

Blurb

Orelia Kane and Chris Immani share three things in common: the same friend group, a love for surfing, and the habit of hiding their mutual attraction with unwarranted antagonism. Nothing lasts forever, not a surfing career, not a fear of intimacy, and not the masks they wear.

For two people who live for catching waves, they're remarkably bad when it comes to catching feelings.

This story can be dedicated to no one else but my wonder
beta readers. <3

For Tara who read it first at it's absolute trashiest. For
Nicole, who tore it apart with her teeth and so many compliments. For Margot and Alexandra, who provided much
needed support and excellent catches on grammar, story,
and plot. For Birdie Teop, who not only provided feedback
on this story, but has helped me grow as a writer overall
from her insights and advice.

And lastly, for Jessica, who suggested I tone down the sex
scenes (Sorry girl, I definitely didn't do that.)

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FIRST EDITION

All versions of this book are available for free.

Author's Note

Bette Tucker (she/her) is excited to share this story with you for free. *Catching Feelings* was written in 2024 while Bette lived in Japan. This was the first book that she completed, and was meant to be a stepping stone to developing her writing skills. Therefore, this book will never be sold, but will always be available for free to showcase where she started and how far she's come. Please note that this book has not been professionally edited and therefore will likely have spelling and grammatical errors.

Chapter One

LITTLE BLACK DRESS or comfy casual? A question for the ages.

Biting my lip, I considered both outfits laid on my bed. On the one hand, the little black dress has the capacity to bring any man to his knees. Well, maybe not Chris Immani, but it would certainly give him pause. On the other hand, the combination of jeans and a standard button up—my usual wear—would indicate I didn't care, couldn't be bothered really, about attending his housewarming party.

"Why are you even going to this event, Orelia?" Clementine demanded of me over video chat.

I rolled my eyes at my younger sister, staring back at me through my phone perched against a coffee mug on my dresser. Clem's judgment could be felt all two-thousand miles away from where she sat at our parents' home in Minnesota.

"My friends are going," I said with a shrug and considered the two outfits again. I had no business wearing the pretty black dress. No business looking like I cared.

"Yeah, but you don't actually like the host," Clem pointed out in that annoyingly astute tone of hers.

Even with my back turned, I could practically see her raised brows and the judgy purse of her lips.

"Not the point, Clementine."

"Yes, the point, Orelia." Clem laughed, but got distracted by something on her side of the call and I took it as my cue to pull on jeans and the button up. I knotted the ends at mid waist, showing a sliver of my stomach which was mostly flat, but didn't completely disguise my love of sweets.

"I don't dislike the host," I said and it didn't sound convincing. Clem's eyes flew back to the screen only to narrow at me. "He's just not my favorite."

“Whatever, you liar.”

“I don’t hate him,” I said, sticking my tongue out at Clem and trying to find the right words. “You know in your friend group when there’s one person you like less than everyone else?”

“Yeahhh,” Clem said slowly, smirking. No one could smirk like my middle sister. “Basically, you’re secretly hoping if you wait long enough, someone else will confess they also dislike Chris.”

Man, if only.

The reality was so much worse. Everyone else loved the guy, and if I wanted to be objective, I might’ve been able to see it. Former pro-athlete, stupidly handsome, generally kind.

Ugh, gag me, I thought as I nodded affirmatively at Clem.

Why didn’t I like him? It was simple and petty and borne from insecurity.

He didn’t like me.

He’d never outright stated it of course, that would be pretty unhinged since we shared the same friend group. Instead, we mutually determined never to talk about our first interaction, and have been faking a cool acquaintanceship ever since.

“What is it?” I asked, a flicker of concern making my stomach jump, when Clem’s end of the line went silent.

After a few moments of hesitation, she said, “Dad’s been gone twenty years this summer.”

I knew when she said Dad, she didn’t mean Mom’s husband Marcello. I bit my lip hard, not from an onslaught of grief, not from a welling of tears, but from discomfort and a familiar tendril of shame. We didn’t talk about our biological father. Clem and Cassidy did, but Mom and I...we hadn’t been there. And it was—. I cut myself off before any further thoughts could dampen my rapidly sinking mood.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I told Clem even as my cheeks heated over my cowardice.

"You never do," Clem muttered, only half trying to conceal her words. "Listen, I've gotta go. I'm joining a play-in poker tournament tonight and it starts soon."

Grateful for the change in subject, my shoulders loosened ever so slightly and I cobbled together a grin. "Look at you, hotshot. Good luck."

"You too, O."

A few minutes later I strode out of my condo and sighed in appreciation as I locked the front door. The balmy evening and warm breeze reminded me more of peak midwest summer than late spring. This should have been familiar after five years in southern California, but I wasn't upset to still be finding joy in it and I let it lift my mood, shaking off Clem's perceptiveness about Chris, about our father.

I left my condo on foot, because less than a mile down the road was where Chris Immani now lived. Where his surf school was now located. A not insignificant breath caught in my throat at the proximity and the irony when I'd spent the last five years doing everything I could to avoid being in the same room as him.

Chris found a beautiful property near the water in disrepair during a major dip in the housing market. A mixture of luck, pro surfing funds, and Chris' willingness to remodel the house by himself had finally moved his surfing school from a meet-up-at-the-beach situation to actually having a homebase near the ocean. When I stepped into Chris' driveway, skirting around a dozen or so cars parked outside his house, the familiar noise of my friends washed over me and the homeowner began to matter less. Instead of heading directly inside, I walked around the house as the sun began its slow descent over the water.

The outdoor space that spilled from the back patio to the beach was magnificent. And I knew from our group chat that Chris had built the porch. There were a half-dozen chairs and even more people

spread out between the grill, the beach, and the outdoor shower on the farside of the house.

I knew exactly where Chris stood when I stepped around the corner, but forced my gaze to dance over him, and not linger. But after I'd scanned the porch, looking for familiar faces, my stare returned to him. Chris had warm brown skin, dark from the sun and his half-Haitian heritage, along with full lips and piercing green eyes. With dark hair falling in soft waves around his face, and the top section tied back in a half ponytail on his head, he looked every inch the surfer he was.

He turned away from the people he was talking to and his eyes found mine immediately, like he'd known exactly who was watching and from where. He didn't raise a brow or nod in greeting as we held the stare for one, two. With our birthdays two weeks apart and just months from our thirtieth, we were definitely too old to be having staring contests. Yet neither of us looked away.

"There you are," came a familiar shout from behind and drew my attention. "I've been looking everywhere for you, Orelia Kane."

I snorted at the way Theo emphasized my full name in a dramatic flare only he was capable of. Theo was golden skinned, blonde and had a jawline that could cut glass. His looks had gotten him through the door in Hollywood, but his dedication was doing the rest now.

Belatedly, I wondered if Chris' eyes would glint victoriously, but I forced myself not to look back.

Very slowly and very suspiciously, I asked Theo, "What, pray tell, do you need me for?"

Theo glanced over his shoulder and satisfied no one else was approaching, said quickly, "I have a specific wedding gift I want from you."

He rubbed his hands together, nervously, uncharacteristically.

"Okay," I grinned, not bothering to hide my amusement. "What is it?"

"I want to say my vows in Japanese." He said it all in one breath, laughed at himself and tried again. "I want my wedding vows to be in Japanese, but I don't want to just memorize words, I want lessons. Scheduled lessons."

"Awww," I said, unable to help myself. "Ren will love that."

Theo and Ren had been dating for nearly five years, and Theo tried on and off to learn the language because Ren was Japanese. Well, technically, he was British, but his family all hailed from Japan and although Ren could flit easily between cultures, he spoke almost exclusively Japanese with his family. And with me. Because it was fun to tease our friends who suspected we were trash talking them in a language they didn't understand.

And I could teach Theo, but—

"You don't want to learn from Ren?" I asked. "He is actually Japanese. I'm just from Minnesota."

Theo released a loud belly laugh and his face dropped to something panicked, as if the noise would draw attention. No one bothered to look our way as Theo's personality had always been bold and loud and happy. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it.

"Don't sell yourself short," Theo said, cutting me off before I could finish. "You've studied Japanese for over half your life, and you've lived there, and you already work as a translator. Plus, if I learned from Ren, it would ruin the surprise." Theo gave me puppy-dog eyes, which should absolutely not have been effective.

"Okay, I'm in." And immediately my mind started whirring at the possibility. "Weekly tutoring sessions at a minimum. And, well, what are you going to tell Ren you're doing?"

"I don't have any more projects until the winter, so I'm free as a bird. Chris suggested meeting here, at the surf house every Tuesday. We'll tell Ren we're surfing."

Balking at the idea of doing this on Chris' turf, I immediately turned to alternatives. "You don't want to come over to my condo and study?"

Theo gave a sheepish half-smile. "I want this to be a surprise so badly, O. But, I'm pretty uncomfortable with lying to Ren about anything more than necessary. If we do it at the surf house, there's at least some honesty to it."

I sighed internally and melted just a little at Theo's earnestness, relenting with a nod.

"Will we actually be able to surf?" I asked.

Theo shrugged. "I suppose that depends on how well I do in our lessons."

Ren and Theo's September wedding in London was heading towards us, full steam ahead. However, in the quiet, a new emotion was trying to make its way to the surface of my consciousness. One I recognized but didn't understand. When the guys had gotten engaged the year before, sharing their happiness had been easy, but now, something that felt much too close to envy settled beneath my ribs. I didn't like it one bit.

I'd been silent for too long, so I put on a big smile. "This is going to be great!"

Theo gave me a rib-breaking hug then turned back to the center of the party. I watched him head towards Ren and Chris.

Chris was chatting with a group of people, some surfers I recognized, and his current girlfriend Jessica. There was a tightness in his face, barely perceptible, but one that indicated irritation and stress.

I sighed. I had no business trying to ascertain what Chris was feeling and why. That's probably, potentially, more-than-likely, why I'd agreed to two shots of tequila from Theo and another mixed drink from Ren.

Two hours later, my rumbling stomach forced me to step away from the pack, away from the party outside. I entered the house through the sliding glass door.

Several empty bottles of champagne littered the counter, but I aimed for the snacks on the kitchen island and circled the cheese trays as their natural predator. Overall, I'd always been a bitch with priorities. I giggled to myself as I shoved little cracker and cheese sandwiches into my mouth. I couldn't see the twenty-or-so guests on the back patio from my spot behind the kitchen island, but I could hear them, and the hooting and hollering made me smile too. It sounded like a group of people were making a beeline for the ocean. If I had to bet money on someone, I'd put it on Theo being the leader of the pack. That man never wasted a chance to get shirtless in front of company.

I wandered away from the kitchen, cradling snacks in my hands, as I observed the layout of the surf house. The entire first floor was for Chris' business while his lodgings were on the second. There was a *Keep Out* sign on the door that led to a second floor staircase. I turned around before I made it to the front of the house because I finished off the tiny cheese and cracker sandwiches in my hands.

I snacked on the green olives no one else had bothered with. They were addicting, so I grabbed a handful and moved to go back to the party, to see if the others were taking a dark dip in the ocean. As I did so, I smacked my hand against the kitchen island and dropped the olives. With a dramatic sigh, and glaring at my mess on the floor, I bent to retrieve them. I had to get on my hands and knees to grab a rogue olive that rolled under the lip of the island cabinet and was still reaching for it when I heard the sliding door open.

At first, I didn't think anything of it as the noise filtered through the open door and was cut off as it closed. Finally, I retrieved the last olive and started to stand.

Tense voices filled the empty house, and I froze mid crouch, closing my eyes as I debated. Their voices were coming from the living room, and as it stood, I was safely hidden behind the kitchen island. If it had been anyone aside from Chris and Jessica, I would have revealed myself immediately and walked right back outside. But this was Chris.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, voice sympathetic in the way I recognized when he consoled Theo or Ren. “You haven’t been yourself this evening.”

“Look,” came Jessica’s nasally voice. “I tried to wait until after the party, but fine. We’ll do it now. I don’t want us to see each other any longer.”

I might’ve stood and awkwardly excused myself and bravely faced down the silent judgment of Chris’ gaze, but I’d waited too long and missed my chance, because this wasn’t a regular argument. This was a goddamn breakup. Albeit for a six-month relationship, but still.

The path from kitchen to patio was an obstacle of mythic proportions. I bit my lip and considered. If I stood now, they’d both see me. Slowly and as quietly as I could, I moved from my crouched position where my calves were burning to sit crisscross applesauce and buried my face in my hands. My jeans stretched and dug into the meat of my thighs, but I silently thanked myself for wearing the tight pants as opposed to the short black dress I’d originally intended. The floor would have been freezing against bare legs. Priorities, right?

There was a long moment’s pause before Chris exhaled, loudly like he’d been holding his breath.

“Why?” he asked, flat and emotionless so I couldn’t ascertain how he was actually handling the news. “And why now?”

“You’re not what I’m looking for long-term,” Jessica said. She didn’t need to continue, but she did. “You can’t give me what I want.”

My face contorted with a mixture of second-hand embarrassment and sympathy pain. Chris was not my favorite person, but Jessica Strauss was a particularly nasty piece of work not even he deserved.

"You said you wanted a family," he said. Chris' voice was even, a deep tenor of calm he armored himself with, even now.

"I do want a family." She paused. "Just not with you."

I shook my head and facepalmed even though no one was around to see.

"Why?" he asked again. His voice didn't pitch, no notes of hurt or begging in his voice. Probably not in his face either, but hiding as I was, I couldn't see for myself.

Let it go, Chris. That's not a question he really wanted answered, not by someone like Jessica, who would use the question to wound rather than explain.

She gave a long-suffering sigh and I could hear the dripping condescension in her voice. "You're not ambitious enough, especially compared to Ren and Theo. I thought they would rub off on you, but..."

Ouch. I opened my mouth in surprise and pressed my tongue against my teeth to stop the noise. I winced particularly hard in the ensuing silence.

Unambitious was an odd insult to me. Chris had surfed pro for several years, won cash prizes and even made it to the top ten ranked surfers in the world. Back when I first met him, I'd found his earnings online from his competition days and in his five years as a pro, he'd topped off above seven figures. After he quit the circuit, he opened his surf school in LA. Chris was still a new business owner when I'd met him that first time in Japan. None of those things seemed unambitious to me, especially considering his new home business literally steps from the ocean.

The silence was resounding though, and Jessica's insults rang in my ears. *Not ambitious enough. Not good enough.*

Yeah, I couldn't imagine having a follow up, but it was pretty telling that Chris didn't lash out at her with equally cruel things. Because my god, he had to have them. I had them and I hardly even knew Jessica.

And this was my unending struggle with Chris, why I couldn't just flat out hate him like I wanted to. He wasn't a bad guy. He wasn't a bad guy at all. He was the type of guy who picked you up on the side of the road when you called him at three in the morning. He was the type of guy who bought ice cream and feminine hygiene products without batting an eye for his uterus-possessing friends. For Christ's sake, this was the guy who, in the middle of the harshest breakup I'd ever heard, didn't cast stones back.

He'd just never directed that empathy and charisma toward me.

There was nothing left to say in the breakup, at least nothing I could hear in detail as both their voices dropped low. When I heard them move toward the front of the house, I shuffled on hands and knees to peek around the kitchen island. I could see the sliding doors to the porch, my path to freedom.

I carefully got to my knees to peek over the kitchen island and watched Chris and Jessica move away. I didn't make a sound, but Chris must've sensed my presence because his head darted to the kitchen. To me in my undignified position on both knees, head just slightly over the counter. In the dim light, Chris was too far away for me to catalog his reaction, but his shoulders tensed before he turned around.

Fuck.

As soon as they were gone, I poured myself a large drink and debated if I should wait for Chris to return so I could apologize. The prospect of being caught alone in the house with him wasn't worth it. Again, priorities. Gulping the wine, I shook my head and made

my escape to the back patio where the guests were cloistered, having returned from their walk down the beach.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the window's reflection. My shoulder length brown hair with hints of blonde from the sun, curled softly. The gold flecks in my green eyes weren't visible in the lamp-light, but the freckles on my nose were. And overall, I looked guilty as fuck. Unlike Clem, I didn't have a poker face.

Blood pounded in my ears, but the noise of the party took the place of the buzzing silence and my crime of eavesdropping. I went to stand next to Theo who for once in his life was standing alone, and soaking wet. As I'd suspected, he'd been the one to lead the group to the ocean.

Theo pulled me into a hug, crushing me tightly to him. I laughed and fought him off but came away damp anyway. He moved away, to the center of the party, as Chris came back outside. Alone.

I'd have had no clue he'd just been walloped in the living room by the way he melded back into the party, like nothing had happened. As the clock struck midnight, Chris began making his rounds, where he gave a few of the familiar acquaintances goodbye hugs and a few kisses on cheeks.

I followed Theo to the center of the group where he met Ren and Chris in the middle, but I paused, just out of reach. Chris threw his arm around Theo who laughed at something he said and slapped Chris' chest. As a group, the four of us had been nearly inseparable for the last five years, but Chris and I were careful to never be left alone, and rarely spoke to each other directly.

Shaking off my sudden nerves, I stepped forward and was welcomed with open arms and a swinging hug from Ren. The evening was ending as everyone said their goodbyes. When Ren released me, I turned and found myself directly in front of Chris.

We stared at each other, assessing, for a moment too long, but neither of us seemed keen on faking our friendship tonight. I cocked

my head to the side and wondered if I should reach out, maybe even apologize, because even though he was hiding it, pain welled in his dark green eyes. Fury too and maybe a little disgust at me. I winced in as close to an apology as I was willing to make.

Chris' nostrils flared and he turned away without a hug, without so much as a goodbye, and our friends didn't notice, because why would they?

Chapter Two

EVEN AFTER MORE than fifteen years of surfing, jogging out of the water with my surfboard felt a little Baywatch. Maybe less so with my wetsuit instead of a tight red bikini, but still: water dripping down my body, wet hair slicked back. Hot, right?

I was amping myself up on purpose, trying to delay the inevitable crash back to reality, to my thoughts, to my real problems. Surfing made my mind go blissfully silent with its pure physicality.

Board in hand, I strode up the beach toward two well-worn and brightly colored umbrellas.

“You two seem to be enjoying yourselves,” I said.

Among the umbrellas there was a cooler, beach chairs and my favorite people in the whole state of California. While the boys were great, nothing could compare to the girlfriends.

“Well, yeah, Orelia,” Jayna said, lowering her bright pink, heart-shaped sunglasses so she could stare at me over them. “You took my kid into the ocean for ninety minutes. This is the most rest I’ve had in weeks.”

Vivian, who seemed to be sleeping, showed the barest signs of life. “Ditto. Are they still alive?”

Jayna wore an itsy-bitsy bikini, and laid in the sun. Motherhood did not mean frumpy swimsuits for her. She was also a pipsqueak compared to Viv and I, even with the few inches of height she gained from her Afro space buns. Her dark skin shone in the sunlight, and I couldn’t tell if it was sweat or lotion.

Viv on the other hand wore as much black as you might see at a funeral, with dark makeup, a black sun hat, and a black shawl to protect her from the evil sun.

We all had vastly different ideas of what was appropriate beach wear.

My gaze returned to the ocean where their kids were still surfing. The waves had dissipated with the tide, and although I was done, they were still happy to stay in the calm water. At eight and twelve years old, I couldn't fault them for it. They were each on their own boards as the small waves got even smaller, but instead of trying to surf them, the kids appeared to be doing a balancing act that might've possibly, but not certainly, been surfboard yoga.

"Oh yeah, very lively," I said as I sat on a towel cross-legged and took a drink of water.

Tattoos covered nearly every inch of Viv's visible skin, which as a tattoo artist herself, was to be expected. My skin was nearly as pale as Viv's was, but unlike her, I spent so much time in the sun I'd managed a tan and freckles.

They were both about five years older than me and at very different life stages, but when we'd met two years before at a bereavement support group, that hadn't mattered. They'd each lost their husbands and I'd lost my father. All three of us had hated the grief counseling and all three of us had ducked out before the first session concluded.

I smiled at the memory. Vivian had left first, Jayna had followed, and I'd thought, *Screw it, I'm out too.*

The grief we all shared wasn't funny, neither was running from it. However, gratitude lanced through me because it led to our friendship. But I didn't want to go down memory lane today. Not on such a perfect day.

"Are you heading out?" Viv asked eventually and straightened slightly in her beach chair. "I swear it feels like we just got here."

"That's because," Jayna said as she reached her foot over to Viv's chair and gave her calf a nudge. "You fell asleep for half of it."

Vivian stretched big and smiled wide. "It was wonderful. But if you're leaving now we'll miss out on your life updates."

Sometimes—oftentimes—at least one of us had a social battery struggling for bars. When it came to that, we used Life Updates.

They were simple, rapid fire, off-the-cuff sharing of work, family, and friends. It didn't have to be in depth and we could always pass if we wanted, but it at least allowed for connection, even when we struggled.

"No, you won't," I said, shaking my head. "I can give 'em to you fast right now. Work: I'm hearing rumors of a big project coming my way that could lead to a lucrative and longer term project. Family: my sister Clem won a play-in seat at the World Series of Poker in July in Vegas. Friends: housewarming party last night was a blast. Irredeemable embarrassing nightmare: I accidentally eavesdropped on a breakup...and got caught."

Irredeemable embarrassing nightmare was not normally on the Life Update list.

Vivian and Jayna stared at me, then slowly at each other. When they turned back, it was with a burst of laughter.

"I'm not sure what I want to hear about first," Vivian said, and although her face was straight, her voice dripped with laughter.

Jayna practically vibrated with interest. "Definitely the embarrassing nightmare. Whose breakup?" She visibly stopped herself. "No, work first. Congratulations on the job, that sounds exciting."

My real full-time job was in translation: Japanese to English and vice versa for a publishing company based in New York. It was the best job I'd ever had because it paid enough for me to live well, required me to use my college degree, and it was different each day because of the projects. The work no longer caused me additional anxiety because I learned to manage my workload and my boss trusted my discretion for working hours. I had time to chase waves and occasionally cover classes. It was rare for Chris to ask that of me, but in the five years we'd known each other, I'd probably done it a dozen times or so. It was nice...and *not*. It always felt like a real opening for friendship, but from experience: it never ended that way.

"Thanks," I said, but since I'd emphasized the eavesdropping thing, that's clearly what they were waiting for. "It was at the housewarming party. Eavesdropping on the friend-not-friend I have. He totally caught me."

"You should just apologize," Jayna said with a shrug as she sat up fully. "What happened, happened. You know, maybe comfort him: it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

I scoffed so hard at her advice I nearly fell over.

"Screw that." Viv said, beating me to a response as she turned to Jayna. "She's talking about the surfer dude who never gives her the time of day."

I wouldn't have phrased it like that.

"Oh," Jayna said and considered that. Her bright voice didn't change in tone. "Yeah, don't apologize. Lord it over his head. Make him suffer."

Laughter bubbled through me. "I love you guys."

"We love you too," Jayna said. "What else are you doing this weekend?"

"Are you begging me to take the kids again?" I laughed and dug my feet into the sand, so they were completely covered.

"If you're willing," Viv said.

"Sorry, not today," I said with a shake of my head as I got to my feet. "I need to get going. For the work stuff, I want to make sure I have all of my other projects in a good spot."

"Boo," Viv said, but she stood as well to give me a hug. "Thanks for helping the kids with surfing again."

I looked toward the ocean where Derek and Willow were splashing each other. Teaching them to surf was supposed to be a healing process for me as much as a helpful gesture for my friends. But as of late, it had started to feel like a crutch, like something I couldn't let go of. Dad had taught me to surf and as Clem had pointed out, he'd

now been gone almost twenty years. There was nothing left, but fading memories and surf lessons.

“Of course,” I said, refocusing and trying not to feel useless. “They’re actually really good, I honestly don’t think they even need me anymore.”

I accepted Viv and Jayna’s hugs and headed up the beach to my car, surfboard under my arm, wetsuit slung over my shoulder.

After forcing myself to change into real-people clothes, shorts and a tank top, I threw all my gear in the car and secured my surfboard on the roof. On my way home, I stopped a few blocks short, at my favorite coffee shop. Since I’d already been hella productive, I rewarded myself with a chocolate monstrosity that somehow also passed as coffee.

As I was waiting for my drink, I stared at my phone, debating whether or not to issue a real apology to Chris. Texting him was almost as bad as talking to him in person, and frankly, I didn’t want to. And maybe that made me a coward, but goddamn it, I could live with that.

“Oreo.” The purple-haired barista read. “Oreo.”

Instead of facepalming, I reached for my drink. There’s no way he actually thought that’s what my name was, but the confidence with which he said the word was impressive.

“It’s actually Oh-ray-lee-uh,” I said, catching his gaze and hoping if they ever ran into another poor soul with the same name, they might surprise them by pronouncing it correctly.

The barista shrugged, completely unembarrassed and turned away from me. I stared at my cup, surprised to see that even though they’d butchered the pronunciation, they’d spelled it correctly.

Taking a large sip of coffee for strength, I opened my phone again, clicking into the text chain between myself and Chris. The last time we messaged each other individually outside of the group texts was so far down my messages that I had to scroll to reach his name.

The last thing we texted about? A perfectly cordial, perfectly curt carpooling message from three months ago.

And there were dozens of other conversations within the text chain that were now five years old mimicking the exact same thing. A few times to cover surfing lessons. The only other exceptions were literal condolences when my grandfather passed, and the same when his childhood dog died. Texting him first always left me feeling stupid and vulnerable, just like talking to him. His one-word answers and zero follow-up contrasted sharply to the way he treated our friends.

As I was trying to muster the courage for a text, I nearly dropped my phone when three dots appeared beside his name, and then stayed there for the next two minutes. I tried not to let it phase me, but as the seconds ticked by I grew increasingly stressed.

Chris (11:56am): Can you cover a beginner's surfing class for the school on Tuesday before your Japanese lesson with Theo? 6am

Was this a trap? To get me alone and accuse me of eavesdropping? I rubbed my face and debated a slap to get me to focus. If it weren't for the eavesdropping fiasco, I'd have assumed he was just double booked.

Orelia (11:58am): Sure

I debated writing something else, and the three dots next to Chris' name indicated he might've been considering the same. But five minutes later it became clear nothing else was coming. His three dots disappeared, and I knew I wouldn't be getting another response, or a follow up. I nodded my head, put my phone in my back pocket and went home to work. And I definitely didn't spend any more time worrying about my next interaction with Chris.

Chapter Three

THERE WAS ONLY one hard and fast rule for teaching beginners how to surf at the Immani Surf School. Chris—for all his faults—had decent priorities too. I repeated the rule to myself over and over and over again until the urge to maim two of my students dissipated.

The rule? Don't let anyone drown.

I typically didn't judge students when they came in, because being new at something was often difficult and occasionally embarrassing. Though I could run waves with Chris now, I'd had to fall off my board thousands of times before I gained those skills. And people of all body types, of all ages, could surf with the right instructions, the right waves, and most importantly the right attitude.

But I was not a babysitter.

One of my students, a twenty-year old named Hunter, had lied on his waiver and did not, in fact, know how to swim. We never left the sight of shore and we didn't go deep enough to where we couldn't reach the bottom and still keep our heads above water. I had to be able to stand in order to help push the students' boards forward at the right moment so they could catch one of the waves and attempt to stand. At five-foot eight, I was able to do it, but Hunter, at six-foot stupid could not wrap the concept around his thick skull.

Usually, there was only one bad apple in the crop. No, scratch that. Usually there were none. Most of the time the students who attended were adults excited to learn. Failure was the cost of the learning, but Hunter didn't understand, because in addition to being afraid of drowning, he was being a whiny, pouty baby.

"My arms are tired," he said, when I instructed him to paddle beside me.

"That's okay," I said through a fake smile. "Just sit up on the board like we practiced and paddle over when you're ready."

I turned to Julia, a fifty-year old crossfitter. She paddled over to me and I watched the waves, feeling the ocean, and when I saw one coming, I prepared myself and Julia.

"It's a good one," I said. "Start paddling. Three. Two. One."

I pushed her forward and grinned as she stood on her board on the small one-and-a-half-foot wave that took her straight to the beach, cheering as though she'd gone through her first barrel. She was pumping her hand wildly as she sat on her board, and moved to the side to clear the path and to paddle back out.

"Woo-hoo, you're amazing!" I clapped for her.

I turned to Hunter who was still frowning at the water, but at least quiet. Then I motioned for my second problem-child to paddle toward me. What in god's name Jessica was doing there was beyond me. Less than a week ago, she dumped Chris, and today she was taking a lesson through his surfing school. I oscillated between thinking him a coward for pawning this lesson off on me and honestly, a fair bit of sympathy.

Maybe Jessica had vouchers she wanted to use. Maybe she was trying to get back with Chris. Either way, from the way she was glaring, she was pissed as hell I was teaching today's lesson, and thus far unhappy with my performance. I wondered if this was Chris' intent in having me sub. Maybe it wasn't cowardice on his part, maybe it was calculated revenge.

"Are you sure this is where we should be?" she asked for the third time. "I really think we were catching better waves when we were over there."

I inhaled deeply through my nose and tried not to think less of her. I wouldn't have thought less of her if she'd listened to my explanation when she'd first asked the question. Because if it was about the ocean and figuring out how it moves, how it behaves, and how to read it, I could explain the basics to her. But she'd looked down her

nose and continued to insist and insinuate I didn't know what the hell I was talking about.

"Come on," I said in my fake-cheery voice, instead of throttling her. "The waves are picking up, this next one will be great."

She turned her head, but prepared as I grabbed the end of her board, adjusting her feet so they weren't tangled in the leash, the rubber material connecting her back foot to the board.

"Three. Two. One," I said and I pushed her along.

Despite her obstinance, she did well, waited until the right moment to push her front foot forward and balanced her way to standing. Both myself and Julia cheered for her as she made her way down.

"Tides are shifting," I said once all three had paddled back to me. "We've got fifteen or so more minutes."

They were all exhausted by the time we surfed on our bellies to shore, but I'd followed the prime directive of the surf school. No one drowned.

"Please get off your boards here," I said when we reached knee high water. "Pick them up and we'll walk them back to the surf house. Five minute walk."

Hunter huffed and Jessica rolled her eyes, but they both complied and as a group, I led them back to the house where they racked their boards on the stands Chris had built into the side of the porch. Julia and Jessica dispersed and I showed Hunter to the outdoor showers.

"Thank you for your help," he said. "I-uh, know I screwed up."

"Maybe take a swimming class before a surf class," I said, softening the reprimand with a laugh. "But you did great."

"Thanks," he said again, his cheeks pink. I watched in horror as he looked everywhere but at me, until suddenly his eyes flew to mine, like he had gathered enough courage.

"I'm serious though," I said, deepening my voice and making it harsh. "Take a swimming class."

I left him alone in the showers before he could get another word in and made my escape. The converted split-level beach house had an incredibly welcoming living area and kitchen. The fridge was covered in surfing stickers and magnets and the walls were a combination of surf photos and board racks.

Chris was in the surf shop room, standing at the welcome desk, typing away on his laptop. I watched him for a moment while he remained unaware of my presence in the doorway. Despite the stereotype of surfer beach bro, Chris infused everything he did with purpose and dedication, especially for his school. Even the way he typed furiously on the keyboard was infused with purpose.

You'd think I'd have learned how to share space with him after all these years, but I hovered. Instead of quiet peace from years of friendship, I became filled with the familiar confusion on where to stand when I was around him. It somehow always felt like I was either too far away and projecting my true feelings of enmity, or I was too close, much too close.

I coughed to get his attention and leaned against the doorjam. "We're back."

"Thank you for teaching the beginner's class today," Chris said as he looked at me and then went back to staring at his laptop.

An awkward moment of silence and a clear dismissal.

"Yup. Anything else?" I raised a brow at him. Was he going to explain why he needed me to cover the class? Normally he at least said, *Oh, I'm double booked*, or *I was sick*, or *Had a doctor's appointment*.

More silence.

I scoffed and shook my head. If he didn't want to admit he asked me to cover the lesson because his ex-girlfriend was in the surf class, it didn't matter. I knew the truth. I wasn't going to bother asking him a question, which would inevitably involve him staring at me like I was a stranger, before talking to me like I was the biggest idiot in the world.

So I didn't speak with a question in my voice, or any hint of banter. "Don't let that kid Hunter back in a lesson until he can confirm with you he took a swimming class."

Chris' eyes lifted from his laptop at my statement, and the question was in his eyes.

"Of course he didn't drown." I didn't bother to stop my eye roll. In fact, I exaggerated it.

Chris turned back to his laptop and I took a deep breath, but was saved from having to say more when Jessica came into the room, pushing past me.

Chris warmed immediately and crossed to her. "Jess."

And it was that, that moment right there, when he smiled wide and large and open to Jessica. A smile that made him so bright and good looking and appealing. A smile that made people want to be around him. And never, in all the time I'd known him, had he directed an ounce of that warm charisma toward me.

Although, to be fair, I wasn't sure if he was faking it now. I sure-as-shit wouldn't be happy to see an ex who'd taken digs at me during the breakup.

When Jessica's eyes darted to mine, I took that as my cue to leave. Either they were going to have a heart to heart, or she was going to complain about my instruction. My presence wasn't required for either.

I walked back into the main area of the surfing school. Because of the early hour I'd met the students, I'd wisely—but regretfully—only had water so far. I made a cup of coffee for myself using the Caribou k-cups I'd come to adore from my years in Minnesota.

I placed the worksheets I'd brought for Theo on the picnic table that separated the kitchen from the open living room concept and checked my watch. He'd be here in thirty-minutes or so for our first lesson.

I took a sip of my coffee and went to find Hunter to ensure he didn't drown himself by accident in the shower. With coffee in hand, I ambled barefoot to the front door and stopped so suddenly that coffee sloshed over the mug and burned my fingers.

"Shit, fuck," I cursed as I shifted the mug to my opposite hand, never taking my eyes from what still had me gaping.

This was my second time at Chris' surf house since the remodel, but the first time I'd ever walked through the front entryway, and what I saw on the wall had my gut twisting—not unpleasantly. A large canvas photo hung on the wall directly in front of the door, and would clearly be the first thing someone would see upon entering the surf house. I had a matching photo on my work desk at home.

There were four of us in the photo. Ren, Theo, myself, and Chris. The first day we met, five years earlier, in Okinawa, Japan.

Ren and I had studied together in Tokyo and I'd convinced him to visit Okinawa where we'd rented boards. It was funny, in a dark way. I'd invited Ren because he'd been suffering a weeks-long depressive episode and I'd basically had to keelhaul him out of bed. If he'd been in a good state of mind, I probably wouldn't have dragged him off the mainland. And if we hadn't, he never would have met Theo who had been dragged to Okinawa by Chris to visit an old surfing friend who owned the school. When Ren and I moved back to the US the following year, we'd gone to California; and Theo and Chris, in their own way, had been waiting for us.

In the photo, Chris and I were front and center, each on our own boards on the same wave, facing each other because he surfed goofy-footed—left-foot forward, while I surfed right-foot forward.

We were both bent low on a small wave, holding hands and grinning like maniacs at the success of the silly maneuver.

Chris was shirtless, his manta ray tattoo covering his entire left pectoral. My hand twitched against my will as if some part of me wanted to trace the animal. Staring at myself, I recognized the sur-

prised delight on my face at being pulled into something ridiculous. In the photo, I had longer, and darker hair falling to my waist. I tugged at the shoulder length locks now, happier with them, happier with myself and my life than I'd been at twenty-five.

Ren and Theo were off to the side, slightly farther back, sitting on their individual boards. Ren was smiling wide, arms lifted in a cheer for Chris and I. Theo might as well have had cartoon heart eyes for the way he stared at Ren.

Chris and I, well...I hadn't always been uncomfortable around him. The opposite actually and this photo was proof. My first impression of him had been an overwhelming, sky-high chemistry that had been embarrassingly one-sided. I forced myself to turn away from the photo, from the joy and excitement on both our faces. I tried to ignore the blatant pleasure mixing in my gut alongside confusion.

I stared at my coffee for a long moment, then remembered that I needed to make sure Hunter had figured himself out. Venturing outside, I found his car already gone.

Good riddance.

Jessica came outside moments later, her hair suspiciously askew as she climbed into her Mercedes-Benz. I waved goodbye and did not receive a response as she peeled out. I may or may not have flipped her off as she turned the corner.

When I turned around, Chris was staring at me, brows raised high. I opened my mouth to defend myself and remembered this was *Chris* and also maybe Jessica wasn't completely out of the picture.

I shrugged at Chris even though I had a biting comment on the tip of my tongue.

He moved to sit on the outdoor bench facing the ocean, which left me with the decision to either sit beside him and take in the view, or stare into the sun, shielding my face with my hand. Again, I was

irritated by my inability to make a comfortable decision about the space between us.

“Anything to say for yourself?” Chris asked, voice cool and filled with chastisement.

My hands clenched tightly on the coffee mug. If he expected me to apologize for eavesdropping on his breakup, he wasn’t going to get it. Lasting a full surf class with Jessica was more than enough penance.

Instead, I stood there sweating, blinded by the sun as I opened my mouth—not to apologize, but maybe to explain. What came out of my mouth wasn’t what I’d planned.

“Don’t take her back,” I said as I crossed my arms over my chest, or tried to before I remembered the coffee.

Chris hadn’t told us he and Jessica broke up and I had a sneaking suspicion he planned to get back with her. I didn’t like it one bit and wasn’t willing to examine why.

“Excuse me?” His head snapped towards me, shaking the pretend calm-cool-and-collected act.

“Just trust me,” I said, words I had certainly never said to him before. “Don’t take her back.”

“Everyone likes her,” Chris said instead, which was a hell of a lot less convincing than if he’d said *he* liked her.

I looked away from him and focused for a long moment on the row of lemon trees he’d planted on the edge of his property.

Deep breath, Orelia. “Of course we said we liked her. You were clearly serious. She—well, she isn’t very nice, and she wasn’t nice to you.”

From Chris’ glare, it was clear he was aware I was being careful with my words. I didn’t know how to tell him that she wasn’t nice to me, specifically. She’d found my personal styles to be simplistic and she’d frequently commented on my “humble midwest origins” as if it were something to be ashamed of compared to the upper echelon so-

cieties of California and New York. Jessica kept her critiques to me, never going so far as to insult or demean Theo and Ren. Then again, she'd used them as benchmarks for the success she expected of Chris. Theo was in Hollywood, Ren was a CFO, but apparently Chris' successes didn't measure up. Neither did mine.

"You're lying," Chris said, shaking his head.

Any of that remaining warmth from the photo dissipated.

"You're impossible, you know that," I snapped and without waiting to take a breath, continued. "She narrowed in on me fairly quickly at being single, and she thought we had a *sordid* history."

Chris bit his lip in thought making it clear to me that this wasn't new information. I stared at him for a moment, eyes open and squinting against the sun. Absurdly, I wanted to yell at him, really yell at him. His usual aloofness always affected me, but I thought I'd perfected the art of accepting it. Obviously not.

"I don't know what side you saw of her," I said quietly after another deep breath. "But she made people feel bad about themselves, Chris. And she knew she was doing it."

I didn't know how to express to him the condescension and honestly hurtful way Jessica had sweetly sliced me to ribbons. My eyes drifted away from Chris' face, but returned immediately when he spoke.

"She made *you* feel bad." It wasn't a question, but surprise colored his tone.

He stood and took a step toward me. I took a step back instinctively and the sympathy on Chris' face wavered then disappeared.

"It doesn't matter how she treated me," I told him. "But you should give a shit for how she treated you."

Surprise, which had been obvious in his tone, was now written clearly on his face. A cloud finally covered the sun, making it bearable to stare at Chris. Because he was no longer sitting, I was forced to look up into his face. Dark skin and dark green eyes.

Chris took another step forward, and this time I didn't move.

My phone pinged once and my gaze lowered to the manta ray tattoo visible at the dip in his shirt. Something in his face, just then as I looked back up, made my breath stutter.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

Shaking myself, I pulled my phone from the pocket of my ratty jean shorts. Breaking eye contact, opened one of the messages on my phone. Three unread emails from my boss Dulcie, two texts, and a phone call I'd somehow missed in the last thirty minutes.

"Oh," I said, a little stupid. A little slow to come back to reality. When I peeked up from reading emails, Chris had taken a step back.

"Everything good?"

This was the big work project Dulcie had been hinting at for weeks, but the concern laced in his voice was... *Oh, no*—those were butterflies dancing in my stomach.

"It's a new work project," I said, not quite meeting his eyes. "I know today was supposed to be my first lesson with Theo, but it'll have to wait until next week."

I had a lot of flexibility with work, it's what allowed me to surf regularly throughout the week, but some things couldn't be ignored. And this big project was one of them. A zing of excitement shot through me as I skimmed the words, more focused now.

"You're smiling at your phone," Chris mumbled.

"Yeah," I said slowly, completely dazed by the email. "I'm going to translate *Night of the Fox* by Hotaru Hayashi."

"And that's good?" he asked with a half-there smile that broke that damn for my excitement.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod," I squealed, because I couldn't help it. I really couldn't help it. "She's only like the most prolific Japanese fantasy writer actively publishing. Do you even know how

good she has to be for an American publisher to be willing to translate?! And they want me to do it.”

I pressed my hands to my face as the grin over my face felt too vulnerable to share. Peeking between my fingers, I realized that Chris was smiling...at me.

“This is different then?” he asked, amusement and not disdain threading his tone. “From what you normally do, English to Japanese. Short stories, non-fiction, that kind of stuff?”

I made several intelligible sounds that didn’t form actual words. *He knows what I do.* A stupid thing to think, really, but as I stared at him, Chris shifted from foot to foot, as if embarrassed. And his easy grin faded.

“It’s very different,” I acknowledged. “This could take my career in a whole different direction.”

“You better get to it then,” Chris said, sounding slightly forced, slightly awkward, but not as rude as usual.

“Yeah, tell Theo will you?”

“He’ll understand,” Chris said and there was a shift in tone, from awkwardness to something much sweeter: comfort.

I had to be imagining things. Maybe this email, this day in general, wasn’t really happening. “I’ll shoot Theo a message about what he’ll need to do with the exercises I left for him, but I don’t need to be here for it.”

“I’ll let him know,” Chris said as I turned to leave. “Orelia?”

My heart did a weird dance when he said my name and I turned back to him. “Yes?”

“Coffee mug,” he said, and held out his hands.

“Oh, right.” I passed him the mug, slowly, careful not to brush our fingers.

“Thank you for covering the class today,” Chris said, and this time it sounded like he meant it.

“No problem,” I said, throat dry as I got into my car and focused on backing up, keeping my eyes in the rearview mirror and then on the road.

I didn’t look at Chris again as I got out of there. Why it took several minutes before my pulse settled, I couldn’t be sure.

When I returned home, my phone started going berserk again before I made it to my home office. It was the group chat I had with Ren, Theo, and Chris.

What Chris hadn’t done three days ago, he was doing now. Announcing his breakup. And echoing sentiments I’d said earlier, an influx of true feelings about Jessica also entered the group chat. Nothing outright disparaging, but enough for Chris to read between the lines. To see I’d told the truth.

Before I could stop myself, I opened the text chain between myself and Chris and sent the message.

Orelia (11:02am): Sorry.

Chris (11:02am): Could be worse. I could have ignored your advice.

Orelia (11:03am): To be fair, it was more like an order

Chris (11:04am): You are bossy.

Orelia (11:04am): Bossy? You’re one to talk ☹

I was clearly high. What the hell was I thinking? I put a smirking emoji in a text chain with Chris. My heart beat at a maddening pace as I waited for a response, waited with baited breath, like it mattered. So it hurt even more when a response never came.

Chapter Four

THEO'S BIRTHDAY, WHICH fell over Memorial Day weekend, was always a blowout affair and always in a club in downtown LA. The best part? He planned them himself. He refused to be given less than the best, and he straightforwardly admitted, only he—and occasionally Ren—knew what that was.

Stopping at coat check on entry, I smiled at the small club already packed with people, neon lights flashing and dance music tempting a dozen to the floor already.

Not Ren though. Sitting alone at one of the back booths, I had no problem sneaking up on him. He had a habit of being even earlier than me. It was typical for us to be early, for Chris to be right on time, and for Theo to be fashionably late.

"This isn't like you," Ren joked in Japanese as he leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. *"Heading to the wall instead of the dance floor."*

I slid into the booth beside him as he closed his eyes as if mentally preparing for the night out. I liked him a lot from the first class project we worked on together when we were twenty, to living abroad in Japan for two years after graduation, to now almost ten years later. He was quiet, always had been, but he'd also always been very warm.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll get there," I promised. It was a challenge and a warning because I loved to dance and was unafraid to make a fool of myself.

"Has Theo told you about the dance lessons?" Ren asked. *"Because if you're trying to get out of it, I'll go with you."*

"I'm sorry, what?" I cut in, reverting back to English in pure panic, unsure what we were talking about.

Ren winced and gave me an apologetic shrug, "It's technically supposed to be a surprise for all of us. Theo wants a choreographed first dance at our wedding."

“Okayyyy. What does that have to do with me?” I asked, pointing to myself dramatically.

“He wants it to be a wedding party choreographed first dance. A big, showy ballroom dance, Bridgerton-esque. My parents love the idea. He wants to rope in the rest of the wedding party.”

I laughed, but it fizzled out when I realized he wasn’t kidding. The wedding party consisted of Ren’s sisters, Theo’s brothers, and Chris and me. A wave of anxiety tried to claw its way into my chest, so I took a deep breath.

I also gave Ren a thorough overview. His depression had become more manageable over the years with the right medication, but a wedding was a huge stressor, so I looked a little more carefully.

Ren—startlingly observant—leaned back and raised his brow at me, as if to say, *Go ahead, take a look*. It helped ease some of my worries, but Ren thrived on stress, so I wasn’t worried so much about a depressive episode during the planning, it was more about the downtime afterwards. He gave my hand a squeeze along with a small smile as if to say, *Get the hell on with it, I’m good*.

I nodded and thought back to the wedding party choreography with a shudder.

“Choreographed first dance,” I whispered in mock horror with a fake shudder. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“It means, Theo’s birthday gift to himself is paying this fancy dancer to give us lessons,” Ren said, and his voice softened to bemused affection. “You know Theo, he’s impossible to refuse.”

For all the fame Theo was just now starting to get from Hollywood, he also was generally the kindest person in the room. He welcomed everyone into his life and made them feel at home immediately. The fact that he teased and made fun of himself, made him even more endearing.

“Dammit,” I whispered. “We’re going to give him exactly what he wants, aren’t we?”

Ren released a laugh that sounded more like a hoot.

"Maybe if we stick together," I offered, but deep down already knew the answer. "I love dancing. I've never been good at following steps. It's a family curse. My sisters are just as bad. Clem might actually be worse."

"We know," Ren said, a small smile flashing along with a boat-load of sympathy. "We've seen it."

"You're a beautiful dancer though, Ren. You'll be great."

Ren rolled his eyes and leaned back in the booth. "You're all confidence and no skill. I'm trained, but with terrible stage fright."

"So together, we make one competent dancer." I snorted into my palm while Ren hummed in thought and shook his head. "Last year, I accidentally punched someone at Theo's party. I was literally just dancing and I threw my arms up. And it wasn't the first time. How exactly is this supposed to work?"

Ren grinned. "Not entirely sure, but Theo warned it would be intense. The lessons are once a week for the next three months leading up to the wedding."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," I muttered and rubbed my face. "This has gotten out of control. We really need to start saying *no* to Theo."

Ren laughed loudly. "Sure, O."

"How am I going to make time for this? Between my new work project," *Japanese lessons with Theo that I'm keeping secret*, "surfing by myself and with Jayna and Viv's kids, and now dancing lessons...This summer was going to be absolute chaos."

"True. You might even need extra lessons," Ren said and I shoved his shoulder, torn between offense and humor.

"Aren't you supposed to be the nice one?" Cradling my chin, a wave of dread washed over me as his words *Bridgerton-esque* caught up to me. "Wait a second, is this partnered? Like a waltz or something?"

"Something like that." Ren patted my hand in sympathy, but it was a useless gesture as mirth filled his eyes and he bit his cheek to keep the grin off his face.

"I'm getting a drink and I'm not going to get you one," I told him in Japanese as I stood and stuck my tongue out. *"You are enjoying my pain far too much."*

Squeezing into the small space between two others waiting for drinks at the bar, I pulled at the hem of the short black dress that had crept up my thighs as I walked over. It was a killer dress though, long sleeved and hugging all my curves, with strappy red heels.

"Apple martini, please," I shouted to the bartender when he came over and took my order. I handed over my card immediately.

A handsome man, and judging by the absolute size of him, probably one of Theo's former teammates from the UCLA football team, met my gaze and smiled warmly.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he smiled back. "I'm Thad."

"Orelia." I smiled as he mouthed the word, and bet myself within a minute he'd have forgotten it.

"Your martini," the bartender said, dropping the drink in front of me, which I gratefully took my first sip from.

"Have you heard the advice?" Thad asked, with a flirtatious smile. "The advice about martinis?"

I winced. "Don't say it, Thad. It's not as cute as you think it is."

"Ah, but you know exactly what I'm going to say." He had a great smile, and he was willing to laugh at himself. "How about we say it together? Eliminate any awkwardness."

I smiled at him and held up three fingers. Three. Two. One. "Martinis are like breasts. One is not enough, but three is too many."

I wasn't sure if I was amused or horrified by the interaction. Either way we laughed easily together.

“Sorry to interrupt,” came a voice I recognized, but certainly didn’t expect.

Thad and I both turned to see Chris staring at us. He was wearing a well-fitted suit, one I didn’t recognize from his usual lineup. And there was a usual lineup, because it was a notable occasion to see Chris out of beachwear and athletic clothing.

We’d seen each other more in the last two weeks than we probably had in the previous two months, so lack of proximity wouldn’t explain the way my heart thumped hard in my chest when he looked at me. Internally, I promised myself I would be nice to him. He did just get dumped after all.

“They sent me after you, Orelia. We’re going to do a group picture before we’re too blasted to see straight.”

He offered me his hand, something he’d never done before, and I took it. Thad watched with a curious stare, suspicious but without judgment.

“One second,” I told Chris and dropped his hand immediately. “Thad, I’ll be here all night with my *friends*. Find me later, yeah?”

Thad’s face lit up when I emphasized friends, and I waved goodbye as we turned to go back to the table. As we walked, Chris put his hand on my lower back, sending zings of *something* down my spine, which turned me mute. He leaned in close to me, our bodies not quite pressing together, his mouth not quite against my ear as he spoke. But he was close enough that I could feel his warm breath, the heat of his body.

“The martini line didn’t actually work on you, did it?” Chris asked as we waited for a group of partygoers to move past us, his hand still warm on my back.

That was new too. Chris never engaged in conversation with me beyond what was necessary. The conversational willingness might have been a good thing, a step forward, if his tone hadn’t come out so cutting and judgemental.

"Of course not," I said with an eye roll. "He is cute though."

I could have sworn Chris was grinding his teeth. "Is he the next flavor of the month?"

I snorted at him, who seemed reluctant to give a smile even though his mouth twitched just a little bit. I couldn't exactly deny that men came through my life exactly like *flavor of the month*.

"At least Thad's nice," I argued and figured if he could dish it out, he could certainly take it. "As opposed to the bitchy women you seem to prefer."

"Excuse me?" he demanded.

Dammit, I really had meant it as a joke. What had been gentle teasing quickly turned. I stopped and turned to look Chris in the face and I could tell we were just getting started. Backing down wasn't an option. So much for my plan to be nice.

I shrugged, in for a penny, in for a pound. "Don't play dumb, Chris. You're obsessed with women who want to put their stiletto heels on your neck. You date these walking red flags for months and months until they break your heart and you move right on to the next one. How many times do we have to watch the same story play out for you?"

"Oh, you're one to talk," Chris snapped. "You don't date anyone. Just your flings. You go for guys who have no chance at keeping up with you until you can't stand them. We don't bother to learn their names because we know they won't be sticking around."

We were very close, almost chest to chest. The desire to close the distance was an idea I was growing fond of. Jesus, I'd only had a few sips of that martini and apparently I was ready to throw down. With my heels, the height difference between us was nearly gone. I was a fraction smaller, which put his mouth nearly in line with mine.

"I didn't know you paid such close attention," I huffed, unsure if the warmth in my face, in my chest, was anger, or something else.

"Same goes," Chris said through gritted teeth, and I stuck out my tongue. "You're such a little brat."

"Brat?!"

I lifted my hand. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it, and then it was moving towards him. Chris stopped it, grabbing it—grabbing me—by the wrist. The accusation had me breathing heavily. In anger. Definitely in anger. He was leaning closer, our bodies pressed against each other from my pathetic attempt to slap his shoulder and he looked...Well, he looked a mixture of unsure, apologetic, and something else. Something that might have been mirrored in my own face.

His thumb moved across my wrist in a sweeping motion we both watched. It was nice, I realized on a shaky breath. Chris' eyes flew to mine at the sound and something changed, darkened in that green gaze.

"Don't like that word?" he asked, his hand tightening on my wrist. And I couldn't speak, couldn't agree or deny. Wasn't sure anymore. His voice turned husky. "Or did you?"

Even over the music, I'm pretty sure Chris heard me gulp. The smirk on his face, all sexual, completely directed at me, stunned me speechless. Never. He'd *never* looked at me like that before.

"Make up your mind, Chris," I said, huffing in defense as I pulled my wrist away from him. "Am I a brat or am I bossy?"

Chris let me go, but for a moment we stood a hairbreadth away from each other. "You're definitely both, Orelia."

It was a strange thing, the way his voice curled with what seemed very much like flirtation. The spell was broken a moment later and he motioned for me to walk in front of him. A frisson of annoyance entered my system, definitely annoyance, and not anything fonder.

"We're gonna take a photo real quick," Theo said, where he was already pressed against Ren tightly in front of the booth.

Theo slightly untangled himself in order to have one hand around Ren's waist and the other around Chris. When I started to move to Ren's free side, Chris put his arm around my waist and pulled me to him. I swear I blacked out. One second he was tugging and the next I had already melted against him. I put one leg slightly in front of the other, but I wasn't focused on our camerawoman. My gaze was on Chris, trying to decipher what was going on. We never touched. Never. It was another unspoken rule he'd apparently decided didn't matter any more.

"Say cheese," Georgie, Theo's sister-in-law said, holding one of our phones.

It took me by surprise because I was still side-eying Chris and deciding if I should shove him off me, or perhaps jump into his arms to see what might happen. My next smile was more prepared as Georgie took a few dozen pictures before handing the phone back.

The four of us moved to the booth and because we were the last to arrive, Chris and I ended up pressed together at the end of the table. His body was hot, and I became more aware of it than of Ren's body on my other side. I wanted to edge away from Chris, but doing so would be a form of retreat. I tried to make myself bigger instead and pressed more firmly with my shoulder against Chris'. If he noticed, he didn't show it.

I wasn't paying attention to the conversation until Theo nodded at Chris, face transforming from handsome actor to puppy dog in half a breath.

"Secret surf spot?" Theo asked.

"Not even for your birthday, man," Chris laughed, and it reverberated against where our bodies were pressed.

Chris had revealed way back when we'd first met that the best surfers kept some spots close to the vest, waves being a commodity and all. He'd said it jokingly back then, and Theo had never let it go. He wanted Chris' secret surf spot like it would allow him access

to a special club. Since Theo was such a charismatic guy, *no* wasn't something he heard often. This running joke therefore was incredibly amusing for the rest of us. Incredibly amusing for me tonight, considering the dance lessons in my future. Theo had to pay up in some way.

"The waves there are far and above your ability, Theo," Chris said apologetically, but it was clear he meant it.

There was a slight pause as I turned to Chris. His eyes darted to me like he knew the question I had poised. It stuttered briefly as I realized how close our faces were, how intense the eye contact. I averted my eyes first and forced myself back on track.

Theo was a good surfer, but his skill level had evened out somewhere between competent and proficient. Chris was an expert and former pro. I was somewhere between them, leaps and bounds above Theo, but I'd never be able to match Chris in skill. I had way less time on the water than him.

My eyebrows raised and my question was clearly implied when I met Chris' stare: *was my ability on a board good enough to warrant an invitation?* The half smile and shrug combo Chris shot at me wasn't an answer, but it wasn't a no either. Which was more than Theo got.

Theo huffed and said, "But it's my birthday."

"Speaking of birthday," Ren cut in, attempting to put Theo off the scent by kissing his cheek. "You said you didn't want gifts this year because you already had something in mind."

"Oh yeah," Theo said, and beat his chest like he was about to make a proclamation. He reached over to Ren, grabbing his hand and kissing it back. It wasn't dramatic, it was for comfort, a habit that made my gaze dart back to Chris' face. "We want to do a choreographed dance with our wedding party. Our parents and siblings are willing to put up with our requests and we were hoping you guys will be too."

Ren mouthed *We?* and shook his head. Theo looked across the table at us and his puppy-dog eyes were out again in full force.

Ren laughed and shook his head, but said, "Of course babe. My parents are excited to see a payoff for dance lessons I had when I was a kid."

"*Traitor*," I told Ren in Japanese. "*What happened to us getting out of it?*"

"*The things we do for love.*" He grinned, completely unapologetic.

Theo gave Ren and I a hard time about trash talking, which we objected to. They waited for Chris and me to give our answers and he fidgeted next to me.

"Of course I'm in," I said at the same time Chris said. "Shouldn't be a problem."

We looked at each other then away.

"Perfect." Theo clapped his hands together and pressed them to his chin. "It'll be the four of us, my brothers Andrew and Hayden, and Ren's sisters Yuki and Aya, then both our parents. Ren's family will find their own instructor in London to assist with the choreography."

Theo proceeded to fill us in on the wheres and whens and details to come, but I grew unfocused and realized I'd finished my martini. I pushed at Chris' shoulder to let me out of the booth, and Theo stood at the same time, telling the group he had to make the rounds with his other friends to thank them for coming.

We both headed in the direction of the bar, but Theo stopped me.

"Hey, girlie," Theo said, giving me a hug and before offering me a twirl to admire my dress. "I forgot to tell you how great you look tonight."

"You," I said, not buying his sweet-boy act for a moment, "are buttering me up. What do you want?"

“So height-wise, we’re putting Aya with Andrew. I wanted to give you the option of dancing with either Hayden or Chris.”

“And why present only me with this lovely choice?”

Theo ducked his head, slightly abashed, which was an all-around strange look on him. “Well, Hayden’s a dick, but he *is* a classically trained dancer...” Theo trailed off, raising his brows intently.

“So, you’re thinking of pairing the worst dancer with the best dancer in the hopes of disguising her?”

I expected Theo’s sheepish grin, but he shook his head seriously. “I don’t care how well you dance and neither does Ren. We wanted to give you the option. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

And I should choose Hayden. A million percent it would be safer for my sanity to choose Hayden. Because he was a dick, but at least I was confident any charm would be lost on me. When I thought of ten weeks as Chris’ dance partner, all I could imagine were stilted conversations and tense body lines. And if I looked deeper, a pining I wasn’t ready to acknowledge.

“Don’t you have a preference?” I asked.

“Of course! We’d love our Best Woman and Man of Honor to dance together, but—”

“Chris,” I said, relieved beyond explanation. “Of course, I’ll dance with Chris. He might not be as classically trained as Hayden, but I’m sure he’ll be great. Better than me at least.”

“Thanks, O.” Theo smiled and pulled me into another hug.

I separated from Theo and grabbed my second martini. A dangerous decision, really. I ignored the voice of warning as I made my way to the dance floor, noting Ren and Theo had migrated there as well. I recognized some of Theo’s other friends dancing around them and moved toward the group. Even dancing across from a few couples, there were so many people crushing in around us I didn’t feel like a third wheel.

Theo had requested a long litany of early 2000's music and there was a sense of nostalgia mixed with the sweaty bodies on the dance floor that had me smiling even as I closed my eyes. When I opened them, Chris joined our group, but he couldn't have been less pleased to be there than if he'd been physically dragged.

He stopped in front of me and started saying something. I threw my head back and laughed. Only Chris, who failed to converse with me with any regularity, would take the opportunity while music was blaring.

"Why did you tell Theo we would be dance partners?"

"I can't hear you," I lied and shrugged, lifting my hands to the music.

I did not expect Chris to step behind me, but he put his hands on my hips like he'd done it a thousand times before. The only difference between him and someone with amorous intent was the respectful space he kept between my ass and his body.

"I said," he leaned in, his breath coming in hot against my ear. "Why did you choose to be dance partners with me?"

I turned my head up so I could meet his eyes when I rolled mine. "Trust me, I would rather be Hayden's partner." I leaned back against him, my head coming to rest on his shoulder, so it didn't strain my neck. "But we're the Best Woman and Man of Honor and it's what our friends want."

He was silent for a minute, as if considering, so I went back to dancing, and couldn't ignore his hands still on my hips. They were big, covering large expanses of my body and I bit my lip. When I looked up, I met Ren's eyes and rolled mine, indicating to Chris, but Ren's head was cocked to the side as if he were considering a complex equation. He was dancing behind Theo, mirroring Chris and I.

What? I mouthed, but missed the response, because Chris snapped in my ear again. "Stop moving like an insane person."

“Rude.” *But fair*, I was moving to a different rhythm than Chris was, completely out of sync with him.

More amused that it was irritating him than anything else, I moved more obnoxiously, throwing my hands back in the air. Chris huffed behind me and letting go of my hips, he grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my stomach as he closed the distance between our bodies.

My whole body stuttered as something breathy clawed at my throat while something far more poignant tugged below my belly.

“You don’t listen,” he said against my ear. His mouth on my skin this time. “And you’re not supposed to lead.”

As his breath came down on the sensitive skin of my neck, I forgot we were supposed to be having a conversation. He was growing hard where he pressed against me and the snake of desire caused a small noise to escape my throat. Instead of jumping and swinging my body as fast as possible, I found myself sinking back into the rhythm Chris was setting. He released one of my wrists and moved the hand to my hip and I still kept rhythm.

It didn’t feel so bad, going at someone else’s pace.

It didn’t feel bad at all being pressed up against Chris.

My skin grew hot and tingly and the feel of his hands—guiding me and firmly not allowing me to return to my erratic dancing—fuddled my mind. I was about to turn, to say something, I don’t know what, I hadn’t thought that far ahead, when he dropped his hands. Their absence caused a semi-truck of emotions to hit me in the chest.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said as he left the dance floor.

Watching him go, I decided that surviving the encounter allowed me another martini. In doing so, I found Thad again at the bar who asked me back to the dance floor.

I tried to replicate following someone else’s pace while dancing, and thankfully Thad moved faster than Chris had. He was more than

willing to dance wildly with me, until we were pressed chest to chest, and I was kissing him.

Thad smelled wrong, like cologne instead of sunshine and salt spray. There was nothing bad exactly with Thad's kiss except the lack of any zing. A full kiss from Thad didn't come close to the spark-o-meter that went off just from having Chris' hands on my waist.

My brain short circuited and I jerked back from Thad.

I'd never done that before, compared my hookups with someone else, let alone Chris. Those martinis did more damage than I originally thought. I pulled away from Thad and winced at him, using my hand on his chest to steady me and keep distance.

"Hey, I'm sorry to do this," I said. "But I'm too drunk and I need to go home."

Thad frowned for a fraction of a second before nodding and stepping back. "I can help you catch a cab."

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he raised his hands in an unthreatening manner. I believed him, and so I followed when he took me by the hand to coat check. As we left the dance floor, I stumbled and he caught me. I held my hand to my head.

"You were right about the martinis," I muttered. "My mistake."

I did everything I could to walk in a straight line out the front doors. Without the darkness and noise of the dance floor, I was starting to realize just how tipsy I was. Then Chris was standing in front of us, pulling me into his arms, which was all in all a shocking turn of events.

"What are you doing?" I asked Chris and turned back around to where he was talking to Thad.

"She's too drunk, man," Chris said without looking at me.

Aww. My traitorous heart did a stupid dance then, recognizing immediately Chris' intent to ensure my safety.

"I know that," Thad said, annoyed perhaps by what Chris was insinuating, but he held his hands up and again reiterated. "I'm just

trying to get her home safely, not going with her.” Thad turned to me and asked. “Are you comfortable going with *him*?”

My drunk brain betrayed all my truth. I was comfortable with Chris, safe with him. I didn’t like him (*lie*), but I trusted him (*truth*).

“It’s fine,” I told Thad. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Thad said, and turned to go back inside.

The fluttering sensation in my stomach was completely unasked for. It’d be so much easier to be annoyed at Chris if he’d cut in because of jealousy, but I knew him better than that. Still trying to find steady ground, Chris shuffled me into the taxi before I could express how irritated I was. Irritated and not soft or goey or appreciative. Definitely not those things.

“Are you trying to big brother me?” I asked when we were in the taxi, carefully sat with the middle seat separating us. I didn’t want to think about what I might do if there was even the barest hint of physical contact.

“Am I trying to spy on you? Am I trying to 1984 George Orwell you?” Chris asked and crossed his arms at me.

“No.” I shook my head. “Are you trying to be my big brother? Scare all the boys away, so I can remain some fantasy innocent.”

Chris snorted in laughter. Another first between us.

“I’m not a virgin, you know. I could have totally not been a virgin tonight.” But I didn’t regret not going home with Thad, because this was nice too. Especially when Chris’ eyes fell to the hem of the dress where it had skirted further up my thighs.

I *knew* this dress could stop a man dead in his tracks, and I was pleased it had some effect on Chris, even though he tried to resist it. I rested my head against the seat and arched purposely. He shifted in his seat and while I couldn’t smirk quite as arrogantly as Clem could, I gave it my best shot.

"I know that too, Orelia," he said, and uncrossed his arms as he stared at me, like I was a puzzle he couldn't figure out. That's exactly how I felt about him.

"No one can say it right, you know? It's not even that hard. It's just Oh-ray-lee-ah. Orelia. I think it's pretty."

"It is a pretty name," Chris agreed.

"Thank you," I said, perking up from my slouched position. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"No, it's not."

Piercing through my martini-riddled fog of heavy limbs and mushy brains, was the anger from before. At feeling dismissed and less-than by years of indifference. All because of a stupidly bad first impression when I hit on him. I scoffed. He should've been flattered or at the very least accepted my peace offering the following day, where I'd swallowed all my pride and thrown away all my dignity.

"Yes, it is," I said, and my words didn't slur or catch. "You're never nice to me."

We stared at each other for a minute. A very long minute.

"That's because you're never honest with me," Chris snapped back. The vitriol in his voice took me by surprise because I'd never heard it.

"What does that even mean? I don't lie." I crossed my arms because he was so frustrating.

"That's not what I said."

"It's totally what you said."

"You're guarded," he snapped. "You never talk to me."

I might have thought he was angry, but there was something more vulnerable in his eyes than just anger. If I'd been sober, I might've been able to control my own frustration, but, well...

"Oh, that is rich," I laughed. "I tried to talk to you. I tried to be your friend and you gave me absolutely nothing. No warmth, no af-

fection, no encouragement. You're the one who let our first *interaction* make a friendship impossible when I was willing to brush it off."

We looked away from each other for the rest of the taxi ride, or at least that's what I assume happened as I stared obstinately out my window until the cab stopped in front of my condo.

"Do you need help getting to your door?" he asked. As if I would say yes when his tone was so colored in annoyance. He would have helped if I'd wanted it, but that wasn't happening.

I got out without saying anything and slammed the door behind me, only realizing, five steps later, it wasn't the taxi driver's fault Chris was a jerk. I looked back apologetically before having the wherewithal to take my heels off so I could make it the rest of the way to my door without falling flat on my face. The taxi didn't pull away until I was safely enclosed in my apartment and left to wonder what the fuck just happened.

Chapter Five

THE DANCE LESSONS began the following weekend.

Theo had given me an option, and I'd chosen Chris as my partner. Had I known how good it was to dance in his arms, to feel our size difference, the strength of him, there's no way in hell I would've agreed.

Ren and Theo arrived next, having carpooled with Theo's parents, Gillian and Thomas. I'd met them on numerous occasions before, so an introduction wasn't required. In fact, they were so supportive and involved in Theo's life, that they not only remembered me, but pulled me into a hug, which I happily returned. Theo grabbed his brother Andrew in a headlock as their father laughed long and loud at the antics. I thought of the wall that stood between myself and Clementine because of my refusal to speak about Dad.

When we finally made it to London, Theo's brothers would dance with Ren's sisters, but until then, they'd each brought their own partners.

"This instructor is coveted amongst my cast mates. She's supposed to be the best," Theo said, cutting an end to our individual conversations.

We'd received some information about the dance lessons over the last few days, but Theo had been surprisingly tight-lipped about the finer details. Now that the lessons were finally happening he was practically bouncing.

"Has she worked on movies?" Andrew asked.

Theo nodded vigorously. "Yes. My stunt coordinator has worked with her on numerous projects, and she only does lessons by recommendation."

"Dang, kiddo," Theo's dad whistled.

I concurred with his shock and found myself fidgeting more. It was going to be fine. Ren and Theo had chosen a three-minute song. So it would be fine. Three minutes wasn't that long.

Who was I kidding? Three minutes with Chris would be an eternity. My pulse raced even as I tried to rationalize that it meant nothing.

"She was a prima ballerina for the Bolshoi Ballet," Theo cut in. That nugget of information didn't help my nerves.

Regardless of how poor of a dancer I was, this was a gift for my friends, and this gift was already making them happy. My shoulders loosened and I took a deep breath.

"Are we going in or not?" Hayden asked, interrupting my thoughts and bringing me back to the sunny parking lot outside the dance studio.

"We're waiting for one more," I said, and Hayden rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

Chris was running late, and as nervous as I was for the dance lessons with him, the thought of going without a partner was nearly as bad, if not worse.

"He'll figure it out," Hayden said, walking towards the entrance.

The others shrugged and followed, but I still opted to wait for Chris, when everyone else went into the studio.

"Give me a few," I told Ren when he tried to corral me with the others. He simply raised his eyebrows in that infuriatingly observant way and went inside without me.

Chris arrived a few minutes later as I was pacing on the sidewalk.

"You don't seem like you want to be here," he said by way of greeting.

I rolled my eyes and we fell in step, heading for the studio. Deciding to tell the truth when I continued to feel Chris' eyes on me, I took a deep breath and ran my hair through my hand.

“Ren gently pointed out that I’m not the most skilled dancer and I’m worried I’m going to fuck this up...”

“You’re not *that* bad of a dancer.”

His comment made me feel more vindicated as we walked into the dance studio. “Thank you, that’s what I thought.

The studio was both intimidating and beautiful in its own way. Mirrors covered two walls while the floor was slippery hardwood that needed a new coat of lacquer. The room itself was cold and I shivered, rubbing at my arms.

No instructor was there to greet us, not until the clock struck exactly three o’clock did Dominika Antanova make her entrance.

She appeared as Russian as her name sounded. Severe gray bun on the top of her head, pale skin marred by minimal wrinkles, flowing gray pants and matching silk top. Her face was impenetrable, and she cut an intimidating figure, towering at nearly six feet tall.

“Hello everyone,” Dominika said, her Russian accent thick. “You are nervous, no?”

A few nods and chuckles from the group, I tried to raise my hand, but Chris caught it and yanked it down. I glared at him, and shifted when Dominika’s hard blue eyes found us and narrowed.

“Well, we’ll listen to the wedding song Theodore and Ren have chosen, loosen up. Don’t think about choreography at all. Dance with your partner how you normally would.”

Dominika turned on the soundtrack, a classic waltz, and I turned to Chris, stopping shy of crossing my arms. He held his open, though his face was tight. I stepped forward and Chris entwined our hands while my other gripped his shoulder and he gently touched my shoulder blade.

I took a deep breath as we moved, each immediately pulling in opposite directions. Wincing, I averted my eyes as I moved towards him, determined to behave. Chris started yanking me in the direction he wanted and for a moment, I allowed myself to be dragged.

Because his direction felt so unnatural, I squeezed at the meat of Chris' shoulder, nails biting intentionally. He didn't look at me, just hissed underneath his breath to stop it before we moved in different directions and I bumped into him, hard.

"You two will be a problem." Dominika said, coming to stand beside us.

My face turned scorching hot and I hoped it wasn't as red as it felt. "We will?"

Dominika didn't bother responding, simply shook her head at me. My eyes widened as I looked between her and Chris. On that sombering note, the song ended and the ten of us let go of each other and stood at attention for Dominika.

"You like that song?" She smiled at Theo and Ren.

"Yes, very much," Theo said.

Dominika's face dropped into a scowl that had me stepping back. "Well, you will hate this song by the time I'm done with you. You will despise it, but you will dance beautifully. So, let's begin."

A man who I hadn't noticed crossed the room to Dominika. He was older than her, maybe in his early sixties, but still relatively fit. Like a general marching to inspect her soldiers, Dominika turned her back to the mirror, then walked in front of each of us. I straightened. It was terrifying.

"We will show you the dance you'll learn," she said, and played the song again.

As soon as she turned to her dance partner, all of Dominika's harsh exterior faded into something softer and sweeter. The way these two looked at each other was as if they were new lovers, and I didn't know if that was part of the dance or if this man was, in fact, her partner. I didn't bother to watch their steps or try to memorize what they were doing, though from the way Andrew was speaking under his breath, it seemed like at least one of us was. I was too enamored by the grace and perfection of their movements.

They crossed to one another, they held one another, they spun. I'd never seen anything like it outside of a tv show. It was as if they were two halves to one whole. I briefly glanced down the line of the wedding party and saw the same awe and delight across their faces.

I looked to my other side, to Chris, whose face was impassive. His hands were gripped into fists at his thigh and I raised a brow at him, but he didn't look away from Dominika and her partner until they finished the dance and bowed to us as we clapped.

"Today, we will learn the opening movements into the first waltz. This will take approximately one minute into the song, and the waltz movements will come back in."

Dominika shuffled the women to one side of the room, men on the other. Theo went with the group of women, lips quirking in amusement at the split. Theo and Ren were both muscular and fit from hours spent at the gym, but Ren was about six-three and Theo just under six-foot.

"Now face your partner."

Looking at Chris from across the dance floor felt suspiciously *Jane Austen* to me. I added a little glare into the dance more for myself than for Chris. It was clear right from the get-go that Dominika had been right. We were going to be a problem.

"You should look at your partner like being this far apart is agony. And you are simply waiting for the beat before you can go to them."

Dominika indicated what beat of the music we were meant to start on and had the men cross the floor to their partners. She picked apart how each of them walked, pleased with Hayden and Ren's walk, while nitpicking the others.

"Now, bend at your waist and kiss your partner's hand."

Chris scowled as he bent in front of me and I stuck my tongue out at him, snickering as he grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard.

"Ouch."

“What are you doing?” Dominika demanded, watching us.

Chris was bent in front of me, my hand snatched back and cradled against my chest.

“I-ah.” I cut myself off as Chris straightened, guilt all over his face.

I didn’t have an answer and from Dominika’s glare, she wasn’t really expecting one. “Do it again.”

Chris went back across the room, crossed to me and bowed to kiss my hand before standing.

“Good, good,” she said to Chris, before turning to me. “Try not to look so constipated when he crosses to you. It ruins the mood.”

Mortified, I closed my eyes as Dominika walked to the front to demonstrate the first spin into the waltz.

“Don’t worry,” Chris whispered to me. “Your glare doesn’t phase me.”

“Oh yeah,” I said sweetly. “Because you are so used to women glaring at you when you’re bent down in front of them?”

Chris scowled. “You don’t have to make this difficult.”

I was cut off from responding when Dominika motioned for us to start the next movement. “Now step behind your partner and put your hands on their arms.”

It reminded me of dancing with him at Theo’s party. Foreign and new and fine—I’ll fucking say it—hot as hell. At first, I relaxed into it, because it was nice to be held like this, but it quickly turned from nice to something hotter when his lips moved against my hair-line, his breath tickling my skin in ways that had hot shivers running down my body.

“Quit breathing on my neck,” I snapped, more out of self-preservation than anything else.

“Difficult it is, then,” he murmured.

We reached for each other’s hands to engage the first spin, each of us going for the grip and fumbling and I put too much oomph

behind the spin itself, because I spun completely away from Chris, stumbling as our fingers stretched then separated.

Dominika strode directly towards us, her eyes on our immediate failure. She made us redo the spin five times for her, and under her gaze I grew clumsier until she finally acknowledged we were monopolizing her time, and pushed us to start the waltz as she returned to the others.

The waltz, the waltz, the waltz. I stepped backwards and to the side, trying to lead us and stepping on Chris' toes instead.

"Stop it," he snapped.

"I'm trying."

And I was, but it was impossible to simply go with him. It felt unnatural. I could feel the well of insecurity trying to rise. Counting steps didn't help, if anything it made it worse.

"I've got you," Chris said, his voice gentling even as his grip on me tightened.

"Yes, okay." I exhaled and bit my lip.

Miraculously, we began to move in step with each other. It was as if one measured look between us fixed what was broken.

It's not like I've not noticed Chris. My self-preservation had never allowed an actual crush, or real feelings to grow, not when he made his indifference known, but I had eyes. If I did sense feelings coming on, I stayed away from Chris, but being in his arms for the next ten weeks made that tactic impossible.

He watched me for a few moments before looking away at Theo and Ren.

I had to say something and I panicked. "Are you jealous of them?"

Chris raised a brow and although I wanted to die of embarrassment, I'd already opened my big mouth and there was no stopping it now.

"I only mean, you've seemed unexcited about the weddings of our best friends, and I wondered, well, if it was personal—"

"Of course not." His eyes narrowed at me. "I would never begrudge our friends their happiness. Jesus, look how in love they are."

We both turned to where Theo and Ren were dancing. Ren's hand was tugging gently on the hair on the back of Theo's neck, like he was resisting the urge to pull Theo even closer when they danced chest to chest. Theo's smile was so soft. Totally different than the exuberant man putting on a show. This soft smile was for Ren, and Ren alone. When Theo thought no one was watching—when Dominika wasn't looking—he leaned forward to give Ren a kiss and moved on like nothing had happened even while Ren's cheeks pinkened.

I sighed, the warm mushiness of their love echoed from across the room. When I turned back to Chris though, he was already staring at me, his raised eyebrows begging me to continue.

No, he would never begrudge his friends their happiness.

"Then, what's going on with you?" I asked.

Chris sighed and looked away from me, not in avoidance, but in thought. His mouth worked before he was able to get it out.

"I want to get married." He said it fast, like he was ripping off a bandaid.

A pinch in my chest felt suspiciously like jealousy, or dread, and had me sucking in a deep breath. I don't know why. It's never been a secret that Chris has wanted a partner, wanted a family, even from the first time we met. So what if it's different from what I want? That's never bothered me before, but an uncomfortable pit was growing in my stomach.

As neutrally as possible, I asked. "You wanted to marry Jessica?"

Chris inclined his head at me, curiosity in his gaze. I didn't want him to try to figure me out when I was so unsure of what I was doing, of what I was feeling.

He sighed. "I was more attracted to the idea of her than Jessica herself. So it's probably for the best." The way he met my eyes was meaningful, but I didn't know why. Didn't trust myself to think he might've meant it was the best for *us*.

"Sorry," I tried to laugh off, but he wasn't quite letting it go, his eyes unreadable. "Really, and I'm sorry things didn't work out. I didn't realize you were the marrying type."

Which was a blatant lie and *oh boy*, the wrong thing to say. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Chris reacted. Stiffening, closing off. It was like watching a wall go up. We didn't talk for the rest of the class, settling into the familiar charged silence.

By the end of the class, we had a rough idea of the first minute of the song, but in terms of ability, Chris and I—thanks mostly to me—were already seriously lagging behind the others.

"Starting next class, you will all come prepared. Heels and skirts for the women. And for the men, button-ups. You must be presentable and you should wear something similar to what you'll dance in at the wedding."

No one argued, though Theo's dad and Chris puffed their chests in a clear desire to object. Ren and Theo held hands and smiled widely. I was sweating again as the full impact of the following weeks hit me.

We were finally dismissed, and in the spirit of not hating the next sessions, I chased after Chris when we left the studio.

"Chris," I started, but he was already shutting me out. "I'm sorry about what I said. I didn't mean to insult you."

"Whatever, Orelia. I'll see you later."

It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did. I was used to it. Five years of being used to rejection from Chris hardly phased me anymore. Except that was a lie. I was more vulnerable to him now. He was barely different, but there was an undeniable shift and it had giv-

en me hope, hope that had apparently been buried and waiting for its chance to escape. In the wake of that hope, there could only be hurt.

Chapter Six

WITH A BUNDLE of books in my arms, I looked out at the ocean from the patio of the Surf School and sighed. I purposely avoided the front entrance and reminder of the photo as I prepared to enter the surf house for Theo's third lesson. The last three weeks of studying with Theo, dance lessons on Sundays, and the hours I was logging trying to perfect my translation project had left me exhausted. No amount of coffee had worked to rejuvenate me that morning.

The sun was shining, the wind was light. My gaze fell to the ocean, to the yearning I felt for it on this perfect summer day. Unfortunately, surfing wasn't on my to-do list. Theo and I had missed our Tuesday Japanese session during the week and had rescheduled it for Saturday morning.

"It's perfect weather, isn't it?" an accented male voice said from behind me.

"Damn straight," I said before turning.

My mouth dropped. Kieran Maz, the number one male surfer in the world, was standing beside me and grinning crookedly.

"Oh my god," I said, and my voice came out almost as excited and squeally as Jayna's sometimes did. "You're Kieran Maz."

He was a New Zealand native with brownish blond curly hair that fell to his shoulders, and a megawatt smile. Skin deeply tanned, but there was a reddish golden tint that made it obvious his skin would have naturally been much paler if he didn't spend all his time in the sun.

"You caught me," he said, chuckling as his gaze raked over me in appreciation. "And you are?"

Wow. I'd never seen mischief so personified before. The way his eyes twinkled with a mirth I didn't understand in combination with the half upturn of his mouth did a helluva job.

Kieran held out his hand and I adjusted the Japanese books in my arms to shake his.

“Orelia Kane,” I smiled, and the handshake lingered, but it didn’t send the fleet of butterflies through me that I’d expected.

Dammit.

“Nice to meet you, Orelia,” he said, emphasizing my name.

It should have given me shivers, the deep baritone of his voice, but my heart didn’t even jump. Just as I was going to ask what on Earth the number one pro surfer was doing in California, Theo and Chris walked outside, clearly in search of us.

My eyes—against their will—found Chris first. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. Which I should’ve been used to seeing by now considering his profession, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen his thick muscles and tattoo out in the wild. Especially when all of my feelings were getting mixed up. He cocked his head to the side and I realized I was staring.

“Ah, good!” Theo said, not noticing the moment. “You’ve already met Kieran.”

“Yeah,” I replied, but I was looking at Chris.

Chris’ gaze didn’t rake over me, didn’t linger on my thighs or freshly shaved legs. His stare didn’t stop at the small expanse of skin between my crop top and shorts. All Chris did was nod in acknowledgement and turn to Theo. I sighed and tightened my grip on the books in my arms.

I watched as Chris and Kieran shared a look and forced my attention solely back to Theo.

“Are you ready for our study sesh?” I asked.

“Actually,” Chris said. “I know you haven’t been out in a while, so we were thinking about playing hooky today.”

He’d noticed I missed surfing. Damn it, now I *probably* had fucking heart eyes.

Between work, weddings, language lessons, and dance class, I'd surfed less in the last month than I had in years. And Chris noticed. I don't know why that mattered, but it did.

"We were talking about where to go," Kieran said, cluing me into the conversation. "Can you lot handle Rocky Point in Laguna? My parents tell me it was their favorite break in California."

Before I could answer, Chris spoke, "They should be good. Orelia is also a great videographer if you want someone to follow you down a barrel."

I flushed warm at the praise and turned toward Chris. "You say that like you're not coming with us?"

He appeared to debate for a moment, but his eyes were on mine when he smiled his answer. "I mean, someone has to make sure Theo doesn't drown."

"Hey," Theo cut in and gave Chris a brotherly shove. "I can handle Rocky Point."

"If you say so," Chris said with a shrug and a small smile. "Up for it, Orelia?"

As if I was capable of saying anything but yes. I nodded and hoped my speechlessness wasn't obvious. I quickly glanced under my lashes to Theo who didn't seem to notice. When my eyes moved back, they caught on Kieran's, who *definitely* did.

"Of course," I said as giddiness overtook my senses. "Let me drop my stuff and change. We'll take the surf van, yeah?"

"Yeah," Chris agreed.

So we did. Chris and Kieran sat in the front and I actually fell asleep against the window on the short trip. When Theo helped me out of the van, he stopped to examine me.

"You look beat, O," Theo said after we'd made it to the surf spot and were pulling our boards off the roof.

"I'm fine," I said, and I was. "Just tired. But I'm glad this worked out today. I'm glad you had time off today too."

Theo gave a guilty shrug. "I'm happy we could make it work."

"And not because you want to avoid lessons for one reason or another?" I said, referring to our missed session on Tuesday. He'd had a weak excuse then and surfing today—while I was grateful for it—was another weak one.

Theo rubbed the back of his neck. "Am I that transparent?"

"No, but you're usually not one to back away from a challenge either."

Theo sighed. "Japanese is harder than I expected. Learning a language doesn't come easy to me. It's a lot more complicated than memorizing a script."

We walked beside each other to the ocean, while Kieran and Chris trailed behind us.

"If all you want is to write your vows, I can translate them and we can practice. Two months isn't going to be enough time to *know* a language anyway."

Theo grimaced. "That would be the easy way out, but I want to do this for Ren and ya know, any future kids we have."

At the mention of kids, my stomach jumped. He looked so hopeful at their mention and I could see it. For Theo and Ren, for Chris one day...I'd never imagined that for myself, but for some reason the thought today didn't seem so off putting.

I reached out with my free hand to touch his shoulder. "Learning a language isn't easy for anybody, but I promise you, you're not a lost cause."

As we moved into the water and dropped our boards, Theo reached over to give me a hug. He gave the best hugs. Tight and true as the waves lapped at our knees.

"Thanks, O. I'll get my head on straight. I'd normally go to Ren when I'm feeling down, but this whole secret thing is driving me crazy."

"You could tell him, you know."

"Nah," Theo said as he laid on his board, his charming grin falling back into place. "Go big or go home, baby."

"Alright."

That was all the talking we did as we started to paddle out to the break. There were two dozen or so other surfers out there, but the break was great and it would definitely fit Kieran's skill level. Theo struggled a little and took less waves than we did, but it was nice to talk with both of them.

When we got out far enough and finally caught up with Chris and Kieran, Chris closed the distance between us.

"Here's the GoPro," he said and passed the camera to me.

I wanted to say more. Talk to him, anything, but as soon as he handed off the camera, he moved over to Theo. I paddled to Kieran following him in on a couple of waves and he returned the favor. The content we were getting was fantastic, definitely good enough for posting online.

I was breathing heavily from excitement, from paddling, from holding my breath under water, but I smiled at Kieran. As the swell started to slowly recede, we sat in the water beside each other. Theo and Chris were starting to paddle back out to us after each having taken their own wave.

"How well do you and Chris know each other?" I asked.

Kieran gave a half-smirk. "We competed together for five years and we were sponsored by the same brand. We got to know each other pretty well."

"What was Chris like on the circuit?" I asked, tucking my hair behind my ear.

"A competitor," Kieran said with a far-away look, thinking back. "He was a hell of a competitor. It surprised me he retired from the circuit so early. He wasn't the best on the block, but he was an expert at predicting the waves that would break in his favor, which is a huge part of competition."

"He's still like that," I said and kicked my feet back and forth on either side of my board.

I watched as Chris' arms cut powerfully through the water. His face with a no-nonsense determination, but when he looked over his shoulder at Theo, he laughed.

"He was a good friend too," Kieran said, drawing my attention back to him. "I'm sure he's still like that."

I shrugged, embarrassed I didn't have an answer.

"Yeah," I said, because what else could I say? "He's dependable."

"Sounds about right. Flipside is though, he's still a control freak," Kieran said and leaned forward on his board. "You're pretty good out here by the way. It's not Chris' style, but I still thought he was only flattering you when he said you could keep up."

I rolled my eyes at Kieran. He might have been full of shit, especially with his laid back attitude and New Zealand accent, but I believed him. While I couldn't perform half the maneuvers Kieran and Chris could, I could at least ride the same waves, survive the drop in.

"I started learning when I was still pretty young," I explained. "But my family moved to Minnesota and that ended any childish hopes I had for competing."

"Did you want to?" Kieran asked.

I shook my head and smiled. "Not really. I never did any research or had ideas about it, but the thought crossed my mind over the years."

It was true, I didn't feel like I'd missed out, but it was one of the what-if games I'd played after my dad died. What if we'd stayed by the ocean? What if I hadn't been forced to give up surfing for eight years in my teens?

I shrugged and tracked Theo and Chris over the waves where they had to stop their progress to avoid getting hit by the surfers coming towards them.

"How long are you in town for?" I asked him after a few moments of peaceful silence.

"You trying to ask me out on a date?" Kieran asked and splashed me with water. I shook my head and splashed back. Kieran put his hand over his heart like he'd been wounded. "I'm only here this week, then I'm back to New Zealand, where my family's at."

"Won't you miss the West Coast Pro in Australia?"

Kieran's laid back vibe wavered and a different man was suddenly in front of me. Someone more reserved, lacking an aura of mischief.

"I guess you didn't catch my last presser," he said, referring to press conferences. "I'm officially retired."

"No way," I said and gaped at him. "Chris said you'd never retire. You're too good."

"Good to know he still thinks so highly of me." Kieran carefully directed the topic away from his retirement and back to Chris, and I let him. He was entitled to his privacy especially as he seemed distraught by it.

"He does," I said. Chris has always been reserved around me, but over the years he's spoken often about Kieran, and the admiration and brotherly love was evident.

"Seems like you think pretty high of Immani," Kieran said pointedly.

"Not sure what you mean," I said with a shrug.

"Mmmhmmm," Kieran said. "I was hoping it wasn't the case, since you're beautiful and funny."

"I—Thank you, Kieran. I'm flattered."

"Flattered enough to go out with me tonight?" This time he asked for real, and while I was flattered, I couldn't. Even though it was the perfect opportunity to end my dating slump, I just...couldn't. And there was no denying it had everything to do with Chris.

I laughed and shook my head apologetically.

"Ah, it's all for the best," Kieran said with a humbled smile. "I'm supposed to be working with Chris anyways."

"Oh yeah?" I asked.

Kieran was looking down the surf and not paying close enough attention to realize I had no idea what he was talking about. "Yeah, help with the new coaching program he's trying to set up. He's got a lot of great contacts already, but mine are more recent."

"That's really nice of you," I said, not quite understanding. Not quite knowing what program Chris was actually in the process of developing.

Before I could ask any more questions, Theo and Chris finally made their way back to us.

"Just one more, right?" Theo asked, panting. "I'm exhausted."

"Sounds good," I said as my gaze turned to Chris. His eyebrows scrunched as I assessed him, but I shrugged.

"Party wave?" I asked.

Amused and eager smiles were my answer, and so on the next wave, the four of us rode it back, nearly all the way to shore, cheering as we went.

I checked my watch. It was great timing. We'd surfed most of the morning, and I needed to get back to a different beach for a lesson with Jayna and Viv's kids. I debated for a moment about telling Chris. If Kieran was right about Chris looking for coaching opportunities, Willow and Derek were worth at least an assessment.

We all made it to shore and worked on washing the boards and ourselves with freshwater. Theo and Chris went into the restroom to change. I didn't bother since I was going to get back in the swimsuit in an hour anyway.

"You know," Kieran said as he helped me strap all of our boards to the van's roof rack. "Chris thinks pretty highly of you too."

I froze, comically, I'm sure, and turned to Kieran. "What?"

“He’s protective of you, you know? Jealous too. He didn’t like the way I was flirting with you.”

Chris hadn’t said anything though. Didn’t go all macho possessive, which was appreciated. Or it would’ve been if I actually believed he was jealous. I didn’t buy that for one second. I took a moment to peel off my wetsuit before I answered, leaving me standing in a bikini in front of Kieran.

“Then why did you? Flirt with me, ask me out.” I crossed my arms. Kieran didn’t seem like the type to play games.

“I’m newly single after a very long time,” Kieran said, and his voice dipped toward honesty I wasn’t expecting. “I wasn’t trying to be a dick. But I’m out of practice. Truthfully, I didn’t think you’d agree to go out with me in the first place.”

Humor instead of outrage made me press my lips together. Amusement colored my tone as I asked, “What would you have done if I’d said yes?”

“We would have had a nice dinner together,” he offered genuinely. “But that would’ve been it. How about friends instead?”

“I like that. Friends.”

Kieran pulled out his phone to give me his phone number. “If you ever prank Chris, get it on camera and send videos.”

“Oh please. What are you, twelve years old?” I asked and we both laughed.

“Let me know if you’re ever in New Zealand.”

Chris rounded the front of the surf van. He wore a long-sleeve shirt which stretched taut over his shoulders and biceps. I was momentarily distracted by it, but my eyes darted back to Kieran in self-preservation.

“It’s been really nice to meet you, Kieran,” I said.

The hug from Kieran surprised me and when I pulled back, Chris was glaring at Kieran who was smirking. I quickly made my way to the outdoor shower to wash off the saltwater.

I stood under the spray in my pink and purple swimsuit and looked up, washing my face first. As I was running my fingers through my hair in an attempt to detangle, Chris came to stand in front of me with arms crossed.

“What are you doing today?” he said with his usual unfriendly tone. If a small part of me was disappointed that we were back on this conversational tenor, I closed my eyes to it.

“I have an appointment this afternoon,” I told him as I wiped down my arms and legs. “Heading out as soon as we get back to the surf house.”

I turned off the shower and grabbed my towel, wrapping it around myself. Chris’ eyes found the edge of my towel low on my thigh. I stared right back, my eyes following the outline of his broad shoulders.

In the silence of movement and space, Chris shifted and gave me a tentative smile. I dropped the towel. Even though I was still dressed in the suit I’d been in all day, we both paused. A low curl of heat spun in my belly and I broke eye contact first.

“Can you stick around for extra dance practice?” he asked as he watched me tug on shorts over my damp suit. “I think we need additional sessions together outside class.”

It wasn’t just a good idea, it was a necessary one, but the confession sounded like it pained him. I found his desperation of the moment odd, but I didn’t mention it.

“You’re right,” I conceded. “We do need the additional sessions.”

I pulled on an oversized t-shirt and tucked it into my shorts. I was not required to be good at dancing, but I silently admitted I needed additional help. Even before this, I tried ballroom lessons, the bachata, exercise dance classes with seniors. None of which helped improve my dance skills.

“Are you free tonight?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

My stomach rumbled. I had to get a late lunch on my way to the kids' lessons, and I checked my watch. I was exhausted, and knowing we had dance lessons tomorrow. I couldn't stomach the thought of adding to my plate for the evening. I loved doing the lessons for Derek and Willow, and the Japanese tutoring for Theo, but all that in combination with wedding activities, dance class, and my own work project, I was so overwhelmed it was hard to see straight, and now that our surfing was done for the day, all those obligations crashed down unrelenting on me.

"No, I can't."

Chris either hadn't expected the answer, or was so displeased by it, that he turned away. A move I found odd. When he turned back, irritation bled through his attempted neutral expression.

"Why not?"

I considered telling him about Derek and Willow, about how teaching them to surf—even though it was Chris' territory—was what I'd been doing for the last year. Chris was looking at me, as if he could see I had more to say. But, it wasn't that easy, and he'd have questions, accusations probably. He'd likely be overbearing and insistent on why I hadn't brought them to him for lessons. I wasn't ready to explain the connection to my dad.

While he might have let it go, he clearly saw my desire to keep the truth from him. With his glare at my refusal to speak it, my own temper rose to match him.

"I don't have time to practice tonight, Chris. Ask me again when it's not so last minute."

"Make time."

"I can't," I gritted out, annoyed.

"We're three lessons in and way behind everyone else in skill and memorization," he said, and even though he was irritated, I was relieved he didn't throw accusations at me, because it was me who was holding us back.

"I know! I know, okay!" I said on a loud exhale. "But I can't do it tonight. I'm busy."

"Is this for a date?" he asked and his eyes darted to where Theo and Kieran were talking at the van.

"It's none of your business." I hissed out a breath of annoyance.

I stared haughtily at Chris and he nodded tightly and marched to the van. Whether or not he believed I had a date was unclear. The ride back to the surf house was tense and awkward, with Theo and Kieran doing most of the talking.

Ninety minutes later, I was eating a sad excuse for a sandwich in my car. I wondered if I should have told Chris the truth. I'd kept this one thing a secret for a little over a year now. I didn't really want to analyze why, but there wasn't a point to keeping it. He probably would have understood if I told him, after he was through being annoyed. And yet there was a part of me that thought maybe he would understand.

Whatever.

Jayna and Viv had already arranged their beach gear by the time I reached them. Willow, Jayna's daughter, and Derek, Viv's son, came over to me, excitement already buzzing between them. The familiarity washed over me.

It was a beautiful day for it. The beach we were at was family friendly, with a jungle gym near the parking lot and a shaved ice vendor near the pavilion. The waves were blue and steady. It was almost funny comparing the small waves and family atmosphere here to the greedy big ones I'd surfed with the more experienced group earlier in the day.

I spoke to the kids first, asked them to practice their pop ups and the warm ups we'd practiced. They ran to the beach, taking their boards to the edge of the water. I turned toward their moms.

"Thanks for doing this, Orelia."

"I'm happy for any distraction from my real life," I told them, which was enough of an indicator for them to raise brows and share a glance.

"Wanna expand on that, honey?" Jayna asked.

I paused for a moment, considering, and then put my face in my hands and tried not to scream. I told them about Chris and the dance lessons, skimming my true feelings. I wasn't even sure what my feelings were at this point.

"I'm doomed," I finished.

"You do love your dramatism," Viv said wryly and I sighed.

"You'll be fine," Jayna promised. "Unless, what you're really referring to isn't dancing..."

I ran my tongue over my teeth and pointedly didn't say anything.

"That's what it is, isn't it?" Viv asked. "You *like* Chris."

"No," I said and tried to make it sound casual. "He drives me crazy."

"Surfing rewards patience," Jayna said sympathetically. "Don't you think this is the same?"

"If we manage not to kill each other by the end of all this, it'll be a rousing success." I scoffed at Jayna. "But anyways, why don't you give me Life Updates?"

Jayna and Viv looked at each other and mutually agreed to let me slide.

"Work: I also have a new project, hired for a period drama," Jayna started, which was insanely cool as she was a costume designer in Hollywood. "Family and friends are par for the course right now."

"Oooh, tell us more about the period drama. Has it been cast yet? Do you know the actors?" Viv asked, wagging her brows.

"Everything is super confidential right now," Jayna said apologetically. "But it's based on a book series. If Buffy met Bridgerton," she said, giving hints. "And you, Viv?"

“This isn’t work or family or friends rapid fire, but—” she took a huge breath and carefully looked into our faces. “I’m trying therapy again.”

Jayna and I looked at each other. Of the three of us, Viv’d been the most reserved of her grief and in denial about dealing with it. We all were to some extent, but it was a surprise for Viv to be taking the next step.

“Why now?” I asked, maybe even a little envious of her bravery. It made me shift uncomfortably at the thought of either her or Jayna moving on when I still hadn’t. That thought made me feel like a horrible friend and I forced it down.

“Derek is really hurting,” she admitted. “He misses his dad so much and he’s been acting out at school, having a hard time with the other kids. And I don’t know how to help him by myself. I signed us both up.”

I reached for Viv’s hand, almost the same time as Jayna did. The three of us sat in a circle, and Jayna reached for me to complete it.

“Wow,” Jayna said and I echoed her.

Viv smiled through an emotional shudder. “I promised Derek if he did the therapy with me, we could do whatever surfing trips he wanted,” Viv said and squeezed our hands before turning to me. “Are there competitions for the kids? Derek’s been watching some of the pro surf competitions and he wants to give it a shot.”

“Oh,” I paused, surprised. “I have no idea to be honest. I never competed, but I can ask around, see the general ages and expectations.” Lucky, I knew someone who had and would know his way around the California competition scene.

“That would be wonderful,” Jayna said. “Willow, I think, has a little crush on Derek, and so when he said competition, she said me too.”

The three of us laughed and looked down the beach at the kids.

"I'll get back to you soon on what's available," I told them. I was going to have to talk to Chris. Even though I didn't want to, having the kids meet a pro surfer would be so cool for them. I just had to swallow my pride and be willing to explain *why* I was giving surf lessons in the first place.

"Thanks, O," Viv said before settling with a book underneath the umbrella.

Derek shouted excitedly from where he was leading Willow in stretches on the beach and I turned back to their moms one last time.

"Are you coming in the water today?" I asked them, but both women determinedly shook their heads.

"Nothing against you, Orelia. Or even surfing for that matter," Viv said.

"It's for the break," Jayna finished for her. "My god is it nice to get a break from them. I've got a new romance novel I've been dying to read for weeks."

Viv lifted her own book in salute.

"Don't let me stop you," I said as parting words.

I jogged out to the edge and the kids showed me their pop ups. Then we went into the shallow water. There was hardly any wind and the waves themselves were perfect, slightly larger than what we'd practiced on before, but I was confident the kids could handle it.

Willow was only eight years old, but tall and lean, with boundless energy. Derek was a few years older, twelve. They'd both lost their fathers in the last three years, and while Willow was young and resilient, Derek was a pre-teen who lost his father at a critical age. Nearly the same age I was when I lost my dad. He was more serious, withdrawn.

But surfing seemed to ease some of Derek's seriousness and having it replaced with focused excitement was rewarding. It was good to be with them in the water. And like this, it reminded me of my

own father. He used to stand behind me, board in hand, like I stood behind Willow, preparing to push her onto the wave.

Clem and I hadn't talked since she'd requested we speak about Dad. We'd traded texts of course, but the lack of closure and my wall being up had done more damage this time than in the near twenty years since he'd been gone. I looked briefly at the beach at my two grieving friends who also were in denial about their grief. It had just happened to them though, it had been two decades for me.

Biting my lip, I wondered if maybe it was time for that wall to come down. At the very least, I could peek over, see what might be on the other side.

Derek and Willow didn't need me to surf anymore. After a year of lessons and practicing, they were both capable of paddling to catch their own waves, but I'd slowly been introducing bigger and more powerful waves to them, and for that, they needed my supervision, along with learning surf etiquette and maintaining situational awareness around others in the water. Yet, I needed them more than they needed me and that wasn't fair, not at all.

"I heard you're interested in competing," I said to Derek who was waiting on his board just behind me.

"He'd be so good," Willow said from beside me, grinning so wide that I could see the gaps from where she'd lost her baby teeth.

"I know a couple of surfers myself, guys who competed in the events your mom says you've been watching."

"No way," Derek said, mouth agape. They'd never spoken about professional surfers before, it had always been about the hobby itself, where the point breaks were best, what kind of trick moves they might practice. "Who?"

It occurred to me to mention Kieran. As the number one surfer in the world for many years, he'd have been the obvious choice.

"I'm friends with Chris Immani. He surfed pro for many years and he lives just a few blocks up the street from me. He surfed all over the world."

"Did he surf at Pipeline?"

"Is that what you've been watching?" I asked, surprised.

Pipeline was an invite-only competition in Hawaii that was arguably the most coveted title in the world. Huge waves, gnarly wipe-outs, and a crown that was worth almost as much as the world title. If you won at Pipeline, you became a legend, regardless of how your season turned out.

"Yes," Derek said. "Did he surf there?"

My mouth curled and I couldn't help the pride that infused my words. "Not only did he surf at Pipeline. He won it in his last year as a pro."

Derek's feet kicked in the water, creating ripples around them, but I had to ignore him as a wave came in.

"You ready, Willow?" I asked, but she'd already been eyeing the incoming wave and was on her belly. "Go now, paddle hard."

Her arms were small in the water, but she'd developed a good stroke and moved with surprising speed. I held my breath, but I needn't have bothered. She held a plank and popped up like it was nothing.

"Yes! Way to go, Willow!" Derek shouted, encouraging her before he turned to me. "She's getting really good."

It was said with all the confidence of someone who believed they were more grownup and experienced than another child. Derek's praise and excitement for Willow were genuine though and it was easy to see where Willow's crush came from.

"Alright buddy, your turn." Derek nodded at me and glanced over his shoulder at the wave. One was coming quickly. "Okay, start paddling, this wave looks good."

He was a little slow, but he managed to catch it and stand. And both Willow and I let out cheers. Derek was starting to fall behind Willow, or maybe she was gaining more skills, either way, they were both becoming incredibly accomplished for their age. I was starting to worry about losing ground in what I could teach them. And if I couldn't teach them, this bonding over surfing, over the loss of our fathers' might go away as well.

But I needed to talk to Chris. If surfing in competitions was what they wanted, I wouldn't be the one to hold them back.

We stayed in the water for two hours, and by the time we paddled to shore, the kids were exhausted, and so was I. I was also resolved to make an introduction. If they wanted to compete, they needed someone with experience, and that wasn't me. It twisted my gut into knots knowing that this last connection to my dad might be over, but I took a deep breath anyway.

"Are you doing alright, O?" Jayna asked me after we'd secured the boards and the kids in their vehicles. "You seem exhausted."

Apparently Theo wasn't the only one to notice, but Jayna's question was pointed in such a way I knew she was asking about my grief. It felt silly to still be holding onto it after twenty years.

"I know," I said and shrugged. "It's not about my dad. There's a lot going on with my friends and work."

"O?" Viv asked, pushing gently.

"I've felt off all year," I said quietly. "I can't explain it. It's like the grief is new. Running from it used to be easy, but it's not any longer."

They both understood. I looked into the minivan window where Willow was asleep and then to Viv's car where Derek was fighting it.

"It gets better for them, and worse," I told them, referring to the kids. "It's been almost twenty years, so the sharpness is gone, but now I have all these accomplishments and life stories I wish he could have been a part of."

Viv's eyes welled with tears. It had been less than two years since her husband died. For Jayna, it had been a little longer.

"Derek's doing much better, because of surfing, because of you," she said and reached out to grab my hand.

"They help me too, you know?" I said with a wobbly smile. "They're great kids."

The three of us moved to hug and end the conversation. We all had things to do and couldn't be derailed by grief.

"I'll message you both as soon as I know more about the local competitions," I said and cleared my throat. "I'll message you when I'm free next, but if you have any questions about what beaches are good and if the weather is safe, just shoot me a text."

We said our goodbyes and I tried not to think about my father on the drive home. It wasn't that I never thought of him, it was that I preferred to do it at my own time, when I could allow myself to feel the full range of grief and anger and whatever else it unearthed.

At the end of the day, I fell into bed without showering, without eating, and sleep took hours to finally claim me.

Chapter Seven

WHEN I AWOKE the next day, it was with a pounding headache. A combination of not enough food and water, and the beginning of my period. I let out a growl and bared my teeth to the universe.

I was ten minutes late when I arrived at the dance studio and missing my heels and skirt. Instead I was wearing ancient joggers and a cropped t-shirt. I debated leaving. Taking a deep breath, I tried to lower my heartbeat and I popped an ibuprofen before I steeled my nerves and entered the studio.

Everyone turned toward me. To my horror, I found Chris holding Dominika and dancing with her. I shuddered. Dominika, who was the only person who hadn't looked my way, stopped immediately once I was in front of them.

"Where are your skirts and heels?" she demanded.

I wanted to disappear. Instead, everyone's eyes snapped to me. I cringed. Most of them were sympathetic, but Hayden rolled his eyes and sneered at me, like my performance affected the way Dominika would see him.

"I forgot them," I mumbled. My cheeks were going to be permanently stained pink.

"Grab a skirt from the bin," she said and continued dancing with Chris. I couldn't look at him as I hurried to the dusty bin in the corner Dominika was referring to.

The nicest skirt of the bunch was horribly itchy to wear. I put it on over my joggers and the skirt successfully trapped all heat and not in a good way.

When I returned, Dominika moved away from Chris and I took her place in his arms. I could tell Chris wanted to be irritated with me. He tried to make that clear with his silence, but he couldn't quite manage it with his body. There wasn't any stiffness in his movements, in the way he held me. Although that might have been mostly be-

cause he'd moved from Dominika to me, which would've relaxed anyone.

Over the course of the lesson his silence turned from petulant to concerned. The latter, a gaze I pointedly ignored.

"Orelia," he started and I finally met his gaze. The concern there made my lips wobble.

"Please," I said, cutting him off. "Let's just get through this as painlessly as possible."

It wasn't painless, despite the fact that Chris seemingly agreed to the silence I desperately wanted. Missing a few meals the day before didn't do me any favors either. I was slow and making mistakes. Ren and Theo gave me apologetic stares throughout the class. Everyone else seemed relieved to not be the center of Dominika's wrath.

We'd all fallen into a pattern of saving the socialization between us until we were well clear of the dance studio. It was easier for everyone and Dominika liked us better when we were focused wholly on dancing.

"Sorry, Theo," I said as I took a drink of water when they started to file out.

Theo shook his head and winced at me with sympathy as Dominika tapped her foot on the hardwood floor impatiently.

"*Ganbatte*," Ren murmured and kissed me on the cheek. Good luck and do your best.

Instead of letting us go at the end of the ninety minute session, Dominika made Chris and I stay back for an extra hour beyond the others.

I nodded and went back to Chris.

Every step I made seemed to be incorrect, and the amount of do-overs for each of the dance moves was getting more and more unstable. I was sweating, my headache returning, and ready to scream. By the time we were trying the spin for the hundredth time, Dominika interrupted us.

“Stop. Stop.”

I was panting and Chris’ face was carefully impassive even though he had every right to be furious as I kept trying to lead.

“You have spent more than a month wasting my time,” Dominika said, her Russian accent thick with disdain. “Tell me now if you can’t dance together, because I can switch pairs.”

“No,” Chris’ voice snapped immediately.

I took a deep breath and turned to him, ignoring Dominika for the time being.

“Chris, maybe it would be better if I partnered with Hayden.” Even the thought made me shudder. More quietly, I said, “I don’t want to ruin this for Theo and Ren.”

“No,” Chris said again with a fury I’d never seen from him before.

“Fine,” Dominika said. “Go again.”

The spins were the worst of it. I was the one fucking up and all three of us knew it. The dancing was bearable until we got to the spins.

When we got there, three successive turns in time with the music, we weren’t anywhere near in time with the music. I stumbled and tripped into his chest. I stumbled and fell sideways. And I was in sneakers today instead of heels, thank heaven. Really the movement itself was causing Chris to keep an incredibly firm grip on me so I didn’t fall. If I’d been in heels, I’d definitely have twisted my ankles.

Whatever reign Dominika had had on her temper until that point, finally burst. A month’s worth of frustrations spewing to the surface in Russian words I didn’t understand.

“You are quite possibly the worst dancer I’ve ever taught. Completely unfocused, clumsy. It is a waste of my time.”

Her words echoed in the empty studio and I turned my gaze down, and caught a pitiful glance at myself in the mirror. My throat

tightened and my eyes started to sting. A wave of humiliation crashed over me as I realized I was going to cry.

I lifted my head to try to stop them, but instead of facing Dominika's hard eyes, I found myself staring at Chris's back.

Chris had taken a step in front of me.

"Enough," he said to Dominika, and from around his shoulder, I had the absolute pleasure of watching Dominika's mouth snap shut. It didn't last long, but it was an image I wouldn't forget in a hurry.

"I only speak the truth," she snapped. Ooof, thanks. Like that wasn't going to be a huge blow to my ego.

"Keep it to yourself then." Chris' tone was so strong and so angry, I would have taken several steps back if he'd used that tone with me. "Don't talk to her like that ever again."

I looked around Chris' shoulder to see if Dominika was having an apoplexy, but she seemed disgustingly satisfied.

Tears, so close to the surface moments earlier, dried and a new feeling began to rise in my chest. No one had ever defended me like that. My heart was doing a shocked sort of tap dance against my ribs, adrenaline from being yelled at, delight at being defended.

"Good," Dominika said to Chris. "Use that passion. Quit stifling it because it makes you a stiff dancer and her a bad one."

Dominika's gaze moved from Chris' face to mine, even as Chris turned. But I watched her face, and her eyes, much to my surprise, twinkled.

"We're done," Chris said and pulled me by the hand to the exit.

"Chris," I whispered and he paused immediately. "Skirts."

He nodded and let go of my hand, but before I could take the skirt off myself, Chris squatted in front of me. I placed my hands on his shoulders for balance just in time for him to yank the skirt down and chuck it across the room.

I gaped in shock and looked over Chris' shoulder to the only other person witnessing what was happening. Dominika strode over to us and while I was speechless, she didn't have that problem.

"She needs someone she can trust to lead her," Dominika said to Chris as we paused in the doorway. "So be that person or let her switch partners."

"She can trust me," he said in a low and clipped voice as he took my hand again. "I'm her partner and you're never going to yell at her like that again."

Was I dreaming? Aroused? Dead? I didn't know anymore, but I was nowhere near tears. Oh no, I winced, the crush. My crush on him was growing to exponential levels. Like the Grinch's heart, it was growing three fucking sizes. And it didn't feel awful. It felt really, really wonderful.

"Fine," Dominika snapped and said something low in Russian.

She strode away from us, turning off the music, her way of ending the lesson. And I was ready as all hell to get out of there. Chris didn't say anything to me as we left the studio, but I wasn't able to say anything either.

Chris stormed to his car, apparently not even aware he was pulling me by the hand. And I never would have let him take me anywhere before. Before this.

"Chris, hold on. You're tugging on my shoulder."

He turned and stopped, almost confused to find me attached to him. I got the delightful experience of watching Chris blush and hastily drop my hand, which wasn't so delightful, but it buffed in the grand scheme of things. He'd been so sure in front of Dominika, but he was flustered now.

I moved before I could think better of it, throwing my arms around Chris' neck. I didn't even pause to worry if he would return the hug.

"Thank you," I whispered into his neck, his hands still at his sides.

I started to shift back, but his arms finally came around me, hands pulling me forward, gripping me tighter against him.

"Thank you," I said again and relaxed into the hug, like we'd done it a thousand times.

But we hadn't. We'd done one-armed greetings or else avoided them as much as possible.

"You're not a bad dancer," he said, against my hair without pulling back. He didn't move his hands from my waist. "And she had no right to talk to you like that. You deserve better than that."

A warm feeling rose again in my chest and I took a step away from the embrace, unnerved. Chris was still upset and his anger chased away my embarrassment. My hands rested on his chest and he moved closer, not letting me step fully away. But the image of another embrace between us flitted across my vision.

The two of us in the moonlight, half-naked in the ocean. We'd both been drinking that second night in Okinawa. We'd been flirting all evening, long after Theo and Ren went to bed. He'd moved a strand of my hair out of my face, and I'd leaned forward in the sand, brave in the night, ready to kiss him. Chris had leapt to his feet, gone into the water and I'd taken it as a dare, not as the rejection it was. When I got close again, he pushed me away and asked me what the hell I was doing.

But before that humiliation, before the rejection, I'd thought there was something there, a spark of something. And when I'd come to see I was wrong and tried to be his friend, he hadn't allowed it.

That was then, and this was now.

Chris' gaze fell to my lips. What had Kieran said? *Chris was jealous*. But I've misread this signal before. This time, five years after the first, it was me who moved away, stepped back.

"I missed our practice because I'm teaching my friends' kids how to surf," I blurted out. "It wasn't for a date."

I don't know why it was important for me to ensure he knew I wasn't blowing him off for another man. He shook his head as if to clear it, and leaned against the hood of his car.

"You do free surfing lessons for kids?" he asked, and his voice was soft, the way he looked at me was soft.

All of my defensiveness crumbled and I nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The anger and annoyance I expected wasn't there.

"It wasn't about you," I told Chris. I didn't have to tell him more, but I couldn't help myself. "I know their moms so I offered to teach them."

That stopped Chris short and he rubbed the back of his neck. He looked away and then back at me.

"Why not tell me about it?" There was no heat behind his words. There was instead a hint of affection that sent my stomach spiraling.

New territory.

I tried to shrug it off. "It's not a big deal, it's for two kids."

"Bullshit," Chris said. Yeah, alright, it was bullshit. "Sending me clients would've been great, but you know how important kids are to the sport. I think it's great, so why hide it?"

I would never have volunteered the information before, then again, Chris had never asked before. In the wake of his defense to Dominika, telling the whole truth didn't seem like such a bad thing.

"I met their moms in a grief support group. The kids I'm teaching lost their dads...just like me."

Silence. Chris rubbed the back of his neck again. He did that a lot when he was nervous. I found I didn't want him to be in this moment. Our cars were right next to each other. I leaned against mine and he leaned against his and we watched each other for a moment, not yet ready to say goodbye.

"You don't talk about him, you know," Chris said. It was an opening, a quiet one without demand or expectation.

It was easy to talk after that. "My dad—my *biological father*—died the year after we moved back to the states. That's how we ended up in Minnesota, that's where my mom's family is from."

"How did he die?" Chris asked and I would've taken a step back if I weren't already leaning on my car.

Had I really never told him? I had to have told Theo or Ren at least, right? I bit my lip and couldn't find the memory of doing so. They knew I had a step-father, knew my own had died, but...no. My closest friends, I'd never even bothered to share this with them. I bit my lip hard. He expected me to share now, his eyes demanded it.

"He was in the Marines," I found myself saying. "But he didn't die in the service. We were living at a home in North Carolina, he was working on the roof on a shitty ladder. He slipped, hit his head."

The heat of the car against my back was nice, grounding. I didn't want to share more, didn't want to rehash the grief, and Chris seemed to know it, because he didn't press farther.

"Are the kids you're teaching any good?"

"Yeah," I said and my smile was small, but genuine. "Kieran said you were trying to get into coaching, not just beginner lessons. Would you be interested in testing them? Seeing if they'd be able to compete."

"Kieran told you?" Chris asked. There wasn't any jealousy, but there was embarrassment. This wasn't something he'd told Theo or Ren either, that much was clear.

"He thought you already had."

Chris rubbed his face and I cocked my head to the side as if seeing him for the first time, past his bullshit indifference and carefully impassive features. I wondered if I ever really looked before, or if I had been content to take things at face value, never searching deeper.

"I was hoping to find someone to start in the Junior Tour and coach them up for their career. It'll be a learning process for me too, so I don't want to start with adults. How old are the kids you're teaching?" He said it fast, with nerves showing through on every word.

I thought of Jessica's breakup words that Chris wasn't good enough, ambitious enough. I wonder if they cut deeper than he let on.

"Willow is eight, and Derek is twelve."

Chris nodded. "Twelve is the youngest you can start competing in the Junior Tour for regional events. There are other competitions for younger athletes as well, they're just not league official."

"I can talk to their moms, see if they'd be interested." Chris gave me a small smile, and I was reminded how precious a commodity they were. Smiling back felt natural this time. "Thank you for everything today, Chris."

"It was nothing," he said with a shake of his head.

"No, it wasn't," I said and I wanted to hug him again, but I kept my body firmly against my car, worried that if I touched him, I wouldn't be able to stop. "No one's ever stood up for me like that."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "You've never given anyone the chance to, Orelia."

Chapter Eight

THEO'S JAPANESE LESSONS were going fairly well, especially since he'd gotten over his fear of failure. I'd taught and tutored before, and he had the passion to learn. There was no denying however, that he wouldn't have the understanding and vocabulary necessary to do the vows by himself.

"Next week," I said as we closed our books on Tuesday morning. "Bring your vows. I'll translate them and we can work on pronunciation and repetition."

Theo nodded. "It's hard to believe we're only eight weeks away now."

"Are you nervous?" I asked, smiling as I stood.

"Only about keeping this secret for that much longer. It's driving me crazy. Like tonight, we're doing a video call with his parents, so they'll be mostly speaking Japanese and I have to pretend not to know anything they're saying."

"You can do it," I cheered, putting my fist in the air as if I held pom-poms. He might catch a few words, but likely not much else. "I believe in you."

Theo stuck his tongue out at me. "Well, thank you very much. And," he said more seriously. "I'll bring the vows next week. Maybe you can help me actually finish them."

I walked Theo to his car, and in reality I should have gotten into mine, but I couldn't help it. Chris wasn't in the house, and I didn't know when he'd be back, so I lingered. Walked back into the surf house, stared at the photo, and drank coffee. In the end, it didn't pay off and I left fifteen minutes after Theo with nothing to show for it.

I didn't have too long to think about it as I spent the rest of my day translating *Night of the Fox*, Hotaru Hayashi's fantasy novel. It was hard work, but so much fun. When I finished for the evening, I

was prepared to stay in. Maybe even binge watch *Bridgerton*, which Theo continued to claim as his inspiration for group choreography.

As I was debating, my phone pinged. And my heart leapt.

Chris (5:25pm): There's trivia tonight at Hubble Brewery.

Orelia (5:25pm): Is that an invitation?

A date maybe, I thought and ignored the way I kicked my feet in excitement on the couch.

Chris (5:25pm): Obviously. Starts at 6pm

I flew off the couch and toward my closet. As comfortable as my joggers and t-shirt were, I wasn't quite willing to go out in them again. Not after the fiasco with Dominika. Within five-minutes, I'd upgraded slightly to washed out, gray mom-jeans and a skin tight, cropped tank top with a low-neckline and no bra.

Chris (5:30pm): hello???

Orelia (5:31pm): Sounds good.

Orelia (5:32pm): This is not a lot of warning.

Chris (5:32pm): No, it is not. Do you need a ride?

Orelia (5:33pm): I'm good, I'll walk.

And minutes later, with golden hoops in my ears and a small necklace, I was out the door, a small bag slung over my shoulder. As I walked, I bit my lip and realized—as Chris had once put it—I'd been suspiciously bereft of my flavor of the month.

It wasn't because of Chris, I'd been busy. Yes, there was a crush, but it didn't have to mean anything. It didn't mean anything. Chris had shut down any possibility of a romantic entanglement between us and I wasn't going to chase someone who didn't want me. Chris had nothing to do with me passing on casual hookups. I was getting older, more settled, and busier, and besides we were becoming friends. It wasn't about him.

For the first time in my life, I was considering family. A partner. Maybe kids. Obviously, it was just about that and not about him.

Trivia at the brewery, five minutes from my house, was not a date. Definitely not. Just friends grabbing a drink together.

Does thou protest too much? my mind supplied unhelpfully.

I arrived with enough time to grab the last open table, a wobbly high top in the back of the room. The noise in the bar was good. None of the conversations discernable from where I sat, but there was laughter, loud and fast voices filling the space. Even though I was alone, the pleasant atmosphere didn't make me feel it. I didn't recognize the music playing in the background, but I still tapped my foot to the beat as I ordered a drink and a basket of fried pickles from the server. I didn't actually know if Chris liked fried pickles.

A few minutes later, the man running the trivia game dropped off a sheet and pencil. I stared at the top line reserved for a team name. I looked around the room as I thought about what I should name us, and that was when Chris walked into the bar. I sat straighter and focused so hard on my slip of trivia paper, I barely even saw him.

The server dropped off the draft beer and briefly blocked my view of Chris. When she moved, Chris was watching me. The smile I shot at him was nervous, and when he didn't move, I quirked an eyebrow. That seemed invitation enough.

"Why trivia?" I asked as he stepped in front of me, holding onto the back of the empty chair. He was twitchy, as if he couldn't decide if he should sit or high-tail it out of there.

"I like trivia. I'm good at it," he said with a shrug.

"Me too," I said, and my grin was wicked. "Ren and I used to do quiz nights in Japan. I miss that."

"We could do these once a month," Chris suggested with a shrug and finally sat down across from me. "I probably come here that often anyway."

"And yet you've never shared this with the group," I murmured and laced my fingers around my beer glass, my fingers growing damp from the condensation.

"Tuesdays aren't usually convenient for everyone," he said and shrugged again.

I don't think we've ever hung out alone together. I mean we'd been alone together, on car rides, for the surf school, even when we'd shared hotel rooms in the past. But looking at him now, I leaned my head to the side trying to remember. If Chris' awkwardness was any indication, I would bet my life on *no*.

"What should we name our team?" I asked in the ensuing silence.

"How about Two Left Feet?" he asked and I snorted.

"Too soon," I said and pushed at his shoulder. He was warm and he smiled when I touched him. It made me want to linger, but I forced my hand back to the table, safely on my beer.

"Best Friends Forever?" Chris asked next, amusement dancing in his face. I liked that he was acknowledging the weirdness, liked that he recognized it.

"Are we though?" I teased.

"If you're not going to suggest anything," Chris said, lowering his voice. "You can't make fun of my names."

"Fair point."

His hand trailed to the top of the pencil and down to my hand, trying to wrestle it gently from me. I pulled back. The pencil was mine.

Our table was in the corner, and in order to see where the emcee was setting up, Chris pulled his chair close to me on the round hightop so our shoulders brushed. There seemed to be other teams, big groups laughing, and couples, but it all fell away into the background.

"How about Junkyard Dog?" he suggested.

I cackled. Junkyard dog was a term used to describe a surfer with poor style. "I mean if we're using derogatory terms why not Barney or Aggro or Gremmie?"

“You know what, no,” Chris said, shaking his head. “We’re both better than all those and we should have some good vibes on our side. How about Macking?”

I snorted and wrote it down immediately. It was surfer slang to refer to huge waves or when the break was really fun. It was also slang for flirting, but I couldn’t tell if Chris was aware of the double entendre, or if it was an innocent suggestion.

Chris picked up the discarded menu and ordered a beer right as the first round of trivia, General Knowledge, got underway.

The first three questions, I answered without consulting Chris. He murmured his agreement close to my ear that made me grateful the trivia master spoke slowly with long breaks, because Chris was making it difficult to concentrate. The questions were easy, warm-up questions, and since Chris was nodding in compliance.

“Is avocado a fruit or a vegetable?” was the next question.

I paused and looked at Chris.

“It’s like a tomato, it’s a fruit.” He said it so confidently and it sounded right, but I had no idea. I wasn’t sure if I hoped it was wrong so I could have the lead between us, or if I hoped it was correct for the points.

The second round was science, and although, technically, I’d gotten the most correct answers in the first round, I slid the answer sheet over and gregariously passed the pencil.

“I know you know more than me on this subject,” I told him as I offered the pen and paper selflessly to Chris.

He raised an eyebrow, but accepted. “How do you know that?”

“Well despite your surfer bro career, you’re a science nerd one-hundred percent.” Was he confused by my observation? It’s not like it was a secret.

In succession, without my input, I watched as Chris answered the questions: *What is the heaviest organ in the human body?* The liver. *What is the only active volcano on mainland Europe called?* Mount

Vesuvius. He smiled at me after each answer as if giving me time to object.

“Multiple choice,” the trivia master announced. “And your answers will be either: stingray, manta ray, or eagle ray. Which ocean ray initiates a mating cycle when the female puts the males through a series of acrobatic twists and turns?”

Chris started to write down his answer, but I stopped him touching his wrist, leaning over to whisper. “It’s a manta ray.”

“No, it’s a stingray,” Chris argued.

“Manta ray,” I whispered and put my hand over his pec, over his tattoo, hidden by his shirt. “And you should definitely know that, considering your tattoo.”

Chris scoffed. “It’s not a manta ray, which I *do* know, considering my tattoo.”

“Wanna bet?” There was no disguising the flirtation in my words, but I didn’t care.

Chris studied me and I resisted the urge to shift in my seat, press my legs together against the heat gathering there. His gaze moved to my hand where it was still pressed to his chest and back to my face. I pulled my hand back and licked my lips, throat suddenly dry.

“A hundred bucks,” Chris said and his voice was deeper than it had been a moment ago.

“It’s not a stingray,” I laughed and forced myself to lower my voice so the other tables wouldn’t hear us discussing the answer.

“Then take my bet.”

My heart started pounding hard against his words, the gruffness of them. Adrenaline maybe, or from his intent look that seemed to promise more. Whatever was in his gaze, wasn’t calming, especially seeing it dip from my eyes, to my lips, to the tips of my nipples tightening against the thin cloth of my top.

"Cash isn't that interesting," I said and then inspiration struck me like a bolt of lightning. "We can put stingray down, but if you're wrong, you have to take me to your secret surf spot."

Chris raised his eyebrows as if to say *Really? That's normally Theo's schtick*. His face hardened in challenge and an all-too-superior smirk.

"What do I get if I win?"

"What do you want?" I asked. Why did my face feel hot all of the sudden? Why did my stomach dance?

Chris opened his mouth, shut it, and then coughed. "I-uh, I'll stick with cash."

"Fine. If you're right I'll give you a hundred bucks. If I'm right, you take me to the secret surf spot."

"Deal," he said.

"Should we shake on it?" I asked, the sense of ridiculous spilling over.

I held out my hand. Chris took it in his and appreciation at the firm grip showed in his face, as if we were sealing a business deal.

His hand didn't release right away, held mine, thumb rubbing on the knuckle of my index finger. The trivia master's voice broke through whatever it was we were doing.

"You are so going to regret this," I said, pulling away as he wrote stingray into the answer box.

We ordered another drink from the waitress as she passed and returned the trivia answer sheet to be scored.

We listened attentively as the trivia master read the answers, and Chris held his breath as he read off the last question, but I didn't bother. I'd never been so sure of an answer in my life.

The female manta ray attracted males and they followed her through an intricate dance. She selected the one she liked the best. I'd never admit it out loud, but it sounded ridiculously romantic, for an animal mating cycle.

Chris seemed stricken, he didn't even enjoy the fact that despite answering the question incorrectly, we had climbed into first place.

"Stingrays initiate their mating cycle when a male bites the female on the back of her fins," I told him.

I laughed again as Chris faced me with a look of curiosity tinged with annoyance. I was gleeful.

"Why do you know so much about marine life?" Chris asked and stole one of the fried pickles, popping it into his mouth as he watched me.

My answer was personal, and it would have been easy to deflect or make a joke, but something about the earnest way he watched me made me want to reveal things I hadn't before.

"My dad used to call me Ray," I said and laughed at the memory. "Which evolved into his little Sting Ray when we started surfing in Okinawa. I spent years obsessed with them."

"You know," Chris started. "My family lived on Oki too, when my mom was stationed there at the airbase."

He'd never shared that before and I cocked my head at him. "When?"

"Three years after you," Chris said. "From what you've said, we would have overlapped there for a summer."

"Really?" I asked, surprised and pleased by it. Chris gave me a small grin. "Is that why you came back with Theo?"

"Partially. The owner of the Okinawa Surf House was a friend whose school was successful. I wanted to take a look at their business model and Theo wanted an international surf trip."

"It's crazy, when you think about it," I said. We both ignored the next round of trivia, opting for conversation instead of listening to the questions. "How easily the four of us might have passed each other by."

"I don't believe in fate," Chris said, but he was smiling. "I'm still glad it happened."

"Me too. I'm glad Theo and Ren found each other. They're so happy together."

"Are you?" Chris asked as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Happy, that is."

My eyes widened, mouth dropping open in surprise, but I wasn't fast enough to stop the reaction. It was a surprisingly insightful question, because the truth of the matter was, things had changed this year, and what I'd grown used to—my lifestyle, my dating, my goals—were shifting for the first time in years.

"I'm not unhappy," I said and that was true. "I feel like I'm in limbo."

Chris' lips quirked. "I know what you mean."

"Do you?" I asked tentatively.

"Yeah," he said. "I've done a lot with the surf school over the last five years, the location, the reviews, the equipment. And I was happy with the way things were going, but I suddenly feel stagnant, now that I have the house."

"That's it exactly!" I said, surprised and excited that he understood. "It's all of it, honestly. Work and...romance." Oh my god. My face heated. I'd just said *romance* out loud to Chris' face. I bit my lip hard to keep from rambling and saying something else equally embarrassing, but Chris didn't tease.

"What do you have against relationships anyways?" Chris asked, imploring eyes landing on me. His gaze seemed to scorch me and instead of dismissing his question, I actually considered it. I'd told bits and pieces of the truth to Jayna and Viv. I could do the same with Chris.

I kind of knew the answer, but for the most part tried not to think about it. There was no denying it had to do with my father, with having him die so young. But it wasn't a fear of losing a partner, not exactly.

“My mom remarried,” I said and rubbed my thumb across the glass, collecting the condensed water around the rim. “And she’s happy and in love with her husband, my step dad. It made things clear that everyone’s replaceable, so one long-term relationship doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“So you don’t think there’s anything special in committing yourself to one person?” he asked, and the disappointment in his voice made my stomach turn.

It sounded laughable when I said it aloud, but the fear was very real. That I was replaceable.

“Pretty much,” I said and forced pep into my voice.

Chris let it go, but instead of letting silence fill the space between us when we so clearly disagreed, Chris guided the conversation back to safer ground. He’d never done that before, eased the situation when he could have let it remain tense. I was grateful, so grateful.

“Let’s get back in this round,” Chris said. “We missed the first couple of questions, but that shouldn’t affect our lead.”

The grin he shot me was cocky, intentionally distracting and lighthearted. When I smiled back, all of the remaining tension disappeared.

Chapter Nine

DESPITE WORKING ODD hours—including Sunday morning before dance class—my ability to work without motivation was unparalleled. It was partially due to the intent with which I used my home office. Work space and work space only. Which was why I was still able to be productive when my mind threatened at every opportunity to wander back to Chris, to the time we were spending together, to the not-date trivia from the week before, to the improvements we were making in our dance lessons. Everytime I drifted I was able to refocus because my home office was for work only.

I sincerely loved the setup. In addition to the desk and monitor, and the large bookshelf, I also had a comfy reading chair with a throw pillow which is where I was currently working. Although my translations needed to be typed on the computer, I liked to read through the original text in a hardcopy. It helped me figure out the tone and the intention, before it came to the individual words.

Night of the Fox, the first in the Kitsune series by Hotaru Hayashi, was the author's fifth series. It was easy to fall into their prose and worldbuilding. If everything about this translation goes right for me, I'll be able to meet Hotaru and discuss the work and try desperately hard not to fangirl. I was already running scenarios on how to politely and professionally get her autograph on my books. As much as this opportunity was a goldmine for my career, I couldn't wholly separate it from my personal excitement of being associated with Hotaru.

As I finished the chapter I was on, I put down the book and kicked the blanket off before draping it over the chair. Stretching, I lifted my arm over my head and bending at the hip before repeating the motion on the other side.

It was time for dance lessons. I tried to enthuse my thoughts, but ended up grimacing as I changed into a knee-length floral dress and

light-pink open heels. Did I think the dress made my cleavage look fantastic, yes. But I definitely chose the outfit for comfort on the hot summer day, not for any other reason.

I lied to myself all the way up to the first glance from Chris, whose eyes widened slightly before he could cover it. Chris may not have ever wanted me, but I wasn't so oblivious that I didn't notice he found me attractive now.

The heat of the dance studio was pleasantly muggy. Chris and I weren't so hot that we were sticking together where we touched, but it was a little sweaty. I liked the warmth, the heat where his hands touched me.

I faced Chris with my hands on my hips, ready to go. We spoke as we moved through the dance with none of the stiffness we'd had in previous lessons. None of the stiffness, but still some of the technical issues, particularly with the spins we were practicing.

"Why do you have so much trouble with them?" Chris asked, and at first I didn't comprehend his words, too entrenched in the fact that his hands were on my waist.

"They make me dizzy," I admitted. *Like you do.*

"Have you tried closing your eyes?"

I cocked my head to the side in thought before shaking my head. No, I'd never considered it.

"Let's try it now. Just hold onto my hand and trust me."

I wasn't sure that wouldn't end with me going headfirst into the mirror, but Chris was staring at me so earnestly I found myself agreeing.

"Just the spin," he said.

Waltz, three successive spins, waltz.

"Okay," I agreed and he took me in his arms.

I squeezed my eyes tightly, and felt him release me. I moved and spun. The cool air caressed my legs as my sundresses flared when Chris spun me. Then, he caught me, held me as blood pounded in

my ears. I found myself breathing heavily when I opened my eyes and met Chris'. The way he was holding me didn't feel like a position in the dance. It felt like he was holding me because he wanted to be close.

"That was good," I said as I took a few retreating steps to grab water.

It was maybe because I was high on success. With only a few weeks left until the wedding, Chris and I were actually doing the dance well, getting all the way through the choreography.

"From the top," Dominika announced and restarted the song.

She hadn't straight up yelled at me since our one-on-one, but everytime she looked at me, I could see she wanted to. As we started from the top, Dominika moved to stand beside Chris and I.

I met Chris' gaze and it became easy to forget that Dominika stood behind us. It was getting easier to follow Chris, his grip on my hand and shoulder blade was firm, but not suffocating. We made it almost a minute into the dance before she corrected us.

"Look at him," Dominika snapped as I watched our feet go round and round.

My spine snapped straight and my gaze flew back to Chris' in obedience, only to find an amused smile on his face. It didn't feel like he was making fun of me though, so I smiled back.

"We're doing it," I whispered, because *holy shit*, we were flowing, gliding across the studio floor without stepping on each other, and finally it felt natural.

Chris' grin grew wider at my excitement while his grip on my body remained firm, and even Dominika gave us a pleased harrumph which had both Chris and I shaking our shoulders to show our delight. She moved towards us with critiquing intent and we paused, our arms still around each other.

"When you spin back to each other, reach up to caress your partner's face," Dominika said seriously.

I made a face at Chris, but lifted my hand. I touched him lightly, feeling his stubble, and I couldn't prevent my thumb from rubbing gently back and forth. Chris' hand didn't reach my face, instead it held firm on the side of my neck.

"Softly," Dominika chastised and moved Chris' hand from my neck to the side of my face. "You should not look like you are about to jump on each other. This is gentle, loving."

As soon as she turned around, Chris' hand slipped back to my neck and squeezed and I rolled my eyes at him.

"Heads together," Dominika said and physically pushed my face into Chris. "You two are perfect height for this."

With our faces smashed against each other, we couldn't quite see anything else.

I bit down hard on my lip as Chris' twitched.

In the span of seconds, we were laughing so hard, we couldn't stop. Dominika's disproving glare only sent us further into hysterics. Seeing everyone around us chuckle and also not quite understand what was going on had us doubling over. I briefly saw Hayden's frown of displeasure, but the rest of the class and our friends laughed with us. Even Dominika didn't bother to cut us off.

I put my face in my hands as tears started streaming. The sound echoed across the studio and filled me with such pleasure, it finally snapped me out of the giggles. As we tried to control our breath, Dominika forced us together again, and when we pressed our faces to each other, we devolved again, unable to contain ourselves.

"I hope you are happy when you dance like shit," she said and her voice was hard. Chris' spine snapped straight and some of my laughter died, but I could've sworn there was mirth in her eyes. "Class dismissed."

I moved over to Theo, who'd stopped to tie his shoe, while everyone else left the studio. As he stood, he looped his arm through mine.

"No class next week," Theo whispered excitedly in my ear.

"Palm Springs," I whisper-screamed. "Bachelor party shenanigans!"

When we left the studio, Theo moved towards Ren, already in his car, and I turned towards mine. Chris was waiting for me. He looked good, leaning against the brick wall, sunglasses on. He fell in to step beside me and walked with me toward my car.

"The swell looks great tomorrow," Chris said.

I brightened. "Secret surf spot?"

Chris looked amused despite himself, and he shoulder bumped me. "Yes, secret surf spot."

WE PADDED OUT together at sunrise, when the sky was still gray. I wore my favorite high waisted bikini and a ballcap to keep the sun from my eyes and protect my easily sunburned nose.

Sitting on our boards, feet and legs submerged in water, we waited for the swell to arrive in companionable silence. There was a calm to the ocean, a quiet, that lulled me to a sense of peace both new and familiar. The water had always been this way for me, but it didn't happen every time. Sometimes the ocean was a challenging bitch, other times a gentle lady, but in the quiet, with only the two of us, it was like another plane of existence.

"Why is this your favorite spot?" I asked, purposely quiet.

"I rarely see many people here." Chris shrugged. "I run into a group or two when I come out, but rarely at sunrise."

"The benefits of dawn patrol," I agreed, using the term for sunrise surfers.

I closed my eyes to feel the rising sun, but I knew he was smiling. It felt good to be out there with him, comfortable, like we didn't have five years of history between us. Chris wasn't tense the way I was used to, wasn't incredibly talkative, but I was learning that was part of his personality too.

“Why do you insist on keeping it a secret?” I asked, breaking the silence again.

Chris smiled at me and I liked it. It made me feel warm. “The waves here would be too challenging for Theo. And, I like teasing him. I don’t know why he got so hung up on figuring this place out, but now I think it’s funny.”

“Fair enough. I’m just glad you know so little about manta rays,” I teased, my heart picking up pace at the prospect of him flirting back.

“Yeah,” Chris sighed and put his hand directly over his tattoo. “That’s on me.”

Chris shrugged and his smile didn’t falter, something I still wasn’t totally used to. That’s why my stomach fluttered, because it was unfamiliar. As the waves began to turn, Chris held out his arm, offering me the first go. The fluttering in my belly became more intense. Waves were a hot commodity, especially with other groups around. There was a certain etiquette, but surfers had to be a little selfish when the good waves came.

We were blissfully alone for another half hour, before a group of five started to converge on the spot. They weren’t loud exactly, but the calm from before dissipated, especially when they drew closer. Two of them in particular were clearly out of their depth on the waves we were surfing.

“Figures,” Chris muttered after watching one of them get slammed and dragged under an incoming wave. “I tell you no one ever comes here and on the day I do, a bunch of newbies show up.”

“Can’t win ‘em all.” I shrugged. “It’s still a beautiful spot. I’m glad you showed me.”

We surfed a few waves together, including taking turns following each other with his camera. He was filming me on a wave I’d just finished carving when I heard a shout from behind me. I turned on my board to see one of the other surfers drop in on a wave directly in front of Chris. The sound of the impact as they hit each other and

went flying off their boards, had me stumbling and falling off my own. I didn't fall backwards and protect my head like I was supposed to. Instead I accidentally launched myself forward and hit the surface of the rock-bottom reef, banging up my hands in the process as the wave pounded me.

I quickly returned to my board, spewing water and coughing to expel more. My heart was pumping in my chest and I could hear a ringing in my ears more so than the ocean. Chris was already yelling at the newer surfer, but my stomach was in knots as I approached, because bright red blood was pouring out of Chris' forehead at an alarming rate.

He held one hand to his head, to try to staunch the bleeding as I drew up on him. The kid—he barely looked twenty—went back to his friends and they started to paddle to shore. I took off my ball cap and loosened the back before I handed it over. Chris put it on immediately and I was so relieved I'd worn one.

He tightened it at the back as far it would go and began to paddle in while I trailed. It was imperative we get to shore and we both knew it, not wasting time on small talk. It felt like the longest stretch of ocean I'd ever crossed. I couldn't keep my eyes off Chris, chewing my lip as I scanned him for any other injuries.

We were closing in on shore with me trailing Chris when he started to lose steam. Instead of staying directly behind him to make sure he didn't fall off his board, I paddled in front of him.

"Grab my leash and keep pressure on your head," I said over my shoulder.

It said a lot that he didn't object, just grabbed onto the leash near my ankle and held on. We needed to get the hell out of the water.

Chapter Ten

WHEN WE REACHED the shore five minutes later, I trailed Chris, keeping him in my vision at all times. Unfortunately, it meant my attention was split between him and walking the rocky shore. I tripped, scraping my hands even more on the damp rocks. Shaking my head, I took a deep breath and moved to Chris. I couldn't get a good look into his eyes, to see if they were glassy, and I wanted to run my hands over him to check him for unseen injuries. My light brown hat was soaked in sea water, but I could see a darker spot pooling blood.

"Let's get the first aid kit," I said and, mercifully, my voice didn't shake.

We moved quickly to the surf van, and set our boards on the ground while he opened the hatch of the van and sat.

"Keep pressure on that wound," I told him again as I opened the first-aid kit with shaking hands. I didn't need to say it, he was already doing it, but I needed to say something.

I grabbed the couple gallons of freshwater he kept in the trunk. As I picked it up, Chris got to his knees in front of me so I could pour the water over his head and body. He kept the hat on, with his hand over his forehead as I poured the water, but he lifted his chin so he could wipe the salt and blood off the rest of his face. He was paler than normal and my stomach dropped. He had to be okay. He had to be.

I watched him carefully as he used one hand to brace against the van. When he was finished and sat back down, I walked to the drivers' side door and braced my own hands, taking in several deep breaths. I was certified for CPR & First Aid, but had never had to put that training into action. I wasn't an EMT, or anyone who could be remotely expected to treat someone medically and it left me shaking and slightly nauseous.

"Alright," I said, turning back and attempting false cheer. "Let's see how bad it is. Take off the hat."

Chris did as I asked, while I grabbed an alcohol wipe pack and tore it open with my teeth and set a large square bandage to the side, along with some gauze. The heat of the sun was partially blocked by the van door above our heads.

He sat on the edge and I stood between his legs to check out the cut. I used the alcohol wipe to clean the wound and Chris hissed in pain as I did it. He didn't comment, just rested his hands on the back of my knees, which made my heart race for a very different reason.

Chris' thumbs were rubbing against my damp skin, and the touch against the sensitive area behind my knees helped push away the fear. While there was a lot of blood, the cut itself could have been much worse. It was about an inch above his right eyebrow and ran halfway to his hairline. I had to push his hair back to keep it out of the wound.

"You need stitches," I said. "It's not bad, but I'd say at least three."

"I've had worse," he said, even as he swayed where he sat, clearly a little woozy.

I used one of the towels to pat his forehead dry and placed the gauze on Chris' forehead before bandaging it.

"Oh yeah?" I asked and handed him a water bottle and granola bar.

Chris nodded and slumped sideways, taking a long sip of water. "I broke my foot at Pipeline in the last two minutes of the finals heat."

"I've seen the video," I murmured, pleased that the water and small pieces of granola were helping Chris refocus. "Spectacular wipeout on a wave you didn't need in order to win."

Chris had had the higher score of the heat, but not taking a wave while he had priority could have allowed his opponent to take it instead, and potentially overtake his score.

“It was Kieran you beat, wasn’t it?”

Chris’ smile was fast and his eyes, which had shifted away as he recalled the memory, flew back to mine. I couldn’t help it, I smiled back.

“It’s the only heat I ever beat him at head to head. He was so pissed. Kieran’s won nearly every major competition around the world, but never Pipeline.”

“I want to know more,” I said, but stepped back. “First, I’m going to get the boards taken care of and we’ll head to the hospital.”

I took the large container of fresh water and poured it over our boards before lifting them to the roof and tying them securely down. I poured some of the freshwater over myself and my hair before towel-drying off and throwing on jean shorts and a baggy t-shirt. Chris started to sluggishly move and get changed too and made it to the passenger seat without more fuss.

When I slid into the driver’s seat and backed us out of the parking lot, Chris looked a lot better, even with the bandage over his forehead. He was shaking his head with irritation, which allowed me to breathe easier for the first time since the collision.

“The kid came out of nowhere. I should have seen him, should’ve been able to move out of the way.” He was annoyed, probably embarrassed, but I was grateful he was okay.

I reached over to grab his hand without thinking, fingers intertwining as if we’d done it a thousand times.

“You’re okay, and he’s okay. I mean, you scared him to death with your yelling and all the blood. Hopefully it’s enough for him to learn or stop surfing altogether.”

Chris nodded, leaned back against the headrest and sighed. He was still too pale and I was mildly worried he had a concussion.

“Do you feel okay?” I asked as I pulled onto the highway.

“A little foggy,” he muttered. “A raging headache.”

"Thirty's coming at you quick." I laughed to ease the nerves, finally pulling my hand away from his and patting him on the thigh before returning it to the steering wheel. "You're an old man now."

"Ha ha," he said and made a face. "Guess that makes you an old lady. I mean, you are a few weeks older than me."

"You're right, please forgive me," I laughed. It was becoming surprisingly easy to joke with Chris.

I tried not to break too many traffic laws as I drove the van to the local hospital. I pressed my hand back over Chris' chest to make him wait for me before getting out of the van.

"I don't want you to pass out." There was no hiding my nerves, even though I was still attempting humor.

"It's okay," Chris said and I think he took pity on me. "I feel better now. The food and water helped."

"I'm still going to walk next to you. Just in case," I said as I dipped under his arm.

Despite his objections, he leaned on me.

We made it to the ER without incident. After checking in, we sat in the waiting room for a little bit, but overall it was a quick process before Chris was called. I stood with him and paused, which caused Chris to bump into me. He steadied himself by grabbing my shoulders.

"I-ah don't have to go with you, if you don't want me to."

Chris' smile was a little tired, but mostly amused. "Come on, it could be hours and this way neither of us have to be bored," he said and squeezed my shoulder. "I want you to come."

Oh, Jesus. Chris was literally about to go into the emergency room and my mind went straight to sex. I sincerely hoped my face wasn't as red as it felt.

I followed him as he followed the nurse. He sat on the main patient seat which I could tell made him uncomfortable, and I sat in a chair in the back corner of the room. *Room* was a generous term for

the space sectioned against a wall of cabinets by two curtains. The nurse came in shortly after to examine Chris' forehead.

The first thing the nurse asked was for Chris to recount the story, which he did.

"I didn't see it coming until the last second. We both fell off our boards when we collided, but I think it was actually my board that bashed my head," Chris said.

"Did you fall unconscious at any point?"

Chris shook his head. If the movement hurt him, he didn't show it.

The nurse continued with a couple neurological checks, for hearing, strength, balance and coordination, which to my relief, Chris flew through easily. As the tests finished up, the doctor came in and spoke to the nurse about the results and reviewed Chris' digital chart. I waited in silence as Chris answered a few more questions.

"I'm not going to recommend an MRI or overnight observation, but you should stay with someone to monitor you in case symptoms appear."

Chris nodded and accepted the advice as the doctor moved to take off the bandage and examine the wound.

"In addition," the doctor said as he cleaned the wound. "You'll want to limit any major activities over the next couple of days. Make sure no additional symptoms are arising—no surfing, no driving, et cetera. By Friday, I'd say you'll be fine, but avoid submerging the cut until the stitches come out."

The doctor moved away from Chris and discarded his gloves and cotton swab into the trash.

"We'll give you a few stitches, shouldn't take long, just until the local anesthetic kicks in. Another fifteen minutes or so. Are you the one who bandaged him up?" the doctor asked, turning towards me for the first time.

"Yes, sir," I said, suddenly nervous, like maybe I had done something wrong.

"Well you did a good job. Did you injure your hands as well?"

Chris' gaze snapped to mine so quickly I almost pulled my hands behind my back, but the evidence was there, sitting upright in my lap.

"A few scrapes, but nothing major," I shrugged. And it wasn't anything. The scrapes on my hands stung a little, but they would be fine.

"Do you want me to look at them?" the doctor asked, but I shook my head.

"No, thanks," I said and forced a smile.

"Orelia," Chris said after the doctor left. "At the very least, you should wash your hands and throw some neosporin on them."

Chris got off the exam table and walked over to me, grabbing my hands at the wrists. He saw the red lines and dried blood, and pulled them—and me—closer for examination. He looked into my face. I swallowed and the sound seemed to echo in the small space.

"What happened?" he asked, and I wondered if he could feel my pulse where his fingers circled my wrist.

My face heated, but I wasn't sure if it was embarrassment at the injury, or something else. I sighed at the intensity of Chris' stare, as he waited for my answer.

"I heard the collision," I said quickly, not because I was embarrassed, but because fear in the moment had been so intense I'd lost complete awareness of my surroundings. "I turned back so quickly that I fell forward and smashed my hands on the rock reef."

"Orelia." Chris' voice was hard and a little choked, which might have been annoying if he didn't seem so shaken by the barely there scrapes on my palms.

"It's fine, Chris," I insisted. The way he was watching at me, like he wanted to wrap his arms around me, well, there was no denying it

went beyond the friendship we were trying to cultivate. I whispered the next bit, couldn't make my voice work properly. "My hands will be good as new by next week."

I tried to tug my hands away, but Chris' fingers locked tighter around my wrists.

"Let me help."

I wanted to protest. But he looked at me like he needed me to relent on this, with the same protectiveness that led him to call a cab for me at Theo's birthday and defend me against Dominika's wrath. With his own bandage freshly applied, I relented. He pulled me over to the sink in the room, and stood directly behind me, arms bracketing mine. A heavy breath escaped me, but was thankfully hidden as Chris turned on the faucet.

He pulled my hands under the spray and grabbed soap. Gently, he began to wash them, fingers scrubbing lightly against the sensitive skin on my palms. His front pressed against me at the same time his fingers ran over the largest cut, at the meat of my palm below the thumb.

"Sorry," he whispered against my hair, mistaking my gasp as one of pain.

I was trying to keep my breathing at a steady pace as he backed away and grabbed the neosporin and bandage from the counter. He gently rubbed the medicine over my palms and pressed a bandage over the deepest cut. The laser focus he had on me was making me warm.

"I never noticed how small your hands are," Chris said, pressing one of his palms flat against mine.

Chris' eyes darted to my lips, and he didn't move his hand from where it was pressed. Oh my god. My heart started pounding so loudly I would have sworn he heard it too.

I wanted to kiss him.

“Are you going to kiss my boo-boos?” I asked, trying to ease the itch between my shoulder blades, the tension in my belly, because this was *Chris* and this want was ridiculous.

We’d barely become friends, let alone, anything else.

Something flashed in Chris’ eyes and it wasn’t humor or amusement. Instead of laughing, he raised a brow and lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss over the bandage on my palm.

Chapter Eleven

“WE MIGHT NEED to get you re-checked for that concussion.” My voice didn’t sound like my voice. No, it sounded panicked and nervous, which I definitely was not.

I was saved from my own awkwardness and strange new feelings when the doctor came in and gave Chris three stitches on his forehead.

His kiss to my palm lingered as we left the hospital. The moment floated between us, unacknowledged, but unavoidable. I couldn’t shake the urge to reach out and hold his hand, so I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

“What next?” I asked and tried to sound upbeat and not afraid of spending more time with Chris.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you want to ask someone to come stay with you or do you want me to take you somewhere?”

“Orelia, I’m fine. I feel fine.” And I should’ve taken him at his word, but I didn’t want to. As much as I was relieved Chris was okay, I still didn’t want to leave him yet.

“The doctor said you need someone with you in case you get bad symptoms,” I said, and would have crossed my arms if I weren’t driving.

“Just take me to the surf house.”

“I don’t want to take you home and leave you,” I said, and Chris didn’t say anything as he looked at me from the passenger seat. “Humor me.”

Chris paused for a long moment and I felt him assessing me.

“How about food?” he said finally.

“I could eat,” I said.

“And if after the meal I’m still alive and kicking, you just take me home.”

I hesitated and chanced a quick glance at him. He hadn't been unfocused or groggy in the last half hour. It really didn't seem like he'd been injured badly, apart from the giant bandage covering his forehead. Or it wouldn't have seemed that way if I hadn't seen the collision, heard the sickening crack of bodies and boards and feared the worst.

"Okay," I amended, mostly because my stomach was starting to clench in hunger.

Chris started giving me directions as we headed back in the direction of the surf house. "Take the next exit."

His stitched forehead was hidden beneath an old LA Angels hat he kept in the back seat. My eyes returned to the road as Chris guided us to a restaurant called *Koki La Me*. The restaurant was hidden behind a fitness center and makeup store, located on two narrow floors of an old building.

Chris held the door open for me as we walked in. It was relatively full, but not busy or rushing, and it had none of the pretentiousness of the five-star restaurants Theo and Ren favored. Even without having tasted the food, I liked it immediately.

The walls of the restaurant were a warm cream color interspersed with light green in geometric patterns. The seats were all hard backed, like you'd find in a diner, but there were soft gold and burnt orange cushions on each one. A map of Haiti and wooden carvings covered the walls. It was homey, comfortable, and welcoming. Not the type of place where one needed to put on fronts, or pretend to be something they weren't. I was immediately at ease.

"You better take that hat off, Chris, before Fabienne sees you," said the host, a teenage boy with a slight accent and a wide grin.

His red uniform shirt had the nametag Kyle pinned at his chest, and he stepped around the host stand and greeted Chris with a hug. They could have been brothers with the same dark brown skin and

wavy black hair, but there was a stark difference in their builds and tones. Chris had a man's body, voice, and desires.

Chris pulled his hat off, revealing the bandage on his forehead. Kyle whistled and Chris briefly explained as we moved to a table in the corner.

"How are you doing?" Chris asked.

"I'm alright," Kyle said as his gaze slid to me for the first time. When I caught him staring he quickly jerked his head back to Chris. "Cami had puppies."

"No shit," Chris said with a smile.

Kyle grinned as he told us about the puppies before leaving us alone, without menus.

"You come here a lot," I said, putting my elbows on the table and resting my chin on my hands as I looked at him.

He nodded.

"With the surfing," Chris started to explain. "People tend to think I'm Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, but my dad's half-Haitian. None of my close family cooks the way my grandpa did and I missed it a lot. I found this place a few years ago and usually swing by once a week. Sometimes more depending on the menu, which Fabienne changes to suit her mood."

He was obviously uncomfortable revealing so much about himself, so I smiled at him in reassurance. I was excited at the revelation, at being welcomed into his world. Still, he shifted in his seat.

"How come you've never brought us here before?"

"We all have our secrets don't we," Chris said, hedging, maybe nervous. Definitely nervous, I realized as he rubbed the back of his neck and looked around. "Like you and the kids you teach."

"Well, I'm excited," I told him with another smile.

"You're also the least picky eater out of everyone. You're probably the only one I *could* take here." He chuckled, and it eased some of his

tension, but he was looking at me like my opinion mattered a great deal.

We shared half-smiles but I was glad we were interrupted, because I wasn't sure what I had for a follow-up. A large woman carrying two glasses of water and an iced tea moved to the edge of our table. She was older than we were, but I wasn't able to guess her age. She might have been forty or sixty. Her face was adorned with clean lines of makeup and she wore a colorful silk scarf wrapped around her head, with a braided crown visible before the scarf wrapped. She wore jeans and a black v-neck t-shirt and sturdy tennis shoes. Dressed for being on her feet all day.

Chris stood and gave the woman a hug. There was love there, too. I assumed this was Fabienne, though she didn't wear a nametag like Kyle did. Fabienne pulled away and patted Chris' face as she considered his bandage.

"Kyle tells me you had a surfing accident," Fabienne said, and eyed Chris' bandage with concern. "And that you brought a pretty girl with you."

Chris' gaze flicked to mine and he smiled before facing Fabienne again. With familiarity, she gripped his chin and angled his face up. Chris waited for her to finish assessing him before he spoke again.

"It's true," he said and paused as Fabienne looked around him to me. "The accident would've been worse if Orelia hadn't been with me to help."

I wouldn't have put it that way, but Chris seemed determined to praise me. He stared me down when I started to object, challenging me to argue. I didn't and found myself flushing under his and Fabienne's stares.

"I didn't really do anything," I said as Chris slid back into the seat across from me, and I shot him a quick glare.

"Just kept him from drowning, didn't you?" Fabienne demanded, but her voice was soft and affectionate.

Before I could protest, Chris said, "Yes, she did."

"Good," Fabienne said. "You're strong and hardheaded, your woman needs to be the same."

I started to object, but met Chris' eyes as she pulled a seat to the end of our table. He gave me a half-smile and shrug that seemed to say objecting wouldn't make a difference. Amusement and a sense of inclusivity had me relaxing.

"Do you own the restaurant?" I asked and propped my chin into my hands.

Fabienne smiled at me and with a wink said, "For fifteen years now."

"That's when she immigrated from Haiti," Chris interjected.

"Family and all," Fabienne agreed and her eyes softened with nostalgia. "With my husband and two daughters who are grown now."

She was easy to talk to. Because she was a good listener, focused, but mostly I realized with a small shock of surprise, because she was willing to talk, to tell her own story. Chris watched her with familial love.

"Does your husband run the restaurant with you?" I asked, curious about this woman and the role she played in Chris' life, and vice versa.

The laughter that spilled out of Fabienne was as smooth as silk. "Lord no. Samuel isn't allowed in my kitchen."

My stomach growled loudly and I clutched it in embarrassment as Chris and Fabienne turned to me.

"Oh dear, I think that's my cue," Fabienne laughed as she stood. "Your orders will be out shortly."

She left and I raised a brow at Chris. "We haven't ordered yet?"

"Fabienne made tchaka for today. I always ask her to call me when she makes it," Chris said and must have seen my confusion because his mouth curved. "Have you had Haitian food before?"

I shook my head, but smiled to let him know everything was okay. “No, I haven’t. I have zero idea what tchaka is, but I’m excited to find out.”

“You’re going to love it,” he said, but it was less of a statement, and more of a question.

“I’m going to love it,” I agreed and took a long sip of water. “I don’t know if you know this about me, but I despise cooking. Any opportunity for me not to dirty my dishes, and not to figure out my own meal plan, is satisfying.”

“Believe it or not,” Chris murmured. “I am very well aware of your dislike for cooking.”

“Really? Here I thought you weren’t paying attention.”

I’m not sure what Chris was going to say, but his eyes narrowed at me and he opened his mouth with what seemed to be an argumentative statement. Fabienne came back quickly with two large bowls of food, stopping Chris in his tracks.

Tchaka, it turned out, was a stew. At first glance, I saw corn and kidney beans and squash in a steaming orange broth. Beyond the soup and the spices, I could smell meat and it had that tangy scent of a smoker. My mouth watered and I waited to dig in.

“Enjoy,” Fabienne smiled and waited for us to take our first bite.

I happily did. Chris was watching me from across the table as I blew lightly on my spoonful. The second it hit my tongue, a combination of missing meals and the objective deliciousness of the Tchaka had me groaning in delight as I chewed the pork.

“Oh, it’s definitely smoked.” I grinned at Chris and Fabienne and flushed at Chris’ stare. “The, uh, pork is smoked. It’s delicious.”

Another beat of silence.

“Why are you guys looking at me like that?”

Fabienne let out an unrestrained laugh.

"This one," she said, pointing to Chris. "Has been trying to figure out my recipe for tchaka for years, and he's never said anything about the meat. He's trying to get all the ingredients first."

Chris seemed unbothered as he shrugged and had his first bite.

"I am going to get that recipe one day," he said, voice teasing as he nodded at me. "And now it seems I have a partner in crime for recreating it."

I shoved another spoonful in my mouth to prevent my obvious delight at Chris' words from spilling over.

"Sorry to disappoint, Christopher," Fabienne said and reached over to pat his cheek. "I'm taking it to my grave, darling. Although, there's always the chance I change my mind."

"What's so special about the meal?" I asked after Fabienne left.

"Can't you taste it?" Chris said, humor lightening his tone.

It tasted different than what I was used to, the squash, or maybe it was pumpkin, wasn't something I'd ever had in my diet, but it added a flair I liked. Chris was apparently as hungry as I was because for a few more moments neither of us spoke as we took the edge off of our hunger.

Finally, with the worst of my hunger satisfied, I leaned back and watched him. "Do you bug her about the recipe often?"

"Every time I come in, it's a bit of an inside joke for us now." He smiled fondly. "Tchaka's like chili, everyone has their own recipe for it and family style is always best. When I was a kid, my grandfather would make it special for New Year's Eve. I loved the tradition and it was my favorite meal of the year."

He trailed off, like there was more to the story.

"What else?" I asked.

Chris visibly shook himself and smiled sadly. "My grandfather never wrote down his recipe, and when he died, we couldn't replicate it. I lost him, and one way I would have liked to be close to him was

that damn recipe and I didn't have it. Fabienne's isn't the same, in fact, it's wildly different, but—" he trailed off with a shrug.

"I get it," I said and reached to touch his hand on the table. "My dad liked to barbecue. I know it's not exactly the same, but every year we have one in his honor, and it's nice. The tradition makes it feel like he's closer."

We were quiet for a few more minutes, and I was surprised by how comfortable it was to hold his hand, to have him turn my own and rub his thumb over my bandage. How nice it was not to be stonewalled by each other and to actually have a meaningful conversation.

I thought back to some of the things Chris pointed out about me; that I was guarded, that I didn't share, that I didn't allow people to come to my aid. He wasn't wrong. It seemed like after my dad died, like I had to be the one to hold it together between my mom and younger sisters. But maybe the five years of indifference between us wasn't solely Chris' fault. He'd never shared parts of himself, but I hadn't either.

I pulled my hand back to finish my food. As we did though, I found I wasn't ready for our time together to end.

"How about dessert?" I asked.

Chris' grin was warm and genuine and my heart did a funny double-beat in my chest as he looked at me and nodded.

"Wait until you try bonbon siwo. It's basically Haitian gingerbread," Chris said and ordered some when Kyle came back to our table to clear the plates and refill their waters.

A few minutes later, Kyle returned with two squares on each plate of cake dusted with sugar. When I lifted mine, it was still warm and Chris never took his eyes off of me, waiting again to see my reaction. I had no interest in tentative nibbles, so I took a large bite.

"Oh my god," I said, completely unladylike, with the dessert still in my mouth. "This is delicious."

“Right?” Chris said, excitement spilling from him as he ate his own.

He seemed happy here, happy with me. I was caught up in Chris and he was raising his brows at me and expecting me to say something. I did the first thing that crossed my mind. I reached across the table and took the bite sized piece of bonbon siwo from his plate and popped it into my mouth.

“Orelia Kane.”

“Christopher Immani.”

“I can’t believe you just did that,” he said, disbelief colored his voice, but amusement was right there with it.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Couldn’t help being a little brat,” he said and shook his head.

Something heated passed between us. My body warmed and my heartbeat picked up. There was nothing friendly in Chris’ gaze now. It was all heat. I swallowed hard and licked my lips.

“What’s your middle name?” We stared at each other for a long moment, both of us surprised. “We used each other’s full names, you know. And it made me think of when you get in trouble from parents and they use their middle names. Do you know what I’m saying?”

I was stumbling quickly over words, nervous despite myself. Surprised we’d never covered such a basic topic between us. And again, I couldn’t put all the blame on Chris for the years of distance between us. Chris’ grin turned thoughtful, maybe sad. Despite knowing each other for so many years, we still didn’t really know anything about one another. When Chris spoke, his voice was solemn

“Alexander.”

That weird feeling between us broke off immediately as I started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” he asked as he pinched the top of my thigh under the table.

“My middle name is Alexandria.”

As we left, Chris paid the bill, I tried to split it, but Chris shot down my offer immediately. A part of me wanted to object, because it felt like by letting him pay, we were making it a date, not a casual lunch between friends.

"Fabienne would eviscerate me if I let a girl pay," Chris said and he turned a little pink around the ears.

"Woman," I corrected, and Chris smiled.

"If I let a woman pay," he amended. The way he was looking at me was more than friendly and I felt a ratchet of panic. He thought this was a date.

"I could still give you some cash," I offered, but didn't feel the need to push hard where I might've before. It was nice letting him do this, pay for our meal.

"And I wouldn't take it," he affirmed. "That's what friends do."

Chris smiled and shook his head at me, and my stomach dropped.

I needed a comeback and I tried to keep my tone playful. "Are we though?"

"What do you think, Orelia," he said as we got back into the van.

WHEN WE MADE it back to the surf house, I took my time taking the boards down and setting them against the house. I knew Chris was only trying to appease me so I would leave him alone later.

"I still feel weird leaving you alone," I admitted, once there was nothing left to do.

"Don't you have work to do?" he asked.

I did. I needed to get ahead of my translation work for *Night of the Fox* before we left for our Palm Springs trip for the boys' joint bachelor parties on Friday morning. And I'd already lost most of the day.

“C’mon,” Chris said, when I’d been silent too long. “I’ll walk with you back to your house. Prove I’m fine.”

Because he’d picked me up that morning, I didn’t have my car. I would’ve been fine walking home, but I didn’t argue back. Falling in-to step beside Chris was natural.

“So,” I started as we passed the small shops near the beach. “Kieran says you’re a control freak.”

“Kieran should know when to keep his mouth shut,” Chris muttered, but there was no venom there, only a clear discomfort he was trying to hide.

I should have let it go, but apparently I was getting used to the taste of my feet.

“It’s not like it’s a secret, Chris,” I said. “We all know it, though I was surprised you’ve always been that way. I thought it was like a quarter-life acquisition.”

I expected him to laugh at himself, or to throw a barb back at me.

“Don’t know what to tell you,” Chris said, and suddenly he was walking ramrod straight, with none of the easy languidness of the afternoon.

It was like a wall went back up. I might have considered it a natural reaction. Share too much, retreat in panic. I might have before, but I didn’t want to accept Chris’ silence or want that space to grow back between us. At the same time, I didn’t quite know how to back-track.

Something cold and uncomfortable settled in my chest. I stopped. “Go back home, Chris.”

His gaze flew to mine, but I turned quickly to leave. I don’t know what I wanted, or expected, only that things had been simple when we hadn’t bothered with each other. They hadn’t been good, I could see that now. Trying to please Theo and Ren by playing nice and not being honest. But it was simple. Trying to bridge this gap wasn’t easy

and I didn't understand why I was so easily hurt by the barest signs of rejection.

"Wait, Orelia. Wait."

I didn't want to wait. I was confident Chris was alright, I wanted to get away from him and the sinking feeling in my stomach. He didn't say anything else when I glanced back at him, my bag over my shoulder.

He caught me by the arm halfway up the steps to my second-floor condo. "Give me a minute, okay?"

"You're starting to pull away," I told Chris. "I thought we agreed to be friends."

"Of course we are," Chris said, but he looked past my head and stared into my building as if it were significantly more interesting than having any conversation with me..

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "We were fine at the restaurant. I don't think you dislike me, but—"

"I like you, of course I like you." It came out in a hiss of fury that did nothing to convince me of his words. I snorted in disbelief and turned abruptly, storming past him on the steps.

He walked behind me to the landing of my condo. When we reached my door, I spun around to face him.

"Then why does it feel like I'm pulling teeth right now?" I asked, pushing a finger into his chest and invading his space, making him meet my eyes.

Standing in front of him and breathing heavily with anger, a not-so-nice expression on my face was finally the recipe to break his control.

"Because you don't need me! You've never needed me," he exploded. "And I'm constantly having to rely on you."

He looked away, shame clearly tugging at him, but he didn't step away. That was different. I took a half-step back, unsure, but my re-

treat seemed to only agitate Chris further because he followed, temper rising.

"Everyone needs something," Chris started as my back hit the door. "All of my friends, my relationships have developed because they needed something from me. When I know what someone needs, I can help, I have direction. But you've always had everything figured out, and for whatever reason, I'm not in control whenever I'm around you."

His warm breath was hot on my skin as he turned the tables and invaded my space, forcing me to meet his eyes this time.

Needing my guidance on Okinawa. Asking me to cover lessons at the surf school. Treating him with first-aid. It was true and not just in these instances. I'd never seen him ask for assistance from Theo or Ren or even his exes the way Chris had been forced to ask it of me.

"You think I have everything figured out?" I laughed with disbelief. "God, it's like you know absolutely nothing about me."

How has he known me for so long and never once wondered? I ran my hand through my hair and it got caught in the tangle of my curls, when a part of his statement finally caught up with me.

"Do you know why I lived in Japan?" I asked.

"You studied Japanese in college. You went back because you lived there as a kid when your dad was stationed there. It's where you learned to surf."

He said it with confidence because he was right, but there was a new look dawning on his face. A look that said he'd never considered there might have been something else.

I paused. The truth was, I was afraid to tell him the whole story. I'd told Ren and Theo variations of it, but never everything. I'd never wanted to seem needy, especially to Chris, and especially after he'd pushed me away. Chris shouldn't have been the one I explained it to, but here he was.

Chris took me by the wrist, careful of my scraped palms. He took a few deep breaths, getting his temper under control again. I took a deep breath.

"When we moved to Minnesota," I started. "Life was better for my mom. She only put up with moving because of Dad. But she loves the winter, the small town, and her family. My little sisters did too. They were too young to remember the move after my dad died. My mom fell in love with someone else."

I was only starting to scrape the surface, and I was unsure if I should continue. But Chris was gently rubbing circles on the back of my hand with his thumb, and even though he was quiet and watchful as he'd always been, it didn't seem intimidating or filled with indifference.

"I stopped feeling like I belonged anywhere, and I shut myself out from everyone because I hated feeling like I was the only one who missed my dad, who missed our old life," I said quietly into the space between us, our breaths mingling. "I went back to Japan because for ten years, Okinawa was the last time I was happy. I was trying to get back to that, to rebuild that community. But I didn't get what I wanted, until we formed this foursome friendship. I've always needed something from you, Chris. I needed friends, people who would listen and understand and be on my side." I broke eye contact and blinked at my toes, which were only inches away from his.

Silence reigned in the space between us. No tears, but I found myself breathing heavily.

"I keep thinking I know you," Chris said quietly. "Because we've spent so much time around each other, but I'm just scraping the surface, aren't I?"

It didn't seem like a question that needed an answer, but Chris let go of one of my hands and lifted my chin, demanding one.

When I nodded, he dropped his hand. We were close, but I felt the absence of his touch. Today hadn't been a date, but as we shifted

in front of each other, neither of us apparently wanting to part ways, butterflies started sprinting in my stomach.

I pushed his hair off his forehead and examined the stitches again. He blinked at the contact but didn't pull away, either.

"I'll be okay," he said softly. "Just a scrape, right?" Like the dance, he lifted his hand, placing it over mine on his face.

I nodded. My gaze moved from the stitches to his eyes. He was breathing carefully, and I was acutely aware of how close our mouths were. My breath was audible, quick, as my mind drew me back to the sink in the hospital, to the way his hands slid over them, the way his body formed against me, and how desperately I wanted to feel him again.

Blood rushed to my head, or maybe away from it. I have no idea, except something new was happening, and I didn't have the capacity to focus on anything except his lips, his breath, falling as fast as my own. It was easy to justify. Fifty/fifty chance he's a bad kisser. If I ascertained that knowledge, maybe my feelings would go away, would go back to normal. The weirdness between us could be something we could laugh away.

"This is a bad idea," I whispered, even as his hands came to my waist, pulling me closer. And it was, because Chris did relationships and I ran from them. If there was chemistry, if this kiss didn't dampen my attraction, we were doomed.

"A bad idea," he agreed and pressed his body against me. "From the adrenaline of the day."

It didn't matter what we said, because our mouths came together in the next breath, and all my hopes of Chris being an abysmal kisser, of having some weird habit that would finally put me off him, were dashed in a heartbeat.

We fought for a moment, pushing against each other with more force than was necessary. A battle for dominance. For a moment I was winning when I nipped his lips and his hips jolted forward to

mine. Just one kiss and I could feel his raging desire against me. It was victory and then sweet defeat as he pushed me firmly against the door to my apartment, his thigh spreading my legs. I moaned. I couldn't stop myself when he was offering that pressure even when he groaned against my mouth, tasting his victory.

His hand traveled from my waist and pressed onto the bare skin of my stomach where he nudged the bottom of my t-shirt aside. His mouth moved from mine to the pulse of my neck. His moan at the contact—not desperate, but grateful, reverent—threatened to burn me alive.

Nerves unsettled me. I should know how to do this. I've had plenty of lovers. I was an expert in knowing how to handle that rush of desire, that attraction, but I suddenly found myself adrift. In the space where confidence had once breathed, doubt took its place.

No. It's too much. He's too much.

I must have spoken the thoughts aloud because he backed off immediately and I reached for the handle of my door behind me. He was startled, eyes still bright with desire, panting in front of me.

Chris had never wanted me even as a friend. Of course he would be surprised by any decent kiss between us. And now I had to live with the knowledge that he was a phenomenal kisser, that the heat between us wasn't totally one-sided. God, he was still fucking staring at me and I tightened my grip on the door handle, afraid if I let go, I'd let go of any inhibitions and sanity as well.

"Just the adrenaline of the day," I said, trying to laugh it off, the breathlessness of my statement disguising nothing. "Bye, Chris."

I turned around and fumbled with my keys for what felt like an eternity and I did not look at Chris again as I opened my apartment door and hid behind it as it closed.

Chapter Twelve

ON FRIDAY MORNING, six weeks before the wedding, I pulled into Theo and Ren's driveway, where they were loading bags into an SUV. Rather than buy flights or drive in our own separate vehicles, Ren proposed a road trip with a rental, courtesy of the many travel points he'd accumulated over the years. I parked my car, grabbed my suitcase and tote bag and added them to the mix.

Theo moved towards me immediately.

"*Ohayo gozaimas,*" he said with a grin. "*O genki desu ka?*"

Theo's 'good morning' and 'how are you' were part of the handful of Japanese phrases that he'd mastered and he said them with such enthusiasm that I laughed.

"I'm fantastic, thanks for asking." But my smile was a bit shaky as I scanned the parking lot for any signs of Chris. Because I knew Theo wouldn't understand what I was saying, I told him the truth in rapid Japanese. "*I am so worried about today. Kissing Chris was a total mistake, but I liked it and I can't stop thinking about it.*"

"Woah, woah, woah." Theo held his hands up. "All I got was the word for today and the *deshita*."

I smiled. "Don't worry. I didn't expect you to understand it. I just said I'm excited about the trip this weekend."

Chris pulled into the driveway and moved over to the SUV. He looked good, er, healthy that is to say.

"Oh my god, what happened to your forehead, Chris?" was how Theo greeted him, grabbing him boldly by the face.

Chris rolled his eyes and shot me a small grin before he shoved Theo off. I stayed back, and took the time to look him over. At some point in the past week he'd gotten the stitches out. The cut was about two inches long, but had scabbed over into a thin pink line. I tried not to notice the rest of him. We were all dressed in casual athleisure

for the road trip, but something about his shorts and long-sleeve t-shirt was not just cozy, but hot.

My cheeks flushed as Chris made brief eye contact with me before he started recounting the story.

"I guess that's why you asked me to cover the beginner lessons earlier this week, huh?" Theo asked.

Was that a tiny stab of jealousy I felt at not being asked?

"Yeah," Chris agreed with Theo. "Doc said not to get the cut wet."

If he'd asked me to cover the class, it's not like I could have said yes this week anyway. I shouldn't have been disappointed. Despite the kiss, we wanted different things. There was no doubt in my mind he wanted a committed partner, and I couldn't be that. *Even if I wanted to.* My mom had moved on after Dad died, like it was nothing, like it meant nothing. And if it was all pointless anyway, why even bother getting into a committed relationship?

Jesus, I needed to shake myself out of this weird mood. The weekend was coming. The bachelor parties were going to be amazing. And I should've been focusing on my friends anyway.

Theo and Ren went back into their house to gather the last of their things, which left Chris and me alone for the first time since our kiss. Coward that I am, I made a beeline to my car as if I forgot something there.

"Orelia," Chris called, and followed me.

I winced hard before schooling my features as I turned around. "Hey, what's up?"

Chris snorted, actually snorted at my high and faux cheerful tone.

"Are we okay?" he asked after a moment.

He was referring to the kiss. The kiss, by itself, might have been benign, just two friends testing boundaries. But Chris' gaze darted to my lips and back to my eyes. It didn't seem intentional, it seemed like

he couldn't look away. Warmth spread through me and the urge to leap into his arms wasn't an easy thing to resist.

"Yup, totally fine." Jesus, was that shaky, choking voice, mine?

"Come on," he said and gave me an eyeroll, more playful than I'd ever known him to be. His voice was soft though, careful. "I mean it."

I looked over his shoulder to the house to make sure Theo and Ren were still inside.

"I'm not going to deny that you're an insane kisser." Which was going to be the bane of my existence since I was five full months into accidental celibacy. I still had a role to play. Calm, cool, and collected, like nothing had happened.

"Oh yeah?" His smirk wasn't even funny.

"Don't look so impressed with yourself," I said, even though the kiss had lived in my mind, in every waking moment, really, and we were going to have to act like everything was normal.

"Sorry, you were saying?" Chris said, hands lifted in mock surrender.

"I don't think we want the same things," I told him truthfully. "Are you going to stand here in front of me and tell me you'd be okay with casual sex and nothing more?" Chris' eyes flashed, but he didn't object. "You're a relationship guy, and I'm not a relationship girl."

"You could be," he said and I drew in an involuntary breath as he took a step closer. As his body moved into my space and I got a deep inhale of his scent, my nerves haywire.

"This is attraction, Chris. This is good enough," I said.

"Attraction is simple," Chris said, shrugging as he lifted a hand to brush against my cheek. "All it is is proximity plus hormones. I want more than that."

I intended to argue back that he made the case perfectly. I hadn't had a lover in months and Chris and I spent every week in each other's arms at the dance studio. Simple. Easily explained. Proximity and hormones.

Liar.

Instead of arguing, I put my hand on his chest and for one moment, leaned forward. Chris' green eyes darkened in anticipation, but I shook my head and took a step back.

"They could see us," I said. "The only thing I would be interested in is sleeping with you to get it out of my system." If that didn't ring completely true, I didn't stop to consider why.

"That's not what I want," Chris said. And I had to respect him for his honesty even as it caused a strange dread to roll through me. "I think maybe you could be charmed into seeing things my way."

"You don't want to make a bet." I scoffed, couldn't help it. "Look what happened last time."

Chris' eyes undeniably grew wide with interest and I bit my tongue. Damn. What a freaking opening. One I hadn't intentionally meant to give.

"What exactly are you saying, Orelia? You think you could beat me again. If that's so, name the terms."

It was so ridiculous. I pressed my lips hard to prevent a smile, but Chris knew. In his eyes, in his unreserved smile, he saw my amusement.

"We're almost thirty years old, we're not going to make a sex bet," I said, but despite the insanity, it was becoming hard to resist the smile.

"I simply think, given the circumstances, I'll charm you into a relationship, before you talk me into bed."

"Really? Chris, if you really think that, my opinion of your intelligence is going to take a serious hit." He seemed completely unbothered by the incredulity of my tone and stepped forward as my eyes darted behind him to make sure Ren and Theo were still inside.

I had nowhere to go except against my car and Chris took advantage, leaned down slowly, so his mouth was almost pressed against

my ear. I shivered, couldn't stop it when he showed me a hint of what could be and my core tightened in response.

"I've thought about being in your bed since we first met, and have already been resisting you since day one. I know how to suffer through that, Orelia," he said and my breath hitched and he pulled back pausing when his mouth nearly slotted over mine. "But you've never had to withstand my affections."

"What?" I asked, partially dazed. "What do you mean?"

"You think you misread my intentions that first night on the beach," Chris said, and his breath fell over my lips, making it hard to think, hard to resist. "But you were wrong."

Shivers cascaded down my arms and a wicked sort of victory danced on Chris' features. I didn't want to analyze what he was saying. That the attraction had been there from the beginning, that the want had been there too, that it had *never* been one-sided.

"I'm not betting against you," I breathed, lifting my chin even though it brought our faces closer.

"Chicken," he said, lips curving. This side of Chris, devious, confident, I'd never seen before.

"You're a child."

"Scaredy cat," he teased.

Begrudgingly, I smiled. Fine. If he wanted to play this game, I could play. "I assume the only actual prize is satisfaction."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Chris said and pulled back. I missed the feel of his body close to mine immediately.

The first kiss could be laughed off as a mistake, a joke. It was the possibility of a second kiss that wouldn't be so easily explained, that would mark the point of no return. We both knew it, could feel it in the static charge between us.

"I guess that's it then," I said and stepped away, towards the SUV, just as Theo and Ren came out of the house.

The tension was definitely there. For some reason—probably all the dance lessons—we had gone from indifference to attraction for the first time in the five years of knowing each other. I tapped my fingers against my thigh as I considered it. It's only a crush, not worth getting worked up over. Gaining confidence in the idea now, I affirmed to myself that things would go back to normal, the attraction—the crush—would fade.

Chapter Thirteen

LAUGHTER FILLED MOST of the trip along with trash talking Dominika. Oh, we all admitted she was a fantastic dancer, but what a *fucking hard-ass*. Chris didn't mention the time she'd yelled at me, or that he'd defended me to her after everyone else had left, but I thought about it. About how warm it had made me feel. I kept sneaking glances at him throughout the ride, but he seemed content to ignore me.

When we stopped for gas everyone got out and stretched, and I leaned against the car, bending over to stretch out my cramped legs. I looked behind me when I heard Chris muttering.

"What was that?" I asked, sweetly. Too sweetly.

"Nothing," he said and then back with an intensity that speared me. "You're playing dirty."

I didn't hide my smirk as I turned back around and continued to stretch. "All I'm doing is playing to my strengths."

The trip only lasted a few hours, and it was getting dark by the time we arrived in Palm Springs. The bed and breakfast we'd booked was adorable and perfectly situated in the center of town.

"Everyone go ahead and get cleaned up. Our dinner reservation is in ninety minutes at La Cave," Theo said, happily taking charge. "It'll just be us tonight, and tomorrow everyone else will be in town."

Ren handed us each our room keys, which were old fashioned bronze keys the size of my finger. Theo and Ren had booked a cottage on the property as opposed to one of the bedrooms, so it was just Chris and me who made our way to the second floor. Our rooms were directly across from one another, which I tried hard not to think about.

"I'll see you in a bit," I told him and tried to ignore the satisfied grin on Chris' face.

The first thing I did was move to the bathroom. I probably didn't need a shower, but having one after a day of travel was something I wanted desperately. Especially since I was going to wear a new outfit, I didn't want to already be sweaty and stale.

When I turned the shower nozzle up, a stuttered clunky sound came from behind the wall of the shower and no water came out. Sighing, I went to the sink faucet to see if it was an issue with the shower itself or the whole-ass bathroom. The sink made the same weird noise the shower did and as I went to turn it off, the faucet burst, shooting water at me.

I may or may not have screamed.

"Shit, shit shit," I said as I fell over and scrambled backwards, covered in water, but thankfully no worse for wear.

I was shoving a towel over top of the sink when the slamming began on my door.

"Orelia. Orelia, what's going on?" Panic was in Chris' voice, in the sound of the knocking.

I threw a second towel over the sink and quickly flung open the door. He moved towards me immediately and gripped my face.

"Are you okay? I heard you scream." His eyes were wide as he looked me over.

"My bathroom sink blew up."

Chris' hand was still on my face, but his gaze narrowed, like he was only just now noticing I was dripping wet.

"Put your things in my room. I'll go talk to the front desk," he said.

"Not going to try to fix the sink yourself?" I asked, an attempt at humor.

"I don't know jack-shit about pipes," he said with a shrug and his hand moved from my face and slid down to my elbows before he left to seek out reception..

Noticing his bedroom door was open for me, I moved my stuff across the hall. In his room were two queen-sized beds. I threw my suitcase on the same one where he'd thrown his, and waited.

When Chris returned, he was a little grim.

"They don't want you to sleep in a janky room, especially while they're working on repairs," Chris said. "They're going to refund you the cost of the room, but they have limited availability, so it looks like you're sharing with me."

"Nothing else available?" I asked after clearing my throat and trying not to sound as panicked as I was.

"No, sorry," Chris said with a wince.

Chris and I had shared hotel rooms before. It wasn't a big deal. We made significantly less money than Ren and Theo, and so over the years it sometimes made sense to share. I couldn't muster the effort to lie to myself. This was going to be *very* difficult.

"Well, thanks for trying."

"Here's a second key for you," Chris said and didn't quite meet my eyes as he handed it over. I was glad I wasn't the only one panicking.

The reality of sharing a room with him for the whole weekend was starting to settle heavy in my stomach, but I consoled myself with the fact that it wasn't one bed. If this were one of the fanfictions I'd translated as a teen, there would definitely only be one bed. So it wasn't a big deal to share with Chris. We'd shared plenty of hotel rooms over the years. We'd slept in hostels together, on bunk beds, shared our space because inevitably Theo and Ren paired off.

"I'll step out so you can get ready," Chris said and left me alone in our shared room.

Chapter Fourteen

I SHOWERED IN Chris' working bathroom and wet my hair so I could tease it with product as it dried. Thinking about getting ready helped me not think about sharing a room with Chris. He came back to the room after I'd put on my outfit and heels, shrugged at me in apology, and then went straight into the bathroom.

I debated for a minute about going to the front desk to beg for another room as I stared at the short distance between the two beds with hands on my hips. I decided against it and used the mirror in the hall to apply a little makeup, and overall was pleased with the general effect. My hair was mussed and curling slightly, taking on a bouncy bob. The matching crop top and skirt of baby blue with pink and orange floral patterns made me feel like a spring fairy.

I grinned at myself and turned around to see the back. Meeting my green eyes in the mirror, I smacked my own ass and said, "You rock."

Steam released from the bathroom and I closed my eyes. I felt the flush all over and my stomach dropped as I turned to face Chris. His expression was somewhere between amused and astonished.

"What," Chris said slowly, "was that?" He was smiling. It wasn't a grin, not even a smirk. But a soft, bemused smile. Something genuine.

"It's something my mom taught me. She taught my sisters, too." I was a little bit defensive, but I wasn't embarrassed by the action itself. More grateful than anything my mother had instilled such confidence and body positivity in myself and my sisters.

"Taught you to, what? To give out spankings?" Now he was definitely laughing at me, his eyes sparking.

"No." I laughed. "To greet the day with confidence. You know, it's a self-love thing. And also a self-supporting thing, I guess."

I gave a little shrug and glanced at his chest, which was still bare and glistening from his shower. Bad idea. Heat lashed down my stomach and the urge to trace his manta ray tattoo, to tangle in his shoulder length hair was overwhelming.

“So everyday...you spank yourself to get ready,” his voice became gravelly, like the prospect of spanking me was at the forefront of his mind and not altogether unappealing.

My nipples pinched at the thought of him spanking me and the ways his eyes flashed told me his own thoughts weren't far off.

“Somebody's gotta do it,” I said, choking on an attempt to recover from the shock of desire.

The silence between us turned heavy as Chris' eyes wandered to my bare waist. I swallowed when I finally realized he was watching me watch him, standing there in a short hotel towel.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, voice dropping. “For someone to spank you and tell you you've been good? Or bad?”

I ignored the jolt to my system, the heat that ignited between my legs.

“Are you offering?” I challenged.

There was so much space between us. And yet, even without Chris in reaching distance, I worried *I* might cross that space, that line. Chris was waiting, his eyes daring me to. Both our questions hung in the silence, neither of us willing to back down, but neither of us willing to move forward either.

He moved forward, the smell of his body wash drifting behind him. I started to move, but I couldn't be sure if it was closer or further away. The buzzing of both our phones stopped me, brought us both back to reality.

Theo sent a voice message into the group chat and I held my phone between us to play it. “Come on guys, we're heading out early to get drinks.”

After exchanging a glance, Chris said, "Go ahead. I'll meet you down there." His voice was gravelly and his fists were clenched.

I grabbed my clutch and opened the door to leave, but I looked over my shoulder as I did so and saw Chris rub at his face as he sighed. Tension flooded me as I closed the door.

I explained the new room situation to Theo and Ren when I met them downstairs and received numerous apologies from both of them, which I waved off.

"It's not like we could have planned it. And the staff was great. No use crying over spilt milk, you know."

"You're more even tempered than I am, O," Theo said.

"We all know that," Ren replied and leaned over to kiss Theo on the cheek. "Let's go to the wine room."

"Oh shoot, I forgot my wallet," Theo said as he patted himself down. "You guys head there, I'll be right back."

Ren cornered me at the edge of the room while we poured ourselves two glasses, and I grinned as he started speaking in Japanese.

"You're giving Theo Japanese lessons, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said with affected nonchalance as I took my first sip.

"He left his journal on the desk last week," Ren said and raised his eyebrows at me. *"And he's been speaking in full sentences recently, instead of pointing at things and saying what they are."*

"Good for him," I said, not willing to abandon the ruse just yet.

He smiled in the silence and I couldn't help but grin back at him.

"Thank you," he said, switching back to English. "It's nice to talk to Theo like that. I've always been willing to teach him, but he gets weird about it, like he's putting me out."

"Out of curiosity, is he writing in Kana or romanji?"

Ren laughed at that. "A weird hybrid of both. Mostly Kana now, though he doesn't know any Kanji. Don't tell him I know, will you? He's really proud of his progress, I can tell."

"I'll take it to the grave," I told him, crossing my heart.

When we made it to the restaurant, I strategically moved to the center of the rounded booth, closed in by Ren on one side and Theo on the other. Not that I was worried about what being pressed against Chris would do to me. Nah. I was just...*just what?* My inner voice laughed at me and I gave up trying to lie to myself. Chris sat on the other side of Theo, a perfectly respectable distance away.

"Happy bachelor party!" I said.

"Let's hear a speech, shall we?" Chris said.

Theo would normally take this responsibility, but Ren gently laid his hand on his fiancé's forearm and Theo quieted immediately. Ren smiled and lifted his glass.

"You guys know how hard this last year was for me," he said quietly. And we did know. He'd been promoted to CFO of the company he worked for and after the wave of excitement had worn off, a wave of depression had taken its place. "I've struggled with depression since I was a pre-teen, and at times worried if I was going to make it to thirty. I appreciate all your support, your understanding, and most importantly your love." Ren wasn't like Theo who declared his feelings so easily, so honestly, so when he did in his speech, it meant a lot. "I love you guys so much and I'm so happy we could all be together to celebrate."

Ren lifted his glass and we all took sips of our drinks. Theo's eyes were wet, but the rest of us smiled and cheered.

"Orelia, have you told our friends about your current translation project?" Ren asked.

"Yes, Mom," I laughed. "I'm way ahead of schedule and should be done with it before September. It's so much more interesting than non-fiction and more challenging when it comes to the Kanji. Some of them I didn't know, I had to research."

"I'm glad you're happy," Theo said and leaned over to kiss me on the cheek. "You're going to crush it."

I was starting to feel a little tipsy from the wine, which is the only excuse I have, apart from maybe wanting to make everyone laugh.

“Do you guys wanna know a secret?”

“What?” Chris asked quickly, instinctively. Ren shot him a side-eye I didn’t want to analyze.

“The last time I translated any fantasy fiction was when I was thirteen.”

“Thirteen?” Ren asked, beating Chris to the punch. “What are you talking about, O?”

“Okay, okay. I’ve been translating work from English to Japanese and back since I was a teenager, because,” I said slowly. There were nods around the room, and Theo knew exactly what I was going to reveal based on the way he was trying to reign in his laughter. “I was writing and translating fanfiction.”

Theo finally let out his laughter, while Chris and Ren were perplexed. I explained to them what I was talking about as Theo laughed so hard he had to clutch his side and wipe tears from his eyes.

“What kind of fanfiction?” Theo asked innocently.

“You know exactly what kind,” I said and stuck my tongue out.

“The sexy, spicy, smutty kind,” Theo laughed and told Chris and Ren. The words *Zutara*, *SamBucky*, and *Catradora* popped into my head, rapid fire.

“You seem to know quite a bit about fanfiction yourself, Theodore Sifakis.”

“Orelia,” Ren said. *“Please send me some to read. I always need a good laugh.”*

“You would be in stitches if you read some of the shit I translated when I was fourteen years old.”

“Pretty please.”

“Maybe for your birthday.”

“You guys are so annoying!” Chris said, but it was with a sweet smile. “Don’t make me come over there.”

Ren and I both knew his threats were empty, but we lifted our hands in surrender and smirked.

“Did you say *tanjobi*?” Theo whispered to me. “Birthday?”

“That’s right. Did you catch anything else?”

“Not much, I think you said a number, but I lost it.”

“It’s okay,” I whispered to him. “You’ll get better at it, and we weren’t speaking slowly so you could understand.”

A little while later, after we’d finished dessert and were getting ready to leave, Theo mentioned a New York trip for himself and Ren the following week.

“That seems last minute,” I said and took a sip of water, attempting to be responsible.

“It’s a pre-honeymoon, honeymoon,” Ren said, laughter spilling out and cheeks reddened, giving away his intoxicated state.

“If I ever get married, I’m just gonna elope. No fuss, no muss, no stress,” I said firmly and maybe a little less soberly than I intended. Ren and Theo stared at me open mouthed. “Oh, come on! It’s not that crazy of an idea.”

“You haven’t been interested in a serious relationship in all the time I’ve known you,” Ren said slowly, still a little dumbstruck. “Let alone a marriage.”

I didn’t dare look at Chris.

“I know,” I said, because I did. It had always seemed pointless to commit yourself to one person and I’d loudly expressed that in the past. “It doesn’t seem as off-putting now as it has in the past.” I didn’t realize how I felt until I said it aloud, but the words rang true to me.

“Really?” Ren asked. Ren’s stare was towards Chris, and I wanted to slap him upside the head. “Why is that?”

“Guys, I’m drunk. I clearly don’t know what I’m saying.”

“I think you know what you’re saying,” Chris said, speaking for the first time during my word vomit.

Very seriously, I said, "I'm not committing to anything. I'm just saying, I'm leaving the door open, I guess you could say."

For you, my mind supplied unhelpfully, I'm leaving the door open for you.

"In addition to Ren's birthday, we're here to celebrate the upcoming nuptials. Which means our next stop is a male strip club," Theo said.

Theo's demands for us to get moving to the strip club finally drew the attention off me, which was good, because I was in danger of sweating my skin off. Heat prickled my face, my chest, and under my armpits.

"That's so tacky," Chris said, but he was grinning.

"It's tradition." I stuck my nose up at him, but smiled anyway.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur and I embraced it. I worried if I didn't, I was going to do something incredibly stupid. Like continue thinking about Chris, and our shared room, and what could very easily happen, if I just allowed it to. We were both careful of each other, always keeping Theo and Ren between us. And every time I thought of Chris, I took a drink.

By the end of the night, I was barely standing.

"We're so drunk," I said.

Ren and Theo and Chris had their arms around one another, helping each other stand. I laughed as I trailed after. They were swaying from side to side, as likely to bring one another down as they were to keep each other upright.

"Wow," I said as I stared at the cottage they'd booked, which had a small, private pool right behind it. "I know what I'm doing tomorrow."

"Shh," Ren said and turned to me sharply. "Don't let Theo see it."

I giggled. Theo was as likely to jump in fully clothed, or strip and skinny dip. I shook my head at him and we all made it to their door

safely. We reached Theo and Ren's room and we let go of each other. Only for Ren and Theo to stumble into each other.

"Good night, boys. See you tomorrow," I said and kissed them both on the cheek.

Ren laughed when I saluted him as he did his best to tug Theo into the cottage. Chris was just as stumbly and put his arm around my waist as we walked back to the main house.

"You are knackered," I said, and heard myself slur a little.

"Yup," Chris said, snapping the *p*.

He seemed content for us to stroll in silence, and I liked the way he tucked me to his side even as we zig-zagged unevenly into the B&B. When we made it to our room, Chris allowed me to push him against the wall as I fumbled in my clutch for the room key. I stopped my shuffling and faced him.

"You smell so good," he said. He was beyond drunk, and I was only slightly better, but something about the intensity was sobering.

"Thanks," I said, because that's all I could say when his face was so close to mine, when the temptation to close those last few inches of distance was overwhelming. "You smell good too."

Chris' smile was drunk and slow and his hands moved to the back of my neck with surprising accuracy.

"You know what though. You bend over way too much."

My laughter was partial relief, partial humor and Chris' hand fell away from my neck, giving me time to recover, and not jump his bones.

"I was trying to tease you," I admit.

"Well it worked, and now you know it."

He stepped closer to me, putting his arms on either side of my body. I wasn't sure if it was to stabilize himself or to trap me, his intent was unclear. Chris kept space between our bodies, but his face came to the side of my neck, pushing my hair out of the way. I shouldn't allow this to continue, but I had to close my eyes and

think hard to remember why. Several uncontrolled heartbeats ticked by with his warm breath on my neck, paralyzing me.

"You're too controlled," he said. "Even now, when I know you want this as badly as I do."

"You're one to talk about control," I said as a zing of arousal shot straight to my clit when he spoke into my neck, his lips moving like a kiss.

He pulled away, with more control than I thought him capable of. His face took on a contemplative look as he considered me, even with his drunk blurred eyes. "I suppose you're right."

I was still breathing heavily against the door, trying to sort through my thoughts. Chris backed away and reached into his pocket for his own key, and while I tried to recover, he opened our room and stumbled in.

Chris fell into the bed immediately, but I still needed time to recover. I went to wash my face and brush my teeth. I put a glass of water and a painkiller on the table next to Chris. By the time I'd changed into my pajamas and climbed into my bed, Chris' breathing was heavy with sleep.

As I crawled in under the covers, I almost wished for the one-bed trope. But this was for the best. Definitely for the best.

Chapter Fifteen

I PROPPED MY head on my hand as I looked at Chris' back where he still slept on his bed. Being drunk had helped Chris, but I'd lain awake for hours, trying to resist the urge to climb into bed with him. I eventually fell asleep to the even sounds of his breathing. It was ridiculous and I was cranky as I yanked the sheets off and went to the bathroom for my morning routine.

I was brushing my teeth as I checked the group text—now called *PS Baby*, for Palm Springs—and found about two dozen messages with pictures from the night before and itinerary suggestions for when everyone awoke. Ren had texted into the group fifteen minutes earlier asking if anyone was alive and wanted to go for a hike with him and Theo's brothers, but I wanted to fall asleep in the sun and have some coffee by the pool.

I quickly changed into a swimsuit. As I slipped the gauzy beach cover over my head, Chris opened his eyes, like he'd known exactly when the appropriate moment would be to wake, and I was left to wonder exactly how long he'd been faking sleep.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his voice rough from sleep, but his eyes were sharp as they surveyed me.

"Swimming pool," I laughed, gesturing obviously to the outfit.

"Well, you're definitely not dressed for a hike," he said and shifted on the bed, pulling a pillow into his lap.

"Are you—" I started, eyeing the pillow in his lap suspiciously, but stopped when he glared at me.

I couldn't stop my grin. Either from me and my swimsuit, or by nature of the morning, he had something in his lap to cover up. I bit my lip and laughed before I turned to leave. His hands twitched on the pillow and for a moment I thought he'd toss it at me.

"Enjoy yourself, Chris."

His gaze lingered on my body, on the swimsuit. He'd seen me in a dozen or more swimsuits over the years, but the one I was wearing, covered by a gauzy white dress, was meant to show skin, not survive being tossed on a wave.

I flipped my hair over my shoulder and turned away from his hot gaze that gave me goosebumps.

"Don't forget sunblock," he called, and I rolled my eyes, flipping him off as I left the room.

Instead of heading directly for the pool, I met Theo at the breakfast table in the main house. My head was pounding and I gratefully guzzled the water set out at our table. We were both wearing sunglasses and Theo looked a little green.

"Too old for this," I muttered, rubbing my fingers at my temple.

"You're not turning thirty for another couple of weeks," Theo said, biting a piece of toast carefully. "You know nothing of pain."

I rolled my eyes and was relieved when my head didn't explode. I knew I had bags under my eyes from sleeping so vigilantly in the same room as Chris and thinking of his mouth on my neck, on other parts of my body.

Whatever decision he'd reached in the week since our kiss, it wasn't ignoring what had happened, which was what I'd been prepared to do.

Theo seemed to be staring at me through his sunglasses. Oh right, he'd asked me a question. About what we were going to do that night.

"I don't think I'm going to drink tonight," I muttered. "I can't believe Ren and Andrew went hiking this morning." We both shook our heads in mutual condemnation of their exuberance.

From the breakfast buffet we selected food with lots of hash-browns and bacon to help absorb the rest of the alcohol.

“Ren never gets hangovers,” Theo said, voice tinged with bitter envy. “That sadist was up at six and went to the gym. You’d think he was the one required to take his shirt off on camera.”

I patted Theo’s hand in commiseration. “Poor baby.”

Our conversation was jumbled, and eventually I sat back in silence, too tired to actually participate. The food and water and coffee over breakfast succeeded in helping me almost fully recover from the night before. And Theo was vibrating across from me with much of the same energy.

As soon as we finished breakfast, I asked, “Pool?”

Theo nodded and offered to carry my tote bag. The cottage with the private pool was an excellent choice and I was happy to take advantage of Theo and Ren’s hospitality. We sat in sunbathing chairs by the edge of the pool and set our stuff down.

“I wrote my vows,” Theo confessed and handed me a piece of paper filled completely front to back, boldly, in pen.

“Yay! This is amazing,” I told him.

“Just put it away for now,” Theo said and shifted nervously. “And translate it when we get back to LA.”

“I’ll translate it before our session on Tuesday and we can start working on it.”

“What if I can’t get it down by the wedding?”

“We still have five weeks,” I told him and reached over to squeeze his hand. “If I can learn to dance, you can learn this speech.”

“Thanks, O,” Theo said and pulled me into a hug.

“Aww, you big teddy bear,” I said.

“On a different note,” Theo started. “You’ve seemed a little distracted so far this weekend, actually pretty distracted all summer. Is something going on?”

Surprise washed over me. I’d always felt as if I were unknowable, but Theo was staring at me, sure of himself, of his deduction that something was different about me.

"I'm rethinking my life I guess," I said cautiously. Cautiously because it was the truth and also I didn't know what to do about it.

"So nothing major," he laughed.

"Nothing major," I agreed, but breathed easier. "I guess thirty has me thinking about what I want now. And I hadn't considered it would change that much from when I was in my early twenties, but it has. I don't know what I want. Or maybe I thought I knew what was best for me, but it's not working so much anymore."

"I get that," Theo said. "I think we're all changing a bit, and maybe the marriage thing for Ren and me has got us more focused on each other. But you can talk to me about anything, you know?"

"I know, Theo," I said with a grin. "You're the best."

"I know," he grinned. "I'm going to do a couple laps in the pool though. Exercise always cures my hangovers."

"Psycho," I spat at him as I stripped off my white beach cover to reveal a very tiny yellow bikini.

"Wowza," Theo said, whistling for the added drama.

"You're so supportive." I grinned as I lay in the pool chair.

Surfing required a more sturdy swimsuit than the tantalizing three squares that barely covered me, but goddamn did I look good in it. I also pulled out my giant sun hat, which made me feel properly fancy.

Right as I was reaching for the sunblock in my bag, Chris walked out to greet us. I started rubbing the sunblock on my arms and legs, as I focused on not staring at Chris while I was doing it. Even so, I could feel his gaze, and while I was rubbing the sunblock on my chest and stomach, I couldn't resist looking up. As I did, Theo jumped into the water, splashing Chris, who laughed gruffly before coming to sit on the blue and white pool chair beside me.

"That's Theo's chair," I said.

"He'll live," Chris said dryly and nodded to where Theo began swimming laps.

I held onto the sunblock for a moment, debating between calling Theo back, burning red, or giving in to the way Chris was eyeing me.

"Would you please get my back?" I asked Chris, passing him the sunblock.

Chris' eyes darted to the sunblock and then to me. I was careful to drop the sunblock into his hands, lest there be any lingering moments, as I turned my back to him. I heard the sunblock being squeezed into Chris' hands a moment before he pressed them to my neck. I didn't try to convince myself I could handle it as he dragged his hands up and down, spreading out the sunscreen.

I let out a soft shuddering breath that I hoped Chris didn't see, hear, or feel. His fingers dipped under the suit top, and he ran his hands across my back to the side, where they very nearly grazed the side of my boobs.

"This is torture, Orelia." His voice was pure gravel and he put additional pressure on my lower back.

I shivered even as the sun beat down on my skin. Since I wasn't sure I'd be able to find words, I looked over my shoulder at him and raised my brow.

"Lay on your stomach and I'll get your legs too," Chris said hoarsely.

He absolutely didn't need to do that. I could have definitely rubbed my legs, but without question, I found myself laying on my stomach. Before he spread the sunblock, he trailed a hand over the back of my knee, like he couldn't stop himself.

Chris' hands spreading the sunblock over my shoulders, my neck, even under the thin bikini straps was bearable, but as his hands moved to the curve of my ass and the back of my thigh, the space between my legs started to pulse.

His hands ran lightly over the crease where my ass met my thighs and I resisted the urge to widen my legs, to push my hips back and offer myself to him, for him to touch me there.

"Now who's doling out the torture," I said on an uneven breath, fidgeting under his touch.

Chris' voice was gruff. "Still you."

I looked back and saw him staring at the exposed parts of my ass in the thong bikini. I might have been pleased with the turn of events if the heat of his hands, still running over my thighs and back, wasn't burning me. Again, his fingers dipped below my swimsuit with fingers lathered in sunscreen, except this time it was a full palming of my ass instead of the relative innocence of mid-back. I buried my face in my hands and smothered a moan and the urge to tilt my hips even further back against his hand.

"I can't tell if this suit was made in heaven or hell," Chris murmured and the gravitational pull between us was undeniable. He was leaning forward and I found myself pushing back, wanting more contact, more of him.

"I never took you for the religious type." I taunted, knowing I was in way over my head. His gaze moved slowly over my body until he met my eyes.

"Brat," he whispered into my ear as his lotioned hands moved to the back of my neck and he squeezed. My gaze shot to his and he looked at me curiously, like he was also trying to figure it out.

"You like it," I said through a shuddering breath, still unsure if that word made me want to deck him or preen beneath him.

"So do you," Chris said with a wink as Theo climbed out of the water and moved back over to our open seats

"Oh, good idea," Theo said as he grabbed the sunblock. "Would you mind getting me too?"

I resolutely turned my head and closed my eyes, determined to ignore Chris and maybe, pathetically, pretended to fall asleep in order to do so. He and Theo spoke quietly, as Chris pulled out a spray bottle of sunscreen and applied it to Theo. They laughed about the night before while I stared open mouthed at Chris.

He winked at me before sliding the sunglasses back over his nose and I closed my eyes and rested my head on my hands, trying not to think about what that meant. I eventually dozed off in the sun.

"Flip over," Chris' voice dug into me through the fog of sleep and I found myself obeying before I was fully awake.

My eyes shot open to where Chris' palms were pushing me at my shoulder and hip. Fully turned over now, front exposed to the sun, I shielded my eyes as I turned to find Chris grinning wickedly.

"Good girl."

Jesus Christ. I looked around frantically for Theo, only to find him at the water cooler across the pool from us.

I flipped Chris off, which would have held more weight if there wasn't a hot blush of pleasure on my cheeks.

"I know what you're doing," I snapped.

"What am I doing?"

"You're trying to..." My sentence fizzled off and Chris raised his brow as if to urge me on. "You're flirting."

"Well spotted."

"How do you even know I'd like something like *good girl* or *brat*? You're very presumptive."

"I prefer observant."

I huffed a breath of disbelief. "Wrong."

"Am I?" he asked.

He wasn't. He was far from being wrong. This was different from being able to guess a favorite color or something asinine. He'd barely touched me and yet he knew, or could guess, something so intimate...it was nerve wracking. This—I decided as I scrambled for my sunglasses and jerkily shoved them on my face—was war.

"You know," I started, trying to keep my nerves and arousal under wraps as I looked at him. "For someone who claims to be a relationship guy, and all the romantic bull that goes along with it, I think you're probably equally susceptible to pet names."

"Is that what you think?" Chris asked, and he might have tried to sound amused, but his words came out breathy and fast. Too fast.

"So what is it?" I asked. "When your face is finally between my legs, or your cock is buried to the hilt, what do you want to be called?"

He wasn't breathing and so I grinned at him, all teeth, all predator.

"Orelia," Chris said, warning in his tone, in the rough scrape of his voice that raised goosebumps on my skin.

"No, silly. That's *my* name." I was really enjoying this. "What do you like? Chris? Baby?"

He was breathing very carefully as he looked at me. I was warm all over. "Daddy?"

Chris choked on the water he was drinking, so much so it drew Theo's attention from across the pool. My grin spread slowly, sweetly, in victory as Chris stared at me caught somewhere between surprised disbelief and desire.

"Are you alright, man?" Theo asked Chris, as he returned with a glass of water and slapped him on the back

"Totally fine," Chris said in a strangled voice.

Delighted to have a comeback, I shook my shoulders and settled back on the chair, content to enjoy the sun for a few more hours, knowing I'd won that round.

I continued to rotate in the sun. Andrew's girlfriend Georgie joined us, grinning brightly. She was more than happy to join Theo and Chris in the pool and eventually I was cajoled in as well. The cool water was delicious against my sun soaked skin and I did a few breaststrokes, keeping my full body submerged. Georgie floated on her back nearby, asking us what we'd done the night before.

I twisted in the water, content to float and enjoy the water for once without the challenge of catching the next wave. It reminded me of my early childhood, of beach days where the sand was bright

and warm and the water was tempting. Even as a child, I'd learned to ride the waves with just my body, feeling the push and pull of the water and the enjoyment of its rocking.

The solitude and peace was ruined when Theo cannonballed near my head and upon breaching the surface, shouted, "Let's play chicken!"

I darted for Theo, but Georgie was already there, preparing to climb on his shoulders. Chris didn't look pleased exactly, but he didn't appear opposed to it either. I was more concerned about my bikini staying in place, but Chris was already reaching for me.

"Theo will be insufferable if he wins," I said, hoping to ignore the awareness taught between us.

Chris nodded at me and dipped underwater so I could mount his shoulders. When Theo and Georgie charged us immediately, relief settled in my chest at not having to have another moment alone with Chris' head settled so intimately against me.

My hands gripped Georgie's as we started to push each other, and for a few long minutes we laughed and chased at each other. I released Georgie's hands quickly and reached for her ankles, lifting her feet and forcing her backwards. The momentum sent both Georgie and Theo underneath the water. I flexed to no one in particular and Theo started splashing us, calling for a rematch, while he caught his breath.

By the time we were done, I'd almost forgotten how intimate my position on Chris was. Theo swam to the other side of the pool and Georgie climbed out, leaving us alone. I set my hands on Chris' head and rested my chin on top of them, content to stay there, amused at the both of us.

"Thanks for not dropping me," I said. And then, because I couldn't help myself. "You performed pretty well between my legs."

I went to fall over and off in retreat, but Chris' grip on my thighs held me in place.

"Thank you," Chris said, his voice teasing. "I just assumed I'd be facing the other way."

"And that's something you want?" I asked quietly, and heard my own cautious insecurity.

Chris must have heard it too because he said, "Orelia, there's nothing I want more than to bury my face between your thighs and make you scream with so much pleasure you forget your own god-damn name."

The heat swirling low in my belly was so hot it hurt. He looked at me, his face turned almost into my thigh as my back curved, so I could whisper to him without being overheard.

"Christopher Alexander Immani, I had no idea how filthy your mouth was."

"You started it, Orelia Alexandria Kane," he said as he gently nipped the inside of my thigh before he pulled away. It short circuited my brain, the way he said my name and the promise of what his mouth could do. "You make it impossible to stay away."

"You want more than what I can give you." I knew it was true. If Chris had only wanted sex, I was sure we would have already been there. But Chris didn't do casual, and I didn't do relationships. "Really. I don't want either of us to get hurt."

"So what *do* you want?" Chris asked, his hands still on my thighs.

"A ceasefire."

There was a hesitation on Chris' part, the only indication I needed to confirm it was the truth.

"Why not try it?" he asked and my heart did a thing that was definitely not fluttering. He was asking me out.

"Why don't you *try* it?" I said. "A fling would probably be good for you."

His mouth grazed my inner thigh one more time, but instead of responding to my question, Chris' mouth quirked.

Between one breath and the next I was flying through the air and sinking beneath the surface. I managed not to swallow a lungful of water, but still sputtered in surprise and delight as I broke the surface. I lunged at him in the water and he allowed me to tackle him under. We fought playfully for a while and it should have been awkward or charged, or anything other than the easy way in which it actually was, like it was something we'd done a dozen times before.

Ren joined Theo at our pool chairs and clapped at our performance as we climbed out of the pool.

"I declare Orelia the victor of that battle," Theo said, pretending to be a king with a scepter.

Chris and I towed off, and Theo was content to give Ren a play-by-play of our chicken match. But Ren was watching me closely, confusion and something else dancing in his gaze.

"*Nani?*" I asked him in Japanese, What?

Theo's ears perked and for the first time I wondered if it was a mistake to start teaching him Japanese. Ren noticed his listening too and smirked at me.

"*Anata-tachi wa tomodachi desu ka? Omoshiro.*" Are you friends now? That's interesting.

"*Nani demo arimasen.*" It's no big deal.

Ren shrugged but kept his knowing gaze on me. He'd noticed Chris and I had never been as friendly with each other as we were with everyone else. That also meant he was definitely noticing the change in our relationship, whatever that change was. I turned away from Ren, unsure if I wanted him to see the depth of what was going on.

Chapter Sixteen

I HAD ONE outfit left, one I'd been too nervous to wear, but after researching *Divine*, the club we'd planned for the evening, it seemed like the way to go. It was a tight forest green bodycon dress that stopped at mid thigh. I struggled for nearly five minutes before I gave in.

"Chris," I said tentatively, finally admitting defeat and walking out of the bathroom. "Can you please zip me up?"

His eyes raked over me, and it was as intimate as if it were his hands, but he didn't say anything, just moved to stand behind me. He gently grabbed the zipper where it had stopped its progress in the middle of my back. The long sleeves and low cleavage left me feeling hot and cold. I shivered when Chris brought the zipper to the base of my neck and paused there as he met my eyes in the mirror. The intensity in them told me more than a thousand words could.

What had been fun and teasing the hours and days before, became far heavier as we watched each other. Chris didn't say a word when I smacked my ass in the mirror. Didn't mention anything untoward as we walked the ten minutes from our Bed & Breakfast to the club. Didn't try to flirt, or even touch me.

Where yesterday had been an intimate group of us, tonight was a big ass party with all of Theo and Ren's closest friends. We gave Theo's name to the bouncer managing the red velvet rope to the club, and he allowed us inside, mercifully cutting past the line snaking around the block.

Theo grinned wide at us from across the room the second we stepped inside. The steady thrum of music and the already packed dance floor was right up his alley. The glowing dance floor and the finery rivaled Theo's own party spaces. The layout of the club with its multiple bars and live DJ gave the party an air that reminded me more of Vegas or NYC than Palm Springs. It was bold and excit-

ing and the music was loud and popular. Ren was bouncing his hand against his thigh to the beat.

I knew most everyone in our group by face, if not by name, but I wasn't expecting Thad, the hot guy from Theo's birthday party.

Thad, Theo, and Ren walked over to where Chris and I had been lingering in the entryway.

"Good to see you again, Orelia," Thad said, and gave me a charming smile that under normal circumstances would have appealed to me.

"Thad," I said with a smile and I hoped someone else would pick up the conversation.

Chris' gaze was on me, but Ren's was the only one on him.

Theo, god bless him, jumped right in. "Thad lives in Palm Springs, and his brother is the DJ tonight."

Thick silence was beginning to descend on our corner, as Chris tried to read the space between Thad and I. It was only then I realized my friends were looking to me for a comment.

"Oh yeah," I said, belatedly. "That's nice."

"Are those our bottles?" I asked, pointing to the table where Theo's brothers and their girlfriends were sitting. "I want one."

"Yeah," Theo said, smiling. "Bottle service. Last night of the bachelor weekend. We've gotta go out with a bang, right?" He winked at me before changing the subject.

Chris frowned at the dance floor and I wasn't sure what about it he found so distasteful. He scanned the place, seeing exactly what the rest of us saw, but his frown didn't waver. I bit my lip and was going to say something when I was interrupted before I opened my mouth.

"Orelia, how have you been?" Thad asked, following me to the table.

I could feel Chris's stare on the back of my neck. Thad took us to a half moon table where he already had bottle service and his own group of friends, including a beautiful woman who immediate-

ly honed in on Thad and I's proximity with a stare filled with polite venom. I couldn't blame her. Under the neon lights and with his dress shirt rolled at the sleeves, exposing his taut forearms, he was swoonworthy. The perfect hook-up. Someone whose attention I would have relished a year ago.

"Do you want to dance?" Thad yelled over the music, offering his hand.

I didn't, and I worried my lip as I observed the expectant eyes of my friends, and the way Chris had curved into the woman at the table. He'd poured himself a drink and whispered something in her ear. I'd intended to refuse Thad, but instead I allowed myself to be pulled to the floor.

"I should remind you," I told Thad. "I'm not a very good dancer."

But I was getting better. I spared one last look at Chris, and he was too engrossed with the woman beside him to pay me any attention. My stomach dropped unpleasantly, but I turned back to Thad and let him lead me to the dance floor.

"I think we'll be okay," Thad laughed.

He was right and he was a great dancer. I'd finally learned when I should let someone else take the lead in the dance, and handing it over to Thad didn't chafe. He put his hands on my hips, gave me a few playful twirls which made me laugh despite myself and we settled into an easy rhythm. I kept looking back over at the table where Chris was still chatting up the model. It's not like I was jealous. Chris had made it abundantly clear he wasn't going to just hook-up, but a nasty curl of envy spiraled in my gut.

While dancing with Thad, there wasn't anything remotely sexual about it. He never moved with any intent to turn it that way. It was baseline nice, but not anything thrilling.

Ren and Theo joined us first, then Theo's brothers and their girlfriends. Without looking at me, even though as a group we danced in a circle around each other, Chris joined with the other woman. Any

easy enjoyment I'd had with Thad turned to ash, and my body started jerking back at its own pace, out of sync with him. Eventually, Thad put us both out of our misery and pulled me to the bar to get us another round of drinks.

"You don't really seem into this," Thad said, moving his hand between our bodies.

I should. My god, this man was beautiful, but yeah, he was right, I wasn't into it. And I especially wasn't into watching Chris dance with Thad's beautiful friend across from me. Not when their bodies were so natural together.

I gave Thad a half smile.

"I'm so sorry, but no," I agreed. "I'm not into this. You are seriously gorgeous and in another life, I swear to god..."

Thad laughed and any anxiety I had about him having hurt feelings washed away. "How about shots instead?"

"I can definitely do a shot," I said and relief washed through me. "It'll help take my mind off of—"

"Off of that guy over there?" Thad asked, amused as he nodded his head toward Chris.

"Oh, that's so embarrassing," I said, hiding my face in my hands. "I'm sorry, again. I didn't even know I had any sort of feelings until right now. How inconvenient is that?" The words left my mouth and I didn't realize they were true until I heard them for myself. Feelings? Feelings!? I wish it were only attraction, but if it were, it'd be so easy to ignore.

"I get it," he said as he pulled me towards the bar. "Don't be embarrassed. It's easy to see shit when it's not your own shit."

"So wise," I said and laughed.

The laughter died in my throat. I turned to the dance floor and saw Chris dancing with the rest of them. When I turned back to Thad, he was smiling knowingly at me.

"I know a thing or two about that," Thad said and pointed to my mouth, to my frown. "Can I give you some advice?"

"Why the hell not?" I asked and threw back my shot after clinking my glass with Thad's.

"Make a decision," he said and paused dramatically. "And own it."

"Make a decision and go for it?" I repeated, underwhelmed.

"Yeah. You're all in your feels and trying to figure out if you should go for it, or keep hiding. Pick one and stick to it. That's the only way to live."

"What if it's the wrong choice?"

"There's no such thing," he said with a small smile. "You don't get to live both ways. But making a choice is always better than passively waiting around for something."

I considered Thad in a new light. "Are you doing that? What about the model?" I asked and we both turned to where Chris and the black haired beauty were still dancing.

"Different problems," Thad said with a shrug. "Too complicated."

"Maybe you should take your own advice," I said.

"I did," Thad said and smiled sadly. "I chose the other route and I'm sticking to it."

We sat at the bar for a few more minutes, but our chat hadn't energized either of us, we both kind of sank into a melancholic state that didn't jive with the club scene.

"Thanks for coming out. It really was lovely to meet you. I'm gonna pay my tab and get out of here," Thad said as he signed his check at the bar and threw back the last of his drink.

"Good luck. Thanks for everything, Thad."

He gave me a kiss on the cheek and turned to leave. I was going to go too. There was too much to think about and the music was too loud. I fought my way through the dancing crowd.

"I'm heading out guys," I shouted to Ren and Theo who'd leaned in around me.

Theo laughed and winked at me. Ren raised a very judgy brow and told me to be safe, and Chris didn't say a word.

MY EYES BURNED as I left the club and walked alone back to the B&B. My heels were killing me, and I struggled unsuccessfully to unzip my dress when I finally made it back. Giving up, I shook my head and collapsed at the edge of the bed and tried to pull myself together.

Chris practically kicked in the door of the room fifteen minutes later, fury and rage as he yanked off his tie. He froze when he spotted me, sitting on the corner of my bed, green dress still painted on. He was breathing heavily and his eyes narrowed in fury as he looked around the room for Thad.

"He's not here," I snapped. "I wouldn't do that. Obviously."

The statement hung heavy in the silence, making the six feet of distance between us feel like six inches. My heart was starting to pound, adrenaline and irritation mixing a heady cocktail in my brain.

"You didn't..." he trailed off, unable to get his mouth around the words.

His hands were still on his tie, tight with tension as he took a breath and waited for my answer.

"We didn't," I acknowledged.

Chris crossed to me in two quick steps, and his lips crushed mine as he spun us onto the bed, kissing the life out of me.

I found myself on top of him. Without my mouth leaving his, I hiked my dress to the top of my thighs so I could straddle him properly.

The hollowness in my chest vanished the moment he touched me, hands gripping my thighs before he started to trace the backs of my legs. I reached my hands behind his neck to pull him closer. Just

like the first time, the kiss was a battle for dominance, his force versus mine. And yet under it, under the hard press of his mouth, and the bruising pressure of his hands moving up my back before settling in my hair, was relief.

A deep moan echoed from the back of Chris' throat as I rolled my hips against his growing hardness, and as much as it shocked my insides, heightened my desire, it brought me back to my own body, to the moment itself and I pulled back slightly. Chris' hand tightened momentarily in my hair before he let it go and opened his eyes.

"You were jealous," I panted.

It was incredibly gratifying. He tensed to flip me, so I pressed down hard, not allowing it. Chris' eyes narrowed at me and I laughed, feeling high on victory. I'd never appreciated jealousy before, but in Chris' eyes, it suddenly had a new appeal.

"Do you want me to admit it?" he asked, thrusting against me just right and wrenching a moan from both of us.

"Yes, admit it," I gasped.

"I was jealous," he whispered into my ear, sitting up, his hands pressed firmly against my back, pushing me into his chest, forcing me to shift my hips more desperately against his. "I was furious when I thought of his hands on you, where mine should be. I was jealous at the thought of him between your legs."

His hot breath against my ear made me shiver, but the words themselves had me arching. I couldn't get close enough.

I was breathing hard, my eyes closed and I forgot to keep my weight on him. Chris bumped me off of him and dragged me, dragged us both to standing.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked, running his hands lightly over my arms, raising goosebumps. Another long moment of looking into each other's eyes, standing chest to chest, feeling the other's heartbeat.

I nodded and leaned forward to kiss up his neck until I was whispering directly into his ear. "I was jealous, too."

Chris' nostrils flared and the most devious, self-satisfied grin crossed his face. "Why are you still wearing this dress?"

"I couldn't reach the zipper." My voice was a choked whisper and his low chuckle sent new shivers cascading down my back.

Chris reached around me and pulled the zipper slowly as he nuzzled against my neck. He peeled the dress off which revealed the matching set of green lingerie, a translucent lace with embroidered flowers on the bra and thong.

The sweep of his gaze over my body was burning me alive. Had I intentionally packed this on the odds Chris might see it? In court, I would've plead the fifth, but here, the way he stared had me gasping. He *knew* I'd picked it out for him. I couldn't tell if it was arousal or satisfaction or something much softer. He licked his lips like he couldn't wait to put his mouth all over me. I squirmed under that gaze, desperate for him to put his body back on mine even as I became more and more delighted by his pleasure.

"Go out with me, Orelia," Chris said against my neck as his hands started to roam over the lingerie, with care.

"Chris," I said on a gasping breath as he bit down lightly. "I don't date. I don't do relationships. Let's just fuck." He was meaner with his teeth, but I loved it. "Please."

Chris stripped off his shirt and tie with decisive movements and a glare at me that did nothing to reduce my desire for this man.

"You want it hot and dirty, Orelia." The way he said my name, possessive and aggressive and unwilling to yield sent shivers cascading over me. All sorts of things, new things, were happening to my body. Legs turned to jelly, stomach twisted in delight, brain was careening toward not functioning one iota. "That's fine, but if you think I'm going to fuck you and not date you, you're crazy."

He pulled me into a kiss as he said it, and turned the kiss gentle, soft and I was starting to get lost in it, starting to forget this was a battle and I was losing. The slowness he was threatening me with was too much, so I bit at his lower lip and my hands came to his ass to urge his hips forward.

“Faster,” I said. “Meaner.” I was embarrassed for half a second, but Chris didn’t balk, hardly blinked.

“Say please,” he demanded and his voice held a note of control that was slipping away from me.

He expected me to argue; I could see the challenge on his face. So I contorted mine into something I hoped resembled innocence. “Please, Chris.”

A glimmer of that control slipped as Chris turned me around and I stumbled, off balance onto the bed. I landed on my stomach before moving to all fours and presenting my ass as I looked over my shoulder.

“What are you—” The words died in my throat as I saw the expression on Chris’ face as his gaze moved from mine to stare at the thong that did nothing to cover my ass.

The reverence, the hunger, and I was able to answer the age old question of whether Chris was a tits or ass man.

Ass.

Ass all the way.

For all the threats he wasn’t going to fuck me without dating me first, that’s not how he was looking at me.

“Christ almighty, Orelia,” he muttered—completely distracted and sounding quite pained—as his hand trailed down my backside and lightly between my legs that only made me want more.

“You’ve seen me in my swimsuit a million times,” I said, choking on my words. “I’ve barely revealed more here.”

"That was different," Chris said roughly, his hands running over my thighs. "I couldn't touch you then, definitely couldn't appreciate how gorgeous this ass is."

He said it as he gave my ass a swat. Not enough to hurt, or even to sting, but the fact that he'd done it at all, and with such control had my throat drying. It was so at odds with this romantic idea I had of him. It was unexpected and unnerving and I moaned because I couldn't help it.

"So touch me now." I dared him, wanting to push back, wanting to see him break that perfect control for me. "Stop resisting this."

"I am touching you," he said as his fingers traced my spine.

"Chris." I dropped my head to my forearms as he kissed his way down my back.

"You're the one who won't compromise," Chris said, his mouth moving to my trembling thighs, his hot breath passing over my underwear, teasing me softly where I wanted pressure. "Date me."

I wanted to say yes. Because if I could have Chris...maybe...

"No," I said, but it wasn't as firm as I'd intended.

Chris cursed in response. Not the first time he didn't like to be told what to do. But he did move over top of me, his hands digging into my legs and then his teeth bit right into my ass cheek.

Jesus Christ. I let out a noise, completely unsure if it was his name or a plea or both.

The shock, the sting compared to his feather light touches...I bucked back against him, wanting more.

"You're going to stay right here and let me eat this pussy, like I've been dreaming of doing." He was leaning over me, his body covering mine as his words branded me.

I thought he would turn me around. I thought I would want him to. This position left me so vulnerable, so exposed, unable to ground my body, unable to affect the pressure. And yet, even though I trembled, I didn't turn away when his mouth lowered close to my clit.

"Say yes, Orelia. Tell me I can." His words and breath were hot on me, like a touch, but not nearly enough. He ran his hands over my ass, squeezing, even as his words acted as a caress on the heat between my legs.

I forgot he'd asked me anything in the wake of his hands, in the wake of presenting myself to him in a way that should have been vulnerable, but instead lanced me with power.

"Yes," I cried and his mouth descended, tugging my thong to the side so his mouth was on me without barriers.

I groaned as he ran his fingers underneath the material of the thong and finally pulled it to my knees, but he refused to take it all the way off, which forced me to keep my legs together when I would have spread them wide.

I almost moved away from it, but his mouth was so fucking eager that instead of moving away, I found myself shaking to stay in place. My hands clenched in the bedsheets and I pushed myself backwards into his face.

I froze, suddenly self-conscious. And Chris knew, could feel it.

"Do whatever you need to, Orelia. We're not stopping until you come," he said against my folds and I let out a loud noise of pleasure.

He licked and sucked everywhere except where I needed him, teasing me, torturing me. And never in my life had I ever been so *revered*. I was practically sobbing with need, so close to the peak I could barely breathe.

"*When* I make this pretty pussy come, will you go out with me?" His words made me cry out as his tongue pressed fully against my clit for the first time.

"N-no," I said, but it was on shaky breaths. "It's just fucking."

He chuckled against me and I felt every vibration. He didn't believe me any more than I believed myself. In the part of my brain that wasn't completely lost to pleasure, there was fear. Chris felt more

than I did, and I didn't want to hurt him. But even beyond that, I knew, even if I wasn't going to admit it out loud, I wanted more too.

"This is just attraction," I told him, having a hard time catching my breath, but his mouth didn't stop, moved softly, so fucking softly between my spread legs, teasing my clit, but never rubbing over it directly. "You said it yourself: proximity plus hormones."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself, Orelia," Chris said. I looked over my shoulder and met his eyes before he continued to lick into me.

I dropped my head onto my forearms after that, unable to string two thoughts together, or on why this was a bad idea. A mash-up of wanting two very different things.

I moaned as he added two fingers to the steady rhythm of his tongue, which slowly and steadily began to rub over my clit instead of around it. I forced my legs wider and heard the distinct sound of fabric tearing. The pitiful remains of my panties fell to the crease behind my left knee. I let out a high keening noise I didn't recognize as my own. I was too gone to care, but Chris' laughter echoed against my thigh.

"Yes," I panted, pushing back against him. "Fuck. Fuck me, Chris."

All of the rhythm, all of the pressure stopped in a heartbeat and I couldn't stop the screech of distress, along with, apparently, all of my dignity.

"Wait, what are you—"

He didn't speak until I looked over my shoulder. "I'm not going to fuck you, Orelia. Not until you can admit that what's between us is more than attraction."

He was angry, voice filled with the quiet and controlled rage he rarely let loose. I should stop this. We wanted different things, so I tried.

"But—"

He smacked my ass, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to shut me up, and then carefully ran his fingers over my sensitized flesh.

“Don’t worry, you’re still going to come, brat. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

He slid his fingers back inside me and put his mouth and tongue to the same rhythm that had nearly pushed me into glorious bliss moments before. Quickly, so quickly, the pressure built back in my core.

I moaned and begged him not to stop, to keep going, but with my face in the mattress, I couldn’t be sure he understood any of it. His thumb pressed down on my anus, not in, but the sensation of having my clit licked and sucked, his fingers filling me up, and then the surprise and pressure at my ass. I came. I came fucking hard.

And he knew exactly what to do to bring me down, backing off, but licked me gently through it, bit firmly into my thigh, and it was so fucking good.

I came back to myself slowly, realized I was clenching the sheets between my hands, even as I still quivered on my stomach from the orgasm. I was dimly aware of a noise as Chris moved around the bed, but I didn’t realize he was leaving until I saw him in my peripheral.

“Wait.” Chris froze in the doorway to the bathroom, and the heat of his stare had me quivering all over. And a voice in the back of my mind admitted this was well above and beyond attraction, but that still didn’t change *me*. “Where are you going?”

Chris looked at me then pointedly to the erection in his pants. I didn’t think he was going to say anything, and I was still trying to make my brain work.

“It won’t take long,” he said and moved closer, crouching down so his face was level with mine, still on the bed. “Not when I’ve seen you like this.”

He reached out to push a strand of hair that had fallen into my face. But his words were at odds with the softness of his touch.

"It won't take long for me to come, when you're still shuddering from my mouth, when you can't even get on your hands and knees for me."

I should have let him go, but my hackles rose and so did I at the implication of weakness. This uneven exchange between us could not be allowed to stand.

Chris already had way too much of me and was trying to get me to give more. I couldn't cede this edge to him. I was going to force us back to even ground and I knew exactly how to do it. Chris did too, if the shift and understanding in his eyes meant anything.

"Fine, no fucking," I hissed, caught somewhere between annoyance and frustration. "But if oral counts for me, it certainly counts for you."

Chris' eyes closed and he visibly shuddered. It gave me the strength to sit and reach for his hand.

"Take off your pants."

His jaw tightened at the order, which he pretended not to like. My eyes widened as he obeyed, not breaking eye contact with me. When he was naked, he moved to the bed and I went to him.

"You think you're the only one who's been imagining this?" I said as I raked my nails gently up his inner thighs.

He was glorious. His cock a perfect mixture of length and girth. A velvety hardness I wanted in my mouth. If he had the power to take me apart, I wanted it in equal measure. It was more than that though, more than physical desire. Affection, *feelings*, the desire to simply make him feel good.

I met his eyes as I licked his shaft and then closed my mouth around the tip and wrapped my tongue, round and round until his hips twitched, a silent cue for me to take him all the way.

"I like being in charge too," I said sweetly from between his thighs. Chris' body tensed as I bit into his hip, before licking gently and moving my attentions back to his cock.

No one had ever reacted to my mouth the way Chris was now. His entire body was shaking with anticipation and his mouth partially slack from desire. He bit his lip as my mouth slipped back around him.

My mouth sank down as far as it could go and Chris' protest started and died in his throat, as I started a rhythm, slow and light, slow and light. He wanted more.

"I bet you want to fuck my mouth. Tug my hair and make it tight," I whispered in between long, wet licks and forced Chris to look at me. "But that's not how you're going to come tonight."

"Orelia." The way he said my name, question and demand, trust and confusion. It was all of those things, and yet the most important was gratitude shining through, appreciation.

I wanted to make him feel good. Part of this elation was my own desire and thrill at going head to head with Chris, but it felt good when he moaned my name. A hot rush shot straight to my clit when his hips jerked against his will.

I went back to my slow and light combination with mouth and hand. Then I tightened and sucked hard, once, twice. Chris' head fell back and his hands tightened in the sheets, but I went back to the slow pace, aroused again by the moans of frustration and pleasure escaping him.

"Beg," I said, letting my hand caress him even lighter than it had before.

Chris' eyes were hard on mine and he bared his teeth, but I squeezed his cock. His head fell back and he thrust into my hand.

"I'm not going to beg," he panted.

"Then tell me why I should make you come." A compromise, of sorts.

"Because you might act like a brat," Chris said, and his hand reached out to grip my chin. "But I know deep down you're a good

girl, and I know how wet this is making you. If you make me come, I'll put my mouth back between your legs."

The breath I released was shuddering and Chris' face was all victory and pleasure.

As he laid back, I straddled his leg and started rubbing my clit even as I sucked him off. His eyes flew from half lidded to fully open in shock. At the brazen act, or at the feel of my wetness against his leg? I wondered, but didn't bother to pause and check.

"Fuck, Orelia." It was almost a growl and it sent shockwaves straight to my clit.

"I don't need your mouth," I said, and even though my voice was breathless, the power was still there, still mine.

I went back to sucking him hard, my own hips moving fast against my fingers. My already sensitized clit brought me up that peak again, until I was at the edge.

"I'm going to—Fuck, Orelia, I'm going to—"

His hand found my hair and tightened as I came again from my own ministrations, but the moan and the way I shuddered against him pushed him over the edge. The grunt he made, some twisted mixture between pleasure and pain, sounded like it was forced out of him as his spend hit the back of my throat.

Satisfied, I stood and walked naked to the bathroom and spit. I spit his come loudly into the sink and when I turned, he was watching me.

"I'm not that good," I told him as I met his gaze in the mirror. He might not have fucked me and I might not have agreed to date him, but it didn't feel like either of us lost.

A huff of laughter and a groan as he got off the bed and came to me in the bathroom. He grabbed me and pulled me to him. I watched him in the mirror, unsure what to do with the soft action and how badly I wanted to lean back against him. What harm could

it do? I leaned back, closing my eyes and humming with contentment.

“This isn’t over, Orelia,” he said, and kissed the line where my hair met my forehead.

“Give me time to think about it.”

His arms came around me in a hug and his face nuzzled into my neck, I didn’t have the upper hand. Chris must have seen the panic in my eyes and maybe felt the beginnings of victory for himself, because he let me go and moved to the shower.

A few moments later, I threw on my overlarge sleepshirt and debated between his bed and my own. My eyes were closed and I was underneath the covers when he came out of the bathroom. I heard him stop when he saw which bed I’d chosen. His breathing filled the space as he reached the edge of his bed, and climbed in next to me.

We lay for a moment on our backs, and I turned on my side facing away from him. I scooted backward, not enough to touch, but enough for him to get the hint. I held my breath, because he was too smart not to know what I was asking for.

Chris pulled me to him, his knuckles casually caressing the underside of my breasts as his arm became a band across my stomach. In his warm embrace, his scent combining with mine, I fell asleep.

Chapter Seventeen

CHRIS WAS WAITING for me on the bench outside the surf house, leaning back and basking in the sun. He'd respected my wishes for distance the week since we returned from Palm Springs, but that reprieve was over. I was relieved it was over, relieved I'd finally come to my decision.

He stood as I approached.

I was smiling before I could stop it and Chris grinned back as he stood. Relief was as clear on his face as it felt on mine.

"You're finished avoiding me." It was an accusation and a question in a deep voice that had me turning to him.

He was looking at me like he wanted to remind me exactly what happened between us in Palm Springs.

"Yes." I swallowed.

"Good," Chris said and his smile was a touch reluctant. "It's been a long week."

"I know. I needed time to think," I said, and it sounded surprisingly like an apology and a thank-you rolled into one.

Chris nodded. In truth, I'd been decided from the morning after, when I'd woken sprawled over his chest. There had been no fear, no urge to run. Pleasure that had nothing to do with our intimacies had washed over me. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to date Chris, to try it out. I was going to be thirty, and being scared of relationships was juvenile now.

"I missed you," he said and his candor surprised me.

"Weeks without seeing each other used to be normal," I told him, even as butterflies tap danced in my stomach. "And now a couple of days feels weird, doesn't it?"

"It's not normal anymore," he agreed.

His gaze was searching. I bit my lip to stop my smile from stretching. He was right. A year ago, going weeks or months without

talking or texting Chris *was* normal. Now, every time I picked up my phone, I had the urge to reach out. I'd asked for space, yes, but I couldn't help to wonder if Chris regretted what had happened. Maybe he was happy to have an excuse to avoid me.

It was clear that wasn't the case now. Not with the hopeful expression on his face.

"You're killing me, Chris," I said quietly. "You could have texted, you know."

His grin flashed, and his mood shifted from avoidance to determination to a willingness to address it. He pulled out his phone and two seconds later mine beeped.

Chris (8:54am): Hey 😊 You up?

I stared at him, caught somewhere between amused and exasperated. "What fuckboy nonsense is that?"

"Isn't that what you like, Orelia? Big, dumb hunks."

I typed back.

Orelia (8:55am): Am I harpy enough for your tastes?

"Very funny." He tried to deadpan it, but the laughter was in his voice.

"Isn't that what you like?" I asked as I batted my eyelashes at him. "Ice cold bitches?"

"Damn it," he said and reached for me. Chris pulled me into a hug and I didn't resist at all even though my face ended scrunched against his armpit. "I *really* did miss you."

"Come on," I said, as I pulled away. "We don't want to be late."

Chris agreed and we walked side by side to the beach, our fingertips brushing as we went.

"Hey Jayna," I said as I approached my friends standing by beach chairs. "Viv."

I gave both women hugs and received raised eyebrows in return. Derek and Willow were playing in the water, their boards resting in the sand.

"This is Chris Immani."

"We've heard...so many things about you," Jayna said and for someone so tiny, she packed a wallop of suspicion in her words.

I could have kissed her.

The years of Chris and I not having a connection and the knowledge it had bothered me shone through her defensive words.

Vivian squared up next to her and even though we were there for Chris' professional assessment of Derek and Willow's surfing skills, their support meant everything to me.

Chris nodded his head, clearly understanding their defensive stature. "Hopefully, now that I've pulled my head out of my ass, you'll hear different things."

I bit my lip and grinned at him. "You wanna go introduce yourself to the kids? I'll be down in a minute."

"Sure thing."

Chris turned and strode to the ocean. When I glanced side-eyed at Viv and Jayna, they were watching him with approval.

"He handled that better than I thought he would," Viv admitted and turned back to face me. "He's also a helluva lot hotter than you ever described him too."

"I'm with Viv on this one," Jayna said as she lowered her heart-shaped sunglasses and watched Chris' impressive form stride down to the surf. "He's gorgeous and you seem *very* friendly with him."

I smiled and shrugged and they smiled back—hints of their own pain, at their own loss was still visible, but not at the forefront. It was nice for them to know even though I hadn't worked up the nerve to tell Ren and Theo.

"Damn," Jayna said, flipping from defender to supporter in a heartbeat. "Good for you, Orelia."

"You're both horrible. Absolutely horrible."

Jayna turned to Vivian. "That's how O says I love you. We're flattered."

"I'm not dating him," I protested quickly.

Viv was a master of the single-brow raise and when she aimed it at me, I felt somehow guilty and annoyed.

"But?" Jayna started and then paused. Her stare was more curious than judgemental.

Jesus, I ran my hand through my hair, shaking it out. How to even put it into words. Because this was Jayna and Viv, I said to them what I'd barely been able to think to myself.

"Seeing my friends engaged has made me consider the types of relationships I have. I've been more than happy with the short relationships I've had over the last couple years, but Theo and Ren are so happy, and I think I might want what they have. A partner, a friend."

Vivian's face softened and they both seemed to understand I was incredibly uncomfortable with this vulnerability because Viv changed the subject.

"Thank you for putting this together," she said as she motioned to the water where the kids were at. "Derek has gotten even more steam on the whole surf competition thing, so getting evaluated by a former pro is exciting."

"It's also good for us," Jayna said. "I have no idea what *competitive* looks like for an eight year old."

"Well, at the very least, you can trust Chris'll tell you the truth and give you an honest assessment of their abilities."

"Life is so weird," Viv said and her eyes grew a little sad. "Never in a million years would I have predicted this is where I'd be and what my kid would want."

"Not all bad," Jayna murmured. "Difficult, but not all bad."

For a moment we looked towards the ocean in silence, each of us thinking about the people we'd lost and how it had changed the trajectory of our lives.

"Better get down there," I said and turned to jog to the water where Chris and the kids were.

Chris was evaluating their pop-ups, to which they'd both appeared to obey without question. However, the second I arrived, Willow stopped listening to Chris. I met his eyes and he gave me a deer in the headlights look. I had to stifle my laughter.

"Derek, Willow, I'm glad you met my friend, Chris. He's a professional surfer, and he's going to come out with us to catch some waves today."

"We already know that," Willow said, crossing her arms and glaring at Chris. "Orelia is a professional surfer too."

Chris nodded solemnly at Willow and didn't bother to correct her. Looks like I had three girlfriends on the beach today who had my back. While Derek was openly staring at Chris with awe, Willow was harshly critical by comparison. Seeing her face scrunch in skepticism had me biting my cheek to prevent laughter from spilling out.

Chris and I took our boards with us into the small waves. Both Derek and Willow were good enough now to get a little further away from shore. A warm rush of pride spiraled through me as they showed Chris what they could do.

They enjoyed surfing. Derek was twelve, so he had a little more focus and passion for it, but Willow at eight was just as excited. She took the falls and setbacks better.

"How long have you been teaching them?" Chris asked as we waited for the kids to paddle back to us.

"A little over a year. Usually, once or twice a month. Last summer I babysat them for two weeks when their moms went on vacation. We were at the beach every day."

Surfing was special between us. I'd made it special because it was that way with my dad while in Japan. I was finally starting to realize I needed some type of closure. I'd tried shutting everyone out after he died, and I ran away to college, to Japan, to the last time we were all alive and happy. I'd broken some of those fears when I came back to the States, but some of it lingered.

Chris shot me an assessing gaze. "You're good with them. The kids. I wouldn't have guessed it."

I wasn't offended. With my aversion to relationships, it was a natural assumption that kids would be as unappealing.

"I like them," I said with a shrug. "I think they're funny and teaching wasn't something I expected to enjoy, but I do."

Chris' lips quirked. "I keep thinking I know you, but I don't. I've only ever glimpsed the surface. Why—" He bit off the rest of his words as Derek returned to us and sat upright on his board to energetically quiz Chris on surfing competition questions.

For two hours we stayed in the water, and it was interesting to observe the way Chris spoke to them. Despite the slightly rocky start with Willow, he was good with them. He also had the perspective of a true competitor and especially with Derek, discussed what was necessary to qualify and compete at an international level.

When we returned to the beach we got some significant glances from Viv and Jayna as they shepherded their kids away. Instead of heading up with them, I said my goodbyes on the beach.

When we moved back to where our stuff was set up, Chris spoke. "Derek started a little too late, but Willow is at the perfect age if she wanted to get serious about surfing. She's a natural on the board."

"Willow and *not* Derek?" I asked, surprised.

Chris winced as if he could read my thoughts. "I know he seems to want it, and he does have a good knowledge of the wind and the tides, the way the waves break, but the way Willow intuitively follows the break is more impressive and she has more time."

He was excited to explain, I realized. He'd always been a champion for his business but this was different. His eyes were bright and he had a youthful aura to him I didn't want to dim.

"Didn't you start surfing late?" I asked, because I was pretty sure he was a teenager by the time he got his first board.

“Yeah,” he said as we moved to walk in the surf. “Which is why I know better than anyone how important an early start is.”

“Are you saying there’s no hope?” I asked.

Derek had already shown himself more resilient than most kids his age and had already been through so much already, I was worried for him. My heart dropped into my stomach. Even though Chris and Kieran were a testament to success, that wasn’t usually the case with professional surfers so it was already an uphill battle.

Chris shook his head and with the sunlight gleaming on his skin I wanted to reach out and trace the tattoo on his chest, and the ink on his biceps that wrapped in a band.

“No, but my experience was rough. There was a huge learning curve, and I got lucky more than anything.”

“That can’t be true,” I said with a shake of my head. “You did it for what, seven years?”

“Yeah, but I had a great coach, and a sponsor,” Chris said and tried to shrug off his success. “And the whole time, I felt like a fake.”

The thought of Chris not feeling good enough was dissatisfying. Putting on an act when he was really feeling alone. My mouth twisted into a frown. “Kieran was saying you were sponsored by the same brand.”

Chris nodded. “Like I said, lucky.”

I hadn’t considered what it would mean for Derek or Willow to compete professionally. I’d only invited them to surf lessons because I’d felt a connection to them through the loss of all our fathers. It was different from what Chris wanted, but also exactly the same. He wanted to help in an area he’d once desperately needed.

“I think you should talk to Jayna and Viv,” I said. “I can obviously keep helping with lessons if they want to for fun, but if time is of the essence, you’re the kind of coach they’d need.”

Chris lit up from the inside. It was like watching a rippling sunrise. Surprise, pleasure, excitement. When he started to shut down those emotions I reached for his hand this time without hesitation.

"Regardless," Chris said. My heart started hammering in my chest. "They're good kids. You taught them well."

"Thanks, Chris."

We walked on the beach back to where we'd left our towels under an umbrella in the sand. Sitting next to each other, I put my arms around my legs and rested my head as I watched him.

"Do you miss the circuit?" I asked.

"Do you miss Japan?" he asked in an obvious attempt to stall for time as he thought about it, as my question took him off guard.

I dug my feet into the sand, reveling in the warmth.

"Yes," I told him, willing to expose myself first. "I miss all the places I've lived before, but especially Japan."

And I did, but not because I needed to go back and live them again. I missed Okinawa and Tokyo, and I missed Minneapolis, and San Diego, but only because they were different versions of me. Sometimes being so far away made it hard to remember just how good those times were.

"Yes," he admitted in the wake of my quiet words. "I miss the circuit. I miss being at the top of my game. I miss winning."

"Why did you quit?"

Chris shrugged and frowned. "Seven years was a long time to live in hotels. I wanted something for myself: a home, a school...a family." He avoided my eye, but he couldn't help pausing over the word. "I'd also peaked two years before, so it was a losing battle. It was only a matter of time before I was out of contention for good."

Chris leaned back on his hands and he stared at me. It was easy to talk to him now, easy to share space. I could picture him on the circuit, struggling with poor finishes, slowly losing momentum. It would be rough for anyone, but for Chris it seemed like it would be

the worst kind of torture. Maybe that was always the cost for athletes: their bodies betrayed them long before their hearts.

"I didn't know what I was going to do with my degree," I told him and slowly pushed sand into a pile over my feet because the movement helped me think. "I planned and studied all through high school and then college. I had all these meticulous plans to get to Japan, to live there, but when I finally did, I didn't know what I was doing."

"You figured it out," Chris observed.

"Still figuring it out. So are you. It's nothing to be ashamed of," I said and I brushed my hands and divested them of as much of the clinging sand as I could. "We're all works in progress."

Feeling bold, I pushed Chris onto his back on the towel. I followed and laid partially on his chest.

"You're too wise," Chris said and smiled at me. "You gave me that bullshit line about not having your life figured out, but I think you really do. Maybe not the minutia, but how you handle yourself. And, I think it's fair I found you annoying."

"The reason why you didn't like me," I started and he tensed immediately to argue, but I put my finger on his mouth, hushing him, and kissed his nose to show I was teasing him, "is hyper-independence. That's the technical term for it."

It was partially why relationships were terrifying. They required dependence, vulnerability.

"Your independence isn't a bad thing," Chris said as he ran his hand over my hair and tucked a loose strand behind my ear.

I smiled at him for a moment. "Believe it or not, I'm not as bad as I used to be. When I was in high school I didn't feel like I could grieve with my family, so I isolated myself instead. I wanted to deal with my dad's death by myself. It was so bad I couldn't even maintain friendships."

“Why?” he continued to play with my hair, focusing on his fingers in the damp strands.

I had expected this to be hard, revealing pieces of myself to Chris, but it wasn’t. He watched me with obvious interest, obvious curiosity and my words flowed without interruption, without fear.

“I tried the whole therapy thing in college. I hated it, if I’m being honest. It was exactly the opposite of hyper-independence, but I didn’t mind self-help books. It was a trust thing. I read a book about grief and how even though death is part of life, people, especially children who lose their parents, can feel betrayed and abandoned.”

“Is that how you felt?” Chris asked, his arms tugging me even closer to his chest.

“Yeah, a little. So,” I breathed out heavily. Truthfully though, I’d been more upset about my mom remarrying, finding love again as if Dad had never been there in the first place. “All that’s to say, I think you disliked me for being too forward and unwilling to trust anyone. It was the truth. You pissed me off so much I forced myself to open up to Theo and Ren, and Viv and Jayna.”

Chris’ silent laughter surprised me.

“What?” I asked, unable to stop my own smile in the dim light as sunset began in earnest.

Time seemed strange as we talked on the beach. Sunset came on quickly, sinking down, nearly reaching the horizon.

“It’s funny,” Chris said. “Your analysis of me, from the first time we met, was the same thing.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to think what I could have possibly done wrong except hit on him. “I asked you to go whale watching, charter fishing, and—”

Chris’ laughter reverberated through me, not just because I was laying half on top of him, but because it was good to hear him laugh. To know I was the cause of it.

"You asked me to give up control," he corrected. "Not only that, but to put me directly in situations where I'm weakest. And you called me out for being afraid to try new things that weren't on my itinerary. That was also the truth."

I thought back on that first week in Okinawa in a new light.

"And for the record, because you keep bringing this up," Chris said, and the way his hands tightened on the flesh of my hips had tingles running up my spine. "I never disliked you. I found you way too attractive for my own sanity."

My breath caught as Chris looked at me like I was beautiful, like what he said might even be true. That he'd found me attractive from the beginning. I suppose I owed him the truth in turn.

"I would have slept with you that week." I was breathless and my voice shook with nerves I wasn't expecting. "Even as annoyed as I was, I thought you were stupid pretty."

Chris' smile widened in amusement shining through. "You think I'm pretty?"

"Yeah," I whispered, feeling braver as the beach became deserted and night began to rise. "Hot seems so physical, and handsome seems too proper. You were pretty. You're still pretty."

There was a pause, a softness that might have always been there, hiding underneath the surface.

"I liked you too," Chris said against my neck. "I wanted you."

All the sensations were distracting me, even from this confession, but in the recesses of my mind, not completely lost to pleasure, I tensed against him.

"From the beginning?" I asked as his mouth found the pulse-point of my neck. My thoughts grew foggy, but I forced myself to keep talking. "You made it seem like I was wantonly throwing myself at you, against your will."

I drew in a sharp breath as his hand trailed on my backside, fingers dipping under the curve of my ass, running over it to the sensitive skin on my hips.

"You stayed with me around the fire," he said and his voice was husky as he recalled that first time on Okinawa. "You followed me into the water."

"Because you," I trailed off, my accusation losing direction. Anger was elusive when he touched me softly like that.

I closed my eyes and remembered. Our faces had been so close on the beach. He'd moved a strand of my hair out of the way, and I had leaned in. I thought at the time he was teasing me when he stripped and swam out in the water. I'd taken it as a dare. And humiliation when he'd rejected me in the water.

I opened my eyes. Chris had pulled away slightly and looked up at me with all the seriousness I'd ever seen in him.

"I was in a relationship at the time, Orelia. And I've never cheated, never wanted women outside of my relationships. I was built for monogamy. But I wanted you," he confessed, and I swallowed loudly, weak against the earnest way he spoke. "And I would have crossed the line if I hadn't pushed you away."

I was drawing in breath, but it felt like all the oxygen around us had evaporated. He'd pushed me away when he'd wanted me from the start too. Did it fix things? Did it make me want a relationship with him now?

"And in all the time since?" I asked, unsure if I should be angry or relieved. His hands were still stroking my hips, my thighs, my ass, making it difficult to focus.

"I'm not a masochist. You never gave any indication you wanted a serious relationship," Chris said, but he paused, clearly hoping for me to object. When I didn't he moved on, unphased. "That's all I've ever been capable of. But I don't want to stay away from you any longer."

I pulled away from him. He was agreeing to this, to us without putting a label on it. Instead of relief, a frisson of guilt spiraled with unexpected disappointment. Before I could fully unpack what that meant, Chris leaned in to kiss me.

“Stay the night,” he said against my mouth as he nipped at my bottom lip with his teeth.

I could feel and hear how loud his heart was pounding, and I was relieved he made me as nervous as I made him. I didn’t hesitate, didn’t try to tease him or lord this over him.

“I packed an overnight bag,” I said as I pulled away to stand. “Just in case.”

The grin Chris shot me sent warm shivers down my spine as I held out my hand to him. “Let’s go get it.”

We stood like that for a long minute, our bodies warm from the sun and covered in sand and laziness. I put my arms around his neck and kissed him, and even though I wasn’t ready yet for us to put a label on what we were doing, when I kissed him, it tasted like forever.

Chapter Eighteen

SHOWERING OUTSIDE, WASHING the sand and seawater off should have been standard. But there was nothing standard about the way Chris pressed me to the wall under the spray, his hands forming to all of my curves. It was truly indecent to know neighbors could see what we were doing and I couldn't bring myself to care.

"You have no idea how crazy your swimsuits drive me."

I released a moan of delight as my head tilted back and Chris used the opportunity to adjust my bikini, freeing a nipple to his mouth. As I looked down, his tongue swept out over the hardened peak and my legs for the first time threatened to buckle.

"These five freckles," he said as he kissed them all across my stomach, "look like a star constellation."

The softness in his eyes had my legs shaking. No one had ever looked at me like this, like I was perfect.

"So you admit," I gasped. "My body is out of this world."

Chris paused his mouth's descent on my body and he murmured against the skin of my stomach, "I'm going to ignore you now."

"Don't stop," I whimpered as he palmed the other, the brush of his hands against my naked chest was causing my core to clench over and over again.

My laughter was breathless and broken as he touched me. He didn't stop, but he did turn off the shower. "If we don't go upstairs right now, we're definitely going to break public decency laws."

I nodded as Chris stepped away from me. He didn't take his eyes off my chest. Perhaps I'd been too hasty to judge him as an ass man. The way he was admiring my tits, the fire in his eyes as he took me in, well, that was just as hot as if his hands were still on me.

"Fuck me, Chris," I said again, and pushed his chest. I needed some semblance of this to remain fucking...not *making love*.

"You give too many fucking orders, Orelia," he said, voice so gruff. His voice was tangible as it washed over me.

"I'd give fewer if you listened the first time," I muttered. "I'm clean by the way and on birth control."

"Me too," Chris said as he shook his head. "I mean the part about testing negative for any STDs at my last appointment."

"Thanks for the clarification," I smiled as he held out his hand to me. "That being said, we don't have to use a condom."

Chris' gulp was audible and he groaned as he bit his lip. "You're going to let me slide into your pretty cunt, bare?"

My stomach twisted deliciously as the hunger in Chris' eyes became almost unbearable.

Without much grace, he proceeded to pull me upstairs, to his living space on the second floor. I hardly noticed he'd carried my bag, and pulled me by the hand directly to his bedroom. His large bedroom window faced the ocean, with a desk underneath. I went to the window and Chris followed me, placing his arms around my waist.

"Are you thinking about Palm Springs?" Chris asked, and he was teasing me, but his voice was a little gruff too. "Because I haven't been able to stop thinking about it."

"Which part?" I asked, breathless, staring out toward the ocean and seeing nothing.

"The way you spread your legs for me." His mouth started to trail between my neck and ear. "I've never tasted anything so fucking sweet."

My response was a moan which pitched high as he sucked slightly harder on my neck before he backed off. I couldn't tell which I wanted more of. The tight grips and mean sucking, or the gentle licks and soft kisses. I'd never been with anyone who could do both, who could switch between the two so easily.

Chris let his mouth linger on my skin for a moment before he pulled away, taking my bikini top with him after unhooking with im-

pressive speed. He turned me around and any thoughts that I had about the view from his bedroom window disappeared.

I watched him as he reached for the bottoms, his fingers dipping into the sides of them. He pulled me further into the room, away from the window, and kissed his way down my body, down my stomach as he lowered my bottoms until I was completely bare to him.

The anticipation was expected and familiar, but the nerves weren't as Chris stood back to his full height and leaned forward. He stopped a breath above my lips. His hands remained on my shoulder, the middle of my back, and he held me loosely.

"Chris," I started.

"Stop thinking, Orelia, and get on the bed."

And my brain short-circuited at the husky sound of my name off his lips. I turned my head to the side, and blinked several times, but I moved instinctively to the top of the bed.

He stripped out of his wet swim trunks and threw them in the laundry before he knelt on the bed. I expected him to come right towards me, but instead he lifted my foot by the ankle and kissed the bone. The start of an agonizing slow crawl up my body, touching me on my legs, my hips, even my toes, until there wasn't an inch of me he hadn't touched, hadn't laid his mouth to.

"Fuck me, Chris. Please, I need you."

He kissed me and it was hungry, primal, with teeth and sucking and the way his groan reverberated through me was sinful.

"More," I moaned and that polite distance Chris kept between our bodies vanished in a heartbeat.

He didn't go for my lips, instead went for my neck, sucking and licking a trail of torment. He pressed his body flush against mine and his cock pressed at my entrance. It would have been so easy for him to slip in, but he didn't. He reached down.

"Oh my god."

He began rubbing his fingers through my soaking folds. We both groaned at the contact, and his obvious desire was like a lightning bolt to mine, setting it on fire. My gaze flew to his and Chris' eyes darkened as I ground up into him, desperate for more contact. I bit my lip, but the hard pressure I desperately needed was too good and I couldn't stop the moan from leaving my lips.

"Will you let me taste you again, Orelia?" he said, leaning forward and saying the words over my ear, his hot wet breath making me shake all over.

"Please." There was no place for dignity, no place for embarrassment, and no need for it, with how reverently Chris was watching me, touching me. I'd never felt more comfortable with a man, never been more desperate for him to put his mouth on me.

"You're fucking gorgeous." A growl snapped from Chris' jaw and he grabbed me by the hips and halted all desperate movement.

The first press of his tongue against me was a long, slow lick.

There was nothing like his tongue, he kept long flat licks to turn me on and then shoved his tongue into my pussy, fucking me like I wanted him to. My legs shook from the effort not to move, and I started to feel that hot pulse between my legs careening towards an earth-shattering orgasm.

Chris bit into the meat of my inner thigh and it had me jolting forward. He squeezed my hips and moaned against my wet heat, and this encouragement, this obvious delight, allowed me to let go.

Then, his tongue stopped moving and instead pressed flat against me. The heat and the deliberate pause made the orgasm build and build until it rocketed through me, the intensity making me scream as my hands found his hair.

He was so vocal, groaning against me like my pleasure was turning him on too. He dragged his hard cock against my thigh as he moved, slotted himself above me, and I reared up to grab his head to

pull him into a kiss, as I used my other hand to guide him to my center.

As he thrust fully inside me, his groan was guttural. A burst of arousal flooded through me, giving me new life, turning my body from languid to sharp. I cried out, reaching for him on a sob that surprised me.

“Oh my god.” I wasn’t sure if I’d whispered it or screamed it, but it urged Chris faster.

When Chris brushed my hair out of my face the intimacy almost undid me. To combat the rising affection, I grabbed his wrist and guided his fingers to my mouth, kissing the pads gently before sucking on his index finger. The way he watched me made me feel drunk with power.

I pushed at his shoulder and he moved to his back, pulling me with him until I was on top.

“You feel insane,” Chris said against my neck, before he buried his mouth there. His teeth and stubble scraped me and the heat and intensity bent me like a bow.

I sat straighter, trailing my hands on my breasts, tweaking my nipples as I twisted my hips. Chris’ eyes never left my body as his hands gripped my hips loosely, letting me move at my own pace while keeping me steady.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, voice rough and hands gripping tightly now.

I leaned forward and from his position beneath me, Chris wrestled my control away until his hips were thrusting to meet mine. I got the thrill of pinning his arms to the mattress above his head. He allowed it for several glorious minutes as I chased my second orgasm, before he ripped his hands free of my grip. They moved to my ass and helped me grind down so my clit was getting all the attention once again, I knew I was going over.

“Give it to me, Orelia,” he said as he nipped at my ear. My eyes were closed, breath coming fast and hitching. “Come again.”

“Chris,” I said in a high-pitched, loud voice I didn’t recognize.

His name was all I could think as the second wave of pleasure started to crest. I stopped moving in tandem with him as my hips started jolting, as my core clenched. He knew it right there, knew I was so close and with one final, delectable thrust upward, he had me coming undone around him.

“Jesus Christ, Orelia,” he growled and covered my mouth with his. “So fucking tight.”

He must have come with me, because for long moments, as I shuddered in the aftershocks, he remained still. I became distantly aware one of his hands was tangled in my hair and I wondered how I missed that, because it was still clenched loosely against the base of my skull. For a few more minutes, I remained boneless, stunned from the most amazing partnered orgasm of my life.

Slowly, very slowly, my breath returned to normal, and I blinked as awareness of my body went from vague to crisp. I disentangled myself and fell back on the bed beside him. I was lightheaded, staring at the ceiling and like maybe I might truly faint this time. He was awful, a demon lover. I’d never be able to escape him.

His low chuckle echoed through my brain and I smiled instinctively and turned toward him on my side.

“Demon lover? I like that.” The amusement in Chris’ voice was soft, tender enough to put off the embarrassment of realizing I said the thought aloud.

There was something achingly sweet about the way Chris was resting his head against my neck, eyes closed, body languid. The soft kisses he was laying on my neck were a silent thank you, as if sex with me was a gift to him, and when he pulled back and his green eyes raked over my face, analyzing to see if I was okay, I let out a sigh.

My limbs were still heavy and Chris was kissing a trail on my shoulder to my collar bone. After a few more moments, he climbed fully off of me and gave me another kiss before going to the bathroom. I took a moment to lay back, unconcerned with covering myself and took a few deep steady breaths.

I let out a relieved one when Chris returned to the bed. He seemed unsure, but he climbed back in next to me and I couldn't resist smiling at him.

"I'll be right back." I kissed him on the cheek as I went to the bathroom.

I gripped the counter and looked at myself in the mirror. I was smiling and I started giggling when I met my own gaze. I was beautiful, flushed, with my hair askew, more curly than its normal waves. And at the corner of my neck and shoulder, was a burgeoning hickey that should have made me nervous, but just made me giggle more and move my feet in a quick dancing pattern as I washed myself and used the bathroom. When I came back to bed, Chris tucked me into his chest immediately.

"It's more than just attraction. But I don't know what it is," I said quietly, my voice hoarse.

"I know," Chris said and reached for my hand to kiss my fingers. He looked at them in thought, before looking back at me. "How about we try dating? No labels, no promises. Start small and see what happens."

A compromise, I realized, even though I knew Chris wouldn't be casual about it. With his arms around me, and pleasure making me drowsy, saying no never crossed my mind.

"You only date harpies," I said, even as I snuggled deeper into him.

"And you only date himbos," he said right before he kissed me on the nose.

We smiled at each other and I liked that. I liked that a lot. He'd come to me without promises even though it went against what he wanted. I found that I didn't want him to be the only one to make sacrifices. I bit my lip and considered him, really considered him and what he was offering. And it was terrifying, like paddling full-steam ahead and preparing to drop in on a wave bigger than any I'd ever surfed. Maybe it was dangerous, but that was part of the excitement, part of the fun.

"Okay," I said after a few moments. "But, can we keep it to ourselves for now?"

I didn't want chaos. Advice and rumors, and fears from Theo and Ren. It wasn't bad exactly, but I still didn't know how I was supposed to feel about Chris, and I didn't want our group to fall in love with the idea of us before we could even decide if we wanted to fall in love with each other.

SEX WITH CHRIS made dance lessons *very* fun.

Being in Chris' arms and knowing what he was fully capable of was a new kind of torture, but since it was clearly affecting him as much as myself, it was easier to stomach. It was like a game of chess. He placed his hand possessively on the back of my neck. I moved close enough to press my body against his. He rubbed circles with his thumb over my pulse. I bit down on his ear while we were turning.

Dominika was finished yelling at us, simply watched with her discerning, judgemental gaze as we butchered one movement and then the next. It wasn't necessarily wrong, just a beat too slow or fast. An audience, our audience at the wedding, would forgive us for these slight mistakes, but Chris and I were better than this, could be better. Dominika knew it too.

Fly apart and then back together to a dip.

"No, no, no," Dominika snapped. "You are supposed to anchor her. Look at how frightened she is. She doesn't trust you won't let her go flying into the distance."

I blushed and Chris looked at me appraisingly. I don't know why, because for once, Dominika wasn't snapping at me. But she was right. I wasn't pushing myself into the spin in part because I was afraid I'd slip out of Chris' hand and stumble out of his grip.

We did it again and he dipped me and spun me around. The move, with his hands on my hips as I leaned forward, was oddly reminiscent of Titanic. My arms were outstretched.

"Lean forward," she snapped at me.

I took a deep breath and tried not to sound as petulant as I felt. "I am leaning forward."

"More," Dominika snapped. "More."

"Chris," I whispered, because I didn't want her to hear. "I feel like I'm going to fall if I lean forward any more."

Chris relaxed behind me for the first time in our session. "I'm not going to drop you, Orelia. I've got you."

Could I let go? It went far beyond simple dancing, I knew that. It wasn't only that I'd decided never to trust anyone like this before, but I'd never even wanted to. I looked over my shoulder at him, and he was steady. He was sure. And he knew this moment was about more than just dancing. But he didn't push, didn't demand, and I think that's what made all the difference. If he could wait, and let me decide, then at the very least I could try.

"Okay," I found myself whispering. "Okay."

He didn't drop me. And for the first time in the ten-week dance lessons, we went a full half-an-hour without being yelled at. Finishing the lessons like that made me feel a little giddy. Continuously spinning and being held by Chris, especially knowing how good we could be physically was quickly becoming overwhelming.

"I never paid much attention before," Chris said quietly. "You're turned on right now."

"I am not," I objected immediately.

"Liar."

"I'm warm. It's warm in here."

In the background Dominika clapped her hands together and declared our weekly session over and Chris looked at me with far too much amusement.

"Saved by the bell," he murmured. "You're calling your sisters after this right? Planning your trip home next month?"

"Yeah," I said as we walked to the corner of the room, still distanced from the others.

"And what about after?"

My natural inclination would've been to make excuses, to avoid him, but I found I didn't want to.

"Maybe a date...with you?"

The expressive joy filtering over Chris' face was like staring at the sun. It took my breath away.

"Text me when you're done and I'll swing over to your place."

Chapter Nineteen

“YOU’RE GOING TO be late,” Chris said, eyes closed as he put his arms behind his head.

I went to pinch the sensitive skin of his side, but he grabbed my wrist, without even opening his eyes. We stayed like that for a moment, him holding my wrist away from his body, eyes closed, me glaring down at him.

“This is your fault,” I told him and tried to pull away.

Chris’ eyes opened and he smiled even as he yanked me back to him. The first time he’d done it, I’d ended up naked and writhing beneath him. The second time he yanked me back into the bed was for a tickle fight he started that nearly culminated with a broken nose. His to be specific. And now, casual as he pleased, Chris prevented me from leaving the bed for the third time. I rested my hands on either side of Chris’ head and he seemed content to just look at me.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“How annoying you are.”

“Liar,” he said and moved forward to nip at my ear, which caused a shiver to run through me.

“Fine,” I amended. “I’m plotting your demise. After my sisters murder me for missing my flight, I’m coming for you.”

“Tell them it’s canceled.”

“Very funny,” I said. “But we really do need to go.”

“Fine,” Chris said.

He released the grip he’d had on my lower waist, but I didn’t move right away. The bed was so comfortable and Chris was so warm. He kissed me one last time, before pushing me out of the bed with his foot. I paused in the doorway, and looked back into the apartment, my apartment, where small signs of Chris were strewn about. We’d spent the previous night talking until we fell asleep.

He fit.

My heart was pounding a wild beat in my chest when Chris turned to me. Years. Literally years, I'd spent trying to figure out how to share space with him. Now, he moved through it like he belonged. He kissed me and I couldn't do anything except respond. I reached my arms around him and bit into his lip.

"We've gotta go," I groaned reluctantly.

I ran my hands through my hair in front of the mirror and slipped on my jean jacket. It was a surprisingly cool day for August. As I was about to turn, Chris reached out and smacked my ass lightly.

Biting my lip, I tried in vain to hide my smile as I shoved a finger into Chris' chest.

"You are never going to let me live that down."

"I'm trying to help you prepare to meet the world head on, Orelia," he said innocently, magnanimously.

The ride to the airport was filled with comfortable silence, and when he pulled up to the departures gates, he tugged me to him as best as he could in the car and cupped my face.

"Think about me, will you?"

I wasn't sure I could have said no. I looked away from his eyes and found myself in even deeper trouble as they landed on Chris' tanned forearms.

"No," I whispered. "I'll probably forget all about you."

"Liar," Chris said, grabbing my hand and forcing my gaze back to his. "You'll think about me."

"Yes."

There was so much about this new *relationship* that I was still figuring out, but I knew I would think of him. That much was certain.

CLEMENTINE PICKED ME up from the airport. I gave her a hug across the center console of her dated yellow slug bug which was a car she'd replaced the engine in herself.

Clementine was the spitting image of our mother with big blue eyes and a button nose, with all the curves that had evaded me. She had reddish blonde hair, but it was nearly the same length and texture as mine. That was the extent of our physical similarities.

“Cassidy,” Clem started with surprising venom, “said she’s not sure she’ll be free this weekend.”

Clem’s shoulders were a tense line as she spoke, that had nothing to do with the traffic she expertly weaved in and out of.

“Cass is going to miss the barbeque?”

Clem winced and looked at me with a quick nod. I wasn’t mad about it, but Clem’s grip on the steering wheel tightened.

Clem and Cassidy were the ones who saw our dad die. Afterward, they’d been the ones to request the annual BBQ. Each year, we cooked steaks and drank beer, because that was Dad’s favorite and we tried not to mope around about the bad things. My heart clenched. It was for the most part, what they remembered about dad. They’d been so young when he died. For Cassidy to skip the BBQ this year, for the first time to miss it in nearly twenty years, wasn’t to be taken lightly.

“What does Mom have to say about it?” I asked carefully.

“Apparently, she’s fine with it,” Clementine practically hissed, and then took a long, deep breath.

That was par for the course, I thought, not kindly. Mom was an optimistic, forward-thinker. She hadn’t sworn off men, hadn’t decided Dad was the one and only. It had made me angry at the time, but looking back, it was nice to see Mom fall in love again. To get a second chance at that. Even knowing Mom deserved that, it was hard to reconcile her being okay with Cassidy missing the barbeque. It stirred something hot and uncomfortable in my gut, as it clearly had the same effect on Clem.

“It’ll be okay,” I said and reached out to squeeze her shoulder.

“Thanks, O.”

The following day, well into the afternoon, I wandered into Clem's old room where she was lying upside down on the bed and reading a book. She'd been alternating between living at home and her remodeled van.

"Is that mine?" I asked, pointing to the regency romance novel she was holding.

"Maybe."

"Give it here," I said. I wanted to see which one it was, but it turned into a wrestling match that had both of us on the floor laughing.

"I'm glad you're home," Clem said as we stared at her ceiling where glowing stars were still stuck.

I looked around the room, amused at how little had changed when my eyes caught on a photo of the three of us sisters. It was from a Halloween party I'd taken them to when I was a senior at University of Minnesota. We'd had matching costumes as the Powerpuff Girls.

Clementine, with her strawberry blonde hair, dressed as Blossom. Cassidy, with her cheery personality, easily transitioned to Bubbles, and I'd bought a black wig and went as Buttercup. We'd each picked out a short dress in the respective color of our Powerpuff Girl. Clem had a big red bow and Cassidy wore pigtails. We each wore matching belts and black heels over the thin knee-high socks.

"Do you remember that night?" I asked Clem as I pointed to the photo.

Clem's grin was serpentine. "We went home with different twins."

Laughter echoed between us.

"Your enthusiasm for hookups used to rival my own." I wiggled my eyebrows at her suggestively.

"Yeah, well. No one here has caught my interest in a long time."

I paused. "Are you dating someone?"

Clementine blushed and looked away, and my mouth opened wide.

"No," she said as she shook her head. "There was someone this summer in Vegas."

"No way," I said. "During the poker tournament? Who was it?"

"It was no big deal. It was just a couple weeks and we ended things before the tournament."

"Clementine Julianna Kane. Were you in love?"

"You're insufferable," she said on a long groan. "And no, I wasn't in love with him, but I'm sick of these halfling relationships. I'm making a celibacy vow for myself."

Redness crept over Clem's face and it seemed like there was more to it than she was letting on.

Clem was different from myself. She'd never tried to run away. No, Clem didn't look back, if anything she looked forward. She did what she liked, she lived vivaciously and people gravitated to her naturally, the same way they did to Theo. Yet, despite all that optimism and charisma Clem had, there was something hurting inside of her that went as deep as it did for the rest of us.

"Come on, Clem," I urged. "You can tell me."

She shook her head and tried to play it off with a joke. "I've had quite enough of you."

I leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. I'd let it go, for now.

"Come on," I said as I climbed to my feet and held a hand back to Clem. "Let's go play some board games."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, the day of the barbeque, Clementine refused to yield the grill to anyone, which meant we were all doomed to slightly burnt brats and burgers. That was as much tradition now as were the scrapbooks we hauled out and combed through. Yet, even

with the traditions brimming over, I couldn't shake the discontent growing in my stomach.

Dad's family had come throughout the years, his parents and siblings, but none of them had made the journey today, and neither had Cassidy, even though she was only a few train stops away.

I met Clem's eyes from where I sat on the patio to where she flipped a burger and I understood now why she was angry about Cassidy. I didn't feel the anger, but a sense that we were losing Dad even more. And that was the fucked up thing about grief. You didn't just lose them once, but over and over and over again, until they faded completely.

My hands tightened on the scrapbook and I looked down without seeing what was in front of me.

"You alright there, kiddo?" Marcello, my step-dad, asked as he took a seat beside me and a long pull of his beer.

Marcello was a skinny man with muted gray hair and a bushy mustache and perceptive gray-blue eyes.

"Just mentally preparing myself to eat one of Clem's monstrosities," I whispered after shaking myself out of the mood.

We both looked to where Mom was speaking quietly with Clem and then back to each other.

"I have a whole apple pie hidden in the fridge for after Clem goes to bed," Marcello said with a wink. "Meet me there to commiserate?"

I laughed, genuinely and my melancholy slipped away.

For several hours the four of us sat outside drinking beer and eating Clem's less-than-stellar food. It was always so nice to be back home, truly. My entire family lived in Minnesota and while I'd never had the urge to move back, I happily basked in the attention and the familiarity of each of them. Mom in particular was a joyous person who had the ability to tell stories and keep the rapt attention of her audience, and so listening to her talk about Dad was not just nice...it was fun.

After a while though, my thoughts began to drift to how long it had actually been. Almost twenty years without him. We just repeated the same stories over and over again. I spoke about surfing with Dad in Okinawa. Mom relived how they'd met in high school and how she'd surprised him with news of her pregnancy while he was at bootcamp. Clem always told the same stories about cooking with him and pointedly saying that *he* never complained about her food. Marcello would say that the pictures of our dad, Ewan, with his leather jacket and motorcycle and penchant for camping always made him seem like a cool dude.

It was nice, but it wasn't new. And I thought of Chris, for some reason as we sat around talking about Dad. I wondered what they would've made of each other, and perhaps what they might make of *me*.

My silent introspection eventually drew my mother's attention.

"I'm worried about you," Mom said.

The conversation around us came to a crashing halt and Clem winced while Marcello's face went carefully neutral.

"You don't need to be. I'm fine." And I winced as I said it, because getting defensive over the question was a red flag that indicated I was not totally fine. There was something that might make it better though. "Actually, you know what—"

"Please don't start with this," Mom said, cutting me off, and I knew exactly what she was talking about. Mom and I were about to fight over dad's ashes. Again.

"Mom," I started. "We don't display them in the living room. We're not carrying them around in little lockets or anything like that. Please let me take his ashes."

"No, Orelia. Please, I don't want to fight about this. It's my decision."

And that was it, the end of the conversation. Mom left the patio and we all heard the door slam.

Marcello shot me a look of disapproval. I winced, but didn't say anything. I was too exhausted to fight him too.

Clementine watched the whole scene unfold before she grabbed me by the arm and hauled me back out of the house and into her car.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to go annoy our baby sister," Clem said, and although it was clear she was still angry about Cassidy missing the barbeque, I was grateful for her decisive actions.

It was only an hour drive to Cassidy's apartment on the other side of the Twin Cities. I hadn't been home in a year and the apartment was new to me. Now that Cass was in medical school, her entire life and living situation was different and she was living alone for the first time.

"Which one's her window?" I asked as I picked up some stones from the ground.

Clem grinned widely and pointed to one of the few windows glowing with light as the darkness of night came in. I threw softly and didn't miss. We both waited a beat, grinning like maniacs at each other.

"One more," Clem urged. "And then we'll just climb the fire escape."

We threw one more and Cassidy poked her head out of the window. "Guys!" she exclaimed. "Would you just knock like normal people?"

"Nooope," Clem yelled, her tone still peeved from Cassidy missing the barbeque.

But Cassidy rang us into her apartment a few moments later and we greeted her by tackling her to the ground with hugs and kisses.

When we were done giggling and smothering Cassidy, Clem seemed more at ease. I watched as my sisters carefully danced around each other as we moved to the dining room table in Cassidy's small

apartment. She had textbooks and study materials spread all over, but we sat at the table anyway and ignored them.

"I have a peace offering," Cassidy said, eyeing me quickly before she settled on Clementine and then went to pull something out of her kitchen.

She came back with a bottle of champagne and a black candle and Clem rolled her eyes. "Jesus, Cass. Are we doing a seance or something?"

Cassidy glared at Clem. "The champagne is in Mom's honor, obviously. But I found this candle, it's a mixture of leather and pine."

Clem and I exchanged glances as Cassidy lit the candle. The scent wafted towards us in subtle waves and my eyes grew damp as Clem made a noise, an effort to push down a sob in her throat. The candle smelled like Dad. Clementine excused herself to the bathroom, which left Cassidy and I alone for a moment.

Despite Clem losing it a bit, it was a perfect apology.

"Why didn't you come to the barbeque?" I asked Cass as we poured ourselves drinks and I pushed down the tears.

Cassidy shrugged, but the move was too casual. "Come on, O. Not you too."

"I'm not mad about it, Cass. I want to make sure you're alright."

Cassidy muttered, "That's more than Clem."

But Cassidy looked towards the empty hall where Clem had fled and winced. Cassidy and Clem were two years apart, but had grown up super close. I'd been jealous of their relationship on and off through my teens, but realized my relationship with each of them was as important to them as they were to me, and that had eased most of my insecurities. I liked that they came to me for advice now.

"Were you just busy or is there something else?" I asked.

We had plenty of time so I didn't push as she moved her mouth, opening and closing in indecision.

"I don't really even remember him, or even what happened. Every year I just feel like I don't miss him, or love him as much as I should. Marcello is the one who raised me, who taught me how to tie shoes and gave me my first driving lesson. I don't know, I feel like I don't grieve the same way."

Her words were at direct odds with the candle and the memory of his scent, but I didn't mention that. Cassidy's trauma made sense, that she was too young to have substantial memories, and she always said she didn't recall what had happened the day our dad died, but Clementine did.

Dad had fallen off the ladder to the roof and hit his head. Clem had ordered Cassidy, who'd been five at the time, to put a towel on his head to stop the bleeding while she called 911. Cassidy was a surgeon now, so even if she didn't think there was a link from that moment to her chosen profession, I did.

"I didn't know you felt that way," I said instead of voicing my other thoughts.

"You and Mom always argue about dad's ashes every year." I cringed at her words, but Cassidy didn't seem to notice. "And it doesn't matter to me what happens to them. I just, I feel bad I guess."

She was gnawing on her lower lip and I could see she was holding back tears, tears close to spilling over. I enveloped her in my arms and squeezed her tightly.

"You don't have to feel bad about it, Cass."

"Thanks, O." She squeezed me tightly, sniffled once, and then shook herself.

AS PROMISED, WHEN everyone went to bed, I met Marcello in the kitchen for cold apple pie. We could have heated it up, thrown some ice cream on it, but instead we grabbed forks and ate directly from the box.

"Evening," I said before I dug into the pie.

"Did you girls have fun tonight?" he asked.

"Mmmm-hmmm," I said around a bite of food. "What about you?"

Marcello sighed and gave me a pointed look.

"I don't want to talk about it," I muttered and shoved a large piece of pie into my mouth.

"Try not to hold it against her," Marcello said as he poured us both a cup of tea. "With you all the way in California, and the years you spent abroad, she's nervous to give you things." He didn't mean for it to hurt. "If Cassidy was the one who wanted to spread the ashes in a lake out here, I think she'd allow it," Marcello said firmly, but gently. "It's different with you, O. You remind her most of Ewan."

It was weird to hear my dad's name. I shook my head at Marcello's words, but didn't deny it.

"I think it's what he would have wanted." Ashes spread in the ocean, at Okinawa. The last time they'd been a happy, whole family.

"Is it?" Marcello asked, both hands coming around his mug. "Or is it what *you* want? It's okay if it is, Orelia. If that's what you need. But your mom knew your dad better than anyone. Not you."

"I hope you know," I started. "Even though I call you Marcello, I know you're just as much of a father to me as my dad was."

"Shit, kiddo," he said and he started to blink rapidly. "I know. I've never been offended by it."

I gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek before I took my mug and went to the guest room to pack.

Chapter Twenty

THE NEXT DAY when I arrived at the airport, I texted my mom an apology, but didn't answer when she called, claiming I was about to board my flight. I opened my notebook and doodled on a page with spikes and stars and flowers until the scratching in my throat eased.

As I taxid back to my condo after the short flight, I opened and closed the text chain to my mom several times, but ultimately decided against responding. After half-unpacking and tossing most of the clothing into the laundry, I paced my apartment. My eyes finally came to rest on the photo of our group from Okinawa. At Chris' house it was a giant canvas, at mine it was a small picture frame on my desk. Chris and I holding hands and smiling at one another had been so easy and I'd forgotten that over the years.

I wanted that easy companionship and chemistry, especially now. Every step from my condo to the surf school had been plagued with doubt and every step I wanted to turn around. Needing Chris was terrifying and yet I wanted his comfort.

"Orelia? What's wrong?"

He opened the door to let me in and he took my hands into his entirely, warmth seeping into them. I could have called Vivian and Jayna or Ren and Theo. Any of them would have taken my call. But I didn't want any of them, I wanted Chris. I wanted the soft way he was looking at me, ready to protect or defend. Chris held my chin in his hand and was checking me over, for any injuries, anything physical to figure out what was wrong.

I reigned it back in.

"I had a fight with my mom before I left Minnesota. I'm feeling kind of crappy."

"Ah, wanna watch a movie?" he asked, and instead of devouring me with kisses filled with passion, he pressed his lips softly to my forehead and pulled me into a bear hug.

"Rom-com?" I asked with hopeful puppy-dog eyes when he pulled away.

"Yeah, okay," he agreed as he tugged me to the upstairs couch.

The house was the perfect temperature, not cold, but cool enough to put a blanket over ourselves and not suffocate from the heat.

"Where are you going?" I asked, as I looked at the blankets, water, nest, and didn't find anything missing.

"Close your eyes," he said as he entered the kitchen.

"Why?"

Chris laughed and crossed his arms. "Do you find it impossible to ever listen to me on the first try?" I nodded. "Close your eyes," he said again. "I'm going into my secret snack hiding place."

I giggled, but closed my eyes and turned to snuggle deeper in the couch in my blankets and cozy sweats.

"Open your hands."

I almost argued, but I resisted the urge and held out my hands. "I can listen."

"Good girl," he said, and placed something square and plastic in my hands. "You can open them now."

Whatever it was, it was in one of those white styrofoam takeout boxes, so I wasn't sure what to expect. When I opened it, the familiar scent of the Haitian gingerbread, bonbon siwo filled the air and my mouth watered. From Fabienne and *Koki La Me*.

While I stared at the box in awe and gratitude, Chris flipped on the cheesy rom-com I'd suggested and settled into the couch on the opposite end, both of us tucked into the corners with our legs and feet pressed against each other. And later, when it came time to go to bed, he pulled me with him.

I couldn't stop moving, tossing and turning and twisting in the sheets as I tried to calm my mind down, calm my body down. As I was turning for what must've been the dozenth time, Chris made a

noise of sympathy from his side of the bed and pulled me to him, trapping me between his arms and holding me.

“Stop moving,” he said against my neck. “Go to sleep.”

The crazy thing was, I did. Having his arm around my stomach and the pressure of him at my back provided enough security for me to finally doze off. My eyes grew heavy and I wasn’t sure if I was imagining the words he was whispering against my neck. They sounded suspiciously like, *I love you*. It was easier to pretend to be asleep.

I jolted wide awake at three AM and for a moment I didn’t know why. My heart was pounding in my chest, I was sitting straight up in bed, in Chris’ bed. But I was okay, I was fine. I wasn’t panting or sweating in the way I did when I had nightmares. That’s when I heard whimpers and I turned to Chris for the first time, realizing what was happening. He was thrashing.

I reached out before I understood my intent to touch his shoulder. “Hey, you’re okay.”

My whisper didn’t seem to cut it, because if anything Chris got worse, not better. I leaned closer to him and put one hand on each shoulder. My face inches from his.

“Chris. Chris.” I gently pushed at his shoulders, forcing him to wake up.

The whimpers stopped and huge gasping breaths took their place. My eyes adjusted to the dark, so I saw that his were wide and searching. One of his hands moved to cover my hand at his shoulder and his other pressed into my bare waist as he tried to understand what was happening, and not—I’m sure—to send lightning up my spine.

“You were having a nightmare,” I whispered.

“Oh,” he said, breathing slightly more controlled. “Sorry for waking you.”

“You’re fine. I get them too.”

Both of us paused at my confession and my skin tingled all over when I focused on the places our skin was pressed together. Chris had stripped out of his t-shirt at some point, and my shirt was riding up where his hand was pressed. Chris' hand tightened on my waist and I inhaled sharply.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked after a few moments in silence as I tried to catch my breath.

We both laid on our sides, facing each other. And Chris paused before he answered, which made his curt answer of *no* seem less impersonal than normal. My hand was out between the two of us, in no man's land, and Chris' hand brushed against it, like he was debating holding onto me, debating telling me the truth.

He took my hand.

I didn't know what kind of nightmares haunted Chris, but I knew when I woke from my own, I spiraled for the rest of the night, replaying every minute, reliving every fear.

"You know that feeling when you moved to a new school at a new station, and you hoped that this time would be different. That you'd make friends, and they'd like you, and you wouldn't have to leave three years later."

"Yeah," Chris said, voice rough. After a pause, he murmured, "Is that what you dream about?"

"Not usually. At least, not anymore," I said as a barely there whisper.

And the silence between us didn't seem as tense, and that small exchange shouldn't have changed so much between us, but Chris reached out, wrapped his fingers around mine.

"I dream about my family. Of not being able to," he paused and his grip tightened on mine. "Of not being able to protect the people I care about."

Quiet permeated the room, neither of us dared to breathe, in the wake of his admission. I squeezed his hand.

"I dream about falling now," I said softly. "Like how my dad died. He slipped on the ladder step. The fall was less than ten feet, but he fell straight back and hit his head."

"Did you see it happen?" Chris whispered in the dark and I stared at the ceiling.

"No, my mom and I were away. My younger sisters saw it all happen, they had to call 911 and ride in the ambulance with him. He was already gone by the time we got to the hospital."

Silence stretched again and Chris didn't apologize for my loss, didn't respond automatically, just listened and absorbed what I told him. I sensed in the silence that Chris wanted to respond, was working himself up to admit what his dream had been about, and what had caused it.

"My mom was in the Air Force and she deployed three times when I was a kid." I knew this secondhand, but Chris had never told me. "She came back the first time and things barely changed, so I wasn't afraid when she left the second time, just sad that she was gonna be away from my dad and me. But she came back early, broken leg, survived a bombing where her friends died."

Chris was looking over my shoulder, recalling the story, the memory, and I knew, somehow I knew we weren't to the bad part yet.

"I was thirteen and she wanted to go back one last time. She and my dad fought for a long time before her last deployment and I'd seen how wrecked she was the last time. So I was afraid they would divorce, afraid she'd die. I was so afraid that year she was gone."

A constant companion of fear, I hummed in understanding. "My dad was never deployed, but he had duties that would take him away for weeks or months at a time. It was hard on my mom."

Chris nodded. "After the third deployment, and discharge, she was lost. Depressed, angry, sad. Unsure of herself for the first time I remembered. When they moved to the west coast the following year, I stayed in Hawai'i. It was easier to be away from them."

“Is that why you quit the circuit? To go back to your family.”

He made a noise that clearly indicated *somewhat*. “My mom got better. My parents went to therapy. But I was ashamed of myself for not wanting to see their pain. Around the time I was winning events, I started to want more than the party circuit. I found I didn't want to spend all my time in hotels, or traveling. So I came here and made it my home.”

It was nice to lay and talk and for it not to feel forced. My eyes grew heavy and I was already drifting, and all he did was tighten the grip he had on my hand.

We laid like that for the rest of the night. Even when I had the urge to adjust, to turn on my side, I didn't. I laid on my back and I held onto Chris' hand because he needed it for whatever reason, and I needed it too, for reasons I wasn't ready to unpack.

Chapter Twenty-One

ON A WINDY Thursday morning in the middle of August, I woke in my bed next to Chris. I was splayed out like a starfish while Chris was pushed to the edge of the bed. Maybe there was some merit to me being a bed hog. I eased out of the covers in my underwear and XXL Minnesota Gophers t-shirt to take care of morning hygiene before I went to the kitchen to start coffee.

“The winds are wreaking havoc already,” Chris said as he checked the forecasted weather on his phone and absentmindedly kissed me on the cheek.

“Are you going to cancel the lessons?”

Chris nodded as he reviewed the list of attendees he was supposed to meet. Even outside, there were dark storm clouds in the distance and the howling wind.

“You can hang out with me today, but I need to work. I’m going to be finishing my translations today.”

Chris set aside his phone to give me a real kiss, and it was so easy. “I’d like to stick around. Whenever you finish for the day, I’ll take you out.”

“That sounds great,” I told him, and meant it. Maybe it was time to admit my feelings to him, to talk about what I wanted, what I was afraid to want.

“I do need to contact my students,” he said apologetically as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Sounds good. I’m gonna get dressed and start work,” I said, turning on my heel toward my bedroom.

Standing in the dim light of my apartment, dressed in high-waisted jeans and a white bra, I debated between two collared shirts and my thoughts drifted. Chris and I should have been complicated together, especially with the secrets we kept from our friends, but it wasn’t complicated. It was easy between us. We were surfing several

times a week, having sleepovers, and so much sex. And I was so incredibly content.

Even though I worked from home, I was rarely productive if I tried to work in pajamas, no matter how comfy they were. I sighed and looked back at my clothing options. Button-up. I nodded at Chris as he walked back from the kitchen into the bedroom, scowling at me before turning away.

Weird, but before I could dredge up any worry, Chris strode back to me and unceremoniously, shoved a soft men's button-up shirt into my hands.

"This is for you," Chris said, his voice gruff, but his eyes were almost pleading, vulnerable.

Nonplussed, I stared at the purple and white collared shirt and my brain broke. Maybe it was because we hadn't had our coffee, but all I could do was stare at the shirt in confusion.

"What?" I blinked several times. "You're giving me a shirt?"

His cheeks colored and that woke me better than a cup of coffee. "For the love of God, Orelia. Just take it. Wear it." He ran his hand through his wet hair, making it stand on the end. His eyes were focused on the wall, over my shoulder. "What's one more for your collection?"

Confused, I slipped the shirt on, buttoned two middle ones and tied the extra length of the shirt at the top of my jeans, a hint of understanding starting to make its way through.

"Chris," I started, biting my lip hard to keep from grinning. "Do you think all the men's shirts I wear come from previous lovers?"

It was clear he did and a giggle slipped out even as Chris glared at me. The laughter died in my throat when Chris pulled me by the shirt's collar into his chest. I felt the weight of his shirt, the possessiveness of what it meant, what wearing it meant.

"They're men's shirts," I smirked, unable to stop myself. "But I get them from thrift stores. No one's ever given me their shirt, let alone a nice one like this."

I ran the soft fabric of the collar between my fingers, staring at him in invitation.

He moved forward, capturing my lips in a bruising kiss. "You have no idea how happy that makes me."

"Don't you mean, how *hard* that makes you?" I said, returning his kiss.

I reached between his legs, delighting in the fact that I was right. That he got hot seeing me wear his shirt. It sent a shiver down my spine.

"You're supposed to be working," he murmured against my throat, trailing kisses to my collar bone.

I backed up against the dresser, pulling Chris between my legs.

"We can make time," I pouted and Chris nipped at me. "You already canceled your surf lessons for today."

"True, but I don't want to distract you when you're so close to completing a contract," Chris said, even as he laid a trail of kisses on my neck, pushing aside the cup of my bra.

"You are distracting." I said and turned to face Chris, ignoring the rest of the scene. "When we started this, I wasn't expecting you to be good enough to make my brain stop working."

"You—what?" He was partly distracted by my hands on his chest, but my words caught up to him and he turned to glare at me.

I smirked at his stunned silence and amused now, decided to dig in. "You're too handsome. I just assumed you wouldn't work for it."

I trailed off with an apologetic shrug and he pressed me further against the dresser where I sat. The weight and warmth of him was delicious.

"You thought I would be boring in bed?" he asked again for clarification. For a terrifying moment I thought I hurt his feelings and

pulled back. But he didn't seem hurt or angry. Instead, his grip in my hair tightened and he pulled my head back, exposing my neck. "Answer the question."

"Yes," I breathed, even as his teeth tested the skin at my neck. "I thought you'd be boring."

I didn't think he was boring now. I was already rocking my hips to get pressure. Already feeling warm and tingly and desperate.

"I would really like to treat you like the brat you are. If you want me to stop, that's all you have to say. If you want more, I want you to say that, too."

He said it like it was dirty talk, like it was another way to turn me on, and it was absolutely those things, but it was also a bid for explicit consent and an invitation to something dangerous.

"I'll tell you to stop," I said seriously as I reached to rub my thumb in slow sweeps over his forearm. And then because I couldn't help myself, "If you're even capable of doing something so interesting."

There was a long, tense moment as we stared at one another. In the silence, I heard my labored breathing for the first time and it had my body clenching tightly in anticipation. Chris looked so calm, it was almost infuriating. It would've been if it wasn't so god damn arousing.

"I want you to beg for it."

Desire and disbelief shot through me like an arrow. I almost opened my mouth to beg, but reminded myself I should be annoyed.

"Make me."

"I plan to."

He quickly divested me of all clothing and kissed down my stomach and then between my legs, but he never touched me, never kissed me where I needed him most.

"I'm not going to do whatever you say," I said, even knowing I would, with the right motivation. I was testing him, seeing if I could push him, to infuriate him, the way he was infuriating me.

"You will," Chris promised. "When your pussy is aching, and you want to come. You'll do whatever I tell you to."

I shook my head and met his eyes, and saw he liked it. He liked that I was resisting him. He liked my bratty behavior. He liked that he was going to reduce me to a shaking, shivering mess. Until I begged, like he wanted me to.

I was panting and so was he as we stared at each other. I sat up and he let me grab him by the neck and pull him down on top of me. He bit into my lips aggressively, and he was heavy on top of me.

"Get on your hands and knees." My breath caught in my throat. I'd been waiting for something like this, this possessiveness in his actions since Palm Springs.

"Are you going to spank me?" I asked, hoped, but didn't move toward the bed. I wanted to see how much I could get away with.

The answer I found out—*not much*—as Chris pushed me firmly back to the bed.

"Yes," he said, promising the edge between pleasure and pain in his stare. "For every one of your shirts I thought belonged to another man."

He took my jaw in his hands tightly. "Tell me I can. Tell me you want this."

There it was again, Chris' explicit bid for consent wrapped in words dripping with so much want it made my legs shake.

I peeled off my shorts and got on the bed on my hands and knees. "I have a lot of shirts."

His hand rubbed my backside, lovingly, slow, and torturous. My breath started coming out faster in anticipation. He would draw his hand away and I'd think it was coming, only for his hand to return, to move up to my lower back, almost in massage.

"Orelia," Chris said, his voice deep, full of control and demand. "Count."

The first swat caught me by surprise, so did the delicious sting of it. I pushed back, moaning, wanting more.

"One."

He did it again, successively on the other cheek, stinging against where my underwear was still on.

"Two," I gasped. "Three."

"Don't give me any more bullshit about getting me out of your system, about this being a fling," Chris said with restrained anger.

Anger that thrilled me. There was a possessiveness I'd never heard and never wanted before now. Now though, it made me feel wanted, and even a little seen, because it *was* bullshit.

"It's not bullshit," I said, but I was breathless and wanting to goad him.

He smacked my ass with more force than before. Not enough to hurt me, but it made me groan, heightened my arousal, my need, my...feelings for him. His hardness pressed against me and the heat already in my belly, between my legs, on my ass, went supernova.

"You're never getting me out of your system," he said and ran his hands over my ass, squeezing and kneading them, and teasing between my legs. "You've had me from the beginning and I've had you."

"I-I—" I was so far gone, couldn't form the words, couldn't tell him how right he was.

"You know, we've had each other," Chris said and kissed up my spine, so tenderly, so gently, adding his insane combination of soft, gentle, and sweet with fierce, hard, and fast. He tugged at my underwear. "Let's take these off."

"Yes," I told him. "Yes."

When my pussy was exposed to him, I expected him to ignore me, to go right back to my ass, but he didn't. Just like the first time, he knelt behind me and ate my pussy out from the back. He dug his

nails into the skin on my hips, preventing me from rubbing against him. I ended up panting face down into the bed cover, my arms outstretched in front of me, hands gripping the sheets. With my nipples rubbing against the sheets in addition to everything Chris was already doing, the whole act became an onslaught of sensations.

When he removed his mouth from my pussy, his fingers plunged into my wetness, I panted, or screamed, or something.

“Chris.”

I was thrusting my hips to no avail. I could feel the build, but it wasn't enough, wasn't quite what was going to push me over the edge.

“Tell me what you need,” he whispered and his breath was hot against me. I arched my hips up, but he pushed them back down. “Tell me, Orelia.”

I didn't know what I wanted, couldn't decide if I wanted more pain, more of his mouth, or his cock to be inside me, to fill me.

“Are you going to beg for me now? Your thighs are shaking.”

I moaned, but didn't say anything. I rolled my hips up, wanting his mouth, his fingers, I wanted him. I wanted him.

“Beg,” Chris said, but his voice wasn't nearly as firm as he had been.

I could hear the want in his voice too. And it was that, the desperation I heard as he whispered against my pussy. How badly he wanted it. He swatted my cunt sharply and it had me gasping out the word immediately.

“Please.” His mouth mercifully closed over my pussy and his fingers returned to their slow, shallow pace. “Please make me come.”

He let my hips grind back against his face now and I heard myself distantly growing louder as the pressure built and built in my stomach, between my legs. I came against his mouth, hands fisted in the comforter as I jolted away, overly sensitive from all the attention.

Still shaking, breath heaving, Chris lined himself up with me.

"What do you need from me, Orelia?" Chris asked again. So tantalizing, so close, and not quite there.

"You." I couldn't think, but then his hand came down on my ass again, and I could suddenly focus. And I knew what I wanted, what my body desperately needed. "I need you to fuck me hard. Please!"

In one swift movement, he was inside me. He was so big, hitting that perfect, sensitive spot inside me. My fingers clawed the bedspread in front of me, tightening with each thrust. It was so good I could do nothing but press my face into the mattress and ride out the sensations of his flesh hitting the sensitized skin of my ass, of my clit pounding through my orgasm, as my thighs shook to remain upright for him.

"God dammit, I have to see your face," Chris said as he pulled out to flip me around.

Chris was panting, pleasure and control were slipping and his voice was rough with want even as he had me.

But the need, his need. Tears, of all things, pricked in my eyes as he turned me over and slammed back inside without hesitation.

When he saw the tears, he froze and panic came so fast into his gaze. I smiled to reassure him. He slowed his pace inside of me, his hands cupped my face, thumbs wiping away the stray tears. I turned my head and licked over the head of his thumb, the salty taste in sharp contrast to the sweet sensation furling within me.

"You make me feel so good, Chris. Don't stop." I reached for him and hugged him, hugged him so hard. It was grounding, it was everything. My eyes were dry when he pulled back. "Fuck me like you mean it, Chris. Fuck me like you promised."

My words burst a dam inside him, because he did what I asked and I met him stroke for stroke, passion for passion. We moved together. I grabbed his ass, and he stuttered against me.

"You're mine, Orelia. You're fucking mine."

My eyes flew open. He didn't ask me for it, didn't demand I share it back with him, but I felt it, and he deserved to hear it.

"I'm yours."

Chris' eyes met mine and his face contorted as he came, his hands tightening on my hips as if they were the only thing anchoring him to this world. He dropped his face into my neck and roared against my skin as his hips jerked in his final strokes. My body was loose from all the pleasure and I was relieved as Chris leaned so heavily against me that he seemed to be in the same situation. The way he was still panting and nuzzling into my hair filled me with so much joy.

I clutched him tighter as he rested against me, careful not to crush me, but not wary about being close either. I ran my hands up and down his back, feeling the warm, damp skin, delighted at how hot we were pressed together.

"Why do you like bossing me around so much?" I asked, shifting so I could see his face. Chris tried to hide how uncomfortable the question made him. "C'mon, tell me. I won't laugh."

He bit the inside of his cheek. "I just like it. I like making you feel good, I like knowing you're having a good time, because I want that for you."

Chris shifted off me, laid on his side. His gaze was over my shoulder, his eyes to the side as he tried to pinpoint exactly what it was. The motion of his hands trailed over my hipbone as I turned on my side to mirror him.

"And the other part?" I asked, and Chris looked at me then, gaze part amusement, part exasperation.

"You're really not going to let this go?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not going to get into all of it," he started. "But when my mom was deployed, I felt like I couldn't control the world around me. I couldn't keep her safe. With the whole control-during-sex

thing, I like knowing I can keep you safe, even when the scene itself creates a sense of danger, I get the knowledge that I keep you safe.”

“I do trust you there,” I tell him because it’s true.

His entire body relaxed. I hadn’t realized how nervous he was to talk about it, to share the pieces of himself. It was a relief more than anything to know I wasn’t alone, and that’s what prompted my own confession.

“I keep thinking I’ll stop wanting you so much,” I whispered. “That at some point we’ll get sick of each other. And not because it’s boring, just out of our systems, you know?”

“It’s not going away, Orelia.” I knew that too, but didn’t answer. Wasn’t sure what to do about it.

I pulled Chris’ shirt on as I rolled out of bed. “Stay here as long as you want. I’m going to work through the next couple hours.”

“You don’t mind?” he asked.

“I like hearing you in the house. Don’t know why. Doesn’t make sense. But I like it.”

“I’ll stay,” he said and kissed me one more time before I left him in my bed and trudged over to my office space.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I REREAD THE last few chapters of *Night of the Fox* in order to complete the translation on time. I would have started another chapter if not for my blazingly loud alarm. I scrambled across the room for it. That was my cue for lunch. As I made my way to the kitchen, checking the weather, I allowed myself to feel the tingles of anticipation, even though nothing was confirmed yet.

I finished the full translation and was going through the document, making minor edits here and there. Beside my computer was the hard copy of *Night of the Fox* and sticking out of it were dozens of colored sticky notes, each representing a different comment, reminder for myself.

With music playing in the background I worked most of the day away in a frenzy to finally complete the translation. As two o'clock drew closer and closer, I finally picked up my phone again.

It was almost five in New York, and although my manager Dulcie would typically be online well into the evening—she hated mornings—I still wanted to get on the phone with her before the workday ended.

“Orelia, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“An update.”

“Okay, I’m listening,” she said, her familiar no-nonsense tone making my lips twitch.

“I’ve finished the first full draft. I’d like to send it to the editors and have the author review this round, before any further changes take place.”

“Perfect,” Dulcie said. “You’re early. Again.”

“Honestly, I couldn’t put it down. I can’t wait to start the second one,” I said, intentionally fishing.

I could practically hear Dulcie's smile over the phone. "You should wait before you start the second one, until we hear back from Hotaru's agent."

I'd already bought the second book, but even if I didn't get the green light to start the translation, I was going to read it for fun. The third and final book of the trilogy wasn't scheduled to be released until the following year.

I smiled into the phone pressed against my ear. "Okay. I'm going to send through the email to you and include a list of questions I have for the author. I've flagged the pages I want to confirm as I think there's something I'm missing in intent for foreshadowing the rest of the series."

"Perfect," Dulcie said and paused. "Hotaru Hayashi expressed interest in meeting you. Can you also send me your availability in September?"

Regardless of the fact that September was already going to be a busy month, I hopped up and down and pumped my fist. Meeting Hotaru was a dream.

"September is a busy month for me."

"Humor me," Dulcie said. "Hayashi's going to be in LA and I've always been impressed with your work, so I doubt she's going to find fault in it."

The praise made me warm. Even though September meant the wedding and my birthday. I held my breath hoping the visit wouldn't coincide with either occasion.

"Thank you, Dulcie. Will you send through the proposed meeting time and date when you have it?"

"As soon as I know, you'll know. Good work, Orelia."

I squealed and immediately texted into the group chat about the prospect of meeting the author. Then, since I was already messaging Chris, Ren, and Theo, I typed. *Moonlight surf tonight?*

Chris responded first with an *In*. Something that would have surprised me last year, but now filled me with giddy excitement. A few minutes later, Ren responded in the affirmative. Theo was the last to respond and in all caps, *HELL YEAH, LET'S DO IT!!!!*

I did a happy dance as I made my sandwich. Plans like this rarely came together without everyone having to check and recheck their schedule. While we all came from different backgrounds, from vastly different families, this was one thing we had in common. A refusal to be wishy-washy with our plans. I didn't have any concerns about last-minute cancellations.

The group chat—now named Dancing Queens—continued to ping as the location was chosen by Chris' critical eye and then bonfire plans were added.

We met at the surf school and carpooled in two vehicles to Mico Point. Excitement danced in the air as we stripped out of our clothing. Trading sweats for wet suits.

"God, we haven't done this in ages," Theo said, moving closer to the beach, itching for the water as the rest of us moved at a slower pace.

"It was a good idea, O," Ren agreed.

There were decent waves and a good tide close to shore, so we started there. It was perfect for all of us, with enough lights streaming from the shore for everyone to feel safe. We moved in a group to the edge of the water and put our boards down before climbing on and paddling out. The water was cool and contrasted with the balmy air.

"I always feel so naughty when we do this," Theo said, as he paddled out in front of the rest of us.

It did seem illicit and dangerous, and in some ways it was, or it could be if we weren't careful.

In another silent agreement, Chris and I waited in the surf and let Ren and Theo take the majority of the waves. Ren didn't seek out surfing by himself, and had no intentions to make it a larger part

of his life, but was always down to spend time with his friends, and seemed happy enough in the dark shallows. But as time went on, Chris and I began looking further out, where the waves were bigger.

An hour or so later, Theo surprised me by cutting out first. "My arms are killing me. I can barely get to standing."

"Thank god." Ren laughed in relief beside him. "Let's go get the bonfire set up. You guys come in whenever you're ready."

"Will do," I said with a grin.

"Don't stay out too long," Ren said. "Bonfire's as much fun as the waves."

They turned to head in and I looked at Chris. He nodded his head and held his arms out in front of him as if to say, *after you*.

We were both itching for the bigger ones further out and our group weren't the only ones in the water now. It was a Friday night, so I wasn't surprised to see more bodies and boards coming into the water. Three other groups were with us by the time Chris' patience was up. And mine too, for that matter.

We paddled in silence. In combination with the darkness and the soft glow of the lights on shore this moonlight surf had an intimacy that hadn't been there on previous outings. It was satisfying to feel the water beneath our hands as we kept pace with one another, dipping under the edges of the oncoming waves as we reached our spot.

We both sat up on our boards to catch our breath. Now that we were there, the urge to rush dissipated. Voices from shore and the crash of waves reached us in a familiar melody and I sighed from the pleasure of it.

"They don't love it nearly as much as we do," Chris said quietly, cutting into the silence. It wasn't said with any malice or condescension, just a statement of fact.

He was right. Even for Theo it was a physical challenge and an exclusive hobby, more so than a lifestyle. For Chris and I, it was more.

"It's a siren's call," I said.

I saw a flash of white from Chris' face, a smile making itself known in the night and he hummed thoughtfully at my words.

"You're getting caught up in the moonlight, Orelia," he said, laughter coloring his tone. "It's bewitching though, isn't it?"

Chris leaned over on his board to kiss me. The feel of his palm cupping my face was slowly becoming familiar, but with the same power of a lighting bolt. Kissing him in the dark, alone in the ocean...it was magic and mother earth and a mixture of danger and romance.

"Ladies first," he offered as a wave came towards us.

I turned the board and flipped on my stomach, looking over my shoulder as I paddled, and just as the wave pulled back, I gave my final push, bracing myself in a plank position, poised to stand. In the next heartbeat, I was on my feet.

The world narrowed to a single wave, to the shift of my board. With bent knees, and my arms out, I stared ahead even as I dragged my hand through the wave behind me. My heart had hardly changed rhythm, so familiar with the thrill and success of riding a wave. It was amazing, incredible, but familiar now too, which was almost as satisfying as the wave itself.

I paddled back out, around Chris' path, as he caught the next wave and for many turns, we missed each other, catching one wave and then another, knowing the waves were slowly receding and our time on them was running out.

I'm not sure how long we'd been out there, but I was starting to feel the effects, starting to slow, making mistakes. On my last wave, I slipped and went flying ass over teakettle as I made a misstep in the dark. My hands came instinctively in front of my face to protect against any potential jerk of the board.

I held my breath and surfaced, a laugh on my lips as I climbed back on my board. I was panting from effort and my time underwa-

ter when I made it back to Chris who hadn't taken the wave that followed mine. He sat on his board and waited for me.

"You know what this reminds me of," I told him, paddling closer and then sitting up on my board. "That first trip to Japan. Do you remember the first time we went out together?"

It had been the day before the rejection, before the awkwardness.

Chris' outline bobbed in the darkness, moonlight and shorelight barely reaching us.

"Yeah, you took us to middling waves," he accused.

"That's because I had no idea what you were capable of. Well, I didn't recognize you, but you know people lie about their experience all the time."

I could see Chris nod in the dark, but we were both silent as we thought back to that time.

I'd worked at the guest house with Danny, the Okinawa Surf school owner. It was a perfect transition as I was getting ready to leave for the states. Danny allowed me to stay in one of the guest house rooms and work for rent that summer. So I'd been the one to host Theo and Chris when they arrived for a week of surfing in Japan.

For that week, for all intents and purposes, I was in charge of the group when they visited. I'd given Ren lessons, but he was a true beginner and the waves I'd wanted us to surf were too big for him.

Ren had been gracious, told me he was too sore to even contemplate going out, and would lounge at the beach next to the guest house instead. I'd been relieved to see him out of his depressive state, so I hadn't argued when he cheerfully went to the beach.

I wasn't sure about Theo and Chris' skills, so I didn't take them all the way out. I wanted to judge their abilities for myself first. Chris had appraised me then, like he knew exactly what I was doing, and proceeded to shred the hell out of the waves I'd taken them to. I hadn't recognized him until he was on a wave.

"We went out farther after we proved ourselves to you," Chris said, chuckling a little as he remembered.

"You were not happy about it," I said, splashing him a little.

He hadn't taken many waves, instead letting Theo exhaust himself. Chris knew I wanted to go even farther out, and he had watched me. It was a careful gaze, one brimming with assessment and a little judgment. He was better than me, and had more experience. We didn't spend much time talking, but we took turns filming each other, riding behind on the waves. At the time, I thought we were flirting.

"I understood why you assessed us first," Chris said and splashed me back. "I actually liked you better for it."

He was looking at me, body and board facing me, but it was too dark to read the expression on his face.

"It didn't seem like you liked me better for it," I said, but without bitterness. Not in my tone and not in my heart.

"Yeah, well," Chris raised his hand out of the water to rub the back of his neck. "It had been a while since I'd surfed with anyone on equal ground."

The compliment, the insinuation behind it surprised me. "I'm not anywhere as good as you were," I said. "As you are."

"I know," Chris said and I saw his white teeth flash again in the darkness. "But it was your home turf. You had the advantage and I was impressed."

"It didn't seem like it," I said, not defensively, just trying to figure him out. "Even before—you know—you seemed more distant with me than the others?"

"That's not what it was. I," he started slowly, "have a hard time in new situations. Not being the one in control doesn't sit well, and I know I was a jerk. I'm sorry for that."

It was the darkness and the intimacy of being alone in the ocean that allowed for this conversation, but I didn't want it to end with Chris' confession. I wanted to be brave too.

"I thought you didn't like me. I hated that you didn't want to be my friend. Even after." My voice was quiet, small, and the words themselves felt like they came out of the mouth of a child rather than an almost thirty-year-old woman.

Chris didn't laugh, I didn't think he would, but he also didn't hesitate in his response.

"I get seasick," he finally answered in a non sequitur I didn't understand. At my blank stare he repeated himself. "I get seasick."

It was amusing for sure, a surfer who got seasick. But, Chris' tone was firm and intense, like he was trying to convey something far more important than the words themselves.

Maybe because I was thinking of our time on Okinawa, it came to me so quickly. After the disastrous rejection, I tried to bridge the gap with Chris and apologize for coming on to him. His rejection of my charter fishing boat idea had been the nail in the proverbial coffin for any potential friendship between us. I'd been hurt and insulted and thought it was me.

"You get seasick," I murmured and tilted my head to the side. All the tension in Chris' body seemed to dissipate. Was it possible our first impressions were a series of bad luck? A combination of poking each other's most tender insecurities without realizing it? "Huh."

"I'm sorry for making you feel like it was your fault. On top of everything else we are," he said, careful for my sake not to put a label on us. "I'd like to think we're friends now."

"We are, Chris."

"Good," he said, but there was a long pause, almost like he wanted me to deny it. The silence between us was different from the quiet intimacy of before.

"Right," I said, on a breathless laugh. "Let's head back."

“One more kiss,” he said, and paddled closer to me.

I was expecting sweetness, but it wasn’t sweet. It was desperate. It was...I was...I was in love with him. His hands on my thighs, his lips hard and demanding against my mouth. I was in love with him.

When he let go, we were both panting hard, coming up for air. Did he know? Could he feel the confession against his lips? I wasn’t sure, but my heart was beating faster than it ever had as we turned to shore in silence and rode our final waves back in on our bellies.

Ren and Theo had made good on their promise to start a bonfire, and we stopped briefly there before we moved to the surf van.

After Chris and I mounted our boards on the roof of his van, he lifted the fresh water jug and offered to douse me first. He held the jug over my head and poured, flattening my hair to my head and washing away the salt from my skin. The cool water felt so good. I offered to return the favor. He had to bend lower, and the wetter I made his skin, the dryer my mouth became. We’d probably done this a dozen times for each other over the years, but my eyes followed the water from Chris’ neck down his manta ray tattoo, over his chest and the soft hair there, before it trailed to the v muscle that hinted at what was lower.

“Orelia.” Dammit, he was smirking. I closed my eyes and stopped pouring the water and turned away, hoping my mortification wasn’t glaringly obvious on my face. “Like what you see?”

“Shut up,” I said and pushed at his chest.

The way Chris’ eyes raked me, saw me and exactly what I was thinking. He pressed me against the van and I gasped and closed my eyes, all resolve disappearing.

“We have to go back to the beach,” he told me reluctantly as I eased forward. I pouted slightly and shifted against where he was still pinning me. “But I owe you, Orelia.”

I shivered at the threat, the promise.

He grabbed my wrist, traced the edge of my pinky and dropped it with a kiss. After changing into comfy beach clothes, we walked back across the parking lot and through the sandy beach to where Theo and Ren were trying to execute one of the dance moves from Dominika's class, which ended both of them on their butts in the sand.

I clapped appreciatively for them and moved to the cooler with beers and sandwiches. I scarfed mine down quickly and noticed Chris do the same.

"Are we dancing now?" I asked. "Even without our proper attire?"

"Let's switch partners," Theo cried and jumped back to his feet, recovering quickly from the fall he and Ren had endured. "Come on. Come on."

Chris and I dutifully got to our feet. Ren moved to dance with me as Theo grabbed Chris. We were partly following the dance moves, but Ren's speaker was playing modern pop music, so there was a lot more ass shaking among the group than there was in Dominika's version. We also danced in a circle around the bonfire, switching partners as we went, until I went through Ren and Theo, before Chris stood in front of me.

Chris offered me his hand and Ren actually played the wedding song on his speaker, and we began to dance.

"Dominika would be proud," Chris whispered to me as he stepped behind me in the first movement of the dance. "You didn't look constipated at all dancing with Ren."

I laughed all the way through the first spin.

"Dominika would be furious that you're not in heels and a skirt," Chris laughed.

"Or that you're wearing a grubby sweater instead of a dress shirt," I responded haughtily.

Neither Chris nor I were particularly graceful in the sand, but we got through the entirety of the dance without forgetting the steps, and it was fun and light without an intense Russian lady looking over our shoulders.

His face was so close to mine. If I wanted to I could have tilted my face to him, captured his mouth in mine. My breath caught in my chest as Chris studied my lips before turning to my eyes again. His hand stuttered at the base of my neck before finding my waist where it was meant to be in the dance.

I was weirdly out of breath, and my words came out in little gasps. "We should stop."

"Yeah," he whispered. My arms were still around his neck, his hands tightened briefly on my waist. "Don't want to get drunk on our success."

Chris licked his lips drawing my eyes there before he also took two steps backwards. Theo chose that moment to fall bodily to the blankets in the sand and I followed suit. I still wanted whatever was going on between Chris and I to be a secret, so I intentionally sat away from him even though my insides protested.

"Is Dominika like your other dance teachers?" I asked the group, mostly to distract myself.

Ren and Theo had taken lessons. Theo shook his head, but Ren didn't answer immediately.

"I had the worst dance teacher when I was a kid. Not in the way that Dominika is, but Gunther was impossible to please."

"And you think Dominika isn't?" Chris asked, incredulously.

Ren shrugged. "She's at least fair with her praise."

"Wouldn't know anything about that," I muttered which led to a smattering of laughter from my so-called friends.

"You're doing great," Theo said, grinning. "And we still have a couple more weeks to work out the kinks."

"Three weeks," I said. "Not that I'm counting."

“What? I thought you loved it?” Theo said, sarcasm belying his words.

I waved my hands in front of my body. “Don’t get me wrong, I have never danced better, or wanted to do so well, but holy shit. I dance in the shower, between work breaks, in line at the bank.”

“Psh,” Theo protested. “You don’t go to the bank. Who goes to the bank in person these days?”

“I do,” Chris said and he chuckled as he raised his hand. “When I want to talk about business, it’s better to do it in person.”

I watched Chris talk more and more animatedly from across the bonfire and turned to our other friends. Theo was tucked against Ren’s side who played with his hair absentmindedly. It had been this way for years and I’d never envied them before. Now though, it seemed nice, peaceful, and when I looked back at Chris, at the empty space on the log he sat on, I wished I was sitting there instead.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I WORE MY favorite dress when I went to meet Hotaru Hayashi. It was one I'd bought in Japan nearly eight years earlier. It had small buttons down the front and was a soft grayish blue. I didn't need the additional ass smack to feel confident. That was the power of a good dress. Though there was a small part of me that wished Chris could've seen me off. He had a way of easing away my nerves.

The restaurant where I was meeting Hotaru Hayashi was a nice one. I stopped at the front door when I saw their listed hours didn't include lunchtime, and so I double checked the address and restaurant Hotaru's team had emailed me. Confirming this was correct, I pushed the door open tentatively.

"Konnichiwa," the voice of one of the wait staff startled me as she came from the kitchen to the hostess stand at the front of the restaurant. "Are you Orelia Kane?"

The pronunciation changed the 'li' in Orelia to 'ri' and the hard sound of Kane to kah-neh, but that was me. I nodded and she directed me to the back room of the restaurant where Hotaru was waiting for me.

Hotaru looked exactly like her picture on the back flap of her book. Her short hair didn't fall beyond her chin and bangs covered her brows. It was an edgy look in sharp contrast to her soft, pixie face. She grinned when she stood to greet me, turning her phone over on the table.

"Hello Orelia-San, thank you for meeting me here. This is my favorite restaurant in LA."

"Thank you so much for meeting with me," I said to Hotaru, bowing slightly before sitting down. *"I've never been here before."*

"Good. I'm happy to show you something new. My assistant read your English translation and was very impressed with the language and tone you kept intact."

We were interrupted when the server came over and asked for our drink orders. We both opted for mango juice and water.

"What do you recommend to eat here?" I asked and a humorous glint flashed in Hotaru's eye.

"Kitsune udon, of course." After her book title, *Night of the Fox*. In Japanese, the word for fox was kitsune.

I laughed and looked at the options, the dish was not made of foxes or fox spirits. It was a noodle soup with seasoned fried tofu, pink-swirl narutomaki fish cake, and scallion. I already loved udon noodles, so it was easy to agree to the recommendation. After our orders were taken, we shifted to business, although with the friendly atmosphere and Hotaru's obvious excitement, it was hard to think of it as business.

"I'm a huge fan of the book," I said. *"I hope you won't find this too embarrassing, but I was hoping you would sign my copy."*

The grin and flush of pleasure on Hotaru's face was answer enough. She nodded and accepted the book I offered, penning a note of thanks on the title page. Upon seeing the tabs and bleedthrough, she flipped through the pages, smiling with interest as she noted the way I had marked up the book.

"Some of those were questions I had, or interpretations I wanted another perspective on. But some of them are just my comments. Like here," I opened the book to the climatic reveal of the Captain of the Guard. *"I wrote, 'wow, did not see that coming.'"*

We spoke for a few minutes about work, but it quickly devolved into two young women sharing their excitement and lived experiences.

"I hope we will see each other again," Hotaru said in English at the end of our meal. My surprise must have shown on my face. "My English is not great, but it's passable. I knew your translations were good, but I wanted to see how you spoke. I like you a great deal and I'd like to offer you a job."

In typical foreigner fashion, she denied the quality of her English while speaking accurately, concisely, and with only the barest hint of an accent.

"Really?" I asked and tried to push past my surprise to listen to the offer. It didn't work that well, my heartbeat was pounding loud in my ears.

"I'm opening a publishing house in Tokyo, and I'm looking for translators to help with deals and translations from the U.S. I'd like to poach you."

I couldn't keep the excitement from my voice and I didn't feel like I had to hide it. "Can the job be done remotely? It's been a long time since I've worked in an office."

Hotaru purses her lips. "I can email you the offer details, but the one thing you should know is we would expect you to live in Japan. You'd be able to work remotely, but you'd need to be easily accessible."

Returning to Japan was something I'd considered off and on over the years, but my heart didn't leap immediately at the opportunity, in fact it sank a bit. I couldn't imagine Chris moving across the world, not when he was firmly establishing his school and looking to develop future professional surfers. And Ren and Theo, Jayna and Viv, all were in California as well.

"I'm interested," I said, despite the logistical problems. I still very much wanted to learn more.

"Good," Hotaru grinned. "Would you be available to visit Tokyo, see our offices, and interview with my team?"

We conferred over our mutual calendars, and I found the opportunity too good to pass up for visiting Japan the week after Theo and Ren's wedding. And sure, it was last minute, but it felt right.

"Book what you need to for three days in Tokyo and then send me the information so we can do a travel reimbursement." The way Hotaru has gone from friendly to all-business made my head swirl.

I bit my lip. "I'm not sure that I'll take the job. I have a lot to consider with a potential international move."

Hotaru nodded. "Yes. And I hope you'll take the offer, but it's win-win for me either way. You either stay here and translate my books to English, or you come work for me. We'll discuss more when you come to Tokyo."

"Thank you," I said again.

Hotaru bowed slightly to me before she climbed into her car.

When I returned to my condo, I booked the trip from London to Tokyo, but I booked another flight as well. Instead of going directly to Tokyo after the wedding, I was going to visit Okinawa, Japan first.

All year, I'd been thinking about my dad, my lingering and renewed sense of grief. I needed to say goodbye, and the truth was, I didn't need ashes for that. Sitting back from the computer, a surprisingly giddy rush made me huff out a laugh.

Closure with my dad, with my family, was right there on the horizon. Something scary but equally as exciting was thrumming through me. At the same time, I wasn't sure how Chris would take the news of me finding another job abroad. I had no idea how we would even make it work if I decided to take Hotaru's offer.

I'd have to tell him, but...my thumb scrolled over his name on my cellphone.

Shaking my head, I put the phone down. I'd tell him, just, not yet.

Chapter Twenty-Four

MY EYES FOLLOWED Chris as he ran Willow and Derek through surfing drills. He always looked good in the water, but my heart was doing insane things watching how joyful he appeared whenever he interacted with the kids. He'd told me that he wanted a family. If I moved to Japan, I'd be making his plan far more complicated. And what if...well, what if he'd decide I wasn't worth the long distance. I certainly wouldn't be fitting into a scripted role, one he could live with. Even if the appeal of a wedding and family was starting to make itself known in my heart.

"I've got early reports from Kerri in editing, and from Hotaru Hayashi," Dulcie said over the phone as I listened with half attention, more interested in following Chris' form in the water. "They're both incredibly pleased with your translation. I am happy to offer you the rest of the series to translate."

I balled my hands in fists and shook them excitedly in front of my body, trying to limit the excitement to that one movement.

"You earned it. Along with," Dulcie said, and I heard shuffling on her end of the phone, "a seven-percent raise."

My hands, in fists, went flat and pressed to my forehead. I didn't bother hiding my excitement and flush as I thanked Dulcie. The raise was impressive, but not quite as impressive as the pay bump and benefits I'd get from the job in Hotaru's new publishing company.

I quickly hung up with Dulcie and sat down in the sand.

Viv looked me over. "Good news?"

"The best!" I said, smiling through the indecision.

"Then why doesn't it seem like it's 'the best'?" Viv asked.

I sighed, but it had been a week since my meeting with Hotaru. I needed to tell someone. I needed to get it off my chest. I also needed to tell everyone, including Chris, that I wasn't coming home to California immediately after the wedding.

After a deep breath, I explained to Viv and Jayna the precariousness of my situation. And I watched on their expressive faces as they went from excited for me at the job offer, to cringing as I explained I hadn't told Chris yet. To utter silence when I gave the dates I'd be visiting Japan.

"It's just all so crazy right now. We have our final dance lesson, then I'll work Monday and Tuesday. Fly out to London. Saturday wedding. Sunday evening, flying from London to Okinawa, where I'll be for my birthday. And then after a few days on the island to Tokyo for the job interview before flying back to California. It's pure chaos."

I was breathless by the time I finished, grinning even as butterflies danced in my stomach at the packed schedule.

Jayna was laying on her stomach in the sand, watching me. "Damn."

"Double damn," Viv said and moved to hug me. "Congratulations and also, my condolences on the craziness of that schedule."

"Are you going to take the job?" Jayna asked after congratulating me. To her credit, she didn't make immediate demands that I stay.

"I don't know," I said, running my hand through my hair. "I need a little more time to decide if moving across the world is what's best for me right now."

Jayna and Viv remained silent as my gaze returned to Chris and the kids. I'd have said before that I wasn't interested. Family, but the pull of it now...I *did* want that. Badly.

"And what's this about your birthday in Japan?" Jayna asked, exchanging a look with Viv. "You're going to be alone for your thirtieth birthday? That doesn't seem right."

I didn't like the concern on their faces. I took a deep breath. "I want to reconnect with my father. I wanted some time by myself to really remember him, that's why I'm going."

"Your other friends don't know, do they?" Viv said, wincing as she did.

"No," I said and bit my lip. "It was kind of last minute." But I wouldn't let that deter me. Progress was progress after all.

"Wanna expand on that, honey?" Jayna asked.

I took a deep breath. "My mom and I had this huge fight when I was in Minnesota about my father's ashes. I always wanted to do a funeral for him, spread the ashes in Okinawa, but that's never been what my mom wanted. I kind of decided that's okay, but I still want to do something for him there."

"Why now? Why for your birthday?"

"My dad was thirty when he died," I admitted and I don't know why I resisted baring my soul for so long. It felt good, amazing, not to be clinging so tightly to the past, to my secrets.

"Oh shit," Jayna said. "I hadn't realized he was so young."

"Yeah. My parents were high school sweethearts. To put it lightly, I was a surprise when my dad came home from bootcamp."

Teenage pregnancy for my mom, but I didn't have any memories of our family struggling, not really. Understanding struck me then, about my mom moving on. She'd been so young, and even though I didn't doubt she loved my dad, her choices had been so limited by circumstance. She'd gone to college when we moved to Minneapolis, before she met Marcello. Instead of letting my dad's death ruin her, she took it as a second chance. Pride filled me now instead of anger.

"Do you want anyone to go with you?" Viv asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I shook my head and realized she was asking about my birthday trip to Okinawa, to finally say goodbye to my dad.

Yes, was the obvious answer, the immediate one, but I didn't want any distractions. I needed to reconnect with my dad, and I also needed to let him go. God though, there was a part of me that wanted all of them. Jayna and Viv. Theo and Ren. Cassidy and Clementine and

my mother. And Chris too. But how could I lean so heavily on Chris' support if I was going to leave him soon?

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It's a trip for my dad."

If the look Jayna and Viv exchanged was any indication, they didn't believe one word of my assurance.

An hour later, Willow and Derek paddled to shore, but Chris waved at me, beckoning me out. It was an easy decision to join Chris in the water once I saw my friends and their children off.

He was already out in the surf practicing aerial flips with his board on the waves. I paused to watch him in the shallow water before I got on my board. It was easy to forget when we were on such smaller waves that he'd been a professional, that he'd had success as one.

The way his body moved now was fluid as he carved the wave he rode and used his entire body to throw himself and the board into the air. When he came down it was surrounded by the broken wave and he disappeared in the spray. A moment later, I could see him standing on the board, smiling.

I paddled out to him.

"I give you a 6.6 score," I told him as I sat on my board and he leaned over on his to kiss me.

"Harsh, Judge Kane. Very harsh. That was at least an eight." Chris' laughter was filled with so much joy, it reverberated in my bones.

"Well, what happened to waiting for me?"

"The waves were too good," Chris said and threw his arms wide. "I knew you'd find me eventually."

"Next one is mine," I grinned.

It was easy to let the stress of the job opportunity, the upcoming travel, fall to the wayside now. But I understood why Theo had been reluctant to lie to Ren, even as benignly as it had been for his Japan-

ese language lessons. It was difficult keeping this from Chris. Mainly because I really didn't want to.

"Better be careful with that bikini. It's not as sturdy as your usual rashguards," Chris said, hungry eyes scanning me.

"I'll be okay."

When we entered the house an hour later, he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me to him, but then he rested his forehead against mine, clearly intent for something far more romantic. I put my hand to his chest.

"Chris," I whispered as he pulled away from me. "I have to tell you something."

The phrase clearly set off alarm bells in Chris' mind because he took a decisive step back as his face completely closed off. He hadn't even heard what I was going to say, but it was clear he knew by the tone that something was wrong.

We moved inside the house, I slipped away to put clothing on. It was an excuse to buy time, but I really should have been practicing my speech over the last week, so at least I could land the blow as gently as possible.

"What is it?" Chris asked, moving to the kitchen island and gripping it, while putting all the space in the world between us.

"Last week, when I told you the author meeting went well, I didn't tell you everything." Chris' whole body tensed. "She offered me a job. In Japan."

I crossed my own arms in defense against a sinking sensation in my stomach.

Chris waited a beat. "Are you going to take it?"

"I don't know, but after the wedding I'm going to Tokyo for an interview. And also to Okinawa."

"Why Okinawa?" There was quiet anger in his words.

I pulled my hand through my hair, shaking it and trying to think. "Stuff for my dad."

Chris waited for me to explain, but I didn't know how to, so I remained silent and waited.

"Let me get this straight," Chris said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Last week you got a job offer and you scheduled a trip to Japan, not just to consider the job, but to do something important having to do with your dad."

"Yes."

"Why haven't you talked to me?" Chris said, and the control he had over himself snapped. No longer was he even-tempered and blank faced.

He paced behind the kitchen island more livid than I'd ever seen him.

"It's not just you. I didn't tell anyone," I said, trying to make up for my mistake. "It's not a big deal."

"Not a—" Chris started with a curse and turned away from me and I flinched at the movement, unsure why the aspect of him turning away from me cut like a thousand knives. "You think your job or your family isn't a big deal to me?"

My hands started shaking at the defeated tone in Chris' voice. I knew Chris cared, but I also really wanted this job. Taking it would ruin everything.

"It's not that," I tried to start. "I'm trying to figure it out, Chris."

"You don't have to figure it out by yourself. That's the whole point. I thought we were becoming a team. Partners."

"We are a team," I tried. "I just—" I trailed off, because I didn't have an excuse. Because he was right, I had been cutting him out on purpose. "If I take the job...we probably, well, it would be hard." I motioned between us.

"Hard to stay together," Chris finished for me.

"Yeah," I said even though I wanted him to protest. I wanted him to reassure me, to tell me I was wrong.

Chris was quiet for a long moment, nodding his head as if to himself and pressing his lips tight together.

"You don't need me. Even now," Chris said, and I felt myself panic as the resignation in his voice settled into me. The hurt. I hadn't realized I had that much power.

I had to make him see, though. I had to make him understand. "That's not what this is. I'm just trying to think through all my options."

His eyes widened further and unreserved anger wasn't nearly as much of a sucker punch as the words that followed, hollow and hurt.

"That's what I am to you though, isn't it Orelia? I'm just an option." Chris put his face in his hands. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking."

"Chris."

He took a step back, as I moved forward and the way he shook his head had me freezing in my tracks. "You told me, right from the beginning. You only wanted casual relationships. No marriage, no partner. I just assumed no interest in kids."

"Wait," I tried. "Chris, wait. I—" *I do want those things.*

"I should have listened to you. Believed you."

"Oh my god," I snapped and tugged at his wrist, trying to get him to look at me again, to calm down and to listen. "Just wait. Let me explain."

"It doesn't matter," Chris snapped and yanked away from me. "Take the job if you want it. Stay if you want to. All I want is to be part of your life, but I can't stand it if you don't want to be part of mine."

"You're not listening now," I said and when I looked into his face, my anger fell to the wayside to make room for the mounting panic. "I'm sorry I wasn't ready for a relationship, it's how I am. How I was."

Even if I took the job, I wanted him to be there with me. Us to be there for each other. We could make it work, I knew we could.

"I can't do this anymore," Chris said, completely cutting me off and rendering me speechless. "I thought I could meet you in the middle, I thought I could make you change your mind about a relationship with me."

He'd been angry before, upset, and that had been jarring, but okay. I could live with that because I'd kept this secret even when I knew it was wrong. But seeing Chris go completely emotionless with acceptance.

"Stop it," I said angrily, my voice pitching high. "This *is* me. I screwed up, what else do you want me to say?!"

Chris' expression was cool as he moved toward me, closing the gap between us and invading my space. "I want to be there for you. I want us to figure out life together. I would have been there for you if you asked."

"Be there for me now!" I exploded.

"That's not fair of you to ask me. You just threw a wrench into everything."

"Well I'm sorry I'm not acting like the perfect girlfriend, because I'm fitting the script that you want me to."

"Orelia, you don't fit into any script that I've ever had."

It hurt. Wow, it fucking hurt. I put my hand over my mouth and then quickly back to my side. We were both breathing heavily. He moved away from me and started pacing. My heart started racing, and an uncomfortable fear settled in my stomach.

"Just put me out of my misery," Chris said. It was so wrong to see him beg. "If you don't want this, put me out of my fucking misery."

The feeling of dread that had been growing finally broke the surface. Chris was saying something else, but for a moment I couldn't hear anything but the buzzing in my ears.

"Is that what you want?" I whispered. Whispered because if I spoke any louder my voice would break.

Maybe he wasn't just hurt, maybe he wanted a way out. A way to extricate himself from what we'd become, a way to save our friendship or the friendship between the four of us.

"I need space," he said.

I felt disconnected from my body. Like someone was experiencing this and making decisions for me. I closed my eyes for a brief moment as I tried to regain control. And Chris didn't step forward, didn't take it back, so I steeled my spine. I wanted to believe it wasn't a line. I wanted to believe he was saying these things as a defense. I tried one more time.

"Don't give me space, Chris. We've had years of space."

Chris shook his head and winced. "I'm sorry, Orelia. Take the wedding. Take your time in Japan. But don't come back to me if you don't want what I do. If you don't want this with every fibre of your fucking being."

"Chris," I said quietly, brokenly and knowing already it didn't matter. "I love you."

"Don't say that to me now." His voice was strangled, but he didn't close the distance between us.

I'd been right all along, love wasn't enough.

I turned around because I would not cry in front of him now. I would not beg for him to stay. But something in my chest was cracking, falling open, and leaving me hollow. I straightened my spine and unclenched my jaw as I turned back to him. An Ice Queen. I could be an ice queen now.

I turned to go, lead so heavy in my stomach I thought I might be sick. When I turned back before opening the patio door, Chris was slumped over the kitchen island, face in his hands.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE WEATHER ECHOED my mood and for once I was grateful. The storm had started after I left Chris' and hadn't ceased in the twenty-four hours since. The combination of rain and wind left the water choppy and impossible for even the most talented of surfers, so I didn't bother with leaving the condo.

My phone had been pinging from the group chat, from Jayna and Viv, and yet I didn't bother with answering. Even from Clementine and Cass, I ignored their calls. I would have stayed in bed all day if not for the final dance class. It cost me to pull away from the giant plushie I'd spent clutching like a lifeline.

I washed my face and made coffee, the best I could do in preparation for seeing Chris again and pretending like everything was fine for Theo and Ren's sake.

The rain was cool as it beat down mercilessly and I was drenched through by the time I made it to my car and again got drenched on the walk to the dance studio. Like a dream the greetings and smalltalk came and went until we were preparing for the final dance.

Chris knelt slightly and kissed my outstretched hand, then he stepped behind me, drawing his hands up my bare arms. I closed my eyes and the tears came immediately. My face crumbled, mouth drawn tightly in a frown as I tried to stop them.

I reached up to engage our first spin and when we came back together in the classic waltz, I awkwardly turned my face into Chris' shoulder so he couldn't see how this was affecting me. Chris guided us across the floor, and I met his eyes, preparing for the dizzying triple spin.

Shock danced across his features the second he met my eyes, but there wasn't time for analysis. I closed my eyes, because I still trusted him despite myself. He spun me and we returned to the waltz, in-

to the core of the dance that would bring us together and apart the same way each time.

“Orelia.”

“Please,” I whispered. “Let’s just get through this dance.”

I was on the verge of sobbing and my voice shook with it. This dance was too much. It was too romantic, too reminiscent of what Chris didn’t want. We didn’t reach for each other’s faces or press our foreheads together like Dominika had tried to get us to do. There was no softness left.

Chris pushed away, hand sliding so that even as I looked away from him toward my other outstretched hand. He was right where he was supposed to be, anchoring me in my movement. He pulled me through the dance, our arms turning into each other as he dipped me back.

The second half of the song passed in a blur as I continuously pushed the tears back. My movements were technically perfect. I didn’t miss a single step. When he lifted me in the final spin, I counted the final seconds until I could flee.

Chris pulled his hand out of mine. Sweat dripped down my spine and without Chris to keep me steady, I felt unmoored.

Applause is what pulled me out of it, Dominika’s slow crisp claps. “That was not terrible.”

My throat was dry as I looked around the room where everyone except Chris and I were smiling nervously. What Dominika gave us was high praise.

She still walked down the line of us and broke apart each of our mistakes. To the growing glee of our entire group, she didn’t have a lot to say. As a group, we cheered and moved out of the rehearsal studio for the last time. It did sink into my mind that this was an impressive feat.

Dominika intercepted me on the way out. She was smiling too, which was more amusing than shocking. It was good, I thought, even

as I watched Chris walk toward the end of the room and frowned as he checked his phone.

"How did we do?" I asked, knowing the question was a little like slathering myself in bacon and walking up to a lion. Or whatever animal kingdom analogy matched willingly opening myself up to Dominika's criticism.

"Very well," she said and stunned me into silence. I was expecting a back-handed insult at best. "Truthfully, you represent most people who come through my doors."

"What? Like no prior experience."

"No appreciation for the art of dancing I've dedicated my life to." It was not said with bitterness or cruelty.

"I'm sorry," I said, more like a question than an actual apology.

Dominika shook her head, seemingly amused. "You found yourself in the minority during this year's dance classes in terms of skill, an oddity I've seen only a handful of times."

"I appreciate that acknowledgement. I'm sorry if I made things more difficult for you." That was an apology I actually meant.

Dominika shook her head again and smiled for the first time, genuinely at me. "No need to apologize. You were my favorite."

Disbelief made all the noise of the ballroom disappear and my mouth dropped open in shock.

Dominika's grin was sharp and knowing. "You change. You grow. And all my students do, I make sure of it. But the beauty of the beginner is watching them go from a hopeless bag of bones, to something representing grace."

Well. Insults mixed in with pride. That's par for the course with Dominika. And if my eyes watered, that was beside the point.

"Thank you."

"Here's another reason why I like you: you would have done better with a different partner. One who didn't distract you." Dominika's eyes were knowing and intent upon her own. "But the best

dancers dance with emotion, and the best partners bring that out, no matter how inconvenient.”

“Chris has been a great partner,” I said, with conviction. Regardless of what had happened, I would defend Chris. He hadn’t been the one to screw up. No, that had been all me.

I would get through this. One day, I would wrangle the pain so I barely remembered it was there. Chris had made me love him, but loving him was going to be another part of my story. It wasn’t going to be all of it. And losing him, letting him go, was the price of love. A wave of appreciation for my mom, for her strength, caused the first tears to fall.

“Well,” she said with a gleam in her eyes as if she could see through me. “I hope you will consider joining me for lessons again.”

The very thought had me shuddering from eyeballs to toes, and yet I didn’t immediately reject the prospect. *I hope you will consider joining me for lessons again.*

“I’ll definitely consider it,” I told her and if she were anyone else, I would have leaned in for a hug. With Dominika, I didn’t dare.

“I hope you dance as well in London as you have today,” she said and moved away from me.

Chris wasn’t waiting for me when I walked out of the studio. Ren and Theo, however, were lingering outside under an awning. I didn’t want to tell him the truth about Chris, so I reached for the only other thing in my back pocket. I told them about the job offer. Everyone else knew about it now, no use keeping it from Theo and Ren.

“I’m thinking about the job offer. Living in Japan again,” I murmured. “It could be a lot of fun.”

“We’d miss you,” Ren said. “But it’s a huge opportunity if it’s something you want.”

“I haven’t decided,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting it.”

Ren waited, watching me in silence, knowing I wasn’t being one-hundred percent honest. I pressed my lips tightly as I tried to figure

out what to ask, what to say. Ren was—must have been—somewhat aware Chris and I were keeping secrets. His eyes had fallen on us more than once over the last couple of months with suspicion and amusement.

“What if moving away hurts our relationship?” I asked, and my eyes implored Ren to understand deeper than between us.

Theo beat him to the punch even as he moved to wrap an arm around Ren’s waist. “Impossible, O. You’ll visit us and we’ll visit you.”

“What if it’s not enough?”

“Do you want to be friends?” Ren asked, a wry smile on his face and I nodded vigorously. “Then it’ll be enough.”

“We all have international friends you know,” Theo pointed out. “Even Chris has remained friends with Kieran over the years. He knows how to sustain those relationships as much as we do.”

If Chris reached out and explained, or apologized, I would run back to him in an instant, but he hadn’t.

I wanted to scream at him. Wanted to ask him why. But I wouldn’t beg, not when he was telling me he didn’t want me. Not when I was so in love with him, it pulsed in every breath. And maybe I could have justified it. Knew him more intimately than anyone else. I needed him, but I didn’t want him to come to me because of pity. Because I could get by without him, I could.

The minute I sank into the front seat of my car, I crossed my arms over my stomach. This wound was deep as death. The loss was so acute it burned. I placed my face in my hands and sobbed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I ENDED UP at Viv's house, and Jayna arrived shortly after. Derek and Willow were shoed upstairs, and the three of us sat at Viv's kitchen table where she poured a generous mixed drink for me.

"What happened?" Vivian said.

So I told them. Everything. I told them what's been going on and how I'd always felt like Chris was so aloof, like he wasn't one of my friends even though our friends had constantly thrown us together. And how all this time it wasn't Chris shying away from our relationship, it was me.

"With Japan and a new job on the horizon, I just don't know that it's enough for us to stay together."

"Oh baby, we understand," Vivian said and reached out her hand.

Of course they would. Maybe that's why I'd been afraid to tell them, to tell anyone in the first place, because doing everything on my own was a default, and the second I started relying on them, the more I wanted to. The harder it would be if I did have to go it alone.

"I'm in love with Chris, but I don't know if it's enough. He wanted space, but what if it's just code for ending things gently?"

"Oh," Jayna crooned. "What an idiot."

I laughed and it came out more of a wet choke. Vivian hugged me again and I tightened my grip on her.

"He was planning your birthday party, a big blowout surprise party. That's why we were so surprised you were going to Japan."

"Oh," I said, echoing Jayna's earlier tone. "*I'm* the idiot."

Viv smiled at me and Jayna took my hand, but neither of them agreed with me. "You both are, but it's to be expected."

"What about the job?" I asked.

"He loves you, O," Jayna said, putting her hand on my shoulder. "You love him. If you want to make it work, you can make it work."

I hadn't told him about my plans. Had tried to control the situation to control myself, and that's why Chris had been so hurt, so worried that I would leave first.

"But, what if I'm replaceable?" And there was the heart of the matter. It wasn't just if I took the job, though that would be brutal. It was about everything. Maybe I was a fit to Chris' script, maybe myself and any other woman would be interchangeable.

Jayna, the most emotionally aware of the three of us, looked at me with raised brows.

"My husband is not replaceable," she said, acutely digging into my own fears. "He's Willow's father, and we had ten years together. I'm grateful for him and for our daughter, but I don't want to be alone forever. I don't believe in soulmates, or stagnation. One day, I want the same kind of love, but that doesn't mean John is replaceable."

I nodded and closed my eyes. I'd never fought for someone before, had always left relationships before they got messy. But this was Chris. After years of dancing around each other, I knew he was worth it. It's why I fell in love with him in the first place. I could show him. Really and truly show him that I was in this. That I wanted him. For keeps.

"You know, Chris texted us about canceling your party." Jayna paused meaningfully. "He's pretty miserable."

Instead of providing me with relief, a new dagger embedded itself into my chest, my heart. I didn't want Chris to hurt and I needed to make it up to him.

"I love you guys so much."

"We know," Vivian said.

"Of course we know," Jayna echoed.

"I need to go," I said standing up so quickly I jostled the kitchen table. "I broke this, and I have to fix it."

"It's never solely one person's fault," Vivian said sagely.

"I know," I said as a smile tugged at my lips, even though I could admit most of the blame was on me for this one. "But if I'm going to win Chris back, I need a grand gesture."

Chris had argued and fought with me. He'd initiated our breakup without talking to me about what he was feeling, but I'd kept things from him too. I'd screwed up, and Chris was only human. He reacted to my keeping secrets the way anyone would. An apology was the least I was going to do, but what I'd said to Viv and Jayna was true. I wanted a grand gesture. Even if Chris didn't want me any longer, I was going to put all of my love, all my hopes and fears on the line.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I went out for lunch at *Koki La Me* while I knew Chris was in a surf lesson.

"Oh boy, do you have a lot on your mind," Fabienne said as she stopped in front of my table, laden with the to-go boxes.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Fabienne's brow creased with concern, but she nodded and sat across the booth from me. "I'm in love with Chris."

Even as Fabienne laughed, she crossed her arms and raised her brows at me. "Why tell me and not him?"

"I tried, it didn't go as planned," I admitted and Fabienne laughed. "Doing it again seems so scary."

"The best kinds of love are," she offered.

"It's just," I started, because even though I'd already talked to Viv and Jayna about it, I couldn't shake the worry. "We've messed up so much already and we had five years of time together and it's still messy."

Fabienne pursed her lips as if finally I had posed an interesting and complicated question. I watched her long painted nails tap on the table between us.

“Well honey, think of love like a recipe. You might have all the ingredients you need, but it’s never going to be a meal until you decide to mix it together and put it in the oven. A bit of heat doesn’t hurt either.”

Surprised laughter spilled out of me. “Wow, that’s good. Have you used that before?”

“Nah, just thinking on my feet here.”

I twisted my ring and bit my lip as I thought some more. She stood to leave and patted my shoulder in an affectionate sort of way.

“You let me know if there’s anything else you need,” Fabienne said. “And before you leave, you should know, Chris has never brought another woman here before you. I think that says something about his feelings.”

I knew how precious life and choice were. I had hurt him by keeping things from him and being away from him had stirred old wounds, but it wasn’t over. Chris had asked for space, not a breakup.

“Actually,” I said, grabbing her hand with mine and pausing her movement. “There’s one thing I could use your help with.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE LAST TIME I'd been in London was in my early twenties and I'd stayed in dirt cheap hostels and tried to eat grocery store snacks instead of real meals to save money for tours. This time around, I was staying at the fancy hotel in downtown London where Theo and Ren would be hosting their wedding.

The hotel had a superb little bar off the lobby and Theo, Ren, and myself sat around a small high top table in the far corner of the bar the night before their wedding.

"Have one of you been smoking?" I asked, sniffing the air as the waft of cigarettes overtook the air.

Ren lifted his hand sheepishly.

"Since when do you smoke?" I asked him. Unsure if in our near ten years of friendship I'd ever seen him smoke anything.

"Since I'm so stressed I can't even see straight," he muttered and Theo and I exchanged a worried glance as Ren scrolled through his phone.

It was clear he was tracking Chris' delayed flight which still hadn't left LA.

"Everything'll be alright," I said. "Chris will make it here on time. You guys will get married, and we'll all get blasted."

Of course, I couldn't actually confirm that Chris would make it. The unfortunate combination of bad luck, canceled flights, and shitty weather had meant that instead of flying out of LA on Wednesday night, it was pushed to Friday instead.

When Ren refreshed the screen for the fourth time in half as many minutes, I yanked the phone from his hand and pocketed it.

"On a scale of drunkenness," I started, ignoring Ren's glare. "Where do we want to get tonight?"

Ren actually laughed and his shoulders relaxed one iota as Theo took his hand. Between all the family and rehearsals that we'd been

through that day, and the week of Ren and Theo coming out and visiting his family, he was stressed to the max. Tomorrow evening couldn't come fast enough.

"I'm good with anything to take the edge off," Ren said.

"Aww, are you getting cold feet babe?" Theo asked and lunged dramatically under the table to grab Ren's feet and blow on them.

"Get off of me, you freak," Ren said, but it was full of affectionate laughter.

"To answer your question, O. I think we should stay relatively sober tonight, so I don't have the ugly-hangover face tomorrow morning," Theo said as he returned to appropriate posture as Ren lightly jabbed him in the ribs. "Wedding is at four. Cocktail hour at five—we have photos then. Dinner and reception start at six. As soon as we get the dance done tomorrow, I'm getting sloshed."

"I agree," Ren said. "As for tonight, I'm ready to sleep. But before that, Orelia. We have your birthday gift."

Despite myself, I preened. "Aww, you guys got me gifts."

While my birthday was next week and I would be by myself for it in Japan, I was pleased to be receiving gifts.

"Of course we did," Ren said and kissed my cheek before he pulled a small card from his inner jacket pocket.

I opened the card greedily and was successfully stunned into silence. I opened and closed my mouth several times as Ren and Theo laughed at me, before I could form the words.

"You got me more dance lessons?" I asked, bewildered as I stared at Theo and Ren.

Theo grinned. "You said you tried the bachata, and this seemed less intimidating than the salsa or kizomba."

"You chose the West Coast Swing?" I asked with growing amusement.

"We live on the West Coast." Theo defended. "And it was actually Dominika's idea."

My brows rose so high I wondered if they disappeared into my hairline.

"She said you and Chris were too silly to learn proper ballroom dancing and told me you should get it out of your system before you go back to her."

"You know, she told me I was her favorite student."

"Did not," Theo said immediately.

"Did so," I said and stuck my tongue out.

We probably would have gotten into a childish skirmish if Theo's brothers, Hayden and Andrew, hadn't chosen that exact time to walk into the bar.

"I'm going to take that as my cue," Ren said. "Have a drink with your brothers, Theo. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I think it's sooo weird that you two aren't sharing a room tonight. That's such an old fashioned tradition," I said, even as I stood as well to hug Ren goodnight.

I kissed Theo on the cheek, but instead of going to my room, I went to the hotel gym because there were mirrors on the wall in the studio. I played the god-awful song Dominika had rightly warned us we would hate and danced by myself in front of the mirror.

After maybe an hour later, I was ready to call it, but Theo stumbled in, several sheets to the wind.

"Orelia!" He shouted, beyond delighted.

"Oh shit," I said as he slumped against the treadmill and I cautiously sat in front of him. "Doing alright there, buddy?"

He hugged a bottle of very expensive whiskey to his chest and smiled dazedly at me. "I'm getting married tomorrow," he hiccupped solemnly.

"I know," I said, trying to match his very serious tone.

I couldn't tell if it was fear or something else dancing in his gaze, but it made me sit up straighter. I had a feeling of foreboding, like something was about to go terribly wrong.

"I just love Ren so much, man," Theo said, tears starting to well in his eyes. "I don't know how I'm going to get through tomorrow without crying my eyes out."

I let out a huge sigh of relief that Theo was too drunk to interpret for what it was. He reached for my hand to pat it.

"Don't object tomorrow, O," Theo slurred, his eyes unfocused.

I couldn't help my laugh, though I tried to hide it behind my hand. "Why would I object? I love you both so much!

"I would have objected to Christopher marrying Jessica. He's my best friend. And you're Ren's best friend. I'm so glad he's not marrying her."

"Me too," I murmured.

"You know. Honestly, he's been acting suppppperrrr weird. He was trying to plan you a birthday party, even though I was pretty sure you hated him. But ya know, you'd be better for him than anyone else. He's had a crush on you foreverrr."

I froze, expecting Theo was going to tell me something I didn't want to hear, or reveal he might know exactly what happened in Palm Springs.

"That's ridiculous," I breathed.

"Nuh-uh," Theo said. "Ren said you'd make a great pair. And I think that's right. You'd fit perfectly. Easy."

Saved from having to respond, Andrew and Hayden burst into the room, panic in their eyes.

"Thank god," Andrew said, breathlessly, as Hayden followed him in, scowling like usual. "We thought we had a runner."

"I mean, he did go straight for the treadmill," I said, but the joke didn't quite land.

Theo laughed a beat after everyone else and then fell sideways laughing as he tipped. I turned to Andrew and Hayden with judgmental brows raised.

“Come on buddy, I don’t want your future husband to kill me,” Andrew said as he crouched slightly to get a shoulder under Theo’s arm.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Hayden agreed with a nod and grabbed Theo’s other side.

“You guys got this?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Andrew said with a friendly smile. “Keep your fingers crossed Chris arrives in time for the ceremony.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

CHRIS MADE IT to the hotel ten minutes before the ceremony was scheduled to start, and I met him in the lobby, practically dragging him through to the dressing room. There wasn't enough time for my big speech and grand gesture, so I forced myself to remain calm and pocket it for now.

"We walk up and back the aisle together," I told him as he stripped out of his joggers and t-shirt and into the tuxedo.

"Sounds good," he said, not looking at me. Someone was squeezing my heart as if they were trying to drain my life force.

We weren't touching and every second of not doing so was so awful and unnatural that for a moment, I was worried I was going to cry. I had a plan. Everything would be okay. I turned away, a false act of modesty and bit my lip hard before I released several slow and silent breaths as I listened for the rustling of Chris' clothing.

"Hey," he said, and I turned. "How do I look?"

He wasn't fishing for compliments, but he'd never looked better. "Jesus, it's like your James-Freaking-Bond."

Chris smiled at me, like he forgot to keep his guard up and I moved to hug him. He let me, and I expected a one-armed one, but he pulled me into him like a man starving and it gave me courage.

"I missed you," I said as I reached to adjust his bowtie.

"Orelia, wait," Chris said.

"What?" I asked, my hands freezing where they rested on his chest.

I pointedly ignored the way his pupils dilated at the proximity. I glanced away from his eyes and focused on adjusting the collar of his tux.

When his lips locked on mine for the first time in a week, relief coursed through me along with its twin desperation. The heat en-

veloping me and the comfort of being in his arms was too good to not sink into.

We were both panting as he pulled his mouth from mind.

“Turn around,” Chris demanded.

A flash of memory sent a thrill to my core. His teeth on my ass, his mouth on my spine. I didn’t want to turn around, I wanted to keep looking at him, seeing the desire on his face. Familiar. Warm. Hot.

Chris’ hands were in fists at his side, trying not to reach for me. “If you don’t want me to ruin our friends’ wedding by missing it completely, turn around.”

I actually whimpered. And I spun so quickly away I nearly twisted my ankle. We had the absolute worst luck in the world to be standing in front of a mirror.

I watched in the mirror as he gently ran his finger down my shoulder blade, right underneath the thin strap, straightening it out. My mouth parted and I saw in my reflection how obviously I wanted him. No wonder he kept pushing, I looked like I wanted to be taken to bed.

His hand moved from the delicate strap to the curve of my neck, and I closed my eyes, shuddering as my head fell back.

“Chris.”

His heat was directly behind me and I felt his breath on my neck. He was going to ravage me. He was going to touch me, and I was going to let him. It would have been such a relief to be back on familiar ground.

“You’re beautiful, Orelia,” he said in that smoky voice somewhere between possessive and sweet. “And we’ll talk, okay, after the wedding.”

I WAS DISTRACTED the entire wedding ceremony by Chris' words. *We'll talk. We'll talk. We'll talk.* I had so much hope burning in my chest, I could barely contain it. Seeing Chris from across the aisle and smiling at him, having him smile back, even before we talked. It was like we both knew it wasn't going to end here.

I was going to win him back, convince him why we would work, even if I did take the job in Japan. Pulling my gaze from where it was locked with Chris, I took in the grooms. Ren wore a traditional tux and bowtie, with round black buttons down the front white shirt. It was the pink flower on his lapel and the black buttons that differentiated the outfit from the other groomsmen. Theo on the other hand, wore a white jacket with black lapels. Both of them were positively glowing.

Ren had managed not to cry thus far, but when he started his vows, it was over. "I take you to be my husband. I promise to love you. To respect you. To be honest with you. I also promise to be your faithful and caring partner, in good times and in bad, so long as we both shall live."

Theo shot me a nervous grin and I nodded in encouragement. We'd practiced the words over and over again. Even *I* had them memorized now.

In Japanese, with a slight accent, Theo said his vows to Ren, and Theo was focusing too hard to cry, so Ren did enough for the both of them. "*I promise to love you, to cherish you, and to always be honest with you. I promise that wherever in the world we go, we'll go together, as a team. I promise that everytime I look at you, I will see both the confident boy you were when you first asked me out, and the kind man you've become. I promise to see you for who you are and for who you have been and embrace whomever you will be. I love you, Ren.*"

Ren laughed through his tears and though he was far from comfortable with public displays of affection, it seemed as though today was the day for exceptions. He leapt toward Theo and when their lips

locked, whistles, cheering, but most prominently joy, spread through the audience. And through me.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur and when Chris and I walked arm and arm down the aisle again, the nerves in my stomach nearly reached supernova status. I attempted to pull Chris down the hallway, but we were immediately roped into pictures with the bridal party.

The photos were easy at first. But when Chris stepped behind me for the pictures, his hands on my waist as instructed by the photographer, the anticipation and arousal started to make my brain go hay-wire.

When the photos were done, Chris tried to pull me to the single bathroom down the hall so we could have a minute to talk, but Theo cut us off by handing out glasses of champagne and insisting that the party keep going. Theo was nearly impossible to deny at the best of times. At his wedding? No chance.

Theo alternated between kissing Ren and demanding we all get drunk before dinner. Things almost felt normal as Chris pulled me to his side and I melted against him. Theo and Ren didn't seem to notice our closer than usual contact, but it made me feel better.

"Cheers to Hayden and Andrew for getting me down the aisle," Theo started. "Cheers to Chris, for getting here on time. Cheers to Orelia for the vows! And cheers to Yuki and Aya for not laughing at my vows. And cheers to you, baby!"

It was the middle of dinner, after the speeches were done, and the toasts were being had. I met Chris' eyes as I crossed to leave the ballroom and without looking back, I knew he was following.

Chris reached me a few moments after I left the ballroom and tugged me down the hall, turning handles at random until one opened to a supply closet and he pulled me in.

"Looks like we finally have a place to talk," I murmured, as Chris hit the lightswitch.

I'd been planning what I wanted to say, but now that the moment was here, I was nervous. I twisted my hands, trying not to worry about the card in my hands and what was hidden inside the envelope. It was just a small thing, but my gift was *not* a mistake. My gift was *not* too much.

"Orelia," he murmured as he stopped an arm's length away from me.

"I brought you a birthday present," I interrupted and held it out in front of me before he could speak. I was really sweating now.

Confusion marred his brow, but he reached for the small envelope and pulled out the card. Was my heart in my eyes? He looked away from me and back to his hands where he opened my gift.

My mouth was dry as Chris read the card and the note within. Chris moved abruptly and without saying a word, grabbed my arms. Oh god. I'd fucked this up. I took three long deep breaths while Chris stared openly at me with an indescribable expression on his face.

"How did you get this?" he said, waving my card in the space between us.

His face was incredulous and intense as he trapped me between himself and the wall, eyes focused on mine, no escape route available. This was so embarrassing.

"I just thought it—" I stuttered, unsure of how to explain myself.

"How did you get this, Orelia?" Chris said, his voice low and soft. "Fabienne said she'd never part with it."

The recipe. Fabienne's secret recipe for tchaka I'd tried to convince her to give me.

"I didn't steal it, if that's what you're implying." My heart was beating so fast, I would have bet money that Chris could hear it.

"That's not what I'm implying," he said, pressing closer to me, the space between our bodies disappearing.

"I-I told her," *I loved you*, "why it was so important you have it. But it's not the actual recipe. I spent two days trying to recreate it and when I showed it to her, she said it was close. It's not 100% the same, but it's close. I thought it would help."

Chris waited a beat longer, staring into my eyes. He was looking for something—probably the truth.

"Thank you," he said finally.

The silence between us was slowly eating me alive, but when I realized he was waiting, trying to gather his own courage as much as I was searching for mine, it became easy. I took a deep breath, I could do this.

"I know you think I don't need you, or that I didn't want this, but that's not true. It's hard and I've never done this before and I didn't want to screw it up. If you were breaking up with me because you really don't want to be with me, I can accept that, but—" Silence except for the heart currently jackhammering its way out of my chest. "If you were worried I wasn't in this, wasn't invested, you were wrong."

Actually though, Chris' chest was rising and falling quickly too. I was positive the hope was in my eyes.

"I'm in love with you, Orelia. I've been in love with you this whole time and I want—desperately—to be with you. I didn't know how to let you set the pace. It's never been about you fitting a role. If anything, it's that you never fit one. I'm sorry for letting you think you were replaceable, even for a moment."

He took another deep breath, because he wasn't done and I clung to him, fists clenched in the front of his shirt. My mouth was slightly open, but Chris didn't seem able to control the words spilling out of him.

"I knew it would be so easy to fall in love with you, which is why I spent four years avoiding you. And you had to ask me to be your dance partner and I tried to stop it. *I tried to stop it*, but I don't want

to. Not if you want this too. That's what the recipe is, right? You telling me you love me too."

My breath shuddered out of me as my sex clenched. I was warm from his words, from the way he was still pressed closely against me. Heady from his scent and from looking at him all evening with hope and anticipation and nerves.

"I love you, Chris," I said and reached up to take his face in my hands. "I need you and I'm so sorry about not telling you about Okinawa, about the job offer. I wasn't trying to keep things from you, I just needed time to sort it out."

He pressed fully against me finally, his mouth searing to mine after so much time apart. Chris smiled for the first time at my words and moved to hold my hand. This time I let him, let him kiss the small scar on the palm.

His eyes were wet with tears now too.

"I need you too." His voice was rough. "And you don't have to apologize. I pushed you before you were ready. I'm sorry too."

When his mouth locked on mine, it was with intent. I melded against him and it was so natural, so right. Without having to worry about keeping us a secret, keeping my love a secret, I could confidently say it was the best kiss I'd ever had and it promised so much more.

I moaned against him, wanting more than the kisses.

Against my mouth, Chris said, "We don't have enough time."

I shook my head, but there wasn't much resolve behind it. "I beg to differ."

"We don't have time for me to go down on you. I don't think I'd ever stop, Orelia."

"Chris," I said. Heat, which had steadily been growing wings in my belly, down my spine, grew to an inferno. "Trust me when I tell you, I don't need that right now."

He froze against me and met my eyes. Since he wasn't willing to move quite yet, I hiked the skirt of my dress up and slipped my

panties down until they dropped to the floor. Chris' gaze following them. His hand was between my legs before I could bask in satisfaction of seeing Chris tent in his pants.

"Fuck, you're soaking," Chris said as he used his fingers to circle my clit, gathering all the proof of my readiness.

I moaned in response, before he kissed me. A half-smile on Chris' face bloomed into something predatory, gaze steady on mine. My eyes darted to the well-fitted tuxedo that did nothing to disguise the muscles of his chest.

Chris' hand moved from my neck down, before he dragged a hand between my breasts and spread his hands wide over my stomach. I was breathing heavily, as he pressed me against the wall and lifted one of my legs over his hip.

"You want me to take you against this wall?" he asked.

"You're strong enough for it."

His hands ran over my ass and I shuddered at the possessive grip with which he held me to him, rubbing me against his hardness, reminding me that I affected him as much as he did me.

My hips started gyrating, wanting something to rub against. My fingers reached for his fly and he let me undo his pants, push them down. And when his cock was freed, he lifted me, pressed me against the door with one arm as he used his other hand to guide his cock to my entrance.

"I want to be your girlfriend." The words tumbled out without giving me a chance to think about it, to decide if it was the right time, the right moment. If not for the rapid beat in his neck, I wouldn't have been able to tell he was breathing.

"What?"

Saying it again was the only way forward, and instead of doubt, a fire of sureness burned in my chest. Lifting my hand to Chris' face, I whispered it again.

"I want to commit to you. I want to be your girlfriend."

Chris shuddered, eyes closing, on a moan that resonated deep in me. His eyes were blind with need, with no control that sent a wild shiver through me.

"I...you know I want that too," Chris said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"Yes." I released the word on a shaky breath.

"I don't think I can be gentle, Orelia," he panted. I didn't think he could be either, the way his hands had tightened on my ass.

"Then don't be, Chris." The groan he made thrilled me and so did the tight hands on my hips.

As he sank into me, my body sang.

Almost from the second he was inside me, I became delirious from the pressure he was providing. That was before I lost all thought as Chris dipped his head and sucked one nipple and then the other. He dedicated so much attention to them that I lost track of time.

"Did you miss me?" I asked breathlessly.

"You already know the answer." He held my gaze, and he was right. I knew the answer and I melted against him as his mouth slotted over mine again.

"I love you, Chris," I said.

"I love you, too," he groaned as he bent low to kiss my nipples, like doing so was as pleasurable for him as it was for me.

Oh fuck. The heat built in my stomach, between my thighs, and I reached for it, higher and higher. It was so good, I was so fucking close.

I didn't have the normal control to move and grind like I had with previous lovers. Chris was holding me in place, fucking me under his control, and the freedom in that was unbelievably arousing. I had one hand around Chris' neck and the other dug into the skirts of my dress, keeping the flowing material above our centers and out of the way. The sensation of having limited movement was pushing me up, pushing me close. I could hear myself getting louder, feel that

build where Chris hit something so tender and delicious inside me. The noise in my throat was coming out more broken, but I didn't care, hardly heard it.

The building pleasure in my lower belly and between my legs went from a fragmented dance to a blinding race to the peak. Then Chris' hand was over my mouth. My hand moved on instinct to press against his mouth and the movement, along with the eye contact pushed Chris over the edge too.

I buried my face into his neck and lost all sense of time and place. I was incoherent with pleasure for minutes, but when Chris started to move, to slip out of me and adjust himself, I took that as my cue to slip my panties back on and straightened out my dress.

"We need to go. We were gone," Chris looked at his watch. "Fifteen minutes."

"They probably didn't notice, right?" I asked, and slipped out of the door, running face first into Theo and Ren.

Ren and Theo were staring at us. Their confusion turned to side-splitting laughter as they looked from me to Chris to the supply closet.

"I told you," Ren said to an open-mouthed and red-faced Theo. "I don't know how you possibly missed it."

I smiled at Chris who shifted nervously. When I nodded at him, he smiled back.

"We're together," Chris said.

"Obviously," Ren said with an eye roll. "You guys have been together since Palm Springs."

"And you didn't think to let us know that you knew?" I asked Ren.

He was smiling, one of his rare open, all-teeth smiles. "You knew I knew, Orelia."

Chris turned to me, eyebrow raised in question even as his arm slipped around me. The heat and comfort it brought was indescribable.

“Okay,” I relented. “I figured you knew, because of all the staring.”

“You both caught all the feelings because we made you dance partners,” Theo interrupted, dancing from foot to foot, mouth curved into a delighted smirk. “Speaking of which...”

“That’s why we were looking for you. First dance is ready to start.”

We followed them back to the ballroom, and I tugged Chris’ hand. “Theo’s never going to let us live that down.”

“I can live with that,” Chris whispered back. “Because he’s right.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

WHEN I LANDED in Naha on my thirtieth birthday, the biggest city on the Japanese island of Okinawa, two people were waiting for me. Chris had told me that it was my birthday present, and truthfully, he'd be hard pressed in the future to find a better one.

Clementine and Cassidy were jumping up and down, holding a handmade sign with my name on it.

I ran for them.

As soon as I was an arm's distance, they were on me, grabbing me in a tight hug that almost sent us careening to the ground. I started crying again. They engulfed me so tightly I didn't bother to stop my sobs. I didn't try to fight it. Crying as they surrounded me and held me. I wondered why I'd thought falling apart in front of them would be so awful. Marveled at the fact that they were here at all.

"Told you she'd be shocked," Cassidy said, after wiping her own eyes.

"That you did," Clem said and handed her a five-dollar bill. "That you did, Cass."

"What are you doing here?" I asked on shaky hiccups. "What about med school?"

"Don't worry about me," Cassidy said. "I'm not missing anything but lectures and they're all recorded online now anyways."

"And you?" I asked Clem.

She shrugged. "You needed us."

"We're your birthday present!" Cassidy said and engulfed me in another hug before I could even comprehend what was happening.

My heart soared. Chris had done this even before we'd resolved things between us. That thought alone kept the ride a blur from the airport to the rental house. It sounded like my sisters landed a few hours ahead of me so they'd had time to get the rental car, gather

some supplies. The most important of which were several bottles of champagne.

Clementine refused to let it sit and cool and poured the drink into coffee mugs at the kitchen counter.

"You know, this is a cardinal sin," I told her as I lifted the warm champagne and sipped it anyway.

"Suck it up, baby." Clem stuck her tongue out at me and I attempted to grab hold of it.

"We brought something else too," Cassidy said, interrupting our shenanigans. "Mom couldn't do it herself, you know how she is."

Cassidy gingerly passed me a heavy bag. It was my dad's urn. His ashes. I didn't know what to say as I stared at my little sisters. They were both smiling at me as I began losing my composure.

"She said she's going to call you to explain."

But I didn't need the explanation, I already knew. We'd had a blowout argument when I was sixteen, and had dozens of smaller subsequent ones since. I'd always wanted to spread his ashes at the surf spot where he'd taught me in Okinawa. Mom hadn't wanted to let him go.

I didn't wait, I called Mom. I'd been so awful to her. Not only when I'd been home, but in all the years since Dad's death. And I had so much to be grateful to her. She taught me self-confidence in the mirror, and to not save champagne for special occasions, and that new love was possible in the face of devastation.

She made sure me and my sisters were happy and healthy, and there was always laughter. She showed me how to choose happiness. And I couldn't wait another moment, I had to call her and tell her how sorry I was, and how much I love her.

"Hey honey."

"Mom." My voice came out wobbling. "I'm so sorry about everything I said to you when I was home."

“Orelia, are you okay?” Her voice was sharp and panicked, like she could hear everything I felt from my soul and was too far away to give me the comfort I needed.

I didn’t know what was happening. I’ve never fallen apart like this before, not in front of other people, not even my mom.

For the first time in ages, I didn’t feel such a painful ache when I thought of my parents. My mom was happy, and holding that against her was childish. And that’s what it was, not some obsession with spreading my dad’s ashes. The anger at everything I’d grown so used to, somehow, someway had faded away.

“Why now?” I whispered into the phone.

I could only hear the quiet noise in the background and the deep breath she took before she explained. I knew how hard it was for her.

“Because you need it, baby,” she said. “I don’t need his ashes to know I loved him. But I also don’t need to hold onto him so tightly anymore. I have you girls, I have Marcello. I have an entire life that I want to live now, because we both know how short our time actually is. I will always hold your father close to me, but I’ve done what I can to move on and live without him.”

It should have been a victory, but it didn’t feel like one.

“I was wrong,” I said instead. “I was wrong and selfish. You were the one who always should have decided, and it wasn’t fair of me to fight you so hard on this. I’ll bring them back.”

In the background, Clementine slapped her forehead so loud it echoed in the house. Mom laughed over the phone and it eased something awful in my stomach.

“No, baby. Let him go, in your own way, in the way you’ve always needed. I realized that spreading his ashes where he taught you this critical part of your life would make him happy too.”

I turned to my sisters, because I hadn’t considered them in all of this either, another reminder of how selfish I’d been.

"I never asked," I said. "But what do you want to do with Dad's ashes?"

"It's never mattered to us," Clementine said, linking her arm through Cass' who nodded. "And it might be nice to see the surf here. We missed out on his lessons, so maybe you can give us some."

HAVING CLEM AND Cass ride out beside me to the surf spot at Sobe where I'd first learned to ride with my dad turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened. I'd always pictured doing this alone, having been alone, but I wasn't. Not then and not now.

"Hey, Dad." I spoke more to the ocean itself than the board or his remains. "I didn't think Mom was ever going to let me do this, but here I am."

"We're here too," Cassidy said. "I wish I'd been old enough to come out here with you guys. I'm glad we're doing it now."

Cassidy and I spoke to dad as if he were there with us, but Clementine sat on the board and rubbed circles in the water. Her eyes focused on the horizon and not on the urn.

Small waves came toward us, beginning to tower, I opened the urn and released the remains even as I paddled backwards with one hand to prevent myself from going on the waves. Cassidy and Clem stayed behind me watching as the ashes mixed with the water, shimmering in the light.

One last ride, I thought to myself. The tears that came were soft, remembered joy. As his ashes sank, a small relieved smile flashed.

The three of us stayed in the water content to speak quietly and sit up on our boards.

"I didn't think I needed this," Cassidy confessed. "But I feel better."

Clementine looked off into the distance and didn't respond. What was therapeutic for Cassidy and I hadn't seemed to have the same effect on her.

"What's going on with you, Clem?" I asked, tapping on her shoulder as she stared out at the horizon.

She didn't respond immediately, bit her lip and considered. "I'm not doing anything productive with my life, O. Cassidy's a doctor, you're considering a huge promotion. I feel purposeless."

I gaped at her. "You placed seventeenth in the World Series of Poker, Clem. That's insane. You should be proud of yourself."

Clementine gave me a half smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I feel like I'm missing something, I can't explain it."

I grabbed her hand and I wasn't sure how to comfort her because Clementine had always marched to the beat of her own drum. She'd never been lost because she'd always known who she was. It was clear however, that her sense of self was shaken.

"Whatever you want to do," I said and gripped her hand tightly. "I believe in you. I know you'll figure it out."

"Thank you," she said and squeezed back.

"So what are you going to do about Chris?" Clem asked and the mischief in her eyes cleared away the uncertainty.

"He doesn't know it yet," I said, grinning at my sister. "But I'm going to marry him one day."

"Gross," Clementine said, and pushed me off the board.

Epilogue: 10 years later

I TURNED FORTY on the beach of Ericeira, Portugal, covered in sand and sweating from head to toe, all the while surrounded by family and friends. The swell of the ocean was pumping, the sun was shining, and the worlds' best surfers were out in full colors. I was the only calm person beneath our umbrellas as we watched Willow jog into the ocean for her heat in the finals.

Chris gave me a brief kiss on the forehead, before moving to sit beside Derek, each holding a pair of binoculars.

"I can't believe how grown up they are," I said to help alleviate the nerves transmitting off of Jayna in waves as she watched her only daughter in the surf.

This was Willow's first year in the Championship circuit at eighteen years old, and she was coached by Chris and Derek, who were ready with voice recording notes, and handheld ones. I smiled at my husband. He'd followed his dreams just as I'd followed mine.

Vivian, who'd been able to join after saving all her vacation days, was enjoying a mixed drink in her not-so-covert water bottle. Ren and Theo stood apart from us with all the kids, trying and failing to properly instruct them on how to build sandcastles.

"Do you think I should help them?" I asked Viv, nodding to where my own daughters appeared ready to riot and potentially tackle their uncles and friends to the ground.

Even as I said it, my muscles were too relaxed in the beach chair to really indicate intent.

"It does look like your Nina is about to pounce," Jayna said, her eyes drawing momentarily away from her own daughter to watch mine.

My eight-year-old went goo-goo eyed for Peter, Theo and Ren's oldest. Nina's painfully obvious girlhood crush made me acutely aware she was growing quickly.

Helena, our youngest at six, had none of Nina's brash confidence and fearlessness, but I secretly thought she was just better at hiding her deviousness. My eyes trailed her as she slowly backed away from the group until she thought she was far enough away to race to her father undetected.

Chris was unphased when she collided into him and he threw his arm around her, even as he kept talking to Derek, Viv's son and now Willow's assistant coach. Helena wasn't hindering their work, she was just as vocal about the small size of the waves, and what Willow should do as her actual coaches.

"She's going for it," Jayna shouted as Willow paddled her way on to the biggest wave they'd seen that day. I reached for her hand and squeezed it as we watched with bated breath.

Willow made the drop into the wave and carved upward for her first turn to the applause of the crowd. I put the hand that wasn't squeezing Jayna's over my chest. It had been so long ago when Willow was just learning how to remain upright, when she'd worn little floaties on her arms and cheered before her wave was even finished. Now, she didn't break concentration as she nailed a second turn and then a third. She pumped her board, picking up speed as she went for a fourth turn.

"What a technical move, perfectly executed!" the announcer shouted over the loudspeakers. "That's going to be enough to secure her first Championship tour victory. What a fantastic finish and showing here in Portugal."

Everyone on the beach was shouting, hugging each other. Nina came running at me and I picked her up in a twirl before kissing her head and setting her down. She ran toward Peter and a faint blush was on her cheeks as he spun her around as well, and they fell tumbling to the sand.

When I reached Chris, he was giving Helena the same treatment, throwing her into the air and spinning her when she came down.

"Can we go out now?" Helena asked. "I wanna do it too. You can teach me to hit the turns like Willow did."

I smiled and waited for Chris' answer. He was a sucker for both of our daughters, but Helena, sweet Helena, was the youngest and even I had trouble denying her anything.

"I promise we'll go surfing tomorrow, but I have to treat your mom to the best birthday ever," he said, dropping his voice conspiratorially. "Plus, Willow needs help celebrating her victory today. Can you help with that?"

He was so good with them both. With Nina, he had a way of following her, listening to her and joining in whatever hijinks she desired. It was different with Helena, who only wanted to know him, his work, his life. He opened himself completely to our daughter, to show her what he loved.

"Oh damn," Chris murmured when he met my eyes. "You're falling even more in love with me, aren't you?"

"Everyday," I said, and my laugh was a little watery. It was true. From the year I'd lived in Japan and we'd managed a long-distance relationship, to the nine we've had together since. I'd managed to convince Hotaru that I could do my job just as well from California and Chris and I had been stuck at the hip ever since.

"Good," he said against my lips and pulled back to tuck a hair behind my ear, cradling my head. "Because I would hate for there to ever be a day where you don't know how deeply in love with you I am, how proud of your career and your motherhood I am, how desperately I want every minute of the next hundred years to stand by your side."

If I didn't pull myself together, I was either going to start sobbing or jump his bones right there on the beach. He seemed to know it because his smile widened.

“Despite these declarations, you’ve yet to give me my birthday present,” I said, throwing him a fake pout and successfully diverting the tears.

“I haven’t forgotten, Orelia,” he said and leaned forward, one hand on the back of my head as he whispered filthy things into my ear that had my stomach swooping a blush riding on my cheeks.

The minute we were alone, Chris delivered on his promise.

And when I lay panting, completely undone by him, I said, “Marrying you was the best thing I ever did.”

Laughter filled the space between us and he leaned over me, peppering my face with kisses.

“What happened to me not being the marrying type?” he asked, teasing me with a long forgotten taunt I’d leveled at him.

“I was wrong.”

“No, you weren’t,” Chris said as he dipped his mouth again. “I wasn’t the marrying type, until I was with you.”

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