doing an advanced maneuver with his oar that has him spinning a slow three-sixty in the water. “I wanted to run away, and I saw an ad online for resort help. Thought for sure it was click bait or that I’d get here and they’d steal my kidneys.” He laughs. “But it’s been great. Two years and counting!” He finishes with a smile, but then it falls. “Shit. Those two are definitely part of the other fifty percent.”

At my blank look, Dylan explains. “Newlyweds? Fifty percent divorce rate? You can tell sometimes.”

I cringe. That’s awful, but looking over to where Dylan is slicing through the water toward Emily and Doug, I can see why he’d say that. They are struggling just to work together. In fact, they’re almost entirely working against each other and as a result are stuck in place and starting to argue.

Happy honeymoon, indeed.

Dylan is almost to their side when their rocking gets outrageous, and not in the good way like ‘if the boats a’rocking, don’t come a’knocking’, but rather like they are going to capsize. One way, then the other as they try to correct for balance. It’s too much by a significant amount and their weight isn’t evenly distributed.

And with a whoosh, they keel over. Emily’s scream turns to bubbles that pop

loudly, but Dylan has made it to them now and reaches his paddle out for Emily to grab on to. Doug surfaces almost immediately, a grin on his face as he whips his hair out of his face.

That grin dissolves when he hears Emily sputtering, “Oh, my God! Look what you did! Dougie!”

“It’s fine, Em. We’ll climb back in and keep going. The island is right there.” He points to our destination, but Emily isn’t having it. She glares at him, eyes flashing fire, and he rolls his eyes. “Sorry, babe.”

Apology begrudgingly handed over, they start to work together to get back in their kayak with Dylan’s help. Eventually, they’re in place once again and Dylan reviews the timing of the paddle stroke.

“Synchronicity, man. It’s everything. As in water, as in life.”

Somehow, this lesson sticks, and we all make it to the private island without further incident.

We’re all set until Abigail and I climb out of the kayak. Though we’re in the shallows right up by the shore, the process of stepping out somehow eludes Abigail and she trips, falling face first into the water.

Emily barks out a laugh instantly. I drop down to grab Abigail. “*Cazzo!* Are you okay?”

She comes up sputtering much like Emily did, but instead of whining and screeching, Abigail is laughing . . . wildly. Swiping water and hair out of her face, she huffs out around braying and unladylike laughs, “Only I could manage to kayak just fine but then totally flop on the dismount.” She lays back in the water, a mermaid framed by a turquoise halo. “Come on in, the water’s great!” she jokes, still half-choking on whatever water she swallowed.

Emily harrumphs and sobers. I think she took twisted delight in Abigail’s fall and is disappointed at Abi’s good-natured tendencies.

I pull Abigail up out of the water, pressing our bodies together. Intending to help, I push her hair back and trace my hands over her shoulders and down her arms, checking for injuries. “I’m fine. Nothing hurt but my pride,” she reassures me.

I lift a brow and growl, “Maybe I just want to touch your wet body.”

She blushes the sexiest shade of pink, and it’s not from the sun but from the fire we create together.

“So, this is where I make myself scare for an hour or so and you’re free to do whatever. There are cabanas over there” —Dylan points to a few huts with white curtains pulled along the sides— “or sand basically everywhere.” He puts his hand to his mouth, talking around the backside of it as though telling us a secret, “Pro tip, sand in sensitive areas is abrasive and more for the movies than real

life.”

“There are floats and snorkels if you wanna swim, a trail loop if you want to hike through the trees, and if you hold a hand up, the bartender will bring you beer or a glass of wine.” He pats his chest, indicating that he’s the bartender too.

With that, he jogs away as if the sand beneath his bare feet is his natural habitat.

“So, what do you want to do?” Emily asks us.

Doug clears his throat. “Babe.”

Whatever drama Abigail is having with Emily, I’m not looking to cockblock my fellow man. This is his actual honeymoon, and I don’t want to ruin it by tagging along. Plus, that plays into my desire to get Abigail alone too.

“Thank you so much for inviting us along today,” I start. “It is more than generous to share your time and this beautiful place with us.” I look deeply into Abigail’s eyes, begging her to understand my intention to get her alone as I tell Emily and Doug, “I am sure you had plans for your afternoon here, so please do not let us interrupt them. We’ll go over to the far cabana and let you have your privacy.”

“Thanks, man!” Doug holds up his hand for a high-five, which I give him. “We’ll go this way then.” He pushes at Emily’s lower back, guiding her toward the cabana furthest away from the one I indicated.

“Doug!” Emily argues, but I turn away, not caring about anything more than the next hour with Abigail.

I take her hand, which is warm from the sun and the work we did to paddle here, and lead her down the sand. “Walk with me.”

The waves lap at the sand and our feet. “It’s so beautiful,” Abigail whispers as though she’s hesitant to disturb the scene.

I don’t see the water, the sand, the sun, or even the flowers. All I see is her. “Yes, you are. The most beautiful thing I’ve seen.”

She blushes, her cheeks pinkening even more than the glow of the sun. Her ducked chin doesn’t last for long, though, as she looks back up at me. “Why do you keep saying stuff like that? I mean, I get it when Emily is around, and it’s definitely driving her crazy—thanks for that—but when it’s just you and me, you don’t have to—”

“Speak the truth?” I finish for her.

She makes a face—one of confusion and doubt.

“Abigail, I think you are an amazing woman, sexy and smart, with sunshine and wildness in your soul. My guess is that you’ve been smothered, people not understanding your spirit and trying to make you fit their narrow views for their own comfort.” She tilts her head, not agreeing but also not disagreeing with my

assessment. "But if they don't support you in your truth, they do not deserve you. Like this Emily." I look back over my shoulder, seeing an empty beach behind us. "I think she doesn't hate you. She simply doesn't understand, and that makes her question everything, especially herself."

"And that's my fault?" she argues, bowing up to defend herself.

I stop our progress down the beach, spinning her so that we face one another. "Of course it's not. My point is that I see you fighting this cage, and I'm saying . . . don't. Why bother? You will never be happy if you allow someone to trap you inside it. Own your beauty, own your wings, own the destiny you have created for yourself without apology."

Her chest is rising and falling rapidly, her eyes wild and sparking. "Pretty words. They make it sound so easy. Just do whatever you want and if it pisses people off, that's on them?"

She's angry but I don't understand why. I'm trying to compliment her, but she hasn't taken it as such. "No, but you should not have to live small because someone else can't fathom your boldness." She settles slightly, sensing that I meant no harm, so I keep going. "At home, in Positano, it was assumed that I would go to university, perhaps get a business degree. I would work and marry, have children, and grow old in the same place I was young. It is what my family has always done."

"But you didn't want that." It's not a question. She understands what I'm telling her now. "You wanted more."

I nod. "Yes. Much more. I wanted to travel, to learn, to experience the world. And maybe I could've been happy making my family happy, but that wasn't my destiny. I could've compromised, but I still would not have been truly fulfilled. So I left because it's what I wanted. What I needed. It is my truth, and now, they see. They understand and respect that I do not pretend. I'm me. Truly."

She smiles sadly. "But you are pretending. This whole thing is pretend."

"Is it?" I dare to ask. "It may have begun that way, but I assure you that what I'm feeling is very real. You interest me more than anything or anyone has in a long time."

I can see her beautiful mind turning that over, examining and analyzing it. For all her untamed wildness, Abigail is not reckless. "But if you feel differently tomorrow, you'll simply move on because that's who you are. And I wouldn't want to cage you."

I understand. She is who she is, and I am who I am. While we both have a streak of adventure, we want very different things, and we're tempting pain to pretend otherwise.

"Ah, an impasse then."

We walk along silently after that, pointing out shells here and there and watching the water race to the sand time and time again. After a while, I hear a sharp whistle and then Dylan's voice carries on the wind.

"Time's up, guys! Let's check out the flamingos!"

We return down the beach to find a pink-faced Emily and a breathless Doug standing with Dylan, who has a knowing smirk. It seems they made use of their hour of privacy with a different sort of intimacy and some make-up sex.

"All right, lovebirds, let's go see some lovebirds!" Dylan shouts excitedly. I suspect Dylan does everything with energy and vigor, attacking life's opportunities with abandon.

"Yeah, I can't wait," Emily says. "That can be one more thing to check off the bucket list." She giggles like a lovesick school girl, leaning into Doug. It's the first time I've seen them behave truly as newlyweds in love, and I'm jealous that in each other, they've found someone willing to tackle life with them.

Maybe I never will.

Or more likely, I will have meaningless relationships wherever I roam, always looking for that special spark that might make me consider putting down roots.

We follow Dylan on a short hike around the shore until we come upon a small flock of pink-hued birds.

"The flamingos!" Dylan explains needlessly. "Here, I brought a little food for them so that you can get up close and personal."

He hands each of us a small bag, explaining how to pour the dried, pulverized shrimp bits into our hands and let the birds peck to get it.

"Are you sure it won't eat my hand?" Emily worries aloud.

"Do you have any lotion on?" Dylan asks, and Emily's eyes widen as she looks at the birds uncertainly.

"No?"

"Then you're fine. They just don't like vanilla bean." He says it so seriously, which for him must be a difficult task, that I think he's serious. Right up until the moment he laughs. "Just fucking with you. Unless you're covered in shrimp, they won't bite."

Still not entirely sure, Emily is slow to feed them, letting Doug take the lead. Abigail and I slowly approach a pair as well. But it goes well, the birds accustomed to visitors and happy to be fed treats.

"Cotton candy, sweet to go, let me see that . . . SUSHI ROLL!" Dylan loudly sings a song I don't know, but a green blur flies past me before I can even think about asking, and the flamingos go wild in a cacophony of honks and screeches, with their wings flapping.

“What the?” Emily shrieks loudly.

“Oh, shit, bro! Sorry! I was aiming for the ’mingo! They like to pick at the ’weed.” Dylan answers, laughing deep and heartily.

The green blur was apparently seaweed, because it’s now splattered on Emily’s chest and belly like Shrek came all over her.

“Ah . . . ew . . .” She continues to make garbled noises, picking at the stringy bits of seaweed to remove them.

“Here, let me help,” Doug says, laughing as he wipes at her hip. But the seaweed smears, leaving a haze of brown on her skin.

“Get in the water,” I suggest.

Emily glares and snaps, “Does this suit look like it’s water appropriate?”

Honestly, it doesn’t. It’s white and so teeny-tiny that I could guess the diameter of her nipples, though if it got wet, I probably wouldn’t have to guess because they’d be visible. The bottom is a thong G-string style but so skinny it’s almost like she has the thong part in the front. Why would they make swimsuits that you can’t swim in? A tiny part of my brain is glad that when she fell in the water earlier, she was fully covered by her life vest and shorts.

In contrast, Abigail looks sexy and sleek in her suit. It’s a triangle bikini, nothing fancy, but the teal color is perfect on her and the ties at her hips and back make me want to tease them loose with my teeth.

Since Emily’s question seems mostly rhetorical, no one answers, but Doug continues helping her clean off as he tries to talk her down like she’s a wounded wildebeest on the verge of going amok. “No worries, babe. We’ll soak in the tub when we get back like we talked about, okay?”

It’s enough to stop her bitching at Dylan, who does seem genuinely apologetic about the whole thing even if he does occasionally start chuckling again for ‘no reason’. And though we feed the flamingos the rest of the shrimp treats, the mood is soured, so we get back in our kayaks to head to the resort.

“Thank you for inviting us,” Abigail tells Emily politely. Even the manners frustrate me because I know Abi wasn’t happy about going today. But she’s doing what’s expected, what’s right.

“Of course!” Emily says, equally as fake. “What about tomorrow? You wanna—”

“No,” I interrupt, giving zero fucks to rudeness. “We’re busy tomorrow. All day.”

Abigail looks at me in surprise, maybe because of my tone or maybe because she’s wondering what I have planned this time. The truth is . . . I’m busy. I have to work tomorrow, cooking for a small portion of the bridal party.

“Oh, sure. I understand. Another day then.” Emily isn’t going to stop going

after Abigail, and though I wish Abigail would just tell Emily to go to hell because she doesn't care what she thinks, Abigail isn't prepared to do that. Yet.

CHAPTER 9

Back in the room, I hop in the shower and clean up from the fun in the water. And to give myself some time and space to think.

Lorenzo gave me a lot of his heart and even more of his mind today. In holding up a mirror to me, forcing me to see myself through his eyes, he exposed quite a bit about himself.

He is dangerous.

But unfortunately, maybe not in the bad boy tattooed and motorcycle way I originally thought. If that was all it was, I could probably have a fling with him and walk away unscathed with nothing more than a good story to tell when I'm old and gray.

But he's dangerous in a way that's much more terrifying. He's deep and observant, philosophical and expressive, all things that go straight to my heart and my core. And that would all be good—hell, it'd be amazing—except that he'll leave. That's why he's dangerous. He's a drug, getting me addicted to him and making me want him, knowing all the while that he's a limited supply, short-term use only.

And like an addict, I need rehab, time away from him for just a minute to get my head on straight.

The shower isn't enough. Especially when I come out of the bedroom to see Lorenzo standing on the balcony wearing nothing but black swim trunks and a heated look. His chest bare, his tattoos beckon me, tempting me to trace them, to torture him into promising things he isn't capable of.

But if he's going to respect my free-spirited wildness, I need to respect his.

"I'm going down to check on Janey in the cooler. Make yourself at home, of course. Don't wait up. I'll be a while," I tell him.

His eyes narrow, as though he can see right through me. Hell, he probably can. He's proving that he sees me more clearly than I do myself.

He turns around, giving the view his back as he stretches his arms out, hands resting on the handrail behind him. “Can I do anything to help?”

Fuck. So, so much. And I’d bet my batteries that he could do it better than my favorite vibrator.

I shake my head. “No, it’s okay. I’m going to see what progress Janey made today so I know where we’re at.”

He’s quiet, not believing me. He knows I’m running. But I’m only doing it now so he doesn’t have to do it later. It’s better this way.

“Yeah, so . . . bye.” I bolt for the door, pulling it closed behind me.

As I wait for the elevator, I text Janey . . .

How’s it going? I’m on my way to help.

I’m fine. Don’t worry about this. Clean the rust out of your pipes.

Ugh, Janey! She’s given me shit about my pussy being as bad as a ‘rusty tin can’ for months now. I guess she’s switching to rusty pipes. Not sure which is worse because they’re both gross and sound painful.

There’s also no way I’m *not* going down to check on her, the cooler, and the flower situation tonight. It’s my name and reputation on the line, and while I might’ve been able to delegate for a while, I’ll never sleep if I don’t know for certain that I’m ready for tomorrow.

Downstairs, I find Janey jamming out to music on her phone and dancing around as she sings. I pale, not because her voice is awful because it’s not, but because she’s singing some Cardi B *WAP* . . . at full volume.

“Janey!” I bark. “Turn that off! We have to be professional.”

She gives me a ‘seriously?’ look, which is warranted considering I kind of bailed on her today, which isn’t the epitome of professionalism either. But after a long moment, she reaches over and taps on her phone. Everything goes silent as she glares.

“Can I help you?” she snaps. “I told you to stay upstairs. Figured you would be full of fun by now. And by fun, I mean Lorenzo’s dick,” she explains, as if her filthy meaning hadn’t been clear.

“I needed to check our status. Where are we at?”

I look around the room and am surprised to see a fair number of flowers. Not wilted ones on their last legs, either. Nope, there are lush blooms in several shades of pink and red, from basics like carnations and roses to more exotic tropical species like pink ginger and hibiscus. “It looks amazing in here!” I gasp, honestly surprised.

Janey beams proudly. “You might’ve put the fear of social media in the manager, but I put the fear of actual death in him. The cooler has been repaired. It’s temporary, more bubble gum and spit than actual parts, but it’ll do for now.

We got these supplies delivered late this afternoon, and I've been sorting through them to see what we have to work with. Another shipment from Venezuela is coming tomorrow."

"Venezuela? What are we getting from there?" I cross my fingers that it's something unique and beautiful like the sourced materials we lost.

"Oh, nothing major, you know," Janey hedges, telling me that's not true at all.

"What?" I beg.

"Some orchids and Andean lupine," she says flatly.

"What?" I say again, but this time, it's a squeal of delight as I grab Janey by the shoulders and give her a good, solid shake. "How are we getting those?" Andean lupine flowers are beautiful and aren't often used in arrangements, so getting our hands on them is a miracle.

"I have my ways," she replies slyly. "Go to it. I know you're dying to get your hands dirty." She waves me toward the buckets of blooms, and I rush over to get started.

"Hit me with our list for the next few days, and let's get a plan based on what we have available and how long they'll be fresh," I tell Janey.

So we get to work. An hour passes by quickly, then another. I should be exhausted after an afternoon on the water, but the creativity flowing through me keeps me moving, grouping flowers together into potential arrangements.

"How was your date?" she asks after a bit.

I consider how to answer that. "Weird?"

"Emily that bad? Need me to *Karate Kid* her ass?" Janey lifts one knee, balancing on the other foot with her arms spread wide like wings. "E-yah!" she shouts, doing some awkward kicking motion that looks more like a pissed off donkey doing a Riverdance than a crane kick.

I laugh, so she does it again. "And yah . . . take that, Bridal Bitch." Her moves get progressively less karate and more catfight until I'm crying from laughing so hard.

"Thanks. I needed that," I tell her gratefully. "But it was Lorenzo who was weird."

"Aw, hell no. I'll go karate master on him too. She mimes a knee to the groin shot and a titty twister on an invisible Lorenzo, making me laugh some more.

"Nothing that bad. He just held up a mirror that I wasn't ready to look into."

Janey is about to ask a follow-up question about my mysterious answer when there's a knock on the door.

She whispers, "You expecting someone?"

I shake my head. "You?"

We each grab a pair of shears and approach the door slowly. I'm sure the resort is safe, but we're alone in a remote area so we can't be too careless. I will not end up as one of those *Dateline* specials with people speculating on whether I ran away with an island lover, got my kidneys stolen, or drowned in a drunken stupor.

Slowly, shears held out defensively, I open the door.

"Hey!" Lorenzo smile melts and his hands come up protectively as he frowns. "Hey! What's wrong?"

"Oh!" I say, lowering the makeshift weapon so I don't accidentally stab him and become the murder-y tourist instead of the trafficked victim. "Just being careful. What are you doing here?"

I see his flinch at the accusation. "We didn't get a chance to eat dinner, and I thought Janey might be hungry as well. I made food." He holds up two boxes from one of the resort restaurants.

The smell assails me then, bright and rich and spicy. "You made dinner?"

His shrug is dismissive, but I know that making food for someone is akin to his love language. I'm the same way with whom I make arrangements for. Especially when it's someone I care about.

I'm not hungry, too much on my mind to actually eat much, but I won't turn down his graciousness. Opening the door further, I invite him in.

"Wow, this looks stunning," he says appraisingly.

"You should've seen it a few hours ago. A barren field of no fucks given, but slowly, the blooms of possibility took shape." Janey sounds like a fortune cookie as she gestures to the flowers, but I'm not saying one word about it after all the work she put in.

"Actually, Janey . . . you should go upstairs and get some rest. You've worked all day on this and done an amazing job. It's my turn to pick up this relay race baton and take us to the finish line."

"Don't have to tell me twice, Boss." She's got her bag on her shoulder, nearly running for the door before I can blink, but then she turns back. She grabs one of the to-go boxes from Lorenzo with a sweet smile, "Thanks for dinner! Do I get the same sausage dish that Abi's about to get?"

"Janey!" I shout in mortification, but Lorenzo just chuckles.

"I'm afraid my sausage is a rather exclusive dish and must be rationed out," he tells her faux-sadly as he cuts his eyes to me.

"Can't blame a girl for trying," Janey sing-songs as she leaves.

She must think that the instant we're alone, we're going to go at it like rabid horny bunnies because almost as soon as she's out of sight, she leans back around the doorframe with a grin. She sighs unhappily. "Damn, I thought I was

gonna get some live action inspiration. Party poopers!”

And then she’s gone again. For real this time. I think.

“She’s crazy. Sorry,” I tell Lorenzo. I’m not really sorry. It’s just a habit to apologize when we get weird. Janey and I do that a lot, a gift of working close together for so long.

“No, she’s fine. Just silliness. It’s amusing,” he says with a soft smile.

I glance to the room around me, realizing anew that we’re alone, and a thread of excitement shoots through me. My brain might be all sorts of confused, but my body responds to Lorenzo’s easily.

But along with the fresh opportunity being alone presents, I see all the work I need to do.

“Do you want to eat with me?” I ask slowly.

The fire in his eyes nearly singes me with its intensity. He licks his lips, and I’m ready for him to step closer and kiss me.

“No.”

I’m shocked, not expecting that answer at all.

“You have much work to do, and even now, I can see the creativity flowing through you. Do what you need to. What we have can wait beyond this moment. We have time.” It’s almost like he believes that can be true if he declares it powerfully enough.

He takes one small step to me, giving me time to protest, time to run. And I should, I know I should with every brain cell I’ve got. But they are not in control right now, so I meet him, toe to toe. He cups my jaw, lifting it as he bends down, and light as a butterfly’s kiss, his lips meet mine. Warm honey flows through my veins at his touch. It’s over too soon, and then he whispers, “I will be waiting for you.”

I’m still frozen in stunned lust when I blink enough to realize he’s gone.

Holy Shit! He’s so . . . everything. Everything I want and everything I don’t need.

Curious as the proverbial cat, I open the to-go box to find a nice pile of seasoned chicken and grilled veggies. The delicious aroma works its way through my nose to my stomach, making it growl loudly. Lorenzo made this for me knowing that I would throw myself into work because that’s what he does too. I can’t fault him for that, and as I dig in, I’m so grateful that he’s passionate about his work.

“Oh ma gawd,” I moan as I shovel another bite into my mouth. It tastes amazing, the chicken tender and full of spicy-sweet flavor and the veggies cooked to perfection. Before I know it, I’ve inhaled the whole thing and am staring sadly at my now empty box.

“Definitely have energy to work now,” I tell the flowers in warning. “Let’s do this.”

I turn my music on, not whatever crap Janey was listening to but some old club tunes I’m technically too young to even know but love, and I jam out while I work. I’m not the best dancer, but what I lack in skills, I make up for with enthusiasm.

Looking at our to-do list and feeling the inspiration flow through me, I pick up a piece of floral foam and set it on the table in front of me beside a blend of blooms. “Talk to me. Tell me what you wanna become.”

Yeah, I’m one of those people . . . the ones who talk to plants and flowers. But it works, for them and for me. Especially at this stage when it’s all a blank slate waiting for my touch to make magic happen.

I’m head down, hard at it, when my phone dings. I’m surprised to see the hour when I pick it up but not surprised at who’s texting me.

Violet: *You up?*

Me: *Yeah, everything ok?*

Instead of an answering text, my phone rings with a FaceTime call. “Hey, Vi, what’s wrong?” I’m already in freakout mode because something has to be drastically off for her to call me at two a.m.

She sighs dramatically, her head thrown back against the chair she’s sitting in. I recognize that chair—it’s in baby Carly’s nursery. But I barely recognize my best friend. She’s usually impeccably pulled together, but she’s wearing one of Ross’s oversized white undershirts, her hair is piled haphazardly on top of her head in a don’t-give-a-fuck bun that looks days dirty, and I think there’s applesauce on her shoulder. Or maybe it’s spit up? God, I hope it’s applesauce.

“Nothing’s wrong, exactly. Your niece just doesn’t know day from night and she’s killing me.” Violet sounds exhausted, and I’m guessing that a middle-of-the-night call while I’m out of town shows just how tight she’s hanging on to the end of her rope.

“Sorry, honey,” I sympathize. “What’s she doing? Not sleeping?”

The guess is met with a snort. “Oh, she sleeps just fine as long as she’s got my boob in her mouth. I’m like the world’s biggest pacifier.” The bundle in her arms shifts, and I realize that Carly is nursing beneath the swaddle of blankets.

Violet sighs again, cooing to her little one. “That’s right, baby. Sleep, sleep, sleep . . .” The over-simple lyrics are soft and sweet and a little desperate.

“What’s Ross doing? Can’t he help you?” Violet is a fantastic mother, someone who took to it readily and with excitement, but she’s also a full-time career woman who needs to get some rest of her own too.

“Daddy went on a work trip for a couple of days,” Violet whispers to Carly

as she answers me. “He’s working so hard, and we’re fine. Isn’t that right, little miss savage?”

“Well, if you need anything, call Mom. You know she’d be over to your place in a hot second if she thought there would be baby snuggles when she got there.” My mom might be more than a little obsessed with her first grandchild. “Or if you’re really desperate, your mom.”

Violet hisses, her eyes cutting to the screen. “Don’t you even invoke her name or she’ll show up like freaking Beetlejuice with an army of Italian grandmothers to show me how I’m doing everything wrong.”

I chuckle, certain she’s joking. She’s not doing anything wrong, I’m sure of that.

But Violet doesn’t laugh back. Her face goes a bit pale, and even on the tiny screen, I can see the panic in her eyes. “What if I’m doing it wrong?”

I put down the flower I was working into the arrangement and focus on my best friend tough-love style. “Violet Russo Andrews, you shut your pie hole. You are an awesome woman, wife, and mother. Charlotte is an amazing, well-adjusted, perfectly healthy, beautiful baby, and that’s all because of you because it sure has nothing to do with my asshole of a brother.” I throw that last bit in on purpose to distract her.

“Ross isn’t an asshole. He’s so good with Carly. I just miss him.” She presses a soft kiss to the baby’s head, and I can see the sheen of tears in her eyes. “Gah, distract me. Tell me about paradise and this whirlwind wedding. Let me live vicariously through you.”

A laugh pops out before I can stop it, and it’s too loud, disturbing Carly. Just like I said, the mother instinct in Violet kicks in automatically and she’s soothing the disruption away before she even realizes it. “What’s funny about that? What happened? Did you slip and fall into the pool and snort so much water up your nose that you sneezed it out . . . again? Or get poison ivy when you peed while hiking through the resort grounds? Or tell the bitchy wedding planner to ‘fuck off’ out loud when you meant to say it in your head? You do tend to do stuff like that.”

She’s right. I do have quite the history of fuck-ups and craziness. But this is on a whole different level.

“Actually, something did happen. Do you remember Emily Jones?”

Violet’s nose crinkles as if Carly just let a stinky one rip, but her reaction isn’t about baby shit but rather about the name Emily Jones. “Ugh, yeah. Why in the world are you bringing her up? Let the past stay in the past, especially the catty, bitchy past.”

“I wish you’d told me that before because she’s here. At the resort. On her

honeymoon.”

“Well, *good* for her.” Violet’s snarky, drawn out tone says loud and clear that she doesn’t think it’s actually good.

“There’s more,” I tell her hesitantly. At that, she leads forward, hungry for the distraction she asked for. “Now, don’t give me shit about this because believe me, I know how it sounds . . .”

“Ooh, this is gonna be good. I can tell,” Vi says eagerly.

“Well, it was when I first got here. Emily saw me and was bragging about her wedding and honeymoon, all the while putting me down—”

Violet interrupts to add, “She always did that, Little Miss Competitive.”

“Before I knew it . . . she thinks I’m on my honeymoon too.”

Eyes wide and mouth open, Violet stammers. “What? How? Why?” And then most importantly, “Who?”

I stick to the easier questions first. “I was standing there, and she was talking smack about my brother and younger sister getting married and how *wonderful* that must be, except ‘*ooh, you never did find someone who would love you, did you?*’ ” It might not be exactly what Emily said, but it is what she meant with her cutting remarks. “And then he just stepped out of nowhere and saved me, telling Emily that we’re on our honeymoon too. We’ve had two double dates now and she totally believes it.”

“Wait . . . so you’re on a fake honeymoon?” Violet says meaningfully. “Along with the most important job of your career?”

I nod. I won’t hide the fake honeymoon thing, not from her. I know how much it hurt being lied to when she and Ross had their thing going on. As messed up as this whole thing is, I’ll own it. Even the hard part, which she hasn’t realized yet.

“So, who is this mystery knight in shining armor?”

Whoops, spoke too soon. That’s the ten-thousand-dollar question with the million-dollar answer. “Uhm, well . . . you see . . .”

Violet can sniff blood in the water. My blood. “Who’s the guy?”

“Lorenzo.”

“What?” she screeches. Carly goes ramrod straight in her arms and returns the scream, starting to wail. Violet stands up, bouncing and swaying with the baby in one hand and the phone in the other. “My cousin, Lorenzo?” When I nod, she lays down the gauntlet. “Abigail Andrews, you’d better start explaining now.”

I expect Vi to say something to me about how I chose this time to do something or to say I’m being stupid doing this in the middle of a very important business deal, but instead, she tilts her head, confused. “Wait . . . why would he

be there?”

I shake my head, shrugging. “Somehow, he got offered a short-term gig for the wedding too. He’s making fettuccine. You really didn’t know?”

Violet glares at me. “Yeah, I knew my best friend and my cousin were working on the same event, going to the same place for a week, but it somehow slipped my mind to mention it as I helped you pack your suitcase.”

Gee, dial down the sarcasm, girl.

I explain the scene in reception and how Lorenzo seemed to just appear out of nowhere and what I did. “So, yeah,” I wrap up, blushing furiously. “We had a dinner date last night and then went kayaking today too.”

“And you did all of this because of Emily?” Vi asks. “What the fudge, Abi?”

“You know, you’re cute when you don’t curse in front of your daughter even though you know she’s going to hear it ten thousand times before she turns five?”

Vi cocks an eyebrow, and I’m reminded that this woman is at least partly Italian and has a temper to match. “Abi?”

“Okay, okay,” I admit, ashamed. “Yeah. I mean, you remember how we were.”

“Of course I remember,” Violet, who also got her fair share of unwanted attention from Emily, says. “She was nearly Regina George incarnate. But my God, Abi, why would you let her get you into such a bad situation? You’re an adult now, and you only gave her more power by doing that!”

“I know, I—”

“How long have we known each other, huh?” Violet fumes, her eyes narrowing. “You’re supposed to be the strong one.”

She lets me think a second and then continues, “That being said, she’s pretty much Voldemort with a vagina, so I got your back.”

That was a good one, but I can’t even laugh right now. This is too serious. “So you’re not upset?”

Violet blinks, then grins. “Upset? I’d be a hypocrite if there ever were one. Just relax. If Lorenzo’s good with it, maybe something good will even come out of it.” I can see the light of hope burning brightly in her eyes as she lifts her perfectly shaped brows at me. Even a mess, Violet is never truly far-gone and probably had an Archie-scheduled brow wax within the last few days. “I’d love to have you in my family the way I’m in yours.”

“It’s not like that, Vi,” I assure her. “I mean, he’s great . . . like, have you seen him?” I fan my face, both of us aware of Lorenzo’s hotness. “But he’s intense.”

“What, Abs? What’s that look on your face mean?” Violet pries, and I never

could hold back from telling her anything.

“He said he’s ‘feeling’ things,” I admit, and Vi’s eyes widen to dinner plate size, “but I think what he’s feeling is horny. I don’t want to do something knowing he’ll get bored and ditch me soon. Hell, maybe even here, but at the latest when we get home. I need to just focus on work. This is too important.”

Violet chews at her lip, thinking. Finally, her words come haltingly. “So, you’re in paradise with a guy who wants to fudge you—wait, that sounds like a totally different thing and is not what I mean . . .”

“Fuck, Vi. You can say it. Carly’s asleep again.” I point to the curled-up baby in Vi’s arms, where I can see that her eyes are closed softly and her lips are pursed up like she’s kissing the air.

“Aw, that’s my girl,” she coos, brushing Carly’s hair on her forehead. To me, she continues, “Where was I? Oh, yeah . . . paradise, a hot guy who wants to fuck you, who you want to fuck, with a bit of sexy roleplaying about being newlyweds on a honeymoon giving you permission to do all sorts of crazy things, and then you can come back to your busy life a bit worse for wear in the best way.”

“When you say it like that,” I tell her, rolling my eyes. Feeling vulnerable, I confess, “I don’t want to get hurt, or mess up the wedding deal, or hell, I’ll admit it . . . I don’t want Emily to find out and have new ammo against me.”

“I can’t believe I’m telling you, of all people, this, but don’t be so serious, girl. Have some fun, live a little, and get laid.” She waves her hand like after those assignments, I should keep going with the crazy adventures.

“Really?” I ask, surprised by her advice.

“Well, and make sure you show Emily that you’re doing amazing. Rub her nose in it a bit. And then tell her that you’re on your honeymoon and not playing these competitive games of who’s more in love or having wilder sex or has the better life.”

“That’s exactly what’s happening! How’d you know that?”

“Because I figure Emily is still Emily. And a Queen Bee-wannabe doesn’t change her stripes.”

“You’re really good with this Lorenzo thing?” I ask again, wanting to be sure.

“Abs, you’re my best friend for a reason. He couldn’t do better than you. Also, that’s why Emily’s always been so jealous of you. She knows you’re better than her.” Violet sounds wise, but that’s ridiculous.

I’m just me—a weird, easily distracted daydreamer.

But I won’t argue with her, not when I can see that sleep is overtaking her the same way it’s finally taken Carly.

“Thanks, Vi. Get some sleep while Carly does. You need it.”

“You need a little something too,” she tells me with a sleepy smirk.
“G’night.”

“Sleep tight,” I answer.

I set the phone down, returning a critical eye to the arrangement I’m working on. It’s taking shape and looking good, perfect for the bridal party luncheon.

Before I can even pick up a single rose, though, my phone goes apeshit, and I see that I’ve got a half-dozen texts coming in, one right after the other, from Courtney, who in no uncertain terms wonders what the hell I’m thinking, and am I certain that she and I are actually related?

“Damn you, Vi, I thought you’d keep it to yourself for at least a few minutes,” I whisper, tucking my phone away. I finish my arrangement and see that Janey’s already got the small supplement pieces ready for tomorrow.

I think we’re ready for the luncheon. The only question is . . . am I ready for a fling with Lorenzo?

CHAPTER 10

Morning arrives too early, but I eagerly reach over to snuggle Abigail. She is reason enough to greet the day with a smile on my face.

But the bed is empty beside me.

I sit up, looking around the room. “Abigail?” She’s nowhere to be found. Instantly, I’m up and pulling on underwear. I slept in the nude, keenly excited for her to argue with me about it again, but it seems she did not come to bed.

In the outer room of the suite, I see her. She’s laid out on the couch, passed out with one leg on the floor and one stretched out, her arms askew. Her hair is a tangled mess, half in her face, and her mouth is dropped open as she breathes softly. Beautiful.

I should move her to our bed so she can get some real rest. Padding across the floor, I bend down to scoop her into my arms when I see movement out of the corner of my eye.

Janey is waving her arms wildly and shaking her head. I quirk my head, silently asking what’s wrong. She mouths, “I’ve got her. Alarm goes off in one hour. Let her sleep.”

It goes against every instinct I have to leave her on the couch, but if she’s so exhausted she collapsed before even making it to bed, an additional hour of rest might very well be important. I nod, slowly stepping back but watching to make sure I haven’t disturbed Abigail’s slumber.

I feel eyes on my body and look back up to find Janey appraising me openly. She flashes me a thumbs-up and a grin. “Boss lady did well with you.”

The compliment is kind, but I feel awkward in my underwear in front of Janey, so I retreat to the bedroom after shooting Abigail one last look of longing. I would so love to carry her to bed, curl her into my side, and listen to her tell me about the flowers she touched last night. She finds them beautiful, but what I find even more stunning is her passion.

I shower and shave, quickly getting dressed in kitchen clothes. I have work to do this morning, a private bridal party luncheon. The same one Abigail and Janey were making centerpieces and arrangements for.

But I can't leave without touching her. Slowly and quietly, I approach Abigail's makeshift bed on the couch and bend down to ever so gently press my lips to the back of her hand. "I will see you later, *mia rosa*," I whisper.

Janey smirks at me as I leave, wiggling two fingers at me in goodbye. I trust that she'll take good care of Abigail today.



"CHEF TOSCANI!"

The sharp bite of my name breaks into the zone of focus I have perfected through years of practice. The entire kitchen could be on fire, sous chefs battling it out with fists and knives, and I still wouldn't break from my concentration.

But that annoying voice does it.

"Yes?" I snap, looking up to see Meredith stomping through the kitchen. She's wearing another black power suit, and I wonder if she sleeps in them.

She probably lies in bed like a vampire, her black heels on and legs straight with her hands crossed over her chest. And when the sun rises, she hisses at it like a pissed off cat but forces herself up. Maybe that's why she's always so cold and angry? She's a creature of the night forced to live in the daylight.

"What are you doing?" she stands behind me at the line, arms folded across her chest.

"You are not supposed to be in the kitchen," I remind her. "There are food and health codes."

Her eyes narrow, and instead of backing up the way I'd hoped, she steps closer to my station. She knows what she's doing, intentionally irritating me to get the answer she wants. I'm certain she's accustomed to people acquiescing to her maneuvers and manipulations.

I'm not one of those people. I don't need anything from her.

On my cutting board, I have a small pile of diced onions and a larger one of tomatoes. The skins and juicy remnants are in another pile to be trashed. Using the back side of my knife, I wipe the unneeded bits into my trash bowl, but one wayward tomato bit misses and falls to the floor, only to be intercepted by Meredith's expensive black pump.

Oops! Did I do that? I think smugly.

"Ugh!" She groans, kicking her toe out to sling the tomato bit to the floor.

"Kitchens are messy places," I say with zero apology.

Her lips press into a thin line. “As I told you at yesterday’s meeting, I needed the menu for today’s luncheon by last night.”

“Must’ve slipped my mind.” It did no such thing. I never had any intention of sending her a menu, my food reduced to nothing more than a list of ingredients. “No worries, I’m already preparing lunch, creating wonderful dishes the guests will love, each more delicious than the last. This, I promise.”

Her smile is robotic, but the gleam in her eyes is dangerous. “How about this? Since you didn’t do what you were told, with each course the waiters bring out, you can come out and explain what they’re eating and how you made the dish. Really give it that personal chef touch for the girls.”

We’re locked in a battle of chicken, seeing which one of us will flinch first.

She obviously knows that table visits are something chefs dread. The fawning over our food is fun, of course, especially when you are a new chef, but it is disruptive to the flow of the kitchen to have the captain of the ship leave the bridge mid-voyage.

Plus, based on the bridal party’s interest at the dinner at Avanti, I might have to play polite with guests when I would rather be in the kitchen.

Or with Abi.

The thought intrudes into my battle of wills with Meredith, setting me off-kilter at a crucial moment, and I give in. “Of course. I’d be happy to come out and share a few tidbits about each course.”

Victory makes her teeth look extraordinarily sharp when Meredith smiles. “Next time, perhaps you’ll simply send me the menu,” she muses.

One last dig to let me know she’s won this one.

Her heels click across the floor as she war-paths out of the kitchen. As soon as the door swings shut behind her, Esmar peeks out from around the corner to whisper, “Is the coast clear?”

I grin. “Afraid of her?”

He nods vehemently. “Yes! She is like a fox, a patient and cunning hunter that pounces when you least expect it.” He snaps his teeth, his fingers claws that scratch at the air in a charade that looks more like a lioness than a fox. But I get his point. Meredith is not one to be underestimated.

“Well, she’s gone for now, so let me get this prep finished.” Esmar comes over to help me, and after a while, Gilberto arrives as well.

Just in time because the front-of-house manager comes back to ask for my approval of the table setting. “Since I don’t know the menu, we want to be sure the silverware is appropriate.”

I get the feeling he’s one of Meredith’s minions, doing her bidding. Intentionally or not.

But it's not an unusual request when I've kept the menu to myself. It's not a secret. I just wanted to let the fresh ingredients speak to me and create something truly special.

I follow the manager to the floor and see that they've set up a lovely table by the open windows. The salt breeze off the sea blows in gently, rustling the pink-and white-striped runners that line the length of the table display. White china plates are nestled on silver charger platters at each place setting, and that is layered onto a large, fresh palm leaf.

Abigail's doing, I'm sure.

As if thinking of her conjures her in truth, she walks in with a lush arrangement. "These are the last ones," she says to no one in particular.

Janey follows along behind her, carefully carrying a tray full of small buds bursting with floral color.

"Let me help with that," I tell Abigail, taking the flowers from her. "Where does it go?"

She nibbles her bottom lip as though she's not sure, staring into my eyes vacantly, and I wonder what thoughts are spinning in that head of hers. The possibilities make me smile.

"Oh, right here," she tells me finally, pointing to the center of the table. "And Janey, set that down and we'll spread those out."

Janey glares at me with a raised brow. "Oh, no worries, I've got this."

I have the decency to look remorseful as she sets the tray down.

"These are beautiful," I tell Abigail earnestly, which earns me a soft smile.

Before I can say anything else, I hear those tell-tale heels clicking across the floor. "There you are, Miss Andrews. Is this what you've made for today's luncheon?" Meredith couldn't be more condescending if she tried as she looks at the vibrant symphonies of color Abigail and Janey have created. She reaches toward the main arrangement, frowning as she flicks a bloom with her red-tipped fingers.

"Please don't touch them," Abigail scolds automatically. Gentler, she says, "They're fragile and will blacken from the oils on your hands."

Surprisingly, Meredith drops her hands back to her sides.

"Yes, each setting has a palm leaf, and the tablescape will have lush greenery accented with the main arrangement, smaller collections of buds, and freshly halved coconuts. The beauty of the tropics," Abigail explains. She makes flowers sound like a vacation escape.

Meredith continues her barely veiled insults. "I guess they'll do. It's better than the overly simplistic one from yesterday, at least."

Abigail's back goes ramrod straight, and her teeth click as though she's

choking down the words she really wants to say. I'm pretty sure what she's swallowing is 'Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.'

Not able to stand by and watch, I step forward. "Great job, Abigail. I'm sure Claire will love them."

Meredith cuts her eyes to me as she likely prepares to go mano a mano again. Measuring the distance between me and her and me and Abigail, a light goes off in the depths of her dark eyes. "Oh, I should've introduced you two, but it sounds like you already know each other?" Curiosity and calculation are palpable as she looks me up and down once more.

I let Abigail handle this one. It's reasonable for us to know each other from before, and even if we weren't familiar through Violet, we could've met here at the resort. At yesterday's meeting, even. But we specifically discussed keeping the whole honeymoon thing to ourselves.

"Yes, Lorenzo is my best friend's cousin. I was surprised to see him here." That's the truth, and her smile makes it seem like a pleasant surprise at least.

"Hmm." Meredith doesn't give anything away, and neither does her Botoxed face. "Well, let's get everything set. Miss Johnson will be here shortly, and we won't have you standing around when she approaches."

I dip my chin in agreement, but my eyes wander to Abigail as I step into the kitchen. I can't help it, nor do I stop the smile I give her, hoping it's enough to get her through the afternoon's festivities.



"So, she loved them? I knew she would," I murmur into the darkness of our bedroom hours later.

We survived the luncheon, even the chef table visits where they didn't ask about ingredients or anything food-related. No, the bridal party might've oohed and ahed about their dishes, but what they really wanted to know was all about me.

How tall are you?

Can I see your muscles?

Say something in Italian.

Are you single?

Can you sing?

I'd done my best to play the flirtatious asshole, walking the line of pissing them off and making them want more.

But now, lying under the blankets with Abigail, the day disappears into a bubble outside a world of the two of us. Without a word about it, we're facing

each other to talk through the darkness. We are both on our 'sides' of the bed, but very close to the middle, making me yearn to reach out and caress Abigail.

"She did. Claire said they were amazing and asked if she could take the main arrangement back to her suite because she liked it so much," Abigail whispers back, and I can hear the unfiltered delight. "What about you? Did they love the food?"

I balk in faux offense, even though she can't see me. "Of course they did. Though I mostly felt fortunate to leave the luncheon with my clothing on. That bridal party was hungry, and I think they thought my chef's jacket was simply a charade for a stripper."

"No way," Abigail says slowly, and I'm sure she's going to say more, but then I just hear the poof of her breath releasing as she begins to fall asleep.

There's more to say, but for now, I'll let her rest. Tomorrow's another day in paradise.

CHAPTER 11

“*R*ise and shine, *mia rosa*,” Lorenzo’s voice sings. He’s way too alert, and when I crack open one eye, he’s also way too dressed in a pair of gray athletic shorts and a white loose-fit tank top.

Fitness Lorenzo looks good.

Pleasantly surprised by how well-rested I feel, I stretch out my arms and legs with a happy moan. “What are you doing?”

“Wrong question. You should be asking what are *we* doing?” he corrects.

I sit upright, giving him a look of suspicion. “Okay, what are we doing, then?”

He sits down on the edge of the bed and holds out a steaming cup of coffee as a peace token for the wake-up call. I take it from him and note that it’s the perfect shade of creamy tan. One sip and I sigh in bliss. It’s got the exact amount of cream and sugar I like. It’s a small thing but ridiculously sweet that he’s noticed my habit of way-too-much cream.

Hearing my own ‘that’s what she said’ in my head, I cover the smile with another sip. Over the rim of the mug, I lift my brows to ask if he’s going to answer me.

He leans in close to tease me. “It’s a surprise. Get dressed. Workout wear, if you have any, or any shorts will do.”

Workout clothes? What in the world does he have up the nonexistent sleeves of his tank top?

A hike, maybe? Or a walk on the beach?

Hopefully not a jog because I will legit die. Running is not my favorite by a long shot. Basically, if you ever see me running, it’s because there’s a knife-wielding zombie chasing me.

But the suspense and surprise of it are thrilling. So is the gleam of ‘gotcha’ in Lorenzo’s dark eyes. Whatever he has planned, he’s excited too.

A tiny warning bell goes off in my head reminding me to be careful because his attention, his romantic ways, and his hot body are all my kryptonite. But Violet's advice turns the alarm off.

Just chill. I can do that. I am so chill, like the frozen sangrias they serve on the resort beach.

I hop out of bed with energy to match Lorenzo's now, all sleep burned away with eagerness. "Give me fifteen minutes."

Smack!

Before I make it one step past him, Lorenzo swats my ass hard, and I yelp in surprise as a jolt shoots to my core.

"Ten. We can't be late."

Oh, shit. I don't know what we're doing, but I'd be ready in five if that's what he wanted.

I yank on pale lavender yoga shorts that hug my ass and have a handy-dandy pocket for my phone on the hip and a matching sports bra with a strappy back. I hold up my tennis shoes and my flip flops, unsure which to choose.

"Flip flops," Lorenzo advises hesitatingly. If he thinks that's some major clue, he is sorely mistaken because all that tells me is that I don't have to run. Hallelujah!

In the elevator, I pull my phone out to text Janey but Lorenzo stops me.

"I talked to Janey this morning to make sure you had space in your schedule. I wouldn't want to interfere with your work." I stare at him in shock. I don't know why I find his respect for my work such a surprise, but it is. It's also a ridiculous turn-on given the way some of my previous dates have treated my passion for flowers and plants.

Oh, you have that nurturing gene. You'll be a great mother one day.

That's so cool. You don't have to work. You get to just play with flowers.

Anybody can toss a bunch of flowers in a vase.

"She said to tell you, and I quote, 'Fuck off, and that's an order.'" He holds his hands up as though I might take offense. "Literally what she said."

I laugh because it does sound exactly like something that would come out of Janey's mouth. I can't help but mentally check my to-do list, though. There's nothing on the schedule for today, no luncheons or photo shoots or meetings, and we can't begin the rehearsal dinner arrangements until tomorrow.

Feeling freer than I have in ages, I boldly slip my hand into Lorenzo's. "Okay, all yours then. Let's do this, whatever this is."

Lorenzo leads me out the back of the resort to a grassy sea overlook area. There are a few other couples sitting on brightly colored striped blankets.

"Welcome, welcome!" a smiling woman with dreadlocks says. "Have a

seat.”

I sit on an empty blanket as she indicated, and Lorenzo sits down beside me. I look around to see if I can figure out Lorenzo’s plan, but I can’t pinpoint anything specific. The dreadlocked woman who greeted us is wearing a swimsuit, and the man seated at her side has on compression shorts. The other couples are also in a mix of workout gear, swimsuits, and casual attire. The only thing we have in common is that we’re all barefoot and in paradise.

Leaning over to him, I whisper, “What are we doing?”

His smirk says that he’s not telling me . . . yet.

Fuck, that ‘yet’ is my undoing. It’s the moment on the precipice of an adventure when you know that something amazing or something awful might happen but you have no idea which. The possibilities feel infinite. I feed on that chaotic anarchy roaring in my blood like a starved animal.

But I don’t let any of that show. Nope, I sit still and wait patiently. My mother would be proud. Shocked, but proud.

Thankfully, I don’t have to wait too long.

“Welcome, everyone. My name is Amalya. I’ll be your instructor for couple’s yoga today.” Her voice is soothing and calm, but my heart jumps into my throat. “This is my assistant and boyfriend, Stefan.” The man sitting beside Amalya bows his head in greeting.

I look to Lorenzo with a huge smile. “How’d you know I love yoga?” I whisper.

Yoga is my jam. I take classes at One Life Gym at home several times a week. I’m not exactly a headstand-meditation sort of yogi, but I can sure as shit touch my toes and do a damn good Goddess pose. I’m also ridiculously skilled at *savasana*, I think with a grin.

Lorenzo leans so close that I can feel his breath on my ear. “Violet.”

Of course. I’m about to ask what in the hell she said when a voice I don’t want to hear breaks into the quiet group.

“Come on, Doug. I don’t want to be late.”

Shit. No way. God, please not now. Not when I have a chance to get my yoga on.

Despite my plea, Emily and Doug come around the corner and stop short when they see every pair of eyes on them.

“Sorry,” Doug says apologetically. “We took the wrong path and got a little lost.”

Amalya gives them the same warm welcome and directs them to a blanket. Right next to Lorenzo and me.

“Oh! Hey, guys,” Emily mouths exaggeratedly as she waves.

I smile tightly in response before turning my attention back to Amalya.

“Today, we will honor existing connections and create new ones from you to your partner and your partner to you. This process is one that must be done with patience, led with the heart, and energized by the body.”

I can see couples looking to each other with questions in their eyes, not sure what mumbo-jumbo Amalya is talking about. I’m sure they thought ‘couple’s yoga’ would be *Kama Sutra* foreplay, but yoga is so much more than that.

“To begin, face one another with crisscrossed feet,” Amalya instructs, and everyone moves to follow the order and the example she sets with Stefan. “Good, now place your palms together. Your right to your partner’s left, your left to your partner’s right. Once this connection has been forged, close your eyes and feel the energy exchange begin.”

Lorenzo’s palms are soft and warm against mine, and as we sit in silence, I become acutely aware of his breaths and mine becoming synchronous.

After a long few minutes, Amalya tells us, “Open your eyes. Look into your partner’s unflinchingly. See the thoughts, feelings, and desires there.”

Lorenzo’s eyes open, and the dark orbs lock onto me. In their depths, I see so much—heat and lust, but respect and intimacy too. I try as hard as I can to stay vulnerable and not throw up my shields of defense, though it’s hard to not fall into the lust alone.

“*Mia rosa*,” he whispers.

From beside us, a sigh huffs out, breaking our connection.

I cut my eyes to the left to find Emily fuming as she stares at us instead of Doug. She rolls her eyes, making fun. My returning sigh is one of frustration, not competition.

I’m going to enjoy this moment with Lorenzo, Emily be damned.

Amalya leads us into the first pose. “Yes, one partner standing in front of the other, back to front. Good,” she coaches with a slow, melodic voice. “Place your hands on the hips of the partner in front for support as they caress their hands down thighs, to the earth, and out. Hips stay raised as you find a downward-facing dog pose.” Amalya demonstrates, becoming an upside-down V with Stefan’s hands holding her hips to deepen the stretch.

Face down, ass up, I decide maybe this will be a bit more *Kama Sutra* foreplay, after all. The idea excites me.

I take the pose with Lorenzo standing behind me. His hands pull my hips back, and I feel his cock nestle into the cradle of my ass.

Oh, shit . . . this is definitely not like yoga at home. It’s better. A *lot* better.

I press my heels to the blanket and my ass into Lorenzo even harder, swaying my hips slightly to massage his thickening length.

“Abigail,” he warns gruffly, and I giggle softly. I like knowing that I can drive him wild.

But he doesn’t laugh in response. Oh, no, he smacks my ass hard and the stinging pain surprises a loud gasp past my lips.

The slapping sound has gotten the attention of all the other couples too. The women look at me with jealousy and the men look at Lorenzo with awe.

I feel like a goddess with my god claiming me for all to see. It might be pretend, it might be fantasy, but fuck, it’s hot.

I swear I hear Emily mutter ‘whore’ under the cover of a fake cough. But all I can focus on is Lorenzo. Emily’s cattiness can’t touch me when I’m under his spell.

“For our next pose,” Amalya instructs, “you have a choice based on your comfort level. For the first variation, one partner should be seated. The other partner sits in their lap, facing them with legs interlocked behind their back.” She demonstrates by sitting in Stefan’s lap, their cores pressed together. “As you begin to feel the intimacy deepen, you can allow yourself to become more vulnerable by opening your heart.” She shows us that too, laying back to the blanket with Stefan holding her hands to support her.

A few people move to mimic the pose.

Standing up, she tells us, “The second variation is similar but requires a higher degree of trust.”

Stefan holds a finger up. “And strength. She makes it sound graceful and pretty, but it does require strength.”

Amalya smiles at her boyfriend’s addition but teases, “Are you saying I’m heavy? *I know you are not saying I’m heavy.*”

Stefan’s eyes go dark as he shakes his head. “You are my queen, perfection in every luscious inch.”

With that, they demonstrate variation two. Amalya jumps up to wrap her legs around Stefan’s waist. He supports her weight under her ass for a moment, but then they transition to holding hands as she arches back toward the blanket. Her locked feet keep her core pressed to Stefan’s belly, and his grip on her hands and arms keeps her head from smashing into the sand.

He bounces her a couple of times to adjust their position and eyebrows raise. For all the heat they’re creating, the rest of us might as well not even be here. I think Stefan and Amalya have a rather interesting sex life.

“Whatcha thinking? You want to see if you can hold me up or hit the blanket?” I ask Lorenzo.

He doesn’t wait for me to jump, simply grabs me and hoists me up his body. I try to lock my legs around his waist like Amalya showed us, but his loose shirt

makes it nearly impossible and I keep slipping down.

“Like this,” Emily advises. I look over to see her hiked up Doug’s body with her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms hanging on to his neck. The smile on her face is one of smug arrogance that she’s doing something I can’t. She’s getting such sick joy out of being better than me even though Doug looks like he’s one heartbeat away from bursting an aneurysm.

“I can’t grip you through the shirt. I keep sliding,” I tell Lorenzo. Resigned, I start to sit down, thinking he’ll do the same and we can go with variation one.

Instead, he rips the shirt over his head. “Get up here, Abigail. I want those thighs squeezing me like a damn boa constrictor.”

Uhm . . . well, alrighty then. Let’s try this again.

I face Lorenzo and let my eyes trace over his tattoos. I can’t help myself and lean forward to kiss the filigree linework over his chest. I’m rewarded with a vibration under my lips from the purring growl he barely holds inside.

His hands go down to my ass and he lifts me once again. This time, without the shirt in the way, I grip him tightly with my thighs and it works much better. We carefully switch to holding hands, and I squeeze him even tighter so I don’t fall.

“You got me?” I ask.

“Always.”

I want to believe that so much, but it’ll have to be enough that he has me for this moment in time.

I lean back as far as I can with our eyes locked. When both our arms are outstretched, he nods, and I discover that I do trust him with my safety. I arch my back to let my head hang closer to the blanket, and he holds me easily.

I can feel the stretch through my thighs as they clamp down for purchase. I can feel my chest opening and my arms lengthening, but surprisingly, I feel like my body is capable of more. At least with Lorenzo’s support.

“Let my right hand go,” I tell Lorenzo.

“What?” he questions even as he does what I’ve asked.

I move my hand to the blanket beneath my head. “Left too.”

And then I’m in an upside-down handstand with my legs still wrapped around Lorenzo’s waist. His hands have moved back my hips, keeping me in place. “Cazzo.” Though his fingers are wrapped over my hips, his thumbs stroke at the very edge of where my inner thigh becomes my pussy. I must be obscenely on display for his eyes. I worry whether I’ve soaked through my cute purple shorts and consider getting down so he can’t see the proof of what he does to me.

“Ahh, excellent!” Amalya cheers with a small clap. “Variation three, if you

would like to try it.”

“Hell, no,” one of the women tells her husband. “I’d bust my head open.”

Another couple simply laughs boisterously from their position on the blanket in variation one.

“Harrumph.” Emily pouts, mad that I’m out-yoga-ing her now.

It’s not a battle, though. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in yoga class, it’s that it really is a journey, a practice. There are sometimes the tiniest, wimpiest looking women in there who are able to do strength poses the most muscled-up guys on the weight floor couldn’t hope to do. Everyone has their own path and this is not your grandma’s yoga, anyway.

Amalya suddenly appears right side up next to me. From her bent-over perch, she asks, “Would you allow me to assist in a progression?”

“Uh, sure.” I have no idea what she’s about to do to me, or with me, but I’m open to deepening my flow. Especially with Lorenzo pressed to my body because I can feel his strength and steadiness surging through me.

“Hold her hips with power. Let her know that you have her,” she tells Lorenzo, and I feel his grip tighten. “Good. Now . . .”

She pauses, waiting for me, and I fill in for her, “Abi. And Lorenzo.”

“Abi, keep your legs tight but unlock your feet, allowing Lorenzo to take your weight.” I do as she instructs, but Lorenzo grunts when my heels dig into the muscles of his lower back. “It’s okay,” Amalya coaches patiently. “Abi, move your right leg around to Lorenzo’s front, straightening it to lie up to his shoulder. And then the left as well.”

I blink and try to visualize what she’s telling me to do. When I realize that it’s a true handstand with my calves on Lorenzo’s shoulders and him holding my hips, I’m able to make the adjustments to get there. I’ve done this with a wall as my support, but Lorenzo feels even sturdier somehow.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Stefan is excited now too. “Hold her hips, Lorenzo,” he advises.

“Can you arch your back in this posture?” Amalya asks me from an upside-down vantage again.

“Uh—” Not sure myself, I try to curve my back. I’m so focused on my spine that I’m surprised when what actually happens is that my core presses to Lorenzo’s abdomen in a whole new way. Instinctively, his forearms come to wrap around my thighs, holding me there as he grinds against me. “Oh!” I call out, shocked . . . in a really good way.

“So, other than watching the sexcapades show, what should the rest of us be doing?” Emily snips out. Carefully, so as not to mess up my balance, I turn my head to see her standing with her arms crossed and one hip popped out as she

taps her bare toes.

Before I even think about what I'm doing, I stick my tongue at her. Childish? Yep. Do I care? Nope.

The mood broken, I kick my leg out of Lorenzo's grip and do a walkover to the ground. I have to slowly roll up to let the blood flow out of my head and back into my body. I'm sure my face is as red as a tomato, but that was so worth it. I've never been able to do that with a wall in the yoga studio at home.

Amalya pats my shoulder and Lorenzo's at the same time. "Excellent." To everyone else, she says, "Let's all return to a seated position."

Before we sit, Lorenzo pulls me in close and bends down to whisper in my ear. "That was magnificent. I want to kiss you desperately, sip your beauty from your lips, and taste the heat I see gathering at your pussy. But if I start, I fear I won't be able to stop, and while I would like nothing better than to feel you shatter for me, I will not share that with these people. I want it greedily for myself so it must be later."

Wow. Maybe my blood flow hasn't quite worked itself out yet or maybe it's just him, but I get a bit lightheaded at his words. He makes it sound like our having sex is a foregone conclusion, and though I hate to admit it and maybe even fear the consequences, I know he's right.

I want him. Past, present, and future be damned. I've always been one to chase butterflies, and Lorenzo is like a whole swarm of them, flitting in and around me with buzzing, heated lust. I want to fly with them, even if only for a moment.

"Please allow one partner to lie face up on the blanket, feet spread slightly apart, and arms in a T. The other partner should carefully make their way to a plank position, hands above their partner's shoulders and toes on the blanket between their legs." She and Stefan demonstrate, him basically being a quintessential starfish and Amalya in a push-up position above him. "Feel the connection flowing as you shift forward and back."

She puts more weight into her hands and then moves it back to her feet, her whole body moving up and down Stefano's, though there is a foot of space between them.

"If you feel called to do so, you may lower to your elbows and continue the flow." She's now grinding her pelvis against Stefano, who smiles blissfully. "The important thing is for the lying partner to simply receive the gift of energy. This is a reminder that while some poses are give and take simultaneously, it is necessary to sometimes be only the caregiver and take nothing but the spiritual satisfaction of generosity. As it is also necessary to sometimes take what you need to gain fulfillment without apologies. All are healthy in their balance."

The couples look from Amalya and Stefan to each other. We are all painfully aware of what that looks like and is emulating. But I guess what happens at couples' yoga stays at couples' yoga? Surely, there's like a Las Vegas code for this, right?

"Give me some of that energy, Abigail." Lorenzo is smiling like the cat that ate the canary, excited for me to rub all over him, and I vow to do the best damn energy giving of my life right here and now.

Lorenzo assumes the starfish position, and I get the sense that he's fighting to maintain it. I think he's not accustomed to being a passive bystander to any action, and the mere act of keeping his hands from me is a difficult task. I like that he's doing it for me, though.

I start in the higher push-up position to drive him crazy. His eyes drift from mine, sliding down my body. They linger on my tits which are falling forward to fill the cups of my sports bra, then trace down over my bare abs to the flare of my hips.

"*Cazzo a mi*," he murmurs. I have no idea what that means, but I can read the hunger in his eyes.

I push forward and then back, keeping the scant inches between us until he whispers, "Please, Abigail." The begging hitch in his voice has me lowering until we are pressed together, chest to chest, hips to hips.

I can feel his arousal against my pussy, and I forget my flow, simply grinding against his hardness.

"Yeah, babe. Gimme more of that . . . flow," Doug grunts out, and despite my utter lack of desire to see anything that remotely looks like Emily Jones's sex face, I can't help but look over. She's on her elbows, pushing forward and back the way Amalya instructed. But instead of sexy and seductive forward and back, it looks as though she's fighting her way through push-ups like she's in a competition to win a car.

Who can do the most? Winner takes home this brand-new Buick!

"Like this, Abi. Did you forget how?" I can't decide if she's teasing me about my lack of sex or that I'm stupid. I decide it must be the latter since she thinks I'm on my honeymoon getting sexed up non-stop. "Or are you just worn out from showboating with that backbend?"

"Come back to me, Abigail. I need you," Lorenzo groans, and any competition, real or imagined, with Emily floats away when I meet his eyes.

I push forward into my shoulders, and my clit rubs along his length, drawing a hiss from Lorenzo. A surge of power rushes through me. I'm in control of his pleasure, his pain, his everything right now, and he has to lie there and take it from me as he begs for more. I'm not usually dominant in bed. I prefer a more

equal sporting event if I'm honest, but this excites me.

I glide down his body, enjoying the way the head of his cock bumps over my clit and down my slit. I'm giving him pleasure as I take some of my own. Amalya might've said this was a give or take position, but I'm finding it to be quite give *and* take.

I find a rhythm and pace that I can maintain, and the flow up and down Lorenzo's length is driving us both mad. My breath is panting, my brow sweaty, and my eyes are locked on his as we reach higher and higher.

Around us, the intrusive sound of grunts tells me we're not the only ones, but I focus solely on Lorenzo now.

He groans deeply, and then, despite the rules of the pose, his hands slap down on my ass, stilling me fiercely. In his grip, I can't move an inch, can only feel the pulsing throb of his cock against my clit. I raise my brows and he shakes his head slowly. "Not here. Not our first time."

Sweet. Sexy. Man.

Oh, shit . . . he said first time! Did Emily hear that? That'll ruin everything. I pale and look over, half expecting to see her evil smile of 'gotcha' at discovering our charade, but I find her shuddering on top of Doug, who seems pretty pulled together and clear-eyed.

Did she? Did he? Oh, my God. Seriously?

Wait, don't answer that, universe. I do not want to know.

As if the universe is actually granting wishes, Amalya calmly advises, "Last but not least, please find your way into any comfortable position that has you and your partner connected. This could be spooning, on your backs holding hands, on top of one another, et cetera. The connection is the important thing."

Lorenzo and I lie on our sides facing one another with our hands and legs interwoven between us. Eyes locked on one another, I try to read what lurks in his. Hunger and lust are easy to see. But could there be more? Do I even want more? I certainly don't have time for it beyond this week. Hell, I don't even have time for more this week!

But I let that go and simply stare into his eyes as Amalya leads us through a guided meditation of connection and hope for our future as couples. It's lovely, though I couldn't tell you a thing she says because I'm too caught up in what Lorenzo's eyes might be saying.

CHAPTER 12

*A*fter that sexy version of yoga, Abigail and I get lunch. I'm hungry for her, not food. But it's the only thing that allows us to escape from Emily and Doug without agreeing to another double date.

"I think she actually rubbed one off on Doug," Abigail whispers conspiratorially as though she didn't nearly do the same thing to me.

"Ah, to each their own." I shrug, unconcerned with anyone else's proclivities. "I am relieved they had a moment to themselves and left us alone."

"Barely." Abigail shudders as though she's still picturing Emily and Doug having a bit of exhibitionistic playtime.

I take her hand in mine across the table and pull her attention back to us. She laughs a tinkly sound of disbelief. "This is so crazy," she confesses.

"What is?"

"You. Me. Us. This whole scheme. I knew it'd all come back to bite me in the ass. I just didn't know how. I certainly never would've imagined this in a million years."

"Scheme?"

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "I'm to blame for the whole Violet and Ross fiasco."

"Fiasco? You mean their happy marriage and new child? Blame doesn't seem the correct word." I get it, my English is good, but sometimes, a usage confuses even me.

For example, I heard a comedian once joking that if you're 'the shit', that's a good thing. But if you're just 'shit', that means you're an awful human being. Nuances are tricky things.

But blame? That has a negative connotation that doesn't fit with the smiles I see on my cousin's face each time I spend the day with her.

"Well, it ended up great, but it could've gone the other way. And then

Courtney and Kaede too, though that was their doing. But I'm always the puppet master, and now I feel like someone else has my strings in their hands." She mimes her arms lifting at the elbow and dangling loosely as though she's out of control of herself. "It's humbling to feel this way. I hate it."

"Or perhaps there are no strings at all?" I hypothesize. "Even with Violet, you might have pushed her, but she made those choices. And us? I stepped in—my own doing," I remind her. "And you went along with it. That's your part in this. Each choice we make, thousands every day—what time to get up, what to wear, what to eat, who to spend time with, what to do—all direct us one way or another. None are wrong, none are right. They simply exist along a path of our life, creating new experiences with each decision."

"Very philosophical," she agrees.

"Are you regretting the choices you've made?" I'm not sure I want this answer, but it seems prudent to ask.

She shakes her head quickly, but it doesn't seem to be a knee-jerk reaction. To the contrary, it seems as though she's thought about this quite a bit. "No. Not regretting things I've done or things I want to do. Just realizing my own limitations and respecting other people's too."

That definitely sounds like she's talking about me. But she sounds resigned to where she thinks we're going. Truth be told, I have no idea where we're headed. That's usually how I live my life. I enjoy the possibilities of not knowing, of making those choices each day and seeing where that leads.

Except there is one very specific thing I would like to choose.

Tonight.



"ANOTHER SURPRISE?" Abigail says. I can hear the fresh delight in her voice. "Two in one day. You'll spoil me."

"I would be honored to have that privilege."

I asked Esmar for recommendations for tonight's plan. He'd sagely nodded and said he knew just the place. I hope he's right.

I follow his directions to the letter, carefully walking Abigail down the patio outside the resort to the beach. We turn right and begin the short walk to the secret cove Esmar told me about in whispered tones after extracting a promise that I won't tell the tourists. That he told me feels like a sign of acceptance as one of the crew.

"It's so pretty out here tonight," Abigail whispers into the darkness of the night, though there's no one around.

Further down the beach, I duck around a large rock and follow the new curve of the shore as the beach behind us becomes invisible. We are truly alone now, in a private paradise of our own.

I pull the blanket from the bag I've carted along with us and spread it out along the sand. "Sit with me, *mia rosa*."

She daintily lowers herself to the blanket, and I pull things out of the bag like a magician. "What all do you have in there?" she asks.

"Strawberries and champagne. Cheese and bread. What would you like?" I prepared the platter of food this evening, packaging it up carefully to make the trip. The plastic glasses took less prep and seem cheap, but glass is forbidden on the beach and I didn't want to risk one breaking. However, with the sweet bubbly in them, they seem perfectly adequate.

Holding one up, Abigail toasts, "To moonlit romantic picnics in paradise."

"*Si*. And to beauty personified before me. It is a sight I am fortunate to behold." We click our cups together and I see the shy smile on Abigail's lips. She's not bashful in the slightest, but sometimes, her worries float to the surface and make her seem so. "You are beautiful," I repeat. I do not want her to ever doubt or question her loveliness for even a moment.

We sip at our champagne, talking of food and flowers, of the past and home, carefully avoiding any discussion of the future. We talk philosophy and point out constellations in the stars that we can't see at home in the city.

Lying back, our hands connected between us as we stare into the dark abyss above us, I can't wait any longer. I can barely believe I've waited this long to taste her, touch her, feel her beneath me.

"Abigail." A statement, a question, and a plea in three syllables that she has heard her entire life, but she knows this time is different.

"I'm ready too. Please, Lorenzo. Make love to me."

Bold and direct, that's my Abigail. It's sexy as fuck to think she could be feeling even a portion of what I am for her.

I want Abigail.

For now. For more. Forever.

Forever?

I don't know what makes me think of a future where we could live this charade out in truth, but it teases along the edges of my mind like the promise of a hazy fog, blurring out other possibilities until there is only Abigail.

I focus on her in the here and now, hair fanned out on the blanket like a dark halo and eyes gleaming in the full moon's light.

"You look . . . take off your dress," I tell her gruffly, knowing that right now all my sweet words won't help. Instead, I take charge, getting to my knees and

helping her pull the excess of fabric down once she finds the clasp behind her neck and releases her breasts.

She's a goddess. I grew up on tales of the old gods, of Jupiter and Apollo, of Diana the Huntress and Minerva the Wise. But of all of them, I have the living embodiment of Venus herself before me, her creamy skin bathed in moonlight.

I unbutton my shorts but don't push them down just yet, so overwhelmed with desire that I have to kiss her, tender at first, holding myself over her body much the way she did to me today. Our kiss deepens with every second until she reaches up, pulling me on top of her warm body.

The feeling of her nipples brushing against my chest is like little sparks between us, igniting the fire that threatens from the heat of our lips. I kiss down her throat, licking and tasting the salty tang from where the sea's breeze has claimed her skin.

"Mmm . . . Lorenzo," Abigail whispers, her words disappearing in a gasping moan when I find a nipple and suck it into my mouth. I flick and wrap my tongue around them with teasing licks, one then the other, as my hands roam her skin, my fingertips exploring every inch.

This isn't before, when we were faking it for Emily against the door even as our bodies took us to the limit or when we knew we'd have to stop or put on an intimate show the way some of the other yoga couples did.

This is real, the true Abigail and Lorenzo choosing to make love under the moonlight.

Her ass dimples under the grip of my squeezing hands as I kiss my way lower, knowing what I really want.

I pause just below her bellybutton, looking up at her face as she gives me a slight nod, knowing what I want. She's surrendered to me, and that fuels me even more as I lower my lips to her.

She's smooth, supple, and wet, ready for my probing tongue. She's tangy, sweet, and deliciously intoxicating as I swipe a long lick between her lips, lapping voraciously at her pussy. Whatever it is that makes up Abigail's special juices, I can't get enough of them and am an instant addict, hungry for more. I suck and nibble, tasting and worshipping every inch of her flesh until she's squirming, lifting her hips, and begging me for release.

"Lo—oh, God, Lorenzo, please."

I grin, trailing my tongue up to the button of her clit and flicking her with the tip of my tongue. She bucks, jolted into pleasure, and her hands fly to my hair, her inner sexual animal growling to be liberated.

She is magnificent in her wanton abandonment of any rules or expectations, freely giving in to her basest urges and instincts. I do my best to release her,

letting her cries guide my pace and her tugs on my hair lead the placement of my tongue. She grinds her clit against me, searching for completion.

The intensity rises and builds until she's reduced to guttural noises. I grip her thighs, holding her apart and not letting her shrink back from the enormous release that's building within her.

"F-fuck . . . *ahh!*" Abi screams, her voice rising over the lap of the waves and the nocturnal cries of the animals to pierce the night.

She is fierce and proud, a woman claiming her release and celebrating her pleasure.

It's beautiful, more than the finest opera, more arousing than any other sound I've ever heard. In an instant, I've let go of her thighs to push my shorts down, and I quickly roll a condom onto my raging stiffness.

Even before the last quiver's left her pulsing pussy, I bury all of my cock inside her tight velvety wetness with a single deep thrust. Abigail cries out anew, her body still thrumming with the throes of her orgasm. The fluttering squeezes are almost too much for me. I'm on the edge from all the flirting and teasing we've done, and I almost come right there, but I hold back, looking into her wide, vulnerable eyes.

"*Mia rosa,*" I whisper, swiveling my hips to feel every inch of her pussy wrapped around me. "How do you want it?"

We have shared much, but this is something different . . . and though I can't bear to think it, it's perhaps a one-time memory in the making. I want it to be everything for her, a perfect blissful moment she pulls out of her mind with a smile every time she thinks of me.

Abi takes a deep breath, biting her lip as she reveals her inner truth. "Hard . . . dirty." She gulps, grabbing my arms. "Take me."

I kiss her once as I withdraw, pausing with just the tip of my cock poised at her entrance before slamming hard and deep into her body. The sand under the blanket cushions the blow just enough to transform the pain into pleasure, and she cries out, her voice swallowed by my lips.

I pound her, long, deep strokes that stretch and fill her, her body clenching around me with each withdrawal. It's not the wild positioning of our yoga class. Rather, it is simply us, face to face as we feel every inch of our joining.

Maybe we can try a wilder position next time?

The errant thought gives me hope for more, even if I know that's not a certainty. But for now, simply staring into Abigail's eyes as she takes pleasure from me and feeling her pinned to the sand by my cock are enough. It's more than enough.

We rise together, my balls tightening as I feel my climax coming. Abigail's

there too, her breasts shaking with each slap of our hips and her chest rising and falling with deep, shaky breaths.

“Come for me. Come all over my cock.” I grunt. Abigail cries out, falling apart underneath me and pushing me over the edge. I come hard, my cock pulsing as I growl through the spasms of my release before leaning down to kiss her again.

I stay inside her, our bodies entwined as I roll to pull Abi on top of me. Stroking her back, I feel her body relax against me.

“*Mia rosa*,” I whisper. I said it before just as an off the top of my head phrase, something to use as a way to give her a ‘pet name’ in our deception.

Now it’s real. She is my rose, tender and perfect in her small imperfections, a woman to be treasured and kept safe and protected. But I’d be a fool to think she’s helpless. Like every rose, *mia rosa* has her strength and her thorns.

But right now, there are no thorns, just petals. The petals of her lips teasing mine, the petals of her pussy wrapped around my cock, the petals of her heart opening to me. Maybe not all the way, but I can feel myself being allowed in the slightest bit.

It’s not something she does easily or without consideration, and I feel like a god at being granted this special access to her soul.

“You okay?” I ask quietly, just audible over the lapping water.

“I am,” she says, stroking the hair at my nape. “Just . . . wow.”

“Wow?” I ask with a chuckle that makes my softening cock jump inside her. “You were wow.”

Abigail sighs happily. “Maybe we’ll have to agree that we’re both wow? This feels so good.”

I don’t know if she’s only talking of our sex or of us in the entirety. Both are so good.

“It does,” I admit, meaning more than my cock inside her.

She looks down at me, her hands resting on my chest where I know she can feel my heart racing.

And like that, it’s no longer pretend, no longer fake. We might not have answers, plans, or a plotted course, but we have something. Together.

She’s inside me, gaining a place in my heart.

And I’m gaining a place in hers.

CHAPTER 13

The morning sun is unwelcome as my alarm goes off, my head aching even though we barely had any champagne last night. I still feel hungover, and I guess I am.

I'm hungover on sex. The hands-down, legs-up, best sex of my life.

I don't even remember when we got back to the room last night, but I remember how many times Lorenzo made me come. His mouth, his fingers, his cock . . . and his cock, and his cock. By the end, I was an utter pile of orgasmic pudding on the blanket by the little cove.

And just when I thought I couldn't take any more, he fed me nibbles of fruit and cheese to keep my strength up for the walk back to the resort.

"Holy fuck!" I scream as a scarecrow appears in my doorway.

Sitting up, I'm ready to run when I realize it's Janey, who lets out her own yelp of surprise and covers her eyes. "Dammit, woman, cover your vagina before it swallows me up too!"

"You scared the shit out of me!" I accuse. But I quickly realize that while she wants me to cover up, Janey didn't say a word about Lorenzo, who is still passed out next to me, apparently oblivious to our yelling.

Did I mention that he's naked?

With the perfectly sculpted globes of his ass on full display for Janey's eyes. I growl jealously and throw the blanket over him to keep that delicious sight to myself.

She shrugs without apology but then gestures to my chest.

Shit. Tossing the blanket over Lorenzo's ass hid my vagina, but the girls are still out on a naked walkabout.

"You should get that mole checked out. I don't like the look of it," she advises with a smirk. There's no mole. Or I don't think there is. Maybe I'll have to double-check later . . . or have Lorenzo do an up close and personal check of every inch of my skin.

Yep, adding that to my to-do list for sure.

“Yeah? Well, you look like frat party rats took up nesting in your hair. Why?” I ask, changing the subject from my nudity. “What did you do yesterday that left you looking so . . .” I search for something semi-kind but give up. “Rode hard and put up wet?”

Janey balks in offense, her mouth dropping open and her eyes going fiery. But she can’t hold it and her expression morphs into something naughty. *I’ve got a secret*, it says.

“Oh, my God, who?” I demand as I sit up straight to get closer to whatever juicy story she’s about to unleash.

Casual as can be, she tells me, “Since you were gonna be gone all day and we’re caught up for the wedding—thank God for a day off—I decided to go down to the beach and work on my tan. I found a little spot where it was private, so I decided to tempt fate a bit and skip the tan lines by going topless.”

“Janey!” Too loud, I slap my hands over my mouth so I don’t disturb Lorenzo, who’s now snoring softly.

I’m no prude and have been to European beaches where the swimsuit tops are teeny-tiny strings, if they have them on at all. But there, it’s like the human body isn’t as sexualized or something. People just go on about their day, have conversations, and it’s like their nakedness isn’t a *thing*. But something about what Janey is saying makes it sound like she wasn’t just topless. She was oiling up her tits like she was prepping for a porn shoot.

“And ultimately, bottomless too.”

My eyes widen to dinner plates. “Damn, girl!” I don’t know if I’m proud or horrified or some weird combination of both.

“And then I got busted.” She doesn’t sound upset about being caught naked on some corner of the island beach. In fact, she’s blushing happily like this is where the real story begins.

“By whom? I’m guessing not the police since I didn’t have to bail you out for indecent exposure,” I tease.

“I don’t even know his name. He was a blond, tanned, muscled Adonis who came out of the sea like it was his home. I felt his eyes on me and rolled over. But something about the way he looked at me . . . God, Abs . . . I wasn’t embarrassed. I felt like art he was appreciating.”

She sways her hips a bit, tracing her curves as though she has a new-found enjoyment of them.

“And then what?” I beg desperately. It sounds like Janey had almost as great a day as I did.

“He put a fresh coat of suntan oil all over me . . . *all* over me,” she says again

with a smirk.

“Did you have sex with a stranger on the beach?” I hiss. Oops, guess that sounded a bit too judgmental because she glares at me.

“No.” Relieved, I sigh. “But I would’ve. We just didn’t have a condom, and I might be crazy and do stupid shit, but not bareback.”

“So?” There’s more to this story, I know it.

She gives a harsh look, daring me to challenge her actions. “He rubbed me off and then I used the oil to jack him off.”

“Wow,” I breathe.

“And then he kissed my forehead, walked back into the water, and disappeared beneath the surface. It was like a dream.” Her eyes have gone hazy, the smile on her lips soft and blissful.

“Are you sure it wasn’t? Maybe you just got too much sun? Had a heat-induced fantasy that seemed real? Come here and let me feel your forehead.” I hold my palm out for her to lean into.

She returns from her mental fantasy to cut her eyes at me sharply. “He was real.”

“Are you sure he didn’t drown out there then? I mean, people get taken under by riptides, right? Maybe this dream guy swam out and went . . . under?” I almost said went ‘down’ but I know Janey will take that a different way and I’m not sure if I want that much detail.

Who am I kidding? Of course I do.

“Never mind,” I tell her, despite my previous fear mongering that her McMermaid might’ve been sucked to his death by the waves. “How was it?”

“*Amazing.*” She sighs, leaning against the doorframe.

“Are you going to see him again?”

“For real?” She looks up to the ceiling as though considering. “You know, I kinda hope I don’t. That would ruin the magic of it. As it is now, I don’t know if he’s a guest, a local, or even a real mermaid man. I can just enjoy the memory for what it is, not see him in an ugly Hawaiian print shirt and jorts or find out he’s on wife number four and has a drinking problem. Though I might find my way back to that little stretch of beach to see if I can get a repeat performance.” Her smile makes me guess that she’ll do just that. “You?”

I look to Lorenzo to check his state of awareness, but his face is relaxed, his breaths rhythmic.

“He took me to couples’ yoga.”

“Ooh, score one for Chef Boy!” Janey teases.

I nod. “It was great. Not yoga like I’m used to but sexy as hell. Except Emily was there.” I roll my eyes. “But I almost—” I look down to Lorenzo to check

once more. “I almost came in the middle of class and so did he.”

Janey claps silently as she does a happy wiggle.

I wave my hand to get her attention back. “I said *almost*. Lorenzo said he wanted our first time to be just us. He wanted it for himself.” I fan myself with the memory of how hot that was.

“So he took me to the beach last night, and let’s just say that we didn’t stop with oil rubdowns.” I smile, knowing that will drive Janey crazy.

As expected, she starts dancing again, but this time it’s more of a pelvic thrusting move alternating with some ass smacking the air. Courtney would be proud of her, probably snatching Janey up to make her the latest addition to her favorite Zumba class.

I can’t help but laugh, but I try to keep it quiet. So instead of being loud, my whole body shakes from the laughter, which makes the bed bounce. That makes Janey even more excited.

“Yass! Bounce that bed with your fat ass. Show me what you’re working with.” Though she stage-whispers it, Lorenzo makes a snort of noise.

Janey and I freeze in horror, sure that we’ve been busted.

But Lorenzo rolls over, facing away from us to curl into a fetal position with his hands up by his cheek. Freaking adorable! And yes, I know how ridiculous it is to describe this big, tatted up bad boy who rocked my world as adorable, but that’s what he is right now.

“Quick, before he wakes up—” Janey babbles lightning fast as she ticks off questions on her fingers. “How is he? Did he dine at the Y? Did you come? How many times?”

“Whoa!” I exclaim, holding up a hand. “Okay, in order: The best by far, yes, *oh yeah*, and I lost count at six. Or maybe just lost the ability to count because my brain melted to pudding?”

“Holy hot spicy meatballs, woman! I’m so jealous!” Janey says before sighing wistfully.

“Uh, sounds like you had a pretty stellar day too. I think we both came out winners this time. Get it, came?” I tease, even though it’s a bad joke.

Janey grabs a pillow off the floor and throws it at me. “That was awful.”

The pillow makes its target, my head, but it rebounds and bounces into Lorenzo’s back. We go still and quiet once more.

Clear as can be, with no trace of sleep, Lorenzo says, “Should I pretend to ignore that too so you ladies can continue discussing your sex lives?”

Oh, my God! He heard all of that!

I grab the pillow and smack him myself. “You were listening?” I accuse.

He laughs, half turning his head to show off that smirk that’s already melting

my heart. “Of course. You aren’t exactly quiet with your screeching . . . ‘oh, my God!’ . . . ‘Janey!’” He mimics my voice, throwing his deeper one high and loud and Americanized.

“You suck!” I’m laughing, not really angry but more embarrassed at being caught talking about how he was my best ever.

“And lick,” he adds. “I think we’ve established that, haven’t we?”

My face blushes furiously, the embarrassment giving way to the sexy memories of last night. Oh, yeah, he licks and sucks, that’s for sure.

Before we delve any deeper into that, my phone goes off with a FaceTime. Leaning back to the nightstand where I set it, I’m hoping to see it’s Violet who I could really spill the tea with right now. Especially about her smart-mouthed cousin.

The universe laughs at that wish, reminding me that it’s not my luck because the call is from Meredith.

“F-M-L,” I groan.

My phone dings again, and Janey looks at me with trepidation. “Whatever it is, you have to answer. It could be important. Besides, if you don’t, she’ll use her dark powers to track you down and send her minions for your soul.”

“Yeah but . . . look!” I complain, my hands gesturing to my nakedness and current situation in bed with the wedding’s chef. “Throw me a robe!” I bark, knowing she’s right. I have to answer.

I pull the robe on and wrap a towel Janey smartly tosses my way around my messy bedhead. It’ll have to do because I don’t have time to do anything else. With a sigh, I put a fake smile on my face and hit the answer button. “Good morning, Meredith.”

My phone shows Meredith rearing back, shocked at my unkept appearance. She’s nearly forking the sign of the devil at me, honestly. “Were you asleep, Miss Andrews?” she accuses coldly.

“Just getting ready,” I reply, not apologizing. “What can I help you with?”

“Harrumph.” She huffs. “I looked for you and your assistant flower girl in the workroom and cooler, but I can see now why I wasn’t able to find you. It’s nearly eleven.” She makes eleven a.m. sound like three in the afternoon.

“Eleven-oh-eight, actually,” I correct, looking at the clock on the nightstand.

Her lips press into a thin red slash across her pale face. “There’s a photoshoot in the Azure Ballroom at noon,” Meredith says, all business. “We need you to have flowers ready to go and prepped. Not the whole room, but enough that the photog doesn’t have to crop the shots too much. And definitely more than those single flower *arrangements* you did the first time.”

What does she have against flowers? I’ve never seen anyone who has such

little joy over the beauty of nature before, but Meredith seems to think that flowers are offensive to the very balance of nature.

Or maybe it's just me she objects to?

"Wait . . . what shoot?" I ask, groaning internally but keeping my voice level and professional. "It wasn't on the schedule."

I know this for a fact. Janey and I have spent hours going through the schedule, line by line, to plan out each arrangement with the new shipment of flowers we've received. The manager did at least come through on that.

Part of me wonders if this little surprise was actually planned by Meredith as a way to catch Janey and me off guard.

I can almost hear Meredith telling Claire . . .

I know, dear. Sometimes staff just can't be trusted to do as they're told.

We'll have to postpone until Miss Andrews can get out of bed long enough to pull a few flowers together.

Your 'flower girl' is a world-class fuckup who gets by on her last name, not talent.

Fuck that. Not on my watch.

"True professionals are ready to adapt and adjust on a moment's notice," Meredith says, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. What, does she think I never heard that little nugget growing up? "And Miss Johnson and Mr. Kennedy did book your services for the entire week, including any impromptu needs." The reminder isn't needed, but Meredith seems delighted to tell me that she's got me over a barrel.

"Of course," I say crisply.

"I sent over the email about today's shoot at the start of the day, at eight a.m., but would you like me to resend it so it moves to the top of your overfull inbox?" The accusation that I'm not handling my shit the way I should stings even though I know it's not true.

I've worked my ass off to build SweetPea Boutique. And I've done it all on my own, taking Dad's advice and the lessons he's taught me my whole life but not taking a single penny of his money or trading on my last name. I know what I'm doing, and I won't let Meredith Wildeman make me feel otherwise.

"That won't be necessary. Janey is already pulling it up."

"I see," Meredith says doubtfully. "I'll meet you in the ballroom at eleven thirty, then."

It's a statement, not a request, and without a goodbye, she disappears from my screen.

"Ahh!" I scream into a pillow. "God, I hate that woman."

Janey looks at me with trepidation. "Want me to make her disappear? I might

know a guy. Or I could slip some arsenic into her coffee?” She shakes her head. “Never mind, she probably drinks it regularly to give her coffee an extra kick and become immune to it.”

“You can’t be immune to poison, can you?” I don’t know why, of everything, that sticks in my head.

“Mithridatism,” Janey says. I have no idea if that’s English or another language, or even something she made up, but I shake my head to focus on the tasks at hand.

“Boss? What’s the plan?”

I look back to the clock. 11:10.

“We have twenty minutes to have arrangements in the ballroom. Clothes first. We’re out the door in three minutes. We’ll have to use some of the smaller arrangements we’ve already done for the shoot and then we can re-do them for the rehearsal dinner. Let’s go!”

I move to get out of bed, but Lorenzo grabs my hand and yanks me back to him. I land on his chest with a thud. “Can I do anything to assist, *mia rosa*?”

I smile. Sweet, sweet man. Sexy, luscious, naked man.

No, I don’t have time for that. Not even a quickie. Besides, my pussy probably needs a break, at least for a few hours, to recover from last night.

I shake my head and press a kiss to his full lips. “Thank you, but no. I’ve got this.”

“Of course you do.” He is sure, certain, with utter faith in me. “I’ll see you tonight because the true craziness begins tomorrow with the rehearsal dinner.”

He’s right. Tonight will be our last chance to be together with any hope of alone time. Tomorrow’s rehearsal dinner will require both of us to work all day, and then Saturday’s wedding will be a madhouse of a day.

“Definitely.” One more kiss and I’m up, running to yank on black pants, a black polo, and black flats. It’s not couture, but it’s functional for my work, allowing me to go unnoticed as I hustle and bustle around to set and reset flowers.

“Janey!” I call out, my hand on the door.

She appears at my side, her hair slicked back and dripping wet in contrast to my excessively messy bun. Desperate times call for desperate measures, I guess.

I open the door, ready to roll, but find a surprised Emily standing there with her fist poised to knock. “Oh! Abi! You scared me!” she says, laughing as she grabs at her chest.

“Emily?”

I do not have time for this right now. Whatever *this* is.

“Yeah, uh . . . hi! I wanted to talk to you for a second.” Her smile is warm

and friendly. I don't trust it. Don't trust *her*.

But manners are so ingrained in me, even when they're the false-sweet kindness of a cutting barb like my mom's sweater set and pearl set is skilled with, that I can't say a flat-out no. "Maybe later? I'm kinda running out right now."

That gets Emily's attention, and her eyes flash from me to Janey in our pseudo-matching all-black attire, to the open bedroom door behind me. I know without looking that Lorenzo is quite visible if he's still in bed.

"Hi, I'm Emily Jones." She introduces herself to Janey and holds her hand out.

Janey shakes the offered hand, but Emily's handshake is more limp-wristed finger touching than an actual shake. "Janey."

Fuck, I love that girl. She doesn't give anything away.

"And you are?" Emily prompts. She's testing to see if Janey is someone she should know, maybe if there's some way Janey could help her on her way to wherever it is she thinks she's going.

"Masseuse," I say off the cuff, thinking that there has to be some reason for Janey to be in mine and Lorenzo's honeymoon suite.

"Threesome," Janey says at the same time.

"What?" Emily is back to holding her chest—or more likely, her invisible pearl necklace—in shock at Janey's statement.

Oh, shit. I'm totally tongue-tied and am about to blurt out something else—anything else—when Janey says something even worse. "What, you've never had a threesome before? I could give you my card if you'd like." Janey looks Emily up and down with open appreciation.

"Really?" Emily asks, looking at me with newfound . . . something. "You kinky bitch!" She laughs, smacking my shoulder.

"She's not serious," I lie quickly. "She's an assistant of sorts."

Emily's face pinches as though that's considerably less desirable than Janey being part of a three-way with me and Lorenzo. "Yeah, I guess being an Andrews comes with privileges, doesn't it?" She laughs as she says it, almost like she intends it to sound complimentary, but it definitely does not. She sounds jealous and catty again.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I'm in a rush this morning. Can we talk later or something?" I have no idea what she might want to discuss. There are no good old days to relieve, no axes to bury, no friendships to reignite. I'd honestly be happy if I never saw her again.

But that won't happen.

She'll be at the country club, at the charity functions Mom holds, and at

every schmoozing elbow-rubbing opportunity back home.

Fuck.

That hits me like a train. I've been faking this honeymoon all week with Lorenzo thinking that once I get home, I could just pretend like this never happened. But I will see Emily on occasion. I've avoided her over the years, but our social circle is small and gossipy. She's going to realize that I don't have a new husband by my side at the next red-carpet event.

What am I going to do then?

"Oh, of course," Emily agrees easily, which makes my skin crawl. I don't know what she wants to talk about, but as she hair flips and walks down the hall, I feel like she got more than she came for.

At my expense.

I collapse against the door as soon as it's closed and look over at Janey, who shrugs.

"Seriously? Couldn't come up with something better than a threesome?"

"Hey, don't talk, Miss Newlywed." I glare, and she waves her hand in front of her face. "Seriously, don't talk. I know we're in a hurry, but you could've at least brushed your teeth. Here."

She hands me a mint and we run out the door.

11:14 and counting.



WE SPLIT UP, Janey raiding the coolers for flowers while I head to the Azure Ballroom to see what we're working with.

I'm counting tables and analyzing the photographer's setup when Meredith approaches.

"Flower girl, you seem to have forgotten the most important part of your job," she sneers.

"Janey is bringing the arrangements. I'm organizing my plan." I tap my temple. "We'll be ready."

Janey comes through the doors a moment later with a cart full of beautiful blooms. "See?" I tell Meredith, pleased with myself and Janey for meeting the ridiculous timeline of this surprise shoot.

"Eleven thirty-three is not the same as eleven thirty, Miss Andrews."

Fuck, there is no pleasing this woman.

"Excuse me," I say coldly. I don't wait for her to dismiss me or discuss my shortcomings further. I beeline to Janey and hiss, "Let's get this done before I kill her."

The photographer's assistant is actually here, and she's more than helpful. With clear, short commands and a willingness to get her own hands into the flowers, we get the staging done in record time, including trimming the petals off over two dozen roses to scatter them on a large white backdrop.

Just in time, too, because Cole, flanked by a bunch of makeup people and the main photographer, comes in. Without even acknowledging my work, they get started, having Cole pose in three different 'sets' while the photographer goes crazy with the shutter.

"Okay, one more," the photographer says before looking over his shoulder at me for the first time. "We'll need the flowers reset for Claire. You can get those done now."

Janey and I get to work, re-scattering the petals and resetting the arrangements that were moved while Cole has his last shots taken.

Then he's done, disappearing as quickly as he came in. I can feel the entire room take a breath, relaxing for a short moment before we go again.

Claire comes in the same way Cole did, with an entourage. But where Cole had been all business, Claire is warm and friendly, talking to people and signing autographs before she gets situated for the shoot.

She really is . . . nice. The word seems so bland, but it's the truth. Claire is a bit of a princess and appreciates the finer things in life, but she's worked hard to enjoy that privilege and hasn't forgotten where she came from. I can understand why she has so many fans and such a rabid following.

"All done, Claire," the photographer says.

"Awesome!" she says with a true smile. "Thank you so much, everyone! Only one more day until I'll be Mrs. Claire Johnson-Kennedy!" She squeals happily and we all smile in return.

As she leaves, Janey and I get to work once more. We need to load up the arrangements that are salvageable and get them back to the cooler for some TLC and make new plans for the rehearsal dinner arrangements minus what we've lost.

"What was up with the last-minute photo shoot, anyway? Did you hear anything?" I ask Janey.

She shakes her head. "I swear I looked at the schedule. You know I did. We both did. And this little shindig wasn't on it."

Janey's eyes narrow as she looks around, and I follow her gaze, seeing the staff, staging, and setup. "This kind of thing doesn't happen on the fly. We should've known about it."

I agree. And that worries me. I know Meredith seems to have it out for me, but would she really ruin Claire's wedding week by 'forgetting' to tell me about

an event?

I can't believe she'd be that unprofessional. But . . .

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a blonde head, but before I can see who it is, the head's gone, and I'm left wondering if I just wandered into a *telenovela* or something.

Or maybe I'm just stressed and going crazy?

"Abi?" Janey asks, tapping me on the shoulder. "You okay?"

"Um, yeah," I murmur, picking up my water sprayer to refresh a few petals. I don't say anything, but I swear that blonde head reminded me of Emily. But why would she be here? Was she spying on the famous celebrity wedding? Or on me? "I think I'm going to go talk to that photographer's assistant and confirm that our schedules line up. I want you to follow up with that resort manager too. He should have a full breakdown of what spaces are being used, at what time, and what for."

"Can I threaten him to get it?" she asks with evil excitement written all over her face.

"Absolutely. I'm not going down like this. Especially because of some bitch like Meredith Wildeman."

CHAPTER 14

“Okay, Gilberto, after you trim those steaks, I want you to start working with Juan on the shrimp,” I tell the cook I’m overseeing as he starts with another filet round. “Make sure the shrimp are perfect. They’re the showpiece of one of the pasta courses. And save the shells for the stock!”

Gilberto nods, answering, “Yes, Chef.”

I’ve spent as much time as I can in the kitchen with Esmar and his crew, laughing and joking as we prep and work side by side. They are a well-oiled machine, providing interesting and flavorful dishes to the resort’s restaurant. Some might look down on a ‘hotel chef’ a bit, snobbily thinking that a true chef owns his own restaurant, but I can see the fire in Esmar and sense a kindred spirit in him. He works where he does because he is passionate about food and experience, not business and the hours of paperwork being the owner requires.

I feel like I have already learned a lot from him and will miss him after this event. But not yet because there is still much to be done.

While Abigail has gone to do her impromptu photo shoot, I’m getting ready for tomorrow’s rehearsal dinner which requires one hundred meals, and Saturday’s wedding, which is less than twenty-four hours later and will serve over three hundred.

These are not events you prepare for on the fly or on the day of, and as such, the true hard work begins today. Now.

Vegetables have to be cleaned and cut, proteins shaped and prepped, and fruits selected. About the only thing we aren’t prepping are the starches, but that’s because risotto can’t be prepared in advance and the pasta sheeter is going to be cranking out fresh fettuccine tomorrow.

Cranking. Such a fun American word, I think. CR-anking, cr-ANK-ing, crank-ING, I repeat in my head, unable to stop the smile from blooming on my lips as I emphasize various syllables. Languages are such interesting and funny

things. An entire group of people simply agreeing that this sound means that thing. *If only we could all agree more often*, I think wistfully.

I know something I could crank. Or more precisely, someone.

I tilt my head, trying to decide if my crude wording makes sense in English, but ultimately, my mind focuses on the better part of the question. Abigail. *Mia rosa*.

The thought of Abi brings a surge of tension underneath my apron. She was all that I imagined and more. Last night was magical.

It wasn't just the almost unlimited passion we had for each other and the touches that left me feeling like I could make love to her body all night long and never, ever tire. It was the pleasure I felt from every gasp, every sound she made, and every touch and look, even every smell.

It wasn't the setting, although Esmar's suggestion of the 'Blue Lagoon' certainly was a good one. It was the woman I was with. She was better than I could've dreamed possible. She was a goddess.

Right now, I would do anything to give her the same pleasure and feeling that we shared last night. The memories flood my mind, and I relive them, my cock surging to full hardness. I'm so lost in what I'm thinking about, in fact, that I don't notice what I'm doing until the flames flash up, and suddenly, I've got a pan on fire.

"Shit!" I growl, grabbing a nearby lid and tossing it on top. Well, there goes *that* batch of herb-infused olive oil for the vinaigrette.

"Lorenzo, Lorenzo!" Esmar calls, hurrying over with a concerned look on his face. "What happened?"

"Shit. Sorry, Chef," I tell him, pulling the pan off the fire and setting it aside to cool. Looking at it, I sigh. "At least it wasn't the good olive oil."

He chuckles good-naturedly, clucking his tongue. "Are you all right, my boy?"

Chefs are notorious for being fickle, and I've seen chefs go on screaming rants over a lot less, but he seems more concerned for me than that I almost burned his kitchen down. "Yes. Just a little tired. Had a busy night."

Proving that we have an audience of cooks watching to see Esmar's reaction to my fuck-up, a friendly chorus of *oohs* and *oh, yeahs* go through the crew.

Gilberto, ever the jokester, calls out, "You used Chef's suggestion well. Welcome to paradise, indeed."

I laugh, and Esmar follows suit, quickly figuring out exactly what my late night entailed.

"Ahh," Esmar says knowingly. "Paradise can be enchanting. Careful, my friend, or you will find yourself with one of these." He holds up his left hand

where a thick black silicone band circles his ring finger. “Kitchen safe and too tight to ever come off.” He demonstrates, pulling at the ring, “at my bride’s *request*.” By his tone, I think Esmar’s wife didn’t so much as request that he wear the ring but demand it. That he does is sweet, as kitchens have a rather notorious reputation for ‘friendships’ between the staff.

“It’s not that serious,” I correct. “We’re just getting to know each other.”

Esmar nods sagely and Gilberto slaps me on the back. “Get to know her *well*, Chef. Very, very well.”

The second batch of oil goes much better than the first, and when I turn off the heat, I know that the herb-infused oil will make a perfect salad dressing for the wedding reception. All of the flavor without the risk of getting a leaf stuck in your teeth or catching in the back of your throat.

As I check my to-do list, my phone rings in my pocket, a huge no-no on the line.

“Not it!” shouts out from all around the room in a symphony of voices.

“*Cazzo!* It’s on Do Not Disturb. Sorry!”

Esmar looks over from his station. “You will be. If someone is not dead or dying, there’s no excuse. You’ll have to do pans today.”

Ugh! I guess his kindness on the kitchen fire has been stretched to its maximum. Every chef has rules, along with consequences for breaking them, but no phones during service is pretty standard. As is dish duty for noncompliance.

“Yes, Chef,” I tell him apologetically, stepping off the line into a dry storage area to pull out my phone. When I see it’s an urgent call from Violet, my heart jumps into my throat.

I’ve been putting off her texts and calls since earlier this week, but if she’s breaking through my Do Not Disturb setting, perhaps something is truly wrong.

“Violet,” I growl as I answer the phone. “This had better be fucking important.”

“Oh, it definitely is, Lorenzo.” She drawls out my name in a way that says I’m in trouble. Ironically, in America, my first name becomes longer, each syllable drawn out. At home, in Positano, my family will add my middle names and last name and invoke Mary, Mother of Jesus, when I fuck up.

“Is Carly okay?” It’s my true first concern but also a way to edge around Violet’s violent tendencies when her feathers get ruffled. Hopefully, by doing a little invoking of my own of her sweet, adorable daughter, she’ll be reminded that murder is a bad idea that will have her seeing her daughter from behind a plexiglass window.

“Of course she is, and you damn well know it. This is about Abi!”

I wince at the hysterical note to Violet’s voice but continue poking and

prodding as I usually do. She's not thanking me in the slightest. She's warning me, but casual and cool, I tell her, "No worries, cousin. I'm quite happy to help your friend out of her sticky situation."

That warrants a full-blown, animalistic growl. I think motherhood suits Violet because she is quite the Mama Bear and has taken Abigail on as a cub that needs protecting as well. "You'd better not be giving her the wrong vibes if you don't mean it. If you hurt her, don't come back to the States. Because if you do, I will find you and I will destroy you until you beg for mercy, but there will be none for the likes of you! You manwhore, playboy, douchewaffle—"

"Whoa!" I exclaim. "First off, I don't want to hurt her. Second, fuck . . . words hurt, Violet. And third, what I do is none of your business."

"She is *my* sister-in-law as well as my best friend. It's damn sure my business. And how about your mom's? Or Aunt Sofia's? Think they'd see your 'honeymoon' as none of their business?" she sing-songs, already knowing the answer to her question.

"You wouldn't," I challenge. God, I pray that I'm right. Violet is a reasonable woman. Surely, she wouldn't throw me to the wolves of our family with this crazy story. Not after what her own story did to the family.

Although, with how well that turned out, maybe they wouldn't be so harshly judgmental?

I consider that. But wait . . . if we go based on how Violet's mess turned out, *Mama* and Aunt Sofia will have me and Abigail married off for real with demands for *bambinos* before the ink is dry on the marriage license. I'm not sure if that's preferable or if a backlash of epic proportions is more desirable.

"I would," she vows.

I'm beat and I know it. Violet has me by the short hairs. "No need to sic the family on me. I'm not going to hurt Abigail. I care for her."

Violet snorts. "Of course you do. I might call you names, Lorenzo, but you're not a bad guy."

"*Grazie*," I say solemnly.

"That doesn't mean you're a good guy, either," she corrects before my head has a chance to swell. "You are romantic and sweet, and apparently, Abi thinks you're sexy as sin, but you know as well as I do that you're going to leave. It's what you do. Abi knows it too, but I think she's conveniently forgetting that."

Violet sighs heavily. "I want you to remember that when you move on to the next exciting thing, she's going to be left behind and I'm going to be the one supergluing the pieces of her heart back together with ice cream while we curse your entire lineage."

The line goes quiet, and I hear Violet murmuring in Italian. It's not spot-on,

more Americanized, but I catch something about my daughter's pigs never bearing . . . cabbage? The curse might be wrong, but the meaning is clear, as are her good intentions.

"Violet," I interrupt her blasphemy before it gets any further, now that she's moved on to my grandchildren's feet smelling like cheese and attracting owls. Does she even speak Italian, I wonder? "I hear you loud and clear. I won't hurt her."

"I hope not. She's more fragile than she seems. Remember that." She sighs, changing the subject from my potential failure. "So, how bad is Emily? Please tell me she's ugly and has a hunchback and smells like rotten cheese."

Huh, maybe she did know what she was saying.

"She's fine, I guess." I shrug even though she can't see me. "Blonde, tall, slim, married a guy named Doug. He's okay, a bit of a 'polo shirt at the golf club' sort, if you know what I mean? The competitiveness is off the charts, though. Just when I think Abigail can leave it be and we can just enjoy the day, Emily will come along and sour it. And Abigail lets her, time and time again. I don't understand it."

This is something Abigail and I have touched on, but the nuances of female hierarchy are as foreign to me as they are to most men, I suspect. Though I didn't want to talk to Violet, maybe this is the perfect opportunity to get some clarity on this because I sure as fuck haven't a clue about Queen Bee hive dominance fights.

"Oh, God," Violet says dramatically, "you have no idea. Back in school, Abi was clueless for the longest. We kinda stuck to ourselves, I guess. She had this heavy name and Ross's reputation casting a big shadow, and she just wanted to do her own thing. But Emily would never let her. Abi let it go on too long, I guess, but when she decided to fight back, she did it right. You've heard the expression 'the best revenge is a life well-lived'?"

"Yes," I hum.

"That's what Abi did. She didn't attack Emily, though she could've. She didn't kill her reputation, though she could've done that too. She ignored her, which ate Emily up inside. Abi simply did her own thing and excelled at it in every way. Emily couldn't keep up and it pissed her off so much. That's why, eventually, Emily went after Abi's guy. He was just a pawn, though I don't feel sorry for that asshole either. But I think Emily saw it as the ultimate win. Has she flirted with you at all?"

I flinch in shock. "No. Not at all. She seems devoted to her new husband. She and Doug have moments of happiness and a few arguments here and there, but that's normal, right?" I realize that I have no idea. I've seen decades-long

marriages in my family, and that's how they behave, but a recently-wed, young, happy couple? That's entirely out of my wheelhouse.

Violet laughs. "Yeah, *totally* normal."

"But Emily hasn't flirted with me." The very idea is repulsive.

"Hmm, that's good, I guess. Just watch her and look out for Abi. Emily has an end game. She always does."

"Thanks, Violet. I will do that," I reassure her.

"You'd better, or the threat of a curse remains."

With that, she hangs up, leaving me with much to think about.

CHAPTER 15

I considered something quiet and romantic for this evening, something for just the two of us, but after talking with Violet, keeping things more casual seems prudent so my actions don't make promises I'm not yet prepared to uphold.

After scouring the resort's options, this sunset cruise seems like the perfect activity.

A way for Abigail and me to have fun, play at being a couple, and touch and caress each other.

And maybe tease a little deeper, my heart begs. I want to see if there's a chance this could be more.

Violet has made my heart and mind at odds with my past and my future. But I'm focusing on the present. Forcefully.

We only have this evening left. Tomorrow, we will be beyond busy with the rehearsal dinner, and Saturday, with the wedding. And then we fly out Sunday afternoon to go home.

And then what?

For the first time ever, the fact that I don't know and have zero plans feels empty and meaningless, not exciting and full of possibility.

"Absolutely not." Abigail sounds like there is no budging her, zero chance of changing her mind as she sits on the couch with her feet curled up underneath her.

I like a challenge.

"*Mia rosa*, you spent the entire afternoon in the cooler. Your fingers and toes are purple, and there is nothing more that you can do to prepare."

I know I'm right because I confirmed with Janey. After their additional shoot in the Azure Ballroom, Abigail and Janey moved their flowers back into the cooler, which has thankfully held up. Hours later, Janey assures me that they are right on schedule for this weekend.

And so am I.

“And you have to eat, so why not do so somewhere beautiful? I promise to have you back home and in bed at a reasonable hour. I know we’ll need a good night’s sleep to hit the floor running tomorrow.” Such an American expression—they are always running somewhere.

Not that I’m one to talk.

“A very reasonable hour?” she clarifies. I nod, and I can see her weighing the options. “What do I wear to this thing?” she asks, and though she hasn’t said yes, I know I’ve won.

“Sundress and a bikini,” I say as I pull her off the couch and push her toward the bedroom. “Janey’s coming too.”

At that, Abi does a wiggly dance of happiness and gets moving a little faster. I even hear her let out a whoop of excitement that makes me smile. She’s so easy to please, so eager for any adventure.



I LEAD the ladies out of the resort, following signs directing us to the resort’s dock. The boat is already loading passengers. In fact, we seem to be some of the last people to board.

It’s not really a cruise ship, and I’ve actually been on yachts that are bigger, but those belonged to billionaires who hired me to cook. But it’s well-maintained and painted crisp white with blue hand lettering on the bow proclaiming it ‘B-Yacht-ch’. Based on that name alone, I think we’re going to have a great time.

“Come on,” Abigail tells me, pulling at my hand now with a big smile. Janey waves her fingers at us with a knowing look. “I know it’s geeky and old and stupid, but I have to.” I have no idea what she’s talking about, but I find myself running along with her, chasing that smile.

She leads me to the bow of the main deck, gets up on the railing, and throws her arms wide. She might not be yelling out, but there’s no doubt who she’s imitating as we pull away from the dock.

I can’t help but laugh at her infectious exuberance. People are watching, some with smiles and some with raised brows, but Abigail cares nothing about either group. She’s simply doing what she wants, as always, and everyone else be damned.

“I’m the Queen of the world!” she shouts into the wind. “I’m flying!”

I put my hands on her waist to steady her, loving the feeling of her curves beneath my palms. I lean forward to press my back to her front and rumble in

her ear, “Don’t expect me to sing Celine Dion for you. But if you want me to sketch you naked later, I’m happy to pretend I can draw.”

She laughs, looking over her shoulder at me, and I know this cruise is exactly what we needed. Now that we’ve pulled away from the dock and waved to the fishermen coming in from their day’s work, Abigail steps down from her perch.

“What is there to do aboard?”

“Yoo-hoo!” a voice calls out, and I groan.

No fucking way. But yes, there they are.

“I thought that was you, Abi. I was afraid you were ending it all by throwing yourself overboard.” Emily laughs as though that’s a funny joke, but there’s an actual thread of disappointment.

Emily is wearing another white bikini top, a sheer white coverup, and frayed white denim shorts. My guess is that her entire suitcase is full of bridal white since it’s her honeymoon.

Doug has on a salmon-colored polo with the collar popped, khaki shorts, and boat shoes.

They’re the picture of the upper-crust yacht crowd.

“Hey, Lorenzo. Good to see you,” Doug says with an offered hand.

We shake and then the awkward silence stretches longer and longer. A waiter walks by with a tray of wine and beer, and Abigail practically dives for it. Taking a white wine, she grabs a beer for me, and I watch with an internal eye roll as Emily does the same.

Maybe Emily just likes white wine, or maybe it’s because she doesn’t want to risk spilling the red on her white outfit, but I’m pretty sure that if Abi had grabbed a beer and chugged it in one go, Emily would try to do the same.

Hmm, that might be a fun theory to test.

“So, what’s up first?” Emily asks as she drains her first wine. “I was thinking a little gambling.”

We end up at blackjack after a little bit of debate. At first, Emily wanted to play Texas Hold ’Em, but Doug and I were dead set against that. Hold ’Em has players going against each other, and I don’t want to give Emily and Abigail a reason to get pissy with each other. Though I can’t be certain of his reasons, Doug was equally against Hold ’Em and had the suggestion of blackjack, a much better option for our ladies.

Because blackjack’s against the dealer. Everyone can win, and everyone can lose. So we find a table, and pretty soon, we’ve all got our pile of chips, a thousand dollars each.

To Emily and Doug, it’s probably pocket change. To Abigail’s family, it’s pocket change. To me, that’s a big investment, and I wonder if I’ll need to call

Violet for a little ‘help’ here if we lose.

But the thing is . . . we don’t lose.

I’ve played before, but I get on a lucky streak like I’ve never seen before. I keep playing smartly, not letting my greed get ahead of my head to make the most of my hot streak. When I finally take a moment to count my chip pile after hitting it big with an ace-queen blackjack, I’ve got fifty-seven hundred dollars.

That’s nearly six month’s rent in some places. Hell, it’s a year’s living expenses in others. I could take this windfall and go so many places, virtually anywhere I’d like to experience. Knowing what opportunities this pile can hold, I quit playing and simply watch the others. Abigail loses two hundred from her thousand, while Emily and Doug stay around the break-even point.

I’m glad when they agree that they’ve had enough and are ready to move on to something else.

“So what’s waiting for you when you guys get back?” Emily asks us as she snags another wine.

Abigail doesn’t mirror Emily, though, and grabs a water with lime this time. I’m sure she’s being responsible and thinking about tomorrow when we have early morning wake-up calls to get to work for the rehearsal.

“The flower shop for me,” Abigail shares. “I just made my last loan payment, so now it’s time to see how I can maybe expand. The hope is to one day really write my own ticket. Like how Violet does.”

“Ah, yes, Violet. She’s your cousin, Lorenzo, right?”

I nod agreeably. “Well, widely separated. Italians don’t have a phrase for just how far apart our branches of the family tree are. Everyone is simply family.”

Before anyone can respond, a disembodied voice on the PA system announces, “All right, everyone . . . report to the top deck in ten minutes because we’ve got a good time in store for you.”

The voice is corny, like a 1950s television host, but people do start to move that way. Emily rolls her eyes dramatically as she snarks, “Cheese alert.”

“Shall we?” I ask Abigail, and she beams.

“Let’s do it!”

The top deck of the ship’s been turned into a dance club complete with lights, lasers, and bass-heavy music. I want to dance with Abigail, hold her in my arms and sway with her. Not for sex this time but just to feel her energy.

“All right, cool cats and kittens . . . everyone on the floor. Now’s your chance to win a helicopter tour of the island. How, you ask?” Nobody did, but people are definitely listening to the announcer now. “Our B-yacht-ch nightly dance contest!”

“What do you think?” I ask Abigail.

She bites her lip, looking uncertain. “I’m not really a great dancer. I like to dance, do Zumba with Courtney sometimes when she makes me, but my head-ass connection doesn’t seem to work as well as other women’s. They twerk. I look like I’m having a seizure.”

“I’m sure you look beautiful,” I say encouragingly. “And we danced at Courtney’s wedding. You did well, very well.”

She laughs. “Yeah, that was some slow dance swaying, but never fear, you’ll see what you’ve gotten yourself into.” Even as she puts herself down, she grins as though she can’t wait to show me just how bad of a dancer she is.

We take to the floor, and I grab her hand, twirling her in a circle around me. She prances with nervous eyes locked on me for cues.

The rules are explained, and it’s pretty simple. Keep dancing until one of the judges touches you on the shoulder. If you’re tapped out, there are chairs around the deck where you can sit and cheer for your favorite contestants.

I can already feel my pulse starting to race as I pull Abigail to me. I lead her in a classic square step to see if she can follow a lead, and to my delight, she does remarkably well. I even dip her, and she leans back easily, trusting me to support her like we did at yoga. When she returns to standing upright, her body is aligned with mine fully.

“I want you,” I whisper honestly over the music. “I want you in every way, every day I can have you.”

It’s a big confession from me, a hint that I’m thinking beyond this week. I don’t know what the future holds, I never do, but the idea of spending it without Abigail makes it seem pointless. We could do so many things, show each other so much.

“You . . . you have me,” Abigail responds, but there’s a question in her eyes. She can feel that I’m saying more but isn’t pushing me. Not yet.

The music comes to an end, and I finish with a big spinning lift that has our lips a paper’s thickness apart.

Well, of course we make it through. Emily and Doug, I note, make it through as well, mainly because while Doug dances like he dresses, about as bland as beige khakis, he at least can keep to a basic rhythm.

Off to the far side of the floor, I see Janey dancing with a trio of young girls, all of whom made it too.

“Partner up,” the voice announces. “It doesn’t have to be someone you know, but be warned, you’ll know them after this.”

Chairs are brought out and placed around the dance floor. I see guys starting to sit down, so I do the same. Janey’s got one of her new friends seated in front of her.

A slow, sexy synth beat starts, and Abigail jumps up and down, clapping as she gives me a huge grin. “Oh, my God, I know this one!”

I think she means the song, but doesn't everyone know Ginuwine's *Pony*? Not that I watched *Magic Mike*, but I've been known to dance to this a time or two myself in the club.

Abigail does a slow, seductive sway of her hips. “When I go to the gym with Courtney, this is a song in Zumba class. I don't remember exactly how it goes, but I think I can fake my way through well enough.”

I growl at the way she's tracing her hands over her circling hips. “Doing great, *mia rosa*.”

“You ain't seen nothing yet,” she warns sassily, confidence oozing from her now

She's right. She rolls her hips, flirts with the hem of her dress, drops it down, butterflies her legs open, and a whole bunch of other moves she apparently learned in this class. All the while, she takes every opportunity to rub herself against me, driving me wild.

My cock is rock hard in my swimsuit, hungry to be buried inside Abigail's warm sweetness once again.

She slides down my body, biting her lip suggestively as she looks squarely at the bulge in my shorts then up to my eyes. If we weren't in the middle of the dance floor, I would tease her lips open with the head of my cock and let her suck me.

But the people clapping remind me that I can't do that here. I fist the chair to stay steady, fighting for control.

Abigail keeps going with her seductive dance, turning around and placing her hands on my knees to grind against my lap. She throws her head back and whispers, “You ready for this?”

“Anything,” I vow.

She moves her hands down my legs to the floor and then carefully lifts one leg and then the other to my shoulders, bending herself into an L shape. It's almost like we're in yoga class again and she's doing handstands.

Oh, mio Dio, is there anything this woman can't do?

Her dress sags, letting me see up it to her core, which is covered by a tiny black swimsuit.

Before I know what's happening, Abigail has bent her knees, which with her feet hooked over my shoulders, pulls my face directly toward her ass. I smash nose first into her pussy and can hear the shocked laughter from the crowd. Quick as can be, she does it again and again.

I laugh in surprise at her boldness.

Good-naturedly, I grab her hips and hold her in place to growl against her. She's having a bit of fun at my expense, but I can smell her arousal.

The song ends and there are huge amounts of applause, and I even hear a few whistles tossed our way. But she's all mine, and when it's time to switch, I push her toward the chair, where she sits down primly as though I don't know that she's a gushing fountain for me.

There's a bit of laughter as the other guys stand up, and it's pretty clear that I'm not the only one sporting wood. Unashamed, I adjust myself, knowing that Abigail is watching my every move.

"Next round," the announcer calls.

Surprisingly, I see that Janey got tapped out. I feel certain that it wasn't for lack of dance skills, though, so if what Abigail did got cheers, what in the world did Janey do? Actually strip?

Also, Emily is now sitting in a chair with a wicked smile of satisfaction on her lips. I guess she got through that round too.

For this round, the song's just as naughty and dirty, Beyonce's *Drunk In Love*. It's not a song I know well, not common in kitchens, but it doesn't matter. They could be playing bagpipe polka music and I would still dance for Abigail.

I circle my hips a bit, nowhere near as gracefully as Abigail did, but she doesn't seem to mind. Letting my hands trace along the buttons of my shirt, I open them one by one to expose my chest.

Abigail's eyes widen with hunger, and I take her shaking hands in mine, guiding her to touch me. Her fingers delicately dance along my abs, over my chest, and back down to tease along my waistband. I pump my hips forward and back, and I see her chest heaving in time with my movements.

It's not part of the rules, not part of the dance, but Abigail leans forward and presses a gentle kiss right below my belly button. "*Mio Dio*," I hiss and then simply lift her out of the chair to stand before me.

Our tongues twist and go so deep I swear we pour ourselves into each other's souls with this kiss.

When the announcements come, we don't win, but I don't care. I'm too far gone, too desperate for her. I pull Abigail off the dance floor, ignoring the crowd's cheers, especially Emily's, and head toward the staircase downstairs to search for one thing . . .

"Here," I growl, finding an empty room. I shove Abigail inside and lock the door behind us. I consider trying to reign in my hunger, not wanting to scare her, but to my delight, Abigail pushes her sundress down and unties her top to free her tits before pulling the loose ruffles of the skirt up to reveal that tiny bikini bottom.

“Fuck me, Lorenzo. Take what’s yours,” she says breathlessly as she turns to bend forward over the bed.

I’m so aroused I’ve lost my English and resort to muttering nonsense in Italian about how sexy she is, how fortunate I am, and all the filthy things I want to do her. She doesn’t understand a word, but still, her hips buck in the air as she looks for relief from this ache.

I rip my shirt off and drop my swimsuit to the floor. “*Mia rosa*,” I say gently as I line up with her pussy. It’s her one last chance, one last kindness I can offer before I unleash on her.

“It’s okay, I’m on birth control. Clean,” she moans.

“Me too,” I grunt as I split her open with a single thrust. “Ugh, yes.”

We’ve had tender moments talking on the beach and in bed after slow and sweet lovemaking. We’ve had naughty moments like nearly coming in the middle of yoga class and long, torturous orgasms pulled from the depths of our souls. But never have we just rutted like a pair of wild animals, my hips slamming into Abigail’s ass again and again. But while my cock claims her pussy, she looks over her shoulder and her lips claim mine.

I feel like a man and an animal all at once, my cock spearing her to send waves of pleasure smashing through her body. She doesn’t fuck me back. I’m in control, holding her hips as I pound into her. But she grips the blanket with one hand and reaches back to grab my ass with the other, urging me deeper and harder.

“Oh, my God, yes! More, Lorenzo—” she pants out. “Claim every inch of me. Make me yours.”

Fuck yes. It hits me like a shot of pure white lightning. That’s what I want. For Abigail Andrews to be mine. Not just her body, not just for this moment of wild passion, but in truth.

I growl, my words coming in short grunts of Italian as I speed up.

“*Il mio . . .*” Mine.

“*Sempre . . .*” Always.

“*Mia rosa . . . amore.*” My rose . . . love.

“*Amore*,” Abigail repeats. She doesn’t speak Italian, but that’s a pretty obvious one. Looking back at me, her eyes are dark and vulnerable, asking if I mean what she means. She won’t give me any more of her heart until she’s sure.

I’m sure. In this moment, I am surer of this than I’ve ever been of anything. Violet’s warning should ring through my head, but it doesn’t. Not at all.

I am simply lost in Abigail—her beauty, her passion, her boldness, and even her quirky weirdness, as she calls it.

“Come, Abigail,” I beg her, holding back so fiercely that I’m trembling on

the edge.

I hold her upright, my arms wrapping across her chest and hips to keep her pressed to my body. Every inch of us is connected, at the skin level and so much deeper. I tease a finger over her clit and instantly feel her clench down on me as she cries out, and then the pulsing rhythm of her pussy triggers my own orgasm.

We buck into each other, jets of my cum filling her as I rub her clit in smooth circles to draw out more and more pleasure for us both.

I've never felt anything like that—a climax that's as much mind as it is body. I feel as though I did claim her. She's mine, but also . . . I am hers.

Surprisingly, I feel no cage from that. Not the way I always feared I would. I feel at peace with Abigail in my arms.

In the post-orgasmic bliss, we're spent and sweating, making promises with our tongues beyond words.

"So beautiful," I whisper. "So special."

Abigail is about to say something in return but a sound pulls my attention. Or rather, a lack of sound.

I put my finger to her lips, tilting my head to listen.

"What?" she says around my finger.

"It's quiet, too quiet," I tell her, and I can see the dawning realization on her face. The quiet rumble of the engine, which has thrummed through the boat from the moment we climbed aboard, has stopped.

"Why aren't we moving?" Abigail asks.

I shrug, not having any idea. This night cruise is more party ship, not swimming or snorkeling, and those are the only reasons we should be stopped.

Unless something is wrong.

Because we are definitely dead in the water.

CHAPTER 16

The mood of a moment ago evaporates in an instant as Lorenzo's wide eyes meet my even wider ones. I jump up, flipping the skirt of my dress down and digging around on the floor for my bikini top. I pull it around my chest, but my fingers are clumsy and I can't get the tie done.

"Help me," I beg.

Lorenzo nods, leaving his own shirt unbuttoned to focus on my swimsuit top. "Good," he says, tying it easily. "There's your bottoms too." He points to the far side of the bed.

How did they get there? Last time I had a conscious thought, Lorenzo had pushed them to my ankles. After that . . . no idea.

I lunge across the bed to grab them and yank them up my legs, wildly kicking my feet in the air to help get the suit situated.

"Come on," Lorenzo says sharply as he grabs my hand and leads me back out to the top deck.

The party never stopped here. The whole crowd is still happily dancing, the dark night broken by flashing rainbow disco lights and the booming music.

"Maybe we're okay?" I say hopefully. Lorenzo doesn't let me pretend, not even for a second, giving me a raised brow look.

"Look, there's Janey." He points across the floor to where Janey is dancing with her new friends. "Let's see if they made an announcement that we missed."

I take the lead this time, dragging Lorenzo across the floor behind me. I must look like a woman on a mission because people are hopping out of my way left and right. "Janey!" I yell over the music, waving wildly. She smiles and waves back, oblivious.

Finally, I make it to her side and shout in her ear, "Why are we stopped?"

"Huh?" I can't hear her answer, but her brows knit together as she looks at me in confusion.

Before she catches a damn clue, the speaker crackles. “Hey there, folks! You might’ve noticed that we’ve stopped for a minute. This B-Yacht-ch is a bit temperamental sometimes. We all know a diva like that, don’t we?” he jokes with a sigh of dramatic exasperation. “Anyway, we’re having some minor technical difficulties, but don’t worry, we’ve got a fix-it man on the way. In the meantime, we’re keeping the party rolling for a bit longer. Here’s to the wild and crazy nights of Aruba!”

The announcer makes it sound like this is no big deal, as though a little longer on a relaxing party cruise is the score of a lifetime. And typically, it would be.

But not tonight.

Not when I have fewer than twenty-four hours until the rehearsal dinner and multiple arrangements to prepare. I knew I shouldn’t have done this, shouldn’t have come out tonight. It was irresponsible, but I’d wanted the one last night of fun with Lorenzo that he promised. I just really need the reasonable bedtime he promised too because tomorrow is coming at a record pace.

And I’m sitting still in the water, miles away from my work, unable to do anything about it.

Maybe I can swim back? How far out are we? I look toward shore and the lights look like tiny pinpricks, so . . . that’s a no.

Is there someone I can call? A lifeline I can use? Way to think like an entitled brat, Abs.

I could take one of the lifeboats and row myself to shore, row-row-row-your boat style.

I’m swirling the drain, and though I know it, I can’t stop the downward spiral of my thoughts. This wedding is too important, and I’m afraid I’m going to let everyone down.

I feel Lorenzo’s steadying hands on my shoulders, lending me strength and warmth, and I suddenly feel like such a selfish bitch for only worrying about myself.

Lorenzo’s got stuff to do too and is likely just as worried as I am about making his deadlines.

I spin in place, wrapping my arms around his waist and looking up to meet his worried eyes. “I’m sorry, I know you’re stressed out too. I just . . .”

I break.

Right there on the dance floor, with partygoers dancing to *Get Low* and singing about furry boots with zero cares in the world. I fall apart in the comforting embrace of Lorenzo’s arms.

The tears come hot and hard, washing away everything I’ve worked so hard

for like it's nothing. I have poured my everything into SweetPea and into this wedding, knowing that it would be make it or break it for me. I never truly considered that it might actually break me, though. I arrogantly thought I could handle anything and would make this wedding my bitch, even with Meredith working against me.

Until now.

That it's not even Meredith's doing but my own choice to fuck off during crunch time makes it suck that much worse.

Lorenzo holds me tight, his palms soothingly rubbing over my back. "Oh, *mia rosa*," he murmurs softly.

I can sense Lorenzo and Janey having a silent conversation around me and blink the tears away long enough to see Janey shrug, telling Lorenzo that she doesn't know what to do.

About me? About this mess? About tomorrow?

Probably all of the above. I'm not the fall-apart type. I'm the crisis management sort that you want on your team when the shit hits the fan.

"We can handle this, Abs. You and me, we got this. Flower power all the way," Janey vows.

"Breathe, Abigail. Focus on the here and now and just breathe." I tune in to Lorenzo's calm breaths . . . in and out, in and out . . . making myself breathe with him.

Between the two of them and a deep well of my own strength, I pull it together, remembering who I am and what I'm capable of. I make the conscious decision to pull up my big girl panties and handle my shit.

I am Abigail Fucking Andrews—flower lover, businesswoman, and creative problem solver.

Nothing has happened yet. This is still nothing more than the potential for failure, not an actual catastrophe.

I wipe my tears away with the back of my hand, give Lorenzo a soft smile of apology that he returns slowly, and smooth my dress and hair. Like Mom always said, 'you can't be put together if you're not put together.'

Well, it was something like that. Or maybe I'm making it up on the fly because I need a little pep talk? Whatever she did or didn't say, I feel better with my back straight and my worries exposed to the light of day to be addressed.

"New plan. Let's go talk to the captain. See what the ETA is on the repairman because if it's the same guy who worked on the cooler, we need a plan B."

"Yes, ma'am," Janey clips out with a salute.

Lorenzo places his hand on the small of my back as he leads me across the

floor once again. There's no time for any booty shaking or playing this time, but even that small supportive touch is all I need. A show of his strength and that though he's guiding me, I'm leading this ship. If I can just get it to fucking move.

We are on a mission.

Halfway across the floor, Emily calls out, "Abi! There you are, silly girl! I was looking for you." She doesn't miss a step of the dance she and Doug are doing. "We're going to hit the blackjack table again since we've got some more time. Wanna play with us?"

"Sorry, can't," I say dismissively, trying to move through the crowd.

"Aw, c'mon! It'll be fun. They're giving chips out now, no money needed," she cajoles.

Her smile is plastered on, but one look in her eyes tells me exactly what she's alluding to.

She thinks I care about the money? Is that supposed to be a dig about my family's riches compared to my lack thereof?

Emily must sense that she's made her point because she verbally dances backward. "You know because of the engine thing." She waves her hand in the air like the 'engine thing' is nothing.

God, how did I let myself get caught up in this again? Especially when there are more important things going on. She's deftly played me right into a corner where she can pretend she was being friendly and inviting me to play a game, and if I say anything snarky, I come out looking like the overreacting bitch.

"No," I tell her more firmly.

"Ooh, you scared I'll beat you again?" she teases, but I can hear the mean-girl thread of challenge. Two steps forward, jab-jab, retreat. It's a ploy she's used time and time again.

One I've honestly played myself a time or two as well, not shutting this down from the get-go but fighting back in small slices of verbal warfare. I just can't anymore. I'm at the end of my rope, and my give-a-fucker is fresh out of fucks to give. At least about this.

Truthfully, my heart hasn't been in it for years, and look where falling back into this trap has gotten me. I'm disappointed in myself.

No more.

"I'm done, Emily," I say flatly. "Done with cards, done with playing games, done with competing with you for no reason. I'm better than this. Hell, maybe you're better than this too and we just fell into old habits? But I'm done. Truthfully, I haven't thought of you or high school in years, and we both know why. As of right now, I'm going back to not thinking of you anymore. Have a

nice life. I truly mean that. I hope you have a great life and a long, happy marriage.” I say that last part to Doug, whose brows are knit together in confusion. Emily can explain it to him . . . or not. I’m out of here. “Excuse me.”

Emily’s jaw has dropped open further and further during my little speech. But when I try to walk away, she grabs my arm, her nails digging into the mild sunburn on my skin.

“You always did think you were better than everyone else, didn’t you, Abi? And now, you think you can get the last word in and then walk away from me like I’m nothing?” Emily sneers.

Lorenzo would’ve let us be if she’d only verbally lashed out, but her fingers denting into the flesh of my arm is too much and he steps in close to our long-coming showdown. He growls, “Get your hands off her. Now.”

Doug seems to realize that things have gotten way out of hand and has zero interest in some fight with Lorenzo to defend their brides’ honor. “Em . . . babe, what the hell?” To Lorenzo, he tries to joke, “Might’ve gotten a little carried away with the wine, ya know?” He mimes tossing back drink after drink.

But it’s not that. Emily’s stone-cold sober. We just bring out the worst in each other like kerosene and fire.

I jerk my arm out of Emily’s grasp. “Yes, I can just walk away. I’m going to live my life and be happy . . . for me. If you need your life to be better than someone else’s just so you can enjoy it, that’s on you, and quite frankly, it has nothing to do with me.”

With that, I walk away feeling like a thousand-pound weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I can’t believe I let it get so far! What was I thinking?

Mom would probably be mortified that I’ve been so awful and equally aghast at my rudeness in handling it. And Violet would’ve told me to just rip Emily’s extensions out and call it a day. But Courtney? I think my Ice Queen sister and her cool managing of situations have rubbed off on me in a good way.

Let’s hope that stays true as I talk to the captain.



“LET’S GO THROUGH IT AGAIN,” I tell Janey who has swiped a notepad and pen from somewhere. Her petty theft is the least of my problems, and I’m thankful for her sticky fingers as she stands at the ready to take notes.

She nods and I start.

“Captain said the doo-hickey is the only way to get us moving again, and they can’t get one until morning when the boat repair shop opens—”

“No, he said that’s ‘worst-case scenario’. There’s a chance they’ll get the

shop owner out of bed in the middle of the night to get the part. Island cooperation, he called it,” Janey corrects me.

“I think we should plan to be out here all night, just in case,” Lorenzo adds.

All on the same page, we continue. “That means our prep time for the rehearsal dinner is going to be cut short . . . way short . . . tomorrow. I’m so glad we already finished some of the arrangements.” The smallest seed of relief sprouts inside my soul at our foresight to do that. “It’s the only way we might survive tomorrow.”

“Tonight.” Janey points at her watch. “It’s already after midnight, so technically the rehearsal dinner is in” —she does the math on her fingers— “eighteen hours.”

“Fuck! Let’s mentally walk through the ballroom and double-check everything we need versus what we have done,” I decide. “I want a prioritized list that we can use as soon as we hit land.”

As Janey and I do what we do best, Lorenzo steps away to call Esmar and give him the update. He feels sure that Esmar and the kitchen crew can get things started in the morning if he’s not there, but there are some things only Lorenzo can do. And that’s what has him as worried as we are.

A couple of hours later, Janey and I have whittled our plan of attack down to minute-by-minute so we stay on target. If only we can start on time.

Because as of now, we’re still sitting dead in the water.

“Okay, Boss. I think I’m going to grab some food—they opened the buffet back up. When I walked by earlier, it was all crappy chips and raisin granola bars, and I passed, but now I’m desperate enough that I’ll take even that to fill this void in my belly.” As if on cue, her stomach makes a loud growling noise and she pats it softly. “I know, I’m gonna feed you, little fella.” To me, she continues, “And then I’m going to curl up in whatever corner I can find for a catnap. You should do the same. We’re gonna be burning the candle at both ends and in the middle, so a few minutes of shut-eye might be our saving grace.”

Janey is probably right, but I can’t imagine sleeping right now. I’m too worried that I’ll get back late, not get the list done, and will ruin the rehearsal dinner. Meredith would love that, but I don’t want to fail Claire . . . or myself.

“You go ahead. I’ll find you if I think of anything else,” I tell Janey to send her on her way.

As soon as she’s gone, Lorenzo pulls me in for a hug. “Ah, *mia rosa*, it will be okay. Have faith.”

With my cheek pressed to his chest, I can hear the steady thud of his heartbeat. The relaxed metronome of it soothes me as my breath slows to match. “Thank you for your help. What about you?”

“Esmar was still in the kitchen finishing dinner service. He was able to reassign a couple of people to do what is needed. I feel fortunate that I have assistance in the kitchen right now, making progress while I am here, while you and Janey are both stuck in limbo.”

The announcer happens to be walking by and hears only the last bit of what Lorenzo says and jumps to a very wrong conclusion. “Limbo? Great idea, man! I gotcha, let me get the limbo stick and we’ll get *down*.” The dark-haired, heavysset man flashes a bright smile that says he’s quite happy to keep this party going as long as needed and holds up a hand for a high-five.

Lorenzo doesn’t have the heart to correct the man and he shuffle-steps away singing so off-key that I want to shove drink umbrellas in my ears, “Limbo, limbo, lim-BO!”

Or maybe those umbrellas would be better in the announcer’s mouth, I think.

I look to Lorenzo, fighting a smile that seems completely out of place, given the situation, to see that he’s doing the same. We’re definitely losing it.

Have you ever been so far gone into things so utterly awful that all you can do is laugh? Like it’s so bad that you can’t even produce tears? That’s absolutely where I am. Like the universe is saying ‘take that . . . and that . . . and how about a little of this . . .’ and I’m ducking and weaving the dodgeballs so they don’t pop my head like a watermelon.

“Oh, my God, we have to get out of here! I cannot limbo!” I cry out in laughing horror.

“Come on.” Lorenzo grabs my hand and leads me through the swarm of people on deck. We keep going until we find a quiet corner on a lower deck with a soft outdoor couch.

I collapse onto it breathlessly. “Hopefully, he won’t find us here. No more dancing. Not tonight, maybe never again.” I’m not serious, but if ever there were a time to making sweeping, melodramatic proclamations, the day your business potentially implodes seems like the right time to do so.

Lorenzo sits down next to me and then rearranges us so that I’m leaning back on his chest between his spread legs. “Relax,” he orders softly, and somehow, I do.

His fingers trace up the bare flesh of my arms, pulling goosebumps to the surface. His touch isn’t sexual this time, merely comforting as he makes his way to my shoulders. He massages them more firmly, prodding at the knots he finds until I groan in relief.

“What was home like for you?” I ask him. I need distraction from the shitstorm looming on the horizon, and learning more about Lorenzo, about what makes him the man he is, is the best possible one I can imagine.

“Home?” he repeats.

“Yeah, Posi . . .Pusi . . .Pussytano?” I’m butchering the name of his home town, but my brain cells aren’t firing on all cylinders because he’s moved up to massaging my scalp. I never knew that was a thing, or at least not a thing I’d enjoy like this. There’s one spot on the back of my skull that has me melting into a drooling, moaning puddle of relaxation.

Lorenzo’s laugh vibrates through my back and bounces me. “Positano,” he corrects. “It is home, I suppose. Where I grew up, at least, and where my family remains.” He’s quiet and contemplative for a moment, and I wonder if he’s back in Italy inside his mind. “The streets are cobblestone and the buildings are bright, rising up from the coast. Tourists come for the beaches, but much like anywhere, it’s simply home to me. Though I haven’t been back in too long.”

He sounds much more certain when he calls it ‘home’ this time. I like that, though I don’t know why. Perhaps it’s just that I want him to feel like he has a safe place to go, always, no matter where his travels take him. Which also makes me question what’s going to happen when we leave Aruba. Will he move on to the next place or stay? Will he stay with me?

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, but he hits that spot on my skull again with his thumb and I moan instead.

“And you, *mia rosa*? Tell me of your home.”

He doesn’t mean America, or even my hometown. I tell him what he’s really asking, or maybe it’s just what I want to share with him. “SweetPea is my home. Everyone thought I was crazy when I stepped out and did it, or they thought Dad was going to support me while I ‘played with flowers’, but that’s not it at all. I had this dream, a goal, and I built it from the ground up with my own hard work. I love it there, making people happy, bringing an unexpected joy to their day with something as simple and beautiful as a flower. It’s the best of both worlds for me—creativity and business.”

“You are a successful businesswoman,” he summarizes. “Brilliance and beauty in one.”

I laugh, saying sassily, “That’s definitely thanks to my parents. Got my good looks from my momma, and my business smarts from my daddy.”

“They are important to you.”

“My parents? Yeah. My whole family is close, too close, some say, considering my brother married my best friend, and his best friend is married to our sister.”

“And here we are, you and your best friend’s cousin.”

We talk about everything and nothing, sharing stories from our youth and dreams for our future. Though we’re careful not to delve too deeply into the

future of *us*, both of us careful with our words.

I do learn that Lorenzo wants to learn Creole cooking, “The real thing, from an old woman who cooks for her family with recipes handed down for generations and stored only in her mind, not a typical chef,” and that he wants to visit the Galapagos Islands, not for anything food-related but to see the tortoises because “They’re ancient and amazing.”

I tell him about propagating my own varieties of flowers and plants and my desire to do more upscale weddings and events, and I share that tortoises terrify me.

“It’s not like they can run after you,” he argues.

“Doesn’t matter. Scaly, creepy, no-teeth monsters. Noping right out of that.”

We laugh and talk and snuggle, and before long, the sun is rising slowly over the horizon in broad strokes of orange and pink that obliterate the purple of night.

Lorenzo hears it first, the hum of an engine. We sit up and look at each other with shock and hope. “Let’s go see how fast we can get moving.”

On the deck, a small crowd has gathered, including Janey, who looks pretty refreshed, all things considered. She’s the only one, though. The party atmosphere of last night has deteriorated, turning everyone else into a walking zombie pack that smells fresh meat.

“How long is this going to take?”

“I need to get back to the resort. Our flight leaves today!”

“I expect a full refund for this mess!”

The repairman, who thankfully isn’t the same one from the cooler, waves his hands at the crowd, trying to get them to back up. “None of that has anything to do with me. All I do is fix shit, and I can’t do that if you’re in my way.”

Ooh, he means business. I like this guy instantly and hope that he’s just as efficient at getting this ship moving.

He pushes his way through, and attention turns to the boat driver. “What about you? Can you take me back? This is ridiculous.” I don’t know who asked because the voice comes from deep in the crowd.

The driver shakes his head. “No can do. Little boat only holds four, and I’m all booked up for the return trip.”

“With whom?” that same voice calls.

“Not you,” the driver replies.

The crowd starts to disperse, though there are lots of grumbles and even a few threats of ‘we’ll see about that’, and the driver turns to Lorenzo with a smile.

“Chef! How you doing?”

Lorenzo holds a hand out and shakes with the boat driver. “Been better, Augie. Those seats aren’t for us, by any chance, are they?”

Augie holds up a finger to his lips. “Esmar says you’d best get your ass in the kitchen straight from the dock and that you owe him an entire dinner shift of pans.”

“Deal,” Lorenzo agrees easily. “Let’s go,” he says to me and Janey.

Augie helps Janey into the boat, and then Lorenzo jumps in before turning around to help me.

“Hey!” I hear from behind me.

I look back and see Emily glaring at me, red with fury. I’m sure she thinks I’m getting this special privilege because of my last name. But nope, this is all Lorenzo. And really . . . why does it even matter?

Once upon a time, I would’ve smugly waved at her. I’m not innocent in our battle over the years. But now, I just sigh and turn back to the boat, letting Lorenzo help me in.

The rehearsal dinner is in . . . seven hours, and we have at least twelve hours’ worth of work, according to our minute-by-minute game plan.

CHAPTER 17

At the level of society Claire and Cole inhabit, a rehearsal dinner isn't a quick ceremony walkthrough followed by foot-long sandwiches before heading home to get a good night's sleep type of deal.

Tonight is a full-blown event before the actual Big Event.

As soon as Augie docks the boat, Lorenzo presses a quick kiss to my lips and then we're off and running—him to the kitchen, and Janey and me to the cooler and workroom.

Our list comes in handy, giving us a plan of attack.

Table centerpieces . . . check.

Mock bouquet . . . check.

Single bird of paradise stems for bridesmaids . . . check, freshly stolen from the greenhouse.

Various other small arrangements for the different stations . . . check.

By the hair on our chinny-chin-chins—not that we actually have any—we pull it off. Speaking of hair, my thick mane looks like I've stuck my finger in a light socket . . . twice . . . after last night's sea air and today's whiplash of work. I take a quick moment to refasten my messy bun and give Janey a look. "Ready?"

She pulls the list out of her cleavage, where she's apparently storing it for safekeeping and easy access, and scans it quickly. "Done to the dun-dun-da-dunnnn," she sings to the wedding march tune.

Gathering everything on the carts, I glance around the workroom one more time to make sure we have everything we need from here to go up to the ballroom. Stage two of prep starts now.

And I'm already exhausted after not sleeping at all last night. After this, I have every plan of falling into bed with Lorenzo, snuggling right up close to his warm body, laying my head on his bare chest . . . and sleeping for days. Or until

my early morning alarm tomorrow to get ready for the wedding.

But before I can fade into a few hours of blissful rest, I have to get through this.

“Make sure everything is perfect,” I tell Janey upstairs in the ballroom as we set up arrangements on the center of each table.

“Duh,” she sasses back. “I figured you’d want me to fuck stuff up. No?”

The lady setting out plates laughs at our banter.

There’s a whole crew prepping for tonight, and we all work together in a coordinated dance to get everything ready. The decorators have draped purple and hot pink glitter tulle around the room, giving it a tropical tent appearance, the lighting crew has added sparkly candelabras to the tablescape which highlight the orange and pink flower arrangements perfectly, and the tables are set with white china and gold flatware.

We’re ready and everything looks beautiful, right up until Meredith rolls in and brings a thundercloud of doom with her.

“People, people . . . no.” She goes around the room, nitpicking this and that. She touches one of my arrangements, flicking at a bloom, and I nearly come unglued and karate chop her hand off.

The only reason Meredith keeps both hands is Janey’s quick thinking when she grabs me around the shoulders. It probably looks friendly, but she’s hissing in my ear. “Don’t you fucking dare, Abs. Fix. Your. Face! You can read every murderous thought you’re having like a neon sign.”

I try. I’m not known for my resting bitch face. That’s Courtney. I’m usually the Andrews who always has a sunny smile for everyone, but Meredith irks the shit out of me. She pushes buttons I never even knew I had.

“Masquerade theme,” Meredith draws out as though teaching the words to kindergarteners who don’t speak English.

Wait, is masquerade even English? I have no idea, and why am I thinking of it now?

“Not Mardi Gras, for heaven’s sake! Remove the beads.” As she barks orders, she grabs the offending strands of beads from the middle of the table and forces them into the hand of the nearest worker. “The last thing we need is the press getting photos of the bride and groom with ‘show your tits’ beads draped around their necks.”

I stifle a laugh that Meredith Wildeman even knows the word tits, much less said it aloud. I’m not the only one fighting the laugh either, because suddenly, everyone is face-down or giving Meredith their back as we bustle around to get things up to her standards without getting called out for laughing at her.

I try to imagine Meredith at a New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration, riding

down Bourbon Street on a big float, and just can't do it. She looks out of place enough in this ballroom with its luxury masquerade décor.

"Flower girl, the sweetheart table . . . fix it."

"On it," I say, not correcting her. She's stressed to the nth degree. I can see that and understand it, but seriously, does it take that much to simply call me Abi? Hell, I'd take one of those bitchy 'Miss Andrews' sneers at this point.

I putz with the sweetheart table, not fixing anything because nothing is actually wrong with the beautiful setup, and then the doors open.

Claire and Cole come in, looking happy, tan, and beaming with love. Claire has on a white gauzy dress with tiny seed pearls along the bodice that give it a vintage and romantic vibe. Cole has on a khaki linen suit with an untucked white button-up shirt beneath. Both are barefoot. For some reason, that's what makes the whole image perfect. Like they're more real with no shoes on.

Claire exclaims as they come into the ballroom. "Oh, my gosh! It's gorgeous!" Her hands cover her wide-open mouth and a second later, she's tearing up. "It's everything I imagined."

That moment right there is why I love what I do. I soak it up, letting it erase all the craziness of today. Hell, of the whole week. Claire's happy tears simply wash it all away.

"Wildeman's orders," Janey says as she hands me a black mask. It's Zorro style, just large enough to cover my eye sockets but still let me see.

I look around to find all the staff wearing black masks to go with their black head to toe uniforms. Typically, the dark clothing helps us disappear into the background, as staff isn't meant to be seen at an event like this. But the masks make us even more anonymous.

I see Claire and Cole donning white masks and the guests putting on various colors and laughing along with Claire's fun masquerade idea. It does actually change the mood to one that seems more mysterious and exciting.

Standing off to the side out of the way, I watch as everyone mingles and finds their seats. And then dinner begins.

But this isn't any old dinner. Not for this crowd.

The door to the kitchen opens, and I expect to see the waiters beginning service. And they do, except the whole line of servers is following a woman in a full ball-gown dress of purple and pink with a painted face and a feathery mask, who's twirling sticks with lit sparklers on the ends.

The crowd gasps in delight and applauds the woman's exciting spectacle. The photographer runs in front of the sweetheart table as the firework-twirling woman stands behind Claire and Cole to take photos.

At the end of the line of waiters, Lorenzo comes out, looking sharp and

suave in full black with a mask of his own. Even his chef jacket is black tonight. There might be major hoopla happening in the ballroom, like literal fire, but Lorenzo is still what draws my eye. He's captivating, and I'm not the only one who notices.

But somehow, though there is a roomful of gorgeous women all clad in fancy dresses and shiny baubles giving him appraising looks and I'm hidden away to blend in, his eyes find me easily.

His smile is everything and over too fast when he turns to face Claire and Cole to explain the first course.

Each course is the same—some new visual spectacle, servers, and then Lorenzo. I live for the moment he walks through those doors and his eyes find mine, promising heat and more.

After dessert, the party really gets started and the DJ plays tunes designed to get everyone on the dance floor. The Cupid Shuffle might be old and cheesy, but everyone from the twenty-somethings to Grandma and Grandpa can step to the left and right when they're told to. And I've never seen old folks get down as when Cole's parents break it down to *Let Me Clear My Throat*.

As Claire and Cole enjoy the night before their wedding, partying and doing it up big with their families, I feel a presence looming beside me. I turn to see Lorenzo, his chef jacket now absent, but he's still dressed in head to toe black, including his mask.

"*Mia rosa*," he murmurs. "I thought about you all day, worried you wouldn't get everything completed, but it all looks beautiful. Not as lovely as you, of course," he says with a heated smirk. Even with the mask, I can see his eyes trace down my body.

To be fair, I'm not dressed for seduction. Slim black pants, a black blouse, and black flats aren't exactly a sexy, flirty look. But his gaze sees right through the plain clothes, almost like he can see my bare skin beneath.

I smile that even with everything he had going on, he thought of me. I confide, "I kept asking Janey if she thought you were okay. I even offered to run to the kitchen to get us some food just so I could check on you." I shake my head sadly, chuckling at the memory. "She told me no and shoved a protein bar in my hand. Told me to eat that if I was hungry."

Lorenzo's laugh is warm, washing over me. It's only been hours since I've been with him, but I've missed him. I want to know everything about his day, how the kitchen was when he showed up, if he feels proud of his work, but first . . . I need to know what he tastes like again.

As though he can read the turn of my thoughts, his eyes go dark, nearly the color of the mask that surrounds them. Suddenly, the mask that had seemed itchy

and weird feels naughty and the anonymity freeing.

“Come with me, Abigail.” An order, but a request all the same. If I brush him off and claim that disappearing in the middle of an event is unprofessional, he’ll agree and wait for later. But I don’t want to wait.

I scan the room out of habit, noting that everything looks impeccable. The arrangements are holding their shapes, the tablescapes are lovely even after the dishes have been cleared, and everyone is having a great time.

I nod and let Lorenzo lead me out of the main ballroom with a guiding hand on my lower back. He draws me to a dark corner, pulling the glittery tulle back and gesturing for me to go ahead. What I find is a doorway hidden in shadows by the lighting and fabric overlay.

“We’ll have to be quick and quiet,” I whisper, knowing he can’t see me because I can’t see him.

He uses my voice to find me in the dark, his lips landing on mine with precise aim. Our bodies mold together, our hands touching and exploring in the dark.

And I’m struck by the most brilliant idea I’ve ever had. I take charge, pushing him back against the wall. “Abigail?” He chuckles in surprise.

But I’m about to surprise him a hell of a lot more.

I let my hands trace his chest, my nails scraping at the ridges of his abs through his shirt until I find his belt. Undoing it and then his pants, I free his cock.

He moans as I take him in hand, giving his hard length a few strokes. And then I drop to my knees in front of him. I let my hands guide his length to my mouth and lay a few sweet kisses to his crown.

I close my eyes even though I’m blind in the dark and encircle his cock with my wet, warm mouth. Up and down, I move slowly and methodically to coat him in saliva and lap up the precum at his tip.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans as his hands twine into my hair. He doesn’t guide me, though, simply letting me work him, and it’s like he needs to touch me to believe this is real and not a figment of his imagination, a dark fantasy of a faceless mouth sucking him off with a party still loudly raging an unlocked door away.

This is so dangerous, and yet I’ve never been more turned on. I enjoy giving Lorenzo pleasure and feel a thrill at the muffled grunts and curses he’s muttering as he tries to stay quiet.

I hum against his skin, “Mmm . . . my poor Lorenzo.” I pull back and use my hands for a moment as I tease him, whispering, “It feels so good. You want to be loud, but you know we might be heard. And how would it look for the chef to be found mouth-fucking the florist?”

“Ugh,” he growls, his hips pushing forward to slide his cock in my tight-fisted grip. “You’re torturing me,” he hisses. “You’ll pay for this, *mia rosa*. Now, suck me.”

He’s on the edge. I can hear it in the tight, strangled words and feel it as his balls pull up tight against my fist. I don’t tease anymore. I swallow his cock as deeply as I can, letting it bump into my throat. I hear a thump from above and realize he’s thrown his head back to the wall in pleasure. I imagine the cords of his neck straining, his teeth gritted. And so I stop, returning to light licks along his tip until he’s trembling beneath me.

With a smile, I suck him down once again until I find a rhythm that pushes him higher and higher, moaning around his thickness. My eyes are closed tight, stars shooting across my vision, and I remind myself to breathe. Inhaling his musky, manly scent makes me desperate for more. I want him, all of him. So this time, when his breath catches in his lungs, his hands bury into my hair, and he thrusts into my throat, I take it all.

He comes, explosively filling my mouth with rope after rope of thick, creamy cum that I swallow down hungrily, reflexively not letting a single drop spill out of my lips.

“*Cazzo, mia rosa*,” he mutters on a jagged exhale.

I wipe at my lips, dainty as can be, like the society-bred woman I am . . . *who just sucked off a guy in a dark hallway*, I think with a smile. Rising, I find Lorenzo’s lips and give him a quick kiss. “I need to get back out there. I’ve been gone too long.”

He growls. “No, I want to taste you too.”

Even though he can’t see me, I shake my head. “Later. Tonight.”

He catches me in his hands, cupping my face. “I’ll hold you to that, Abigail,” he vows before kissing me deeply.

“I’ll go out first. Give it a minute so we don’t look suspicious, and then you can come out too.”

I feel his chuckle, his chest jumping beneath my palms. “Why does it sound like you’ve done this before?”

“A girl never reveals her secrets,” I tease.

Truthfully, I’ve never done anything like this. Oh, I’ve made out in closets, but when you’re a stupid teenager and come out after Seven Minutes in Heaven, everyone cheers and asks you how it was. I definitely do not think that would be the case at this party. And full disclosure, it was awful as a teen, all unsure and awkward and never more than some over-the-clothes petting.

Blowing Lorenzo at a rehearsal dinner, in contrast, was awesome.

I straighten my clothes, even remembering to smooth my hair back a bit from

Lorenzo's ruffling fingers, before quietly and slowly opening the door back into the ballroom.

I'm still behind the glittery tulle, a black-dressed shadow in a shadowy room, when I hear something that stops me in my tracks.

"I can't talk now. She's right here," Cole says. Peering through the haze of the fabric, I can see he's got his phone pressed to his ear. A dark thought goes through me and settles like a stone in my stomach.

It's not so much what he's said but the secretive way he said it and the way he's looking over to Claire like he's making sure she's blissfully unaware of his conversation.

No, don't jump to conclusions, Abi. There's no use in doing that.

"Yeah, I'll call you back later after she goes to sleep. I love you, too."

And with that, Cole hangs up the phone and walks off to rejoin the party.

Uhm, excuse me . . . what? The? Fuck? He loves who?

Because his bride to be is standing a few feet away, smiling and laughing as she talks to an old lady, and the only other person I could think of that he'd be saying 'I love you' to is his mom, and she's on the dance floor with his dad.

Shit.

CHAPTER 18

I'm ready for today.

I've been ready for a long time. Taking this last-minute opportunity to come to Aruba to be a guest chef for the wedding of the year had sounded like an escape from a bad situation at Avanti. But since I've arrived, it's been a dream come true. Maybe even better than a dream.

Cooking alongside Esmar and his crew, I've learned so much—about the flavors of the island, the creativity he's honed over decades as a chef, and his own congenial style of running a kitchen, which is so different from others I've worked for who felt that yelling and insults were the best way to command respect. Esmar, on the other hand, is welcoming and generous, even friendly with his team.

I'm thankful for that because it's allowed me the freedom to make several meals and dishes over this week, for Claire's events and even for dinner services. It's been a true culinary gift I am thankful to have received.

And tonight is the proverbial cherry on top.

I'm running the kitchen for the wedding, even Esmar taking orders from me.

"This is your show, Chef, what you were hand-selected and flown in to do. Show us what you've got," he'd said.

And I am.

"Henri, more lime on the albacore crudo," I order.

"Yes, Chef," he answers as he grabs another fresh lime and begins juicing for his life.

I step to the pasta workstation, double-checking that my instructions are being followed correctly. Letting go of that duty had been difficult. It's the one thing that always makes me feel at home, like I'm honoring all the lessons taught in the steamy kitchens of Positano. But I can't be locked down in one place. I see that Gilberto, for all his craziness, is hyper-focused on his dough. "Good. Steady hands make for consistent noodles."

“Steady, Chef,” he repeats with a smile.

I look around in delight, seeing dishes I designed being crafted with care. I’ve stuck to my roots, the foundation of Italian cooking that lives and breathes in my soul, but added touches of the island to honor our beautiful locale.

Finding myself next to Esmar, I whisper, “I don’t want to jinx things, but it seems as though this is all going well, yes?”

He smiles and touches the wooden spoon sitting next to him. I do the same to banish any bad luck my words might’ve conjured.

“You are a thoughtful chef, Lorenzo. You should not be surprised that prep is going well.”

His praise means a lot to me. “Thank you, Chef.”

He scans the room, double-checking on his crew before tilting his head toward the dry storage. Silently, I follow him to the semi-private area, sure that he’s going to impart some knowledge or give me some feedback on something I can do better.

“Have you enjoyed your short time here on the island, Chef Toscani?” Esmar says formally.

“Absolutely,” I answer instantly.

The truth is, I have. More than I had anticipated.

The time in the kitchen has been amazing, but also, the time exploring the island with Abigail has been unexpected and powerful. It feels like I have this full, vibrant life where I never know what to expect—are the papayas ripe to make Aruban hot sauce this morning? Will Gilberto show up on time or will Henri have to drag him out of some random guest’s bed to get him to the line, where he’ll regale us with tales that I’m certain are more embellishment than truth? Am I playing along with some honeymoon scheme by making eyes at Abigail? What shocking craziness will come out of Abigail’s mouth when the two of us talk for hours after the sun has long since disappeared below the horizon?

It feels like every moment is full of possibility.

Esmar nods, a wide smile showing his white teeth. “Good, good. I know you travel frequently, a man who always wanders but is never lost, you are.” He makes it sound fanciful and romantic to live out of a duffle bag so small it can attach to my motorcycle. “So I know I cannot keep you locked down. But I would like to offer a position for however long you’d like it. A week, a month, six? I would be honored if you would work alongside me.”

I’m shocked. I’m honored. I’m excited. I’m . . . terrified.

“Wow, I don’t . . . I don’t know what to say,” I stutter. “Uh, first, thank you, of course. Thank you, truly. But . . .”

And that's where I get stuck.

This is how so many of my opportunities have come up over the years—a friend of a friend recommending me or a chef coming through a restaurant that I'm working at, or even my hearing of a chef I'd like to learn from and approaching them directly. It's always been a buzzing thrill of 'what if?'

If I stay here, I will get to work with Esmar, Gilberto, Henri, and more.

If I stay here, I will live in paradise, steps from the sea.

If I stay here, I will have a whole world of new foods and flavors to learn and incorporate into my portfolio and palate.

If I stay here, I will never see Abigail again.

She will go home, this I know for certain. Back to her family, her business, and her future. She is not a flower arrangement to be pulled from the dirt for transport anywhere I wish. No, she is an oak tree with roots spread deep and wide, meant to live out her life in one place.

Would Aruba be the same without her here? I don't know.

But will returning ruin things between Abigail and me? I don't know that, either. Perhaps this is nothing more than one of her schemes that has gotten out of hand, and when we hit the mainland, it will vanish into thin air.

Esmar senses my uncertainty. He pats my shoulder, much like a father would a son. "No rush, Lorenzo. The offer has no expiration date. I simply want you to know . . . you are always welcome here. I do not share often or well, but with you, I would share my kitchen anytime. Or if you'd rather run your own pass, there are two other restaurants on the resort grounds that would be lucky bastards to have you."

Emotion makes my throat tight. "Thank you, Chef. Working with you has been a true honor." I shake his hand, both our hands squeezing respectfully.

But never one to play too fast and loose, Esmar adds, "By the way, I put you on the schedule for dinner service on Monday night."

I laugh. "My flight leaves on Sunday."

"Aah, we shall see, Chef Toscani."



"CHEF!"

I do not have time for this. Though everything is running smoothly—I touch the wooden spoon again—I don't have time to pause for Meredith's meddling.

But such is life.

"Yes, Meredith," I say, not stopping my movements as I add the final touches to the tray of hors d'oeuvres.

She oversees my work for a moment, and internally, I dare her to say one word. She doesn't know a thing about fine cuisine, probably eats a microwaved Lean Cuisine each night or nibbles on celery stalks to maintain her harsh, angular shape.

"I received the menu . . . this time."

Ah, come to rub my nose in the fact that in the end, I did acquiesce to her request. She seems to feel some victory in my choice to send on the list of courses this evening, but it's reasonable for an event like this one. I will not be going out to make course announcements as tonight is all about the bride and groom, so it's common courtesy to let the guests know what they're eating.

"Yes." I don't have time to play her games or invite further conversation.

Still, she lingers. "What is that?" she asks sharply as I begin adding small yellow blooms to each plate.

"Marigold."

She balks, her voice reaching high into the screech zone. "Flowers? On the tuna?" She makes it sound like the most ridiculous idea she's ever heard.

I pause and turn to face her fully, standing to my full height. "Ms. Wildeman, Claire hired me to provide her guests with a wedding feast and I am doing so with the full skill and scope of my years of experience." I let my judgement of her lack of palate shine through. "If you, as the wedding planner, would've liked ingredient by ingredient approvals, then you should've requested it long ago. Right now, as the chef, I have two hundred more plates to prepare. If you'll excuse me."

Cold fury freezes her face with her lips pressed into a thin line and her penciled-on brows drawn up . . . well, as high as they can be, considering her forehead doesn't move.

"Chef Toscani, you would do well to remember that I might be a *wedding planner*" —she mimics my obvious distaste, mistaking it for her profession when it's entirely personal— "but I work with a long list of clients on a multitude of events. And I find your lack of professionalism alarming. I'm not sure I would be comfortable recommending your services to my clients in the future."

"Okay."

She thought her threat would hold water with me, but I don't give a fuck about her snooty list of clients. I want to cook, to create, and will happily do so for people who can appreciate that.

Hell, I don't even know where I'm going to be next week! Why would I bend to this imaginary list of clients in one town that she's holding over me?

But Meredith Wildeman is a cunning woman. She might not have anything

to lord over my head, but she does have an ace up her sleeve.

“I do wonder,” she muses as she taps her red lips with an equally red-tipped finger, “where you got these marigolds? Is it from the flower girl? I hope she hasn’t let her work suffer from providing the kitchen staff with flowers. I guess I’ll have to see, won’t I?”

Flower girl. Kitchen staff. Every word she speaks makes it quite clear that she feels we are all beneath her, puppets for her play.

And her threat is thinly veiled. If she can’t get at me, she’ll go after someone else I care about.

“You mean Abigail?” I correct, feeling my blood heat. How dare this bitch!

Meredith smiles serenely. “Ah, yes, Miss Andrews, the flower girl who gets by on her name. Or her father’s, I guess I should say,” she clarifies snidely. “If her work isn’t up to snuff, I guess I shan’t be recommending her either. Such. A. Pity.”

Who the fuck says ‘shan’t’ in regular conversation when they’re not quoting Elizabethan literature? Or wanting to sound like a fucking Disney villain?

“I’m sure the arrangements are exactly as Claire ordered,” I reply coldly, gritting my teeth. I want to smash things. I want to go out there and tell Abigail that this bitch is threatening her business. I want to tell Claire exactly where she can shove her wedding planner, and it’s nowhere as nice as an island paradise.

No, I’d leave Meredith in the desolate cold of Siberia where she belongs. I bet her blood wouldn’t even freeze, cold bitch that she is.

But this a battle of words, of leverage. And she does have some power over Abigail, working in the city she does and with a similar clientele. Meredith Wildeman could sabotage Abigail’s plans.

“I suppose you would know. You’re rather close with Miss Andrews, are you not?” Meredith tilts her head, looking down her nose at me smugly. And that’s saying something considering I’m a good six inches taller than she is in her black heels.

“We have people in common, as you’re aware.” I’m hedging, not mentioning this week but playing on Violet as our common denominator the way Abigail and I decided to early on. It’s not the best look for the staff to be fraternizing, even if it hasn’t affected our work in the slightest.

“Hmm, it is good to have close friends and family on a trip like this,” she declares. “I’m glad you’ve gotten on so well with the other staff.”

I can see it now. The picture she’s painting . . .

One of a grand opportunity to work the wedding of the year in paradise. One where Abigail and I spend the week fucking off, taking yoga and sunset cruises, and neglecting our work. One where, regardless of the food or the flowers,

Meredith can deem them inadequate and sell the storyline that if we had only focused on what we were supposed to, things could've been so much better.

How does she even know that Abigail and I have been spending time together? Does that even matter?

Before I can respond to our verbal warfare, Esmar comes up. "Chef, you are needed at the pasta station. *Urgente!*"

Fuck! What has Gilberto gotten up to now?

I don't bother excusing myself from Meredith. I simply walk away to handle my work, exactly as I'm supposed to do. That's what a chef does—no matter what's happening, service must go on.

"Ugh, this is why I need you here!" Esmar rants loudly as we walk down the line, though now I can see that he is smiling so it can't be that bad. "I can't wait for you to help me corral this madness!"

He slaps me on the back, and I help Gilberto, having forgotten all about Meredith and her threats.

CHAPTER 19

Bouquet? Check, and looking gorgeous, if I do say so myself.
 Row cappers? Check. Janey's a boss and already has them
 installed on the final white chair lining the aisle.

Petals for the flower girls to toss, boutonnieres, and bridesmaid's bouquets?
 Check, check, and checkity-check.

"I think," I say before unleashing a bone-cracking yawn that leaves me
 wondering just where I could have built up that much tension in my jaw, "that
 we're looking good."

"Good?" Janey snaps. "I'm pretty sure you mean things are looking *Modern
 Wedding* cover ready," she declares, holding her hands up in a square like a
 photographer framing her shot.

I can't help but smile as I look around the beach setup. The archway that will
 frame Claire and Cole as they say their vows is probably the most beautiful thing
 I've ever created. Claire requested a wooden frame and white curtains to blow in
 the sea breeze but then left the details to me. "*Just make it dreamy.*"

I feel like there are degrees of dreams.

. . . a wish, which is a quick shorthand of a thought and grows into . . .

. . . a fantasy, which is layered with textures and details that make you want
 to live inside it, and if you're fortunate, it can become . . .

. . . a reality.

That's what I've done here, brought Claire's vague description of romance
 and magic to life with lush blooms and greenery. The Andean Lupine flowers
 are the cherry on the sundae.

I laugh as Janey continues her faux-photographer act and I pose as though
 I'm a model on a gorgeous set. "You're right. We're the best."

"I sincerely doubt that," a voice says behind me. Meredith was probably
 trying to frighten me, knowing her, but I'm so exhausted that I honestly
 wouldn't jump if Jason Voorhees came wading out of the Caribbean right now.

“The ceremony site’s good to go,” I assure Meredith, who sniffs in that way she has that sounds like she’s got a dry congestion but really means *We’ll see*. I wait for a few tense minutes as she looks around and comes over, nodding curtly.

“I suppose the ceremony site looks up to standard,” she concedes with an icy eye roll. Oh, not a full one—that’s way too low-brow for someone like Meredith Wildeman—but rather a side-eye roll that throws more shade than a hundred-year-old redwood tree. “Now, how does the reception space look?”

“We’re on it and running to schedule. It’ll be ready in time.”

“It had better be.” Meredith is giving it her all to be her usual snooty, bitchy self, but when she turns to walk back inside, I can’t help but see that she’s barefoot.

Guess those red-soled heels don’t work in the sand? Honestly, I’m surprised she has feet and not hooves like the demon she is. She stomps nevertheless, aiming for intimidating but looking more like a wobbly-legged drunk who can’t hold a straight line.

Janey and I hold off on our giggles until she enters the back doors of the resort, but when our eyes meet, we’re done for and the laughter erupts out of us like champagne. “Oh, my God, she’s the worst,” Janey declares.

“Shh,” I chastise her, not wanting to tempt fate that Meredith might overhear. Even though Janey is absolutely correct.

Meredith is the worst.

But she’s gone off to make someone else’s life hell for now, so we move on to the ballroom, taking advantage of her absence to work without her harsh oversight.

We’re putting the last zhuzhing touches on the tables when a bridesmaid comes in wearing a pink satin robe and fuzzy slippers, her makeup done but her hair in curlers.

“Abi?” she hisses.

“Yes?” Seeing the panic in her eyes, I amend my response. “What’s wrong?”

“The bouquet! Claire’s dog got ahold of it,” she says in near-hysterics. “Claire doesn’t know . . . yet.”

“Her what? I didn’t even know she had a dog!” My voice is too loud, drawing the attention of the other workers, and the bridesmaid shushes me with a hand.

Looking at me in confusion, she asks, “Do you not follow her? Of course, she has a dog. Adopted from a rescue that she supports and volunteers for.”

Of course. That actually sounds like something Claire would do.

“Janey, you got this?” I gesture to the tables around us.

“Yep, you handle that before the bride finds out and has a mental breakdown,” she responds, and I’m off, running for the elevator with a bucket of loose flowers, matching pace with the bridesmaid.

In the bridal suite, I find a party atmosphere with several other bridesmaids surrounding Claire. They hold up champagne flutes and smile as they ooh and ahh over how beautiful Claire is. But I see several pairs of eyes cut to me with a silent plea for HELP!

I give them a nod. I’ve got this.

And I’m quite sure of that until I see what has become of the gorgeous bouquet I designed. “Oh, no,” I cry, slapping my hands over my mouth so Claire doesn’t hear me.

The bridesmaid who came for me says, “You can fix it, right?”

I look at her with wide eyes, incredulous. “Fix this?” The flowers are destroyed, more petals than actual blooms, and the ones that are still held together at the stem have bite marks on them. “No, but I can replace it. Give me a few minutes to work my magic.”

“Please!” she begs.

A cheer goes up in the other room and Claire shouts happily, “Madison! What are you doing? Come toast with us.” The bridesmaid flushes, and I guess she’s the missing Madison.

“Go, just keep Claire in there. And where’s the dog?” The last thing I need to do is recreate a masterpiece and then have Cujo eat it again. The bridesmaid points to a kennel where a fluffy white mop of a dog is sleeping soundly.

Madison leaves me alone and I raise a brow at the dog. “Why you gotta destroy my hard work?” The dog doesn’t answer, but even in sleep, it growls unhappily.

I sort through the bouquet bits one by one to see if anything is salvageable and discover there are a few usable pieces. Very few. Using the loose blooms I brought with me, I’m able to create another bouquet. It’s not as large as the original, but it’s the perfectly round poof of multi-colored blooms that Claire requested. I even add a cascade of pearls that I swiped from the tablescap downstairs to tie it together with the whole design.

Looking at the snoring dog, I’m struck with an idea of brilliance. I grab a few more flowers and a length of ribbon to fashion a collar of sorts for Cujo, or whatever Fluffy McFlowerEater’s real name is.

“Flower girl, I thought you had already delivered the bouquet. What are you doing here?” Meredith’s voice sends a chill down my spine. How does she do that? I swear she needs a bell tied around her neck so she can’t sneak up on people.

I spin, the dog collar going behind my back. I'm sure I look as busted as I feel, though I'm not doing anything suspicious. Or at least not now that the bouquet crisis is handled.

"Oh, hi, Abi!" Claire calls from beside Meredith. "The bouquets look so gorge!" She swooshes into the room in a white satin robe, her hair and makeup perfect. She comes over to the desk to pick up the new bouquet, looking at it through glossy eyes. "I can't believe it's all happening today," she says earnestly, not even noticing that the bouquet is different than it was before.

I swear, this woman is too damn perfect. She's beautiful, kind, big-hearted, saves dogs, thinks of her guests and followers, and appreciates the work everyone's doing to make her dream come true.

If she wasn't so nice, I'd hate her. But she is . . . So. Nice.

I'm still worried about that phone call I overheard, and I even consider telling Claire about it so she could do what she wants with the information. But I don't know anything. Not really. It could've been nothing. God, I hope it's nothing. Because I don't want to be a gossip. I've seen how quickly a rumor can run amok and cause all sorts of problems. And in the end, it doesn't even matter what's true and what's exaggerated.

So I swallow my questions and let Claire's watery-eyed smile bloom. I won't take that away from her. I won't mar this day with unfounded concerns. That's the right thing to do . . . right?

Claire looks to her circle of friends, who all seem truly relaxed now that the bouquet crisis has been handled.

"I couldn't have done any of this without you guys. You were there to talk me into going out with Cole, celebrated with me when he proposed, and will be there to support me when I say 'I do' to forever with him." She snuffles and fans her face, trying to stop the tears from spilling over.

"And stash tissues," Madison offers as she pulls one from her cleavage. Claire takes it without hesitation. That's a real friendship there, boob sweat and all. The group of women all hug in one big pile as they talk, laugh, and cry about how they'll always be there for one another, no matter what.

Claire continues to look around the room, "And Holly, thank you for my hair. It's perfect. And Dominique, my makeup makes me feel so beautiful. You two have made me your canvas. And Meredith . . ." Her voice catches.

Ugh. Meredith has done a good job, I'll begrudgingly admit that. But I can't help that it'll make my stomach turn to hear Claire waxing poetic about what an amazing wedding planner Meredith is.

"I was so excited to work with Beth and had done so much to plan everything with her. That poor thing had to deal with all my Pinterest boards and

whittle all that craziness down to specifics.” Claire shakes her head like she can hardly believe what she put Beth through. “And I was so sad when she couldn’t come . . . I mean, happy for her! Of course, happy for her. But it felt like this thing we’d planned wasn’t going to be the same without her. But then you stepped in, filled Beth’s big shoes, and you’ve done everything to make those dreams come true. I know it hasn’t been an easy job. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

Claire says it so sincerely, so earnestly, that I would absolutely believe her purity of heart except that then she turns to me and there’s a fresh glint in her eye. If it were Janey, I’d think she was saying ‘I got you, bitch’, but this is Claire, the internet’s All-American sweetheart.

“And Abi . . .”

I freeze, forcing a plastic smile to my face.

“Or *Flower Girl*, as I hear Meredith call you,” she says with the smallest laugh, as if that’s utterly ridiculous. “You are so much more than that, though. You’re an artist who uses flowers as your medium. Thank you for sharing your talent with me.”

I’m touched, truly and deeply, that Claire gets what I do. Not many people do.

But while I’m floating with the happy fizz of such a feel-good compliment, Meredith looks like she sucked on a lime and followed it up with a string of black licorice. I guess Claire did take the wind out Meredith’s sails a bit, making it pretty obvious that she was a back-up, stand-in planner for who Claire really wanted. It was complimentary in a way, but not nearly the same glowing love she gave the rest of us.

“I hear I missed out on the cutest dog ever,” I blurt out, “so I wanted to bring you this. A little extra touch.” I hold out the flower-decked ribbon.

Claire squeals in delight as she grabs for it. “Oh, my gosh! It’s adorable!” She delicately runs a pink-tipped finger over the ribbon and then laughs boisterously. “Did you say ‘cutest dog’?”

I nod with a polite smile.

“Sock is cute, no doubt about that, but he’s an utter beast. I’m still working on teaching him manners.” As if the dog knows Claire is talking about him, he wakes up and bounces around in the kennel a bit, letting out a pitiful whine. Claire wiggles her fingers through the wires, and Sock settles, but not before I see why his name is Sock and not Socks. He’s a white fluff of mop, but he’s got one brown foot. “You want the pretty collar, baby?” Claire coos. “Tell Abi thank you.”

This seems like a good time for me to get back downstairs and check on

Janey. The bouquet crisis is managed, Sock has a new chew toy, and I got a little ego boost from Claire's sweet compliments. "Excuse me, I need to get back downstairs if everything's good up here?"

Madison flashes me a thumbs-up, and I run for the door before anything else can happen. I swear I feel daggers stabbing me in the back as I go though, and I'm pretty sure Meredith is shooting them with her eyes.



THE WEDDING IS . . . idyllic. The crowd's not too outrageous, only about three hundred people, which sounds like a lot, but for this degree of celebrity, it might as well be a small, intimate affair.

Standing off to the side, I look around and can place face after face. Either they're beautiful people, women and men from Claire's set who've turned their good looks and charisma into social media fame, or they're from my set like Cole. Hell, I'm surprised Ross isn't here. Cole and he weren't close in school, but sometimes, high-society isn't about how well you know someone but just that you do.

Janey sounds wistful as she whispers, "Have you ever seen the water more beautiful?"

She's right. Somehow, the clear blue Caribbean has become even more jewel-like, the sky even more dauntingly blue. Everything looks like it's been fed through a photo filter and maximized to its best settings. I think even the sand's somehow made whiter and more sugary.

The musicians start up, and first to march down the aisle is Cole with his groomsmen. He looks handsome in his white tuxedo, tropical and cool and just a little nervous. It humanizes him somehow, and a small chuckle works its way through the crowd when he repeatedly adjusts his tie as we wait for Claire.

The Wedding March starts, and all breaths are taken away as Claire comes out. Her dress is stunning, a simple satin gown with a deep V, a lace back with tiny buttons, and a full skirt that swooshes along the sand making it seem like she's floating. The veil, the sandals that let her walk on the sand, the music . . . I'm not the only one sporting real tears as she walks by smiling eagerly.

"Friends and family, we're gathered here today to join this man, Cole Kennedy, with this woman, Claire Johnson," the minister begins, and somewhere along the way, I lose myself. I'm so tired and the minister has this pleasantly droning voice, almost meditative, causing my eyes start to sag . . .

"Ow!" I hiss as Janey digs a thumb into my ribs, waking me up. "What—"

"Wake up before you start snoring!" Janey growls in my ear.

I nod, pinching the hell out of my armpit until I see tears, and focus on the lovely couple under the beautiful arch. Thankfully, the minister is making quick progress, and we're at the main event . . . the vows.

"And now, if anyone should have any reason that this man and this woman should not be joined in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace," he says.

I have a moment where I imagine being *that person* who calls out, 'I object,' but I just can't. I'm too unsure and don't really know anything other than that I heard a suspicious phone call. I send up a silent prayer that I'm doing the right thing.

The rings are brought out, and Claire takes her vows. "Cole," she begins, looking into his eyes, "I never thought I could find someone who'd see the real me. The girl who's scared and lonely sometimes. The girl who likes to sleep in on Sundays, watch old horror movies at midnight, or who thinks that Pop-Tarts are pretty much heaven in a foil wrapper. You've taken me at my best, seen me at my worst, and held me when everything was falling apart. You're my other half, the piece that completes my puzzle. All I can think of now is going forward step by step with you, together. I vow to be your wife, your friend, your love, and the mother of our children. I love you now, and I will love you forever. C2K, honey."

That's what I want.

Cole's vows aren't as poetic but are just as heartfelt. "I promise you, with everything I have, to be the man you deserve. I will support you, surprise you, and live every day to the fullest with you. I vow to be your husband, your lover, your protector, and your partner, from now to eternity. C2K, always."

They kiss, and moments later, the minister announces, "May I present Cole and Claire Kennedy, or as they've dubbed themselves, 'C2K'." He chuckles, as does the crowd, but then everyone cheers and applauds.

The reception goes off just as well, with everyone eating Lorenzo's delicious food, giving toasts, and watching with teary eyes as Cole and Claire do their first dance as husband and wife on a white dance floor that has a laser light show dancing around a C2K monogram in the middle.

Janey and I have divided, standing on opposite walls, to watch over the tablescapes and arrangements, at the ready in case anything goes awry. Meredith finds her way over to my perch along the wall. At least she doesn't scare me this time. I see her coming a mile away and stiffen, but a quick scan tells me all the tables and flowers look great.

"Yes?" I ask, not letting her get a dig in first.

Meredith smiles at me. It's creepy as fuck, with zero sense of friendliness.

“The flowers look lovely, Miss Andrews.”

A compliment? It sounds like an actual compliment, which makes me suspicious.

“Thank you,” I say carefully.

“I might have been hard on you, but you’ve really come through in the end.” She nods her head, looking around the room from arrangement to arrangement appreciatively. “You must understand, I was simply concerned that your work would falter with all the distractions of the *island*.”

Oh, shit! Does she know about me and Lorenzo? I mean, there’s no real reason we can’t have spent time together, but it’s not exactly professional and I don’t want it to affect how either of us is perceived.

“It is a beautiful island,” I concede, though I feel like we’re having two separate conversations. One topical, with niceties like rose petals, and the other deeper, with thorns.

“I think we would make a good team in the future,” she says with another one of those smiles. “Especially since at home, you won’t have the same distractions . . . the island, celebrity clients, your chef friend.”

She tacks on the last bit almost like it’s an afterthought, but something tells me it’s the entire point of this weird conversation because I don’t believe for one second that Meredith wants to work with me when we get home.

Confused, I reply, “Lorenzo? He’s flying back on Sunday too.”

Meredith’s lips quirk and evil delight gleams in her eyes. “Hmm. Perhaps I misunderstood? I could’ve sworn I overheard him and Esmar discussing his new position . . . here at the resort restaurant.”

What? No fucking way.

Lorenzo wouldn’t do that. Or would he?

It is who he is . . . a wanderer who goes to the next exciting thing at the drop of a hat. And cooking in Aruba would definitely qualify as exciting. But surely, he’d talk to me about it first, right?

Abi, it’s been a week. You really think you have any hold on him that would keep him from working in paradise? Your pussy’s not that special.

You’re not that special.

But while my world is crumbling into shatters of questions and doubts, Meredith looks concerned as she places a hand on my arm. “Miss Andrews, are you okay, dear? You look pale.”

I fix my plastic smile on my lips. *Thanks for the lessons, Mom.* “I’m fine. Sorry. Guess I need a little snack after this long day. Low blood sugar, you know?”

“Sure. Take a moment and get a quick bite. Again, everything looks lovely.”

Her concern morphs to a soft smile. Her kindness is the last straw.

I nearly run for the bathroom, not needing food but needing . . . something. Staring at myself in the mirror, I can't believe what Meredith said.

But I do.

I flash back to those moments on the boat with Lorenzo buried inside me, our flesh bare, but I'd felt like there was more. So much more. Like he was baring his soul to me and I was letting down my walls. But if he's staying here, maybe I should've just continued protecting myself. Then this wouldn't hurt so much.

I clench my jaw, swallowing down the maelstrom swirling in my gut. I can't do this now, not in the middle of an event. Not in the middle of this big moment in my career.

Focus, Abi. Pull yourself together. Deal with the here and now. The rest can wait.

I can wait.

I've got myself under a false sense of control when I hear Cole's voice. Loud, as though he's on a microphone out on the ballroom floor.

"Excuse me, everyone . . . if I could have your attention, please. Claire, I have something I need to tell you."

What the hell is happening? Is Cole confessing to Claire *at their wedding*? I freeze, my hand on the bathroom door.

"You have no idea how hard it's been to keep this secret from you. Actually, I wouldn't have been able to if it hadn't been for Madison's help."

Oh, shit! Madison who was saving the bouquet from Cujo? That's who he was talking to on the phone? That's who he told 'I love you'?

The door flies open in my hand and I'm back in the ballroom an instant later. Cole is on the stage at the far end of the space, smiling as he holds the room in the palm of his hand.

My eyes find Claire, who's in the middle of the dance floor, happily teary eyes on her new husband.

No, no, no, no.

He chuckles and then says, "Some guys get their brides a piece of jewelry as a wedding gift, like a pearl necklace or diamond earrings. But you're not a jewelry kind of girl . . . except for that ring. You'd better never take that thing off your finger." The audience laughs.

"But I wanted to get you something that would show how much I love you and support your weirdness in every form, something you'd still tell stories about when we're old. I had a lot of ideas . . . a lot of really bad ideas. That's where Madison came in to talk me down." He stage-whispers into the mic,

“Thank her later for that. Trust me, Claire Bear.”

The crowd laughs again and I am so confused. This all sounds . . . okay? Or good?

“So, without further ado . . .”

There’s a collective gasp I don’t understand, and then I see it . . .

“May I present N’Sync singing *It’s Gonna be Me!*”

A scream of pure, unadulterated joy explodes from Claire as she runs for the stage, pressing her expensive white gown right up against it. And then the band—I think that’s really them—starts singing.

I’m crying, boo-hoing snotty tears . . . for Claire, for Cole, for myself. And I’m not the only one. I’m so glad I didn’t ruin their day. This is what Cole was planning with that phone call. I know it in my heart.

Just like I’m sure that given the chance, Lorenzo will follow his heart and cook somewhere new. It might be here with Esmar or somewhere else . . . but eventually, he’ll leave. It’s what he does.

I knew that. I knew it all along. He made no secret of his dreams of travel and his love of spontaneity. Hell, he jumped in to save me on a whim and got caught up in this crazy scheme because I just couldn’t let the drama from high school with Emily go. It’s my own fault I let it go this far.

It just felt like maybe . . . this time would be different. For Lorenzo and for me. Like we left the whole fake honeymoon thing behind us and had reached somewhere deeper and better. And real.

But if this was just a flash in the pan, a vacation fling or some wild story I’ll remember with a fond laugh one day, I’ll have to be okay with that.

I’m Abigail Andrews. I always land on my feet.

And as the party rages on around me, the concert turns into karaoke as Claire and Cole, along with Madison and the rest of the bridal party, sing along with every song. Who knew a young twenty-something social media darling would be a secret ’Sync-er?

But if Claire, in all her apparent quirks, found Cole, who’s obviously more than his family name would lead one to believe, then there’s got to be hope for the rest of us.

I want that. What they have . . . happily singing along into a ladle they swiped from the punch bowl with hearts in their eyes and the promise of forever.

I didn’t get it this time. But one day, I will. In the meantime, I guess I’m going to enjoy this scheme for all it’s worth.

Enjoy Lorenzo in paradise . . . for one more night, I think hollowly.

CHAPTER 20

“*A*bigail,” I call out as I enter our suite.

Tonight has been exhausting. Rewarding, but exhausting. The wedding service went off with only a few minor hiccups. Well, minor if you can call Gilberto getting his sleeve caught in the pasta maker and it taking three of us to set him free. Oh, and then there was the cake designer coming into the kitchen like he was the freshly crowned prince of Weddingtopia and demanding a central workstation for his masterpiece.

“You won’t believe the story I have to tell you, *mia rosa!*”

Oh, Esmar had thrown me a side-eye, told the cake guru ‘right this way’, and set him up to make delicate sugar flowers . . . right by the hot cooktop. He hadn’t lasted thirty minutes before declaring that he could not work in such hostile conditions, and we’d openly laughed as we shuffled him off to the back where he could create in relative comfort.

There’s no answer in the suite. No outrageous stories from Abigail or bawdry stories from Janey. It’s quiet.

I suppose they’re still cleaning up downstairs. I consider going to help but reject the idea because I don’t think it would serve Abigail to have Meredith see me playing the role of helper boy. I’m worried about the fallout of Meredith’s veiled threats for Abigail when we get home.

Home.

The word has never seemed so loaded before. I’ve always considered Positano my true home, the place I grew up. But wherever I lay my head is home too—the sense of comfort and belonging one I cultivate everywhere I go on my adventures.

And spending time with Abigail . . . it’s home too.

But could Aruba be home? In Esmar’s kitchen or one of my own, here on the island?

It’s a big decision. One I can’t make tonight with my head fuzzy with

exhaustion.

I decide a shower is in order as a way to refresh my body and mind, not to mention wash off the smells of sweat and food, before Abigail returns. The hot water is heaven, relaxing muscles I didn't even know were tense.

By the time I get out, I feel like *scotta* pasta, overcooked and mushy. Nude, I lay out on the bed with the lamp on to wait for Abigail. I can't wait to hear about her day.



SOMETIME IN THE early morning hours, I startle awake. I don't know what I heard or why my eyes pop open, and I settle slightly. Then I remember . . . I'm waiting for Abigail.

In the corner of my vision, I see a dark shape in the bed with me. My heart leaps automatically, and then I smile at my own ridiculousness. It's her.

My bleary eyes focus, tracing the outline of her black clothes against the white of the bed sheets in the dim light. Poor thing must've fallen into bed straight from finishing for the night.

I get up, carefully pulling her sensible flats off her cute little feet, noting how red her toes look. I consider removing her clothes so she is more comfortable, but don't want to risk waking her if she's as exhausted as I am.

At least we have tomorrow morning to enjoy the island before our flights out.

I pick up my phone, pulling up the resort's website to see if there might be a particular way to make the most of our last morning in Aruba.

Reservation made, I set my alarm so we don't sleep too late. We need rest, obviously. But we need something else even more.

I turn the lamp off and curl up behind Abigail, making her the little spoon to my big, and cover us over with a blanket.

Sleep overtakes me quickly once again, more restful with Abigail in my arms.



"WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?" Abigail asks as I lead her down the hallway. She was a little suspicious when I asked her to put on a blindfold in the elevator, accusing me of having a few *Fifty Shades* fantasies, but she's been a good sport so far. Especially considering the blindfold is less silken luxury and more linen napkin from the suite.

I'm working with what I've got here.

"Don't worry, just a few more seconds," I assure her, guiding her around the final curve.

There are two women there to meet us, but I raise a finger to my lips to tell them to be quiet and they smile as they nod. One of them holds open the door and silently mimes what they want me and Abigail to do.

They close the door behind them to give us a few moments of privacy, and I stand behind Abigail with my hands on her shoulders. I can feel the tension there, from the week's stress I'm sure, but is there something else too? Maybe she's sad to see this fake honeymoon end the way I am?

"Abigail, you give so much to so many, making nature's beauty into something even more magical. So I want to give something to you." A shiver works its way down her spine at my heated words delivered directly into the delicate shell of her ear. "You deserve the sun and moon and stars. And more. Unfortunately, though I wish I could, I could not capture them for you, so instead, I offer you something less, but hopefully, it will be enough."

I untie the knot of the napkin, letting it fall away from her eyes. I watch as she blinks before looking around. The light is dim in the room, though there is one full wall of tinted glass. In the middle of the small space sit two white sheet-covered tables.

"You got us massages?" she asks on a gasp.

"I did. You worked so hard yesterday. We both did. We need this."

We need many things, but this will have to be enough for now. I'm too uncertain to begin the dangerous conversation burning in my throat. Unsure of myself and even more of Abigail.

But I won't let that mar this one last pristine, beautiful day in paradise.

"The massage therapists will be in momentarily. They said to strip and lie under the sheet."

Abigail nods but looks carefully at the window. It's wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling gray glass. "The beach looks awesome out there, but I'm not sure naked beach time massages are on my bucket list," she says shyly.

I laugh, feeling the same way. I'm a risk taker, but that might be a bit much. "It's one-way glass. We get all the beauty of the sand, sea, and sky, but no one can see in. I confirmed it with Esmar, and if anyone would know, it's him."

Abigail takes Esmar's word, though she doesn't even know him, and starts to undress.

I'm supposed to be disrobing as well, but all I can do is watch her, enjoying every inch of flesh as she bares it to my eyes. Her tits pearl up under my scrutiny and goosebumps break out along her skin.

“What?” she whispers.

“You, *mia rosa*. You’re beautiful. A vision I want to study, memorize.”

Her soft smile seems sad, but she recovers quickly. I wonder if she’s feeling the loss of Aruba’s magic too. “Your turn.”

I have to cup my thickness, which is growing under her hungry gaze. Laughing lightly, I spin her, pushing her toward one of the beds. “I can’t get a massage with an erection, and it’s never going down if you keep looking at me like that. Lie down and cover up.”

She goes slowly, and I reach out to smack her ass, enjoying the way the flesh jiggles. I groan, getting no relief, and she giggles. But she does lie face down on the table under the sheet.

I close my eyes, thinking of my family’s recipe for lasagna, repeating the layers until I get to a thirty-layer dish. *That’s deep dish*, I think with a chuckle, noting that ricotta is a definite turn-off.

I climb under my own sheet just in time as a knock sounds out on the door. “Come in,” I call out.

The massage therapists take their place beside each bed and slowly start to rub oil all over our bodies. I should be relaxing into the firm touch, my muscles turning to jelly, but all I can do is watch Abigail turn to liquid from her own massage.

Her skin gleams, supple and slick, and I want it to be my hands slipping along her curves, drawing the soft moans and groans from her throat.

Tucking the sheet around her hip, the massage therapist bares one cheek of Abigail’s firm ass and my hips shift of their own volition, looking for some friction on my rock-hard cock. The table isn’t nearly enough.

“Turn over,” I hear above me.

“Uhm, that’s not a good idea,” I say sheepishly. All three women look to me, two with poker straight faces and one, my Abigail, with a big grin.

“What’s wrong, Lorenzo? You got a half-chub from having her hands all over you?” Abigail teases. She thinks she’s playing a game, throwing me under the bus to embarrass me. Little minx having her fun, but she doesn’t know who she’s tormenting.

“No. I’m painfully hard . . . for you, *mia rosa*. You look so sexy and soft, I want to lick that oil from your skin, feast on your flesh, and drink you down.”

“Oh.” Her voice hitches, unexpectedly high.

Not exaggerating in the slightest, I boldly turn over beneath the sheet. My cock bobs against my belly from the movement and then I pitch an obscene tent in the white sheet.

“Oh!” Abigail repeats, this time sounding more aroused herself. A circle of

wetness appears on the sheet where it absorbs my precum.

The massage therapists, probably used to seeing and hearing much worse, maintain absolute and utter professionalism, simply moving to do their jobs on the front sides of our bodies, massaging our arms, legs, and across our chests. The shadows of Abigail's nipples are visible beneath the thin sheet, tantalizingly hard, and I wonder if she's getting wet too, if her lush lips are coated with slickness, her own juices mixing with the oil on her thighs.

At the prescribed time, the massage therapists end on a synchronized note. "Thank you for visiting the spa during your stay. There is complimentary lemon water on the table for your refreshment, and you may wear the robes on the hooks back to your suite when you are ready. This beach view room is yours for one hour of additional relaxation."

She points to the clock on the wall above the door as they exit, leaving Abigail and me alone, nude, slick, and aroused.

Abigail sits up, holding the sheet to her chest as if I couldn't pluck countless images of her bare tits from my mind. As if I can't pull that sheet right out of her hands. As if she doesn't want me to do just that.

"Now what?" she asks quietly, biting her lip.

Isn't that the big question? Unfortunately, I don't know the answer.

Yes, *you do!* my heart thumps out, but my brain overrides it with fear and indecision.

"You want more?" I get up, leaving the sheet on the table to cross the scant feet between us naked as the day I was born. Abigail's eyes try to lock on mine, I can see her trying, but they dip down to my cock almost instantly as she loses the battle. I give myself a few strokes, looking for some relief for this hunger I feel for her.

Her eyes twinkle, and she flips over to lie back down on her stomach, adjusting herself until she turns her head and looks me in the eye. "Show me what you've got. I'm ready."

I flash a cocky smile her way. "You think so?" Challenge accepted, I pick up a bottle of massage oil and pour a healthy dose into my hand.

"We'll see," she teases back lightly.

Warming it in my palms, I start with broad strokes on Abi's back, causing her to moan.

"Mmm . . . where'd you learn this?" she asks.

I work down her spine slowly, stopping just short of the puddle of sheet at her lower back, and then move back up her sides again, my fingertips brushing the sides of her squished breasts. "One of the chef jobs I took was on a cruise ship," I tell her, remembering the six-month stint at sea. "I picked up quite a few

skills on the *Rotterdam*.”

“Like what?”

I start on her shoulders, keeping both my conversation and touch light. “For one, I can strip and remake a bed in under two minutes.”

“Is that one thing, like stripping *and* remaking the bed, or two separate things like stripping, and *also* making beds? Very different things, if you know what I mean? Are you holding out on me? You got some Magic Mike moves I haven’t seen?”

“You’ve seen my dance moves,” I remind her, remembering how we’d run off the sunset cruise ship’s dance floor to find the nearest room with a lock and gone after each other hard and fast. I also remember what I felt, what I said.

Heat builds inside me, my skin suddenly too small for everything I’m feeling. Lust, need, care, doubt, and questions all swirl, but Abigail draws me back to here and now.

“That I did,” she agrees on a moan as I push into a knot between her shoulder blades. She’s carrying a lot, and while I can’t get all the tension out without going to painful extremes, I do soothe her body.

She jumps lightly when I start on her toes, her breath catching when I start massaging her foot with some reflexology strokes that have nothing to do with relaxation at all. From there, I work up her gorgeous calves to the backs of her thighs, again stopping just below the edge of the sheet before switching legs.

“I know what you’re doing, Lorenzo,” she whispers huskily. “And it’s working.”

“Good,” I reply, leaning in and kissing the tip of one toe. She moans, her thighs parting and making a dark cave under the sheet for me to imagine. I’m pulsing hard, my cock oozing precum and wanting me to hurry up.

I don’t. I do everything in my power to control my urges, to focus all of my attention on Abigail and what she needs. Finally, I finish both legs, and I’m faced with the toughest decision of all.

If she turns over and I see those soft, pillowy breasts, I’m not going to be able to resist devouring them. But to be able to knead that ass . . .

I reach for the sheet and slide it off to leave her fully bared, Abi humming happily when I do so. I reach out, starting with my thumbs at the dimples on either side of her spine, and work my way down, promising myself that I’m going to actually work her muscles.

That lasts until the second tight squeeze I give her ass muscles because Abigail shudders and spreads her legs invitingly.

Fuck.

No, Lorenzo . . . control. I work my hands lower, smirking when my oily

hand brushes over her pussy lips and her hips jerk off the table and into my touch. “Fuck, Lorenzo . . . yes,” she hisses even as I continue to massage her ass while brushing my thumbs over her lips. She’s wet even without my oil, and soon, her pussy’s open, gleaming and begging for more.

Abigail moans deeply, lifting her ass to meet my strokes, and I prop her up with a rolled towel before sliding two fingers deep inside her.

“Mmm . . . more, please,” Abi begs as I curl my fingers inside her, stroking her inner walls and finding every little spot that gives her pleasure. As my thumb brushes over her clit, I explore her ass with my other hand and she pushes against my fingers encouragingly. “Yes.”

I’m tempted to take her sweet ass, but instead, I just massage her while pumping my fingers in and out of her tight, perfect pussy. “That’s it, *mia rosa*,” I whisper to her as I add a third finger. “Take it. Come on my hand, and then I’m going to fuck you as deep as you can take it. Give my fingers a taste.”

Am I speaking English or Italian? I don’t even know. My brain is short circuiting, but she must understand because she grips the edge of the table, pushing back into my plunging digits. She arches her back, her body trembling on the edge, her breath coming in deep gasps. “Lorenzo . . . fuck me, please. Fuck, I need you.”

“Come for me,” I demand, thrusting my three fingers deep as my thumb finds her clit. She explodes, clenching around my fingers and crying out softly. Her body’s as tense as a drawn bow, the wave pulling her tighter and tighter until she totally releases, her body sagging to the table in a boneless heap as she pants jaggedly.

Even as her legs and arms relax, I can feel her pussy squeezing my fingers and hear the whimper in her voice when I pull out. “Lorenzo.”

“Me too,” I promise her, giving myself a firm squeeze to stave off my pending orgasm as I climb up on the table on top of her. Her ass is oily and slick, nestling my cock and slipping around it to wrap it in her soft warmth.

I know what she said, but I can feel not only her breath catch but the tension in her shoulders when the head of my now oily cock rubs over her ass, and she isn’t ready for that. Instead, I slide back and forth, feeling my balls brush against her pussy.

“Tell me what you want?” I whisper in her ear. “I want to hear you say it.”

“I . . .” Abigail says, swallowing as she takes a moment to look over her shoulder. “I want to feel you fill me. I want you to come inside me. I want to remember this forever.”

This woman . . .

I nearly come right here at her words, but then my breath is stolen from my

lungs with her brutal honesty. Maybe that's what we both need—something to remember.

So I worship her, leaning in to sample her mouth as I move my cock down and then up and into her warm wetness. Both of us moan into the other's mouth as her body gives way to my invasion.

I give her everything, gripping the table with my toes and hands so I can fuck her, not just with my hard cock but with my whole body as I rub and slide over hers.

We move together until she pushes back, and I understand, getting to my knees as I pull her up by her waist, staying buried balls deep inside her. She wants it hard and fast, and within seconds, my hips are slapping against her in wet, oily smacks that fuel our passion.

When Abigail throws her head back, I wrap my fingers into her hair, pulling her tight and pounding her mercilessly as she's reduced to being totally in my control. The table shakes, both of us making the wooden struts creak as we drive ourselves to the limit. We're desperate, or at least I am, fucking myself into her body, her mind, her memory. If that's what I'm going to be reduced to, I'm going to make it count. I want this to be the moment she compares all others to. I want to be the man she compares everyone else to.

I growl because . . . fuck that. There aren't going to be any other men, any other lovers, any other orgasms. Not for *mia rosa*.

"You're mine," I growl, tugging on her hair to emphasize my point. "Say it!"

"Yours," Abigail cries, and I slam home as hard as I can one last time, exploding deep inside her. It's the most intense orgasm of my life, and Abigail's body spasms around my erupting cock as I give her what she wants.

As we give each other what we need for as long as we have left.

She sags completely, collapsing into my arms even as I stay nestled inside her. I lower her back to the table, and I soften and slip out.

It's too soon. It feels final and I want more.

She flips over, ungraceful as she scoots her ass to the side of the table and throws a leg over my head, nearly knocking me out. The only way I avoid a potential concussion is because of my timely duck.

But Abigail's smile isn't one that acknowledges the silly awkwardness of the move. No, it's her fake one, forced to her lips but not reaching her eyes.

Our eyes search each other's, looking for . . . something. A clue that I'm wrong? A sign that maybe this could be more?

But I see only sadness. I can feel that it's not only the hour in this room, or the amazing sex, that's done. There's a lot that's over with today. Like us, like this fake honeymoon that became something else to me.

She was making love with me so desperately to tell me goodbye. It's in her eyes, and I can feel her walls going back up.

I've never been the one left behind. I'm usually the one who leaves, so I never realized how much it sucks to know that someone's walking away from you. Oh, our planes might be going back to the same town, but we're going back to something very different.

CHAPTER 21

I can already hear them in my apartment and I'm still down the hall, my suitcase bumping along behind me. "Oops, shit," I bark out as the hard side case twists in my hand and the corner bumps into the wall, leaving a black mark on the pristine white paint.

"Perfect. Abso-fucking-lutely perfect," I bitch aloud, not caring about Mrs. Miller's kids overhearing my curses or anyone thinking I've lost my marbles for talking to myself. Especially when the rebound makes the wheel run up on my heel. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," I repeat, hopping on one foot and rubbing at the pain.

I knock on my own door, not willing to dig my keys out when everyone's helped themselves to my place anyway. The door swings open, and Violet dramatically waves an arm through the air as though she's a *Price Is Right* girl and I've won access to my own apartment. She doesn't look like a game show girl, though, in sweatpants and one of Ross's oversized gym shirts. She does look freshly showered, at least. "Come in! We've been waiting for you. We're ready to hear everything!"

"No cheating!" Archie calls out from somewhere inside.

"Cheating?" I ask.

Violet rolls her eyes, "At Aruba Bingo. Archie's idea. Game is . . . you don't know the words, but you have to tell us all about the wedding, your trip, Lorenzo, the works, and we have pennies to mark our cards. Winner gets to take home a bottle of wine . . . if there's any left."

I smile. I swear I do. But Violet's eyes go dark and her jaw clenches.

"That son of a bitch!" she hisses. "I'll kill him for you, don't you worry about a thing, girl. I'll send his body back to Italy in pieces and Aunt Sofia will handle things on that end. She knows people." She makes it sound like that's a perfectly normal thing to do.

"No, no," I argue weakly. "It's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine." If I say it enough, it'll have to be true, right?

She huffs out a laugh of disbelief then points at me with a short, manicured nail. “Keep on believing that, Abs. Good girl.”

She shoves me inside the apartment, taking my suitcase from me. It disappears, and I can’t care to see if she puts it in my bedroom or the bathroom or . . . hell, the kitchen, for all I know. As long as she’s not destroying more walls, it’s probably for the best that she manages it instead of me.

Archie and Courtney are poised in the living room, cards in front of them, pennies in one hand and wine glasses in the other.

“Let’s go, girl! I have faith that I’ve got the winning card!” Archie says with a jerk of his chin toward the glitter-accented paper in front of him.

Glitter is the herpes of crafting materials. Once you’ve got it, there’s no un-getting it. My apartment’s done for. It’ll be perpetually covered in gold glitter for the rest of the time I live here no matter how many times I vacuum. I should move out now and forfeit my security deposit.

I flop to the couch, half falling on Courtney who lets out a whoop of surprise and almost spills her filled-to-the-brim wineglass, which would be a double tragedy because she’s wearing cute jeans and sitting on my white couch. “Hey! Watch it!”

I steal her wine glass, upend it, and chug it down in one go like I’m a sorority girl with a curfew and a crush on the quarterback of the football team. I hold it up, barely a spot of red in the bottom. “Again.”

Courtney and Archie meet eyes over my head, worry and shock in both, I imagine. Violet swoops in from wherever she took my suitcase.

“One more, and then you’re cut off,” Violet declares as she grabs my glass, refills it, and then gives it back. I look at her wryly as she gets Courtney a fresh glass too.

“Okay, hit us with it,” Courtney demands, “so we know what we’re dealing with.” She’s a planner, always has been and always will be. By the time I get this story out, she’ll have it analyzed from every angle, thought of at least three different ways to handle it, mentally argued the pros and cons of each with herself, and then . . . she’ll tell me what I need to do. Usually, it drives me nuts. Right now, I would love for someone to tell me what the fuck just happened and why I feel like I left something vital in Aruba.

Like a foot. Or a hand. Or . . . my heart?

“Dream gig in paradise, you know that part. But the wedding planner was a total pain in the ass. Nothing was good enough and she kept calling me ‘flower girl’ and ‘Miss Andrews’.” I imitate Meredith’s snooty manner.

Courtney’s brows raise when she hears the tone, probably having gotten enough of that in her own life. Violet, being Violet, spits out, “Bitch.”

“Yeah. But despite her, the wedding was beautiful and the flowers were some of the best work I’ve ever done, which says something considering we lost all our flowers early in the week when the cooler broke.”

“The cooler broke?” Archie says in horror. “What about the flowers?”

I shake my head sadly. “Casualties of war.”

He tracks a finger down his cheek from his eye, mimicking a tear.

“Yeah, but the resort got it fixed and we got flower replacements from every resort and flower shop on the island, and we even had a boat bring us some special ones. It was stressful and not what Janey and I had spent months planning, but the arrangements were gorgeous in the end, and that’s what matters.” I lift my wine glass in a silent toast and then drink again. This time, truly a sip, at least.

Violet leans forward and tilts the glass up, spilling another healthy swallow into my mouth. “You’re gonna need it.”

I choke a bit at the unexpected mouthful and Archie laughs. “Girl, you are too old to be gagging like that. Get it together.”

I sputter, but he’s moved on to his glitter-infested bingo card. “Ooh, I’m one away from a bingo! Look! I’ve got paradise, dream, flower, and bitch.”

His excitement instantly changes as he hums and shakes his head sadly, “Does it count if Violet said bitch, not Abi? Hmm.” He ponders to himself and then says, “I admit I thought the bitch square was going to be about Claire Johnson, though.”

He ducks his chin behind his ring- and tattoo-covered hand to stage-whisper, “She’s not really all feel-good, do-gooder, is she? It’s a social media front to cover her bridezilla, bitcharella true self. Gotta be.” He nods sagely, certain in his assessment.

“No, she’s actually that nice, from what I could tell. And gorgeous, even out of makeup and hair. And adorably in love. Cole got N’Sync to sing for her as a wedding surprise. They were as cute as puppies—Claire and Cole, C2K, not N’Sync—all googly-eyed and all over each other while they sang off-key. It was . . .”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Archie hisses as I start to break down, tears spilling silently down my cheeks. “My bad! I thought she was gonna say Claire was awful and I could get my ‘divorce waiting to happen’ square.” To Violet and Courtney, he apologizes by waving his hands around. “I didn’t think she was gonna go all hormonal about the Social Media Darling and Mr. Khaki Pants. I mean, who’d think *that*?”

Violet growls. “Yeah, why in the world would someone else getting their happily ever after with the wedding of the year bother Abs? Oh, not to mention,

she was reduced to faking a honeymoon to keep our childhood nemesis from gloating about her own honeymoon. Literally everyone around Abi is married but her . . . *why* would that possibly bother her, Archie?”

Time freezes as Violet’s blurted words sink into us all. Me especially.

The tears aren’t quiet this time. Nope, ugly sobs wreck me and I bury my head in my hands.

“Ah, fuck!” she snaps. “I’m sorry, honey! I’m so sleep-deprived my mouth-brain filter isn’t firing on all cylinders. Sorry!”

Archie whispers, “You have a filter? Ever?” He shrugs and examines his black-polished nails. “Huh, news to me.”

Courtney stands up and claps her hands. Boss Bitch is taking over this party. “You . . . get her tissues. You . . . another refill. She’s earned it. Abi . . . tell us everything about this fake honeymoon thing and Lorenzo. All of it.” She takes my chin in her hand, lifting my eyes to hers. “All. Of. It, understood?”

She’s my younger sister, and we spent a lot of years in the same family without being as close as we should be. The few years’ age difference had seemed massive when she was playing with dolls and I was playing in the dirt with the gardener, learning the Latin names of the plants and how to propagate species, or off with Violet, my sister from another mother. And later, she’d been the straight-and-narrow to my twisted, devil-may-care ways, and I’d kept her as far out of my business as I could so Mom and Dad didn’t find out about the crazy shit Vi and I got up to. Not that it was that crazy, but it’d seemed like it was at the time.

But as adults, Courtney and I have found our way to each other as sisters and as friends. She would do anything for me and always has my best interests at heart. Even when I fight her on it or don’t want her to get involved, she’s got my back and will do what’s needed.

I sigh. “Yeah, let’s do this. Might as well get it over with so you can tell me ‘I told you so’ and we can move on.”

My whole body feels tingly, full of jangly nerves and jittery confusion, so I get up, needing to pace for this. “I get there, and literally at check-in, I see Emily Jones.”

Violet makes a spitting noise, aiming toward the floor. I’m assuming it was spitless because she bought me this rug and loves it as much as I do.

“And there’s your ‘divorce waiting to happen’, Archie. She was whining about having to wait in line and wanted to cut in front of me. She realized it was me and was all fake ‘Abi!’ like we’re buds,” I say, going full *Mean Girls* dramatic.

I pause in my tracks as I see Archie trying to sneak a penny on his bingo card

and doing a tiny, silent shout out, “Bingo!” When he sees that I’ve caught him, he doesn’t miss a beat, waving his hand expectantly. “Well, go on. Maybe I’ll get a blackout bingo by the end.”

I sigh, annoyed, but fuck, I love him. The entire world could be falling to shambles in fiery flames of destruction, and he’d be the one roasting marshmallows and hot dogs while singing anarchy limericks.

“So, Emily was being Emily and made a comment about my being alone. And out of nowhere, Lorenzo showed up.”

“We know this part. Violet told us everything. Get to the later stuff and the good stuff,” Archie directs.

“And the bad stuff,” Courtney adds levelly.

Somehow, I do. I tell them about yoga and boat cruises, dinners, and breakfasts in bed, and though it’s hard, I follow Courtney’s orders and tell them about how I’d fallen for Lorenzo bit by bit, day by day, poetic word by poetic word.

“Yep, I’m going to kill him,” Violet declares.

Archie puts a staying hand on her arm, not to stop her but because he’s a great assistant and an even better friend. “Let me know the bare bones of when and I’ll make sure you have an iron-clad alibi with witnesses. And this conversation . . . it never happened.” He looks to Courtney and me pointedly, thinking we’re the weak links in the room.

I relish in the thought for point-oh-three seconds and then shake my head. “No, no. I don’t want you to kill him. He didn’t make any promises other than the crazy scheme I got him mixed up in, and he held up that bargain and then some. And let’s be real, that was a big ask. I can understand why he’d want to skip out on dealing with someone . . . like me.”

I’m a lot. I know this. I’ve been told that by more than one boyfriend in the past, and I always soothe that sting by reminding myself that I don’t have to be for everyone. I only have to be right for one person.

No, not a guy.

Myself!

And if I’m good, then Mr. Right will come around, see how amazing I am, and want to join the ‘Abigail Andrews is Awesome’ party. Even with the mess of glitter, fireworks, and midnight runs for Chinese food that pretty make up my existence.

I just got a little carried away and thought Lorenzo was RSVPing to more than this week. But that’s on me, not him. He never said otherwise. I just hoped, and wanted, and wished.

“Someone like you? You mean the best thing that could ever happen to

him?” Violet summarizes, ever my cheerleader. She’s got a lifetime membership to my crazy, weird parties, and I love her for it.

“What happened today?” Courtney asks, still gathering data.

I look at my hands, twisting them as I walk another lap around my living room. “He booked us couple’s massages this morning, we had sex, took showers, and packed. And then I left for the airport. His flight was a few hours after mine, so he was going to say goodbye to Esmar, the restaurant chef who offered him a job.”

“What?” Violet screeches. “I didn’t know that part! I thought this was just getting you two idiots transitioned back to the real world. Is he really going to cook in Aruba?”

I shrug. “That’s what Meredith said.”

Archie’s perfectly micro-bladed brows lift and he presses a hand to his chest as he clarifies, “The bitchy wedding planner?”

“Yeah,” I say glumly.

“Well, what did Lorenzo say about it when you asked him?” Courtney asks.

“I didn’t ask. It’s not my place. I know who he is, what he is, and that living here is temporary for him. He even told me how much he hates working at Avanti, so why wouldn’t he go somewhere he loved the crew, the cuisine, and the weather?”

“The weather,” Archie says dryly. “Girl, are you so bad in the sack that you think this man is going to trade an all-access pass to the Abi-Promised-land for ninety-degree sunshine? If so, we have bigger problems than I thought. Let’s start with blowjob techniques. You’re not a spitter, are you? Spitters are quitters.”

Blinking in confusion, my feet stop of their own volition. “What? No, I don’t spit,” I answer before I realize what I’m saying. I shake my head, trying to clear up the swirling haze of bewilderment at Archie’s train of thought. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t Lorenzo go to Aruba?”

I hate to admit it, even to myself, but hope, tiny and struggling, tries to bloom. Like a good plant mom, I give it light and encouragement, feeding it to life. “You think there’s a chance he wouldn’t?”

The three of them look at each other, leaving me outside to watch their silent conversation.

Archie is somehow elected spokesperson, or he nominates himself. Either is possible. He gets up, stomps over in his black combat boots, plum joggers, and grey off-the-shoulder shredded designer T-shirt. He puts his hands on my shoulders and looks deep into my eyes. His are dark brown and warm but filled with worry.

“We don’t know. Here’s the plan, though . . . you are going to get on with your fabulous life, doing and being exactly who and what you are. If he hasn’t pulled his head out of his ass within the next few days and come crawling back with promises of multiple daily orgasms and planning on forever, we’re going to assist with a forceful head-ass-ectomy.”

“Oh! Violet, I’ve got your salad tongs,” Courtney blurts out.

“Uh, salad tongs? Is that for the head removal?” I ask, only partially concerned. If it’d been Violet mentioning torture devices, I would’ve reminded her about the need for an alibi, but Courtney’s not rash that way. If she were going to do something illegal, she’d definitely plan an airtight alibi, probably somehow managing video proof of her being miles away from the crime. She’s good like that.

“For the dinner party,” Violet corrects. “Lorenzo has until Friday, and then I’m calling a mandatory dinner party and we’ll get his shit straight.”

CHAPTER 22

*M*y return to Avanti is loud and boisterous for all of five seconds.

“Chef! You’re back!”

“Good to see ya, man!”

“Thank God you’re here to do the fettuccine tonight. Sergio’s been all up my ass about it being too spicy because I paired it with blackened salmon one night. Hasn’t shut up about how no one does it like you.”

Roberta’s lament makes me laugh, but it’s enough that everyone has returned to their stations and their work. It’s as if I was never gone.

It was only a week, but somehow, it seems like the longest and most important week of my life. How is life the same for everyone else when mine feels so different?

“Thanks, Chef. I’ll get on making the pasta and the sauce for tonight,” I tell Roberta as I wash my hands and slip on my jacket and apron.

“Heard. Might as well go ahead and make Sergio the first plate so he can ooh and ahh over it,” she advises sarcastically. She’s not bitter about my compliments, but I’m sure Sergio wasn’t exactly kind in his comparison, and chefs tend to be more than a bit prickly about coming up short when we’ve put our heart and soul into our food.

I get to work, the routine of prep mindless and automatic. Take out a ball of dough, knead and roll it, and then start the process of feeding it through the pasta machine while I ready the next batch. Next, I let a mixture of butter, heavy cream, garlic, parmesan, pepper, and a shake of Aunt Sofia’s special spices bubble on the stove.

The first plate complete, I call out to the line, “Chef, off line.” Eyes pop up, and Roberta nods as I hold the plate up. “For Sergio.”

“Good. Don’t let him hold you hostage. Service is already starting.” She pulls an order from the machine and yells out to the crew. “Table eleven, app

vegetable misto, entrée one boar Bolognese, entrée two wagyu bavette with beet and apple puree.”

Milo and Alesandro are already in motion, and I watch for a moment as they rally together to begin tonight’s service. They’re a good team. I know I bring a lot to the table, but they’ll be okay without me.

The thought hits me harder than I expected. It’s what I do . . . arrive, work, and leave when the mood suits me. It’s what I’ve done time and time again, so why does this time feel different? Like there’s a black void in the pit of my stomach when I think of not being here?

Is it Roberta, Milo, and Alesandro I’ll miss? Perhaps.

Or maybe it’s that I already miss the island, with Esmar and his crew.

I sigh, knowing the truth. It’s none of those people I miss, though they are good friends. It’s Abigail. She might be right here in the city, but she’s never been this far away.

I swallow down the sour pain and head to Sergio’s office where I knock once and then open the door.

I should’ve waited for him to call out ‘come in’ or something, because the sight that greets me is atrociously obscene. I’ll need a gallon-sized bottle of eye bleach to even have a hope of erasing it from my memory.

Valentina is bent over Sergio’s desk, looking bored as she chants, “Oh, yeah, baby. So good,” in a dull voice. I swear she’s checking her manicure.

Sergio is behind her, grunting and railing into Valentina with everything he’s got judging by the red tint of his cheeks and the sweat at his brow.

“Sorry!” I exclaim, moving to shut the door.

“Lorenzo! My boy!” Sergio calls out. Though my eyes are on the floor, I can hear him pull out of his wife and zip up. “Come in, come in. Is that alfredo for me?”

“Uh, yeah,” I say hesitatingly. Risking a glance up, I see that Valentina hasn’t moved but the boredom in her eyes has been replaced by sharp hunger. She wants me to see her this way, is getting off on being half-naked and folded over the nearest piece of furniture. Not for her husband but for me in some sordid pretend fantasy in her mind.

Sergio has come around his desk, his shirt messily untucked in the front and his belt undone, but at least I can’t see his dick. His extends his hand to shake mine. My lip curls. “No offense, Sergio, but I know where your hands have been.”

Valentina lets out of squeak of anger as she stands upright. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Her skirt won’t fall over her hips, it’s too tight for that, but she shimmies and wiggles it down into place.

Sergio's eyes narrow at me.

"I'm on the line," I remind him, as if I'm going to walk directly back into the kitchen and start touching food and don't want his sex juices—gag!—to contaminate anything. No worries about that, though, because I'll definitely be washing my hands and doing a look around to see if I really can get ahold of some eye bleach.

"Oh, of course!" Sergio says congenially. "So good to have you back. Roberta, she tries, but her alfredo is just not the same as yours." He looks at the plate in my hands eagerly, his fingers twitching as he holds himself back from grabbing it out of my hands.

"Here." I shove the plate his way. "Excuse me."

My escape is short-lived because as Sergio sits down to chow on his special plate of fettuccine, Valentina is coming down the hall in quick strides. *Click-click-click*, her heels sound out on the floor.

"Lorenzo!" she calls out.

I'm almost free and clear, just two more steps and I'll be through the door into the kitchen, but she catches me. Her nails dig into my arm to stop me in place. Gritting my teeth, I hiss, "What?"

She actually looks wounded. "I . . . I missed you."

I blink. "You don't even know me."

Ignoring my assertion, she pouts, "Didn't you miss me too, baby?" She reaches up to cup my face and I jerk out of her range.

"Don't touch me," I growl. "And I'm not your 'baby'. As I've told you before, Valentina . . . not just no, but hell no. Go to your husband."

Her lips purse haughtily, a gleam in her eye. "Did you like seeing me like that? Bent over, getting fucked from behind?" She takes a step closer, and though I want to run from her, I refuse to give up ground to a woman like her. Lowering her voice, she confides, "I only let him fuck me from behind so I can pretend it's you, Lorenzo. Always you in my mind, but I know the real thing would be so much better. We could be so good together."

"Never gonna happen," I snarl, shaking my head with my eyes fixed on hers, imploring her to hear me for once.

She purrs, "Come on, baby. Just once . . . for me? Or I could tell my husband that you've been pursuing me." Her hand reaches for my cock, and I gently grab her wrist to stop her, not wanting her touch. "Ouch, you're hurting me," she exclaims softly, all fearful drama with tears threatening at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm not hurting you. Don't touch me."

Her face morphs again as she muses, "But who will they believe? The dutiful

wife of a loving dimwit of a husband, or the tattooed bad boy who blows in and out of town on his motorcycle, leaving women in his wake after taking what he wants from them?”

“I don’t . . .”

I freeze. Is that what I do? Not with Valentina, never with a barracuda like her, but I have had relationships in the various towns I’ve lived in. Some casual, some more serious, but never enough to warrant my staying beyond the short time I found something interesting there. Once my cravings for food adventures were satisfied, I was happy to move on . . . from the food and the women.

Until now.

I might have moved on from the food in Aruba, though I admit I wasn’t ready to come home and am still considering Esmar’s offer because there is much to learn there. But I haven’t moved on from Abigail. She keeps me guessing and surprises me with her passion for life, and I find that thrilling. But is it only a matter of time before that too becomes boring and I’ll want to move on?

Something in my gut says no.

But Abigail’s moved on from me, wanting only an island ‘honeymoon’ to satisfy some schoolyard competitiveness. Even if what we had went beyond that, she is not a woman to leave her mind unspoken, and yet, she said nothing about continuing once we came home. The only logical conclusion is that . . . she doesn’t want to.

While I have an existential crisis, something even worse has happened.

“Valentina! Lorenzo!”

Sergio’s voice is hot with barely restrained fury and loud enough that I know everyone on the other side of the kitchen door heard him because the din of the hustle and bustle of work stops abruptly.

I clench my jaw, not willing to apologize when I have done nothing wrong.

Valentina is of no such ethical dilemma. “Oh, Sergio, thank God! He was all over me, talking about how much he missed me. He . . .” She breaks down into gushing, sobbing tears, and I watch incredulously as she burrows against her husband’s round belly, laying her head on his shoulder.

What the fuck is she talking about?

From her vantage point, she snuffles and throws me a look that Sergio can’t see. ‘Gotcha’ that look says.

“Lorenzo! Go to my office. Valentina, go home. We’ll discuss this later.” Sergio’s orders are barked and authoritative, something I rarely hear from him.

I stomp down the hall, past Sergio and Valentina, to return to the office. I see the plate of half-eaten fettuccine sitting on the desk amid the mess of papers with

Valentina and Sergio's sex juices and sweat on them.

I can't do this.

I don't have to do this.

I can go anywhere—like Aruba. Cook anything—like island fare. I wonder if the papayas are ripe today and what stories Gilberto is telling the crew to make them laugh.

Sergio comes in, shoulders back and chin lifted. He plops down into his chair, which makes a creaking noise.

“Sergio—” I start, my mind made up.

He jerks his chin toward the chair, silently telling me to sit down. I lower myself into the chair, thighs spread wide and my hands clasped between my knees.

“That was not what it looked like,” I try again.

“How long?” he demands. “How long has my wife been coming on to you like that?” His voice has gone softer, the hurt woven through the roughness.

For all of Sergio's faults, I do believe he truly loves his wife. Unfortunately, she's demon spawn in stilettos.

“You know?” I hedge.

He sighs heavily. “I was in the hallway and overheard some of what she said.”

I guess her teary blame game wasn't so successful after all. I can't find any joy in that, though, when Sergio looks like someone just stole his happiness.

It wasn't me, though. That was all Valentina.

“Look, man to man . . . she started flirting with me when I first started. At first, it seemed friendly, welcoming. But she's been more and more aggressive. I've told her no dozens of times, told her to go to you more than that. I'm an asshole, but I've got no interest in your wife. In anyone's wife. I'm not that guy.”

It's a harsh way of putting it, but sometimes, the deepest cut is needed to get all the truth out.

Sergio laughs, though it's hollow sounding. “I actually believe that. When I mentioned you were coming back for dinner service today, she was excited . . .” His voice drifts off, and I catch his meaning about what prompted their office activities earlier. He's quiet for a long moment, so I fill the dead space.

“I'll get my knives and go,” I offer, knowing where this is headed. Sergio might believe me, might believe that his wife is the aggressor in all of this, but he can't have me in his kitchen.

That's okay. My mind's already made up.

At least about working here. I'm not sure about Aruba, but there are a

world's worth of kitchens to explore, and I don't have to stay somewhere where the shine has worn off.

"I cannot allow you to quit, Chef. I need to fire you, with severance, of course," Sergio negotiates. He pulls a checkbook from his desk and writes me a check.

I can understand his need to fire me as a show of dominance. He'll need to continue as the alpha in his restaurant, and he's well aware that everyone in the kitchen and probably the front of the house too heard our hallway encounter and are gossiping like old women out there as we speak.

"Understood." I dip my chin in agreement and we both stand. He hands me the check, and I fold it, placing it in my chest pocket without looking at it. The amount doesn't matter, though I'll need it to get by for the next few weeks while I figure out what the hell I'm going to do now. The point is that Sergio and I are good, two men in a bad situation because of one woman.

He holds out a hand and I look at it carefully. "Still no, man. I know you haven't washed your hands."

He shrugs with a small hint of a sad smile. "I will miss your fettuccine, Lorenzo. If you need a recommendation anywhere, feel free to use my name. I will gladly tell anyone about your culinary skills."

An exceedingly kind gesture, all things considered, but I don't think I'll be risking that recommendation. What if a potential employer got Valentina on the line? She'd paint a most unflattering picture of me, I'm sure.

"There are several more servings of fettuccine in the kitchen, already prepped for service. Grab one of those before they're gone."

With that, I walk through the kitchen of Avanti for the last time. I shake hands with Roberta and wave at the rest of the guys on the line. They offer a small applause and call out, "Bye, Chef!" like they have so many nights before.

Tonight, when I climb on my motorcycle and fly down the road, I have no destination in mind. I simply feel free, the wind rushing against my body as I drive too fast, my knives in my pack and armed with the knowledge that I could go anywhere right now.

Anywhere I want—to start fresh, to learn something new, to meet new people.

So why do I end up driving by SweetPea Boutique and feeling let down at the dark interior?

CHAPTER 23

“*I*’d like to raise a toast to my daughter, the magnificently talented Abi Andrews,” my dad, Morgan, says as he lifts a glass of scotch.

“We really are so proud of you, dear,” my mom, Kimberly, echoes as she lifts her wine.

Ross and Courtney lift their drinks, and I do the same, feeling a flush of pride at Dad’s praise.

We sip our drinks and set them back on the white tablecloth-covered table at the country club.

Dad called this family meeting tonight to celebrate as soon as his press alert popped up with my name.

“Abi, line one’s for you. It’s your Dad,” Samantha yells across the shop. She did a great job while Janey and I were gone, really showing her stuff by managing the shop and the arrangements. Janey might have some competition as my right-hand girl, except that Janey’s a brutal bitch who’ll cut a girl if Samantha gets a big head.

With a grin, I answer, “Thanks! I’ve got it.”

“Hello.”

“Abi, got an alert on you. Thankfully, good news . . . this time,” Dad says. I can hear the creak of his chair as he leans back, relaxing at the office for a moment before he starts the next thing on his never-ending to-do list.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say with a smile, sitting on a stool at my work table. The parallel strikes me—Dad at his office and me at mine, his desk likely neat and organized while mine is strewn with blooms that I’m arranging into a lovely custom piece for a customer.

I keep messing with the flowers aimlessly as he reads off the dry alert he received. He set them up on Ross, Courtney, and me when we were kids and added Violet, Carly, and Kaede when they joined the family. Unfortunately, the

alerts have been bad news more often than good, especially with Ross's younger tabloid-worthy days. Luckily, those are far behind him and us.

"We're celebrating tonight, and I won't take no for an answer. Your mother's already made reservations at the club for seven o'clock."

"Uh, okay. Sure, Dad." I can't say no to him, even though what I really want to do tonight is go home, curl into a burrito inside a fluffy blanket, and stare at bad reality television until I fall asleep. Alone.

The quiet hum of the fancy country club dining room brings me back to the here and now, as does Dad's deep voice. "So, pretend I'm an old, out of touch sort and explain to me again how this helps you," Dad says with a light chuckle.

I take a big breath, knowing that while Dad's joking and is definitely not that clueless, he's not particularly social media savvy. "Claire's a huge online personality with a lot of pull, like millions-of-followers type of influence. She posted an album's worth of wedding photos, tagging vendors from the event like the resort, the wedding planner, the bridal gown designer, and the florist." I frame my smiling face with my hands because that'd be me.

Dad follows up, "And all of these followers see the tags, and you get money on that how?"

I shake my head, though I'm impressed that he understands that clicks equal dollars. He's getting better. "I don't. She gets the click-through monies for her likes, but I get the exposure. It's a free advertisement to a cultivated audience. That's huge when we're talking that many people looking at every detail of Claire's wedding and wanting to copy it down to the flowers. I'm already getting more calls, and people are booking their weddings with me sight unseen, just wanting to reserve their dates."

"All based on this Claire person's recommendation?" Dad summarizes.

Mom lays a hand on his arm. "It's like a personal recommendation for the social media age, honey."

He lifts his glass again, understanding now. "As long as it's good for my girl, I'm happy for you." He takes another sip of scotch as our dinners arrive.

We eat in relative peace as Ross tells us about Carly's sleep and poop schedule, since Vi's at home with the baby, and talks about One Life Gym's business. It's nice that he can share that with Dad now. They spent a long time on opposite sides of the table, but moving to separate sandboxes has done them well. And Dad is truly proud of Ross's success. Courtney jumps in, and she and Dad get to talking about work stuff, as always. They're two peas in a pod and their brains are always at least half-focused on work.

I'm mindlessly zoned out as they talk about their latest project and I pick at my chicken. That zero-percent focus—my daydream tendency, as Mom calls it

—causes me to miss the incoming bomb until it's standing right beside me.

"Abi! Oh, my gosh, it's so great to see you!" a voice exclaims happily.

I look up to see the absolute last person I want to lay eyes on. "Emily."

"Can you believe it? We don't see each other for years and then it's like we can't stop running into each other." Emily laughs, looking around the table at Ross, Courtney, and my parents. "Emily Jones . . . oh, I mean Emily Daniels. It's my new last name, so I'm still getting used to it. My Dougie is a VP at a mutual fund index company. Working late, you know?" she brags.

Slick, Emily. Way to throw in that you just got married without saying it outright, and tack on Doug's title like we'll be awed by that. Everyone at this table is a VP, CEO, or sits on a Board of Directors. Titles don't impress. People do. Wisdom from my dad.

"Congratulations, Emily," Mom says, ever polite even when some stranger interrupts our family dinner.

Courtney knows exactly who Emily is and mutters under her breath, "Working late hours after the market's closed?"

Mom jumps in, covering Courtney's snarkiness with a gracious smile. "May you and your new husband have a lifetime of happiness."

Emily ignores Mom's well wishes, her eyes locked in on me. "I guess you don't have that problem, do you, Abi? Not since you kept your last name."

Dad chokes on his bite of pasta, coughing into his napkin. "Kept? Your name?" Dad's right eyebrow has climbed a solid inch up his forehead, and if I know anything about him, his calculating mind is putting together puzzle pieces faster than a Rubik's cube champion can spin those colored blocks.

Ross and Courtney have my back, knowing exactly what's going on and what Emily is playing at. Courtney jumps in first, on defense, "Forgive me for forgetting you, Emily, but how far behind Abi were you? In school, I mean."

Ooh, she's good. So damn good. I forget how skilled my sister is with her words, cutting like knives as she tells Emily to her face that she was utterly forgettable while making it sound like simple pleasantries.

Emily's lips purse. "We were in the same class. But that was so long ago." She forces a smile to her bright red lips, making her look like Pennywise, evil clown incarnate. "Imagine my surprise to see her in Aruba! And for both of us to be there on our honeymoons!"

Her voice has gotten loud, enough so that conversation at the tables surrounding us has all but stopped as people look our way. She's a good strategist.

Even Mom loses any semblance of caring about her public face and screeches, "Honeymoon? Abi, what is she talking about?"

Thanks, Mom! If everyone wasn't already looking, that would've gotten their attention for sure. And Emily is cunning enough to know she's struck a nerve with a direct hit.

She feigns horror, her eyes wide and her hands covering her mouth, but she makes sure to drop them and enunciate so everyone hears her loud and clear. "Well, yeah. Abi's husband, Lorenzo. She said they were on their honeymoon in Aruba last week too. Of course, I saw her working there one day and everyone saw the mention of her little flower shop, SweetPea Boutique, on Claire Johnson's 'gram this morning, and I just thought it was the sweetest thing that Abi could piggyback her honeymoon on a work trip. Double dipping and all. Must've been cost effective to have Claire pay for your honeymoon, huh, Abi?" She lifts a shoulder at me, almost like she's giving me a friendly nudge, but she's a solid foot away and talking louder and louder, dropping names left and right to demolish me with every word.

The room is no longer quiet. A hum of whispers surrounds us and disgusted glares are being thrown at me from every angle. Except from one table behind Emily, where a group of women sit . . . women I know from school. They were Emily's friends then and apparently are her tag-alongs still, because they're smirking with victory at taking *The Abi Andrews* down so publicly. Vaguely, I wonder what Emily told them about our week and the childish competition we'd resorted to. I'm sure it was nothing flattering to me.

My tongue is thick in my mouth. For all my brilliance, I can't find a word of explanation that can somehow make this okay. But knowing I have to try, I sputter out, "No, that's not . . . Emily." I take a sip of my water, trying in vain to find the ability to speak.

Emily takes advantage of the opening I've left, smirking as she fires another bomb, "Oh, no, did your family not know about you and Lorenzo? I can understand. A bit awkward to keep it in the family that way with his being Violet's cousin. Unless . . ." Her eyes narrow in glee, and I know that whatever she says next is her true purpose, the real reason she came over here.

"The whole thing was fake . . . like your brother's wedding and your sister's engagement." She tsks and adds, "You Andrewses just can't stop faking, can you?"

The crowd openly gasps in shock at the accusation. It should be ridiculous, but it's a bit too plausible considering Ross and Courtney really did fake their relationships, so everyone quickly assumes I've done the same thing. That I did doesn't make it any easier to refute.

Sorry, Mom and Dad! I know you taught me better, but I'm past looking for words in my fried brain. Impulsive, spontaneous, crazy action is the coping

mechanism I default to. I stand, throwing my water in Emily's face.

"Ah!" she screams. "What—"

Water drips from her eyelashes, her makeup ruined and her hair flopping down to make her look like a spluttering, drowned rat. Her white dress—yeah, white like she's still a bride—is nearly see-through, but the country club is definitely not a venue that holds wet T-shirt contests.

I freeze, not believing I actually did that. I should feel remorse, should be horrified. But what I feel is . . . free.

Laughter bubbles up, fizzy and warm and bright, exploding past my lips and making me sound like a manic hyena. Courtney snorts, trying to contain laughter of her own and doing a much better job of maintaining a sense of proper decorum.

There's a mix of laughter and horror from the crowd, who aren't even pretending to ignore the spectacle now.

Ross throws his napkin to the table and stands. "Enough!" he shouts, and even Emily has the good sense to flinch.

But it's my dad who truly saves me.

He doesn't even put his fork down, make a face, break a sweat, or throw things . . . all things I've done in the last several seconds since Emily walked up and nuclear bombed my life.

But Dad is the cloth we're all cut from and has perfected his skills around boardroom tables we can only dream of one day sitting at, so he coldly demands, "Are you quite finished now, young lady? I was rather enjoying a quiet dinner of celebration with my family before you came up and started spewing your venom all over my chicken marsala. It's obvious you are no friend of Abi's, and therefore, no friend of mine." He makes a shooing motion with his fork, a bit of sauce slinging on Emily's white dress too. "Leave us alone so we can continue to celebrate her good fortune as an artist and as a new bride. And you can go back to enjoying a night away from your new husband too." Dad glances at the table of women who are sitting straight and slack-jawed now. "I'm sure your husband is particularly enjoying the evening away from you."

Whoa! Dad is . . . stone-cold brutal. I'm really glad he's on my team.

"Harrumph!" Emily makes a sound of displeasure before spinning on her toe and stomping back to her table. She snaps her fingers and calls across the room, "Check, please!"

We're quiet as Emily gathers her purse and entourage, stomping some more as she heads toward the door and loudly remarks, "Some people . . ." But the door closes on whatever she was going to say about people like me and my family.

I shrink in my chair, wishing I could fall straight through the floor. I'm in hell already. Might as well get a little tan from the flames too. "Dad, I . . . sorry, I—"

He cuts his eyes to me, giving me a hard look. "Eat. Tell me about the flowers at this fancy wedding," he demands. But the true order is in his eyes, promising me that we're going to have a conversation about all of this, but not now, not here.

"Yes, where was I? Oh, the cooler broke right when we got there and we had to source replacements on the fly . . ."



WALKING INTO DAD'S OFFICE, he heads straight for the scotch. He pours a skinny pour, upends and swallows it, and then eyes me critically. I don't know what he's searching for as I stand there feeling like I'm a child again, waiting for a lecture. But whatever he sees, he goes for a second pour before sitting down.

Mom isn't waiting on him. She barely restrained her questions for the remainder of dinner, which we boldly ate while conversing about nothing of consequence to be sure we were seen as strong and unwilling to put up with shit from someone like Emily Jones. I mean, Daniels.

Ugh.

"You've got some explaining to do, so you'd best get to it, Abi," Mom starts.

I nod, finding a chair to plop into defeatedly. This is going to suck. I'm embarrassed, angry, and know I should've handled Emily with more grace, but in the moment, throwing my drink seemed like the right thing to do and the fastest way to shut her up.

"I know," I sigh, "Emily and I weren't friends in school. More like competitors—"

Dad interrupts me. "Yeah, yeah. We got that part. She's a bitch."

Mom gasps, "Morgan!"

He lifts a sardonic brow. "Am I wrong?"

Mom doesn't say anything for a long second, and then she shakes her head, on the verge of laughter but fighting it valiantly. "No, that girl was a bitch." She sounds like the very word is a delight to say. I'm a little proud of Mom. She's loving and kind, sweet and strong, but she's not exactly one to let her ugly thoughts and feelings run amok.

Dad gestures widely, giving me back the floor. "Now that that's settled, continue. But start with Aruba, not schoolyard stupidity."

I need to get this off my chest, this craziness that I've gotten myself into

that's worse than anything I've done before. "I saw Emily and Doug at check-in, and she was . . . well, herself, and I was floundering. Lorenzo—he's Violet's cousin—came up and saved me. I didn't know he was going to be there, but he cooked for the wedding last-minute. And it just popped out . . . I said we were there on our honeymoon too."

Dad mutters under his breath, looking at the ceiling as though cursing God for his stupid children. Or maybe praying that we finally grow the fuck up. Either way, he ends the private conversation by swallowing his second scotch and setting the empty tumbler on the side table next to him.

Leaning forward, hands interlaced between his knees, he clarifies, "Instead of bragging about this amazing wedding you were there to work on, on the successful business you started on your own and run not only debt-free but with a stellar ROI, and the happy life you have carved out for yourself . . . you went with a *fake honeymoon*?"

"Well, when you put it like that, I do see how stupid it sounds," I admit. I hear Dad's assessment, his pride in how well I've done, and it soothes something in me to know that he's proud of me, of what I've accomplished. Even if I haven't done all the things I want to . . . yet. And even if I did . . . this.

Unexpected emotion wells up in my throat. "In the moment, it was just easier to . . ."

Mom comes to my side, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me to her in comfort. "It was easier to beat her at the only thing she values. She wouldn't have understood the hard work you've put in or the goals you've crushed. People like her only understand who they are based on who they know."

Mom is so fucking smart. I don't forget that she's brilliant and leads events and charities by the dozens, but she's quiet about it in some ways, making it seem so effortless that I do forget that she's as much a powerhouse as Dad.

I nod into her shoulder. She lets me have a meltdown for one more second and then she pats my back before pushing me away coldly. "All right, now. Get on with it. Tell us the rest."

I find strength and keep going. "I was faking a honeymoon with Lorenzo. Like dinners, couples' yoga, a sunset cruise." Dad makes a snorting noise, and I rush to clarify, "Only when I was all caught up with the wedding stuff. Janey and I did everything one hundred percent."

"I'm sure you did, Abi. I don't doubt your dedication to your work. I do, however, doubt your sanity. All of yours, actually." Dad looks from me to Ross to Courtney. "Is it too much to ask that my children simply meet someone, fall in love, and get married in the usual way?"

“We’re unusual people,” Courtney states dryly.

There’s a moment of stunned silence as we look from one to another, frozen in time and space. And then surprised, shocked laughter bursts out of all of us.

“Oh, my God, Abi, you should’ve seen the look on your face when you threw that drink,” Courtney huffs out between snorts. She pulls an exaggerated look of disbelief in mockery of what I apparently looked like.

“Not as great as Mom’s!” Ross adds, mimicking Mom’s horrified face.

“That was not funny!” Mom argues, but she’s laughing too.

Even Dad is chuckling.

“Thanks for having my back like that, Dad,” I tell him earnestly. “That was above and beyond any smackdown I’ve ever seen. Bitch smackdown, verbal warfare style.”

Dad bows formally. “Glad to be of service. You might choose to make your own way, but when push comes to shove, you are and always will be an Andrews and I will always ‘have your back’, honey.” He says the common phrase as if it’s weird on his lips before admitting, “I just wish it hadn’t been so . . .”

“Public?” Courtney offers.

“Yes,” Mom confirms. “Speaking of . . . are we making an announcement about another new marriage?” She leans forward, eager to hear my answer. I think she’d be quite happy and not surprised at all if I had run off and gotten married without telling a soul. Hell, as grandbaby-keen as she is, she’s probably hoping for a baby announcement too.

“At least this wedding, we won’t have to pay for,” Dad jokes, though I think he’s at least partially serious.

“Not funny, Dad,” Courtney complains. Her wedding was beautiful and spectacular and . . . not cheap. It most definitely had the price tag to go along with an Andrews event.

“Shh! I want to hear about this Lorenzo!” Mom bites, cutting off Dad and Courtney’s chitter chatter.

They hush, looking pleased with themselves but not willing to open their mouth and risk Mom’s wrath.

“He’s Violet’s cousin, a chef from Positano. He travels, cooking all over the world. He’s smart . . . funny . . . and passionate about life.” My voice fades off as memories of our conversations, our adventures, and our time together wash through my mind and body. I feel the smile on my face and the blush on my cheeks before anyone mentions them.

“Ah, hell, I’ve seen that look before. He’s a goner. Total toast in another Abi scheme. Does he know it yet?” Ross jokes.

I duck my chin, not wanting them to see the pink turn to a full flush of red. “It’s not like that. He was just helping a friend through a tough time.”

Courtney whispers out of the side of her mouth, “To answer your question, Ross . . . no, he doesn’t know because Abi hasn’t really admitted it to herself yet.”

Ross laughs at that, and I look up hotly, instantly in fight-or-flight mode, and I’ve never been one to fly. “What? Why is that funny? You think it’s funny that I had this great week with him and then it’s over just like that?” I yell.

He doesn’t back down or cower in the slightest, rather his laughter amps up. “Do I think it’s funny? Fuck yeah, I think it’s funny that for all your scheming . . . your whole life’s worth of scheming . . . you end up caught in one of your own webs and are floundering around, fighting it like we always do. I’ll let you in on a little something we all learned long ago . . . don’t. Just go with it. It’s better that way.”

“What?” I balk.

Ross and Courtney look at each other, united against me. That’s a first and I don’t like it. Not one bit.

Mom and Dad have matching looks of mirth on their faces too. I’m used to seeing them on the same page, but not united against me too.

Mom is somehow the elected spokesperson. “Dear, you know we love you, but you are rather known for your schemes. You have to admit that it’s a little amusing that you’ve gotten yourself tied so deeply in one of your own devious plots that you can’t see a way out. Ironic, no?”

I pout, crossing my arms over my chest. “No, I don’t think so.”

Dad has never been one to let me stew in my own pity party, even though I throw a hell of a soiree. “What’s your plan for this Lorenzo?”

I shrug, not over my sulk yet.

“Do not tell me you intend on sitting back and doing nothing?” Dad demands.

I shrug again, that being pretty much my exact plan. If Lorenzo wants more than the week we had, he knows where to find me.

At my silence, Dad leans back in his chair, his legs spread wide and his hands rubbing at his face. He meets my eyes through heavy lids. “I’m disappointed in you, Abigail.”

I flinch. “What?” That hurts sharper than a rose thorn stabbing through delicate skin.

He keeps his relaxed posture, but every word is precise. “You are a remarkable woman who attacks life with a passion I have rarely seen. If this Lorenzo holds your interest—a task not to be underestimated—if he is worth

you, then you owe it to yourself to meet him halfway. Simply doing nothing is beneath you, Abi. If that's what he inspires in you, let him go. He deserves . . ." He shakes his head, changing his phrasing. "You deserve someone who inspires you to do anything, everything for them. To fight, to love, to dream, to live."

He takes Mom's hand, and they look at each other with all the love they feel bared and pure. They are a lot to live up to, but I won't settle for less than the example they've set.

Could I have that with Lorenzo?

I don't know. It seems so fast, but I've never felt anything close to what I feel when I'm with him. I've never felt this way about anyone. And Courtney's right about one thing . . . we're unusual people, and I'm an anomaly in a family of weirdos. If there's one thing I'd be likely to do, it's fall in love with a near-stranger in one week while doing something crazy like faking already being married.

"All right, so say I was going to do something, what would you suggest?" I ask my family, wanting their input into one of my schemes for the first time.

Ross raises his hand like we're back in school and wants the teacher to call on him. "I believe I know your partner in crime rather intimately, and she already has some ideas on that. Something about salad tongs this weekend?"

"So should I hold off on the press release then?" Mom asks with a smile.

CHAPTER 24

LORENZO

*M*y phone rings for the third time in a row, and I silence it the same way I have the previous two times. I growl, throwing it on the coffee table in front of me. It lands next to my boot and I have to fight the urge to kick it across the room in frustration.

Why won't she leave me alone? She's called nearly every hour on the hour, left dozens of messages, and still keeps trying.

I let my head fall back on the couch I've barely moved from since getting home from Avanti days ago. At least I came here, didn't just keep riding to destinations unknown. And this morning, I managed to ride to the coffee shop I prefer to get a strong brew.

Progress. Or giving up?

I'm not sure.

I take a sip of coffee, noting that for all the enormous effort it took to get, I've let it go cold and undrinkable.

There's a loud knock at the door. I'm too numb to flinch, too empty to care. The phone rings on the table and I sigh in annoyance.

Go away.

"I can hear your phone ringing, Lorenzo, so I know you're in there. Open up or I'll bust this door down. You know I will," she yells out.

The door is thin, making me reasonably certain that she could actually break through it with minimal effort if she put her ass into it with a good kick. Lord knows, she's hard-willed and stubborn enough to try.

I get up and cross the small room before she has a chance to hurt herself. But I only open the door a few inches, just enough to stand in the tight opening. "What?" I snarl.

"Way to greet the person who's going to fix your fuck-up, asshole," Violet snarls right back. Hell, if anything, hers might be more intimidating than mine.

Not that I'd ever admit that to her.

“I don’t need you to fix anything, Vi. I’m fine.” I’m nowhere near fine. I haven’t slept in days, am basically pumping caffeine and whiskey through my veins, and haven’t cooked anything in days. The Chinese food delivery guy has basically been my only visitor.

Violet scoffs. “Really? Because I can smell you from here, you look like shit, and Abi isn’t doing much better.”

The mere mention of her name weakens my resolve exponentially, and I lose my grip on the door. Violet instantly takes advantage, likely having plotted that from the get-go. She bursts through the door and into my small apartment.

I sense her looking around at my place but can’t give a shit about what she thinks of it. It’s temporary, anyway. My homes always are.

“What’s wrong with Abigail?” I demand. Of everything Violet said, that’s what sticks out.

Violet’s heels click across the floor and she daintily picks up a dirty T-shirt from where I threw it yesterday. Or was it the day before? I don’t even know. She sits down on the arm of the couch, crossing her legs and looking as casual as can be now that she’s past the threshold of the door.

“Do you care?” She glares at me critically, her eyes narrowing in challenge. “Truly care? Because I’m here to help you, but not if you’re half-assing this.”

I crowd her, close enough to be threatening, but she’s a ballsy Italian woman and doesn’t react in the slightest. “What’s. Wrong. With. Abigail?” I repeat, needing her to answer me so I don’t run out the door, hop on my bike, and ride to SweetPea Boutique to lay eyes on Abigail myself.

“Honestly, you’re what’s wrong with her. For some stupid reason, she misses you.” She rolls her eyes and sounds like that’s the most ridiculous thing she’s ever heard.

“She does? She hasn’t called me,” I argue, but I’m so surprised that I give her space, falling back on my heels. Giving a woman like Violet the win is never the right thing to do. She’ll hold it over my head for the rest of my days that all it took to bowl me over was the barest hint that Abigail might . . . maybe . . . sort of want me.

“Have you called her?” Violet argues right back. She’s got fire in her veins now and is ready to call me on any shit I might spew about it being a vacation-only thing at Abigail’s request.

The truth is, I’ve called a hundred times but never hit *Send*. I’ve driven by SweetPea daily, and yesterday, I hit a low point and started Googling for images of her. Seeing her done up with fancy hair and makeup at socialite events hadn’t made me feel better, though. I like the beachy Abigail who was bare-faced, open-hearted, and . . . mine.

Violet takes my non-answer as a no. She scowls and gets up, strutting for the door.

“Wait!” I beg.

She freezes with her hand on the knob but doesn’t come back. The glance over her shoulder says this had better be good.

I’ve never been a coward, so I dig deep to find some bravery and tell Violet the truth, praying that she really will help me. “I’ve been killing myself to stay away from her because I thought that’s what she wanted. I should be halfway across the country . . . or in another country by now. But I couldn’t leave her. I’m on the edge of a fine line of ex and stalker at this point, but I just . . . miss her, can’t be without her.” My voice is deep, rough with emotion at the admission of what the last few days have been like.

Violet spins in place and points a pink nail at me. “That’s what I want to hear.”

“You want to hear that I’m destroyed? That I’m fucking falling apart without her? That I can’t cook, can’t sleep, can’t do anything without wondering what she’s doing every minute of the day?” I shout, my hands flailing through the air dramatically. I’m Italian. It’s what we do. “Fine, there you go.” I grab my chest through my T-shirt. “That’s all I’ve got laid bare. Do with it what you will.”

She click-clacks her way back across my floor and pats my cheek too hard, somewhere between affection and assault. “I will. I’m going to help you.”

“You are?” I’m relieved, hopeful for the first time in days.

“Yep. For her, not for you, so remember that.” But she’s smiling openly as though I passed some significant test. Or maybe that I failed the test of being away from Abigail and that pleases her. Who knows with Violet?

“First things first, you need to do something about that.” She motions from my head down to my toes, making a face of disgust. “Do I need to call Archie?”

I shake my head. “I can shower and shave myself, Vi.”



I PARK my Ducati in the private parking garage, already sensing the security guard heading my way. I pull my helmet off, hooking it over the handlebar to run my hands through my hair. Freshly washed it on my own, thank you very much, Violet.

“You can’t park here,” the security guard tells me, thinking I give a shit about his supposed authority. I know what he sees when he looks at me—dirty motorbike rider, hair too unkempt, jeans too holey, shirt too off-the-rack, and attitude too fuck-off.

But I am who I am. Abi never seemed to mind my roughness, though I was more ‘board shorts and flip flops’ in Aruba than biker.

“I was invited,” I tell the guard, making no sudden moves—to leave or to obey.

He sneers in disbelief. “By whom?”

“Violet Andrews. She’s my cousin.”

I can see the color drain from the guard’s face. Apparently, my cousin’s name means something significant to him. I imagine Violet’s told him off a time or two, probably at fingertip. “Hold, please,” he says, less fierce than he was initially, but his eyes stay locked on me as though I’m some major threat even though I’m chilling on my bike with my arms relaxed at my sides. He messes with the radio at his shoulder, which crackles in response.

“Ten-four,” he says to whoever’s on the other end of the radio. To me, he’s now casual and at ease. “You’re good, man. Have a great night.” He offers me a wave and continues on his patrol route around the garage while whistling a tune I’m unfamiliar with.

I can’t help but chuckle a bit at Deputy Do-Good thinking he was going to stop me from getting upstairs to my Abigail. But he has delayed me long enough. I jam the button for the elevator, willing it to hurry.

The elevator eventually lets me out on the top floor, and I approach Violet’s penthouse apartment, ready to break through the door.

It’s not until this very moment that I wish I hadn’t arrived with empty hands. Riding the bike, I couldn’t bring a bottle of wine or flowers and arrive with them in anything other than shambles, but I feel unprepared for what’s on the other side of the door.

Is Abigail waiting for me eagerly? Or angrily? Should I grovel or shove her up against the nearest flat surface and remind her how well we fit together?

I won’t know until I see her, so I knock. Ross opens the door, his jaw tight and his eyes hard, and instead of letting me in, he comes out into the hallway, pushing me back with a palm on my chest. Instinctually, I want to swat his hand away, but I deserve this if Violet was telling the truth. Ross needs to defend his sister, vet me, and question my intentions.

“Why are you here?” he spits out.

“You already know. This whole round two is unnecessary.” I might understand his right to do this, but that doesn’t mean I have to play along. “Violet interrogated me thoroughly and is, quite honestly, scarier than you. I passed her test, and we both know that’s good enough.”

He growls at my brutal honesty because he’s well aware that I’m right and equally because I’m not giving him the challenge he wants. For all his suit and

tie persona, Ross Andrews would throw down with me at the slightest provocation. I respect that, his utter willingness to bleed, both himself and others, for his family. I'm the same way.

"Hurt her and I will torture you," he grits out.

"Not kill me?" I ask with a fuck-off smirk.

He moves another inch closer, so close I can feel his breath on my cheek. "No, torture is pain, the second by second agony through your entire soul. Death will be what you beg for."

He leans back, and I slow-clap his performance. "Well done. How many times did you practice that?" One second, he's glaring at me and the next, he's given me his back. I follow him into the apartment, where a group of people has hopped back from the door where they were presumably watching through the peephole and listening.

Oh! No peephole needed, I guess, because there's a security screen television with a live feed of the hallway.

Of all the people staring at me, only one matters.

Abigail is standing off to the side with her shoulders back and those beautiful brown eyes locked on me. Questions swirl and nerves glitter in their depths, and I hate that I gave her any reason to doubt me, to distrust what we feel.

I rush her, my hands cupping her face to lift her jaw so I can devour her mouth. It's been days, which might as well be an eternity for how much I've missed her. I steal her breath, replacing it with my own. "*Mia rosa*," I murmur against her lips.

"I didn't know if you wanted . . ." she tries to say, but I cannot stop tasting her.

"I did. I do. Always." I finish her thought with my own as I lay tiny, sweet kisses along her jaw toward the shell of her ear. "Do you?" I whisper.

"Yes," she moans. An answer, an urging for more, or both? I don't know, but I take it as agreement and kiss her again.

From behind me, I hear a voice say, "Bravo! Keep going, keep it going, puh-leese."

"Archie!" That was Violet for sure. "Hush, and maybe they'll forget we're here," she whispers.

I press my forehead to Abigail's, certainly not able to forget our audience now, though I fall into her smile once more and lay another soft peck to the edge of her lips to nudge it higher. Her smile blooms in response, and I feel like a god for being the cause of her returning joy.

"It seems Violet was right this time. I'm an asshole," I tell Abigail as an apology. "I've been dying without you, *mia rosa*." I have no shame and will

admit to being weak for this woman and utterly destroyed without her.

She shakes her head. “I should’ve called or said something. This is on both of us.”

My sweet Abigail, so responsible and reasonable when she’s not driving me crazy.

“Great! Now that you admitted I was right—which we got on video, by the way,” Violet informs us, “let’s sit down to dinner. I made lasagna. And you two can take it easy, not just inhale each other’s soul through mouth-to-mouth. Maybe, I don’t know, do something unheard of like date and get to know each other for more than a week while you’re faking some stupid honeymoon scheme?” Violet sounds quite proud of herself for getting us back in the same room.

I hear the tiniest hitch in Abigail’s breath and meet her eyes. Knowledge shines brightly there, sure certainty that’s reflected in mine.

We could do what Violet suggests, sit down to dinner and chat about the mundane whatever they discuss over pasta. Or . . .

I shake my head. “You said not half-ass, Vi, so that’s not how this goes.”

“What do you mean?” Ross demands.

“We have to go,” Abigail blurts out. “Now.”

She takes my hand and drags me toward the door despite everyone’s argument that we’re supposed to have dinner so they can interrogate me to see if I’m worthy of Abi.

“I was told to write my top three questions for these two and assured that I’d have the floor, only to be dismissed this easily?” Archie protests snarkily. I’m sure it was Violet who told him he’d get the chance to play twenty-questions, firing squad style.

“Oh, let them go. I don’t want the chef judging my lasagna, anyway. It’s too much pressure,” Violet tells everyone. “No telling what he’ll tell the people back in Italy about my American bastardization of the family recipes.”

“Are they leaving to have sex?” Ross makes a gagging sound as if he can’t fathom his sister having sex, much less fucking me in the elevator, which feels like a very real possibility.

I wonder if there are security cameras there too?

“More likely to find the closest Justice of the Peace,” Courtney answers. I recognize her and her husband, Kaede, from the wedding when I first met Abigail. And I like the way she thinks.

If I put a ring on Abigail’s finger and my cock inside her, I could stop her from ever leaving me again. The idea has merit.

“Absolutely not! I forbid it!” Ross shouts after us, but we’re already in the

hallway with the elevator button lit up.

“Of course it’s not forbidden,” Violet encourages. To Ross, I think, she says, “It’s Abi, and she always does whatever the hell she wants. Why would finding a man be any different?”

I have no idea where Abi’s taking me, but wherever it is . . . I’m in. Even if it’s a JP to put a ring on her finger.

For some reason, that actually doesn’t sound like a terrifying, ridiculous idea. It sounds . . . beautiful.

The elevator doors open, and I have her pressed against the back wall in a blink, sipping at her lips once more. “Fuck, I missed you. It felt like half of my soul was gone,” I murmur between kisses.

CHAPTER 25

We run out of the elevator and into the parking garage with smiles and laughs that we can only control long enough to kiss each other again. I need to feel him, firm and hard where my hands grip his chest, to trust that this is real and not a crazy figment of my imagination.

He stops at a gorgeous black motorcycle that looks like it could eat the road. As he grabs the helmet on the handlebars, I stupidly ask, “Is this yours?”

He pushes the helmet onto my head and begins fidgeting beneath my chin with deft fingers. “Yes, and I can’t wait to have you on it with your thighs locked around my hips as we race off to . . .” He pauses, his focus on the buckle I can’t see. “Wherever you want to go, *mia rosa*,” he finishes.

It is, I know it. I remember from that first night, feeling the anticipation that he’d stop and we’d ride off into the night together, and then the let down when he’d kept going without me. But that’s not going to happen tonight. I’m getting on this beast . . . the bike. Not Lorenzo. Although, I’m probably going to get on him as soon as possible too.

He’s intoxicating. I don’t know how he makes me feel both entirely under his spell and simultaneously in control. He doesn’t try to wrangle me or make me anything other than what I am. If I said I wanted to go back upstairs, he’d shove me back in the elevator to make that wish come true. If I demanded that he take us on a cross-country trip, I’d be over the state line in minutes at the speed he’d drive us there.

Controlled chaos that feels so familiar, but also exciting and fresh because it’s not me against the tide, fighting alone while everyone else judges me as weird. Rather, it’s me and him, going wherever our whims take us and doing whatever we desire, and all the while, flipping our middle fingers to the world that doesn’t understand.

I literally jump around, dancing awkwardly with excitement, and Lorenzo

laughs and pats the top of my helmet. Yeah, it's mine now. I've claimed it and am never giving it back. Certainly not to let anyone else ride with him. He's mine too.

Sorry, ladies, claiming him, I think, not caring in the slightest that I'm smiling goofily and can feel my face smooshing up against the hard plastic of the helmet. I probably look like I'm squirreling away nuts in my puffed-up cheeks, but it seems like Lorenzo likes my chipmunk cheeks.

"Have you ever ridden before?" he asks seriously, though he's smiling back at me with a dark gleam in his eye.

I shake my head and the helmet surprisingly stays put.

"Legs go around my hips, arms go around my waist. Squeeze me tight enough that I know you're with me. Lean with me. It's like dancing. I'm in charge and you follow. If I lean, you lean, no matter what. If you need anything, pat my stomach and I'll check on you. Understood?"

He's in full boss mode, telling me what to do. Usually, I'd balk at anyone doing that, but in this case, he's the expert and I will happily take his instruction to keep us safe. I hold up my index finger. "One thing . . . just so you remember, I'm a really bad dancer, so take it easy on me. But I'll do my best."

He smirks that grin that tells me he did not expect me to say that after his safety lesson. "*Mia rosa,*" he says on a huff of laughter, "if you don't wish to dance, then imagine it's yoga." His smile melts and his expression goes lustful. "No, think of it as sex. I set the pace and you flow with me, trusting that I will get you where you need to go."

We are so not talking about motorcycle riding anymore. Or if he is, I want to get on . . . now.

"Let's go!" I nearly shout, laughing as my own echo in the garage cheers me on. In seconds, I'm sitting astride the sleek machine as it roars beneath us. I scoot as close to Lorenzo as I can, damn close to being a spider monkey on his back like Bella on Edward in *Twilight*—don't judge. Everyone watched that and imagined themselves on that particular piggyback ride through the forest.

Lorenzo looks back at me, his eyes assessing and his hair curling from his fingers running through it. He squeezes my thigh once, twice, three times before putting his hand on the handlebars.

"Another of many firsts . . . and of lasts," I think I hear him say, but maybe it's my imagination. Either way, it's the truth. Tonight is the first night of many I want to spend with Lorenzo, not as co-conspirators in a scheme or as heated lovers on a vacation without rules but as something more.

I don't have all the answers. Hell, I have more questions now than I did when Violet told me to come over because she'd done as she promised and

handled things. She'd even jokingly told me that the head-ass-ectomy had been surprisingly easy, given what a mess Lorenzo was. I'd secretly been glad he was as big a disaster as me.

We ride.

For minutes or hours, I don't know, around town in some path only he understands.

At first, I'm terrified and hang on for dear life like he's my sole lifeline to gravity and the only thing stopping me from floating away from Earth. Eventually, I trust more, incrementally relaxing into his back to simply let the night cocoon us. I lean with him as he instructed, and as I do better, he goes faster and faster.

I could do this forever.

I feel free. I feel rooted. I feel wild. I feel chaos both raging and quieting inside me at the same time, which makes no sense but is the only way to explain what I feel. By letting him take me wherever he wants to, the wind whipping through my bones, I let go of everything and just . . . exist. It's peaceful in a wholly unexpected and beautiful way.

We drive back into the city, lights making my eyes squint at the abrupt brightness. Until I see one that sparks a light inside my soul that I can't ignore.

I pat Lorenzo's stomach, and he slows instantly, looking over his shoulder quickly to check on me. I point to the yellow sign, and his dark brow lifts in surprise. But he pulls over without question.

Right up until I'm inside the yellow-signed building and sitting in the chair with a tattooed, bearded guy the size of a refrigerator leaning over me. Then the question comes.

"Are you sure about this?" Lorenzo asks. He doesn't try to talk me out of it, though, and I appreciate that more than he'll ever know.

"Never been surer," I reply with a nod. "I'm ready," I tell Reno, the guy with the tattoo gun.

Reno looks to Lorenzo for confirmation, but Lorenzo's eyes are locked on mine in awe. "Fuck, *mia rosa*. You amaze me with the passion for life you have. I want to experience it all through your eyes. See your smile as you greet each day. Feel the depth of your strength. Know the power of your love."

Reno snorts as he tries to keep a straight face. Guess he's not a romantic like I am, but as long as he's got steady hands, I'm good.

The tattoo gun hums with a loud buzz, and Reno touches the needle to my skin. My face is already screwed up in anticipation, my breath locked in my lungs, but it's . . . not bad. Or at least, not as bad as I expected it to be.

"That's it?" I ask with a smile.

Reno does laugh at that. “I just started. It’ll get worse before it gets better, but yeah . . . that’s it. Only about forty-five more minutes to go, doll.”

Doll? I’m definitely not one of those . . . unless it’s one of those second-rate Barbies that gets left in the bottom of the bin too long and loses one shoe, gets a bit of chewed gum stuck in its hair, and has uncapped marker ink on its naked body.

Well, actually, that last part does make me a doll in a sense, I guess, because when Reno is done, I’ll have ink on my ribcage, just below my left breast.

“Tell me what I’m doing here again?” Reno says. “Not that I care. I’m just happy to not be doing flash art off the wall or copying something from Pinterest.”

I smile though the pain is getting more intense, a deeper burn rather than a stinging sensation. “The circle represents a motorcycle wheel. Tonight was my first time.”

Reno pauses and looks at Lorenzo again. “She’s riding bitch, I hope?”

I answer for myself. “I rode on the back of his bike, if that’s what that means. But it was awesome . . . a milestone in a lot of ways.” A big moment for more than just me sitting on the back of Lorenzo’s bike, that’s for sure.

The idea that I’m not controlling some huge monstrosity of a motorcycle seems to ease Reno, promptly making me want to march right out and get a motorcycle of my own. Hmm, that’s an idea. An image of Lorenzo and me riding alongside each other down some deserted road with beautiful leaves all around us fills my mind. But then I wouldn’t feel the same freedom of just floating along the road tethered to Lorenzo, so I dismiss the idea and decide I don’t care what Reno thinks anyway.

“Hmm,” Reno hums, getting back to work and drawing a hiss of surprise out of me at the return of the stinging. “What else?”

I realize that he’s keeping me distracted, asking me questions that require more than a yes or no answer to keep me focused on something else. Maybe for all his male-assholeness, he’s a semi-decent guy. Or at least a good tattoo artist.

“The numbers across the center of the wheel are the coordinates for Aruba. We just got back. The four compass points are a heart because . . . well, obviously, for my heart. A flower because I’m a floral artist, and the sun and moon are a reminder to live each day to my own standards. No one else’s.” I explain my reasoning in fits and starts, fighting to stay still the whole time.

“Almost done,” Reno says, and Lorenzo takes my hand, running his thumb in a soothing circle along the tender part between my thumb and index finger.

He murmurs into my ear in Italian. I have no idea what he’s saying, but the soothing, rumbling tones help me sit still for the remaining few minutes.

“All right. You up next, man?” Reno asks Lorenzo.

Lorenzo shakes his head. “No, thanks. This was her desire tonight. I’m just here to make sure she gets whatever she wants and support her dreams.”

It’s right then that I know.

I suspected. I probably even knew on some level that I stuffed down in the dirt of my gut and tap-danced on top of to keep it from blooming too fast. But it’s bursting through the dirt in a beanstalk of a sprout now.

Love.

I love Lorenzo.

Big and wild, loud and scary, and so not temporary.



“THIS IS MY APARTMENT,” I offer with a wave of my hand. “That’s Delores, my fiddle leaf fig tree. Those succulents are Wilma, Fred, Betty, and Barney. The *Monstera* is named Loch, the snake plant is Medusa, and the fern is Christofern. And that’s Meredith, my new cactus that’s prickly as hell and keeps falling over, making a mess of dirt I have to clean up.” I sneer at the offending asshole of a cactus. Yeah, I named one of my plants after Meredith Wildeman. It’d seemed appropriate given its phallic shape and how many times I’ve cursed it this week. I might kill it just for some cathartic healing too.

Lorenzo smiles at me, barely giving the plants a glance. He’s judging me, that’s for sure, but he seems to think my habit of naming all my plants is cute rather than weird as fuck.

“Abigail,” he starts, his voice low and rumbly in a way that makes my belly flip and my core clench.

“Yeah?” I drawl out.

“I need you to tell me what we’re doing here. You told me where to take you, and I did, but I’m about to take you over that couch and let all of your plants watch. If that’s not what you want, tell me now because it’s been too long since . . .”

I don’t let him finish, knowing exactly what he’s saying. We left Aruba, left that massage room, almost a week ago. A week that I have spent feeling empty without him—mentally, emotionally, and physically.

And I’m done with that.

I slowly pull my shirt over my head to not disturb my sore ribs and watch his eyes dilate at my bare chest, my bra an impossibility after the impromptu tattoo. He stomps my way, and I let him have three steps before I turn and take off down the hallway toward my bedroom.

“What?” he mutters, and then he realizes it's game time and gives chase.

Fuck, I love the sound of him running down the hall after me, the feel of his heat getting closer, the focus of his attention on me, not whatever surroundings we're in.

Through the door first, I spin to sit on my ass on my fluffy peach comforter-covered bed. I expect him to stop at the bed's edge, either between my knees or straddling them with his own.

He doesn't. He keeps coming, forcing me back on the bed. I writhe beneath him, careful to not stretch the sensitive, tattooed skin.

“Don't move, *mia rosa*. Do not hurt yourself. Let me,” he groans. “Fuck, let me.” He drops to his knees, his hands undoing my jeans and yanking them down and off, taking my shoes with them. He gives my panties the same treatment and then shoves my knees apart.

There's something so obscenely sexy about being nude and vulnerable when he's fully dressed and looming over my most sensitive part. His eyes trace over my core, his thumbs teasing at my lips to open me even wider.

He leans in, nudging my center with his nose, and I hear him inhale. “Nectar of the gods. You smell so good and taste even better.” I feel the heat of his breath a moment before I feel the flat of his tongue lick a long line over my entire pussy as if he wants to claim every inch as his own.

“Fuck, Lorenzo. Yes,” I moan.

“That's it. Let me hear how much you've missed me, how much you've needed me, and know that I will never leave you again, even if you want me to. Even if you beg me to.” He switches to soft kisses and lapping licks, from one thigh, across my middle, to the other thigh. “Sweet, wild Abigail . . . I'm afraid you're stuck with me . . . forever.”

I'm already on edge embarrassingly easily with his words that pierce directly into my romantic heart and his tongue that's hitting my needy clit.

I reach down with my hand, twining it into his hair and holding him to me, demanding what I want. What I deserve.

“Please . . . fuck.” The plea is for more—more of his tongue, more of his poetry, more of something I can't even name as I'm swirling higher and higher under his power.

But he knows. I don't know how, but he does. “You're mine.” The soft claim is paired with a fierce suck on my clit, and together, they send me flying into the abyss. My eyes flutter closed and I see white sparkles against the black of my eyelids. He grunts against me, demanding more until I'm wrung out from the bliss.

Slowly, I come back to the moment and to my body, unsure where I

disappeared to but knowing I went on a journey to somewhere magical. Lorenzo is slowly circling my clit with his thumb, patiently waiting on my vision to clear, and when I look down between my legs, it's to see him with a lazy smile of awe on his face.

“Bellissima, mia rosa.”

I wiggle and he lets me move. I scoot up the bed, waving him closer with one hand. His eyes narrow, asking carefully, “Are you hurting?” He nods his head toward the tattoo.

I bite my lip, not willing to admit that it's sore and moving around isn't helping because I want to keep going, especially when I see the hard ridge in his jeans. “Not too much. I might just have to be a starfish this time.”

His brows knit together. “Starfish?”

I lay my arms and legs out wide and lax, telling him dramatically, “Do with me what you will.”

Oh, shit. There's a fresh gleam in his eye instantly, and his hand goes to his cock, massaging it through the denim. “You're asking for it,” he warns.

But I don't need a warning. I need whatever devious thought is running through his mind right now because it's written all over the hard lines of his face as he grits his teeth, making the muscles in his jaw flex.

My hips buck, looking for something in the empty air above me.

“Don't move. You'll hurt yourself.”

The order is clear. And I'm not a girl who takes orders. I'm a girl who gives them. But my hips still, curious at what he's going to do.

He yanks his shirt over his head, toes off his boots, and slowly, so damn slowly, undoes his jeans. He pushes them and his underwear down in the front, freeing himself. I must make some sound of hunger because his hand goes to the base, squeezing himself tightly. “*Cazzo*,” he groans.

I'm pretty sure that means ‘fuck’, but even if I wasn't sure, his tone would tell me. “You said don't move. You didn't say I couldn't talk, Lorenzo. Are you going to climb up here and fuck me or stand there and jerk off onto me?”

Honestly, both options sound pretty stellar right now.

He pushes his jeans and underwear the rest of the way down, leaving a puddle of clothes on the floor. Stroking himself, he tells me, “Neither.”

But he kneels on the bed between my legs, lining up with my entrance. He gives a few shallow thrusts, not breeching me but coating his crown with my juices. My hips buck as I try to impale myself on him to ease this aching need that only he can fix.

His hands find my hips. Pushing me into the softness of the bed, he forces me still beneath him. I gasp in disappointment at losing the contact when I was

so close to having him fill me again.

“Abigail, look at me.”

I have to blink to focus on him, but once I do, I can see that he’s on the edge too, holding on by a fraying thread.

“I’m not going to fuck you. Not this time.” He shakes his head, and I swallow a cry. “I’m going to make love to you, and you’re going to let me worship you the way you deserve. You’re going to be still and let me love you. This is a time for you to take, to feel, to receive.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to agree or disagree. He slides inside me in one smooth thrust forward, stealing my breath.

Complete. That’s what I feel with him inside me, his eyes locked on mine and his heart written all over his face. It’s been in his every action. I was just too fearful to trust. Until now.

Cathartic tears pour out of my eyes as he strokes into me, keeping a steady and even pace as he whispers love, tells me all the things he sees in me that are beautiful, and appreciates my passion, needing nothing less or nothing more than exactly who and what I am.

I didn’t know I wanted this. I certainly didn’t know I needed this.

But this is what my romance looks like. A little reckless, a lot spontaneous, and a whole lot of *carpe the shit outta that diem*. With Lorenzo.

I wrap my legs around his and grip his shoulder with my one hand, staying still but wanting to be there with him, giving him back as much as he’s giving me.

“I love you, Lorenzo,” I shout.

I know, I know. Women aren’t supposed to say it first. It’s like the kiss of death that instantly scares guys off. But it’s the truth, and I don’t play by others’ rules. I feel it, so I’ll own that, and he deserves to know.

Instantly, he grunts and thrusts deep into me, holding still for a split second with his neck muscles strained and his eyes locked on mine. I feel him throbbing, the pulse of his hot cum filling me as he vows, “I love you too, *mia rosa*.”



“I THINK there’s a spatula in that drawer,” I tell Lorenzo the next morning while he tries to make us breakfast with the woeful lack of supplies in my apartment.

He opens the drawer only to find more take-out menus.

He glares at me, holding up a flyer from my favorite pizza place. I don’t

move from my perch on a stool at the counter and only offer a shrug, knowing I'm blushing and hoping he thinks it's cute that I can barely boil water.

"I need to eat. I don't need to cook," I tease.

He digs around a bit more and comes out victorious with a spatula after all. He then promptly gathers up all of my menus and dumps them in the trash.

"Hey!"

"I'll cook for you now."

Uhm, well . . . okay, then. Anything Lorenzo makes is better than the pizzas I only get because they're fast, cheap, and good for two nights.

"F-Y-I, I'm gonna hold you to that," I promise. He smiles as though he hopes I do. "I can't believe that train wreck of a week got us to here." I gesture from me to him, and okay, to the fresh-cooked breakfast.

"It wasn't a total train wreck. We had fun, ten of ten, would do again," he jokes.

"Oh, God, you sound like Violet or Archie when you say that," I lament, but then I admit, "You're right, though. You met Esmar, and I told Emily off, which was a fair amount of closure until the whole country club kerfuffle."

His questioning look tells me that Violet didn't share that little tidbit with him, so I fill him in about Emily trying to ruin our family dinner and doing so rather loudly. "But now the whole club thinks we're married too because Dad had to basically defend me by saying we were celebrating my good work and new marriage."

Lorenzo smiles around a laugh. "So, the scheme continues?"

He doesn't sound disappointed about that at all. Not one bit.

"And you know how Claire basically told Meredith she was second-choice at the wedding? Well, her whole wedding album online has both Meredith and the original planner tagged. I wish I'd been a fly on the wall when she saw that!" I laugh.

"Fly on the wall?" Lorenzo repeats, looking confused.

"Weird expression. Basically means I would've loved to see that," I explain.

"That woman . . . she is . . ."

He seems to be searching for a word, so I help. "We've decided on 'bitch'. Even my mom said so, and that's basically a miracle."

"Yeah, that bitch held you over my head when she couldn't get me to do her bidding."

"What?" I screech, slapping the counter with both palms.

I'm going to kill her. Kill her and have Archie give me an alibi.

Sigh. I'm not.

But I am going to skip watering Meredith the cactus. Maybe poke it with a

few pins, voodoo-doll style too. I wonder if a pin hurts a cactus? You know, because they're already full of stabby sticks? I should look that up.

Lorenzo nods as he stirs the eggs, oblivious to my new botany plans. "She has it out for you, more than just the wedding. She told me that she would refuse to work with you so her brides wouldn't be able to use you as their florist. I don't know what kind of power she might have in your town, in your crowd," he warns.

"Not that kind of power, that's for damn sure."

I am furious. How dare she? I rocked that wedding, made Claire over-the-moon happy, and created some of my absolute best work. What is her deal? I mean, does she hate flowers on principle or just me?

"What are you gonna do?" Lorenzo asks as he sets a plate of perfectly fluffy eggs in front of me.

He doesn't tell me to let it go, doesn't suggest that maybe I'm overreacting, doesn't even come up with some crazy scheme of his own. He just lets me be me.

"I don't know yet, but I'll figure it out. I always do." I take a bite of eggs and moan at the deliciousness. "Oh ma gawd, these are so good," I say around the mouthful. After I swallow, and before the next bite that's already poised on my fork, I ask, "Speaking of, what's the deal with this job offer from Esmar? That's what Meredith hung over my head about you."

"That bitch! How did she even know about that?" Lorenzo says around his own monster bite of half-chewed eggs, not shy at all about the new label we've bestowed upon Meredith's head.

Maybe I should rename that cactus? Bitch has a nice ring to it.

"He offered, but I couldn't accept. I couldn't leave you, even when you weren't mine," he confesses boldly.

"I was always yours," I tell him.

"And I yours, *mia rosa*."

We lock eyes, no words needed before we shovel the rest of our eggs down our throats at eating-contest pace and run back to the bedroom.

CHAPTER 26

*W*e roar down the tree-lined street. I can feel the eyes peeking out of the windows as we pass by each house, the inhabitants wondering who dares to disturb their peaceful, gate-controlled community.

Abigail points right, and I follow her directions, praying that our destination is what she promises it is. Not that I think she'd mislead me, but we grew up in very different worlds and this will be my first true step into hers.

I'm nervous.

Fine, I'm fucking mental about it. I'm not the sort of guy girls ever took home to their fathers. And later, when women would suggest it, I'd run for the nearest exit before their misconceptions could go any further astray. But this time? When Morgan Andrews invites you to dinner, you do not say no. You go.

Even if it's with his daughter on the back of your motorcycle.

The private gate begins a slow swing open as we approach, reinforcing my thought that we're being watched. Abigail waves to a camera. I stare directly into it, not sure who's watching on the other end of the feed.

We cruise down the long drive and I park. Abigail climbs off first, and I take her helmet. I'll need to buy another one today so I can be safe as well. I'm an asshole ninety percent of the time, but a safe one.

Actually, I'm feeling less of an asshole these last few days. I simply can't quit smiling when Abigail explains American reality television to me by acting out the shows charade-style, has entire conversations with her plants while she waters them, and implements naked yoga Sundays as a household rule.

I'd fought that one because downward dog with my dick hanging and my ass in the air isn't exactly a pleasant look, but Abigail had argued that she would only do it if I did. So down dog, I did.

And so did she, my cock reminds me.

She's nothing if not interesting, a delight to experience each day with as she

sees things I would never even notice.

In return, I've kept to my vow to feed her and she's enjoying foods she's never tried, become a pro at riding behind me, and has pulled a promise from me to go see Reno again . . . for some new ink for myself that she's designed as a surprise.

I secretly think she's going to put a lip imprint of her own kiss on my ass because she had a giggle fit that lasted for twenty minutes about the very idea. I'd refused, of course, but if it makes her smile every time she sees my ass for the next fifty years, I'll happily get it permanently inked on my backside.

And it's only been days since I rushed her at Violet's. I can't imagine what adventures fifty years might hold.

Like tonight.

We approach the door, and surprisingly, she rings the bell and doesn't barge right in. Something about that seems oddly unexpected about both Abigail and her family, based on what I've heard from Violet about how close they are. I lift my eyes in question and she explains, "Once, I came home and caught my parents in a rather compromising position. It's great that they love each other and all, but I do not want to see that again. Ever. So now, even when they know I'm coming, I ring the bell, knock, or go in yelling my arrival so they have time to get dressed."

"Ah, love!"

She smacks my chest with the back of her hand. "You can say that because it wasn't your parents." A shiver works its way down her spine and I grin.

The door opens, and a black-suited, white-haired man stands before us. He's smaller, frailer, and older than I thought the great Morgan Andrews would be.

"Karl!" Abigail squeals and promptly gathers the man up in her arms for a hug. "It's been ages!"

Karl? So not Morgan. Who's Karl?

"You should come home more often then, Miss Abi," the old guy says.

"I know. Been busy working on my tan, you know how it is," she jokes to the particularly pale man. She's done no such thing. She's been working with Janey and Samantha every day at the flower shop while I scout out restaurants to consider applying at.

"Looking quite Virgin Islands, you are," he replies dryly.

"I haven't been a virgin in a long time, Karl," she tells him with a laugh. "A really, really long time. And we both know that." He returns the mirth, though it's with a significantly higher degree of restraint.

I clear my throat.

"Oh! Karl, this is Lorenzo Toscani. Lorenzo, this is Karl. Technically, he's

the house manager. Realistically, he's the reason we're all sane. Well, everyone else, anyway. I'm the reason he's crazy most of the time." She nudges him with her elbow.

"You're certainly what makes life interesting, Miss Abi." His smile is warm and genuine. He offers me a hand. "Good to meet you, Mr. Toscani."

"You as well, Karl."

"Come in, come in. Mr. Toscani, if you'll follow me to Mr. Andrews's office. Miss Abi, your mother is in the kitchen with the caterer," Karl says.

Honestly, I'd rather go to the kitchen to hang with the caterer to see what they're cooking and maybe what I can learn. But after Abigail shoots me a wink for strength, I follow Karl almost happily.

Down this hallway awaits my fate.

Karl knocks twice and then opens the door. "Mr. Morgan, may I present Mr. Toscani?"

"Come in!" a deep voice booms.

Inside the room, I see three men sitting in club chairs by an unlit fireplace. They stand as I enter, and Karl closes the door behind me, leaving the gladiator with the lions.

Kaede, Courtney's husband, with his dark hair and eyes, was once an interloper who, like me, fell for one of the Andrews women. He gives me a pitying look. Ross, Violet's husband, seems eager to get this shitshow on the road.

And last but certainly not least, Morgan Andrews.

He's an older, slightly less athletic version of Ross, a man who has carried the weight of the world on his shoulders and has no intention of shirking that responsibility any time soon.

Morgan is in charge here, and I wait for him to make the first move. "Good to meet you, Lorenzo." He holds a hand out. Our handshake is firm and solid, not a dick-measuring contest of who can squeeze the hardest. I appreciate that. "Have a seat." He gestures to a fourth chair.

"Drink?" Ross asks as he leans forward to pick up a crystal decanter.

"Abigail actually warned me to take the offered Glenfiddich. She said the one guy who dared to say no was kicked into the front yard. So, yes, thank you," I tell Ross.

All three men laugh at my confession.

"Honesty, a rare trait and one I appreciate," Morgan says as he sips his own scotch. "Tell me more about yourself, Lorenzo."

I mirror his move with a sip of my own. "I'm from Positano originally but have cooked all over the world. I recently left Avanti and am currently

researching for my next move.”

Morgan nods in understanding, as if I didn't just pretty up telling him that I'm unemployed. “And your intentions with my daughter?”

I appreciate his directness, so I return it with some of my own.

I set my glass down on the table. “I know it has been a short time, but those days in Aruba were rather intensely deep, and since then, we've been sharing even more. I won't say I know everything about Abigail, but I want to learn more every day. In fact, I wanted to ask you . . .”

I swallow, wishing I could pick my drink back up. But I can do this without the assistance of alcohol, even if my mouth is drier than cotton.

“I know Abigail told you about the pretend honeymoon we had, but what I would truly appreciate is a chance to earn your blessing to ask Abigail to marry me in truth.” I exhale in relief at even getting the words out.

I'm not weak, not one to bow under the weight of daring risks, but Abigail is the most important dream I've ever had.

Morgan eyes me critically. “It's a little late for that, don't you think? Considering you and Abi have already told that little lie and forced my hand into confirming it?” His voice is even and steady, almost flat.

I expect he is waiting for an apology. None is forthcoming, from me or Abigail, I suspect. “I supported Abigail with what she needed at the time to deal with Emily and would do it again, because however unintended, it brought us together, and I wouldn't change that for anything. Also, if I may be so bold as to point out, you blindly supported Abigail with the same lie when backed into a corner.”

He hums thoughtfully. “So, your wish is to actually marry Abi and you're asking for my permission?”

“Blessing,” I correct.

“Semantics,” he replies with a small smile. “Abi would kill you where you sit if she heard even a whisper of this conversation. You know that, right?”

The knife of his words stabs me directly in the heart. “You don't think she would want to marry me?”

There's a moment of silence where I barely manage to restrain myself from stomping out of here, grabbing Abigail, sitting her on the back of my bike, and riding off into the sunset with her. Fuck this pretense and politeness. I don't need it. I only need her.

But she needs her family.

They're close, and I won't take that from her.

But there's a fresh tic in the muscle beneath my left eye.

That's when all three men burst out laughing. Kaede even points a finger at

me, asking Morgan, “God, did I look that terrified and furious all at the same time when we talked about Courtney?”

My confusion must be obvious because Morgan takes pity on me.

“Look, Lorenzo. We’re going to pretend—see what I did there?” Kaede and Ross groan, and Morgan throws his hands out. “What? Too soon?” But I can see the hint of evil in his smile letting me know that he’s giving all three of us shit.

“We’re going to pretend you never asked for my permission or blessing because Abi would kill us both. She does what she wants, always has and always will. As long as you know that—truly respect that about her down to your soul—you’ll be fine. She has guts, is stubborn, and was fearless to step out on her own from minute one. While I’m glad that Courtney’s here to take the reins of Andrews Consolidated when I step down and I’m proud of what Ross and Kaede are building, Abi is a different breed altogether. I worried that she would settle for someone who wanted her small. I’m glad to see that’s not the case.”

“Not at all, sir. I like her—love her—exactly as she is,” I assure him.

He smiles, and I can sense that some of that weight on his shoulders has lessened. Abigail told me that family is everything to her parents, so I can imagine Morgan’s joy at his children finding love the way he did.

“Hell, to be honest with you, I’m surprised Abi hasn’t dragged you off to a courthouse to get married already. Kimberly and I figured tonight was going to be Abi’s big reveal that it’s all really real now.” He drops his voice to a whisper. “I think Kim’s hoping there’s a baby announcement with it too.”

I do pick up my glass of scotch at that and upend it in one swallow. I gasp at the burn that flows down my throat and up into my sinuses. “Uh, no. Not yet. We’d like to be married first and get to know each other better. I think.”

The idea of kids scares me. The idea of a mini-Abigail is both adorable and terrifying. But I’m under no pretense that if she said she was ready to start trying tonight, I’d have her underneath me in seconds. I’m a full-blown sucker for her.

“Good luck with that. I do appreciate the gesture of this,” he says, pointing from himself to me, “but all you need to do is make my little girl happy and we’ll be fine. Understood?”

There’s the threat I’ve been waiting on, cold and sharp and hard-edged.

“Understood.”

“Good, then let’s eat,” Morgan says. “Fair warning, the caterers heard they were cooking for a chef tonight and got both nervous and excited. I’m not sure if that means we’ll be eating extra well or if it’ll be inedible.”

“I’m sure it’ll be lovely.”

As we walk down the hallway, I can hear female voices from a room somewhere ahead and wonder what interrogation Abigail’s been through while I

was with her father.

“What restaurants have you been considering? Or have you thought of opening one of your own? I could help with that, you know,” Morgan offers kindly.

“Thank you, but no. If I ever open my own restaurant, it will be with my own funding. I want it to be mine. For now, I’m happy to let others take the financial risk and focus on the kitchen to allow my creativity to run free. I still have more to learn and excellent opportunities to do so here,” I tell Morgan.

“You passed that test with flying colors, son,” he says with a smile. “Much like my Abi. And I’ll admit I’m glad to hear you say ‘here’ because I would hate to see her leave the business she’s worked so hard to create.”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not. She is SweetPea and SweetPea is her. I know the roots she has here are important to her, and therefore, they are important to me.”

“Dad! Quit with the third-degree,” Abigail yells as she comes out to meet us.

But I don’t need her to save me from her dad. He and I are on the same team . . . Team Abigail, both willing to do anything for her.



DINNER IS DELICIOUS, as I predicted. Or at least I think it is. I’m so nervous, I barely taste a thing, but everyone else seems to enjoy it.

Finally, with dessert complete and after-dinner coffees sitting on fine china plates, I feel ready.

“Abigail?” I say when there’s a lull in the conversation.

She turns to me. Actually, everyone turns to me—Morgan and Kimberly, Ross and Violet, and Kaede and Courtney. Even baby Carly, who’s sitting in a high chair at the formal dining table.

“I never imagined I would meet someone like you, someone who would make me want to stop everything and find stillness and peace in their eyes—”

Ross chokes on a laugh, “Did he say that Abi’s peaceful? Has he even met her?” I hear Violet’s smack to his chest, and they quiet down for me to continue.

“Someone who makes anywhere feel like home. You make me smile, make me laugh, make me want to smack your ass—”

Morgan interrupts this time, clearing his throat. Oops. Seems Abigail has broken my brain-mouth filter too.

I cut my eyes to Morgan in apology, and Abigail snaps her fingers in front of my face to get my attention back. She’s beaming, already nodding her head when I haven’t even asked what I want to yet.

I could wait. This is fast, strangely, crazily so, but as the happy couples in my family always told me, when you know, you know. So why wait? There is nothing to be gained by delaying.

I scoot my chair back, dropping down to one knee right there at the fancy dinner table in the Andrewses' dining room to take Abigail's hands in mine.

"*Mia rosa*, would you do me the honor of being my wife and allow me the blessing of being your husband?"

Her answer is written all over her face, but she makes me wait a split second while she inhales.

"Abso-freaking-lutely!" she shouts so loudly that I hear dishes clatter in the kitchen.

I smile so big that my face feels stretched and my heart feels filled with her. Standing, I grab her in my arms and spin her around as her family—*our* family—claps.

I take her lips, molding them to mine in a parent-unfriendly kiss, but I can't care. I'm too happy, too amazed, and too shocked at the wild and crazy turn my life has taken. Twists and turns for the better with Abigail.

"Wait. On one condition," Abigail says suddenly, and I freeze.

"Anything. You know that," I promise, meaning it.

"You sure about that?" she tests.

CHAPTER 27

“Okay, people, chug that coffee like it’s light beer at a frat party. We’ve got places to go.” I’m in full Boss mode, something my family understands quite well because we all tend to tackle shit head-on when it’s needed. We’re ambitious, hard-headed people.

Of course, right now, they’re looking at me like I’ve also grown a second head on my right shoulder and it’s wearing a fruit headdress because this is not what they expected three seconds after Lorenzo proposed. I’m sure most women tear up, flash around a ring, and start making plans for bridal gown shopping and venue selections.

I am not most women.

This is not most situations, where the wedding is happening after the honeymoon.

I’m a person who spends day in and day out listening to other people’s dreams, doing all the hard work of making them come true, and watching the stress of putting so much into one day.

I don’t want that. Never wanted that.

I want . . . Lorenzo.

I’m out of the dining room, dragging Lorenzo down the hall by his hand, though he’s coming willingly and with a smile that says he enjoys my weirdness that means he never quite knows what I’m up to.

“Oh!” Mom exclaims as she gets up to follow. “Abi, what are you doing?”

“Where are you going?” Courtney asks.

“Oh, hell, let me get my purse.” Violet’s a great bestie, always happy to do the crazy things with me too, though that’s changed a bit since Carly was born and she’s gone all responsible and mature on me. *She needs a little crazy in her life again*, I think gleefully.

In the foyer, I pause long enough to steal some blooms from the arrangement on the table. It’s one of my own designs, so I don’t feel bad about destroying it

for my new purpose, but I do shoot Mom a look of apology and promise to send another one as soon as possible.

Mom just blinks in confusion.

Long before I even opened SweetPea Boutique, Mom would make special requests for flowers and I would go out back to hand-select just the perfect ones. Now, she supports me by having a standing weekly order for one foyer display and a small seasonal bud vase bloom on her vanity. It's one of my favorite jobs each week because she gives me full creative freedom to make whatever I'd like.

I shove the handful of blooms to Violet. "Bring these with you because they can't ride the bike. Follow us."

She laughs, trying to hold the flowers, Carly, and a diaper bag at the same time. Ross saves the flowers by taking Carly from Vi's arms. "By all means, Abs. This is your scheme. Lead on," he tells me.

Out front, I stand by Lorenzo's motorcycle. Struck by a momentary flash of nerves, I ask, "You meant it, right?"

He pushes my hair back from my face so he can slide the helmet onto my head. As he fastens the buckle below my chin, his eyes tick up to me. "The proposal?" he clarifies.

"Uh, no. I guess I assumed you meant that. You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

He shoots me a cocky smirk, one dark eyebrow lifting in that sexy way that makes me want to bite him. "No. Definitely not. Just interested in what we're doing because you look so beautifully pink with excitement and happiness that I'm memorizing each expression on your face to take out and leisurely enjoy later."

Sigh. The words that come out of his mouth.

I push up to my toes, planting my lips on his to taste the sweet romance he gives me. He tastes like coffee, tiramisu, and dreams come true.

"Anything?" I hedge.

"I'll go wherever you tell me to go. Happily, *mia rosa*." I can hear that he truly means it. Even when everyone else worries I've lost my ever-loving mind, he sees the method to my madness and the organization in my chaos and thrives it in all.

"Follow us!" I shout, climbing on the motorcycle in my dress. I could've worn pants tonight, but I'd wanted to look nice for dinner and hadn't cared about the appropriateness of a skirt on a bike. Now, the dress seems especially apropos.

I guide our caravan of cars through the night by tapping Lorenzo's belly and pointing where I want him to go.

Several minutes later, we pull into the parking lot as an entourage of vehicles—one motorcycle, my parents' Mercedes, Ross and Vi's new SUV—pretty sure that's for the additional kids they're planning but not telling anyone about yet—and Kaede's fancy sports car he got to celebrate the opening of the latest One Life Gym.

Lorenzo parks and shuts off the Ducati, looking over his shoulder at me. The quiet of the night is shocking, and the sign's yellow glow throws Lorenzo's face into highlights and shadows. I can't read his expression. He's not mad or surprised. Maybe it's simply acceptance.

He helps me take the helmet off and whispers, "We're getting tattoos?"

I bite my lip to keep my plan from popping out like a champagne cork. Okay, not plan . . . this is a scheme too. I'll admit that, even if I've argued the semantics of the two words multiple times with Ross.

"Uhm, sort of?" I respond. "Come on!"

Our hands locked, Lorenzo and I walk through the glass door, triggering a tinkling bell.

"Reno!" I shout.

"Hold your fucking horses," his gruff voice answers.

"Abi?" Dad is looking around with uncertainty. And maybe a little bit of distaste.

I press up against Lorenzo, my hands on his chest as I look up at him, a plea in my eyes. "When we were here before—"

"You have a tattoo?" Vi snaps. "Why don't I know this? Why haven't I seen it?"

I decide right then and there that Ross is the best brother ever because he places a hand over Vi's lips and whispers something in her ear that makes her mouth clack closed and her eyes silently lock on me. There'll be hell to pay later, I know that, but for now, she's letting me keep this train chug-a-chuggin'.

I repeat, a bit harsher, "When we were here before . . ." softer, just to Lorenzo, I continue, "Did you hear what Reno said about how he started tattooing?"

Lorenzo shakes his head. "He could've said anything. All I saw was you. All I heard were the little whimpers of pain when he went over your ribs. I wanted to take the pain from you, feel it myself so you wouldn't have to."

"Ribs?" Vi says behind Ross's hand. Well, I think that's what she said, but it's pretty muffled.

"He's an ordained minister for a motorcycle club of vets. He's former military himself. But he can legally . . ."

Lorenzo's eyes flare, not with brightness but with dark heat. "You mean . . ."

?”

“Abigail Marie Andrews! You cannot get married at a tattoo parlor in a dinner dress!” Mom shouts, utterly horrified. She’s gone along with a whole lot of strange things, loved me through some weird phases, and supported some odd ideas, but apparently, this is too far.

I turn to look at Mom. “I’m already married, remember? Or so everyone thinks. Might as well make it true. Besides, I don’t want to wait.” Locking my eyes back on Lorenzo, I repeat myself softer, sweeter, “I don’t want to wait. Do you?”

He might say no. He absolutely could, and I’d have to be okay with that. Hell, one of us should probably be the voice of reason in any given situation and it’s rarely going to be me.

But I hope . . . deep down inside my soul, I hope he’s the wild to my crazy, the ride to my die, the kerosene to my fire.

“No, I don’t want to wait to make you mine. If this is what you want, it’s what I want. Anything, always . . . for you.”

Swoon.

Maybe it’s the accent, I decide. Maybe one day, Lorenzo will be telling me to wash the damn dishes for the tenth time in a row and I’ll realize that it’s not what he says, it’s how he says it. But if that’s the case, it’s not happening today.

Today, he is romance, seduction, sweet, and sexy . . . all tied up in one sexy package of man. And he’s in my arms with his wrapped around me, his palm cupping my ass right here in front of God, my family and friends, and even my parents. And if they don’t like it, they can learn to deal and knock on the door when they come over like I do.

“I don’t have a ring. I thought I’d have time to get my grandmother’s from Italy for you. But after talking with your dad, I couldn’t wait. I had to ask you tonight.”

One of my brows lifts. “You talked to my dad about asking me to marry you?” Warning bells are going off in my head and through my whole assembled party.

“You might not like it, but he’s a little traditional, dear. It was sweet.” Dad comes to Lorenzo’s defense. I can see Dad shaking his head at Lorenzo out of the corner of my eye, miming zipping his lip.

“So, you’d thought about it enough that you talked to my dad, had plans to get your grandmother’s ring, but then decided on a whim to just go for it and ask me tonight?” I clarify.

I can see Lorenzo teasing through the words, mentally translating them to Italian and looking for any errors. My family is utterly still and quiet, not even

breathing. Well, besides Carly, who's babbling away, happily oblivious.

"Yes," Lorenzo says finally.

I jump up on him, my legs going astride his waist, and he catches me easily. "That's so sweet! You were all 'gonna do this right' but got carried away because of me?"

I feel his smile against my lips as I pepper him with kisses.

"I do tend to do that with you, *mia rosa*."

I wrap my arms around his neck and lay my head on his shoulder, squeezing him tightly. God, I love this man who's somehow as rooted and as wild as I am.

"We can get rings later. But you're totally getting a tattoo wedding band from Reno tonight. I'm leaving my mark on you," I tell Lorenzo, leaving no room for argument.

His smile is soft as he lets me slide down his body until my feet hit the floor. His hands release my hips to cup my face gently. "You already have."

"Okay, I think I get it now," Vi says. It's like she didn't even know that her cousin was the best thing since Betty White or sliced bread.

"Are we really doing this?" Courtney whispers to Mom.

Mom turns to me. "Abi, are you really doing this?" She looks worried. I think any mother would be, so I understand, but yeah, I am.

"I can do the whole white dress situation later at a celebration reception, okay?" I know how important those moments are to my mom, but this is my wedding and I want it like . . . this.

Dad's always got my back, though, and truly has only ever wanted his children's happiness to surpass his own. "Works for me. A party is cheaper than a ceremony and reception." He wraps his arm around Mom's waist, squeezing her hip, and she sighs.

Her nod means everything.

Vi hands me the flowers. "You are crazy as f-u-c-k," she says, spelling out the curse word so Carly doesn't learn bad language. Newsflash, she's my niece and Ross's daughter, so it's fairly written in stone that her first words are not going to be scrapbook-worthy.

"Yep," I agree. "Good thing I found a man who likes me like that."

On cue, Reno walks out from the back with a guy in a leather vest. "What the hell do y'all want?" Reno barks. He definitely wasn't expecting to find a dinner party's worth of fancy people in his lobby.

I raise my hand to wave. "Hey, Reno!"

His gruff demeanor melts. "Well, hey there, Abi. Who you got with you tonight?"

"My family. Remember when you were distracting me and told me how you

do weddings for your friends?” I bat my lashes, knowing this might take a little finesse. Maybe even more than it took to get my mom on board.

“Yeah.”

“Can you marry Lorenzo and me? Like now? And tattoo our wedding rings?”

“Uh . . .” He looks to Lorenzo, his bushy brows asking if he’s okay with that. I think if Lorenzo blinked twice in rapid succession, Reno and his buddy would probably grab Lorenzo and run out the back door with him, hostage rescue style.

Lorenzo takes my hand and nods. A smile teases at his lips. “Please. I need to . . . what’s the expression?” He searches his mind and says with a bigger smile, “Lock her down before she learns what a degenerate I am.”

Reno laughs at that.

But he’s no dummy, either. He sees my dad—hell, probably all of us—and knows money when it’s standing right in front of him. He might even know who Ross is from his early tabloid-cover days.

“Thousand bucks sound fair? For the ceremony and the tattoos?” Dad offers first.

I think Reno’s eyes are going to bug out of his head, but he blinks and rearranges his face into something closer to his usual scowl. “Yeah, I guess I could stay open a little late tonight for that. You ready now?”

We organize ourselves—Violet with Carly on her hip, Courtney, and Mom on my left, and Ross, Kaede, and Dad on Lorenzo’s right—and then we nod to Reno.

“‘Kay, we’re gathered here tonight to witness these people joining together in marriage . . .”

I can’t stop the smile from getting bigger and bigger as joy fills my entire being. I’m nearly bouncing with happiness at this weirdly wonderful wedding. One I never thought I’d have, with a man I never thought I’d find.

Reno does the typical ‘do you take this man’ and ‘do you take this woman’, and Lorenzo and I both say, “I do.”

“Y’all got other stuff you wanna tell each other? Promises and vows or some shit?”

Reno is the epitome of formal, I think happily as Mom swallows loudly enough that I can hear her.

I meet Lorenzo’s eyes which are dark and crinkled at the corners from his own smile. He dips his chin, letting me go first.

I’m glad because I have a suspicion I’m going to be reduced to ugly tears when he does his. His poetry is better than mine but no more heartfelt.

“Lorenzo, I think somehow, I knew. From the first second I laid my eyes on

you, I knew there was something about you. I thought you were a bad boy with a rolling pin, and that was enough to reel me in. But every moment since, you've shown me you're more than that. You risked everything to help me, gave your all to woo me, and you showed me the man you are inside. The person not everyone gets to see. But I see the love in your heart, the strength in your soul, and I pledge myself to giving you every bit of love, honor, respect, and love that I can, from now until death and beyond."

Lorenzo's throat works, and he looks up to the sky to blink back his tears before starting his own off the cuff vows. "*Mia rosa, mia amore*. It seems right that we met at a wedding and now are here ourselves. Our story is a tale to tell our children in the future, a lesson in trusting fate to have plans bigger and better than anything you can dream of yourself. I pledge to always give you more smiles than tears, more happiness than sadness, and to be your partner through whatever life, or your brilliant mind, throws our way. I wish to spend the entirety of my days with you, side by side, building our forever."

Yep, destroyed with messy tears. Ever prepared as a mom, Violet reaches in her diaper bag and hands me a burp rag. Unused, at least.

"That was real pretty," Reno says, a little choked up himself. "Seal that shit with a kiss, lovebirds."

I'm glad I get that much warning because Lorenzo sweeps me back, kissing me with a depth and intensity that are definitely not what you'd expect for a formal wedding kiss but are perfect in the middle of a tattoo parlor. I kiss him back just as intensely, only stopping when Mom whispers to Courtney, "She might beat you on giving me a grandbaby, Court."

I laugh loudly, my smile huge. "Ten minutes ago, you were all 'absolutely not, Abigail Marie', and now you're all 'give me grandkids', Mom?"

She has the heart to look chastised, but then she shrugs. "Woman's prerogative to change her mind."

I might've gotten my kick-ass business sense from Dad, but I got my crazy from Mom. She just hides hers a lot better than I do.

"Who's going first for the tat?" Reno asks with a loud clap of his big hands.

Lorenzo sits down in the chair first, and I sit on the far side, away from Reno's work station. Reno makes quick, careful work of inking black bands of varying widths around Lorenzo's finger. And then it's my turn. I choose a thin, dainty band with a bow that looks like a string tied around my finger. I will never forget this moment right here.

We take a few pictures with our phones, promising Mom that we'll have a proper photographer at the reception.

"Anyone else want a tat? I don't mind. Daddy paid," Reno jokes, pointing an

ink-covered finger at Dad.

“Hell, no,” Ross says.

Everyone else murmurs some version of ‘thanks, but no thanks’, and we stand, ready to leave.

Lorenzo shakes Reno’s hand, and I reach up to hug his broad shoulders. “Thank you for making tonight come true.”

“Y’all are some weird fuckers,” he replies with a shake of his head.

He’s right about that. But we’re happily in love weird fuckers, and that’s what matters.

We make our way out the door, but I glance back once more with a smile.

We did it. Lorenzo and I are married for real, the sting of my finger a good pain.

Wait, what’s Dad doing?

Oh, my God. I’m going to need to scrub that image out of my head because I just saw Dad pick up one of Reno’s business cards and shoot sexy eyes at Mom.

Ugh.

“Okay, well . . . bye!” I tell everyone, focusing on Lorenzo. “We’re off on our honeymoon . . . again. No worries, this time we’re just going home,” I joke, well aware that everyone knows what we’re going home to do.

Ross makes a gagging noise that Carly starts copying, and Vi growls at them both.

Lorenzo helps get my helmet on and then, like before, we race off into the night.

I feel free and floaty, tethered to nothing more than Lorenzo with a tiny but strong string. Not the inked one around my finger but the one from my heart to his.

CHAPTER 28

“What do you think?” I ask Janey. I spin the arrangement in front of me, trying to decide if I’m done.

“Hmm, it’s all right, I guess. What’s it for?”

“Bitch! This is not ‘all right’. It’s fabulous and you know it!” I counter.

She smiles and points at me. “Then why the hell are you asking me if you already know it’s perfect? Anything by *The Abigail Andrews*, floral designer to the stars, will be.”

I blush even though she’s teasing me but ultimately play along by resting my chin on the back of my hand Glamour Shots-circa 1995-style as I look off to the right with a smug smile.

“Bitch,” she repeats.

“Thanks.” I laugh. “For real, though, Violet and Archie will be here any minute to pick this up. It’s for a client.” I eye the vase and flowers once more, replaying what Archie said they wanted.

“Fab. You. Luxe. Over the top, big and bold, and huge. Like, I need the Jonah Falcon of flowers type of huge, with purple of every shade from deepest night to the barest kiss of lilac. I’ll bring you the vase because I sourced it to match the candlesticks.”

Well, this definitely matches what Archie said he wanted, though I’d had to Google who the Falcon guy was. Let’s just say ‘huge’ was the right word selection from Archie.

Janey has lost interest in my assessment of the flowers and has taken to clicking on her phone. It kinda irks me until the Bluetooth speakers start playing Prince’s *Purple Rain* and I realize that she was with me all along.

Janey starts doing some smooth, hip-swaying, sexy moves to the song, and I can’t help but try too. She’s better than I am by a mile, but it’s fun to goof off and giggle in the back while Samantha holds down the register.

“Oh. My. God,” Archie’s voice says from the back door, which we

apparently left open because he and Violet are standing in the doorway. Vi's trying not to laugh, and Archie looks pissed that we didn't invite him to the dance party.

"Abs, girl. No," he tells me, grabbing my hips. "Like *this*," he hisses, helping me sway.

Laughing, I swat at his hands. "I thought I was doing pretty well!"

He gives me a sad look as he shakes his head. "I know you did, babe. That's the worst part." He tsks. "You thought that was some grade-A, stripper quality work. Make time to hit the gym with Courtney again. A little Zumba would do you *good*. Help make all that flex-y yoga worth something. You can't just stick your ankles behind your head and lie there. You've gotta move."

He demonstrates himself, bending his knees and giving his ass a little twerk. He does a hair flip, locks eyes with me, and then sashay walks across the room. I'll admit he gave a better performance than either Janey or I did.

"Bravo!" I say dryly with a polite clap. Knowing when I'm beat, I get back to work where nobody can beat me. "Here's the arrangement." I hold my hands out wide around the purple monstrosity in a ta-da move.

Vi whistles. "It's perfect. Great work, Abs. Archie, load it up. We need to jet if we're going to be on time for our meeting."

He rolls his eyes at her. "Do you even know the address of where we're going?" Not waiting for her to answer because it's a rhetorical question, he snaps his fingers, "Of course you don't. Because why?" He leans his head to the side, sticking his earring-covered ear Vi's way.

She huffs. "Because you're the King of Everything."

"That's right. And don't you forget it." He points a black-nailed finger at Vi, but then at me and Janey too.

"We didn't do anything," I balk.

"Mmmhmm. Not this time." He picks up the arrangement as Vi requested and calls back over his shoulder, "For reals, you should hit the gym with Court and have your man work out with Ross and Kaede. Let him get to know them."

That's actually not a bad idea. "Thanks, Archie!"

"Kisses," he says through the rolled down window, already behind the wheel to drive Vi to their appointment.

My phone rings next, and I hustle over to my work table to grab it. "Hey, Mom," I answer.

"Abi, I just wanted to say thank you again for the flowers for the fundraiser luncheon. They were lovely. Several people said so, and I was quite proud to say they were your work."

Mom's the best. She really is. When I started SweetPea, I wouldn't do the

flowers for Dad's office for a while. It felt too much like special privilege and I wanted to earn my way. But Mom had instead offered opportunities to show my creativity in a different way.

With her encouragement, I'd donated dozens of arrangements to every charitable event and gala for over a year, getting my name out there, not as an Andrews but as a floral designer. People had seen my work firsthand, and when they called on me for paying jobs, it'd felt like my marketing and exposure were paying off, not my name.

Today's luncheon flowers, a dozen centerpieces Samantha delivered this morning, are a sign of that. I still donate arrangements here and there, but more often, my services are contracted for the galas and events, and I donate money to the fundraiser in support instead of my talents.

That's what Dad taught me. Do what you love, do it well, and pay it forward.

"Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate that," I say with a flush of pride. The tinkling bell up front sounds, and though Samantha will take care of the customer, I tell Mom, "Oh, I have to go. I've got a bride coming in soon."

"Of course, dear. Just wanted to say how proud I am of you. You and Lorenzo are still coming over to dinner this weekend, right?"

I nod, though she can't see me. "Yes, Mom. Love you."

"I love you too. 'Bye!"

The click gives me permission to laugh. For all the craziness of the one dinner we had with my parents, they seem particularly excited to have Lorenzo come back over.

At least they gave us a solid week of solitude to 'honeymoon' at home after our vows.

"Abi, your two o'clock is here," Samantha says, fighting a smile.

I glance to the clock in surprise. No, I'm not wrong. It's barely after one thirty. "She excited?" I ask Samantha quietly.

Samantha widens her eyes and holds up her finger and thumb a good inch apart, whispering, "Little bit."

I smile and wash my hands to go greet our eager bride.

In the front, I hold out my hand to the blonde who's sitting at our consultation table. She's dressed impeccably, her hair and makeup flawless, but her heeled foot is bouncing like she needs to pee.

"Abi Andrews. Welcome to SweetPea Boutique," I tell her.

She smiles and shakes my hand. "Sadie Mason, soon to be Sadie Yi." I can see how happy it makes her just to say her future name, and her joy is infectious.

I sit down at the table. "Tell me about you and your fiancé, Miss Mason."

She waves a hand at me. "Oh, you can call me Sadie. You probably don't

remember me, but we went to school together. I was in Courtney's class."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize," I apologize, looking at her more closely. She doesn't look the least bit familiar, though. Our school wasn't humongous, but there were definitely kids in my own grade I didn't know, so there's bound to be a bunch from Ross and Court's grade that I've never seen or heard of. "Such a small world."

She doesn't seem offended in the slightest, thank goodness. "No big deal. I wasn't really friends with Courtney either. Different crowds, you know. I was on the math decathlon team."

Something niggles in the back of my mind. "Didn't we win state or something around then?"

Sadie beams. "Yep, we did." She bows dramatically, laughing the whole time. "That's actually how I met my fiancé too. Math decathlon in college."

She disappears into her memories for a moment, and I can see on her face that they're all happy ones. Lucky woman.

Not as lucky as me, but good for her for finding her own perfect man.

Coming back to the moment, she leans forward. "Not to go too high school, but I did hear about what Emily Jones-I-mean-Daniels did at the club." She says the name like that's Emily's actual name now and then shakes her head disapprovingly. "I never did like her."

I'm not a gossip, not any more than average human nature leads us all to be. But Emily has always been able to get under my skin. I test my heart and my mind, expecting to find some scab Sadie's words disrupt. But there's nothing. I just can't care about all that long-ago drama anymore.

"I'll admit, the stuff with Emily won't make my 'finest moments' list, either. But I'm moving on, trying to be better and do better."

I look down at the small, delicate tattoo on my left hand. Lorenzo's family said we would need to come to Italy to get his grandmother's ring, and I'm excited about that adventure and to meet his family.

Sadie holds up her own hand, showing me her large, square-cut diamond with a smile.

"I'm happy, Emily's happy, you're happy, and those are the things that matter," I conclude.

"Wise words," Sadie agrees, touching her ring. "I'm so glad to have you do my flowers. I feel like if every little detail is done with love, the whole day will be perfect."

"I will do my best. But the only thing that needs to be perfect is for you and your husband to be standing together. Everything else is window dressing for the really important stuff."

It might be a weird thing for a wedding-focused person to say, but it's the truth. My flowers bring detail and beauty to an event, but if the bride and groom don't truly love each other, there is no number of roses that can save the day.

The bell tinkles again, and the one person I don't want to see walks in. Meredith Wildeman. She's got on another of her black suits with heels, her silvery hair frozen in place and her eyes hard.

"Miss Andrews, the flower girl. Believe me, I tried to talk Sadie out of using your services. There are simply so many more talented florists in the area." She sits down, looking snooty as ever. "Well, show us what you've got," Meredith demands.

The entire mood of this appointment just changed with her entrance. Sadie is now sitting straight-backed with her lips pressed together like we were busted misbehaving by the school principal.

I blink, not at Meredith's arrogance but that she's so bold with it. I let wheels churn and cogs turn in my head, trying to channel Dad because what I really want to do is tell Meredith to get the fuck out of my shop and take that high horse she rode in on with her.

Finally, it's Mom's practiced calm voice that saves me, with a little Ice Queen Courtney thrown in for good measure. Giving people enough rope to hang themselves is sometimes prudent, though taking the high road is a trait I'm still learning.

Completely ignoring Meredith, I turn to Sadie. "It has been so good catching up with you, and I'll tell Courtney you said hello. Unfortunately, while I'm happy to work with any vendors you might hire, there is one I'm not comfortable contracting with on any event, and that's Ms. Wildeman. I'm sure she'll make your wedding absolutely lovely, and I can recommend another floral designer who will do an amazing job if you'd like."

I pause, letting what I said sink in. Lorenzo told me that Meredith threatened to blackball me with her clients, and by the sound of things, she's definitely trying. The truth is, I can do the same and choose not to work with her. I'm an in-demand floral designer with a full calendar of clients. I don't need Meredith Wildeman's clients.

I have never traded on the weight of my last name, and in this, I don't need to. I have the power and draw of SweetPea Boutique, and that's enough.

"Hmmp, very well. We'll be happy to get someone else to do the flowers then." Meredith's smile is predatory, victorious at having triumphed over me. To Sadie, Meredith softens. "I did warn you, dear, but there are so many much more talented florists. Let's go, Sadie."

Meredith stands but Sadie doesn't move.

“Uh, no. I want Abi to do my flowers. It’s what I’ve wanted ever since I saw Claire Johnson’s bouquet. It’s what *everyone* wants.” Sadie looks confused as hell at how her fun flower selection appointment has gone so awry.

I sit back quietly. Sadie seems nice, but this is her wedding. I’ll do the bouquet or not, but either way, I’m not working with Meredith.

“Yes, Claire’s bouquet was lovely, I suppose. And another designer can certainly recreate it if you’d like.”

When that doesn’t sway Sadie, Meredith decides to play hardball. “We have a contract, dear. Perhaps we should follow up with your mother to see about this.” Meredith plays the mom card, and I swear there is steam coming out of Sadie’s ears.

“No need. It’s my name on the contract, and if I recall, there’s a buyout option. Here.” Sadie pulls out her checkbook, writes a check with three zeroes, signs it her damn self, and hands it to Meredith. “Your services are no longer needed, I’m afraid. I’ll be sure to tell my friends.”

Meredith is shocked. So much so that even her eyebrows lift and her forehead wrinkles. “Well . . . I . . . good day, then.”

She might be wrong as hell with her little power play, but I’d be willing to bet she cashes that check at the bank as soon as she leaves.

She strides for the door, looking back once, and our eyes meet.

Game. Set. Match. Bitch.

And I did it with grace, boundaries, and integrity I can be proud of. No bail money or alibi needed.

I don’t know what Meredith has against me, because it’s obviously me and not flowers in general. But the truth is, it doesn’t matter. She made me out to be something in her head, and nothing I did or didn’t do was ever going to change that. It’s not that I’m taking my ball and huffily going home but rather that there are infinite playgrounds and we can just . . . not play together.

Though if given the chance, I’d throw a mean dodgeball at her without a second thought.

“Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out.”

Sadie laughs as Meredith pushes the door open a little too hard.

Shit, that was out loud, and I was doing so well! I guess you can take the girl out of the crazy but not the crazy out of the girl.

“Looks like I need a new wedding planner. Got any suggestions?” Sadie says.

“Actually, I do. Courtney had an excellent one whom I’ve seen in action first hand. And Claire was actually working with another planner before Meredith took over to cover her maternity leave. I can give you both of their names and

information. I'm happy to work with either, or anyone else you'd like to use if you find someone else is a better fit."

Sadie smiles. "Sounds good. Okay, so let's look at flowers! Do you want to see my Pinterest board?"

"Absolutely," I tell her happily. "Let's look at wedding bouquets first."

CHAPTER 29

“*I* need the olive oil. Who’s got my EVOO?” I shout down the line.

I’ve got a lot to do before tonight’s event, and of everything I’ve ever done, tonight has to be perfect.

“With all respect, Chef . . . get out,” Belinda says.

I look over sharply to find her holding my bottle of oil with a look of challenge in her icy blue eyes. She’s an excellent chef with a strong work ethic, a precise palette, and a long history of working with some of the best.

And now she works for me. Usually.

“Get out?” I laugh as I grab olive oil from her station and let her keep the one in her hand. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ve got too much to do.”

Belinda steps in front of me with one strong hand held up. “Lorenzo, we’ve got this. We’ve been talking about this for weeks, designing the menu, and trying out new recipes. Let me do this so you can at least go home and take a shower before you change into your suit.”

I glance around the kitchen to see my entire crew nodding with Belinda. But I haven’t lost them.

This is my kitchen. My crew.

But not my restaurant.

I don’t want that, not now, at least. But being the chef for a small restaurant with an owner who wants me to create and allow him to manage is the perfect compromise. Here, I have the opportunity to source local products or have specialty items shipped in, I can change the menu daily or seasonally, and I can experiment with free reign.

This is my new cooking home. Except I’m being kicked out, apparently.

“Belinda . . . guys . . .”

“We’re good, Lorenzo. I swear it. We won’t let you down,” Belinda reassures me.

I sigh, knowing she's right and that I need to trust them. But I can't let it go easily. "Run it down for me one more time."

"Yes, Chef," Belinda snaps.

She begins reciting the menu I've been agonizing over, different members of the crew picking up to recite their contributions to each plate. It doesn't take long. It's a set menu of items I selected.

Once she's done, I realize that she's right. They're all right.

"Okay." I can't believe I'm doing this, but I am. I take my apron off and then my jacket. "I'll see you later . . . on the other side of the table. Do me proud, guys."

Belinda leads the crew in a round of applause that dies out the instant I leave the kitchen and is replaced with the hustle and bustle of knives chopping, food sizzling, and pots and pans moving around on the stovetops.



"YOU LOOK AMAZING," I whisper to Abigail.

She's wearing the white gown she promised her mom she would, though I think it's not quite what Kimberly had in mind. But in the end, Abigail will always do what she feels is right, and she's gone with a two-piece. The top is a delicate silk tank with a deep V and lace in creamy ivory. The skirt is full in the palest blush pink with tiny buttons down the entire length of the back. She let me see it once, saying it wasn't bad luck since we're already married, though she'd only held it up, not actually put it on.

But even holding the skirt up, she'd twirled like a little girl, her face exuberant with joy.

On her now, it's even more stunning.

Abigail's smile in this moment, in this dress, is something I will remember forever. "Thank you." She spins once again, the skirt flaring out beautifully. "You too. So handsome."

She snuggles up against me, her arms going around my waist, and there's a click from off to my right.

I ignore it in favor of looking at Abigail because I know the photographer is going to be taking pictures of the entire reception tonight.

"Are you ready for this?" I ask her.

"Absolutely, without a doubt. I'm ready to get our party on and celebrate." She wiggles against me with her smile bright, not only on her lips but in her eyes. She takes my hand and holds our interlocked hands up. "Us against the world, yeah?"

“Always.”

The doors in front of us open, and Archie pokes his head out with a grin. “Okay, cats and kittens, you ready to rock and roll?”

I can’t help but laugh in confusion. “What?”

Abigail shakes her head and explains, “It’s an expression. A really old, dead one.”

Archie pouts sassily. “Let’s go. I’m ready to get our food on because I want to hit the dance floor.” He spins in place in his black boots and finishes by striking a pose with one arm up and one down, his fingers spread wide and shaking.

Walking into the restaurant, I see our family and friends are already seated at the tables, each of which has been draped with pale blush tablecloths and lovely arrangements Abigail created and set with a mix-match of china and flatware.

“May I introduce Mr. Lorenzo Toscani and Mrs. Abigail Andrews!” the DJ says into the microphone, and everyone claps and cheers as we walk through the restaurant. It feels like a victory lap.

We won at life by finding each other!

I can’t help but smile. This is all so . . . American. It’s like a rave version of a party but with everyone dressed up in their finest.

Abigail and I sit down at a table of our own and dinner service begins. I’m critical of every morsel on every plate, checking the ones I can see for consistency, but Belinda and my crew have done a top-notch job. Each bite is pure pleasure.

Everyone else seems to be enjoying their dinner as well.

“Uhm, this is delicious!” Abigail raves about the fettuccine. The dish that started this all. “Promise me we can have this at least once a week.”

“Daily, if you want it,” I vow.

Abigail seems to actually be considering that. But too soon, dinner is over and we move on to dancing.

If there’s anything Abigail’s family enjoys, it’s dancing. Apparently, Violet’s wedding had a dance off that was the stuff of legends, I danced with Abigail at Courtney’s wedding, and now, I’m holding Abigail in my arms once again.

The music is slow and sweet, and I enjoy swaying with her until I see Aunt Sofia dancing with Archie. “Uh, is that okay?” I ask Abigail. “He’s not going to dip her and drop her on the floor, right?”

Abigail shrugs. “He’s usually pretty good. I’m more worried that Sofia is going to pinch his ass . . . again.”

I look at her in surprise. “She did that?”

“Yep. More than once. So if he dips and drops, she might deserve it.”

I can't help but laugh, and now I don't give Aunt Sofia another thought as she and Archie dance on around the floor.



WE FACE OFF, small bites of white cake in our fingers. “Don’t you dare,” Abigail warns me.

This is another one of those American things I don’t get . . . when the bride and groom don’t politely feed each other bits of sweets but rather shove it in each other’s faces. It seems so . . . rude?

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I tell her.

I feed her a gentle bite, leaning forward to kiss the tiny bit of white icing that’s left on her top lip. It’s even sweeter from her skin. “Beautiful.”

Abigail giggles. “You mean delicious?”

I shake my head. “Beautiful.”

She ducks her chin, and I lift it back up with a finger, forcing her eyes to mine. “I love you, Abigail.”

“You sure?” she dares, looking at the cake still in her fingers.

I open my mouth for her to feed me the sweet morsel. She does . . . sort of. The rest of it smashes into my cheek and she laughs boisterously.

The crowd gasps in shocked horror. But I grab Abigail around the waist and pull her to me, leaning down to kiss her fiercely—cake, icing, mess, and all. She squeals in shock, writhing in my arms as she tries to get away. “Ah! You said you wouldn’t!”

But she’s laughing, encouraging me as I rub my face along hers. She reaches toward the cake, her only available weapon, and before I know it, she’s smashed another fresh handful of cake in my face.

I lick my lips with a smile. I lean forward, posing as I ask, “Want a taste?”

She meets me this time, not play fighting. Her tongue swipes along my freshly-shaven jaw. “Ooh! It is good.”

“You want to try some?” Abigail asks the crowd.

Some people scatter. I even see Archie pick up Aunt Sofia and take off with her protectively. Others argue with Abigail . . .

“Abi, no!”

“Please!”

But Abigail does what she wants and suddenly, there’s cake flying everywhere. People cry out, but some grab fistfuls themselves and throw it back at us. Well, at Abigail. But since she’s taken to ducking down behind me, it all hits me first.

It's utter madness in cake form, with a mess all over the restaurant, but all I can care about is the way Abigail is laughing so happily as she licks icing from her fingers.

I grab her hand, taking her thumb into my mouth to suck it clean myself.
"Beautiful."



SOAKING in Abigail's tub is a necessity tonight. As is the very thorough washing I give every inch of her sugary skin. With her sitting between my splayed legs, I give extra-special attention to soaping her breasts.

"I don't think I got any cake there," she teases on a sigh.

I hum in agreement but don't stop my slippery hands. "Just making sure," I tell her. I massage the full globes, plucking her nipples and then circling them with maddening strokes that make them harden and poke through the bubbles.

"I've got some other places you should check then."

I do. I check every bit of her, glancing along her fingers and arms, down her chest and belly, and to her core. Beneath the water, I slide my fingers along her slit, finding it slippery. "Is this frosting?" I joke, my voice rough with hunger.

"Wanna taste it to see?" An invitation I intend to accept, but not yet. She's too soft and warm, melting into me with her head laid back on my shoulder and her eyes fluttering closed from the barest touch along her lips.

I circle her clit with the pad of my finger, slowly stroking her higher and higher. Every few seconds, I tap the little nub firmly and she jolts under the differences in the soft and rough touches.

"*Mia rosa*, my love, my wife . . . come for me." I speed up my ministrations to her clit, feeling her slickness even through the water, and my cock aches, wanting to feel it.

"Yes," she moans, going tight and then shuddering against me. I keep brushing her sensitive pussy, drawing aftershocks from her until she jerks away.

"Mmm, my turn," she tells me with an evil glint in her eye.

I have no idea what she intends, but I'm with her for whatever it is.

She moves around, splashing water on the floor, to sit astride me. Facing each other now, she peppers my face with butterfly kisses so gentle, they make me groan in need for more. I grip her hips firmly and lift her to line up, and then she impales herself on me.

"*Cazzo*," I hiss. The water has washed away some of her juices, but after coming, she is still wet enough for me to enter her. I feel every millimeter of her pussy clench against my hard cock, gripping me tightly.

“Fuck,” she repeats in English. She knows a handful of words in Italian now, but especially when we make love, her English curse words are what fall from her lips.

Placing her hands on my shoulders for leverage, she lifts and lowers herself. I hold her hips, helping her. I try to guide her to go slow, enjoying the drag of her lips along my length, but Abigail is a woman on a mission. She bucks hard and fast, making waves in the bath water that splash over the side. But she doesn't care. I don't either. That's what towels are made for.

So I let her ride me, taking me where she wants to go, enjoying every second of her wild passion.

“I'm coming,” I tell her, and the smile on her face is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, second only to the smile that steals across her lips when she comes.

I feel the pulsing jets of cum erupt from my cock, filling her, and together, we sag back into the water. Spent, I'm thinking I could lie here for another hour if the water would stay warm that long. Simply do nothing but recover.

“We should take a shower next,” Abigail suggests.

One thing's for sure, a life with Abigail will never be boring. She will always keep me guessing, and I love her for it. Wherever she is, that's my home.

EPILOGUE

One year later

*T*here's arriving in Aruba, and there's arriving in Aruba in *style*. For once, I accept the offer of using my family's wealth, and as the seaplane curves around the island on final approach, I look down on the resort. I can see all the places we visited on our first trip.

"There's the cove!" I point out, seeing the little postage stamp of a private beach. "Ooh, I want to go back there!"

"So do I," Lorenzo purrs in my ear, his arms around me in our luxury seats. "In fact, I think we can do *everything* we did last time at the cove."

"Plus some," I promise him, tracing shapes on his hand. "In fact, I was thinking we could recreate several of the things we did all over the island. Yoga, cruise, and even the massages."

"If you don't stop, I'm going to have you right here on this plane," Lorenzo promises me, "and I was going to save that for the private plane home."

"Mmm . . . good idea," I agree. Actually, I start looking around, considering whether we have time before landing to mark that off our week's plans. But the engine's whine changes pitch, and I realize we're already losing altitude and getting closer to the ground.

Moments later, we're standing in the resort lobby, the sea breeze blowing through the open doors making my skirt dance. Lorenzo wraps his arms around my shoulders and murmurs into my ear, "We made it. Back to where it all began."

"No. Way." I hear from off to my right.

A shock of horror jolts through my entire being, and Lorenzo stiffens behind me, and definitely not in the good way. I turn toward the voice.

"Emily?" I say softly, not believing my eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"It's our one-year anniversary," she says as she holds up her and Doug's

interlocked hands. He looks like he wouldn't mind sinking through the floor a bit. "You?"

"Us too," I answer.

We freeze, eyes locked on each other for a long moment.

"We should get dinner or something. You know, like we did before," she suggests, but I can hear the hesitation in her voice.

I relax, purposefully letting my posture lean into Lorenzo. If I said yes, he'd think I'm crazy but he'd do it. For me.

"Let's not pretend anymore, Emily. We weren't friends in school, we weren't friends last year, and we're not friends now."

Blunt? Yeah. True? Also yes.

"So, let's just not," I offer with a shrug. "You do your thing, we'll do ours, and hopefully, we won't run into each other again, just like we haven't back at home."

"Wow," she snarks. "Still the same old Abi Andrews, aren't you?" Bitch is implied.

Lorenzo moves as though to defend me, but I don't need him to. "You know what, Emily? I feel like you have some things you need to say. It might make you feel better. Go ahead and get it all off your chest."

She makes a tight sound of dismissal, but then she opens her mouth. "You always thought you were better than me, but you know what? I'm living my best life with a man I love, a happy life, with a baby on the way. So what if Claire Johnson says it's 'totes adorbs' that her floral designer and chef are in love. Who needs that kind of ass kissing?" She points a finger at me. "You do, that's who."

She's furious, so mad that tears fall down her cheeks, and Doug is trying to comfort her though he looks more confused than concerned.

"Anything else?" I ask gently.

She snuffles, wiping at her cheeks with the back of her hand as she shakes her head.

I wasn't going to say anything, but her coldness tells me that maybe it'll help. "Emily, everyone's the villain in someone's story. And they're the hero in their own. Neither is actually true." Her eyes narrow, not believing me. "Congrats on a happy life, a good husband, and the baby. Enjoy it. I truly wish that for you."

Doug dips his chin at me, trying to put together whatever he's heard from Emily with what's happening right now, and leads Emily away.

"That was sexy," Lorenzo whispers against my ear.

"What? That?" I say faux-modestly. "That was nothing."

He chuckles. "Last time we were here, you would've taken that challenge

and had us out to dinner, doing crazy stunts, and battling it out like this was some game show. But you're different now, stronger and more settled."

I swat at his chest indignantly. "You take that back. I'm just as crazy as I always was. I'm not some old, *can't we just get along* type now."

"Never. You'll be old and gray and still causing a ruckus wherever you go. I can't wait to see it each step of the way."

"Ruckus?" I question the odd word usage.

Lorenzo looks pleased that I noticed. "Courtney showed me an app. There's a word every day, some obscure, some humorous, and some particularly unusual, but I like it."

"I like you."

"I love you," he answers with all the heat and passion of the first time still burning in his blood. For me.

Lorenzo

The waves lap at the shore, the sun nearly touching the sea beyond the cove, but I barely notice as I kiss my wife, cupping her cheek and tasting her deeply. We've been doing this almost from the first instant I spread the blanket on the sugary sand, kicking off our sandals and lying down, our hands going to each other. Our picnic basket's ignored, but we can get food later.

After all, the resort's got twenty-four-hour room service, and Esmar would let me in his kitchen any time, day or night.

"You're smiling," Abi murmurs as I pull back. "Why?"

"I'm happy," I admit, kissing the tip of her nose and then the point of her chin.

Abi nods, her chin pressing into the top of my hair as I kiss down her throat to the V of her blouse. I've undone all of the buttons so it's only gravity keeping her perfect mounds from being exposed, and as my tongue traces the edge of the cotton, her little hitching sighs tell me that her nipples are being slowly teased by the blouse as it gives up its touch on her skin.

"Mmm," I moan, licking and sucking as she arches, pressing more into my mouth. I consume her, intoxicated by her.

Abi captures my hand, pressing it to the moist juncture between her thighs, and I grin around a mouthful of nipple.

I unbutton the top of her denim shorts, teasing her by sliding her zipper down so slowly it's torture for both of us. "You'll get what you want, *mia rosa*, but lovemaking is like cooking . . . best when you take your time."

Abi growls, her fingers digging in the sand as I tease her other nipple, still not touching her warm, wet pussy until she's writhing in want and need. I slide the fabric to the side, and she's soaking wet, easily taking my two fingers and

bowing up to meet me as I finger-fuck her rapidly.

I pump quickly, almost harshly, as my thumb rubs her clit, pummeling Abi until she cries out, her voice lifting above the crashing waves as she screams her climax.

She falls to the sand, completely relaxed, and I take this moment to slide my own clothes off. Kneeling next to her, I offer her my long, hard cock, moaning as she happily turns onto her side and sucks my head into her mouth.

“That’s it,” I rasp as she bobs her head back and forth. “Get it nice and wet so I can fuck you.”

Abi pulls back, letting my cock head *pop* out of her mouth, grinning. “Or maybe this time, we go slow and tender, make love all night?” She laps at my shaft, laying soft kisses to the most sensitive part of me.

“Any way you want it,” I vow and am rewarded by her swallowing me again. She teases my slit, swirling her tongue until my hips are moving on their own, thrusting in and out of her mouth.

“Abigail,” I warn. She pulls back, not letting me come, and flips over onto her knees, offering herself to me.

I grab her hair, pulling her back as I thrust forward, filling her in one deep thrust. Our hips slap together, and I retreat, taking my time relishing the velvety grip of her body before slipping back in an inch at a time, watching the way her eyelids flutter as I fill her.

Abigail meets me stroke for stroke, her hands clenching fistfuls of sand and pushing back into me. We’re moaning, crying out in a love language that isn’t Italian, isn’t English, but a private language that says more than either one.

I love you.

I need you.

You’re mine.

I’m yours.

Forever.

My balls tighten and I swell, teetering on the edge of falling into the abyss, but I won’t go without her. “Come,” I beg.

And she does, pulling me with her into bliss. She cries out as I explode into her. Eventually, we fall apart, collapsing onto the blanket and holding each other until the waves pass.

“What do you think of having a baby?” Abi ventures carefully as her fingers trace my tattoos. She has them memorized by now, could do it blindfolded, but she still does it every time we lie down to relax or after we have sex. It’s become one of our *things*.

Abigail tells me that every couple has things like that, but I prefer to think

it's only us.

"Is this because Violet's pregnant again?" I joke, but I want to be sure.

"No," she says, tears gleaming at the corners of her eyes. "It's because I am. I'm pregnant, Lorenzo!"

"*Oh, mio Dio, mia rosa,*" I shout. "You knew and didn't say anything?"

"Surprise!" Abigail replies with an uncertain smile.

"You have made me the happiest man to ever walk the face of the earth. To know that you carry our child is a miracle I never thought I'd be blessed with. I hope he or she has your wild sense of adventure and my hair." I push my hands through Abigail's mass of locks and lay a soft kiss to the tip of her nose.

"I hope they have your bravery and my eyes," she adds.

"I think that sounds perfect."

But we both know that whatever comes our way, we'll greet it with a smile and a barely half-formed plan. It's who we are, still spontaneous and slightly crazy but together, no matter what.

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed this story, make sure you read the other two, [My Big Fat Fake Wedding](#) (Violet and Ross) and [My Big Fat Fake Engagement](#) (Courtney and Kaede). Read on for an excerpt of Violet & Ross's story!

EXCERPT: MY BIG FAT FAKE WEDDING

T

his can't be happening. He can't be leaving me.
Not now.
Not ever.

My heels click across the hospital floor as I race down the hallway. I'm in such a panic, the words blaring over the PA system hardly register from the blood rushing through my ears in a dull roar.

"Code blue, room four! Code blue, room four!"

I nearly trip over my own feet as I break into a shuffling run, boomeranging for the nearest patient room. I swear my heart is going to explode when I spot the correct door and burst inside to see . . .

"Nana!" I exclaim as I see my grandmother, Angela Russo. She looks up from where she's hovering like a hen over my grandfather. The scowl on her face highlights the parentheses of wrinkles around her lips, making her worry immediately apparent.

My grandfather, Stefano, looks up at me, his unusually pale face widening into a huge smile. But even with the happiness blooming, I can tell he's worn out, aged decades in the short time since I last saw him.

"My beautiful little flower, Violet!" he sings, his Italian accent coming through as he holds his arms out to me. "I knew you would come. Come here so I can give you a kiss!"

"Oh, Papa, I was so scared!" I say, rushing into his arms and collapsing into a ball of relief. "I dropped everything and came as soon as I heard."

Papa looks over at Nana with a triumphant wink of his eye as he rubs my shoulders. "See, Angie? This one loves me the most. Do you see any of our other granddaughters here?"

"That's because you've scared them all away with your crazy stories," Nana growls, but there's an undercurrent of affection for the man who is both a thorn in her side and her everything.

Papa laughs and squeezes me with a fierce strength that belies his shrinking frame, raining kisses down upon my forehead. I feel comforted, enveloped in his familiar scent, leather and spicy meats . . . masculine and comforting. For a moment, I forget the direness of the situation as he rocks me back and forth in his arms like I'm a child or the one in need of comfort, though he's the one in the hospital bed.

But the moment is fleeting as reality slams back into me, and I rise to my feet to ask Nana in a rush of words, "What happened? Is he going to be okay? How long has he been like this?"

"The old fool was working out back in the summer heat after I told him he should take it easy and come inside," Nana says with a frosty scowl at Papa, but her voice softens as she speaks, revealing how frightened she really is. "I found him lying face down in the dirt."

"Papa!" I say in admonishment. "You know you're not supposed to be taking on a heavy workload, doctor's orders. Why didn't you listen to Nana?"

Grandpa waves away my worry with a bony hand. "I don't see what the fuss's all about. A man has to work, and I'll do what I need to until the day they put me six feet under. I just tripped and had a little fall, that's all." He says it like he believes that to be the truth.

Nana gives me a sour look that says, "That's definitely not what happened." "He passed out—" she begins.

"I fell and was getting up before you came squawking like a worried hen, making things worse," Papa interrupts. "So, I decided to lie back and let you do what you were going to do. You shoulda done the same for me."

"Nonsense!" Nana snaps. "If I hadn't found you, who knows what would've happened?"

"Nothing." Papa dismisses Nana with a nonchalant shrug. "I'd be fine, maybe about to pass out from eating some of your overcooked pasta—"

"Why, you old bast—"

"Bah! Hush, woman, you worry too much. I'm more likely to drop dead from all of your hen clucking than I will from a little heat."

Their bickering is comforting in a twisted way, the camaraderie of being together for decades and knowing which buttons to push to get a rise out of each other but also which ones are entirely off limits.

He pulls a long cigar out from the side of his bed and offers it to her. "Here. Calm yourself and have a stogie." The shit-eating grin on his face says he knows he's poking the bear, and I realize he's giving her something to focus on besides worrying about him. He's a slick old fox, I'll give him that.

Nana snatches the cigar out of his hand, brandishing it as if it's a weapon.

“Have you gone *pazzo*? They don’t even allow smoking in the hospital. And really? A smoke when you’re supposed to be recovering?”

“Sure, why not? I’d rather have a smoke than act like a *pagliaccio*!”

Nana throws her hands up in frustration, the cigar flying from her hands in a perfect arc that ends in the trashcan. If she wasn’t so riled up, I’d give her a round of applause, but as it is, I’m staying out of their battle. For now, at least. “Oh, *fanculo tutto*! You’re impossible!”

“I know.” Grandpa tosses me a mischievous wink meant to lighten the mood. “That’s why you married me. You like the challenge.”

The two continue to bicker as I look on fondly, feeling a sense of relief. Whatever happened to land Papa in the ER hasn’t robbed him of his feistiness, so it couldn’t have been too bad, could it?

It’s a particularly hot summer, and it’s not uncommon for the elderly to overheat when they underestimate the weather. Maybe he’s right and this is all a lot of fuss for nothing. He just needs a slap on the hand to follow the doctor’s and Nana’s orders a bit better, and everything will be fine.

Even as I tell myself that, I know it’s wishful thinking and childish hopes. A girlish desire to deny the mortality of a man who has always seemed larger than life to me. Deep inside, I know he’s no more immortal than the rest of us, but even so, I need to know this isn’t going to happen again. I love him too much to lose him. Especially not now, and if I had my say, not ever.

After being reassured several times by Papa that he’s fine, I excuse myself from the room to let him and Nana bicker themselves out.

In the hall, I run into a man wearing a long white coat and carrying a binder with Papa’s name on the spine. His name tag says *Dr. Lee*, and he has an aura of calm control that seems to relax me immediately.

“Are you Violet?” he asks before I can say anything, giving me a warm smile.

I nod. “I am. How’d you know?”

He grins. “Your grandfather wasn’t concerned in the least about his health and has been talking about you since the moment he came in, telling anyone who’ll listen about his granddaughter. If you didn’t know, he’s quite fond of you.”

I smile. “That definitely sounds like him. Can you tell me what happened? I’m not sure I trust his version of events.”

Dr. Lee’s expression turns solemn and the energy around him shifts, making me instantly nervous. “It appears that, due to the heat and overworking himself, your grandfather’s blood pressure dropped and he lost consciousness.”

“That’s what Nana said. So, if we can keep him from overdoing it, he’s

going to be okay.” I say it definitively, like I’m adding tying him to his recliner in the air-conditioned living room to my to-do list.

Dr. Lee tilts his head, his lips pressed together. “Well, as I explained to Angela and Stefano, we’re waiting for tests to come back for a more complete picture, but I don’t need the tests to tell me that his heart isn’t in good shape. It hasn’t been in quite some time.”

Oh, no.

“But he’s stable now . . .” I say, like I’m refuting his medical knowledge with only the power of my hope.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Violet, but . . .”

The growing look of sorrow and despair in Dr. Lee’s eyes says everything, and I’m forced to grab ahold of a wall rail to keep from falling.

No.

It can’t be.

It just can’t.

My worst nightmare come to life.

“How long does he have?” I ask through the lump in my throat. The words sound surreal, like someone else is saying them.

“At his age, it’s hard to say,” Dr. Lee muses, shrugging his shoulders. “Anything I say is at best an educated guess. Six months? A year, maybe? But he’s a stubborn mule who refuses to follow orders, which complicates things. To be honest, he could go at almost any time if we can’t get his heart to function properly and him to be compliant.”

His words, an awful confirmation of what I feared most, hit me like a sucker punch to the gut, the air leaving my lungs in one forceful gust.

Six months to a year? Or less?

How can Papa, the only father figure I’ve ever known, the man who practically raised me from a pigtailed toddler to adulthood, the man who could take on anything the world threw at him and live to tell about it . . . have such little time to live?

In that moment, all the should’ve, could’ve, and would’ve’s flash in front of my eyes. It’s as if everything I expected to experience with Papa has turned into a puddle that’s evaporating quicker than I’d ever considered.

But the worst part is, the one thing he’s wanted to see the most is likely to never happen, and that looms like a dark umbrella over my breaking heart.

When’s my beautiful little flower getting married so I can walk her down the aisle?

To say marriage is a huge tradition in my family is like saying a tsunami is a little wet. An understatement of such magnitude, it’s laughable, especially for

my grandparents, who look forward to the next generation of weddings with teary smiles and proclamations of the continuation of their legacy with another branch on the family tree.

Hell, most of the women in my family are married off before they're old enough to drink alcohol. In fact, I'm probably the only woman in my family, at age twenty-six, who isn't married with a wagonload of kids.

Due to my busy career, I've been single for as long as I can remember, although I've always dreamed about having this big fairytale wedding. I used to use Nana's curtains as a makeshift veil and Papa would pretend to walk me down the aisle. I want him to do that for real, hold my hand as I greet my husband-to-be, bless us with a marriage as long and happy as his and Nana's has been, and see that I've finally grown into the woman he always told me I could be. Successful, loved, happy.

Now it's never going to happen.

As if sensing my tormented thoughts, Dr. Lee adds, "If there's anything you need to say or anything important left for you to do with your grandfather, I'd do it very soon. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

Gee, thanks for the guilt trip, Doc.

Whatever else the doctor says fades off into the background as I watch Nana and Papa bicker through the glass window, happier now and blissfully unaware of the countdown looming.

In that moment, denial surges and I clench my fists.

This can't happen. I won't let it.

Six months to a year?

I can make it work.

Suddenly determined, a feeling of resolution washes over me as a plan formulates in my mind.

Don't worry, Papa. I'm going to find myself a husband so you can walk me down the aisle on my wedding day before you leave this earth . . . if it's the last thing I do.

VIOLET

“I still can’t believe it!” I squeal, wiggling my fingers and watching my engagement ring flash as the overhead lights reflect on the diamond’s faceted surface.

Having already heard this once, or maybe two dozen times, my two best friends sigh but rally with the appropriate oohs and ahhs, even throwing me a bone of another “Congratulations, girl!”

My lifelong bestie, Abigail Andrews, and Archie Hornee, my interior design assistant, are basically saints for putting up with me at this point. “Colin and I are getting married!”

Archie arches one perfectly sculpted eyebrow and presses a palm to his black T-shirt-covered chest, which is most definitely manscaped. Ever the sarcastic ball of sass, he deadpans, “Dear, we know.” He continues the performance by pulling a Vanna White, slapping a big fake smile on his face and gesturing widely to the roomful of wedding gowns surrounding us. When he finishes, his face goes right back to his usual blank ‘fuck off’ mode.

As if we’d be at a wedding dress shop for any other reason. Lord knows, Abigail and Archie aren’t looking to get married, and obviously not to each other since Abigail lacks a rather important piece of the perfection that Archie is looking for, a never-ending appreciation of his special brand of hilarious, off-the-cuff, don’t-care-about-being-politically-correct, catty-bitchiness.

So nope, not for them, for sure. We’re here for me! I can’t believe it’s really happening.

It’s been five months since Papa’s diagnosis, and what a busy five months it’s been.

Initially, I thought there’d be no way I’d ever get married before his heart gave out. After all, his doctor had painted a grim picture with no happy ending.

But despite the odds, Papa has miraculously held on long enough for me to reconnect with an old high school fling and get engaged after a whirlwind romance where we both said we wanted the whole nine yards—wedding, marriage, kids. Luckily, since Colin and I already had a history, it wasn’t starting at ground zero, and instead, we moved quickly after a short get-to-know-you-now phase. He’s a really good man, and I think we can be happy together.

Serious relationship, party of two . . . here! I think, adding a shimmy to my ass as I raise my hand, peering at the weighty sparkle resting there again.

But despite my excitement, the rows of gorgeous gowns, and two friends

with a sharp eye for fashion, I'm currently trying on what has to be my twentieth wedding dress. Ride or Die Bride, an edgy bridal shop that calls itself the *Number One Bridal Shop for the Modern Badass Chick*, is failing to deliver a dress that is *The One*.

They've got everything from fairy tale princess to woodland nymph to Vegas stripper, mixed in with classic beauties covered in expensive lace and hand-sewn beading. My dress is here, I know it is. But in the three appointments I've made, I haven't found it. Yet.

I need *perfection*.

It has to be. Everything about my wedding has to be perfect in order to do it right for Papa.

"I'm so happy for you!" Abigail declares, rushing forward and pulling me into a fierce hug. A moment later, I feel another set of arms wrap around me, Archie's, and I'm encased in a group hug.

"Hey, guys!" I gasp as I feel my bridal shapewear corset, a marvelous invention that gives me the perfect hourglass figure, squeeze me to within an inch of my life. Any more and I swear it'll crush my ovaries. "I know you're both excited for me, but I can't breathe!"

No one told me trying on wedding dresses and getting the right shape could be this painful. I thought it was come in, try on a few dresses, and after a few twirls and happy tears, be done.

"Shit, sorry!" Abi and Archie exclaim in near unison. As Archie jumps back, Abi tries to loosen my corset but fails as there's too much dress fabric in the way. "I forgot how tight we had to pull it to get you into this thing."

"I'd blame it on the pa-pa-pa-pasta!" Archie sings, doing a not half-bad riff on *Blame It* by Jamie Foxx, while measuring my curves through fingers held in a square like he's a cameraman looking for my good side. His puckered lips and sharp brow remind me of Zoolander, and I'm waiting for him to say something about 'Blue Steel', but it doesn't come.

Still, I can't help but burst into laughter at his antics then gasp as the corset tightens even further. *Shit, is this damn corset alive?* "Hey!" I rasp, leveling a stern finger Archie's way and defending the curves I was blessed with through a particularly short and fierce round of puberty. "I'm half Italian. Pasta, pizza, lasagna, and red wine are a way of life for me, okay?"

With zero apology, he traces my shape reflecting in the mirror, which is admittedly a little fuller looking in this unflattering white taffeta ballgown that's a definite no-go. "No one's commenting on your curvy figure, love. There damn sure ain't nothing wrong with a little a junk in the trunk. Just look at Kim Kardashian." He waits a moment and then adds under his breath, but still loud

enough for Abi and me to hear, “Only in America can someone turn an ass and a sex tape into a multi-billion-dollar family empire!”

The next gown is wrong too, and the one after that is even worse.

It’s a sparkly number that somehow makes me look like a constipated fairytale princess. Too New Jersey, if that makes any damn sense, and as a half-Italian, avoiding *any* Jersey Shore comparisons is vital to me.

Which probably means I’ll have to come back another time to try on even more gowns. Abi and Archie might kill me if I make them sit through this again, but I need their help and want someone to celebrate with when I do find *The One*.

Because I will.

Against all odds, I found a husband-to-be, a venue with an opening for our short-notice ceremony and big reception, and I will find a dress that makes me feel special for my big day.

Abi adjusts my bra straps, beaming at my reflection even though she already told me this dress is ridiculous and Archie made a rather harsh comment about my being ready for Wedding Day: 90s Vegas Style with the amount of bling thrown on this thing.

“When do you want to come check out the invitations?” Abi chirps. She co-owns a local specialty floral boutique and is handling all of my flower arrangements personally. But as my maid of honor, she offered to do the invitations as well.

Shit.

“Oh, yeah, sorry! I’ve been so busy with work and dress hunting, I totally forgot about that! When do you want me to come by the boutique to see them? Colin and I have a breakfast date tomorrow morning to talk about the wedding, so we could rearrange and come by the shop instead. But Archie and I have a job lined up right after—”

“With Bitch-ella, the Ice Queen,” Archie interrupts with a mutter that I can’t really disagree with, but I give him a side-eye that begs him to at least try to be professional about the client.

“So, we’d have to be fast,” I finish.

Abi purses her lips thoughtfully as she places her hands on my hips, moving my body slightly to the side and staring at my shape in the mirror. “No way. You two do a breakfast date, and we can figure out a time when it’s not a rush. Tomorrow’s Friday, so maybe we can do it after work and then grab drinks?”

I nod, ignoring the flutters of butterflies in my stomach. I don’t know why I’m so nervous all of a sudden. I mean, yes, there’s a lot to do and not much time to do it in, but everything’s going to plan, just like I hoped.

Papa.

Colin.

The wedding.

I should be on cloud nine. Yet, these butterflies don't feel like good, happy flutters. More like a tornado of responsibility, expectations, and nerves.

Abi turns me, eyeing me thoughtfully. "You good? Everything all right, Vi?"

I don't want to bring down the mood or start examining the questions in my head too closely, so I play pretend, telling myself that slightly cold feet are normal. After all, getting married is a big deal and not one to take lightly.

"I'm fine. It's just this damn corset!" I say with a grimace, grabbing my sides. "After I meet with Colin tomorrow, everything should be good to go." I look between the both of them, spreading my arms out to the side and twirling across the showroom stage in my dress one last time. "Final verdict?"

"Not my favorite," Abi says, shaking her head.

"I agree," Archie co-signs. "It's totally giving me *Tangled*, meets the *Little Mermaid*, meets *Cinderella* vibe, but like they all became dancers on the Vegas strip. Emphasis on the strip."

"Gee, thanks, Arch," I mutter sourly. But funnily enough, I agree with his assessment, although my terms were a little less . . . animated and crude.

Archie winks at me. "You're welcome, sweet cheeks."

"Don't worry, Vi. We're going to keep looking and find the perfect dress that'll knock Colin flat on his ass!" Abigail's assertion settles me slightly, helping me focus on the issue at hand . . . my dress. If I can just find that, everything else will be smooth sailing.

"Yeah, turn that frown upside down!" Archie adds, pushing at my cheeks with two fingers. He looks deep into my eyes, and I'm expecting some sweet words of wisdom, but I should know better with Archie. "Just think, before you know it, Colin won't have to bag it up anymore, and you'll get to feel the *real* thing. How big we talking here?" He holds his fingers a few inches apart, spreading them to indicate a bigger and bigger appendage, but it's seeing the whites of his eyes growing as I don't stop him that does me in.

"Oh, God, you're too much!" I groan, forcing his hand down and chuckling.

Come on, girl. Everything is going to work out. It has to.



"I'M CALLING OFF THE ENGAGEMENT."

The words hit me like a freight train, a grenade launched directly into my heart.

When Colin told me he wanted to meet with me this morning, I was under the impression it was to discuss the details of our wedding, plan who we were inviting, what DJ we were going to use, etc.

Never in a million years did I think it would be to dump me.

“Violet?” Colin asks, noticing that I’ve gone completely rigid, my latte frozen inches away from my lips and my half-eaten bagel in front of me.

Colin Radcliffe. My fiancé. *My ex-fiancé*, I correct with a wince. *Fucking rat* is what my mind is yelling loudly.

Dressed in a gray, freshly pressed, tailored suit, Colin’s blond hair is styled and parted, and he’s gazing at me with expectancy, as if I’m supposed to burst into hysterics, crying and making a scene worthy of Hamlet.

But I’m frozen, thinking WTF?

Why?

And . . . why now?

But wondering the whys won’t do me any good. Colin’s obviously thought this through and wants to end it all.

Doesn’t matter that I just spent weeks trying to find the perfect wedding dress.

Doesn’t matter how much I want the fairytale wedding.

Doesn’t matter that my Papa won’t get to walk me down the aisle. Maybe never.

None of it matters to him.

In a hit that’s even more impactful than Colin’s words, I realize that none of my thoughts on this betrayal have anything to do with us, our relationship, or our love. *Love?*

Do I even love Colin?

Stupid me thought I’d make it work using a checklist for our compatibility.

Both career-oriented people. Check.

Former lovers. Check.

Both matured and ready to settle down. Check and check.

Boy, was I wrong on that last one.

“Violet?” Colin presses again, this time reaching across the table and placing his hands atop mine.

Suddenly, I feel queasy, and I have to fight back the urge to throw up in his lap.

“I know this has to come as a shock to you, but I’ll cover the lost deposit on the wedding hall and every other expense associated with our engagement so you don’t have to worry.”

Just like I thought, he’s already planned his exit strategy, as if our wedding,

our marriage, was some business transaction. For him, maybe it was. For me? I don't know, I realize. Maybe this is what the buzzing butterflies have been trying to tell me?

"Why?" I ask simply, battling down the surge of nausea.

Colin licks his lips, lips that I once enjoyed on my neck, on my breasts, on my most sacred of places.

"Violet, you know I adore you, and you're beautiful, smart, and kind, but . . . I don't think I'm ready for marriage." He stares at me again, rubbing my hands as if waiting for the crying hysterics he knows must be coming.

He definitely wants a show, just not too much of one. That perfect balance of greedy hunger for drama, tampered with the knowledge that he doesn't want to look bad.

That's why he picked the coffee shop, I realize. Cold and calculated. The Radcliffe way. In public, he knows I'm not going to go fully emotional, batshit crazy or really even make a scene. It's not my style.

But he does want to see me shatter into a million tiny pieces, and he wants an audience while he does his dirty work.

I've been ignoring it, something I could easily do with our quick whirlwind relationship, but I can see it clearly now that he's serving it up on a platter like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Everything is a façade with him. Image and reputation reign supreme.

I bet he thought I'd fit some corporate wife checkbox. Which would be so hurtful, except that I guess I was doing the same thing with my own checkboxes.

This was doomed from the start.

When I don't muster even a single teardrop or argument, he continues, "We're both so young, and hell, we haven't even had sex in over three weeks." His tone is accusatory, like it's my fault we've been so tired that sex has seemed like one more thing on the ever-growing to-do list.

He keeps digging at the wound, pouring salt in a steady stream into the bloody mess of our relationship. "We're both so busy with our jobs. You have that decorating thing you do that you love so much, and it takes up so much of your time, and I'm really busy at Dad's company, kicking ass and making deals. I . . . I just think we're at two different crossroads in our lives."

The decorating thing that I do? Fuck off.

Out of all the things he said, insulting my job pisses me off the most.

And I could argue against so many of his points, letting him know that everything he said was bullshit.

But I'm not going to because, simply put, I don't have time for this shit.

And I realize . . . I don't care. Not about Colin.

I'm such an idiot. But it was all for a good reason.

Sorry, Papa. I tried.

"Fine," I say simply, pulling my hands away from his before taking off my engagement ring. "Here. You can take this back, too. I don't want it."

I place the ring on the table and slide it across toward him, resisting the urge to throw it in his face or shove it up his nose, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of an emotional outburst. The huge diamond rock in the center sparkles against the light, catching the eye of several women sitting around us.

I swear some of their heads turn like *The Exorcist* to get a better look as they realize what's happening, their eyes as big as saucers as they gawk at the size of the ring.

One of the women even leans so far forward to get a better look that she jostles her steaming hot coffee, spilling it on her hand. But instead of crying out at what I know has to hurt, she quietly blots at it, blowing cool air across her hand so she doesn't miss a single moment of the Colin and Violet Breakup Show.

"You know," I say as I grab my purse and slide on my Gucci shades, ignoring the commotion of googly-eyed stares and growing whispers from women around us, "It was really good to reconnect after so long, Colin. And we tried to make it work. It didn't. Thanks for everything."

My words are clipped and to the point.

If he's going to break off our engagement like this, I see no reason to drag it out with some long ass monologue that'll amount to nothing in the end, anyway.

Finished, I begin to rise from my chair, but Colin grabs my arm, holding me in place, his jaw slack in surprise.

One of the women watching suddenly decides that's her cue and claps her hands sharply, interrupting our scene with one of her own. "Boy, you'd best let that girl's arm go. You had your moment, and a queen like that is better off without a twat-stain like you."

Several people gasp at her language and volume, but Archie has me corrupted to not even blink at that level of crudeness. Thankful for the support, I look over to her and offer a weak smile of appreciation. For his part, Colin scowls but loosens his grip. Still, he's not done.

"Wait a minute now, Vi. You're not even going to try to talk about this? After all we've been through?" His voice has an almost whine to it, confirming what I expected.

He wanted me to break down and beg him not to leave me.

In front of a fucking audience.

Like he's some golden goose prize that I would debase myself to possess.

Well, he can kick rocks.

I won't give him the satisfaction of a show.

I shrug nonchalantly. "Nope."

"Look, Vi, I know how much our getting married means to you. I get it, you're pissed and upset. I would be too, but can we please not end things on bad terms? You don't have to act this way—"

"We're *fine*," I say, disengaging my arm from his grasp and rising to my feet. "Besides, you're right. It's probably for the best."

Colin's lips work for several seconds, at a loss for words. Like he can't believe this didn't turn out how he expected, me in a crying puddle at his feet.

He clenches his jaw, showing that he's actually getting angry. "Violet—"

"Bye, Colin."

Ruffled, Colin straightens his collar and clears his throat, trying one last tactic, gesturing at my half-eaten food. "Will you just sit down and finish the bagel, at least?"

Turning away, I toss over my shoulder, just as casually as he tossed away our relationship, "No time. I gotta go to work . . . and do that 'decorating thing'."

My single cheerleader stands up, her arm circling in rally. "That's right, girl. Strut it out of here and own the world." She sneers at Colin, more emotionally invested in this than even I am, and isn't that pitiful?

She's my only supporter, though. Every other woman in here is judging me as unworthy of keeping Colin. All they see is a handsome guy in a suit with a flashy diamond ring . . . back on the market.

I imagine Colin will be collecting numbers by the stacks before he even walks out of the coffee shop.

Well, they can have him.

I get into the cab and far down the block before the tears come. Not for Colin, not for the decimation of our relationship, but for Papa and for the little girl I once was, and still am to some degree, who wants to make her grandfather happy.

Read the entire book [here](#). Or search My Big Fat Fake Wedding on Amazon.

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