



INVITATION

EDEN

RANDOM ACTS OF FANTASY

Random Series

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Random Acts of Fantasy

by Julia Kent

Be careful what you wish for. You might just get it.

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To all of my absolutely amazing readers who made *Random Acts of Crazy* a wild success in the summer of 2013. You've changed my life in so many ways. I always sign my books with the phrase, "Be Random!" and, indeed, life is random on the deepest levels. This book is for all of you – you who have begged for more Darla, you who have insisted on more Trevor, you who have worried about Joe (and quietly lusted after him) and you who just wish we all had a little more sass and a little less judgment in our lives.

For all of you, each and every one, this is a love letter, a hug, and my sincere gratitude. I could not have written this without you.

Chapter One

Darla

I couldn't believe my eyes. My Aunt Josie had sent me the link with a cryptic comment: *Don't get bird flu.*

What the hell did that mean? I clicked and read:

Hockenfield Times, May 3, 2013

Hockenfield, Mass.

By Janet Simkin

Naked Man Steals Chicken, Evades Local Police

Hockenfield Police Chief Bart Jansen has issued an alert for a white male, early twenties, with blond hair and blue eyes who stole a chicken from farmer Mike Kemper's coop this morning at 2:33 a.m. The man is completely naked, and while unarmed, is considered a potential threat to public safety.

"I heard rustling and figured it was a fox," Kemper explained. "Instead, I got an eyeful. Naked guy, young, wearing a collar around his neck like a dog. And a guitar. Nothing else. He kept calling my laying hen 'Mavis' and hollered he was eloping with her."

After a brief scuffle, during which the chicken scratched him, Kemper let go. The man shouted, "I wasted my only answered prayer!" and fled.

Kemper called 911 immediately, though the cruiser was delayed as the operator struggled to understand the nature of the call, but local police arrived within eleven minutes.

Too late.

"The suspect escaped on foot with the allegedly stolen chicken under his arm, headed for the Mass Pike," said Jansen. "Concerned citizens with any information are advised to contact the Hockenfield Police at our non-emergency number at 413-555-1000, and travelers on I-90 or any other interstate should not, as always, pick up naked hitchhikers by the side of the road."

Bird flu. Haha. Motherfucker.

Sitting here at the reception desk at work, I found myself wondering what I was supposed to do with *that* piece of information. Torture my boyfriend Trevor some more, sure—but, um... he *stole* Mavis? The man stole a chicken from a henhouse while naked and high, right before I met him seven months ago?

Random Acts of Crazy indeed. It wasn't just the name of Trevor and Joe's band. Living out here in the Boston area meant seeing him and Joe plenty enough, even though everyone—Uncle Mike, Mama, hell, even Aunt Marlene, the resident slut of my hometown, Peters, Ohio (and it took a lot to earn that title, if you know what I mean...)—thought that moving out here meant I'd find myself chained to someone's basement wall and erotically tortured within an inch of my life, then sold off into some underground of sexual slavery where cellulite was worshipped.

Hey. Wait a minute. Maybe that would have been better than sitting here with a letter

opener and an anti-virus program malfunctioning on my new computer.

Me, Joe, and Trevor had some talking to do.

Tucking that into a dark corner of my mind to be dealt with later, I looked around the small office and marveled that I was getting paid to work somewhere that didn't require a polyester vest and a pile of sawdust next to the mop bucket in case of vomiting customers (or their dogs). Office jobs that paid \$40,000 per year just didn't happen for people like me. What a life change these past few months.

Picking Trevor up by the side of the road back in Ohio, naked as the day he was born except for the guitar he wore. Meeting his best friend, Joe, when Joe came to retrieve him, six hundred miles from their home in Massachusetts. Falling for them both. Moving to Cambridge. Starting my job at Good Things Come in Threes. Enrolling at Harvard.

Harvard. I know!

That one had been at Joe's urging—he'd so carefully walked me through how to take courses at Harvard's super-secret night school (super-secret to me, at least—Harvard letting me take a class seemed like inviting Kanye West to ghostwrite for Jonathan Franzen), and now here I was, taking an English course and a math class, all on account of my stupidity in picking up a naked dude wearing a guitar back home.

If it weren't for stupid choices, I wouldn't have made *any* choices. That this one turned out so well was either dumb luck or divine interference, and I didn't see the hand of God anywhere near these days, so I leaned on the lucky side. Maybe I was part Irish. I'd have to ask Mama the next time we talked, which would be tonight, because lately Mama was so lonely she glommed on to whatever I would give her in terms of attention. Hours alone now (what with Uncle Mike on the road) meant Mama had been doing double-time on entering online sweepstakes, and the result had been, well...

I reached back and plucked the ass floss that passed for underwear out of my butt crack. Mama had won me a complete set of underwear from a rust-proofing company that sprayed chemical coatings on car undercarriages. The giveaway slogan was "Don't Let Rust Destroy What You Love Down Below." The g-strings had rust spots on the tiny little postage-stamp front cloth and made me feel like I was looking at a medical textbook full of pictures of STDs, but hey—free underwear, right? The guys hadn't seen them yet, and I did a mental check to groom the lady parts, because right now my muff must look like a dandelion covered in a rust-coated muzzle.

With a little pink tongue.

Let's swing away from that image, because once I start comparing my lady bits to things that require muzzles I need to question my own sanity. Or sex life.

Or both.

Leaving Ohio had been the ballsiest move ever. Took even more ovarian fortitude than picking up Trevor that night, all tan and blond and muscled and just plain old *yum*. Moving away took even more courage than giving in to what me, Trevor, and Joe had turned out to actually want that night at the bar, after Trevor sang me the new song he'd written, just for me. No other man in the band had written a song for their lady...love? Crush? Booty call? Eh. Call me whatever you want.

Just sing to me. And about me. Because when a naked soul finds you, you find them right back.

Abandoning every preconceived notion I had about who I was and what I would turn out to be was like killing a piece of myself off and hoping against hope that it would grow back better

and stronger.

I smiled.

It had.

I caught a familiar set of golden-haired legs walking down the outside flight of stairs. Even through the thin sliver of window that slitted the main door, I could catch Jack's approach.

Jack. Deliverymen with hot legs were worth their weight in gold. Who else could make those brown shorts seem like something out of a Gap ad?

And then there was that grin. "Hey, Darla," he said as he smiled back. Surfer dude mixed with a hint of hot porno actor. He was a pre-orgasm on legs. Toned, tanned legs that a woman could imagine bent at the knee with his head between—

"Jack!" I gasped, looking straight into his eyes, doing that fake control thing where you will your mind to stop imagining his face buried between your thighs as you hope what you're thinking isn't written in three-inch letters in permanent red marker all over your face.

Even if it feels like it.

"Hooked up any threesomes?" he asked, waggling thick brown eyebrows that slanted down just a touch at the edges of his eyes, giving him the perpetual look of a hot Jake Ryan from that *Sixteen Candles* movie Mama made me watch every time it was on TBS.

Sure. How about you, me, and your tongue. That's three.

"Nope," I said, looking away, wondering if my chest were as flushed as it felt. Like an Arizona forest fire combined with a Bessemer furnace. I worked here at my aunt's company, a threesome dating service. Jack knew what we did because you can't deliver packages to a business and not know.

"I'm sure you will," he crooned. "Something special came for you. Need your signature."

"Sure. I'll take it." Our fingertips brushed and it was like having a feather dragged across my clit. You're probably wondering why I'm all drooly for Jack when I have rock-star gods I can fuck damn near any time I want, and I will join you in your confusion. Let's sit at the bemused table for a round of what-the-fuck discussion. My best guess is that being turned on all the time by Trevor and Joe is like buying a white car.

(Bear with me here. I do have a point).

Until you own a white car, you don't notice all the other white cars on the road. And then, suddenly, they're everywhere. Invading the streets. Your neighbors own one, your boss drives one, and the ubiquity of it makes you a little dizzy.

Like Jack. Being with two hot guys made me see hot guys with more acuity, and that meant my clit was at a libido-induced buffet of scrumptious masculine brunch.

With a big old side of sausage.

"It's for you," Jack said. The nondescript envelope felt like a lead weight in my palm.

"You said that."

"No. I mean for *you*. Darla Josephine Jennings. Certified, signature return, blah blah your firstborn baby and all that required. Not for Good Things Fuck in Threes." Big grin. The joke had gotten old by the third time he said it a month or so ago, but a reflexive return grin stretched my mouth, one side curved up.

Oh, honey, if only you knew.

And the man talked about babies, which were conceived by sex, which made me think about his penis and...shit. There went my clit. Squirming in my chair, I stood, hoping it wasn't obvious. Damn, Trevor was about to get rode *hard* when I got home.

"Me?" The package he handed over was your standard overnight mail envelope. Sure

enough—my full name, with my title. “Operations Assistant.” Josie and Laura decided that was the best way to describe me. I recommended “Grunt” but they vetoed that one.

“You.” He handed me a little plastic electronic machine thing with a stylus. I signed where he tapped.

After ripping open the envelope, I found...another envelope. This one felt rich. *Rich*. The slide of the paper fiber against the pads of my fingers was so alien, as if there were materials on earth I didn't know could be generated. The luxury spoke of a different world, far beyond the confines of my office, certainly way outta this world compared to my trailer back home.

I wanted to lick the envelope just to know that some part of my DNA was on something so fine.

Jack must have seen my tongue peek out between my lips as I brought the fine paper closer to my face, for a look of alarm scattered over his face.

“Uh, wow. This is...”

“Yeah.” He emitted a low whistle and shifted his hips. I almost sighed aloud. *Goddammit, girl*, my conscience hissed, *aren't your two hot bods enough?*

“Yes!” I exclaimed in answer. Jack looked ready to bolt. “Um, yes—it's an interesting invitation.”

“I hope the wedding's fun,” he said politely, then beat it out of there like I was the skanky ho on the first episode of a new season of *The Bachelor*.

Huh. It did look like a wedding invitation. And then my phone rang. The display said “Mama.”

I answered, and before I could get a word in edgewise, Mama said, “Darla, do you like minty condoms?”

“You mean, like as a late-night snack?” Because the thought of talking with Mama about Trevor and Joe's penises encased in condoms that went inside me made a giant air horn blast off in my head.

The throaty smoker's laugh that greeted me sounded like a stranger, not the soft, sad Mama who loved me. She sounded like a woman with a past, a woman with a sense of the sensual divine, and it made my head spin for a minute.

“If you like to gobble 'em—”

“Mama! That ain't what I meant!” I groaned with horror. “Why are you asking me about condoms?”

“You're making Trevor wrap it, right?”

Let's stop here for a minute, because *you* know I'm with Trevor and Joe, and *I* know I'm with Trevor and Joe, and Uncle Mike is pretty fucking sure I'm with them both (though he's still a bit weirded out that Trevor proposed to Mavis the Stolen Chicken while high as a kite and traveling naked), but Mama?

No. Just...no. Mama can't know I'm with them both, and that is a sore spot in my little sweet threesome.

Then again, Joe hasn't told his parents about me at all. At. All. Trevor's mom has heard about me, though. But not the fact that Joe's all naked and at attention in the room at the same time.

We have a lot of invisible people getting up in each other's nude skin.

“Can we change the subject?” I asked archly, clearing my throat. “I am not pregnant and will not be pregnant, and why are you asking about minty condoms? And before you answer that, ewwwww. My vagina does not need to taste or smell like a cough drop.”

“Taste?” Mama gasped. Time to turn the tables.

“Are you calling to ask for advice? You find yourself a man?” Yeah. Right. Mama’s parts had been retired since my daddy died two decades ago. She was about as likely to go off and find a friend with benefits as I was to join Joe’s mom at her Pilates class.

That same disconcerting laugh, deep and knowing, poured through the phone like a demon’s whisper. “No. But these romance writers are having all these giveaways now, and the sweepstakes forums are full of these contests. One of them includes a big win of mint condoms, and I wondered why any woman would want that inside her. Wouldn’t it feel like shoving a tube of Ben Gay inside your pink tunnel?”

My mouth formed a giant O and I pulled the phone away from my ear as if it had transmogrified into Satan’s face. Who in the fuck was on the phone with me? Because it sure wasn’t my mama.

“But...no...Mama...the...those are for the mouth.” Those last words poured out of me like vomit. Oh, God, I was going to throw up all over this beautiful linen envelope as I tried to explain oral sex condoms to a woman who had last had sex when the television show *Full House* was still in original episodes.

“Why would someone need a condom for their mouth? Makes no sense—*ohhhhhhhhhh*.” Mama’s voice went down to a whisper. “For when you...oh.”

Kill me now.

“I guess mint would taste a hell of a lot better than spooge,” were the next words out of her mouth, and I swear if there’d been an old-fashioned letter opener on the desk, like in those *Mad Men* episodes Joe liked to watch, I’d have plunged it straight into my ear and pierced the drum, giving myself a lobotomy so that I never had to properly comprehend my mother’s use of the word “spooge.”

It took everything in me to tighten my core and force out the next words. “Mama, there isn’t a delivery truck about to deliver a pallet of mint condoms to Josie’s front yard, is there? Because we only just got rid of all that kitty litter two weeks ago, and if you expect me to use up an entire pallet of condoms, I’ll need a few lifetimes.”

Silence.

Aw, shit. “Mama?”

She cleared her throat. “No. Nothing like that. But you will be getting two large packs of them and some, uh...hang on. Let me read the letter here.” Shuffling sounds came next, giving my heart a chance to resume its normal rate, and for my stomach to stop doing the two-step.

“You win an assortment of sexual aids and lubrication devices, along with those condoms.”

What in the hell is a lubrication *device*? The words came so close to flying out of my mouth, but if I had to hear the answer from my own mama’s lips I wouldn’t ever have sex again. Hell, I would take fishing line and a rusty nail and sew my pissflaps together at this rate.

“Um...thanks?” I said.

“Darla, I was trying to win the \$250 gift card. It’s not my fault some of these writers give away these specialty prize packs. You also get an assortment of—*oh*.” The way her voice went quiet made me cringe.

“I’ll just look at it all when it comes. You don’t have to detail it—”

“Chocolate penises.”

Bucket! I needed that pile of sawdust and a bucket for vomit emergencies at the gas station *right now*. I was going to be sick.

“Well, thank you much, Mama. Now—can we change the subject to something that doesn’t

involve procreation?”

“No one’s saying anyone has to procreate. Just have the fun associated with—”

“STOP! STOP IT! We are done with this topic! Thank you for the prize, but I need to be done before my vagina joins a convent in self-defense!”

“My diabetes landed me in the hospital yesterday,” Mama blurted out over my little hissy fit.

That stopped me mid-rant. “Hospital?” I rasped. “Oh, Mama, why didn’t you say somethin’?”

“I am saying somethin’ now,” she said primly.

“What happened?” The room suddenly looked foreign to me, all modern and freshly painted, with carpeting that had no stains, complete baseboards and real potted plants a service came and watered. The hues of the walls were designed to be soothing, but right now I was anything but serene. Mama was in crisis and I—I was here. Here. Hundreds of miles and a lifetime away.

“It’s those test kits,” she said in a hushed voice. “My insurance don’t cover as much as it used to.”

“And you’re not testing enough?” I couldn’t keep the exasperation out of my voice. She’d been like this when I lived at home, and there was nothing I could do about it sometimes. That woman was as stubborn as...well...

Me.

“You can buy your cigarettes but you can’t buy test strips?” I blurted out. I knew the words would make her righteously pissed at me, but I couldn’t help it. Hurt seeped through my statement because she should have told me. Should have asked for help. Should have turned to me, her only daughter—

Who had left.

Now guilt took over.

“I quit, Darla.”

Knock me over with a feather. “You quit *smoking*?”

A triumphant tone popped into her voice, and it made my eyes go wide. “I am using the patch and it’s expensive, but I’m saving so much money. And Mike got me one of those electronic cigarettes. It’s helping.”

“But the e-cigs have nicotine!”

“Not the flavors I use. Cotton candy is my favorite.” She sounded like Buddy the Elf, her voice was so infused with pleasure.

Mama quit. Mama quit smoking. I couldn’t imagine my own mother in my mind’s eye without a ciggy between her fingers, always searching for an ashtray to rest a lit one, or to flick ash.

“And you still can’t manage the testing strips?”

“It’s not just that. The machine died. Insurance...” She sighed. “And a pipe burst, and Mike’s not getting the miles he normally gets...”

“Let me send you some money,” I said quickly. “Cash my checks.” Unlike Aunt Marlene bugging Josie constantly for money, my mama had never, ever asked. Wouldn’t take. Wouldn’t hear of it.

“No!”

Remember the stubborn part? I kept sending her checks, around a hundred dollars a month, but she just returned them. Uncashed.

“Yes! If you’re gonna send me lubrication devices and condoms that taste like a breath mint, the least I can do is send you money to help save your life.”

“Darla.” One word could bring tears to my eyes. It was the closest thing to “yes” she could manage.

“Okay then, Mama, case closed.” My heart was breaking. “You safe? Jane still coming to help you?” My old high school friend was my mama’s home health aide.

“Jane’s the one what got me to the hospital, Darla,” she said sadly, the spark in her voice now gone.

“Then Jane deserves one of your winnings. She need some kitty litter?”

The laugh we shared almost took the tears out of my eyes.

Almost. Mama said her goodbyes and hung up, and it was like the earth had shifted direction.

I could take a wild guess at how much money a broken pipe cost. What the trailer needed was an overhaul, all-new plumbing, and a new heating system. We plugged space heaters in and played the game of Pop Goes the Fuse Box every winter.

Four figures, I guessed. Even my hundred-dollar checks wouldn’t help.

Fuck.

A deep sigh filled the room, and given that I was the only one in the room, it sounded like me. Confused. Confounded. My fingers brushed against the envelope on my desk.

Breaking the seal seemed like a sacrilege, my fingers tracing the lines of the paper’s folds, the weave like linen in printed form.

I smelled it, just to see if it smelled like fresh cash. That’s what it reminded me of.

With a shaking finger, I slid the tip under the open corner and felt the tear of the envelope’s lip like I felt my own hymen breached back when I was a virgin.

(Quit laughing. I was one once, too.)

And then my eyes must have looked like Jack’s a minute ago as I drank in the words.

Dear Ms. Jennings,

You are cordially invited to join me...

And then my phone started buzzing like mad.

Chapter Two

Trevor

There are three words no guy in his early twenties ever wants to say to his parents. Bet you thought I was going to say “She is pregnant,” right? Nope.

(But she’s not, thank fucking God. Let’s not even go there).

Those three little words are:

You

Were

Right.

Law school was so much better than I ever imagined. A million times more interesting than undergrad, and high school was like being water boarded by comparison. Sure, the law professors were, by and large, pompous people who thought they were the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s gift to law. And a few were—especially the ones who went on to become senators and Supreme Court judges.

The rest—especially the theorists—were just assholes. And then there was the international law expert who was a secret Brony. Let’s not go there.

Quirky people weren’t new to me. Look at my girlfriend. And my, uh...whatever Joe was to me. We had a man-code agreement that we wouldn’t—couldn’t—name each other. No labels. No boxes (except Darla’s). If we didn’t call it something, it didn’t have any power over us.

And power was a tricky topic between me and Joe.

He had less than I did, and he hated me for that. What the hell was I supposed to do, though? Not headline the band? Not go to Harvard Law? Not be the one to stay in Boston with Darla? A thousand little choices we make every day led us to this moment, and Joe had made one big choice—moving to Philly to go to Penn Law—that led to the imbalance of power.

Not that I minded, because I had a sweet deal. All the ass and tits I wanted, plenty of sweet sugar from Darla, an interesting future career and right now, a case about whether a guy who shoved his cell phone up his ass had a claim against the cell phone carrier for legitimate damage that was under warranty.

Seriously? You couldn’t make this shit up.

Researching tort law and contracts should be dry. Boring. Ennui on top of brittle despair, and yet...it lit me on fire. My mind went down so many legal mazes and what-ifs, like playing chess with my brother Rick, except real life, real laws were at stake.

I loved every fucking minute of it.

Ding! The doorbell rang. Who rang my doorbell but didn’t text first? Darla was at work, plying people with sweet talk to get them to sign up for the threesome dating service where she worked. Joe was in Philly. Liam and Sam were—who the fuck knew where. Taking their clothes off for random strangers as strip-o-gram dudes and making bank doing it, I supposed.

A glance at the clock as I stood and went to the door to buzz the person in told me that they couldn’t be stripping. Maybe—

“Mr. Connor?” a sultry woman’s voice asked. My dick twitched a bit. Don’t blame me. Dicks do that when they hear the female voice, like Tom Brady cries when he loses.

“Yes?” I tried to keep the sex out of my voice, my cock failing me. When did Darla get home?

“I have a special delivery for you,” she crooned. Ah, fuck. This was Stacey the delivery chick. The one who wore that tight little brown uniform like she was dressed for a quickie porno video job.

Bzzz. My finger reached for the button to unlock the door as if guided by my now-throbbing cock. Not my fault. The penis did it. When it doubt, blame my pants.

The thump of her footsteps made my palms sweat, my heart palpitate, and as I looked through the apartment door’s peephole I felt like a pervert in the back of a sex-toy store, peeking at a nudie show. Yes, they still have those.

Knock knock knock. “Hi, Trevor,” Stacey’s breathy voice intoned on the other side of the door. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and steeled myself as I pulled the door open, arm flexed and occupied, the grip on the doorknob about as strong as the grasp of Darla’s hand at the root of my cock when she—

“Someone has been a very, very good boy,” she whispered. Doe eyes the color of brown silk stared up at me from under silken eyelashes, and her long, straight hair was pulled back in a ponytail that made her look about sixteen. Athletic calves flexed as she bounced in place, pulling up to her tiptoes in running shoes, breasts bouncing like melons caught in a giant popcorn popper.

Agony. She was sexual agony in a brown paper wrapper.

Could you fuck a woman sideways? Because Darla was getting every orifice for the next three days. And two dozen roses. And all the takeout Thai and Ethiopian food—her new favorite—she could handle if she’d just stay naked and in bed with me.

“I’ve...what?” I muttered. Her last words hung in the air between us.

She reached toward me and handed off a thick delivery envelope. The movement of her body made the scent of cotton candy and lemon fill the air. God, she smelled like a candy shop. Which made me think of lollipops.

Which made me imagine her licking one.

Groan.

“You okay?” she asked, taking a torturous step forward, breasts leaning toward me, her cleavage on display. What a uniform violation. I’m sure the delivery company she worked for didn’t allow the edge of a rosy nipple to jut out. What a bad employee. A bad, bad girl.

She needed a spanking.

“Yeah.” I took a step back and ran my hand through my hair. It made me look down. Sweatpants, going commando, and Stacey didn’t mix well. My erection stood out so straight and hard it could have signed for the fucking package by itself. Who needed a stylus?

“You groaned.” She lifted the stylus to her lips and worried the plastic between her tongue and teeth. “Something troubling you?”

Bzzzz. My phone was in my loose pocket and vibrated against my unleashed cock like something out of an Adam & Eve catalog.

“Holy fuck!” I shouted.

Stacey snickered as I fumbled for my phone. Joe. Texting. I ignored it. Something about an invitation.

“Here,” she said, sidling up to me, rubbing the edge of her breast against my arm. *Darla Darla Darla*, I chanted inside my head. Stacey licked her lips and held the stylus out for me to sign her little brown box.

Er...you know what I mean. My stylus wanted to go on...in...her little brown box.

Bzzzzz. Joe again. Whatever.

“Trevor, I saw you perform down at that festival last summer,” she rasped, her breasts taking on a life of their own, as if they had eyes. And lips. Vertical lips.

“You—what?”

Bzzzz! I grabbed the phone out of my pocket and flung it backwards onto the couch. The thwack it made after it bounced off the cushion and hit the end table shook me out of this Tucker Max-like experience.

What was I doing? She was just some random chick, like all the random chicks who hung on after performances and wanted to blow us for some kind of groupie street cred. This time, two shaking hands whipped through my hair as I realized I was way, way in over my head.

Both big and little ones.

I thumbed toward my apartment, my left hand occupied by the thick envelope she’d delivered. “That was my girlfriend, probably wondering who I was doing—uh, *what* I was doing.”

She made a snorting sound from the back of her throat. “Girlfriend? That big blond beast who slobbers all over you and your bass player at concerts?” The noise of dismissal that came out of her mouth made my blood run cold.

So that’s how it was.

I shot her a grim smile, one corner of my mouth curling up in what I knew was a sneer, but she took it as agreement.

“That big blond beast,” I murmured, tipping down and whispering in Stacey’s ear as I carefully placed one hand on her shoulder, her scent now nauseating me, “has me. Cock, balls, heart and all.” I pulled back and turned away.

“What a waste,” Stacey shot back.

“The only waste,” I answered, my chest expanding with anger at her mischaracterization of Darla, at the notion that someone would think it was acceptable to trash-talk the woman I was in love with (even if we hadn’t said it yet), “is this conversation, Stacey.”

Too many snapbacks. Too many angry words were right there, ready to be thrown out at her.

But why bother? She wasn’t worth it. The bitchy ones never were.

I’d already given enough of my energy over to her. As her ass sashayed down the hall, though, my little devil dick gave a final-death-throes shudder.

It felt like a reverse orgasm.

Fuck.

After stepping back in the apartment, I closed the door and ripped the envelope open. Weird. A fancy invitation, on graduation or wedding paper, was all that was in there. I started to open it—was yet another classmate bowing under the pressure of the parents to marry? It seemed like open season as we all slipped from twenty-two to twenty three, undergrad years gone, degrees earned, and expectations high.

You have a life list, right? Twenty-three is the perfect time to check marriage off, for those who’ve been dating each other since high school.

Just as I was opening the linen envelope, my phone buzzed again. Shit. I leaned over and found my phone under the end table, along with Amy’s lost bullet thermos she’d been bitching about for the past two weeks. Sam had torn the place apart but never found it. Cool. He owed me now, and Amy would give me more than a wan smile next time she came over.

Nineteen text messages. Joe, Joe, Joe, Darla, Darla, Joe, Joe, Darla, Darla, Darla, Darla, Liam, Darla, Darla, Joe, Sam, Joe, Joe, Darla.

Was the fucking world ending?

And then the door flew open, and my big blond beast stood there, wild-eyed and clutching an envelope that looked exactly like mine.

Joe

Coffee is no longer my friend. Oh, cruel mistress, how dare you disappoint? This fucking paper wasn't going to write itself, and it was the last damn thing holding me back before I could grab my phone and my dick and start sexting with Darla.

If I had to pull something, I'd rather it be my cock than an all-nighter. But because I didn't have a choice, I pulled both. Desperation made a man do whatever it took to make the gnawing need go away. Yet it was hopeless, because choking my chicken just increased my suffering and made the prospect of an all-nighter look dim. Why couldn't my body cooperate?

My eighth shot of espresso and it was only—what? My phone said 3:44 p.m. My paper was due in the professor's email box by 9 a.m. tomorrow. Plenty of time when I was an undergrad, but now? This was the *show*. The Big Time. If I didn't have every comma in place, every period just right, the professor would take my right testicle, ridicule it until it shrunk to the size of a raisin, and cover it in chocolate to feed to the university president.

No—worse.

My mom.

Forgive me if my elegance disappeared with my sleep deprivation, and as my ever-faithful mistress cuckolded me, the caffeine betraying me by withdrawing affection, I found myself sucking down a strange mixture of Mountain Dew and freeze-dried instant coffee, all of it mixed with Red Bull.

Why?

Because I *could*.

The first semester of law school had officially kicked my ass, and I wasn't even done. All the parts of law school I thought I would love turned out to be about as interesting as getting blown by Rush Limbaugh.

Contracts and torts? I'd rather listen to my mom list the difference between organic black beans in a can lined with some toxic plastic versus buying the same beans from some company that may or may not use some toxic metal in the manufacturing process. The professor sounded like the teacher in those old Charlie Brown specials.

Mwah mwah mwah mwah.

The fun part of law school wasn't materializing, and I was getting pretty pissed. Sure, I was in one of the top law schools in the country. I'd made it. *Made* it.

And now that I was here, it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I felt like I was getting screwed without the reach-around.

Speaking of my cock, an image of Darla pounded my head. Pound. Pounding Darla. Ah, fuck. Here I went, up like a flag pole. I reached down and adjusted myself.

The words on the page in front of me blurred. Study groups with the top students eluded me. Those fuckers were gunning for law review editor and closed me out, because someone tipped them off that I'd been a wait-lister. Being wait-listed meant I hadn't been good enough on the first round to be accepted here at Penn, so that trickled down into a condescension that would—I knew—follow me for the next three years.

How did I know?

Because in their shoes, I'd do the same. You want to swim with the sharks, you have to be a

shark.

I didn't like being chum.

Tap tap tap. The knock on my door made me shoot up out of my chair like a gunshot had just pierced the air. "What?" I shouted, loud and growling.

"Joe? It's Marley." Marley was the hot chick next door. I shared this two-bedroom apartment with two other law school students, Mary and Jake, two high school sweethearts who were so fucking syrupy you could spread them on a stack of pancakes from IHOP and eat them.

Where did that thought come from? Darla had invaded my mind so thoroughly I was drawing on her ridiculous analogies. Goddammit.

"Hey, Marley." Her roommate was a bizarre gay dude who went by one name—D'Man—and who shaved all his hair except for one long strand he braided. It flopped behind him in a tail that stretched down to his ass. He hated my guts for no reason other than appearing to hate anyone who wasn't Marley. I'd never seen Marley without him, so I steeled myself as I opened the door and found myself salivating at the sight before me.

Long, honey-brown waves of hair stretching down over nearly naked breasts, the curls at the ends of her long locks licking at her hips. Tiny little bright red strings dotted her smooth, tanned, taut skin, and eyes the color of blinding lust looked into mine, nervous and uncertain.

Her shy smile showed the kind of evenness only years of orthodontia could produce. Marley was an incessantly tweaked, optimized twenty-three-year-old piece of lovely ass.

That I couldn't tap.

But I could look and tent-pole my pants.

"Hi, Joe," she said, breathless and suddenly more relaxed, as if showing up at my door in a string bikini in December, in Philadelphia, were the most normal thing on earth.

Sure it was.

In a porno movie.

Excitement flushed through my veins. Was that what she did for a living? Every time I'd asked her about her career she'd shied away. Holy shit, she was a porno actress. The tent pole became a flagpole.

"Where's Demon?" I blurted out.

"D'Man," she said flatly. "Like 'the man.'"

"Whatever." I bent forward, pretending to crane my head around her to look for D'Man, but really just getting my face closer to those amazing breasts. I inhaled deeply. She smelled like lemons and vanilla lotion and freshly washed pussy.

Someone needed to make a car freshener with that scent. They'd make millions.

"So, um," Marley said, and then I realized she had something in her hand. Hard to notice when half a mile of perfect flesh was stretched out in front of me, an ass begging to be grabbed, tits that wanted to be sucked, and hair I could yank—

"Yes," I choked out, needing to stop my thoughts before they made my hands do things that would make Darla cut them off and feed them to Mavis.

"You got this envelope. The guy who delivered it interrupted me," she added, pointing toward her door. She looked up at me with a coquettish look that made my heart stop and my cock beg for sweet mercy.

Handing me a thick delivery envelope, she licked her lips. My throat closed. Time stood still. My eyes raked over that fine, nubile body stretched out before me. This was how I would die, wasn't it? Drooling uncontrollably over a woman whose heart beat feet from mine, whose blood rushed to all the right places, her nipples now tight little buds under that red, stretchy

fabric I wanted to eat. A sudden image of Darla catching me gnawing on Marley's nipple made me think of Trevor, how unfair life was that he got Harvard and my woman, and how he was probably banging Darla right now without me.

Without me.

But if Darla ever did catch me with another woman, I wouldn't be alive. I'd be hanging from a crane in the back of some construction site in Ohio, naked and covered with honey while she released swarms of bees.

And I'd be hanging by one testicle.

That quelled my fucking insane libido as Marley looked at me like I was a bit addled. Which I was. Enough Red Bull can lower anyone's IQ.

Even a super-high one like mine.

A quick glance at the envelope and I noticed my signature on the front. Except it wasn't mine. It looked like a squirrel with a broken paw signed it.

Under water.

"You signed for me?" I asked, a bit incredulous.

"No. D'Man did."

"And the delivery guy let him?"

She pinked. "The delivery guy was kind of surprised by what, um, he saw when D'Man told him to just walk in."

Intriguing. The hair on my arms started to tingle. "And what were you doing?"

"Modeling."

The envelope became an afterthought, something to throw backwards into the living room like a frisbee. "What kind of modeling? And do you want to come in and have a..." Shit. I trailed off because the only drink in the house was my Red Bull/Mountain Dew/coffee combination, and I didn't want to offer the gastronomical equivalent of sweet diarrhea to a chick wearing a string bikini who was about to confess that she modeled—

"Dinosaur erotica book covers."

I blinked stupidly.

"Dinosaur *what?*"

She brightened. "Ever watch the Stephen Colbert show? The one with that super-conservative guy my mom and dad say has such great American values?"

Cognitive dissonance. I opened my mouth to try to explain that Colbert was a hyper-ironic parody of the conservative talk show hosts her parents clearly adored, but I realized it was hopeless. *Bite your tongue, man. Just go with it.*

Curiosity overrode my need to be right, so I just made a noncommittal sound, which she took as encouragement, her excitement showing in the gentle grace of her boobage bouncing.

"So, he talked about dinosaur erotica on his show a while ago, and how it's, like, this big industry, m'kay? And Bigfoot erotica, too."

"Bigfoot—what? How is Bigfoot erotic? Like, Wookiee porn? What kind of woman wants to fuck a guy who doesn't ever wipe?" That poured out of me like jizz coming out of a fourteen-year-old during his first nipple contact.

Marley frowned. "I never thought of it like that, Joe." She looked like she was about to cry. "Maybe D'Man is wrong, but we're making a few thousand a month selling these modeling pictures online."

I made a face that showed her I was impressed. "That's...interesting. The delivery guy, though—what did he find?"

“We were shooting covers for T-Rex sex.”

“T-Rex sex?”

She nodded. I wanted for her to elaborate. She just gave me the Bambi eyes.

“You were being fucked by a T-Rex?” I asked. Surreal. Were these words really coming out of my mouth when I had half a day to finish my final paper for a contract law course?

“You’ve read one of the books? Because that’s totally a title.” Her hips shimmied and my dick whimpered.

“I…” At least this conversation had one benefit: I was now as limp as D’Man’s hair tail.

“The delivery guy walked in while I had a big plastic T-Rex between my legs, and D’Man was shouting, ‘Lick her good!’ He just trembled when D’Man signed for you.”

“Gotcha.” *Bzzzzz*. My pocket roared to life.

Saved by Steve Jobs. Even from the grave.

“I have to go, Marley,” I said with genuine regret. Hearing more about prehistoric fucking or Sasquatch eating someone out would be way more interesting than whatever—I looked at my screen—my mom wanted.

But the image of D’Man, a BPA-covered dinosaur, and Marley’s parted thighs made my cock do push-ups. Up. Down. Up. Down. It didn’t know what it was supposed to do, and started to spasm. Not in a good way.

“I hope your package is fun.”

I looked at my crotch. Shit. Could she tell?

“My what?”

Gesturing at the envelope, she twisted her body, giving me a healthy eye full of side boob. “Your envelope. Whatever’s in there, I hope it’s fun and something good.”

Bzzzzz.

The flounce of her hair as she opened her apartment and disappeared made me feel like my balls were permanently lodged in my throat.

Ignoring my fucking phone, I ripped the envelope open. D’Man would pay for scribbling what appeared to be a facsimile of a drunken preschooler’s forgery of my signature. A fine linen envelope greeted me.

Bzzzzz.

I opened the letter and within seconds I realized I wouldn’t need my Red Bull any more. Because I was permanently turbocharged.

Chapter Three

Darla

Joe was on the screen, that chiseled jaw covered with stubble, his hands twitching like Christian Grey with a set of handcuffs.

“Joe, honey? You all right? You look like you’ve been run through a car wash and force-fed a half-dozen Ritalin after going through a haunted house a few times,” I said to the screen, touching it with my fingertip lovingly.

“I hate when you do that!” he snapped, running a hand through his mane of curls, which were a shaggy mess. He hadn’t cut his hair since he went off to Penn and it framed his face just so, curling at the ends and making me want to rub his head against my naked breasts so I could feel it.

“Do what?”

“Act like touching the screen is a form of affection. I hate it.”

“Sorry I’m not a pussy pocket you can attach to your tablet and fuck, with sound effects and vibrations and all,” I teased.

Liam and Sam had appeared out of nowhere within minutes of me getting to Trevor’s place. The four of us were clustered around Trevor’s tablet, all clutching our separate copies of what we now referred to as The Invitation, the capital letters etched into the hushed tones we used when referring to it.

Three sets of eyes turned to me, eyebrows to high heaven after I uttered that remark. “Is this another Ohio-ism?” Sam whispered to Liam out of the corner of his mouth. Liam shrugged.

“We’re not supposed to talk about that,” Joe shot back in a strained voice. His screen blacked out but we could still hear him.

Amy was furiously texting Sam, who was texting back faster. He looked up from the screen, his hair as long as Joe’s but the color of Ron’s from the *Harry Potter* movies. “Amy wants to know what a pussy pocket is. So do I,” he added, face scrunched up in a look of fear and curiosity.

“And how do you know what that is?” Trevor asked me.

“Mama’s romance contests.”

His eyes closed slowly, and a sound of defeat hissed through his parted lips.

“Of course.”

“That’s supposed to be an answer?” Liam said, laughing. “What are your mother’s romance contests, and what do they have to do with Joe fucking Steve Jobs’ baby?” Everyone ignored him as Joe gave him the bird and spoke up.

“Read yours again,” Joe told me. I pulled that fine, fine piece of paper out of my envelope like it was the Golden Ticket from *Willy Wonka* and read:

Dear Ms. Jennings,

You are cordially invited to join me for a four-night stay at my island, accompanying the band Random Acts of Crazy as its manager. All of your transportation and travel expenses will be paid for, and I offer you the sum of \$5000 for your role in assisting the band. In turn, the four members of the band Random Acts of Crazy will be contracted to perform one ninety-minute set on the Saturday night of your stay.

Should you wish to accept this offer, please contact my assistant at...

Holy motherfucking shit yes I would be contacting your assistant, Mr. Island Man. An all-expenses-paid trip and \$5000? I'd lick the resort's toilets with my labia for that deal. Hell, I'd have an open conversation with my mama and Uncle Mike about my life with Trevor and Joe for \$5000. Make it \$10,000 and I'd throw in Joe's mom and James Dobson.

"And you checked with your mother?" Joe asked me after I finished reading. "This isn't some sort of sweepstakes she won, like the Mount Everest of kitty litter or that S&M gift pack?"

Liam and Sam snorted. That got Sam's attention, and he looked up for the first time since they'd barged through the door, waving their envelopes.

"S&M what?" Liam sneered. You know those guys in teen movies who are the gorgeous, surfer-blond, tanned rich boys who act like they own the world? The ones who are breathtakingly gorgeous and even though they're mean-as-fuck bullies, you want to fling yourself into their arms and dry hump them?

Yeah.

Liam.

"Shut up, Magic Mike," I snapped. That silenced him. Sam snickered and tapped away.

"Are you going to finger fuck your phone all night?" Trevor asked Sam, whose head snapped up so fast his overgrown bangs bounced like he was one of the Jonas Brothers.

Ding! The apartment bell rang. "You guys invite the neighborhood?" Joe cracked.

In walked Amy. "Hi, Joe. Good to see you, too!" All long, brown hair and clear, quiet brown eyes, Amy walked in with a laser focus on Sam. The two kissed and she settled in his lap as he handed her his invitation. Those brown eyes got as big as full moons and I could tell the exact moment she saw the dollar amount.

"Ten thousand dollars!" she gasped. The guys were each being paid more than me, which was more than fair. But it was too bad Amy wouldn't get to go.

"You didn't get an envelope?" I asked her. "Maybe yours is late?"

She looked up and frowned. We were friends. You can't help someone pull a smart phone out of their vagina without being buddies.

(For the record, the phone was stuck in *her* vagina. Not mine. Mine does not have that kind of roaming capability.)

She scanned the page and then smiled, her voice loud as she commanded our attention. "You are welcome to bring Ms. Smithson as a guest, with all expenses paid," she announced.

Sam looked like he was about to cream his shorts. "Can you believe it?" He slung an arm around her shoulder and kissed her sweetly on the cheek. It made me smile.

Hell, it made Liam and Trevor grin. Everyone was all sappy happy until Joe muttered, "Kumbaya and all that. I think it's a scam."

Amy frowned, twisting a lock of hair around her finger as she snuggled in to Sam's chest. "Why?"

"Because who does this?" he spat out. Joe could be terse. He could even be an asshole sometimes. What was driving him right now, though, into evil-dude territory was his need to finish the damn semester and come home to me and Trevor.

"Don't you have a paper to write, hon?" I asked in a calm voice, the kind of voice you use on angry wild boars you find rustling through your garbage.

"Don't patronize me!" His knee was bouncing up and down so hard I thought his leg had turned into a pogo stick.

“Not patronizing,” I said soothingly. “Just asking.”

“This isn’t helping! And Marley and demon and dinosaur sex!”

Eh? “Come again?” I asked.

“That’s what she said,” Liam muttered under his breath.

“Original!” Trevor joked, punching Liam’s shoulder. Liam hit back. The two started to joke wrestle, powerful, muscled legs entwining quickly, taut arms groping to gain the advantage.

“Amy!” I shouted. “Get the bottle of oil while I rip their shirts off!”

Sam looked like his eyebrows were about to knit together as he stared at the screen and said, “Dinosaur sex?” to Joe, Liam grabbed the hem of Trevor’s shirt and pulled. Hard.

Riiiiip!

“I was joking!” I screeched, as Amy came running back from the kitchen with a big old bottle of olive oil.

Her face fell. “Oh,” she said quietly, garnering Sam’s attention.

His eyebrows shot up. “You want to see two half-naked men oiled up and touching each other?”

“Who wouldn’t?” I couldn’t help but mutter. Sam ignored me.

“If I wanted to see that,” she shot back, “I’d just make sure I came to one of your bachelorette party gigs.” Sam’s stripping job was a bone of contention between them. Still, apparently.

“Or maybe you just want to see Liam shirtless.”

All motion stopped and Liam and Trevor’s faces tipped up to look at the couple. Oh no.

I smiled nice and tight, the way women around here did. Like they smeared Preparation H all over their lips. Someone needed to break the tension, because Amy was furious, and calm, placid Sam’s fingers began tapping against his hips like they had a life of their own. When Sam did that, you knew trouble was brewing.

“We have just been given the opportunity to get a nice tropical vacation and each earn more money from one gig than from the last six months of them,” I said. “Not that I’ve earned a penny off your gigs. You people are rolling on the floor like something out of *Borat*—”

“Dude,” Liam said to Trevor, “no balls in my face, okay? Save that for when you’re with Ross and Darla.”

Oh no he *di’int*.

Man Code, according to what Trevor and Joe had told me, dictated that 1) you never talk about a friend’s balls touching another friend’s balls unless they had been officially married in a lovely beachside Cape Cod ceremony in Provincetown and 2) you definitely never talk about our threesome and how Trevor and Joe related to each other within it.

But, of course, Liam had *gone there*. Because Liam was a loose cannon.

When in the ever-loving hell had this meeting turned into the beginnings of a brawl? Now Amy was whispering furiously with Sam, pulling him to the hallway. Liam and Trevor were playacting at being angry with each other, and Joe was hissing about his paper and something about how Liam could bite his ass. Which I don’t think helped, because Liam said:

“You want *another* guy in the band to touch your ass?”

And Joe shouted (to the extent that you can shout through the glass of an 8.9-inch screen), “We don’t touch! You fucker! Stop saying that!”

This was all too much. I felt like Chris Harrison from *The Bachelorette* breaking up a cat fight, except this one involved six-pack abs and my strung-out, law-school-hating, Mountain Dew-addicted boyfriend.

And my other boyfriend wrestling his hot bandmate while all I could do is feel my head spin from it all. Pea soup was about to come shootin' outta my mouth if this didn't end *now*.

"HEY!" I shouted. "YOU MOTHERFUCKERS ARE INSANE."

They ignored me. Shit. I'd used that line a few too many times since I'd been around the band, huh?

"I AM PREGNANT!"

Dead calm and all eyes on me suddenly. I could, of course, only use that line once. I'd just blown my wad.

Like Joe needed to.

"You're what?" Joe choked out, going so pale he looked like a whiteboard. He turned to Trevor. "You fucking ass—"

"NOT pregnant," I rushed in. "Just tired of you people arguing and ignoring me."

"Lying about a pregnancy is one of the shittiest things a girl can do," Liam said, his sudden personality change daunting. He looked at me like I was dogshit dipped in diarrhea.

"Good thing I'm not a *girl*." One long, drawn-out look at my abundant, overflowing bosom was enough to make Liam shrug one shoulder in concession. Hah. Call me a girl? Might as well call him a zygote. And speaking of zygotes...

"Good thing you're not pregnant," Trevor added. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

Trevor

Liam's arms went super tight, like he was ready to punch something. I moved back, tensing up, worried about the way he looked at Darla. My own heart was slamming in my chest after Darla's really fucked-up way of getting our attention. The fastest way to get a man to go into shock was to tell him he had fathered a baby he hadn't intended to.

Something was off in the way Liam was reacting to Darla, and it kept me on guard. I nudged Liam's knee with my toe as I said, "Hey. What's up? She was joking." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Darla run a hand through her bushy waves, blond hair nestled against her neck, that curve of skin crying out for my mouth. Even Liam's anger couldn't tear me away from that sight.

"Bad joke." His words came out clipped and strained, but Liam took a deep breath and slowly unfurled his fists. I didn't think he'd actually *hit* Darla—that was certain death by pummeling from me. Hell, Joe really would climb through the tablet screen and beat the shit out of him if he so much as put one feather touch on Darla.

Stand down, I thought, watching Liam relax as if listening to my silent command.

Too bad the world didn't work that way. Things would be far less fucked up if people just did what I recommended.

Joe was having a sputtering shit fit on the tablet, going on about the whole thing being a scam, while Darla tried to calm his over-drugged self down. Caffeine alone didn't account for his state. Not even his insane concoction of Mountain Dew, Red Bull, and dried coffee. Crazy motherfucker.

Snorted Adderall, on the other hand...and I had no doubt he knew exactly how to find it, too. Joe was probably dealing it, making bargains with an enterprising third grader for his stash.

I paused to take in my own invitation. A private island resort. All expenses paid. \$10,000. I could use the money (who couldn't?) and it would be a blast to spend some time with Darla and the band down there.

But my own questions seeped in, making me frown as I stood, leaving Liam alone on the

ground. I began to pace. Who saw us and invited us? What kind of resort was this? What had we done to be offered \$10,000 each for a single performance? All the songs we'd written and performed rushed through my mind like a fast-moving ribbon attached at the end of a kite, carried off by the winds of chance.

I mean, we knew we were awesome and that the rest of the world just needed to catch up and realize our glory.

Had it? Had someone figured out that we were the next big thing?

The next big thing with a fucking awesome deal to test the waters, have fun, and come home with fat bank accounts.

Joe didn't need the money. Sam sure as fuck did, and Liam was cut off by his old man. Darla...I smiled at her, our eyes catching, her righteous indignation flashing in those ocean-green eyes until she let me steady her with eye contact that deepened.

And then she granted me such a wonderful grin it blinded me.

Love. It makes you do stupid shit, like not saying "I love you" because the power of the feeling is so much greater than the meaning of the words. "I love you" wasn't just a commitment—which I could handle. It wasn't just an expression—which was easy enough.

It was inadequate.

In her eyes I saw love. Oceans and meadows of pure, unadulterated joy. In her throat I heard the melody of my name whispered in furtive moments where we claimed each other. That voice was like a luscious stroke up my spine, rendering me dumbstruck. And moments with her and Joe, the three of us united, were like inventing a whole new world and then shaking its axis, as if we were the universe itself.

How in the hell do you shrink all of that emotion into three little words?

It's easier to say nothing at all.

"Let's settle this by calling the number," Liam rumbled, standing. He wore old jeans that were probably from high school, a ripped *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* t-shirt I'd given him for Christmas last year, and an expression of disdain for all of us that was louder than his words.

"No shit!" Joe shouted through the tinny speakers on my tablet. "I've been saying that for the past five minutes while you all run around in your little circle jerk."

"So eloquent," Amy snapped, turning away from Sam. She barged over to the screen, that long, brown hair fluttering over her face, eyes angry and mouth twisted into a snarl. "Penn has really brought out the gentleman in you."

"Don't you have a book to dust off and shelve somewhere, Amy? The grown-ups are talking now," Joe replied, pretending to be bored.

We were all *waaaay* over the top.

"Hey," Sam growled. Nothing like ending a fight with your girlfriend by taking on a common enemy. "This shit was old back in high school, but it's really fucking stupid now, Joe."

"What are you going to do? Put your thumb on the camera and block me from sight? Turn off the tablet? *Ooooooooh*. Sam's going all caveman on me to protect his librarian."

Darla and Liam sighed with tones of shared disgust, looked at each other, and smiled ruefully.

I grabbed my phone and dialed, pressing the screen against my ear, one finger held out to them all in a gesture of silence.

Miraculously, they complied.

"May I help you, Mr. Connor?" a pleasant man's voice answered, tinged with a European accent I couldn't place.

The phone might as well have been a copperhead. I snatched it away from my ear and looked at it like it was about to bite.

“What the fuck?” I couldn’t help it. How did he know my name? This had gone from awesome to creepy in two seconds. Someone was playing a very elaborate practical joke on us.

“Did you drop acid in my coffee pot?” I asked Liam.

“Huh? Why would I do that?”

“Because what the fuck? How does this guy know my name?” I turned on speakerphone and held out my screen to everyone, like it was some ancient relic possessed by a demon.

“Mr. Connor?” the voice asked from an echoey distance. “You have set up your caller ID.”

The room erupted into snickers. Good. Let them all be united in making fun of me. Which meant the chicken jokes would be next...

“And I was expecting your call,” he added as I pulled the phone back to me. Darla winked and shook her head slowly, while the others stopped laughing and leaned in, curious.

“I assume you have questions. Are any of the band members with you? And Ms. Jennings and Ms. Smithson?”

These motherfuckers I called friends got the same WTF look on their faces, making me grin. Good. Feel the discomfort. Hah.

“We’re all here,” Joe announced. “So what are the terms of this contract?” He pulled out his invitation. “No one is signing on without seeing the actual performance contract.”

“The island’s owner assumed that your astute legal nature would emerge,” the man told Joe. Oh, man. I needed a shovel. This guy was laying it on thick.

And Joe was eating it up. Metaphorically speaking.

“Yes,” was all Joe could choke out, his eyebrows raised, mouth turned in a frown of impressed approval.

“Please refer to your personal email account, Mr. Ross, and you will find a copy of the proposed contract. In fact, Misters McCarthy, Hinton, and Connor will find the same, and Ms. Jennings’ contract is quite different.”

All of them checked their phones, then squinted, reading quietly. I couldn’t because I’d lose my connection, and Amy surveyed the room, looking awkward.

“Ms. Smithson,” the voice said soothingly, “I assure you we have included you and you are most welcome as Mr. Hinton’s guest.”

A shy smile was all she could muster as Darla avoided eye contact with her. Bad blood between them would be wicked awful. They weren’t exactly best friends, but they got along well, and it made being in the band easier. Chicks complicated everything. Chicks in a fight with each other made life a living hell.

Especially band girlfriends.

Sam reached out and squeezed Amy’s hand gently, though his eyes never left the phone. Funny how a big break like this invitation—and realizing it was *real*—could cut short all the negativity and invoke wonder.

“I trust you would like to have your band’s lawyer look this over,” the voice said.

Band’s lawyer? We didn’t even have a band *pencil case*, much less a lawyer. Most of our performances had contracts made of handshakes and promises of free beer and a percentage of the cash taken at the door.

“We will have our counsel review it,” Joe said, smooth as freshly cleaned ice at the Winter Olympics.

“Very well. May I mark your group as a tentative ‘yes’? It will make travel arrangements

easier to initiate.”

Six sets of eyes—if you included Joe’s on screen—looked back and forth among the crowd, like a really fucked-up version of *The Brady Bunch*. You know, the opening scene where they’re in that nine-square box and look at each other?

If the issue weren’t so serious I’d have burst into laughter. Darla put her hand on my knee and I could feel her shaking. The gravity of being handed our big break was so strong, so weighty, I could taste it in my throat, threatening to choke me. We were an eclectic bunch, a ragtag bundle of people with different worldviews, financial woes, traumas and joys, and we had one thing in common:

This was one badass invitation to start the rest of our life.

“Yes,” we said in unison.

Darla

“Very well, then,” said the man who sounded like Jeeves the Butler, or the guy from that old sitcom Mama liked to watch. *Mr. Belvedere*. Only the man on the phone sounded like what I imagined was the European version of Christian Grey. I could close my eyes and conjure up the cashmere suit, tailored just so. The fine leather shoes. Cuff links that cost more than my trailer. Hell, more than Uncle Mike’s semi.

You could hear money in his voice. What was that like, to live in such luxury? To sound like you had crisp hundred-dollar bills coming through your pipes? Must be nice.

I looked down at my invitation. Five grand. That would buy a lot of diabetes testing strips and some nice pipes of a very different kind for Mama.

A quick glance at Sam told me he was thinking his own version of my thoughts. We were a pair, similar in some ways. Nobody had beaten my body like poor Sam had been crushed by his preacher dad, but I knew a little something—a *lot* something—about scraping by to make it through the day fed and not broken.

His face was alive in a way I only saw when he looked at Amy.

“You will each receive a new envelope within the next few days.” *AHN-vuh-lope* was how he said the word. It made my pulse race just from the feel of how cultured and nuanced that word was, like how Trevor said *RAH-ther* (rhymes with father) and *AWWWnt* (rhymes with font) and not *rather* (rhymes with lather) and *aunt* (rhymes with ant).

Like you could think yourself into a higher level of sophistication by speaking a certain way.

Then again, I could think myself into all sorts of layers of being by saying certain words, like leaning into Trevor and whispering softly: “All this talk about islands and money is making me horny. You interested in fucking a woman who’s been invited to manage this amazing, breakout rock band? I hear she’s one awesome lay.”

Sam whispered something in Amy’s ear and I got the distinct impression that Trevor wasn’t the only guy in the room whose pole was about to be encased.

“Mr. Connor, would you please change the telephone settings from speakerphone so I may finish this call with you?” the voice asked, and Trevor gave me a jaunty grin, his hand taking mine and putting it on his rock-hard erection. His naked cock still looked like a piece of carved marble, but now I knew its intricacies well, and there was this sweet spot that I stroked just the right way and that made him....

Gasp. He stood quickly. Liam’s eyes darted to us, then to Sam and Amy, who were now kissing, and he rolled his eyes. Picking up the tablet, he said to Joe, “Everyone’s pairing off, so

that leaves you and me. Let me go find that pussy pocket attachment and you can give me a blowjob.”

“Just turn the camera on yourself and you can blow yourself. Give me Darla now.”

Trevor finished up with the island dude while Joe’s face softened as I took the tablet from Liam, who waved without effect as he slipped out of the apartment, clutching his envelope.

Joe’s eyebrows lifted with a look of tentative joy on his beleaguered face, like a kid with the stomach flu on Christmas morning. You’re puking your guts out, but hey! Santa still came!

“I have this damn paper to finish,” he said with a regretful sigh. “Or I’d—”

“Or you’d get your ass on a train back here so me and Trevor can playact that scene with you.”

“What scene?’ His eyes went smoky and confused.

“The one in my head.” My wink made his mouth stretch into that pulse-tripping grin that always made me wet.

This was no different. A light touch on my hip from Trevor told me that nothing would go to waste. My own fingers and the plethora of sex toys that seemed to reproduce in mine and Trevor’s bedside table drawers (helped out by Mama and her crazy winnings) would have to wait.

Right now? It was all about the flesh.

Joe sighed. “Yeah. My paper.”

“Tomorrow!” I said with great enunciation. “One more day.” Trevor’s palm now ate my ass like it was a cheeseburger. He did it out of Joe’s view, which was kind of him, but when his fingers snaked up my inner thigh and began teasing the seam of my jeans, which happened to rest right against my clit, I wettened and reddened at once.

“I—”

Joe stopped himself, and my heart stopped right with his words. Was he about to say...?

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” He kissed his fingers, pressed them against the glass, and smiled.

Trevor grabbed the tablet and planted a big old sloppy kiss on Joe’s face. Tongue and all.

“Ewwww,” me and Joe said in unison.

Click. Trevor shut off the machine just as we turned each other on. The absence of Joe sucked, but you know what sucked even more?

Me. On Trevor. And his mouth was...

“Get a room!” Sam barked. Trev’s hands were unbuttoning my jeans as his fingers rubbed my hot spot, and I was so caught up in the dizzying scent of him and the smell of money and fame (that, apparently, my mind manufactured because neither were in the room right now) that I forgot about Amy and Sam, who looked at us from across the room with twin expressions of disgust.

“Like you’re not about to do the same thing,” Trevor growled, picking me up in his arms. That’s no small feat. His biceps bulged obligingly and he walked with steady strides to his bedroom, his heart thumping in my ear in time to my clit.

All four of us laughed, a soundtrack of happiness to what we’d just experienced, but none of that mattered. The brush of Trevor’s tongue against mine, the parting of our lips to connect, the wet, smooth, luscious taste of him as he set me down on the bed was what mattered.

And Joe. Joe mattered. But right now Joe wasn’t here, so it was Trevor I would take, inside and out, because we were enough. We weren’t *complete*.

But we were enough.

You spend six months with someone, fucking on a regular basis and making love half as

many times over (yes, there is a difference), spending the night at their place and them at yours, and you get a feel for their rhythms. Their deeper core. Who they are and what they like and how a sigh means *yes* and a growl means *hell yes!*

When we pulled away from the first kiss, Trevor's thick wall of muscle nestled in against my softer form; it was like we were meant to be like this—not because we were hot for each other but because we'd *found* each other.

The finding is the hardest part. You spend so much of your time seeking that you forget the in-between parts matter.

Or do they?

Because I didn't need an invitation to some island resort to be happy.

Everything I needed was kissing my neck right now, stroking my wet clit under my open jeans and panties, and finishing up the last paper for the law school semester.

Both of them were everything I needed.

But, by God, right now I was so swollen and excited and filled with lust for Trevor that I was about to go all praying mantis on him and eat him after I fucked him silly.

The glide of his smooth fingers over my sensitive folds made a mad rush of warmth pulse through my body and brain. Needing to touch him, I reached down to find him erect and throbbing, the veins I'd memorized thick and at the ready. His sweatpants slid off easily, freeing him, and my hand closed around his shaft. My touch made him gasp.

There was no better sound on earth than the husky rasp of a man responding to your touch. Yours and yours alone.

He ripped my jeans and panties off in a motion so controlled and yet swift that I'd have thought he did that for a living. Stripped women down bare so they could be ravaged. Ravished. At this point I didn't care much which one he did to me, as long as his hands and mouth and cock touched me somewhere.

Our eyes met as he kissed his way down from my collarbone, mouth teasing my rosebud nipples that went tight nearly at just the sight of him, now stripped down bare, our shirts a torn afterthought. What had I done to deserve this?

And how could I do it again? If God had given me Trevor and Joe for some past blessed behavior, I wanted a manual to follow in my future lifetimes so I could know nothing but this throughout all eternity.

And then an infinite set of nerve endings all began to sing at the very end of Trevor's fingertips and tongue, his eyes heavy and lidded, turning down and breaking away, fingers parting my wet folds to come home to the very part of me that cried out his name in supplication and pure pleasure.

That tongue should win a Grammy (of course). An Academy Award. A Golden Globe. Especially a People's Choice Award. Someone needed to create a category for Tongue Most Likely to Be...and I'd nominate Trevor every year for the rest of my life.

My hands never knew what to do when he was turning me inside out, making me twist and gasp his name like it would keep me grounded as he licked and stroked me high into the heavens, making my arms ache, my neck tight with pent-up release, my belly taut with a deeper, core orgasm that wanted him in me so he could touch every second of it as it unfurled.

"You like that?" he murmured from between my legs, one hand revealing my aching clit to him, the other taunting one pert nipple.

"I love it," I whispered, almost saying "you" instead of "it," taken out of the moment by my hesitation.

And then Trevor brought me firmly back in as he stopped, making me whimper.

“Please?” I begged. My climax was right there, standing on the barest of ledge rock on an enormous cliff, almost ready to leap but not quite there. If he stopped now, my blue clit would cause a backup worse than a traffic jam after a money truck roll-over on I-270. A snow globe of cash.

“I want you to come for me, but I want you to do it the way we did the last time Joe was here,” he said, surprising me.

“On all fours?” I choked out, even hotter and wetter with the memory. Trevor had made love to me from behind while Joe had been under me, mouth on me, the twin sensations making me come so hard I’d been a rag doll for the next day and slept fourteen hours.

All the way through the new *Sons of Anarchy* episode.

Yep—the sex had been *that* good.

“Here,” Trevor said, throwing a pile of pillows to the head of the bed and gently nudging me into place. He reached for the bedside table and pulled out something unfamiliar.

“What are you doing to me, Trevor Connor?” I said in a deep, throaty voice. This was inventive. I liked inventive.

Hell, I liked orgasms, period, so whatever he was about to do was just fine.

But good God, man, *do* it.

“Close your eyes.”

Oh. This was getting even better. I did as told and then—

“You have the best ass on the planet,” he murmured in my right ear as he leaned over me, the head of his cock pressing gently into my folds, the heat of his muscled belly resting hard against my curves.

“You say the most amazing things,” I whispered back, wet and pumped for him, my brain pulsing now like my nether regions. My belly hot and in need of release.

The stroking began then, a soft lapping that felt all too much like a tongue against my wetness. As Trevor began doing something to make that happen just below my clit, he eased himself into me, inch by inch, my pussy walls clenching down—fast—so ready.

So needy.

“What is that?” I asked, reaching down.

“Uh uh. No touching!” he ordered. A steely tone in my Trevor’s voice made a zing shoot through me. *Oooh*. He was being the master. I loved this game.

“This is Joe,” he said softly, stroking that...*thing*...up from where the top of his cock entered me to my clit, the maddening rush of restraint fleeing my body so fast.

The orgasm slammed me hard, my breath catching as I flooded into the moans and cries that normally took so long to elicit from me. Trevor began to hammer me hard, long, deep strokes exactly what I needed as his thighs tightened, and I knew he was aching close, too.

“God, Trevor, I—” Words failed me as he somehow maintained those dizzying strokes on my clit, so like Joe’s tongue, and still pumped from behind, using the exact right angle to make me insane. Thrashing, I let go entirely, my mind running off with my sense of propriety as I became primal, my communing with Trevor so basic and animalistic it made me cry out with the sheer joy of connection.

And because fucking felt so soothingly good.

We were on top of the world, wet smacking noises and complete abandon all making us dance with our bodies, and Trevor came in a rush. Hot pushes combined with a full-body tensing. Then hands that dug into my hips as he picked up the tempo at the end told me he was

finishing, the strokes becoming long and drawn out as he shuddered, then leaned against me, chest to my back.

The strokes on my clit stopped. The air was full of our warmth, our release, our panting and gasps as we came back to center.

Center is soooo overrated.

“What’s the name of that island? The guy on the phone didn’t say, did he?”

Trevor smiled nice and wide, a Cheshire Cat grin that I could feel deep inside me. “Oh, yes, he did.” He just shook his head slightly and chuckled.

I smacked him on the chest as he drew out the suspense. “C’mon! What is it?”

After taking a deep breath and frowning just enough to look a little bewildered, then intrigued, he said just one word:

“Eden.”

Chapter Four

Joe

I managed, through sheer force of will and a snort of crushed ADHD meds, to get that final paper in on time, and here I was, at Logan Airport with the motley crew, getting ready to board our plane for Miami.

The journey would then continue with a private plane to the island. The contract had checked out, and we hadn't been asked for a penny for the travel arrangements. They'd even sent up pre-paid Visa cards for incidentals and meals. One slick operation. Darla couldn't stop squealing about how it was raining money from *Fantasy Island*, and while I'd thought she was a bit gauche about it, over time it started to look like she was right.

And, besides—gauche was good when it made you smile. I hadn't seen her this happy since the first time she'd seen us perform after we convinced her to move out to Boston. Magic. She looked like magic personified, as if a muse had come forward in time from ancient Greece and arrived in a seedy downtown bar by the colleges, crazy-wild hair and bright green eyes full of nothing but...

Shit.

I almost said "love," didn't I?

I was sunk.

I'd only been home for four days, and with Christmas coming, time was tight. After two days of hot monkey sex so frequent and hard I had chafing marks on my dick that spelled out "SOS," the day of travel was a relief. At least Darla couldn't hump me on a plane.

Hm.

Wait.

The Mile-High Club hadn't occurred to me.

Bzzz. Fuck. That had to be my mom again. Learning to ignore her had become like a second full-time stint for me, an education of sorts that began with not answering her texts. I was so close to blocking her, but doing so meant she'd block me.

From money.

I put up with it, but I was getting so desperate. \$10,000 was a way to buy my independence a little. Just a little. If this gig turned into more gigs, or a tour, then I'd have an excuse to quit...er, take a leave of absence from law school and be financially independent.

Win-win.

Add in a Mile-High Club stint with Darla and make that win-fucking-win.

You'll be home for Christmas, right? Mom asked for, oh, the umpteenth time.

Not if my plane crashes, I texted back.

My phone rang. I ignored it. Three calls later and the TSA dude started glaring at me. We were in line and Darla and Trevor were arguing about whether some football player who trash talked a team was justified or not.

I finally relented and picked up the phone. "Mom?" I made fake sounds like the line was breaking up. "—can't—you—"

"That doesn't work on me anymore, you faker," she said in that tight tone reserved for being pissed. "Don't make jokes about dying. Please. That plane joke made me reach for a Xanax."

The weather report made her reach for a Xanax. Starbucks running out of peppermint lattes

made her reach for a Xanax. When everything made her turn to the twenty-first-century version of Mother's Little Helper, why not throw in a morbid plane-crash joke?

"If my plane crashes, will you stop texting me?" I got the evil eye from a TSA agent. And then found ten more of them lasered in on me.

"Ixnay on the ayn-play ash-cray okes-jay," Darla said in the worst pig Latin attempt *ever*.

A man standing behind us wearing a University of Michigan sweatshirt, salt-and-pepper hair thick and wavy, whispered to his blond wife, "Is she speaking Arabic?" The alarm in his voice was more fury than fear. My gut tightened and I set my bag down, Mom's tinny voice fading into the background as I took a good look at the couple, sensing trouble.

She looked me up and down, a cougar look in her eyes, heavy makeup covering wrinkles and bringing out crystal-blue eyes that were predatory. "He looks dark enough to be an Arab," she whispered, pronouncing the last word like *AY-rab*.

"I'm an American," I assured her. "Born and raised in Boston. I have relatives who came over on the *Mayflower*."

The woman's eyes lit up. "We were there last week. Lovely little seaside town with a wonderful cafe and that little natural foods and soap store—"

"Then what about *her*?" the husband said, flinging a thumb toward Darla.

"I know you're too stupid to know the difference between pig Latin and Arabic," Darla said, "because anyone who roots for Michigan over the Buckeyes must be." Darla's eyes were glaring with such intent at the front of the guy's shirt I thought she was trying to make it spontaneously combust through sheer force of will. Reminded me not to piss her off or I'd find my chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

Caused by her eyes.

"Joey!" My mom's voice came over the phone as I watched the brewing war, my lovely blond, unruly woman taking on these Midwesterners who looked at us with confusion. What did they see?

"Gotta go, Mom. No plane crashes. No worries, and no more phone calls and texts! See you December 23." Click. I ended the call and turned the fucking phone off, like pinching an umbilical cord.

"Can we get through one public event without having an altercation?" Trevor asked, his arm stretching around Darla as he tried to smooth things out. They were both blond, Trevor tall and muscled next to Darla's lush figure, the two of them more comfortable with each other after my semester of living apart. He was such an opportunist. *I* wanted to be the one touching her.

Starved for more, I'd been interested less in sex (shut up) this past few days and more in just being together. The rush of the trip, the planning, practicing our gig routine, and being treated like a stud during a mare's time in heat left me no room to breathe. In fact, this was the first time since August where I felt like I owned my own body and mind.

And now a Wolverine fan was yelling at my woman.

"You know how you find Ohio from Michigan? Go south until you smell it and east until you step in it."

"That's a West Virginia joke, you jackass," Darla shot back. The line began to move and we all kicked our duffle bags accordingly. Instruments had been checked when we got to the airport.

"Ohio, West Virginia. Potato, potah-to...."

"Are we seriously standing in front of a TSA agent who could have us getting prostate exams instead of luggage exams in three seconds flat, arguing over which state in flyover land is less shitty than the other?" I asked.

“You ever been to Michigan, son?” the man asked me.

“No.”

“Been to Ohio?”

I couldn’t help but crack a nostalgic grin. “Yes.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said, shaking his head with a sigh.

Darla held up a palm. “I am-yay un-day ith-way is-ay onversation-cay.”

Amy started snickering. Then Sam.

“Aitor-trays!” Darla hissed.

A white-shirted TSA agent came over to us, sending a zing of fear from the base of my throat down to my balls. The only thing that could fuck up this trip was, well...

Happening right before my eyes.

Thank God I’d scrapped my plan to bring some outstanding recreational hallucinogenics with me. Last time I flew I’d managed it, but this time I’d decided to play it safe.

Darla’s big mouth, though...

“And if anyone’s giving Joe a prostate exam today, it’ll be me,” Darla declared in a voice that was just loud enough to make people three lines over turn and cringe. “A semester apart gives me the right.”

Snickers turned to groans of disgust. “Oh, man,” Sam whispered, while Amy suddenly became very interested in a game of *Candy Crush* on her phone. That’s right. Candy fucking Crush.

Something was off. Darla was on edge and jerky, bouncing like a little kid with three espressos in him, waiting in line to see Santa Claus before heading over for a day at Disney World. A little too excited and overstimulated.

A lick of guilt hit me. Why hadn’t I paid more attention to her? Something was wrong.

Blessedly, the line moved quickly and we made our way to the scanners without incident.

Until Darla.

Darla

Here I was, shoeless and hopeless, overcome by despair and fear, a river of anxiety so toxic running through me, like a Koch Brothers company infesting West Virginia’s water supply.

Because I had a secret Joe and Trevor didn’t know:

I’d never been on a plane in my life.

Stop laughing—when in the hell was I supposed to get on a fucking plane? In between standing behind a counter asking people whether they wanted menthol cigarettes or the 2-for-1 sale on the cheapies and taping plastic sheeting to the trailer’s windows in winter? Seriously. I’d been on a bus. Buses are different.

Buses don’t randomly fall out of the damn sky when they run out of gas.

I knew, in theory, that it was safer to fly than to drive, but that’s like saying, statistically speaking, it’s safer to go find a mother in a crowded mall when you are a kid and get lost. With my luck, I’d go find Andrea Yates or Susan Smith.

So pardon me for thinking that this whole “aerodynamic transportation” thing was a bit overwhelming. Riding a Greyhound on a class trip to Niagara Falls was about as sophisticated as I got with organized public transportation. Uncle Mike always just figured out a route for me on big rigs if I needed to go somewhere farther than my old car would take me.

The only people I knew back in Peters who flew regularly were the rich kids, and by “rich” I meant mostly the ones whose parents actually owned the businesses the rest of us worked for,

like Mr. Hipkin, the gas station owner. Saw him once or twice a year, but his son was three grades ahead of me in school, and you can bet your ass little Mikey never cleaned up dog vomit in front of the Corn Nuts display.

They went on vacations to Disney World and some island called St. Martin, and sometimes they called it something like “Martin-eek,” which I guess is French for “island in the Caribbean where rich Ohioans brag about going.”

A few of my friends visited grandmas and grandpas far flung from us, and flew to do it, but most of my people took buses, drove cars, and hitchhiked.

Nothin’ wrong with hitchhiking.

But this plane shit? Oh my God. The airport was huge, loud, and overcrowded, and those TSA agents looked at us like their fingers were just itching to do a full-body cavity search and turn into deep-sea-diving digits.

Some voice announced a flight delay to Jamaica and then repeated it in two different languages. A baby in line behind the serpentine queue that stretched out behind us began to cry so hard it gagged, and now this Michigan jackhole was giving me shit while Joe shot me looks that said I was a no-good hick from Hoopieville who needed to just shut up.

This was not how my island getaway was supposed to start.

“Eden” my ass.

Joe was suddenly next in line, while a short, squat woman with long brown hair tucked under a uniform hat waved me over to her. My palms were wet and I could feel sweat beads forming under my arms and—yes—under my breasts. When you have to wear a bra with letters that head into the middle of the alphabet, all kinds of things collect under them. It’s like the Bermuda Triangle of body parts. I could probably tuck a chihuahua in there and still have room for Kanye West’s ego.

The woman had the cold look of someone so thoroughly disgusted with human nature that nothing anyone did mattered; we were all doomed to disappoint. Her eyes flitted between my driver’s license and my plane ticket, then she handed me my papers and pointed to the scanner thing.

And that was when I panicked.

I had forgotten Josie’s advice. Now, Josie had flown plenty of times, and was an old pro at it, so when I confessed my airline virginity she just jumped in and gave me friendly advice, like “Don’t joke about bombs” and “No—seriously, Darla, don’t you make a single fucking joke about a bomb” and “So help me motherfucking God, if I have to come bail you out of federal prison and explain that shit to Aunt Cathy because you couldn’t shut down the short circuit between your funny bone and your mouth, I will make you sponge bathe my mother when she is too old to care for herself.”

Helpful advice like that.

But in addition, she gave me another bit of advice: don’t wear an underwire bra. She said I could set off the metal detectors or something.

To say that Josie is...*under-endowed*...is an understatement. It’s more like if you took two raisins and pinned them in place with those little cocktail toothpicks with pink curlies at the end, you might approximate—why the fuck am I talking about cocktail toothpicks in relation to my aunt’s boobies?

Because it’s better than pissing my pants in front of this scanner machine at Logan. I’m *that* scared.

Joe looked at me from the other side of the scanner and held his hands out like I was a

toddler about to take its first steps. Trevor was behind me, his attention split between the TSA agent's questions and my own, increasingly obvious, dilemma.

And me?

I was frozen in place with the words *Don't say bomb! Don't say bomb! Don't say bomb!* screaming in my head like a crack addict with a butt plug attached to a jackhammer.

"Darla?" Joe called out in that fake-quiet shout where you are trying to get *someone's* attention but not *everyone's* attention.

My big old wide eyes met his and my heart slapped away against my stomach. I was, in a word, dying.

Just...dying.

The room swelled to ten times its real size, and people began to speak through gallons of Karo syrup. My shoes grew and my knees began to shake.

Don't say bomb!

You're wearing an underwire!

Trevor's hands felt like searing-hot fire irons on my arms. "Honey? Darla? You are green." He nudged me forward, three steps or so, to the scanner.

Amy was next. "Darla?" I couldn't say nothin'. Couldn't even croak out the word *bomb*.

Not that I should!

She went through the scanner real slow, looking back at me repeatedly, and then when she was done shot me a thumbs-up.

What was I supposed to say? *Yay you, Amy, for doing that because I can't. I am dying, and fuck your thumb, you overly cheery chipmunk who got an iPhone caught in your twat.*

I get mean when I'm terrified, if you haven't noticed.

A new TSA agent waved me and Trevor over. Joe was talking to Amy in a super-controlled way, both of them talking out the sides of their mouths and sounding like they were Stephen Hawking. It made them both look lawyerly and mature, and I wanted to annihilate them with a flamethrower for having the audacity to be okay while I wasn't.

'Cause I was dying.

"You're ice cold, too," Trevor said in a voice of such compassion I would have wept if more than three brain cells were working.

But all three of them rattling around in my head were devoted to making sure I didn't say *bomb!*

Finally, the TSA agent, a balding man who was built like my Uncle Mike but who had the cynical scowl of of a big-budget action movie villain, called out to me and Trevor.

"You need to proceed," he said with a sneer, like it was so easy, like I could just take a step forward.

Trevor even kicked the backs of my heels a bit, as if I were Colin Mochrie or Brad Sherwood in an improv skit gone maniacally wrong, but all it did was injure my achilles heel and make me want to punch him.

"Do something," he hissed, no longer compassionate now that his tender ass was in jeopardy of being made sweet, sweet love to by an un-lubricated silicone glove covering the hand of a government worker who made \$17 an hour.

So I did. As Trevor went up to that big, *Star Trek*-like beast of a machine, I reached my hands behind my back and unhooked my bra.

That's right.

My bra.

Don't ask me why, but the part of my mind that wasn't screaming *Don't say bomb!* was telling me *Take off the underwire*. My left hand snaked under my right shirtsleeve and slipped that arm out of the bra, then ditto with the left, the long string of bra coming out, unfastened, through my left sleeve.

A distant set of catcalls from people in the security line reached my ears as blood pounded through me, my eyes now finding a gawking Joe, Trevor giving me a WTF look, and Amy shooting me that chipmunky thumbs-up.

My legs decided to work again, and I got one of those bins and threw my bra in it, nipples free and rubbing against the thin cotton of my shirt, poking out hard and ready for a fight. Most people think you go into one of two states when you're scared: fight or flight.

But there's a third. It's *freeze*. Fight, flight, or freeze—and I'd frozen, all right. So had my nipples, because going around in a thin cotton t-shirt in mid-December in Boston would make any nipples stand at attention. The girls were tight.

"Does that bra have a bomb in it?" Mr. Asshole Wolverine whispered to his wife, one scanner over, and then I watched three TSA agents whisk him away, his wife pleading after them, saying, "Harold, I told you not to say *bomb!*"

And then I was being beamed up to Planet Starlac as the second lieutenant in the *Star Trek* mission for this episode. Light flashed before my eyes and I saw my skin dissolve into the molecules in motion, neutrons and electrons floating fast in patterns of solid matter and then an amorphous, twisted realignment of the essence of Darla.

Okay. Not really. The scanner did its job, some bureaucrat got to see a blobby image of my blobby nakedness and deem me not unfit for plane travel, and then they made me turn around and let me out to get my bra and stuff.

It was sure as hell easier than I thought, and less invasive than having my locker searched back in high school during one of those "random" drug searches the principal was always organizing, until he was arrested for being the ringleader of a massive pill operation that stretched from Detroit to Miami.

Joe gave me the hairy eyeball.

"You took your bra off in *public*? Why?"

If I opened my mouth I knew I would scream *Don't say bomb!* so I just shook my head, gathered my things, and marched through the first door my half-blind eyes saw.

To find a Wolverine getting a rectal exam.

Okay, that didn't happen either, but it would have been a weird kind of coincidence, huh?

Instead, I walked into the men's room. Just saw a few peens and a lot of guys with really bad aim. A rough hand pinched hard into a spot beneath my shoulder, and finally I found my voice.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Get out of the men's room," Joe said through gritted teeth. Fuming. He was fuming, and all I could think was:

Don't say bomb!

Trevor

My shoe came untied and I'd bent down to fix it when a very warm, friendly palm settled on one ass cheek and squeezed.

Because I was facing the men's room Darla had mistakenly stumbled into and had seen Joe rush in after her, ice water ran through me at the touch. That wasn't Darla's hand. No woman

had touched me like that since Darla, and it made me deeply uncomfortable.

On its own, the discomfort was odd, because being handled by women had been part of my life for enough years that it shouldn't feel so alien. The implications of finding a strange woman's touch chilling, and not thrilling, would have to be processed and dissected later. While it was fine to look at other women, it absolutely was not fine to touch when I'd promised Darla that we were monogamous.

Trinogamous? Is that even a word? Whatever Darla, Joe, and I were, it was just we three.

So who the fuck was grabbing my ass in public?

"Trevor!" squealed a familiar voice. An unpleasantly familiar voice. A *what the fuck is she doing here?* kind of voice.

"Suzy?" Arms went around my neck, which was awkward because she was half standing, half squatting and I was still bent down, hands on my shoelaces. A mouthful of light brown hair that tasted like coconut and chemicals assaulted me.

Joe's ex.

Joe's rabid, stalker ex.

The awkward "hug" ended when I stood abruptly, spitting hair out of my mouth and using my hands to draw a zone around me. A No Suzy Bergen Zone. Because Suzy was, well...

You know the saying "Don't dip your dick in crazy?"

Joe hadn't heard that one before he slept with Suzy, unfortunately. The wide, over-eager brown eyes that met mine with the full force of a woman who stumbles across an opportunity denied her through three court orders, made my gut ache.

Suzy was all those chicks in those crazy bromance comedies who are over-the-top insane rolled into one tight package. With a heaping dose of borderline personality disorder and a voice that made fingernails on a chalkboard sound like Beethoven.

She was hot. I had to give Joe that. And he'd met her during Intro to Sociology his sophomore year, her little model's body all his slobbering cock could notice for the first year or so they dated.

(My cock slobbered here and there for her, though it never dipped a toe in the Crazy Suzy love pool.)

"Trevor! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Flying." Sticking to simple, short sentences was best with Crazy Suzy, because she wasn't going to let you get a word in edgewise, and because she didn't listen anyhow.

Ever.

"Haha, silly!" she squealed, hitting me across my abs with some kind of passport wallet thing. Her voice shot up into an octave only dogs and NSA agents could hear, the squeal making my jaw clench. "Of course you're flying. You wouldn't be at the airport if you weren't!" Furtive glances all around me, and then she asked, "Is Joey with you?"

Just then, Joe and Darla emerged from the men's room, his arm around her shoulders, the two heads huddled together in a conspirators' talk. It made me smile, and that was my mistake.

Suzy turned around, her face aglow with expectation and promise, like a big-game hunter who's spotted an injured elephant.

And then her expression morphed into that of an Orc. An Orc with perfectly applied makeup and a lovely, shimmery tan from a bottle.

A tanned Orc with laser eyes that could kill Darla on sight.

Joe's head was still bent over as Darla giggled, the two walking toward us in that loopy way you walk when you're entwined in another person, feet not quite in sync, hips jutting and jarring

each other. It's fun when you're the one with your arm around your woman, her soft side boob catching your rib and making you hard.

But it's kind of like watching your best friend walk down to his own execution to see him doing it in front of Crazy Suzy, who now looked like she was calculating the tension of the wire she'd need to garrote Darla.

"Joey!" Suzy exclaimed in the Voice of Death. How she dropped three octaves into *Exorcist* pea-soup-scene territory so quickly was a force of nature to admire.

Joe's head snapped up and he caught my eyes for a split second as it registered who was standing next to me.

It was like watching hope die.

"Suzy?" he choked out. Now it was Darla's turn to change expression, those apple cheeks nice and shiny then going slack as Suzy stomped her way to Joe, long, slim, tanned legs in five-inch stilettos click-clacking across the buffed marble floor like gunshots.

Aimed right for Darla's heart.

Joe's pleading look as he let go of Darla and steered himself toward Suzy said—without words—that I needed to man up and help him in no uncertain terms.

I've got your back, I wanted to tell him. That hand on my ass. Just the memory of it made me shudder. Once a man identifies crazy, his body stops responding to it.

Except when drunk. Unfortunately, the dick shuts off in the presence of alcohol and turns into a golden retriever. It finds friends everywhere and loves to stick its nose in every woman's crotch.

(Actually, alcohol isn't always required.)

"Who is that?" Darla asked me, the twist of her neck dangerous and predatory. The hair on my arms stood up, a prickly sensation pouring over all my exposed skin. As Suzy and Darla locked eyes, it was like watching Magneto and Professor X square off, the electricity in the room taking on a taste.

The taste of a cat fight that reached into electromagnetic fields.

"I don't like her," Darla added, the words cold and dead, spoken with such conviction and clarity that I began to imagine random items in the airport levitating. Spinning out of control into a vortex of unimagined dimensions wasn't on our list of things to do in the hour before our plane to Miami boarded.

Sorry. No time for this.

Joe looked like he'd just seen Elijah Wood from *Maniac*. Or wished he had. Maybe having Suzy scalped would be a kinder way to let her live out her remaining moments, because Darla turned away from where Suzy chatted with great animation and fervor as Joe really, truly turned green.

"And who, exactly, is she?" Darla asked with an arch in her voice higher than a runway fashion model's foot in Milan. Her hand shot out and brushed against her braless boob and I froze, completely engrossed by the beauty of her soft roundness, how that arm got to rub up against her breast whenever it wanted, with heedless insouciance, and I wanted to be that upper arm.

Her elbow.

I wanted to be anything but me, Trevor, standing in an airport watching this train wreck unfold before me. We were supposed to be having fun, dammit, and watching Joe get air humped by the words coming out of Suzy's mouth while Darla prepared to turn Suzy into a one-woman human centipede wasn't my idea of frolicking.

Liam, Sam, and Amy walked up behind me, all gawking at Joe and—

“Is that Suzy?” Sam gasped, starting to laugh and then pretending to cough.

“Holy shit!” Liam burst out, letting his laughter come out. He clapped Sam on the shoulder and the two of them turned away, snickering.

“Dude is so fucked,” Sam added as Amy looked at me, bewildered.

“Suzy is...”

“Joe’s ex.”

Joe and I were no stranger to women fighting over us. Especially Joe. He’d been at the center of chick fights for all of college, and most of the band’s life.

Maybe we should have named ourselves Hair Pull.

Something about him drew women to him like moths to a flame. Babies to a breast. Middle-aged women to Benedict Cumberbatch. Sam to his sticks. Liam to pussy. A great dane to a woman’s crotch.

You get the point.

Darla hadn’t met any of our exes, though, and the look of confusion and pure revulsion as she and Suzy sized each other up and found the other deeply wanting made my hands clench.

And then it hit me.

Joe hadn’t told her.

Every relationship has that awkward point where you have to tell each other your innermost thoughts and feelings, and all that touchy-feely crap.

And then there’s your cock’s story. Oh, it has one. The cock has its own biography, and it can be a slim volume stapled and folded in half like a little pamphlet or a three-volume series complete with extensive footnotes. Some books even need to be read while wearing sterile gloves and an air-filter mask.

But our cocks all have a history, and when we get into a new relationship, the dick’s dirty laundry has to be aired.

Joe, though, had kept his stinkiest, most-stained nasty old cloth to himself. And now that old cloth was getting rubbed in his face in an airport terminal between a donut shop and an airport bookstore with a long line of *Fifty Shades* books the backdrop for his comeuppance.

I groaned. Couldn’t help it. My time interpreting and explaining my dick’s adventures hadn’t been exactly fun, but Darla got it. Her pussy had some tales to tell as well, and her history was more Scheherazade than Pope Joan. I mean, my magic number was still larger than hers, but not by much. A finger or two, if we’re counting.

Those stories, I knew, had been told to Joe, because Darla told me she’d told him.

Turned out old Joe had been holding out on her.

“Joe never told you about Suzy,” I said in a hiss of a sigh. My chest ached and my legs were filled with a tight energy that needed to be kicked out.

On Joe’s ass.

“Suzy.” Darla might as well have said, “Shit.”

“Suzy is Joe’s ex,” I started to explain.

“I heard Sam say that. She better be.” I looked at Darla—really looked at her. The anxiety she’d shown in the TSA line was gone. All her focus was on Suzy, which was good. Whatever the fuck had happened back in Government Grope Land was done, and now we had this mess to deal with.

Her chest heaved and her eyes were so narrow and determined, so pinpoint smart, that my cock began to twitch, then slowly rise and make my pants tight.

The power emanating off Darla as she held herself back from marching over to Joe and Suzy showed a possessive side to her, a deep loyalty I knew was there but hadn't been tested yet. Groupies stayed the fuck away from us now, and all Darla had to do was glare at them.

Suzy?

Oh, my big blond beast had just met her match.

"She's his ex, all right. The third restraining order finally took." I knew my words would have to be chosen carefully, but Darla's spitfire made my blood pump through me so hard it all collected in my penis and threatened to be mistaken for the nose of a jet plane.

"Restraining order? Did you say *restraining order*?"

I nodded.

"Cray cray?"

"Yep."

Darla frowned, then rolled her eyes. "I bet she *still* got to meet Joe's parents."

Ouch. I winced. Not that I could say much. My parents still hadn't met Darla, either, but they at least knew she existed. That made me slightly less of an asshole than Joe, and I'd take it.

I slipped my arm around her waist. Suzy's eyes flicked up and caught the move, and the resulting smile made my balls crawl up and tuck into my ribcage.

She looked at Joe now like he was a plate of tiramisu and she was ten months pregnant.

"The reunion is lovely," Sam said in his slow, quiet, neutral way, "but we need to get to our gate and prepare for the ride."

"I'd miss a plane to watch this," Liam whispered. "It's like the best reality show ever. *Wedding Crashers* meets *Fantasy Island*."

"You should write screenplays," I said. Liam pointed his finger at me like a gun and pretended to fire, then walked off with Sam and Amy toward the gate, the three of them looking back at Joe and Suzy.

I've seen plenty of bored guys in my life. And I've seen Joe bored out of his mind, high as a kite, angry as fuck, terrified beyond belief, and filled with unrestrained glee.

I have never, ever seen him manage eighty percent of those in one look.

Until now.

Darla stepped forward and I grabbed her arm, which she shook off with a terrifying level of anger. Fuck. I needed to step up my game.

"The restraining order must have expired," I explained, calculating the months in my head. Yup. About a month ago. "And it's probably a coincidence—"

"Riiiiiiiggghht." Amy had walked up behind us and now stood right next to Darla, shoulder to shoulder, her head held high and eyes narrowed, like a hawk's. She and Darla traded a look that made my blood run cold and my cock tighten.

Amy did that thing chicks do, where they suck in air through their teeth and then talk in a hushed, low voice while they act like they're not talking. Major turn-on from anyone but Amy.

"Her thighs can't be real," Amy said.

I knew the answer to that one. "Liposuction." Both women looked at me with raised eyebrows, not because they were surprised by my answer, but with twin looks of surprise that I was still there.

Taking the hint, I grabbed my bag and walked over to the water fountain. Amy could pull Darla off Suzy before an ear got ripped off or a nipple bitten. She was tougher than she looked.

But I was still in earshot. Joe needed backup.

"She's plastic. Mommy and Daddy paid a boatload to keep that body going. Spray-on tan

and shoes that cost \$300,” Amy stage whispered to Darla.

“\$300! And she can barely walk in them.” My eyes watched what they critiqued and it made me realize chicks live on a completely different plane from me. All I saw when I looked at Suzy was nice, high tits, athletic legs, and smooth skin.

Nice.

But the crazy eyes negated it all. There was a look in them that said she was as likely to give a guy head while driving down the highway as she was to cut off his penis with an old nail file and fling it out the open window.

Just as Amy was about to explain the \$300 shoes to Darla, Suzy leaped forward and gave Joe a sweet kiss on the cheek. She grabbed her rolling bag and ran off down a slanted hallway to the international section of the airport.

Joe walked toward us, alternating expressions of deep relief and uncertainty.

“So that was Suzy,” he said to Darla as he got closer. “My—”

“Ex.” They said it in unison. Amy and Darla folded their arms over their chests simultaneously, shifting their weight onto one hip.

He was so fucked.

Chapter Five

Joe

In the movies, there's this moment when someone—one of those dispensable characters who has a first name but no other meaningful qualities—sees something and has a change in expression that tells the audience that he or she is about to die, and that the entire trajectory of the movie's story line is seconds away from changing.

Forever.

Irrevocably.

Meet that moment in my life. Right here. Right now.

Suzy made me want that bus to take me out, that sniper to put a shot through my brain, for that *deus ex machina* to rip into the scene and make the problem of Suzy, and the detonation of Darla, end with a bang that took me out of the picture.

Staying in the picture was a kind of torture.

Like being in *Saw 12*.

Her entire being gave me hives. Clinical case of actual hives. A release of histamine in my body was the reaction to seeing those pert tits, those tight little calves that used to wrap around my waist as she squealed my name when I made her come, her manicured fingers with that perfect, sophisticated shade of tannish-pink that had a name, like Sun-kissed Lips, that my mother would know if Suzy were to meet her for lunch at a vegan restaurant in the Back Bay and they traded fashion tips.

And the nail polish would be cruelty-free, vegan, fair trade, and tested only on fully consenting disabled little people who were undergoing sex-change operations.

In Darfur.

Suzy's eyes had gripped me the same way her lean, petite little cheerleader's ass made my dick swell. Painfully and with total engagement.

I could feel Darla's eyes burning through us, like Godzilla, except with less control. Trevor could keep her contained, but why? There was nothing to worry about. Nothing to be jealous about.

And that tiny detail where I never told her that I'd dumped Suzy a few months before I came to Ohio, and that it had taken the full strength of the Massachusetts court system to get her to stop stalking and sexting?

Details. Just details. I was *going* to tell her.

Eventually.

Eventually just crept up on me in an unexpected place and my mind drifted to the calendar...yep. Ten days after the last RO expired. Fuck. I'd been too busy with finals to think about it.

Those honey-brown eyes ate me up, the crazy that lived at the edges of her irises and multiplied like maggots sending a tingle of terror into the root of my cock.

Part of my desire to go into law was Suzy. No, seriously. You call the police a few times and then fill out restraining-order paperwork and you realize how important knowing your legal shit really is.

As long as we were still fucking and I showed up to her sorority parties, she didn't care what I did with my time. But then my time became her time. Go more than five minutes without answering a text? I'd get eight voicemails in ten minutes.

Not answer the voicemails? All my friends would be simul-texted.

None of them answered? She'd start writing desperate wall posts on Facebook, like *OMG, Joe's hurt! He's not answering his phone! If anyone's seen him please get back 2 me!*

My mom was whipped into a frenzy every. Fucking. Time.

And I was just *whipped*.

That alone wasn't enough to stop slipping it to that piece of tanned Aphrodite who was the perfect complement to my arm, turning heads and gaining nods of approval. It was when she turned into Medusa that I realized it had to end.

"I'll never give you back your ring," Suzy had whispered as she hugged me just now in the airport, her voice sending tentacles of revulsion down my body, one entwining perfectly between my balls, squeezing. Breaking up with her had been my only option, and while I knew it would be hard, I needed to do it.

A man's oxygen is a limited enough resource when he's trying to move up in the world, and the world already had me by the throat. Half the time my mom had me by the balls, and Suzy had my—

"I told you, Suzy, that you can keep it—"

Here we were, less than an hour before we were about to embark on a huge step forward in climbing up an unconventional ladder, one with different checklists, but one that required no less ambition than law school.

And goddamned Suzy had to rear her Medusa head, begging me to come back.

Except the look in her eyes wasn't one of contrition or pleading.

It was one of determination.

"Because you still want me to marry you," she said in an Annie Wilkes voice, from that creepy movie my mom made me watch on cable one time when I was thirteen.

Suzy was totally the type to hide a sledgehammer in her makeup bag.

"No, because I'm done, and because I'll never marry you and it means more to you than it does to me." The psychologist I saw at our college told me that becoming a "gray blob" was the best approach when dealing with a psycho stalker...er, person with a character disorder.

But with a face like mine, trying to become a "gray blob" was like asking Darla to stop screaming during sex, like she was trying out for a porno.

Not possible.

"I know you need me to prove myself to you, Joe," Suzy said breathlessly.

"No I don't." Robotic. Stoic. Blob.

You know the most dangerous time for any man in college who is dating? It's a vector. Amount of time dating someone and December break of the senior year. If X = amount of time dating someone and it's over a year, and Y = December break, then Z = expectation of marriage proposal.

By January, Suzy had popped the "question": "We're getting married." It wasn't interrogative.

It was, most decidedly, declarative. She'd told my mother before she told me. The two of them were studying ring patterns when they invited me to coffee that day.

I was just...meat. A fleshbag with good bone structure and a nice ass that would be good arm candy.

Those were my mother's exact words, by the way, as they cackled and pulled out the Tiffany's wedding brochure and discussed the presentation of the bride at the aisle.

"I am still in love with you," Suzy hissed as Lufthansa Airlines made some sort of

announcement about baggage and my arms began to shake, neck raising up like a cat's, balls steady and under control as a chill shot through me.

Thank God I hadn't given her my great-grandma's ring, holding myself back for—what? In the darker parts of my soul I'd restrained myself, knowing that the proposal had been a business transaction of sorts, a move designed to meet the Checklist of Life, like getting into a great college, graduating, going to grad school, getting the right internship...

You get married in there and have the oceanside wedding with three hundred of your parents' closest friends.

A rite of passage, and Suzy had the right (tight) passage. That had turned out to be the crazy tunnel, and when she took a sharp turn into borderline territory, I was a man naked and without a passport in an uncharted land.

"Remember our last night together?" Her pupils had gone inky, so wide they reminded me of black holes. Which they were. My throat tightened and my eyes glanced over and back, seeing Amy and Darla now watching us, probably mocking.

Mocking was good. Anything that kept Darla in a good mood.

Ha.

"I still have the scars," I replied.

Her eyes narrowed in that menacing way that used to make me jump in and calm her. Instead, I stared. Then I realized she wasn't glaring at *me*. Her eyes rested on a point over my shoulder.

"Who's that bitch?" Suzy sneered. She didn't need to clarify. I knew who she meant.

"I only see one bitch here." I couldn't help it. My temper began to show itself, my clothes too intense against my body, eyes widening and brow lowering, the muscles in my jaw working themselves.

That chill turned to a flush of fury.

I was done with this "gray blob" shit.

"I know she can't mean anything to you." Her eyes crawled over Darla's body, head to toe, and I could see the unbridled desire in Suzy's eyes.

To cook Darla's raw boobs in a lovely saute pan with fava beans.

Barely a month into our "engagement" (is it an engagement if you never really agreed?), I'd broken it off.

She'd broken my toe. Stomped on it, with those little Manolo Blahnik spiked heels on shoes that cost more than a week's worth of solid Molly.

The pain hadn't ended there.

No, that took the last night we were together. When she'd kidnapped me—

You're laughing.

Go ahead.

I'd woken up in my own bed, chained to the bedposts. Chained. Naked, too, with Suzy's crazy eyes focused not on my dick, where they should have been (because it's a fine specimen), but on the ring I'd asked her to give back the night before.

And the rest is part of a long, sealed document that I'd rather not discuss.

Trevor's not the only one who finds himself naked and in compromising positions.

And wearing a spiked collar.

Right now, though, I didn't want to think or talk about that, because my people—I had people!—were waiting for me, to go on a plane and experience our breakout moment.

A flash of how cold the chilled air had been on my tied-down, exposed flesh ran through

me, making me shiver. Darla's eyebrows went lower, and if they dropped any more they'd be framing her pussy.

My people needed me.

"It's been lovely, Suzy."

"Really?" She shifted so fast back to eager-peppy-cheerleader voice that I felt the air shimmer.

"No. I'm being polite."

And then her face morphed. Rippled. It was extraordinary to watch, because I didn't know human flesh could do that, as if she were a Stepford Wife and some developer ran a few lines of code in her internal software program and made a mood change.

"It was really great to see you, too, Joe," she said in a controlled, pleasant voice, eyes hooded and all sign of the nutjob she really was scrubbed from her, like emotion catalogued and killed off in a debate.

Remarkable.

I admired it.

She still scared the shit out of me, but I admired it.

Standing on tiptoes, she touched my shoulder and I flinched, trying to move back but stumbling and taking a half-step forward, into her body. A gentle peck on the cheek from her made me tense, then step back.

But not before she whispered something in my ear.

Three little words.

"You. Are. Mine."

And with that she was gone with the rat-a-tat-tat of expensive leather shoes on airport floors, the sound melding into the rumbling of wheeled luggage, the whoosh of air-ventilation systems, the *beep beep beep* of golf carts moving the infirm and their luggage, and the sound of Darla's glare.

Oh yes.

It had a sound. Darla managed to invoke synesthesia wherever she roamed when she was angry. Fury had a taste. A glare took on auditory qualities. A wave had an odor.

And right now, that glare screamed a song.

Do you want to die?

"So that was Suzy," I said to Darla as I got closer, knowing I was about to be questioned via the Socratic Method in a manner no law professor at Harvard or Yale could match. "My—"

"Ex." Amy and Darla said it in unison, both folding their arms over their chests simultaneously, shifting their weight onto one hip.

I was so fucked.

Amy cocked one eyebrow and turned to Darla, and their eyes locked. A series of micro-movements took place between them, a language of women that I couldn't even hope to translate. Chick tongue.

Actually, chick tongue could be great if it was—

"You were going to marry someone? Don't you think that at some point in the last, oh, seven months I've been part of your life you could have mentioned that?" Darla was fuming. It made her even hotter. The creeping flush at the tops of her breasts made me hard.

Thinking with my dick got me Suzy.

I needed to pay attention to Darla. Or pretend to pay attention. It didn't matter which one, because she was worked up the way my mom gets when nothing I say matters. She just has to get

it out.

“I wanted to,” I said in that crooning voice I saved for seducing her—it always worked. The flush spread to her cheeks and the pulse in her throat seemed to skip a beat. Nailed it.

Normally that meant I’d get to nail her, but I could tell this one wasn’t blowing over any time soon. Whatever had been wrong with her back at the security gate was still there, too, and she was rattled.

This was crisis management at its finest, and being fresh out of semester projects and only home for four days didn’t help me.

Suzy put me over the top, too.

“You wanted to?” she said, her voice softening. “I wanted to ride Santa’s sleigh over that damn naked scanner machine, but instead I got a squishless mammogram and walked out here to find my boyfriend’s ex-fiancee giving him a kiss.”

“That’s not what—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Darla said quietly, her hands shaking, eyes red-rimmed with tears and the threat of more. Fuck. This I hadn’t planned for. A disappointed, dejected Darla was new to me. Her head tipped down and my gut clenched with something close to guilt.

I should have told her. Why didn’t I tell her? Because I didn’t want to deal with shit like this. We met just as summer started and then she moved out here and summer was amazing and hot and oh...yeah...hot.

Where was I?

“Why didn’t I tell you?”

She sniffed. “Quit using lawyer tactics on me. Repeating the last thing I said and all that shit.”

Huh? She actually *listened* to me when I talked about that? The tightening in my gut got worse. That tugging feeling around my heart was real. This wasn’t the fake guilt I manufactured in a lame attempt to replicate the real guilt people actually felt when they’d disappointed someone. Never capable of being perfect enough for my mom, I’d just figured out a long time ago that what she wanted was a show of guilt. Whether I actually felt something was less important than *acting* like I felt something.

But this was real.

Darla was making something crack inside me.

And the only way to make it go away was to use the truth.

“I didn’t tell you,” I said as I reached for her hand and clasped it a little harder than I meant to. Desperation had a way of doing that to you. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know how to explain it. It was surreal.”

“Like finding a naked man wearing only a guitar by the side of the interstate?”

She had me there. “Yeah. Like that.” Her hand was so soft, the back of her palm under the knuckles like warm silk, the pulse of her heart in the pad of her thumb. I blinked and it beat. Blink. Blink.

When had I fallen so fucking hard for someone I wouldn’t have looked at twice—hell, *once*—seven months ago?

When she looked up, her eyes did that thing only Darla could do, where somehow the way they moved told me everything she was feeling. The eyes themselves were a beacon, a light inviting me to come on an intense journey with her into our hearts and bodies.

And I was hard. Just like that.

All thoughts of Suzy vanquished, what was left in me was a big, roaring train full of want

and hope aimed straight at this crooked-smiled, bright-eyed, curvy woman wearing no bra and looking like the most beautiful, vulnerable, challenging person in the world.

Who had my heart and dick handcuffed to her hip.

Voluntarily.

I leaned down and brushed her golden hair away from her jaw, those knowing eyes finding mine. I heard the guys urging us to get our asses in gear, something about boarding, and then Amy's beseeching tone, but when my lips found Darla's it was all I could do not to take her right there, the world disappearing as my arms wrapped around her, the hair on my forearms brushing under her long, frizzy waves, buried in her the way I inhaled and found myself encased by her entire being.

As it should be.

She grounded me. Made my feet feel like I wasn't always buzzing, needing to run off to do the Next Thing that someone expected of me, to tap dance on top of a rolling stone engulfed in flames. With Darla I could exhale. Then inhale. Smile. Then really smile.

Sappy, huh?

Suck it. You're not the one who gets to feel her very real body pressed against yours, to breathe in her essence, to know that she is rock solid in her devotion and loyalty to you. Nothing replaces that. Not one damn thing in this world can, because the fakery and pretension that I subscribe to won't let it.

She makes me believe that the Suzys and Moms of the world are the *pretend*, and that my own doubt about them is *truth*.

Which is why she's so damn dangerous, and why I pried my lips from hers.

"Damn it! They're right. We're going to miss the plane if we keep this up." I grabbed her hand and my bag and started to move us toward the gate.

Flustered, all she did was stand there, arm pulled nearly out of its socket by me. Darla looked like a deer stuck in headlights, and not a deer wearing a guitar.

And only a guitar.

She broke the statue thing she was doing and took off like a shot, lumbering through and weaving between people like she was on roller skates. Gave me a sweet view of her ass, too.

And I was still hard.

Darla

Just when I damn near got to knock my brain out of this anxious loop-de-loop it was doing about being afraid of flying, I had to run. Joe gave me the perfect fucking excuse to get out of my own head: his fiancée.

FEE-ON-SAY. Like Beyonce, only without the Hulk face while dancing. Fiancée. He put a ring on that toothpick-legged chick with the useless shoes and a bitchface that could give Tori Spelling a run for her money.

We got to the counter thingy in front of the gate where we were supposed to get on the plane, the unnecessary glare from an uptight airline employee ratcheting up my overall state like someone falling off their roof and snapping a femur after getting attacked by a swarm of bees.

I just didn't need that shit at that exact moment.

"You're cleared to board," said the perfectly coiffed woman with hazel eyes and drawn-on eyebrows, her lips a shade of red that you only found on mail-order-bride websites from Russia.

"Thank you!" Joe and I said in unison, looking around. No Trevor, Sam, Liam, or Amy.

Hope they boarded already.

Oh—and no Suzy.

FEE-ON-SAY. Joe almost married the woman. That meant love, right? Men don't put a ring on it if they don't intend to declare themselves before a justice of the peace or the president of Harvard or whoever the fuck performs weddings out here in Fancyland.

Joe almost made Chicken Legs his forever woman.

And never said one single word about her to me.

So, if you are with someone for seven months, and you're trying to figure out whether you're in love, you talk about your past loves, right? Me and Trevor had. He knew all the nitty-gritty about Davey, the atrocious car-window speller, and the other mumblety-mumblety number of guys I'd been with. And that one girl.

Maybe. We were seventeen and I had a lot of peach and peppermint liqueur, so my recollection of that night is hazy. I do know there was a kiss...

"What are you thinking about?" Joe asked sweetly, which made all my sensors go off and scream like DEFCON 9000. Because Joe didn't *do* sweet.

And no straight man ever, *ever* asks a woman what she's thinking. It would be like a man having a period or suddenly thinking Josh Groban is the best singer *ever*, or begging to rent *The Notebook* and watch it. Nuh-uh.

"I am thinking that you are trying to deflect me by going all gooey-metrosexual man on me and that shit ain't gonna work." I handed my boarding pass to a woman who used a handheld scanner on it. *Beep!* And then she handed the paper back and did the same with Joe's.

But she didn't tell me what to do next, and I stared at a doorway that looked like the tunnel to hell. A gaping maw without teeth, and a whooshing sound with the distinct scent of cooked rubber and air freshener. My stomach roiled.

Wasn't this all enough already? Mama's diabetes problems, Joe being gone and coming back, juggling his jealousy and Trevor's needs, adjusting to my new, weird job, and then this invitation to a place called "Eden"—and to top it off, Joe's ex-fiancee shows up and there's some sort of kinky ex-stalkerchick element there that I'm supposed to process?

Hello! Too much. Overload. Not okay. My motherboard just fritzed out as I stood there.

I couldn't move. Joe bumped into me as he tried to go, and whispered, "Darla. Go through the door to board."

Silence. My brain just...wandered off. Like an American hockey player in the finals against Canada at the Olympics.

"Darla," he said more urgently. People were looking at us. I didn't care. My brain was picking daisies in the sunlight. My brain was a little girl dressed in a bee costume in a field of flowers. My brain was a teenage singer dressed in a bear costume licking a rope. My brain had done gone over.

Joe grabbed my upper arm and yanked me out of the way. Everything smelled like chemicals, like structure and oppression and fear and control. I couldn't go down that hallway. There Be Dragons, or something like that.

Why couldn't we just take a bus and then a nice ferry to the island?

"What is wrong with you?" Now his voice was a blend of anger and genuine concern. Nice of Joe to summon that from the depths of that cold little heart.

Truth. My brain decided to let my mouth open and dump out the truth.

"I hate you and Trevor's better in bed than you."

OKAY. NOT TRUE. But apparently my brain had decided that it was better to piss him off than to admit my vulnerability. My brain can be stupid like that. It's part Justin Bieber in an

M&M factory with a tricked-out forklift made from a Hummer. With a flamethrower attachment.

“I love you, too, dear,” he said. It felt like a smack in the face, but he said it with a smile. Our eyes locked. My heart slammed in my chest. The air smelled like flowers and hope and freedom. Nothing but Joe was here, and he reached for my hand and slipped something in it.

A ring?

Nope. A pill.

“Swallow this. You clearly have a problem with flying,” he added, his voice clinical and nonchalant, as if the “I love you” meant nothing. Apparently it hadn’t. It was a joke to him, said as a joke and meant as a joke, and dammit, that’s how I’d have to take it, too.

My head pounded in a jagged off-beat, out of sync with my heart. I dry-swallowed it and grabbed my bag, following him into that tunnel. Then my brain kicked back in and I asked:

“What was that you just gave me?”

“It’s like a Valium. Just don’t drink any alcohol on the plane and you’ll be fine. What do you normally take when you fly?”

See? He assumed I’d flown before. And if I admitted I never had, it would become another thing that separated me from Trevor and Joe. I’d be poor, underprivileged Darla who didn’t know anything about the world, and I was sick of that. So I played along.

“I don’t take anything.” Which was technically true.

“Nothing? I’d think for anxiety like you have—”

The floor was a series of sections with thick edges, covered with a rolling black industrial carpet that smelled like rotten oil. The air was pumped through by some kind of fan and a jumbled pile of hastily dropped strollers greeted my view as we came around a slight curve. The stewardess looked like a warden.

“I don’t have anxiety!” I said.

He laughed, that low, comfortable sound people make when they’ve been together a while and know each other. “If you don’t have anxiety, then I don’t have ambition.”

Fair enough. I let it slide because why argue when you’re boarding the plane to your own death? At least I’d get a bag of peanuts and a watered-down cup of pop before meeting Satan.

Acting like a mute eight-year-old got me through greeting the stewardess, who seemed to glare at me and speak in words I didn’t understand, but I forged ahead as a nice, low-level glow started to build inside me. She sounded like she was speaking Bulgarian.

The inside of the plane looked exactly like it did in the movies and on television, except all the seats seemed to be designed for people with twelve-inch asses. I possess an ass that is distinctly not in the twelve-inch range. Not even close. Hell, I think I slithered out of my mama’s body with an ass bigger than that. When we got to our row, Trevor was already there, his brow creased with worry.

He looked hot.

And I creased my brow, too, and said, “You don’t think my ass can fit in any of these seats either, do you? Don’t worry. I’m sure they have an ass crowbar somewhere here.”

Someone in the row ahead of us chuckled and I fell in love.

“Your ass is fine,” Trevor said, shooting Joe a look that I didn’t understand, because my hands had decided to defect from the rest of my body. It was kind of nice, being handless and all. Suddenly, the plane seemed so loving. I wanted to just start singing that old ’70s Coca-Cola commercial song.

So I did.

Trevor un-clicked his seatbelt and jumped up. He’d taken the aisle seat, and Joe whispered

furiously in his ear, the two arguing while I looked around the plane for my hands. Detachable hands.

“Detachable penis,” I began to sing, and that caught Liam’s and Sam’s attention. A big old red head of hair turned around and looked at me with more expression than I knew Sam was capable of making with that beautiful face.

“You our new lead singer?” he asked. Amy giggled.

“I hear you, Amy. How’s your phone?”

She went silent.

And then a wave of fear poured over me. Where would I sit? My ass was too juicy to squeeze between my men. The only way this would work would be to reduce the amount of stuff that I had to fit in that itty-bitty seat, and I couldn’t cut off chunks of my own flesh.

So I came upon a lovely solution as I began to panic in earnest.

My clothes had to go. Any layer that added bulk to my body was now non-essential. While Joe and Trevor hissed at each other like they were speaking in Parseltongue, I began to unbutton my jeans. Joe caught me out of the corner of his eye and smacked Trevor’s shoulder.

“Darla?” Trevor’s hand grabbed mine. Oh my God! My hands were back! I wrenched the one he held away and started clapping. Yup. If you love your hands set them free. If they come back, they’re yours. If they don’t, then they’ll probably end up in the property of some serial killer who uses your skin as a pussy pocket.

Words to live by.

“Pussy pocket hands,” I marveled. Hands. Hands look like five-legged spiders, you know? Spiders. I hate spiders. I began to shake, because holy motherfucking shit, there were spiders attached to the ends of my arms!

“I think the flight is terrifying her,” Joe explained as Trevor made me sit down. He took the window seat, carefully guiding me into the middle, and Joe took the aisle seat, his face smug as a bug in a rug.

Or something like that.

“You’re shivering,” Trevor said, throwing a thin blanket with the airline’s logo on it over my lap.

“Spiders,” I murmured. “Spiders on a motherfucking plane.”

He laughed. “No, that’s snakes on a motherfucking plane.”

“SNAKES?” I screamed. “OH MY GOD, WHERE?”

A few people who were loading their luggage into those bins up top stopped and frowned at us, and Trevor clutched me in his arms, pushing my mouth against his shoulder. “There aren’t any snakes or spiders anywhere, Darla. It’s okay. It’s fine to be a nervous flyer. You’ll be okay.”

“I am not a nervous flyer.”

“That’s what she said when she froze as we boarded,” Joe added, leaning across me to talk to Trevor as if I didn’t exist. As if my hands weren’t spiders. As if he didn’t have a FEE-ON-SAY he’d hidden from me for eleventy billion years.

“No. I didn’t.” I began to giggle. Haha. Secrets. I had one, too.

“Yes, you did.”

“Nope.”

“Do you have to pick a fight with everyone, Joe?” Trevor asked. Ah, his warm body felt so good. Joe reached for my free hand, the other one now inventorying the chest hair that sprinkled the edge of Trevor’s t-shirt. One, two, eleventy.

“But she said—”

“I’ve never been on a plane before,” I blurted out, pleased with myself for keeping such a big secret.

Oh. Wait.

“Never?” they said in unison. Trinison. Quadrison. No—quintison, because Amy, Liam, and Sam must have been listening. Five voices all realizing my secret.

“It’s not like I’m a virgin and you’re all finding out right now,” I declared. Perhaps a little loudly, because people a few rows up laughed.

“But you’re a flying virgin,” Amy said.

“I have never flown. Nope. Lots of people haven’t. I’ll bet this is the first time for one of you.”

Silence.

I stood, my dignity ruined, and now my earlobes done run off with my ego. “Anyone else here on their first flight ever?”

A woman said, “My six-month-old is flying for the first time.”

That made Joe snicker. I sat down, defeated.

“Even the spiders and snakes have flown before,” Trevor said.

“SNAKES!” I screamed, shaking against his warm chest. Joe’s hand squeezed mine and he and Trevor shared some quiet words. Then Trevor peeled me off him, the coolness shocking me. The plane felt so tiny, and the thought of moving up into the clouds with no ground beneath us seemed so stupid.

Stupid. Who goes into the air and has that kind of pride, of thinking you could cheat nature and make humans fly? If we were meant to fly we’d have wings, right? I reached back and caressed Trevor’s shoulder blades. Nope. No wings. He was such an angel, though, that I wouldn’t have been surprised to find some tucked in there.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a smile, voice rumbly and low in that way that always made me wet and hungry.

“Checking for your wings.”

“C’mere, Darla,” Joe said, tugging on my hand. “I think you need to go to the bathroom.”

And you know what? He was right. Because suddenly I had to pee like a racehorse. I stood and looked back at the sea of faces sitting, thirty rows of human fleshbags with feelings and opinions and hopes and dreams and hands that didn’t wander off like lost children at the county fair.

But I sat down instead. “No. You go. I’m fine.”

Joe frowned but said nothing, snaking his way (snakes!) through the aisle back to the End of the World where the plane just stopped. Stopped. Like the edge of the planet.

Trevor stroked my shoulder and hitched his hips up from the seat, lifting his ass.

“You want a blowjob? Here?”

One of the guys ahead of us started choking.

“I’m reaching into my front pocket to get something,” Trevor said slowly, enunciating with great care. And then he pulled out a tiny pill.

With hands that were still attached. He handed it to me and my hand took it. It came back!

He pulled out a bottle of water. “Drink this. It will help calm your anxiety. My mom always gives me one just in case when I fly. I guess when I was a kid I was a real basket case on flights.”

“That must have been so annoying for your mom. To deal with someone anxious, I mean.” I put the pill on my tongue (which had not run off) and swallowed.

He just smiled in response.

“You and Joe are so sweet to help me calm down.”

Trevor put the bottled water in the little flappy thing on the back of Sam’s seat. And then he froze in mid-reach.

“Joe?”

“He gave me a nice pill, too.”

Trevor’s eyes got real wide, like I could swim in them if I wanted to, only I’d need hands to help me push the water aside, the water of Trevor, the lapping ripples of pure sunshine and love inside him that could make its way into my pussy and...

I suddenly needed to pee.

My legs were still there, and when I stood all those fleshbags were there, row after row of men and women and boys and girls, the occasional squawking baby fleshbag in the mix. I smiled nice and big as my not-twelve-inch ass made its way down the long aisle to the bathroom.

Occupied.

Bang bang bang. Didn’t people understand I needed to go? My shirt covered my waistband, but my hands found the button to my jeans undone. Silly Trevor. He must have tried to get in my pants earlier.

“Occupied,” a man’s voice said.

“I can *read!*” I said loudly. And then—click. The door opened, an arm shot out, and I was pulled into a silver-covered room not much bigger than a coffin.

Hey, if you’re headed to hell already, might as well spend some time in a coffin on the way there.

Joe’s mouth crushed mine with the kind of kiss that tells you everything. He wanted me, he wanted my mouth, his hands (attached!) ate up my big old ass, running up under my t-shirt. A groan escaped when he groped my unbra-ed breasts and I groaned, too. Trevor had made my pussy nice and wet by just being Trevor and now Joe was—

What in the hell was Joe doing?

“Want to join the Mile-High Club?” he asked, shuffling his feet, the press of his erection against my thigh the only card I needed to become a member of this exclusive, invitation-only group.

“Hell yes. Sex on a motherfucking plane sure does beat snakes.” Snakes! My head whipped around the room as Joe’s fingers undid my zipper, his hands everywhere, like he’d multiplied them and had them surgically attached to come out whenever he had an erection.

Maybe he had. I couldn’t put anything past Joe.

Oh, how he tasted so fine, like coffee and mint and citrus and man and *yum*. My hands found his cock quickly, somehow figuring out zippers and boxer briefs and the feel of his soft flesh against mine was like ice on fire, like something immortal and naughty being emblazoned into my soul.

He turned me, one finger sliding in my wetness, and I groaned, because Joe had this way. This perfect way of touching me that made me—

“Oh, God,” I whispered. “Right there.” The throbbing made all my fears and shakes and worries go away, and he turned me so my ass faced him, then pulled my jeans down with a frantic need that made me want him more.

“What about a condom?” You’d think my brain, which was more likely to wander off than my hands, wouldn’t worry, but some part of me did.

“Got it.” A kiss on my neck came with the tearing of foil and then he was poised at the tip

of my sweetness and plunged in from behind, his thighs hot against my own, my arms balanced over the toilet seat, my face inches from the flushing warning.

Romantic.

You take what you can get, and in this case I was getting out of my head as Joe was getting into me, and holy fuck as he thrust into me it was like all the cacophony of this plane-ride chaos—of Mama and work and Suzy and the enormity—disappeared into the lust of being fucked so hard and so well I pulled in, a wave of muscle and need curling up and tightening around him like I could never let him go.

“You’re milking me from the inside,” he hissed, the motion making him thrust harder as I came not once, but a million times in one giant wave, pulsing through my core as I shook not with anxiety, but with the *oh, holy hell* of Joe delivering exactly what I needed, and when.

His tight legs told me he was coming, too, and then he bent down and hissed my name in my ear, the kind of verbal branding that makes you smile from within at the knowledge that you own him and he owns you.

And then my hand slipped and I flushed the toilet.

My loose shirt slid down the little hole, into the blue water, and I watched it, transfixed, mouth open and my vision barely returning to normal after orgasming like it was an Olympic sport and I was defending my gold medal from four years before.

“What the fuck?” Joe said, loud, just as someone banged on the door.

My neck pulled down from the sheer force of the cotton from my v-neck being sucked down into the bowels of purgatory, the stainless-steel bowl that normally held excrement now holding me hostage, my shirt a ridiculous parody of what a shirt should be, my body struggling with Joe still in me, my naked ass facing him, pants and undies in a pool between my ankles, my face being drawn into the bottom of a toilet bowl.

A toilet.

The seconds before death descend are rumored to be a moment of reckoning, where your entire life flashes before your eyes and you come to profound understandings about yourself.

I had those seconds.

And the most profound thing that went through my head was *Please don’t suck my body in and make my face pass through a pipe covered with businessman shit and deposit me through 10,000 feet of air.*

Half naked.

Joe pulled out and I swear he did it so fast I heard a *pop!*, like a sexual sonic boom from moving faster than the speed of sound. My jeans and undies slid up my legs and he whispered, “Oh God oh God oh God” over and over while I was trapped, attached to the commode by my shirt.

And then Joe reached into the center of the toilet, grabbed the end of my t-shirt, and yanked. Hard.

Released, I went flying backward, my back whacking against the little sink behind us, but I was free!

Bang bang bang. “This is inappropriate and you need to come out now. This is the flight attendant, and I could have you removed from the plane.” The woman’s hard voice snapped me out of it.

“You okay?” Joe fussed with my shirt, which now looked like I’d been eating a blue snow cone the size of a small child, and tripped and fell. The cotton was twisted all to hell and I had this huge blue streaky wet mess down my front.

“Go! Just go. I’ll be back in a second.” He kissed my cheek and squeezed his tight ass out of the bathroom. I heard low voices as he went into hardass mode, and I knew that flight attendant wouldn’t bug me. Not after a tongue-lashing from Joe.

My pussy ached with that post-sex rush you get, my shirt was a god-awful mess and I felt flushed (no pun...aw, hell, *that* one was intended) and numb all over. When I looked in the warped mirror, the face that greeted me had bright eyes and red cheeks, and my hair was a bit blue on some of the ends, like I’d just done one of those 5K running races where people throw colored powder and water at you because you have nothing better to do than to pay to run in a race where you come out of it looking like you got stuck in Willy Wonka’s factory.

“Please prepare for takeoff,” the pilot’s voice said, loud and large, and I looked down. Shirt on. No bra. Hands in place. Pants. Oh—I buttoned my button, smoothed my wet, stained shirt over my pants, and left the bathroom for my seat.

Fourteen rows away.

This time, all these smiling, warm lovebags of light stared up at me. I was them and they were me. My heart and soul and pussy were so expansive they could hold everyone. Really. I felt like bliss and the world, including the plane, loved me. The wings loved me and the peanut packets were my Cupid.

I sashayed up to my seat and Trevor looked to his left in horror. Loving horror.

“What—” he barked, fury pointed instantly at Joe. Loving fury, of course.

Amy turned around, Sam and Liam with her. They all half stood, eyes coming over me. I was that luscious. I know, right? They felt the love.

“What happened to you?” Trevor asked.

I looked down at myself. “You missed the announcement. Tie-dye workshop in the bathroom.”

“You sick dog,” Trevor said to Joe as Joe stood and scooped me past him, nestling me between them.

Amy gasped and just pointed to my shirt, looking at Joe and Trevor with a curious look. “What? Haven’t you ever tie-dyed a shirt in an airplane toilet before? Pffff. And you call yourself accomplished,” I muttered.

And then I clicked my seatbelt in place and rested my tired, loving head on Trevor’s shoulder, my hand on Joe’s thigh. He took my hand. We didn’t need more. “I’m a member of the Mile-High Club, Trev.” I giggled.

He smoothed the hair off my forehead, fingering the end of one piece. “Blue?” He took in my shirt and I closed my eyes.

I could feel Joe shrug.

“I hate to break it to you, Darla, but we haven’t even left the tarmac.”

“Is the tarmac some kind of country I don’t know about? We don’t have tarmacs in Ohio.” And the world faded out slowly as I gave over to a cloud of love so big it made me snore.

Chapter Six

Trevor

My shirt had a big drool stain on it from Darla by the time we landed, and her shirt had dried, leaving a long, cone-shaped streak of blue dye that flowed across her soft breasts, making me hard every time I looked down. Fucking Joe. Giving her that chill pill without telling me, and then nailing her in the bathroom.

Was I jealous? Of course. Still didn't make them members of the Mile-High Club, and I was totally claiming that honor on the plane ride home now.

Dibs.

Somehow, Darla slept through the entire flight to Miami. I guess we'd tranquilized her, though knowing what sex with her was like, the two pills plus a rocking orgasm was more than enough to make her crash for a few hours. Her breath was steady even as she leaned over me, and I liked it. A lot.

I liked Darla a lot.

Fine. I *loved* Darla.

A lot.

I shifted, my shoulder starting to ache from having her on me, and she groaned, moving across to press on Joe. Ha. He seemed surprised, earbuds plucked out of his head as she took her turn using him as a pillow. His face went from annoyed to soft and wistful. Damn.

He loved her, too.

He hadn't been home long enough for me to really talk to him, or have conversations beyond grunts and *heys*. And sex, but we won't go there.

The invitation blindsided all of us, and now that our first semester was over Sam and Liam were stoked. I had to clear my head and take this sliver of time to figure out what this adventure could mean. Were we being lured into something creepy? The lucky recipient of a promoter's largesse? Just damn fortunate?

Or—what we all hoped—were we actually talented enough to be asked to do a gig this big?

Too many unanswered questions. Eden, as a resort, had checked out. It was a real place, and the expenses were covered. I'd end up with a few hundred left over on my prepaid Visa after this was done, so the client was generous.

Way generous.

A little too generous. After having arguments with bar owners over our cash take, and whether they could take the cost of ads out of our cut, or charge us \$8 for a bottle of water we'd consumed backstage, this kind of generosity pinged my radar.

Let it go, dude.

Law students aren't a naturally trusting group.

But that's just it.

Am I a law student or a rock star?

I thought I could be both, but now it's looking more and more like I need to choose.

And a year ago I could tell you cold which way I'd choose.

I've changed. Changed more from these seven months with Darla and Joe, then by my first semester of law school, than I'd have ever imagined. Changed by love and lust and law.

Love.

There's that word again.

A quick glance at Joe, and I saw him touching Darla's hair, his eyes caressing her face, lingering over her shirt, playing with the fingers of one hand. He was appreciating her with sight and touch, and then—yes. He leaned down and inhaled her scent. You had to take Darla in with all five senses, because if you didn't you missed out: the whole of her that was so much more than any one part.

So what was holding us back from being whole with her?

I ran a hand through my own hair, a little too long from my body being ignored through school. Who has time for a haircut when you hit the gate wanting to be editor of law review in two years? That shit hadn't mattered to me those first few weeks of school and then, out of nowhere, it had. Bad.

Darla stirred and sat up as Joe's fingertip grazed her forehead, following the line of her eyebrow. "What? Are we there? Did the plane fall? We crash?"

Joe chuckled. "Nope. You're safe with me. With us." He shot me an inscrutable look. We were goners.

The plane's descent was nearly done, and Darla sat up, making herself yawn. "It's over?"

"Close. Just the landing."

"Mmmmm." She curled up against Joe's shoulder like a cat in a spot of sunshine and faded off until the wheels clicked down on the plane and we hit the Miami tarmac.

"Now we're here. Sweet Jesus, I haven't had something that bumpy since I killed that skunk when you were naked in my front seat," she declared.

Loudly.

The "seatbelt on" light clicked off and the mad rush to grab carry-ons began. Darla stretched like a cat and one nipple flashed as the cotton v-neck dipped in a funny way.

Made me inhale sharply and, as if air were blood, I was suddenly hard.

The scramble off the plane took my mind off my cock and the craziness of the past few hours. I had a feeling that this was just a taste of what we were about to experience. What kind of a resort was Eden? I'd done a little searching online, and what I found made me think that Sam, Amy, and Liam were the deviants in our group.

What Darla, Joe, and I did was more the speed on Eden.

"Sex resort" was too strong a word for the place, because I'd seen articles about family reunions, pharmaceutical conventions, and sports training programs at this luxury resort. Scratch the surface, though...but maybe I was reading too much into this. Paranoia was Joe's specialty. Not mine. And he hadn't said a word about the island itself.

"C'mon, guys! The driver takes us to the private puddle jumper and we only have ten minutes!" Sam shouted back to us. He, Liam, and Amy were ahead, and I left Joe to tend to Darla, who was grinning and a happy, limp noodle. Uncharacteristically quiet, too.

We got out of the connector between the gate and the plane and gathered our bearings.

With a handful of minutes with just my body and my bag to worry about, I took some deep breaths. Palm trees swayed in the wind outside, blinding sun making me smile. New England was covered in a gray blanket of dirty snow and dreary days right now.

This was more like it.

Darla and Joe appeared, both smiling like idiots, comfortable and joking. We were all a little giddy, because this was real.

Showtime.

A chauffeur, complete with the cap and suit, held a neatly printed sign that had four words on it.

Four perfect words.

Random
Acts
of
Crazy

Oh yeah.

That was definitely more like it.

Darla waved and Sam practically sprinted halfway to him, then stopped, finding his sense of restraint. We were like little kids picked to go to Disney World, except we were getting paid to go to the resort.

We were the entertainment. Hired help. Artists. Anything but vacationers.

And when the crew got there and realized what Eden really was, we would realize how appropriate our band name was.

Darla

A limo? A real, actual limo? I knew we needed to go from the big jet plane to something the guys kept calling a “puddle jumper,” which I hoped was a joke, because a plane too small to jump a puddle made no sense at all.

Neither did having sex in an airplane bathroom or picking up a naked dude on the highway, but whatever...

The limo ride was short. Real short. Like, we could have walked to the plane in five minutes short. It seated eight, and there were the six of us and a single woman who looked more nervous than me.

Not possible.

We made eye contact and I gave her as friendly a grin as I could without looking like Pennywise the Clown. “Hi,” we said simultaneously, then laughed. She looked a lot like Amy, with long, brown hair and an intellectual air that made me think she might be a librarian, too.

“I’m Darla,” I said.

“Leila. Leila Connors.” She dipped her eyes down and then caught mine again. “And you’re on the island because...?”

“Rock band.”

Her eyes took in our group, lingering just long enough on Liam to make me wonder.

“And you?” I asked.

“Romance novelist.”

Amy sat up like someone had stroked her spine with a broomstick from ass to neck. “You write romances? Contemporary or historical? Or some subniche? Maybe I’ve read you!”

Leila paled a little, and she seemed completely nonplussed by the questions. The limo halted and suddenly the doors opened before we could hear her answer.

Blinding sun hit us as we scrambled out to shouts over the sound of jet engines coming in and out of a melody of supersonic proportions. I think we spent more time loading our crap into the trunk and getting it back out than we did actually riding in the limo. Opening the door, though, I kind of understood.

The air felt like a blast furnace being opened.

“It’s hot!” I shouted, the roar of airplane engines deafening. At least my hands and earlobes

had come back, along with my mind. Note to self: never, ever eat any pill given to me by Joe or Trevor. I was Alice in Wonderland for a while there. Alice in Wonderland caught in an episode of *Girls*.

“It’s Miami!” Amy called back, laughing.

Someone other than us weighed and loaded our luggage, and a small group of five people, including Leila, experienced the same procedure. Then a woman I assumed to be the pilot came on over.

“I’m Joely,” she announced, reaching over to shake each of our hands. She looked to be just a few years older than us, and her eyes were awfully familiar, ’cause they looked just like mine. The rest of us was different—her hair was long and wavy, and she had a tight, compact athlete’s body, where mine looked like the landscape of a woman who happily taste tests chocolate truffles for a living.

Joely wore khaki shorts and a black polo shirt without a logo on it. “How long is the flight?” Trevor asked, eyeing a tiny little plane that looked like you could shrink it right down and tuck it in your pocket.

“Two hours.”

I groaned. Couldn’t help it. Joely laughed, an open, friendly sound that put me at ease. Or maybe the remainder of the drugs Joe and Trevor shoved in me did that. Hard to tell the difference.

“It’ll fly by.” Our turn to groan, a collective sound of fun and excitement.

Liam took a step closer to Joely, the wind whipping his hair around that strong, cocky face, the sunshine enhancing his golden-boy features. He put a (over) friendly hand on Joely’s shoulder. “I’m sure the time passes well in the hands of our capable pilot.” He looked like he wouldn’t mind joining the Mile-High Club with her.

Joely’s friendliness cooled considerably as she moved away from his touch and went officious. Liam didn’t need to be told twice.

“Now comes the unpleasant part,” she said. “Need to know your weight.”

“Our weight?”

She hooked a thumb toward the plane. “There’s a weight limit for the trips. I can generally handle six passengers plus luggage, but we always double check. Water landings are no fun if they’re unplanned.”

My shakes returned. Joe picked up on it immediately and put an arm around my waist. “It’ll be fine,” he murmured. Trevor added his hand on my hip and I relaxed.

A little.

People began reciting their weights to Joely, and all the numbers began with a one. Shit.

Mine didn’t.

I was about to make us crash, or be left here like the fat girl excluded for her weight, and no one wants to be *that* person. I wasn’t worried about the actual fact of my weight. It’s a number. Numbers are things—they aren’t biased, and they don’t carry morals or shame or worry. They just *are*.

Unfortunately, in the real world, numbers attached to the mass of my body carried way, way more than just a measurement value.

Joely was professional, jotting down the weights, and when she came to me I said my number. Not a blink. Not a comment from anyone. Not a single damn—

“Holy cow!” a voice shouted behind me.

A huge lump filled my throat, because that voice was one I knew.

And it emphasized the word “cow.”

Joe’s arm tensed, and I looked up to see his jaw clenched so hard he could snap a steel rod between his teeth.

“One-twelve,” that voice said sweetly to Joely, who hadn’t asked her. Joely didn’t even look up from her clipboard. She scratched a few numbers and then turned away, walking over to and motioning to the other group. She explained they were next, and she was taking our group first.

Then she trotted back to us and tapped Trevor, Amy, Sam, and Liam on the shoulders. “Go ahead,” she said. Those green eyes were mad.

Pissed, even. I knew that look.

Joe looked at Trevor, then behind me, then nervously at me, holding back. Trevor stayed put.

“It’s okay. I can handle myself,” I whispered. “Suzy Nutjob can’t do anything to me I can’t do back.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Joe said. But I slapped his ass playfully and he gave me a warped grin.

Trevor stayed put.

“She’s nuts, Darla. Cuckoo. Whacko.”

“I am right behind you, Trevor Connor. I can hear every word.” We both turned around to see Suzy standing there with her phone in hand, typing away with two thumbs, refusing eye contact.

“I know you can hear me, Suzy. You need to hear it from someone other than a judge.”

Her tapping got harder but she said nothing, then took a few steps forward as if to board the plane.

“Uh, no,” Joely said, holding one hand out, looking at the clipboard with the other. She tapped my shoulder and looked at Trevor and Joe. “You three go ahead and board.” Then she looked at Suzy and said, “Sorry, honey. You’ll have to wait for a later flight.”

“My name is Suzy, not honey. And what do you mean?” She looked at the plane. “It’ll hold me.” Her face twisted into a nasty smirk as she nodded toward me. “*She’s* the one who violates the weight limit.”

“Actually,” Joely said, nudging me and Trevor forward, Joe in the lead, “you violate too many other policies we have in place.”

Suzy’s face turned red. Bright red. The kind of red you only see when someone is so angry that a new part of their psyche emerges.

“What are you doing here, anyway, Suzy?” Trevor asked, shaking his head slightly as if coming out of a trance. “Are you stalking Joe? That’s a violation of the restraining order.”

Joely reached up and touched an earpiece I hadn’t noticed until now, pulling down a tiny microphone. She whispered into it, then pulled back. “Miss Suzy, you definitely won’t be on this plane.”

“But! But the restraining order expired!” she said. “And that’s a sealed record! You’re not allowed to talk about it.” She gave Trevor a look with an edge so hard it could guillotine him.

Two bodyguard types appeared out of nowhere. “Miss Bergen, we need to sort this out before we can allow you on the plane, so if you’ll just come with me,” one of them said in a voice that indicated she had no choice. These were beefy guys with shaved heads and don’t-fuck-with-me demeanors. You’d expect they’d be as likely to pour body parts into a freshly cemented highway as they would to take a bullet for a president.

“You can’t do this!” Suzy said. “I’ll get you, Trevor! I’ll get Joe! That cow can’t win! I’m

calling Joe's mother!"

And that was when I froze.

"Joe's mother?"

Her lips spread with an evil smile. "She loves me. Loves. Me." Her eyes traveled up and down my body, making me shiver even in the heat. I felt like I was being catalogued for her future skin-suit trophy wall. "I'm sure she just *adores* you." Suzy rolled her eyes and Trevor rushed me on that plane as the two security dudes escorted Joe's ex into a small cement-block building.

If I thought the jet plane was a challenge, this one—*this* felt like riding in my old, rusted-out '86 Toyota Tercel. Only with wings.

"Puddle jumper" was right. We were squeezed in there like a group of kids from my trailer park in someone's daddy's old Cadillac de Ville. You could fit fifteen of us in one of those cars and catch a drive-in double feature for \$20 a carload.

But we weren't here to watch movies. Oh, no.

We were here to fly to our watery graves.

"Ah, I don't think so," I said as Trevor put his hand on the top of my head and gently nudged me in. "One of my thighs weighs too much for this thing."

That made Amy laugh. At least I knew she really was smaller than me. By about twenty pounds. I'd suspected, but...Trevor's hand landed on my ass with an affectionate squeeze and he leaned in for a quick nibble on my ear.

"More to hold on to when I'm in you," he said, the touch warm and...yep.

I was wet.

I squeezed into place and worried that a light breeze would push us down in the ocean. Hell, this thing was so small a bird could shit on it and we'd drop a thousand feet from the weight. Joely started the engines and the noise was so loud that none of my screams seemed to matter.

Screams. Oh, yeah. There were lots of them.

Joe

I looked out the window as we took off and saw Suzy struggling with the two security dudes, her face turned up and watching the plane, and I swore I could feel handcuffs on my balls, cinched tight, the chain draped down into my butt crack, making me tense.

Darla was screaming as the plane took off but the sound was drowned out by the engines. There was another sound amidst the noise.

The sound of hope being crushed and fear triggered. Suzy had followed me. Suzy knew how to get to Eden. Suzy was nuts.

And now, even worse—

Suzy was righteously pissed.

An angry Suzy was a dangerous woman, and in the grip of whatever fury she now felt at being scorned not just by me, but by the plane pilot and by—hell, the universe, in her mind—would lead to vengeance.

Think I'm overreacting?

Read the doctor's report about what she did to me.

No one could hear anything until the plane had reached a decent altitude, and by then Darla had gone hoarse, her words raspy. "Can't we just take a boat?"

"You could," Joely said with a little too much cheer. "It takes seven hours, though, and the waters can be choppy."

“But you’re not in a tin can flying against God’s law,” Darla hissed to me.

“You’re an agnostic,” I reminded her.

“Not when I’m flying in a Sprite can.”

The engines roared and everyone went into a zone, jaws open and eyes wide. I felt the same way, but not because the blue waters and bright sun made me gawk at nature’s spectacle.

Because a sense of doom deeper than anything I’d ever felt before had seeped into my body and brain. What a clusterfuck. Suzy, then Darla on the plane (with a nice interlude in the bathroom!), then Suzy, and now...

What?

Five days on an island, performing the gig of our life, with Suzy on a tiny piece of land surrounded by water meant no escape.

It meant manning up.

Deep breaths, I reminded myself. Life moved too fast sometimes. This was one of those times. My fingers itched to reach out, to hear the voice of wisdom, to have some direction handed to me so I didn’t have to be both the doer and the decider. Making decisions and guiding myself through life was hard.

Fucking hard.

Darla’s eyes locked with mine.

But worth it.

She gave me a sad, silly smile and mugged at me, making me laugh. Miming that her stomach hurt, she pretended to throw up, and pointed out at the ocean. I shrugged, over-exaggerating the gesture.

Suzy could go to hell.

I already had found heaven, and was staring at one of its angels.

Gag. When did I go so soft? But now she pointed to Sam and Amy, who were sucking face, and Darla rolled her eyes and took her hand and made her mouth look like a blowjob, then thrust her hips forward in simulated sex, making fun of the earnest couple who had no idea what she was doing.

The plane began to descend and Darla grabbed her seat in terror. I reached out for her hand and got a death grip in return. That was okay. She could hold on to me whenever she needed me.

Always.

Trevor reached for her other hand and somehow we managed to get through the water landing without Darla throwing up. All of the other passengers seemed to be old hands at flying, which made Darla’s sheer fear stand out.

Darla rushed the door, and as Joely popped it open, Darla stepped out and screamed, “Land!”

“Uh, no. Water,” Joely said, pointing.

“Where’s the land? I ain’t Jesus. I don’t walk on water.”

“The dock is right here.” She pointed to a narrow wooden dock, one that stretched hundreds of feet from a beach, the kind of jut-out you only see on movie scenes.

Except this was real.

I’d been so focused on Darla that I hadn’t looked out the windows as we landed, and as I pushed my own way off the plane I heard Darla shout with excitement, “A castle! Hey, guys, we’re at a *real castle!*”

Sunlight glared off a small boat across from the plane, blinding me momentarily. As my eyes adjusted, I turned toward Darla and saw what she meant.

That was a castle.

“It’s like they carved it right out of a giant rock,” Darla said, followed by a low, slow whistle. All traces of her fear and sickness on the plane were gone, and she seemed giddy. My trepidation and fear of Suzy began to lessen, the grip of the unknown replaced by my sense that we were exactly where we were meant to be.

On the way up.

Brown brick and stone melded together in layers climbing high into the sky, as if the castle were a city. A fortress. Tall spires punctuated the enormous building, a series of terraces and stories that gave the impression that this wasn’t some tiny island getaway with thatched-roof huts and fancy drinks in a fake coconut.

Oh, no. This was nothing like one of those “fancy” resorts that catered to Americans who wanted to go to some “exotic” locale but never wanted to sully themselves by having actual contact with the real tropics.

Like my mom.

Random Acts of Crazy had made it, all right. This was the big time.

As the six of us gathered, Joely assured the group that our luggage would be delivered to our respective suites. Suites? That’s right.

Suites.

Your basic spring-break trip normally meant four of us crammed in a two-double-bed room the size of a dorm hovel, with the scent of pine overpowering the vomit-stained carpet. Then again, on spring break, who cares about your room? The only carpet you give a shit about is the landing strip attached to the pussy you’re chasing.

We were a long way from spring-break student accommodations.

But the pussy chasing...now we just chased Darla around the bed.

The sound of the waves lapping at the piers of the dock, the bright light bouncing off the crystalline water, the hulking castle that stared down at us as if it were alive—it should have been too much.

It was just enough. Just big enough to fill me with a sense of awe, enough to manage on the inside.

How we handled it on the outside was up to us. I took the first step down the long dock extension and the rest followed.

This was our path to greatness.

Chapter Seven

Trevor

The steps leading up to the main entrance of this palace—no, castle—were like something out of a Tolkien book. In fact, I felt like I was from the wrong race or species, even, ascending these stairs to stop before a door that was made for men much bigger than me.

This was a monument built for honor. Duty. Command. Not in the modern military sense, but in an ageless, ancient way, begging for a human authenticity that made me feel worthless and craven, as if I dared to equate myself with the people who had built this.

As if it were an affront to the universe that we were both called “men.”

I was a boy. An infant. A zygote.

A wasted sperm.

Joe felt it, too. Even Liam had a toned-down expression on his face, and his shoulders hunched a bit. We were cowed. Awed. Humbled. What right did we have to perform here?

Hell, to set foot on the floors of such a towering place?

Amy and Darla didn't have the same reaction. There was a distinct gender line here when it came to our reactions. For once, we guys were more emotional. How's that for fucking weird?

Darla walked right in like she owned the place. Thick marble stairs led us to a lobby that included skylights that stretched up to the heavens, stained glass sending patterns of colored light that were simultaneously random and meticulously planned, leaving me with an abstract idea that my mind was being manipulated on some deeply subconscious level, as if I were seeing and not seeing something subtle and significant all at once.

What was happening? What was this place?

Who ran this operation?

Liam walked up to me, his feet shuffling a bit, eyebrows furrowed. I wondered if he felt it, too, and he confirmed it when he opened his mouth.

“One hell of a gig. I feel like we're on some movie set and we're about to be thrown into Hogwarts.”

“Think bigger,” I muttered. “This isn't about wands and good versus evil. Something's really intriguing here.”

“The light is...different,” he added. “Soft and in my head, like my contacts need their prescription updated.” Liam had worn glasses since we were kids, switching to contacts in high school. He was blind as a bat without them, and couldn't read anything farther than an inch in front of his face.

“You gonna be okay?” I asked. “Maybe the ocean air is fucking with your eyes.”

“It's not the ocean air,” he said quietly. “I was fine on the dock.” He put his hand on my biceps. “And I think you see it, too.”

I did. He'd put his finger on it. Something visual changed everything, making the room warmer and friendlier, more open and more intimate at once. Darla's face from afar was gorgeous. Just...gorgeous. Not that she wasn't already hot and beautiful, but there was a shine to her, a fine-tuning of her features that made her more ethereal. Breathtaking. I felt bigger and lighter, happier and freer, all at once.

Was it this building? This place? Something in the air? Maybe we'd all accidentally swallowed some of Joe's pills. I should have been exhausted after all that travel and the job of managing Darla, but instead I was pumped. Hyped. Ready to take on our role here and to check

out the island, to have some fun and bring some awesome to the stage.

Whatever change was happening to me and Liam was welcome, as far as I was concerned. I liked it.

“It bother you?” I asked Liam.

A half-smile stuck to his face. “Damn if I know. It’s just...weird.”

“You keep saying that.”

“I keep feeling it.” His frown faded and he blinked, running a hand through his hair.

Darla came back over and the six of us convened near a fountain that I could stare at for the next hour and still not take in its full majesty. “We’re checked in.”

“Where are the room keys?”

She handed us little stickers, like nicotine patches. “Here. Just put it anywhere on your body and it automatically opens your room.”

Five sets of eyebrows shot up. “We’re microchipped?” Joe sputtered. “What the hell is in that patch? Soma?”

“What’s Soma?” Darla asked in a dreamy voice, her face tipped up to the sky, taking in the artistry of the ceiling. Could she be more lovely?

“Haven’t you read *Brave New World*?” Joe didn’t seem to be as affected by...whatever this was. He was Joe, sharp edges and all.

“Nope. You read *Laid Bear*? Good book. The bear shifts into a human and they have sex a lot.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “You’re equating one of your mom’s romance novels with Aldous Huxley?”

“How can you two fight in a place like this?” Amy asked. Her face was luminous. Sam was a lucky man. My cock twitched and I quickly turned my attention to Darla, because I wasn’t going there. Amy was...off limits. Always and forever.

But damn if every woman in this place didn’t look good enough to eat. In every way possible.

“Cut the crap and let’s go find our rooms. Then we need to talk to whoever is in charge of facilities and ask about equipment setup, rehearsals, sound checks, how they want this presented, speakers,” Joe cut in. Ever the businessman. Which was fine with me, because I didn’t want to do any of that right now.

I wanted to grab Darla, find a quiet corner of beach, and make love in the sun all day. And have Joe join us halfway through.

She smiled at me as if I’d just said that aloud, and just as my dick responded, my heart melted. Everything here was larger than life. The walk down the hallway made me feel like I was in a Gatsby movie. My parents had taken me to plenty of luxurious places with Persian-rug-lined hallways and century-old carved oak walls. None of that impressed me.

It was the feel of the place. Darla stared at everything with her mouth wide open, eyes like saucers. I knew she didn’t get out of Peters—ever—so this had to be a thousand times more overwhelming for her than it was for me.

I needed to remember that.

So deep in my own thoughts I wasn’t paying attention to everyone, I almost plowed over poor Amy as the entire gang came to an abrupt halt.

“Trevor!” Liam called back. He, Joe, and Sam were clustered around a series of framed photos on the wall between guest rooms.

“Yeah?” What could be so interesting in a hallway?

“It’s Taddy! Holy shit, Taddy did her centerfold here!”

A zing of hotness filled every inch of my skin and I pushed past Darla and Amy to see if Liam was serious. He was right.

“Who’s Taddy?” Darla asked.

All four of us guys laughed. “You don’t know?” I asked, amazed.

“Why would Taddy be plastered all over the walls here?” Joe asked, his voice lulled into the same sense of reverence that we all had. Sam just stared, saying nothing, his hands tapping at his sides.

Amy spoke. “If you bothered to read the words—oh, hey, look! There are words next to the picture. Who knew?—you’d see that they shot this spread ten years ago, here. On the island. Apparently the centerfold is a big deal.” She and Darla shared a look that made it clear they didn’t understand the enormity of that particular event.

My opinion of this place just went up a level.

“Which room is ours?” Liam asked, eyes still on the framed picture.

“They didn’t say. You just—” We walked past a room and a tiny nameplate near the door went from blank to Liam’s name, and the door opened on its own.

We all stopped cold.

“Did you do that?” he asked, pointing.

Darla shook her head. “Nope. Must be that patch thing.” None of us had put them on. We each held the little piece of paper they were stuck to.

“Is this *The Twilight Zone* or what?” Liam said.

“If this is *Twilight*, watch out for sparkly vampires,” Joe cracked.

“In a place like this...” Darla trailed off as she looked at the fine molding, paintings that probably cost more than my house in Sudborough, the lavish interior that stretched on and on for what seemed like miles.

“Well?” Sam said, shoving Liam a little too hard. “You too afraid to go in?”

“Chicken?” I asked.

“Where? You bring Mavis?” Darla asked, snickering. “Where’d you hide her?” She patted my ass.

Everyone erupted into laughter.

They would never, ever let me live that one down. I patted her ass in return and upped it, sliding my hand up her thigh from behind, making her squirm.

And then I walked down the hall, waving my little patch, waiting for—

Open sesame.

Darla

I could pull up eight feet of carpet in this hallway and sell it on the black market back home and have enough money to buy Mama a real house. This place was unreal.

And I mean that.

Unreal. Like something from the greatest movie set ever, except this was reality. Seriously real. It wasn’t fake or made up. We were living in some sort of alternate world where marble steps and fancy carved teak and oak adorned everyfuckingthing.

And they didn’t get the furniture from no Rent-A-Center, that’s for sure.

Trevor triggered something in the door to one of the guestrooms—excuse me, *suites*—and the door opened. I waved my little patch all over, wandering about seven doors down, and... nothing.

Same with Joe.

Trevor walked in the open door and Joe closed the door behind him.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Joe held up one finger, then waved his patch.

Click. The door opened.

Aha. We three were sharing a room. Someone had done their homework.

Big time.

I looked down the hall—Liam had his own room, and it looked like Sam and Amy shared one. How did they know? Promoters didn’t care about the personal relationships in a band. Just didn’t want that shit overflowing into the performance.

But here? The people who ran Eden seemed to know way, way too much about us. This was getting creepy.

Luxuriously, fabulously creepy. I could handle it for five days, right?

If I could fly on the Giant Metal Tube of Death and have a sexy tie-dye session with Joe after eating elephant tranquilizers, then I could manage this.

Joe stood in the open doorway to our room. “You have to get in here,” he said in a low growl, walking over to me and grabbing my arm. With a lurch, I was across the threshold.

This was like a blend between a French palace and a Las Vegas penthouse suite. The room had a swimming pool in it. *In* it. A pool about the size of ten king-size beds shoved together, and little waves lapped at the surface. A trickle of water running down the wall wasn’t because of a busted pipe, but from some manmade waterfall, the clear glass wall leading down to a fish pond. A fish pond inside this room.

You could fit half a football field in here.

Trevor came around a corner, eyes exploding. “You. Have. To. See. This.” I followed, Joe practically running. You didn’t often see Joe impressed by anything, so my sense of the surreal was correct. This was way bigger than anything we’d all experienced.

It was nice not to be the inexperienced rube for once.

Trevor held open a heavy door and we entered a room with its lights turned down low. My eyes took a few seconds to adjust, and then—*whoa*.

A full recording studio. Professional setup, with the sound box and the guys’ instruments all organized exactly in the blueprint they used onstage when they performed. Someone had *really* done their homework, and it made me smile.

Because life isn’t like this. No one takes the time to look at all the layers and make them fit so your experience and emotions are optimized to the fullest.

Someone here had done that—and not just with the band stuff.

With all of us.

It felt...creepy. But good. Is creepy-good a feeling? If not, it should be.

Joe emitted a low whistle. “This must’ve cost a fortune.”

“I don’t think the person who owns this island has any problems with spending a fortune,” Trevor added, practically jumping up and down with joy as he touched and checked the equipment, the instruments, the walls. His chest was heaving with excitement, and the deep rumble of his voice as he expressed his glee made me wet and wanting.

Hot damn.

“I’m going to find the bathroom,” I announced, all ladylike and shit. What I wanted to do was fuck them both, but I had an idea, and it didn’t involve the little couch in the lounge area next to the sound box in the recording room.

The Recording Room. Now we had rooms I was naming?

Sure beat my Purple Passion Place back home.

The bathroom made me scream. My shriek brought Joe and Trevor running.

“The shower is bigger than my entire trailer back home!”

And it almost was. Twelve gold nozzles popped out of the upper edge of the tiled mosaic walls at different angles, and there were two detachable shower heads. Two! Where would you aim two of those?

Oh. The thought made me...

“I am feeling very, very dirty right now,” Trevor whispered in my ear, pulling my hair back from my ear and sliding his hand along the waistband of my pants. Joe came on over and began rubbing my back under my shirt, which he dispensed with faster than you can say “Eden.”

“You are?” I turned to Joe and pressed my bare breasts against him, sliding to get just enough friction to make my nipples nice and tight, my hips pressed against his basket, his groan all I needed to hear.

Trevor stepped back and worked the shower mechanism. It looked like you needed a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering to turn it on. Somehow he did, and hot, steamy spray filled the glass-walled shower.

“I’m awfully dirty, too,” I murmured in Joe’s ear, nipping at the lobe. He pulled away and stripped naked, giving me a fantastic show.

One of the downsides of being in a long-term relationship with someone is that they never undress you for sex after, say, the tenth time or so. The clothes become your job. No one ever says it aloud, and it’s not like one of you says “Hey, I’m too impatient/lazy/whatever to slowly tease you and strip you nice and slow,” but that’s what happens.

Watching Joe made me want to do the slow undressing thing to him, but Trevor’s naked cock shoving against my cleft nice and fast kind of put a damper on that.

These guys were ready. Judging from the tingling need deep down inside, right where Trevor’s hands were sliding as Joe undid the clasp on my pants, I was, too.

“Mmmm,” I moaned as my pants pooled at my ankles and I stepped out of them, the steam filling the entire room now, the glitter of water on glass and gold like sunshine. My heart, my clit, my core all sang with anticipation at the hot glide of their hands on my body, and my own palms’ hungry need for their skin melded into one big, wet, well...

Dream.

We moved as one tangle of sizzling skin and sultry want, this passion so big it couldn’t be contained in our bodies, Trevor’s tongue parting my lips as Joe guided us to the shower wall, the click of the door opening and the rush of fine mist barely registering. My skin pinpricked with the shock of the hot spikes of water, and I gasped.

I wasn’t sure if that was from the sensation of the spray or from Trevor’s fingers finding my clit, and I sure wasn’t going to waste any part of my consciousness trying to sort it all out. My body wanted theirs, pressing against their erections, one against my mons, the other pushing up against my ass, the pleasure of two chests against my torso like being pressed into service to a god of lust.

Connection was so much more than flesh, though the way Trevor strummed my little red nub was the kind of connection a woman could enjoy forever and always, my own hand finding Joe’s cock, ready and beautiful, like a work of art. I couldn’t see it; my view of everything was obscured by clouds of steam and mist, the effect like something my mind conjured in a deep reverie.

Was that the point? Trevor's lips circled around my left nipple and I gasped as he stroked below while suckling above, making my pussy walls clamp hard around his finger. Fingers. Now there were two and his free hand cupped my ass and played lightly with the puckered pink skin of my anus, the thrill of the *zing!* making me want more.

Where Trevor was tall and broad and golden, Joe was olive-toned and tight, compact and dark, with brooding eyes focused solely on me. Turning me around, Trevor splayed my hands against the shower wall and leaned against my back, two-thirds of my body blanketed by the wall of his front, and he whispered, "No tie-dye sessions in here."

My brain registered the tease as he slipped in me, my muscled walls clenching with the giggle, the whoop of a gasp from surprise choking my throat as I found the pulse of the shower spray, my wet hair, his hot mouth on my neck and thick cock in me all too much.

And then.

Joe appeared beneath me, slick and wet like a swimmer, his hands parting my legs, mouth seeking my clit. What? This wasn't really happening, right? But oh—oh, that mouth confirmed that this was very much true as he teased my clit with tight, light strokes that lapped at my need, my building climax at the ready as Trevor impaled me with long, deep strokes from behind, one hand pinching a nipple with just the right calibrated perfection to make my entire body shimmer and shake.

They knew me *soooo* well.

"Oh, God, you're so hot," I murmured, Trevor's front slamming against my ass as his breathing shifted, and Joe's tongue became more insistent, moving in wide circles punctuated by a hummingbird touch right on the center of my clit, each layer bringing me closer and closer.

Trevor's body went taut and he leaned down to bite my earlobe, the pressure and pain maddening, making me fuse and clamp instantly, bucking and screaming with the pleasure of a thousand climaxes. He pumped hard three or four more times and went tight, his own orgasm pouring into me, as Joe pulled back and used his fingers to stroke me to a second wave that made my legs go weak, sliding down the shower wall into a loose pile of Darla, half covering a panting Joe, with Trevor removing the magic condom he always seemed to make materialize and returning in seconds.

We curled up into a little ball of perfect on the shower floor and let the water wash over us.

It was like a kind of baptism.

In Eden.

Joe

There is no problem that can't be solved with shower sex.

None. If I could fuck all the professors who give me Bs and have a shower sex session I'm sure I'd make law review editor.

I just...Darla. Trevor. Us. The three of us, here on Eden, in this freaky automated, antiquated building being paid gobs of money to—

Have shower sex.

See? Perfection.

But I don't believe in perfection. Perfection is what you get when you over-plan. Overanalyze. Over-function. It's a feature of being ambitious and on top of every detail. Perfection doesn't just happen.

It's a result. Not a state.

So my radar was way, way on high about this place, even now, sitting in the bottom of a

shower that looked like something from a sheik's mistress's cottage in Abu Dhabi.

Perfect situations have to be orchestrated by someone. So who was the someone who thought that inviting the band, and Darla and Amy, to perform here was a good idea?

And then there was Suzy.

That was a big fucking wrench to throw in the works. Pardon me if my hackles were up, even as our asses were indented by the shower tiles as water flowed through faucets that looked like pure gold and we rested like something out of...

Eden.

Okay. I get it. The island is some sort of haven from real life. But real life is nice and pragmatic. You get surprises but there's a baseline of a game, a finite game, that you can play if you're smart enough to figure out the rules.

What were the rules here?

Darla peeled her nice, full breasts off my thigh. I missed her heat, her softness, and as she stood she yawned, giving a display of Rubenesque beauty that made my cock twitch to life. It had only been a few hours since the airplane sex, so *what the fuck?*

I was in rare form.

"I'm going to get us something to drink," she announced, padding out, her hips swishing in that go-to way that didn't need five-inch heels, didn't need a well-trained runway walk. She had the gait of someone who knew herself and who greeted real life with passion and—

Goddammit.

Why hadn't she said "I love you" back? At the gate, before we boarded the plane? Suzy had distracted the fuck out of me until this point, when the thought bombarded me. Her nasty crack about sex and Trevor hadn't rolled off me like I'd pretended. Faking my emotions was my default, so I'd been able to see she was scared and brushed it off.

But now? I sat up and put my head between my knees, letting the hot water pour over the back of my neck. Something welled up in me, not quite tears—fuck that noise, I don't cry—but a feeling that hurt.

She didn't feel it back. Darla would have said it if she did. That was her way.

Instead, she left me hanging, and that was what hurt so much. The not knowing had been bad enough, the months of torture where I tried to figure out who I was in this bizarre little club we'd created, and then the slow unraveling of my feelings.

And I'd taken that shot. Gone for it. Let it come out, and maybe I had lousy timing, but it still counted.

It still fucking counted.

She came back with three bottles of sparkling water and handed them off, one eyebrow turning down as she caught my eye. Darla could read me. I didn't want to talk. Didn't want to think. We'd just had a fantastic, amazing, fucking awesome sexual experience, and now I was a little wimp sitting here nursing my *fewings*.

Because I'd let myself have some for her. And, worse, told her.

That little tendril of hope that I'd nursed all these months against my better judgment turned out to be a rope.

And I'd just hung myself with it.

Fuck.

Chapter Eight

Trevor

Day two on the island was turning out to be about as boring as any gig. I'd spent most of the morning with Joe, Sam, and Liam doing nothing but staring at the un-windowed walls of the recording studio/practice room in my suite, nailing down sound equipment, rhythms, new songs, and getting our instruments used to the Caribbean ocean air.

Which we weren't experiencing ourselves, being trapped in the dimly lit room while our girlfriends wandered the island, probably on the beach in their bikinis (or—*drol*—in the clothing-optional section) drinking something sweet and intoxicating.

Like the taste of Darla.

Work was work, though. We weren't being paid ten grand each to fuck women and get drunk.

That was a gig we could all get behind, though.

A parade of assistants came through our suite, asking questions about our lineup, explaining our audience, and giving us the basics on how this would all work. One ninety-minute set. Outdoors. At about 10 p.m., so the crowd would be liquored up. Dance floor around a pool, so we could play a few faster-paced songs that would get people on their feet.

Other than that, a perfectly normal gig.

With one exception.

A lot of audience members might be in costume.

"Costume?" I'd asked one of the assistants, a man who seemed to be my dad's age, but who looked more like he could be Joe's dad. Dark and swarthy, with thick soccer legs and bushy eyebrows. Like Chris Pine's dad, Greek style.

"Costume, yes." A polite smile. "We ask that you not comment on any of the forms of dress, nor on the activities that take place on the island. Our guests are here expressly for freedom of movement and activity."

Liam cocked an eyebrow and lowered it quickly, his face a careful mask. "You mean like dressing up at a ComiCon?" The way he asked the question told me Liam knew exactly what the guy meant, and it wasn't a damn gamer's convention.

"I mean that we have a sex-positive attitude on Eden, and you may see people exhibiting behaviors that would not be considered within the range of acceptability in other settings."

Oh, he was smooth. In other words: this was a sex resort. I was right! Damn. Too bad I hadn't said anything to the guys when I did my research and had my suspicions. Then again, if I had, would everyone had taken the gig?

Of course we would have.

Joe opened his mouth to say something, then shut it fast, like a nutcracker popping a walnut.

The assistant—Stavros? I think that was his name—gave us each a long, searching look meant to communicate without words. And then his smile was broad and wide. "As you know, the contract you signed included a non-disclosure agreement. The master of the island selected Random Acts of Crazy for your...ability to fit in seamlessly here at Eden."

Huh?

"Seamlessly?" Liam's laughter was so close—his voice held back very little. I kicked his ankle, hard, and he stumbled back, grimacing. Good. Pain was better than fucking this gig up.

Stavros's eyes went hard. "You're here to entertain, but you are also here to participate and

learn what you can about yourselves and others. That is what we do here. An invitation to Eden is an honor, and one that is rarely extended.” His eyes softened. “Your group caught the attention of someone who deemed you worthy of the master’s inclusion. It is for you to take full advantage of all that this means.”

And then he walked out without another word.

Joe turned slowly toward me, eyes narrowed. Sam looked like a fish on the beach, dying, his mouth moving up and down. Liam rubbed his ankle and swore under his breath, shooting me daggers with his eyes.

“What. The. Hell. Was. That?” Joe asked.

“I think we’ve just been schooled,” I said, sighing. “This is a sex resort. A pretty... interesting one.”

Sam began to laugh, hands on his hips, his chest heaving with the chuckling. “We...I’m...I brought my girlfriend...oh, God. Sex resort.” He couldn’t stop, bending over with a fit of the giggles.

Everyone had gone to bed early last night and had room service, so we hadn’t wandered much. Left that to Amy and Darla, actually. I checked my phone. 11:16 a.m. They’d been gone for about two hours.

“Amy and Darla!” Joe said, snickering. “They’re exploring the resort and—”

“Oh, God,” we all said in unison. Sam, Joe and I grabbed our phones and—

No service.

“No bars!” Joe called out.

No way to find them.

Liam laughed harder, still rubbing his ankle.

“Well, guys,” he declared. “We’re all about to get one hell of an education. And get paid some damn fine money to do it.” He clapped me on the back and looked at Joe and Sam. “Too bad you all have balls and chains.” He walked to the door and opened it. “Time for me to see what I can score at an ‘anything goes’ sex resort. Better get the mega-pack of condoms at the gift shop.”

The recording studio door clanged shut as Liam let himself out, leaving Joe, Sam, and me to stare at each other, a little burned by his comment. It’s not like we were here to fuck like bunnies, but being tied down, well...

Yeah.

Let’s just say we all probably wished we’d been invited to Eden a year ago or so.

“We need to find them. They have no idea what this place is,” Sam said ominously.

“They’re about to learn,” Joe said.

Darla

We’d woken up to paradise. Seriously.

The guys had gotten down to work (after a little morning delight that made the shower scene seem like a peck on the cheek) and left me and Amy to go off and learn more about Eden. A tiny espresso bar right at the end of our hallway had caught us off guard, as if it materialized because we wished it would, and the attendant gave us lattes that were head and shoulders above anything we could get at the better Cambridge coffeehouses.

Much less pencil-shaving gas station coffee.

“How was your room?” Amy murmured before sipping, then groaned with pleasure at the taste. I took a sip, because if I was holding something that tasted that good, I needed to get in on

the action.

Chocolatey-nutty-creamy yumminess that was almost as good as my morning orgasm greeted my tongue. I was ruined.

My coffee center had just been reprogrammed and now I was an Eden coffee addict.

“We can never, ever leave,” I hissed to Amy, who nodded somberly. Tears almost filled our eyes at the thought of not being able to drink these lattes ever again.

“I would give up sex with Sam for—”

“Ever?” I gasped.

“—a week to have this.” She sniffed and cuddled her cup between her breasts, stroking the outside like a baby’s head. I think she even huffed it a little.

We sauntered down to the main lobby, on our own for a few hours while the band practiced and got their act down. We’d known from the start that we’d be on the edges of everything. Amy’s nose was a bit out of joint because I was getting paid but she wasn’t, but then she was leaving early, too—she couldn’t even stay for the performance because her mom had some family thing she needed to get home for. I had handled more administrative paperwork than I’d ever imagined, from tax forms to shipping instructions to equipment orders.

I still hadn’t done five thousand smackeroos worth of work, but that was okay. My time to bust my ass was on performance night. Trevor and Joe would need some ego holding, Liam would get cocky, and Sam would get all morose (especially without Amy here), and that’s when I always went into the zone.

Fangirls know exactly what to do when they’re given the opportunity to shift from squeeing fan to part of the crew. We just do. It’s in our DNA or something. You listen to every recorded bootleg version of a band’s song and get to know the nuances so well you can tell when Trevor had a cold for the Attleboro performance, or that Joe sprained his thumb a week before the Franklin bar recording, and...you get the picture.

I was like the fifth Beatle’s girlfriend.

But not now. Now I was Darla, Amy’s buddy, and we were checking out this resort that used an awful lot of nudity as art on the walls, as we were just noticing.

I mean beaver shots. No Michelangelo paintings. Not Rubens.

Hair tacos. Pussies galore in picture after picture, from Georgia O’Keeffe watercolors to spun colored glass under frames to artistic black-and-whites that showed whether a woman had ever nicked herself shaving her pussy bald.

“Are we in the Labia Wing? Is there a Penis Wing we’re missing out on?” I whispered to Amy as our necks ricocheted back and forth, taking in the overwhelming view of labia minora, clitoral hoods, and hair.

“I don’t know about you, but I’d rather look at vulvas than cocks and balls,” she said.

“You got something you want to tell me?”

She laughed. “No, no. I’m straight. I like penises. They feel good to touch and have in me,” she clarified. “I just think they look like flesh-covered gearshifts with two big meatballs attached, and I giggle when I see them presented as art.”

“Great. I’ll never view a gearshift the same way again. Thanks for that.”

“What are friends for? Just don’t touch the gearshifts with lotion on top.”

“Amy!”

She ground to a halt and stared ahead toward the lobby. Sunlight poured down in those colored waves that made the room both old-worldly and psychedelic at once, like Sherlock Holmes and the Grateful Dead joined forces to run a chain of resorts.

“Take a good look at the fountain, Darla,” she said in an even tone that I knew she was struggling to maintain. Her head cocked to the right and she studied it, so I took her lead and—
Oh, my.

To quote George Takei: *Oh, myy.*

The fountain was two figures made of blown glass, their bodies like a Greco-Roman ideal of what male and female look like, with these vulvas and penises—scores of them—attached at intervals.

All spurting up.

“At least they give equal attention to female ejaculation,” Amy murmured. “Feminist points for that one.”

“Female *what?*”

She patted my arm. “We’ll talk later.”

“Talk about what?” The fountain was mesmerizing, and my eyes were attached to the water and glass now that I knew what I was looking at. In real life when a man comes you get about ten seconds of the lotion geyser and then—that’s it. Even a dude with a healthy refractory period can’t get it together for another half hour or more, and by then your fingers are stained orange from eating Cheetos and watching more episodes of *Scandal*, so why bother?

But this was like being able to watch a penis orgasm again and again and again and—

It was on a timer! How cool. One, two—come! One, two—come.

“It comes on a timer.”

“Don’t most guys?” Amy whispered. We got caught up in a fit of giggles and had to turn away, my eyes anywhere but on that damn fountain. I turned and saw the elevators as I tried to gather myself, and then noticed some sort of character, a person in a giant rabbit costume, bright pink like the Easter Bunny, with those big, blue -and-white plastic eyes and floppy two-tone ears. A sea of pink and white fur and those eyes.

Like a happy *Donnie Darko* moment.

He waved and I waved back, but my eyes didn’t quite catch up to my hand. Amy turned toward what I was staring at and her hand didn’t wave.

It clasped over her mouth in a kind of shocked horror. If she’d been wearing pearls she would have clutched them. Hard.

Because the bunny was fucking a chipmunk.

Not a real chipmunk, mind you, but another human being dressed in a chipmunk costume.

“Are they doing what I think they’re doing?” I said like a ventriloquist, trying to speak without moving my lips. My eyes, though. I couldn’t turn away, so my staring was giving it all up. Might as well just talk in a normal voice, because if there’s any point in life where you don’t have to hide your shock, it really ought to be when you watch the Easter Bunny fucking Alvin from *Alvin and the Chipmunks* in broad daylight in a hotel lobby.

I mean, really.

Apparently, we arrived just as they finished off. The fountains behind us spurted in with perfect timing. And then the chipmunk ran off, making happy noises.

We sort of shuffled toward the door where the chipmunk had run off to, the spray of the fountain now a bit ominous, like we were surrounded by nothing but sex suddenly. As we walked through the enormous carved doors, the sunlight blinded us.

“If you see a were-hedgehog, then I’m going to start thinking we’re at a really perverted romance writer’s convention,” Amy hissed at me.

“A were- *what?* Did you mean to say werewolf?” What in the hell was a were-hedgehog?

“Ask your mom. Hot book in romance.”

I was about to ask what in the hell hedgehogs and romance have to do with each other when a light ocean breeze filled with the scent of salt and heat made me relax instantly. I pulled sunglasses off the top of my head and put them on, my eyes adjusting. Hedgehogs and nympho chipmunks be damned.

Amy did the same, sucking down the rest of her coffee and pitching the empty cup in a gold trash can at the building’s entrance.

We got no farther than about twenty feet onto grass that felt like walking on a thick carpet of memory foam when Amy suddenly went down, tackled by someone, her body flying with his through the air and landing about eight feet ahead of me.

And then the sound of Sam shouting “Get your fucking hands off her!” filled my ears, the thump of heavy, fast footsteps, and I saw Trevor and Joe coming up right behind him.

Sam ripped the guy off the ground and I bent to check on Amy. Her face was smashed into the grass and she looked stunned. I would be, too, if I’d been tackled by a unicorn.

Yep.

A naked unicorn.

Not a real one, of course. A naked male human wearing a white unicorn mask.

Carrying a giant water gun.

A sudden shock at my back made my sacrum tighten and I turned around to shout and was greeted with a mouthful of water in a long stream that soaked my waist, my breast, and my face.

“Oh! Sorry!” A thick Irish accent came from behind the head of a chicken.

And it wasn’t Mavis.

The chicken head and the unicorn held their guns up toward each other in a gesture of “time out,” while Sam’s nostrils flared and he let go of the unicorn to help Amy up.

“I didn’t mean to hit you, Miss,” said the unicorn. His accent was British. A thick cockney that made me take a second look at his pecker and—yep.

Intact.

I’m going to digress for a moment here, because why not take a small detour in the middle of a story about a naked water-gun fight between a unicorn and a chicken to talk about penises? Intact men are so interesting to me. It’s like there’s this polite turtleneck there, keeping everything nice and slick and ready for you. So very proper.

Like a sex butler, at your service.

That’s all I wanted to say about that.

Now Sam blew a gasket and started screaming at the unicorn until he looked down and saw the flaccid dick just sitting there, like a witness.

“You’re naked?” he asked, his voice going up so high I thought he was being castrated on the spot.

“Indeed,” the unicorn said, but because I’d just been thinking about sex butlers I had an unreal moment where I thought maybe his foreskin had actually responded. Because, hey—if men think with their dicks, evolution means they should eventually speak with them, right? Wouldn’t that make everything so much easier if peckers could talk?

“Would you like to join us?” the unicorn added, pointing to a small shed with little windows that reminded me of a much nicer version of my purple passion place. “The masks and water guns are there. Naked water-gun fights are a hallmark of our annual stay at Eden.”

Amy spoke up. “Are they co-ed?” Her eyes were very obviously on Irish’s penis, which began to respond as if it somehow knew she was looking at it.

“AMY!” Sam thundered.

“Just curious!” she shouted back, eyes merry and nose twitching with impishness. Joe and Trevor started laughing. The naked dudes trotted off, penises bouncing like Hacky Sacks attached to bungee cords. It was hypnotic. I could watch the *boing boing boing* forever.

Amy stretched her arms out, checking her body and brushing grass off. She’d chosen a lightweight sundress that made me think of pictures of my grandmama from the 1950s, like a pinup girl, with a Marilyn Monroe sensibility. Amy had that casual look, all round and curvy with a naughty-librarian feel.

Sam seemed to love it, his arm slipping around her waist as he pulled her in and whispered something in her ear that made her step in closer to him and press her hips against him.

“Naked water-gun fights,” I said to Trevor and Joe. “What the hell kind of place is this? And did you notice the penis and vulva fountain?”

“The what?” Trevor asked as Joe seemed distracted, looking all over the grounds. To the left was a topiary of greenery carved in animal shapes. Straight ahead, the ocean, with beaches that—at a glance—were very “clothing optional.” So optional that no one wore any.

“Never mind.” I pulled the guys close. “I think this is a sex resort,” I hissed, expecting them to be shocked.

They just nodded. “We know,” Joe said, his mouth crooking into a half-smile. “One of the music assistants explained it to us just now.”

“‘Explained’ is an overstatement,” Trevor added. “We had to put two and two together on our own.”

“Yeah? Well, Amy and me had to watch the Easter Bunny ramming Alvin and the Chipmunks for us to get it.”

They both just stared at me.

Couldn’t blame them, because damn if that made any sense to me, either, but I’d seen it with my own eyes, so I knew it had happened.

“Furries,” Joe mumbled.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Furries,” he said louder, looking out at the ocean, spotting some—yep—naked parasailers. Wouldn’t you get contact rash from your sac dragging on the surface of the salt water?

I must have said that part out loud, because now they stared at me again, and Trevor kind of tucked his hand down near his basket.

“What’s a furry?” I demanded, tired of being looked at like that all the time.

“What you saw. People dress in furry costumes and have sex in animal character.”

“Interspecies costume sex?”

“I, uh...hey, your kink is not my kink,” Trevor sputtered.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Just because someone else gets off on it and I don’t, doesn’t make it wrong,” Joe said.

“Oh. That. Duh,” I said, stretching out the last word. If someone wanted to fuck through a costume and have fun pretending, so be it. Same with naked unicorn water-gun fights. Have at it.

I’m sure plenty of people thought our threesome wasn’t quite normal either, and I didn’t give a shit what they thought as long as they left us alone to enjoy ourselves as we were.

It clicked.

I relaxed.

“So it’s a sex resort,” I said, kinda loud. “If people want to have fun, as long as they leave me alone, I don’t care. Live and let live.”

“There’s an entire costume section here,” Joe said. “Want to pick some mascots and fuck each other?”

I smiled. “Would you wear a Michigan costume and let me peg you in an Ohio State mascot outfit?”

“No.”

I pouted.

“No!” But he was distracted. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sam and Amy hurry back to their room, clearly turned on by something. Amy and I would be walking funny by the time this was over, because frankly, even if I wasn’t into the kinks that I was rapidly becoming aware of, right in front of my face, I was turned on by the turbocharged air of sexuality in general.

It was hot. Steamy. Intriguing, that people came somewhere so open, so free. We could be ourselves. No judgment. Just don’t cross someone else’s boundaries and it’s all good.

I grabbed Trevor and stood on tiptoes, kissing him, hot tongue and lips sucking on his. With a loud smack, I popped off him and took his hand and put it on my ass.

Then I kissed Joe the same way, and when I stopped, I looked him square in the eye.

“We don’t have to hide here.” Joe smiled and he glanced over to some point beyond me, eyes widening with horror.

I followed his line of vision.

Suzy.

Dressed as a Patriots cheerleader.

Giving some guy in a Brady jersey a blowjob.

Joe

Thank God.

No, really—if there is a God, and my Mom always taught me that there probably is, but we’re not sure, so let’s fake it—then he or she or it or the noodly being was smiling down on me.

I knew Suzy would appear eventually, but like this? Giving head to some guy on the front lawn of the resort? Perfect.

She was done with me. Would leave me alone. I watched, transfixed, as her eyelids fluttered open and she locked on my eyes, her mouth wrapped around this guy’s dick as he shouted football plays, and she just stared at me, cheeks sucked in, the red ring of her lipstick around him, her knees on the thick grass.

Darla shoved me harder than any good linebacker could. “Quit it.”

“Quit what?”

“Letting her control you.”

“Letting her *what*?”

“Your mom groomed you, Joe. Suzy just took what was designed for her. Now it’s on you, honey, to stop letting this shit happen to you.”

What?

“That’s bullshit.” I did tear my eyes away and walk with Darla back around the gardens, through an English rose display that made the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum grounds look like a 7-Eleven parking lot.

“Darla has a point.” Trevor spoke the words as he craned his neck to watch Suzy. I couldn’t help but look back as she jacked the guy off to climax, the same bored look on her face that I’d caught whenever I opened my eyes during sex with her.

I almost puked breakfast up right then and there.

“You seriously think that? Asshole.” I punched Trevor lightly on the shoulder, catching myself before using more force.

“Hold up,” Darla said as we turned a corner and found an enormous pool, shining in the sun, stretched out with little tent cabanas along the edge, a waiter serving drinks to the twenty or so sunbathers and swimmers. All nude, of course.

Eye candy. My God, the bodies. Some were model perfect. Others less so, but the confidence was what made them attractive. Even forms that I’d have never looked at twice back home made me do a double take. A swirl of confusion began to twist inside slowly, like a growing hurricane, taking disparate pieces of myself and merging them for an enormous storm.

“If he’s an asshole for saying that, then so am I, Joe,” she said.

“You’re not assholes,” I said, backing down. “You’re probably right, but who the fuck wants to hear that?” I felt raw and overwhelmed. All I wanted was to get out of here; some kind of culture shock was smacking me hard. The contract, the big break, the money—it all paled in the shadow of the huge feeling of too much, too soon, that the past few minutes had triggered in me.

“Joe, I just watched your ex-fiancee, someone I didn’t know existed until twenty-four hours ago, go down on a guy dressed like a quarterback. After seeing the Easter Bunny pull out while fucking a woodland creature. And then the naked water-gun fights...” She looked at Trevor with wild eyes. “I thought the naked hitchhiker story was about as crazy as my life would ever get, but apparently I set the bar a little lower than I really should have.”

And then she stalked off, leaving us in front of the pool.

I did the only thing I could think of that didn’t involve punching something.

I stripped naked and threw my clothes at Trevor, taking off at a dead run for the pool and diving in. The water was the perfect antidote to this whole fucked-up mess. Trevor and I, apparently, had a penchant for finding ourselves in complex social messes hundreds—now thousands—of miles from home.

Home. As I dove headfirst down to the bottom of what I guessed was a ten-foot-deep pool, I thought about that word, the water’s pressure making me nothing but a vessel. Home. Home meant something totally different now, seven months after meeting Darla, a semester after going away. Home meant my mom and dad, but it also meant the apartment with Trevor (which wasn’t mine anymore), the time I spent with Darla, my apartment in Philly.

Home meant a lot of things, and nothing, all at once.

Breaking the surface felt great, the water cold enough to make my balls crawl inside me but warm enough to be pleasant. The fact that I was completely nude didn’t register on the faces of the people congregating about the pool. No children were here, and that was how it should have been. I hadn’t been at a public pool without teenagers and kids around since...

Never.

I felt more adult than I had any right to, and yet it felt right, too. The sting of Darla’s kiss on my mouth from a moment ago clung to me, the water unable to wash it away. When she did that—kissed me *and* Trevor in public—something lurched inside me, fearful and repelled, because that?

Being that open?

Couldn’t happen in real life.

Knowing this place wasn’t in touch with real life was one thing. Living each moment as if that were true was quite another.

For a guy who made that claim I was awfully hypocritical, clinging to the side of the pool

with my balls ready to drip all over the smooth, gray concrete when I climbed out.

“Join me!” I called out to Darla and Trevor.

Trevor had guts, stripping out of his clothes and sauntering right over with a swagger I’d kill to copy. His junk was right out front and no one said a word. This really was the norm here.

Darla was the one who was the deviant, clinging to her button-down shirt and yoga pants.

“C’mon!” I shouted as Trevor plunged in, his body disappearing in a blur of bubbles under the blue water.

Do it, I thought. Join me. Because my heart can’t take being rejected again.

Is it a test if you don’t know you’re being evaluated? Was I being fair to her, to keep so much bottled up? What if she thought my “I love you” at the airport had been a joke?

And then Trevor broke the surface.

Darla walked over, her hair shining in the sun, no clouds obscuring anything. A light breeze tickled her waves and she did a slow striptease, unbuttoning one button at a time, sharing her eyes with both of us as Trevor swam to the pool’s edge and grinned like a maniac at the sight before us.

Could she swim? The thought hit me, hard, and I almost asked, but stopped myself. I knew she hated being treated like...like she was different from us. Less worldly or less experienced. And some mental filter I didn’t own before kicked in suddenly. I could imagine myself in her shoes, and I hated it, too.

Hated being treated like someone worthy of being disconnected, of being different.

If she couldn’t swim, I reasoned inside, she wouldn’t striptease, so don’t borrow trouble. The part of my brain that thought all this through was on 24/7 and I felt it unwind the tiniest bit, my sac floating with my shriveled cock in a public pool where I was decidedly naked, in the water next to a nude Trevor, and then Darla slipped out of her panties and, newborn-naked, cannonballed right in.

We

Were

Free.

Until I looked over to see two beady eyes peering at me from one of the tent cabanas, a woman whose body I knew all too well, one so different from Darla’s that they might as well be from different species.

Suzy. She nodded with approval at my display, and that made my balls crawl even higher, as if they sought asylum. At this rate they’d be in my throat soon.

What was she doing here? She didn’t work here, and this was an invitation-only resort. Why...her? Had the people who hired the band somehow wanted her here? Was this all connected to me in some mysterious way?

Darla swam over to us with confident, practiced strokes. So much for my stupid, useless worrying about her ability to swim.

“This is nice,” she said, a bit breathless. The buoyant water made her breasts float around her collarbone and it made me want to reach out and take one nipple in my mouth. I could do that here. No one would care.

So I did. The pink skin tasted like sea water and chlorine, and I realized this was a saltwater pool. Nice. The slippery nipple pebbled in my mouth and I slid my hands under the water to cup the bottom of her breast, my legs scissor-kicking to keep me afloat.

I wondered what sex in a pool would be like.

She squealed, and then Trevor came to the other side of her and did the same.

“What are you guys doing? We can’t!” she hissed.

“Why can’t we?” Trevor crooned. Great. We were on the same page. My cock hardened at the idea of it. Sex in a pool? Under everyone’s noses? In public?

“Because you don’t just do that!” Darla said, but her voice held a moan.

“Do what?” Trevor teased her, and our hands bumped. I pulled back while he worked on touching her clit, her face a picture of pure arousal and conflicting thoughts. Oh, she wanted to, but...

“When in Rome,” I whispered, tonguing both her nipples.

“When in Rome, you visit the Pope,” she said.

“Let’s see whether we can get you to say ‘Oh, God’ and call that the same,” Trevor said, coming up behind her, his arms on either side of her.

“Not here,” she said, suddenly serious. “But hell yes to the swimming pool in our room.”

When I looked up, Suzy was gone.

Aha.

Darla

You think that having sex in a pool is going to be all smooth gliding, with the water warming you up like you’re in a womb, and that you’ll be sleek like seals and all sexy and shit like those old Chanel No. 5 commercials that pop up sometimes on cable.

It totally does not work like that. First of all, holy lube. You need some lube down there, because water and pussy are like oil and water, only worse: at least oil is a lubricant.

Second, you ever try to position your body just right in the water while someone tries to enter you? There needs to be a Red Cross class with certification in Water Fucking 101, because me, Joe, and Trevor failed that one miserably. In frustration, we finally just climbed out and had sex on the edge of the pool until Joe made some foolish move and upended us all into the water just as I was about to have a screaming orgasm.

I screamed at him instead and we just got on the bed, soaking wet and all, and fucked ourselves into oblivion.

And then there’s the chlorine rash that made the edges of my hoohaw swell up like a blowfish.

So pool: 1

Pool sex: 0

(And hint: hydrocortisone cream is great for damn near anything, but Joe wants to make sure you guys know that it tastes awful. Whoops! Plus, don’t have oral sex with the kind of cream that has lidocaine in it. Feeling resumed about twelve hours later in Joe’s lips, so thank goodness he’s a bass player and not a singer.)

We ended day two here on the island by ordering dinner in, along with a few bottles of wine, and just chilling. Does it seem wrong to hang out in luxury and hole up? I think we all needed it.

And I had the whole fish-lips thing going on down there, so sex wasn’t exactly on the menu.

A good night’s sleep was what we all needed, and my sweet dreams were filled with unicorns, squirt guns, blowfish, and crazy cheerleader eyes.

Chapter Nine

Trevor

Day three on the island passed by in a blur of practice, talk, practice, confusion, and sex.

Attempts at sex would be the more appropriate term, because pool sex with Darla had shown us that the resort's work at finding the perfect water pH might have saved us from various germs in the pool water, but her body did not like the chemical combination it took to drive out Ebola or whatever organism they worked to eradicate by using what should be trademarked as Cockblocker Solution.

Her lips just...yikes. She looked like Donatella Versace, Carrot Top, and Megan Fox combined in labia form.

My sympathy had limits, and by the end of this pre-dinner set, my body was pumped, throat hoarse from singing and brain addled by too many talks about sound-equipment positioning, coming in at odd moments, Sam being offbeat and Joe's weird face movements as he kept stretching his lips, trying to find feeling in them.

Dining at the Y had come with a side of temporary lip paralysis for old Joe. I tried to warn him, but...poor guy.

Okay, that's not what I really think. I'm just supposed to be nice and care. It was fucking hilarious.

Darla offered blowjobs, which we happily accepted, and back home that would have been fine, but here? This place was the Sex Hotel.

We took a break to go down to the lobby and coffee up. We were wearing what we called "practice clothes"—old concert t-shirts and jeans, clothes we could get sweaty in and move around without worrying. We looked like shit, and who wouldn't after being stuck in a small, windowless room with three other guys and a sound tech for hours on end?

Along the way, I saw no fewer than twenty-seven naked pussies (yes, I counted) on the walls, about seven in the hallway attached to female bodies (I say "about" because one of the bodies made gender determination difficult), and the lobby was teeming with naked women.

Women only, I realized as I sucked down half a macchiato in front of the fountain, a glass penis ejaculating at regular intervals that were a marvel to behold.

I looked down at my own crotch. If only...

"You walking around with a boner nonstop, too?" Liam asked, double-fisted with a cup of coffee in each hand. He finished one and tossed it, three-point style, into a gold trash barrel. Score.

"Yep."

"At least you have Darla to help with that."

That made me do a double take. "You are in a buffet of pussy. I figured you'd have sampled most of the spread by now."

"The buffet appears to be closed for me." He frowned. "Nobody's biting."

"Or sucking?"

He nodded slowly. "It's...I think a bit Sapphic around here."

"Sapphic?"

And then I got it as I watched two women who could have been Ralph Lauren models start a deep, slow French kiss that made me hard in under a second.

"Oh, God. Please, have sex now. Please. Please let me watch," I practically growled, blood

shooting through me like cannons engaged.

Joe

You don't see your ex-fiancee dressed as a cheerleader going down on a fake pro football player every day, now, do you?

Unless you're me.

I'm a good, smart person. I follow all the rules (most of the time). I'm clean cut, good looking, well mannered, and highly educated. I've climbed the ladder to success and currently hold a much-coveted spot in a top-seven law school in the United States, and as long as I stick it out for two and a half more years and follow the Big Law path, I'll be in the one percent for the rest of my life.

And yesterday I just watched my stalker knob gobble a guy dressed like a quarterback.

Worst of all?

It was kind of hot.

I'm not above admitting that, but this was the final straw. Day three of being on Eden and I'd had enough. Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money, and I wasn't going to pitch a fit or be "that guy" and hold the band hostage, but as I walked down to the beach, averting my eyes from the naked kite-flying contest, I felt like throwing something. Screaming. Punching a wall.

Eden was anything but.

Starfish dotted the sand, and as I came over a grassy bank and down to the beach itself, I saw loads of brown starfishes as naked people bent over to pick the real starfishes up and fling them back into the water.

Perfect. Something completely ineffective that involved throwing shit. This I could do.

For the next hour I just threw starfish—stupid starfish that would get stranded again and again on the beach with the tides—back in the water. Natural selection made the task Sisyphean.

Much like my relationship with Darla and Trevor.

What was I doing here? Practice time had me stoked, inflamed and fueled by the knowledge that we'd perform tomorrow night, knowing this was our next step in hitting it big.

The thought of leaving here—well, until an hour ago, it made me sad.

Now I lived in anticipation—no, trepidation—of what Suzy would do next.

I needed to know why she was here. How she'd been selected to come. What purpose she served.

I needed answers.

And I needed them now.

"Excuse me?" I asked some random naked dude whose penis seemed vaguely familiar.

"Yes?" His voice had a lilt. Irish?

"If I want to learn more about the island, where do I go? Google didn't cut it."

He laughed, a dark sound that made my hackles go up. "Good luck, my friend." He chucked a starfish into the waves like skipping a flat rock on a placid pond. It skipped twice, then sank.

"That tight, huh?"

"They really protect the master. As they should."

"Who is this mysterious master?"

He shrugged. I had to stop looking at his cock. I wasn't naturally drawn to it, but it was only day three. I wasn't used to talking to naked strangers. Yet.

"He runs the place. Makes all the decisions. Decides who's invited."

"Invited to work here? I'm with a band that's performing tomorrow night."

“You’re with Random Acts of Crazy?” Heard a lot about you folks. Looking forward to tomorrow’s concert.”

Never one to miss a chance to be admired, I felt my spirits rise. “Thanks. You said ‘invited.’ You on a gig, too?”

He smiled wistfully. “No. Just lucky.”

My gears turned a bit. “So everyone here really has been invited. On some level.”

He nodded. “It’s all for some purpose only the master understands.” He clapped me on the shoulder, and then someone in the distance shouted his name. “Freedom, man. It’s all about freedom. Don’t overthink it. Just live it.”

And then his cock and balls bounced like a pink ball attached to a rubber-band paddle as he ran across the beach to his friend. The two embraced, then kissed.

Just live it. Suzy was invited? Was here for a reason? What did the master (and what the fuck was up with that? Master? Like I was living in some BDSM fantasy land?) have in mind when he invited her here?

I had fewer answers and more questions. Story of my life.

This would not do.

I wasn’t going to let this go.

Darla

I suppose the first clue that we were in a very different section of the island should have been the clothing.

People wore some.

It was a relief, actually, because while the resort appeared to be “clothing optional,” the operational word was *optional*. Liam had started walking around naked all the time (and hoo boy, my eyes didn’t hurt when they landed on that body), and Trevor and Joe and I had our outdoor pool time, but for the most part I stuck to my non-optional body covering, and so did Sam and Amy. If they were getting naked it was behind closed doors, and that meant they were getting naked quite a bit, because those two spent as much time as possible in their room.

It was kind of cute, and if I didn’t have labia that were doing an impressive imitation of the Goodyear blimp, I’d have been the same with Joe and Trevor.

The section of the island we strolled toward was intriguing. It was like an amusement park unfolding before us, except instead of rides and sections, we had humans as benchmarks. First, we passed by the naked croquet players. Then the paddle boats—shoes, apparently, weren’t optional, but as I watched people paddling those boats along a canal that split the island, I had to wonder about chafing. Ouch.

“I’d love to try a paddle boat,” Amy said, pointing.

“Bring some disinfectant wipes,” I muttered.

An increasing number of men began to dot the grounds, sitting on benches and chatting, playing chess in a little courtyard, or riding bikes past. Now, normally I don’t pay attention to other men (quit laughing—not much) because hello? I have Trevor and Joe, which is more than enough for me.

But these men were paying attention to us. A lot. Heads turned, eyes flashed, lips were being licked, and I started to feel like a piece of steak at a starved-dog convention.

“Darla,” Amy said real slow, my name drawn out. “Are you noticing...” She looked around and her eyes jumped from man to man. The bald dude who was my age sitting on the grass with earphones on, staring. The old gray-haired man who walked with a limp who raked his eyes over

us. The twins who looked right out of the military, arms cut so well that any molecule of fat must have been beaten out with kettle bells and sandbags in a gym.

They all stared at us.

And I mean *appreciatively* stared at us. I know what a man's eyes look like when he's imagining having sex with you, and this was a tsunami of lust. I felt like RuPaul at a Liberace convention.

They loved us.

"Hey," said one of the twins. Both had shaved heads, with those perfect ears and noses for that look. Faces chiseled from bone and muscle, both had glittering blue eyes and sweat-soaked chests. One had a towel around his neck and a chest that was so sculpted, right on down to a thick thatch of hair that led to a bulge that might as well have been a microphone he spoke our names into.

"Hey yourself," I said back, both on edge and protective, and at the same time really, really horny.

I can admit that. You have the eyes of every man within a half-mile vicinity and all the testosterone can be like pheromones, making a woman—even an attached one—start to think about possibilities.

Blame my clit. It had a mind of its own, and now that the swelling was diminishing it was starting to think about being taken out on a nice date and treated like a lady.

"You two here together?" the other twin asked, his face inscrutable.

"Together?" I asked.

All the men around us seemed to hold their collective breath.

"He means are we a couple," Amy whispered.

I sputtered laughing. "Oh, hell no, we ain't a couple. I like sausage. Not fish."

"Could you be more vulgar?" Amy hissed.

"Not vulgar," Twin #1 said, reaching for my hand. "Direct." His eyes swept over my hips and breasts and I swear he licked away some drool. "I like that in a person."

"So do I," three voices echoed, a little too eagerly. You know that scene in one of those old *Monty Python* movies where the knight stumbles across all the sexually deprived nuns who beg to be spanked?

I was starting to feel like the knight.

The twins were joined by a guy who looked familiar. "Unicorn?" I asked him, and he laughed.

"You remember me?" It was the dude who crashed into Amy the other day. He turned to her, face full and glowing, like she was the Madonna and he was discovering her for the first time. "I hope you'll accept my sincere apologies again, miss," he added as he gently took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips, eyes never breaking contact with hers.

She flushed and squirmed. I was glad she had Sam back at the hotel, because his accent oozed over me and made me want to go orgasm. Like now. In public. And I actually could, here on Eden, but I still had some boundaries I wasn't quite ready to ditch.

"Thank you," she replied, her words breathy and hitched. A hand on my hip was so warm and pleasant, but I got confused. Which twin was that?

"You part of the BBW trans dubcon group?" Twin #1 asked me, his breath hot on my ear, the scent of expensive men's cologne mingling with intense arousal.

"Dubstep? No, I don't dance like that," I said, which made him laugh.

Hard.

“The boat’s arrived!” someone shouted, and all the men except the three now touching us got up and began to walk toward a dock in the distance.

“What boat?” I asked, feeling dreamy.

“Our lovelies,” the English dude murmured to Amy. He was one of those men who looked amazing clothed, wearing a polo shirt and shorts, feet in athletic ankle socks and tennis shoes, like he was about to take in a game at the courts.

Amy and I looked at each other. “Lovelies?”

“You’re lovely, too,” Twin #2 said, his hand getting a little too grabby on my hip. I shifted back and gave him a “hell no,” look, which he seemed to misinterpret as play, reaching in to stroke my elbow.

Flattering as this was, I pulled Amy away from the unicorn guy and whispered, “Why are they all hitting on us?” But Amy wasn’t paying any mind to me; her eyes were firmly focused on the dock.

And then I understood a hell of a lot of things.

The “lovelies” coming off the boat were women of varying hair color, wearing dresses and slacks, in a range of ages from early twenties to, I guessed, early forties, but with one thing in common:

They were all built like me and Amy.

“You ever see so many men gather and drool around a group of women like that?” I asked.

“Only at a strip club,” she replied.

That cut through the moment. “You’ve been to a strip club?”

Her lips curved up. “You don’t know everything about me.”

Leaving that little mystery aside, I watched about twenty men rush the dock, each pairing off fast with a woman, little bands of singles forming in dyads and triads around a tiki hut that looked like one of the island’s ubiquitous bars.

“They like...”

“Curvy girls,” I finished.

“Curvy...What is this place?” Amy asked, looking around in marvel.

“Heaven,” I said, laughing. “I think it’s heaven.”

“Heaven with some women who look like something out of an Aerosmith song,” Amy murmured. Before I could ask her what she meant by that, Lucius Malfoy’s evil female spawn appeared.

“Moo!”

“You little bitchface,” Amy snapped, not even bothering to turn around.

“I’m sorry. I don’t believe we’ve been introduced,” Suzy said, coming around to face Amy. “I’m Suzy, Joe’s fiancée. And you are...irrelevant.”

“Why are you here?” Blood turned cold inside me and I could feel my fists itching for a fight. In school I’d shied away from the cat fighters, but I’d been in my share of hair-yankers, and right now, I’d be happy to give Ms. Brazilian Blowout’s scalp a nice reorganization.

“I’m here because Joe invited me,” Suzy said to no one, watching the boat with a look of distaste, as if she’d just crushed a baby seal with her stiletto and gotten blood spatter on her new Vera Wang gown.

“Joe didn’t invite you,” Amy and I said in unison.

“How do you know?”

“That’s so sixth grade,” I said, laughing. “I know because I know Joe.”

“The invitation said that I was here to help Joe Ross.”

I'd taken a deep breath to continue talking, but it stuck in my throat.

"Are you getting paid?" Amy asked.

Suzy tipped her head and evaluated Amy like she was sizing up an opponent. "No."

"But you got one of those linen invitations?" Amy continued, like a lawyer in cross-examination.

"Yes."

"How long are you here?" Amy asked.

"Five days total."

"And you give out blowjobs to random strangers on the grass because...?" I asked.

After taking two slow steps toward me, she reached for a lock of my hair and I willed myself not to pull back. Her breath smelled like coffee and pain.

"Because I do whatever I want, Darla Josephine Jennings. What I want, when I want, and where I want."

"You don't get to do *who* you want, you bunny boiler," I said.

"Bunny? *She's* wearing a bunny costume now?" Trevor asked, appearing suddenly, huffing as he stopped and caught his breath.

Suzy snapped, "You people are so bourgeois."

"I'm not French," I retorted.

Suzy snorted. "Oh, Joe. Seriously? Joe picked *this*?" She moved her hands like she was doing a grotesquely large version of a woman's hourglass figure and puffed up her face.

"The fat shaming doesn't work here, you little twit," Trevor said, brow strong and jaw clenched. "It's sad at best and pathetic at worst. No, actually, it's both."

That made me stand up straighter, and I swear Amy looked at Trevor like she was seeing him for the first time.

"Trevor Connor's a chubby chaser. Who knew?" Suzy spat out.

Time just stopped.

You know, if you held my fingers to a flame I couldn't tell you a single second of memory from what I did next, but all I know is it involved a fistful of what turned out to be a really well-done weave in Suzy's hair, and my ass on her head, grinding it into the thick grass as I shouted, "Moooo fucking who?" and twerking her from up top, until Trevor pulled me off.

"Why is that offensive?" he whispered in my ear. "It's only debasing if you let her make you think it is. What I love about your body doesn't fit into words like that shit coming out of her mouth." He had my elbows hooked into his and I struggled to get in there and grab more of her. Too bad there wasn't much—she was a taut, skinny little thing with no meat on bones made by Satan.

"Oh my God, you stupid fucking cow, that weave cost me \$600!" Suzy screamed, patting her head like it was on fire.

"What's going on?" The twins walked past, arms looped in one very happy-looking Latina woman with long, rich onyx hair and an ass that went on and on, currently being loved up by my two strong palms. Except something was different about that woman...

"She's fat shaming us," Amy called back, pointing to Suzy, who held one side of her scalp and screamed something at me. I couldn't understand it because 1) I don't speak Bitchface and 2) I don't speak Bitchface.

"The fuck is this?" Joe's voice came from behind us, and Bitchface jumped up and ran to him, clinging like some virginal heroine on a historical romance book cover, hand on his chest and cheek pressed to his shoulder.

“Rrrrrr!” I growled. Yes, I actually growled, like I was about to shift into a tiger, and I don’t mean in a good way, like in Mama’s shifter romances. Trevor was stronger than I realized, pulling hard on my arms.

“Stop, Darla. She’s not worth it. She’s never been worth it.”

Joe shoved her off him like she was a leech he had discovered, his hands brushing against where they’d had skin contact over and over, all OCD-like. He shivered, then looked at me, eyes filled with alarm.

“What did she do to you?” he asked. “Did she hurt you?”

“Yes!” Suzy whined, pointing to the handful of hair I still clenched. “Look at what—”

“Not YOU!” he thundered. “What did *you* do to *my* girlfriend, you crazy, abusive, intrusive...?” He ran out of words.

“I am fine,” I announced, letting my shoulders go slack so Trevor would let me go. I threw the mat of hair on the ground and straightened my clothes. “She attacked me.”

“That’s not quite what happened,” Trevor said softly.

“She *verbally* attacked me.” Now the twins and their new chick were creating a little crowd at the scene. Good. Let people gawk. My hormones were shooting sky high in my body, adrenaline like fucking Old Faithful after a tectonic plate shift, and I felt like chanting “JERRY! JERRY! JERRY!”

“You grabbed my hair in your fist, threw me to the ground by the head, and shouted, ‘You moo at me and I will make you fuck my boyfriend’s ex-fiancee,’ which made no sense. I am Joe’s only fiancee.”

“I meant Mavis,” I said, with far too much calm.

Trevor rolled his eyes.

“Who is Mavis?” she screeched at Joe. “You were engaged to someone else?”

“Mavis is a chicken,” Trevor explained, reddening.

“You people are crazy!” she huffed. “And fat!” she spat at me.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Twin #1 said sadly.

Suzy flinched, and any other woman would have cowered or at least had the decency to realize she was in the wrong. But not the cray cray.

Chapter Ten

Trevor

Day four: showtime. Darla had spent the entire previous night fuming about “Cray Cray Suzy Badweave Bitchface” (Darla’s term, not mine) and trying to find inventive ways to get me to look at her pussy and confirm that I could do it without screaming.

You look at your woman’s vagina and find a blowfish and you tell me you wouldn’t shriek like a little girl.

Now that we avoided pools and gave her body a day and a half off, everything seemed primed and ready. Men were all over her. Everywhere we went she turned heads, which was how it should be, right? Sam had seen Amy off, her stay shorter than the rest of ours, and I felt for him. Really. Being here in Sex Central was tough without your woman.

Liam had finally struck it big with a little enclave on the other side of the island filled with women who were here...for rock-star fantasies.

“You wouldn’t fucking believe it, guys,” he’d said, coming back with a torn shirt and one hell of a grin. “They’re all very excited about the concert.”

Darla had peered at him with a look I don’t even want to try to name. “They’re all coming to the concert because they have sex fantasies about rock stars?”

“YES!”

A long sigh had come out of her, and then: “Can’t blame them. The reality is so much better than the fantasy.”

“Too bad we can’t rename ourselves Random Acts of Fantasy,” I’d said.

And now here we were, ready to live out our own little rock-and-roll dream. The stage was being set up, and we were expected for dinner tonight at some formal restaurant at the resort. The Grand Ballroom. So far, we’d stuck to the smaller venues that served pub food—good pub food—or the chocolate and lobster buffets all over the place. But tonight it was fancy, and Darla was excited.

So was I. Hadn’t worn a tux since my junior year of college, and hadn’t gone to a dance in...no idea when. This would be a little bit like prom night, minus the virginity.

Of the girl.

What did Darla look like for her prom? She must have been luminous, real and casual and fun. Or did she even go? Plenty of chicks in high school boycotted the dance, headed out for alterna-prom, though most of them were losers who couldn’t get a date, or the rare one who couldn’t afford it.

Ouch.

I could be a douche sometimes. Nothing like Joe, but still.

“We fixed that monitor,” Joe explained as the sound tech fiddled with knobs on the display.

“Fuck of a lot of good that’ll do us downstairs.”

“I meant the one on stage, asshole.”

“Oh.” Joe had gotten weird since we came here, morose and silent, especially after the shower sex. Couldn’t figure him out. He got everything he wanted—Penn, Darla, us (whatever that meant), and now this huge show, and yet...

“Suzy really getting to you this much?” I asked.

“What?” He made a derisive sound. “No! No.”

“Then what crawled up your ass and started ice climbing?” The look he gave me wasn’t

your standard, patented Joe Expression, one of the seventeen looks he gave in precise, emotionally calculated ways.

It was, dare I say, genuine.

“What’s up?” I lowered my voice and pulled him aside. He plunked down on the little lounge couch while Liam and Sam walked in and out, moving equipment to have it delivered to the stage area.

“It’s...all of it.” When I’d asked him what was up I hadn’t expected an authentic answer. My skin prickled. Now I had to actually listen.

And guys are as good at listening as women are at getting a prostate exam.

“What do you think of Darla?” he asked me. It felt like a bucket of ice water against my chest.

“What do you mean?” I answered, carefully measuring my tone.

“We’ve been with her for seven months now,” he said slowly, gazing up at me with a look I couldn’t read.

“Yes.”

A long puff of air from him and a bunch of words rushed out, crammed together like one long line of sound. “Itoldherilovedherandshemadefunofmeandsaidshehatedmeandsexisbetterwithyou.”

“Whoa, dude. Slow down. What?”

“You heard me.”

“I heard ‘love’ and ‘hate’ and ‘Your dick is bigger than mine and you are a better lover.’” I thought the joke would lighten the mood, but then he ruined it by agreeing with me.

“Pretty much.” Damn.

“You told her you love her? Really?” I blinked hard. Didn’t know what else to do. Joe had beaten me to it and Darla had said *what?*

“Yes.” We were down to one-word answers. Not good.

“And she...”

“Blew me off.”

Whoa.

“Hold on. When? When did you say it?” Love? Joe said the L word? Joe?

“As we were boarding the plane.”

“Right before your tie-dye lesson?” I couldn’t keep the bitterness out. Hey, when a guy beats you to it on multiple levels...

“No. After we showed our boarding passes and she freaked out before we entered the plane.”

“And she...?”

“Said nothing. Just got on the plane.”

“Joe. Come on. She was having a total panic attack. You saw her. We didn’t know she’d never flown before. You can’t take anything she said at face value. It’s like holding a guy to what he says when he’s coming.”

Joe just nodded and frowned. “True.”

Silence blanketed us.

“Love?” I finally said. “You feel it?”

He shrugged. “If that’s not what this is, then I’m really confused.”

“Me too,” I said, sighing.

“You feel it, too?”

My turn to shrug. “I feel...something. Don’t know what to call it, but I guess love is the closest word I can think of. And she really said all that?”

“Said she hated me and you were better in bed.”

“She said that after you said ‘I love you’?”

Joe frowned and thought for a minute. “No. Before.”

“That’s not quite as bad, but...” I covered my abs with both arms as if he’d punched me. “That’s a gut check.”

“Yep. The hating...that I can chalk up to nerves. And I know the idea that you’re a better lover is a joke.”

“Fuck off.”

He chuckled without actual laughter. “But she just ignored what I said. So...”

I got it.

Message received.

Nobody was ready for it yet.

Least of all Darla.

Darla

We got ourselves together, showered, and put on what we were told was “mandatory formal attire” for all dinners. That meant something close to a ball gown for me and tuxedos for the guys.

The resort had called ahead and asked for everyone’s measurements, and just like our luggage magically appeared in our respective suites, full black-tie outfits appeared for Joe and Trevor, and I was given a choice of five extraordinarily amazing ball gowns to choose from.

Guess it was time to shave my legs, huh?

I gave the guys a fashion show, and by gown number three Joe declared, “Can’t you just get Amy in here to choose?”

“She left—remember?”

He winced.

“Poor baby,” I said, caressing his cheek. “Having to watch me in gowns.”

“It’s not that!” But he skedaddled as fast as he could, like a Jets fan who accidentally stumbles, drunk, into a Pats bar after a loss.

I chose on my own, a sleek, sea-green gown that matched my eyes. Five pairs of shoes were delivered in my size, too, and I picked these little silver, shimmery strappy-heeled things that looked more like earrings than footwear, but what the hell do I know? I buy almost everything on color-dot sale day at the Salvation Army.

This was more Tim Gunn than grunge rock, you know?

The phone rang. A woman cleared her throat. A smooth, cultured voice made me shrivel into nothing. “Ms. Jennings? This is Simone, from the spa. Your reservation is in ten minutes.”

“My *what*?”

“Your appointment for your work.”

“My *work*?”

Simone cleared her throat again, her tone of voice nasally to my midwestern ears. “According to the reservation, you’re to have a cut and style, waxing, a mani-pedi, and a facial. See you in ten minutes, and we look forward to working with you.” *Click*.

That was perfunctory.

“Hey, Trev? Joe? You guys schedule me for a bunch of spa stuff?”

Two distinct “no” responses.

Hmmmm. Must be part of the resort deal.

Waxing? What do they wax? Legs and pits, right? Maybe my upper lip and eyebrows. I know some women wax the nibbly bits and the brown starfish, but they wouldn't do that...here. Right?

My mind flashed back to the naked women I'd seen this week, and there had been plenty of 'em. Hmm.

Waxed clean.

Smooth as a...

Blowfish.

“Who was that?” Trevor came out of the bathroom, clean shaven and smelling of shaving cream and aftershave. Uncle Mike always had that scent exactly once a week, on Sunday, right before he'd go to church. Sometimes. Now that I think about it, he never came back talking about the sermon, but sometimes Mama would ask how Miriam was.

Hmm. The only Miriam in Peters was the woman who ran the florist shop. Two plus two hit me and I realized Uncle Mike had a girlfriend.

Hot damn.

Trevor was watching me as I muttered under my breath, and I looked up to find him wiping his neck and face with a hot, wet cloth. “What are those gears doing in there?” he said, tapping his own head.

“Figuring shit out.”

He kissed me on the cheek. “Go get beautified. Not that you need it.”

I snorted. “You want a hairless taco?”

“Anything but a blowfish.”

Joe

I watched from around the corner at the easy way the two of them talked to each other, a hot, throbbing, jealous zing shooting through me as Darla left.

Talk to her, my mind told me.

Don't even try, said my heart.

I'd tap that, blowfish and all, my dick added. *And I wonder what she'd be like with a full Brazilian.*

Shut up, cock. You're not helping.

Trevor and I killed an hour riffing and goofing off with our guitar and bass, just keeping the fingers limber. Finally, he set his instrument down and went to the bedroom area.

“You worried?” Trev asked, starting to dress in the tuxedos the resort provided. He needed help with his cuff links, and I figured what the hell? We were practically each other's bitches anyhow, and with Darla gone...

As I fiddled with his wrist I said, “About Suzy? No. What could she do?”

His eyebrows shot up. “You really want to be found handcuffed to a bed again with a tunnel butt plug up your ass and a ball gag in your mouth?”

“You promised you wouldn't talk about—”

“By your mom?”

“Shut up!”

“Suzy is fucking scary, man. Darla took out part of her hair. She's going to rip out Darla's heart and make it dance at the next VMAs on live TV.”

“But Suzy can’t...the master has a purpose for her.”

“The what?” Trevor froze and yanked his wrist away from me.

“The master.”

“The *master*?”

“The guy who runs this island.”

“And he has a purpose for...Suzy being here?”

I nodded.

“You been dropping acid?”

“It sounds crazy. I know. I was talking to this guy. He told me there’s some guy called the ‘master’ of the island, and all the people here are by invitation only.”

“Even the workers?”

I raised one eyebrow. “We’re here by invitation.”

“And so is Suzy?”

I nodded. None of this made sense. Not one detail. But talking it out with Trevor was helping, even if we couldn’t solve anything.

The phone next to the bed rang. Trevor poked his chin towards it, a silent request for me to answer. I saw him affixing that tiny little patch to his wrist as he finished putting on his shirt, then he went for his socks and pants.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Mr. Ross? Your dinner assignment is in the Nin ballroom.”

“Nin? As in Nine Inch Nails?”

The man cleared his throat and sounded like he was smiling. “As in Anaïs Nin.”

“Oh. Thank you.” I felt like a preschooler in the presence of doctoral students.

We finished dressing and stared at each other. Trevor and I cleaned up nicely, and it felt like prom night all over again. A tap at the door and Liam and Sam appeared, all spiffed up as well.

“We look like a Vegas act,” Liam quipped.

“If Vegas had naked croquet. You see those bruised shins? No thanks,” Sam said dryly.

“We ready?” Liam asked.

“Where’s Darla?” Sam asked, looking mopey. His chick was gone. Too bad. I had to live without mine for three and a half months. Boo fucking hoo for a couple of days.

“Getting,” Trev said, jazz hands around his face, “a bunch of spa treatments and hair and makeup stuff.”

“Amy would have loved that,” Sam said.

“She’s having Christmas with her family, Sam, not joining a convent.” Liam’s comment stung and Sam shut up.

“Ready?”

We were.

Naked crotch shots on the hallway walls aside, the walk through the labyrinth of hallways was uneventful, until we reached the grand ballroom and navigated to the doorway marked *Nin*. A tall marble staircase, the kind with two sides that curled inward, was across from the ballroom’s entrance, and crystal chandeliers that weighed more than the building hung in the foyer, making everything glittery and diamond-like.

But that wasn’t the shiniest object in the room.

I saw her bare shoulder first, then the sweep of hair across her back, the blond locks coiffed into perfect, silken waves that were half up, half down, the glamour making my breath catch in my throat, my exhale a ragged stretch of amazement.

Her dress was the color of her eyes, a sea green only found in nature, with a shimmery effect that made her curves stand out, her body lush and welcoming. Beckoning. The cloth looked molded onto her, from neckline to ankles, as if the finest designer in Italy had hand-stitched it just for her.

Darla rarely wore makeup, and normally I wouldn't have liked it, but the look was one of a 1950s glamour girl, like a movie stunner who graced posters. Her face was porcelain smooth, lips lush and red like cherries. Ripe, round, sweet ones. Cheeks pink with excitement, her eyes stood out, clever and promising.

Long lashes fringed those sea-foam irises, eyeshadow bringing out the planes of her face, giving her an ethereal, solid beauty. An old Norse goddess come to life, in Hollywood form. I half expected her to reach out for a cigarette and slide it into one of those long holders from the old black-and-white movies, and for twelve men to rush over with gold-plated lighters, flints at the ready to spark up and light her fire. In more ways than one.

Darla looked like an earlier generation's version of Marilyn Monroe in a pin-up poster, minus the nudity. There was a sensual grace to her as she walked to us with small steps in high heels I wanted to feel digging into my back, legs wrapped around my waist as I made love to her with Trevor eliciting cries of pleasure from her, the three of us—

Stunning. Elegant and ideal, she pierced my heart and made it grow.

She caught my eye, then Trevor's, and looked us up and down twice, her eyes taking us in and clearly liking what she saw. We were a dapper pair, and this time, wearing a tux made me feel like the man I am, and not the man I wanted to be.

Like this, I saw a part of Darla that I wanted to cleave to, a future we could share with her graceful beauty and grounded reality blending with my own sense of self and path for the life I could live if I were with her. The synergy between who she was, who she could be, and who we wanted to be together was complete and waiting.

Those ruby-red lips parted slowly, showing me the tip of her pink tongue. A wave of possession ripped through me, my hands itching to wrap around her waist, to bury themselves in her coiffed hair, to kiss her until her knees went weak and she clung to me.

But, instead, I listened as she leaned forward, the scent of something timeless and heady overwhelming me, making me want her even more.

"They waxed my hole," she whispered when I got close enough.

She really knew how to make an entrance.

Chapter Eleven

Darla

I...it takes a lot to make me speechless. *A lot*. As in, it mostly takes ripping out my vocal cords or watching naked high school boys pushing against the back of a cow they were trying to get on a Ford F-150 to take to school as a homecoming dance date back in Peters.

Like that.

The sight of Liam, Trevor, Sam, and Joe walking to dinner made me feel like I was in a fairytale. An offbeat, unconventional fairytale, but a delightful one. My eyes were only for Trevor and Joe as they surveyed me, and I knew that all the treatment at Simone's spa (a.k.a. Torture Monkey) had been worth it. Simone had been an interesting woman, with the kind of bleached-blond hair and dark tan plenty of women back home adopted, but with a kind of not-quite-male, not-quite-female sophistication that left me in awe.

Unaccustomed to spa services, I'd deferred to her. The eyebrow threading, the lip waxing, and getting naked on all fours for purposes that did not involve sticking a penis inside me, but instead involved hot wax and a scream that peeled paint...

Was worth it.

Their eyes roamed over my face, my hair, my body, and my heart as if they were painters memorizing me in fine details, forever holding this image inside. Love and lust blossomed in their eyes. Trevor's broad shoulders and fine hands made the cut of his tuxedo serve him well, the tan he'd acquired from a handful of hours these past few days outside a lovely contrast to the crisp whiteness of his shirt. I wanted to slowly unwind the bow tie, unbutton his shirt with a lingering anticipation, and run my French-tipped fingernails down the delightful groove between his pecs, lower and lower until he inhaled sharply and I knew I had him.

Joe looked like a model from *GQ*, the same Greek-god looks that caught me unaware and by storm in Ohio now on triumphant display. His strong jaw and cheekbones with sun-darkened skin stretched across under eyes that glittered like dark gemstones made butterflies take off *en masse* in my chest. The cut of his tuxedo nipped at the waist, leading up to compact shoulders, the tie under a chin stretched by a small, intimate smile. Aimed at me.

When he showed teeth, he looked like a wolf. I wanted to be prey. Hunted. Those animal eyes certainly took me in. A whirlwind of sophistication took all the air in the large foyer and made time stand still. I felt worldly. Polished. Elegant and, as Mama would say, "All done up nice."

All the guys had shaved and cleaned up nicely, and I was completely flustered, a jumble of emotions that whirled and swirled inside as my two men ate up the floor between us and I found myself enveloped by them, the scent of aftershave and them consuming my senses.

So what do you say when you're in that state?

"They waxed my hole."

They waxed my hole? Did I really just say that? My hand flew to my lips with a smack, as if spanking them for being so stupid.

Way to ruin the moment with my big mouth. Not that it was a change from the usual...

"Which one?" Trevor murmured, laughing. Joe just shook his head, eyes flitting about, suddenly a bit nervous, as if I'd broken some magic spell.

"You look great, Darla," Sam said, giving me a hug. The dress was tight in all the right places, which meant I could barely move. Simone had said something about sacrifices we have

to make to be beautiful, but I hadn't realized that meant I'd have a hairless asshole that felt like I was walking around with my lip turned inside out in a blizzard.

Liam gave me a hug, too, and my God, that man had muscles. He was bigger now, I noticed, than Trevor—more filled out. Some lucky woman was going to sweep him off his feet, though from what Trevor and Joe said, this week he'd had more than his fair share, horizontal and all.

Trevor's hand on the small of my back felt like a claiming. Joe did the same with my bare shoulder, the touch soothing and confirming.

"Shall we?" Joe said, gesturing to the grand dining hall.

A woman approached us, holding a notebook. "You're Random Acts of Crazy?"

Liam stepped forward. He ate this up. "Yes. I'm Liam, the guitar—"

"Liam McCarthy!" she said in a clipped, knowing voice. And then she pointed. "Sam Hinton, Joe Ross, Trevor Connor, and you must be Darla."

We all pulled back, a bit surprised. So far, we'd been pretty much unknown here, just doing our thing and getting ready for the performance. Most of my day had been nothing but detail work, making sure the guys were taken care of right. This was the first bit of fame for us.

"Yes!" Joe said, turning on the charm. Oh, and once he did, it was magnetic, so hard to step away from you almost needed a stronger magnet with a bigger pull to get away. "And you are...?"

"Noelle Davis. I'm a reporter," she said. Blond. Curvy like me. Our features weren't similar, but seeing Joe smile at her like he wanted to fuck her made something in me go tense.

"Reporter?" someone behind us murmured, practically running away.

"I'm covering the band and noticed," she said, eyes on Trevor and Joe's hands on me, "you three have an unusual arrangement. So the rumors are true?"

"Rumors?" Joe quickly withdrew his hand from my shoulder. It felt like a punishment.

"Oh," she said, waving her hand. "It goes with the territory, doesn't it?"

"What does?" Trevor said, tightening his hand on my waist.

Noelle ignored him for a few beats as she jotted something down on a small notebook. She was good. Knew how to be vague and direct at the same time. Nothing about this bothered me, except Joe's reaction. And then she just sauntered off with a little wave, leaving a pool of confusion in her wake.

"I can't have that reporter figure out that we're in a threesome. It will be all over the news and...no way. My legal career, my family...fuck no!" Joe said in a tight, low voice. Liam touched Sam's shoulder and jerked his head toward the dining hall. They left us alone, standing near a giant flower display. Irises, of course.

I gave Joe a steely look. "I hear you. Loud and clear. You might as well have a bullhorn pressed against the side of my head." My heart rate shot up and fireworks blasted through me. "So what do you suggest we do?"

"How about we lure her into thinking you're not with me? That you're just with Trevor?"

"She's long gone, and who cares?" I said, matching Joe's tone.

"Someone already told her you're with more than one guy," Trevor said.

Joe's face fell. "That's right. Shit." He frowned and thought for a bit, giving me a chance to really look at him. Lines formed in the skin around his eyes, indentations that weren't there even last summer. He looked weary and a bit worn. His brow creased all the time with tension.

My Joe had always been a bit intense, but being this tense was different.

"I know!" His face lit up with a smile that made me return it. Ah! Now *this* was the Joe I

wanted to see more of.

Eyes excited and hands animated, he said, “How about you hit on a few of the men here, in front of the reporter, so she’ll think you’re with a *bunch* of guys?”

Trevor looked at him like he’d just suggested we bomb North Korea.

“Say what?” I asked, not quite believing my ears.

His hands flew into the space about his head, fingers splayed in a grotesque version of jazz hands as I reacted to what I thought he’d just said. My stomach was like a cattle fence combined with sriracha sauce, all in a buzzing blender.

“It’s genius! You come on to a bunch of guys and make her think you’re a fun girl looking for a lot of action. Throws her off the scent. And then she won’t suspect we’re a threesome.”

Trevor cocked one eyebrow, pulled his hand off my body, and folded his arms over his chest. Eyes ping-ponging between me and Joe.

Okay. So I had heard correctly. In my best Mr. Rogers voice, I responded with, “What I’m hearing you say is that I should pretend to be a whore so that reporter doesn’t think I’m actually in a permanent threesome with you as part of it.”

“Exactly!” he said, smiling and nodding, with the damn look I knew so well, the one that was so pompous and pleased with himself and pleased that his little project (that would be me) was coming along so nicely in her education.

Fucking Pygmalion my ass.

SLAP!

Don’t blame my hand. It couldn’t help it. Involuntary, like a sneeze, the smack I gave him across his face made his neck pull a full ninety-degree turn to the side, his mouth open and lips rippling from the impact. I could see it in slo-mo (and would, for the next hour or two, like a loop I couldn’t control, so intrusive it took over half my mind, and I would need that half, as you’ll see in a moment).

I stormed off, unable to even look at him, knowing what I’d see in those eyes.

Suzy had tried to fat shame me the other day, but Joe?

Joe was just plain old *shaming* me.

Trevor

“That went over about as well as trying to ride a lead balloon out of a tornado,” I said as we watched her leave.

“You sound like her,” Joe said.

“After a while, it’s hard not to.” My belt cut into my belly, which was now tight from tension, and blood roared through my ears. Being surprised by the reporter was one thing, but what Joe’d just said...

He deserved the growing red blotch on his cheek.

His hand came up to press it. “Damn.”

“What made you think it was acceptable to say that to her?” I demanded, increasingly pissed as the crowd filed into the dining hall. My appetite was gone. Our woman had stormed off down the hallway, hurt and righteously angry.

Rightfully so.

Joe’s face hardened. He looked like a piece of tanned marble with a pink overlay in the shape of a hand. “I was trying to do damage control.”

“You failed.” I turned and spun away, my pants crisp, with a razor-sharp crease in the front. The walk to my seat in the dining room wasn’t enough time to get my emotions in check.

I found Sam and Liam at a huge table that seated twelve. The room was enormous, with at least a hundred of these. Who knew there were so many guests?

And, thankfully, we were all clothed.

The faces swirled in my vision as I looked around. Men. Women. People of undetermined gender. Some obvious cross-dressers. A few not-so-obvious cross-dressers. Hell, there was one woman, a gorgeous Chinese lady who looked so porcelain smooth in a way that only laser treatments could achieve—which made me think she wasn't born a she. Which was cool—live and let live.

Not that we had any room to judge.

I took my seat where a placard with my name, written in an antique font, rested. Sam and Liam were sprinkled about the table, and I saw Darla's name on one of the cards.

A waiter took my drink order and within a minute I had a tequila shot in front of me. One drink before a performance was fine, and I had four hours to go. This would work. It had to work.

Joe wandered in about ten minutes later, looking hangdog and filled with regret. Shit. This was deteriorating fast, and we couldn't take the stage acting like our puppy just got run over by a steamroller.

Liam was chatting up a very hot, older blond woman, and Sam just took in the room, an awed expression stretching his face. Scores of tuxedoed waiters milled about. I felt like I was at a pre-Oscars dinner.

As the first course was served, there was an empty spot across the table and Darla's still free. I ate my food robotically, and Joe seemed agitated as they cleared the plates and brought the next course, a simple squash bisque. Soup and tuxes don't exactly go together, but I ate, knowing I'd need the energy for our performance.

Joe came over to me and rested his hand on the back of my chair. I turned and he whispered, "I think I need to find her and apologize."

"You think? *Now* you think that?" I checked my smartphone. "We have to finish here in twenty minutes and then go get ready to rock. No time."

He frowned. "I guess I'll see her at the stage, right? Maybe she's just skipping dinner."

When did Darla ever skip something like this, though? She wasn't the type to hold grudges. Then again, until forty minutes ago, I'd have never guessed she was the type to slap a guy like that.

"Give her time to cool down," I whispered. Sam's eyes caught mine and he pointed to Darla's empty spot near me. I shrugged. He mimicked me and continued gawking, taking in the gold-painted ceiling and the frescoes on the walls.

The room reminded me of a trip my parents had forced me to take with them when I was thirteen, a sprawling vacation throughout Italy. My autistic brother, Rick, had just been put in a new group home and Mom and Dad had needed the change of scenery. I understood that now, but back then I thought I was being tortured with this boring trip to some boring country.

Man, was I a spoiled little shit.

And that was how Joe had just acted toward Darla.

The soup dishes were cleared, a second tequila magically appeared, and I broke my own rule. Joe and Sam were tapping their feet so hard I could see their bodies vibrating, bouncing up and down. I expected it from Sam. Not from Joe.

Nerves. We were going to be destroyed by nerves if we didn't get this shit under control. Everyone except Liam, who was now nuzzling the neck of the painted blonde, a woman who was

the polar opposite of his old high school girlfriend, Charlotte. That wasn't an accident.

Time crept by like the kind of unending ennui I remembered from high school, my inner self screaming inside, overcome by waves of needing to escape. Every second that Darla didn't appear made my teeth ache.

Joe was rapidly coming unraveled before my eyes.

How could he say "I love you" and then a few days later treat her like she was some expendable piece of meat, good enough to fuck behind closed doors but not worth acknowledging in public?

Hypocrite, my conscience whispered.

I closed my eyes just as a gorgeous plate of filet mignon, lobster, julienned vegetables, and artistically shaped root vegetables was put in front of me.

I wasn't much better.

Much.

Chapter Twelve

Darla

Storming away, my hand stinging from hitting Joe's cheekbone, I felt the tears in my throat first, thick and indignant, my brain a mush of rage and horror and disappointment.

How could he do that?

Who did he think he was?

Who did I think *I* was, stomping down a hallway like a mermaid with split legs on shiny high heels that would be better used for picking locks than to support my frame, walking down hallways where the carpet-cleaning fee alone was more than I made in a year, and in an atmosphere where, once again, it was clear that I was the fucking weirdo.

The outsider.

The outlier.

The outcast.

You know what it's like to feel that way all the time? Every damn moment of your life? It's like pressing your face against the cold glass of a big old department store window, or a fancy restaurant, and watching all the fun taking place so close, but so far and out of reach. Seeing the clothing you can't wear. Watching other people take bites out of food you can't taste. Separated by something as simple as a clear quarter of an inch, yet continents away, because you're outside.

And the rest of them are all where you don't belong.

I would never, ever belong with Joe. The damndest part of it was my heart ached more than it had any right to at that thought. Whatever made me think he could care about me in the first place?

I tore the comb thingy out of my hair and flung it against a wall, where it bounced off a sponge made to look like a vulva. The shoes came off next, because who could balance on toothpicks?

I looped my fingers in the straps of the sandals and walked to my room, wishing the distance were longer. Might as well just go back, grab a snack, and change into jeans and a t-shirt for working the concert. Not that I was feeling it, but they had to have someone there to mother-hen them, managing all the stupid shit that they couldn't handle when it was showtime and their brains and mouths had to click over to live in the world of music.

Even in this state I could shift into manager mode. The night unrolled in my mind: change, concert, sleep, and then we'd fly home tomorrow and I'd be done.

And I do mean *done*.

Joe could be done, too. How do you break up with one person in a threesome? The relationship logistics of this were worse than trying to avoid potholes in Ohio in March.

But I wouldn't let myself be shamed any more. Letting someone who didn't love me, and who had no hope of ever accepting me—us—for what we were was like smashing your head against a brick wall over and over only so you could stop sometimes and feel so much better.

The little patch that magically did everything was on my ankle now, and the door opened. The made-up bed, my discarded earrings, the half-drunk bottle of water, and the scent of shaving cream all hit me as I stared across the threshold. Taking in a shaky breath, I let my eyes well up with tears.

Add a good cry to my to-do list tonight.

“Oooh, lookit you!” said a voice behind me, a hand on my glittery green hip.

“Trevor, cut it—” A hand clamped over my mouth. Strong, stronger than me, and my palm sought anything I could grab to fight, finding a bald head.

Excited blue eyes.

In double.

It was the twins. What the fuck? The men from yesterday near the docks, with the big, beautiful women who got off the boat. And they were...?

Hands tore at my dress, pinning my flailing arms and grabbing at my fingers, bending them until I cried out. My neck whipped back and forth, muscles strained to the hilt, making bobby pins dig in behind my ear, the sickening crush of torn skin less important than the thought that I was being abducted. My mind reeled.

The two men lifted me into the air like I weighed no more than a candy cane, but I fought, long and hard, kicking and biting their hands, screaming ineffectively. They muted me easily.

“Ooooh, she’s good,” one of them said as I struggled with a loose hand to grab one of their sacs and twist and hurt them. No luck.

“Yeah, baby, that’s right,” the owner of the now-erect penis said. I tried to hurt his inner thigh, tried to get out from the gasp of four strong hands, but failed. These French-tipped nails were useless.

Joe! Trevor! my mind screamed. My mouth tried.

Fingernails that only a woman could possess cut deeply into my ankle as I was lifted into the air by what felt like an octopus, but turned out to be only two men. Both twins frowned deeply as I twisted and scratched, feeling my own blood dripping down my Achilles tendon, and heard a woman’s voice.

“Not here. Down the hall.”

And then a cloth over my face and one final sound from the woman before I descended into darkness.

“Moo.”

Trevor

Dinner dragged on. And on. Liam slipped out with the blond chick he was chatting up, leaving with a wink and a promise to be at the stage long before we started. Sam ate his dinner quickly and then left, claiming he needed to call Amy, but I knew the truth: the loud, opinionated bloviator sitting next to him, a guy about our fathers’ age, was a bit too much like Sam’s abusive minister dad.

So I was left with Joe.

Joe kept looking at the main door, as if watching it every ten seconds would make Darla appear.

“Did she drop her glass slipper?” I finally asked.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

The bloviator, without Sam to target, tried to talk to us. “Who missed dinner?” he asked, pointing to the two empty spots, silverware perfect and untouched.

“Our—*my*—girlfriend,” Joe said quietly, face a neutral mask.

“I don’t know about the other person,” I added. One of the music techs appeared at Joe’s side and whispered something in his ear. I checked my phone: ninety minutes to showtime. We had to get down there.

Bloviator stood and peered at the placard. “Darla Josephine Jennings.” He looked at me with rheumy eyes. The guy’d had more than a few. “Girlfriend?”

We both nodded. Joe paused, chin dipped down, and slowly closed his eyes as if in pain.

“What about,” the guy said, looking at the other card, the one turned away from us, “Suzy Bergen?”

What
the
Fuck?

Joe stood and ripped the placard off the table, staring at the words.

“No Suzy. No Darla,” he groaned, urgency in his voice. “This is not good. Not good. We have to go find her. Darla would have come back. I wondered—” His voice caught. “I’m such a fucking asshole.”

Ninety minutes to showtime and we discover this? “We don’t have time,” I blurted.

Joe’s eyes bugged out of his head, all decorum gone. Fuck, mine was, too, because all I could imagine was Darla, chained to a bed, being tortured by Suzy like Joe had said he was.

Or down in a hole in the ground with a bucket of lotion being lowered.

“What the fuck do you mean we don’t have time.” His voice was so low and angry he might as well have gargled with broken glass, the words a comment, an indictment. Not a question.

“We have a show,” I said in the calmest voice I could muster. “We cannot back out. We’re on a fucking island. The show lasts ninety minutes. Suzy won’t *kill* her...” And that was when my own words stopped making sense. What was I saying?

He sprinted out the main doors and called back: “I’ll be there. Just hold out for me.”

And even I knew not to shout out for him, but I did anyway, turning heads as I called out, “No way you’re going anywhere alone.”

Taking off at a sprint, my new shoe soles slipping on the marble floors, I was stopped by a music tech. “Ms. Jennings hasn’t appeared to help with setup,” he said in an annoyed tone.

“I know. She’s missing.” My terseness didn’t affect him one bit.

“We need someone to help with sound checks and mics.”

“Can’t Sam or Liam do that?”

“Mr. McCarthy isn’t there, and Mr. Hinton said he’s not knowledgeable enough about vocals.” True. He wasn’t.

Only me and Darla were. Damn.

Joe disappeared down the hall and I walked quickly with the tech. “I’ll help with setup,” I barked. “But I need you to contact security and ask them to search the entire island for Darla Jennings.”

The tech repeated my request into the small headpiece he wore, nodded curtly, and said, “You can change into your concert clothes—”

“Not now. Let’s get this over with and then I need to get back to this...” What do you call it when your girlfriend may have been kidnapped by your friend’s ex-fiancee?

“This *what*?”

I sighed. “This random act of crazy.”

Joe

Our room opened easily when I waved the cuff link to which I’d attached my little piece of patch. I didn’t even need to set foot in there to know Darla wasn’t here.

Without knowing where Suzy’s room was, I sat on the edge of the bed and thought. Darla

would have come back here, wanting to change and go to the stage. Never in a million years would she miss the performance; she had too much integrity to let anger get in the way.

I fiddled with my cuff link, nervous and frayed on the inside. Way to fuck up your life, Joe.

And then—my cuff link.

The patch.

The patch. I took off for the concierge desk, shooting past two people in Pokemon costumes, a Charmander and a Pikachu, and someone dressed in a steampunk masterpiece with a copper espresso machine looped around their chest as armor.

A young Asian woman about my age, with pale porcelain skin and long hair in a braid, tipped her face up from the counter and smiled.

“Mr. Ross.” They always knew our name. Always.

“Can you locate people with this?” I held out my piece of patch.

Her eyes went neutral. “We...use that as a smart device for guests to move about the premises in—”

“What if someone’s life is at stake?”

Her eyes widened and she pushed a small button on the counter. I’d seen enough movies to know what she’d just done.

“You just called security?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Now track the location for Darla Jennings.”

With a few taps the clerk looked up, puzzled. “She’s in the ocean.”

My balls tightened and my throat closed. I wanted to punch something until I bled. “The ocean?”

“According to the GPS coordinates, yes.” Aha! So they did track us.

“That makes no sense. There’s no way Suzy would take her out into the ocean.” Unless she’d killed her and dumped her body. No. Couldn’t think like that. Besides, Darla could twist Suzy around her neck and wear her like a scarf, so no amount of Pilates could make Suzy strong enough to beat Darla.

“Suzy? Ms. Suzy Bergen?” Her lips turned down at the ends as she typed. “We’ve had a few complaints about her,” she said under her breath.

“I can’t believe you let her on the island after the way she acted back on the mainland.” My words were meant to be a pointed barb but they came out with more bite than poke.

The woman ignored it. “We are well aware of Ms. Bergen’s past,” was all she said, her face neutral.

“Where is her location? You have to track it,” I demanded.

Two huge security guys, dressed in black suits, appeared as if materializing with a molecule ray. “You need help, Li Ping?” Burly and Big looked like twins with shaved heads and beefy cheeks, though Big had gray in the light stubble that covered his pate.

“Mr. Ross needs assistance in locating his guest, Darla Jennings.”

The big guys frowned at each other. “We just got a request from Trevor Connor to search the island for her. Why?” Big asked, pressing an earpiece and holding up one finger.

“My ex-fiancee is here and may have kidnapped her,” I explained.

“Is this part of a role-play gone wrong?” Burly asked, his face a mask.

“A role-play?”

Li Ping shrugged. “It happens. People express their fantasy wishes, and then reality does not hold up to fantasy.”

“You think I have a fantasy about my ex-fiancee stealing my now-girlfriend and—oh, no. Not one bit.”

“You never know what someone wants in the deep recesses of the libido,” Burly said in a philosophical tone. Great. Now bodyguards were turning into Dr. Ruth.

“Can we find Suzy? I’m sure wherever she is, Darla is.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for the performance?” Big asked. “You’re with the band.”

“Fuck the performance,” I muttered. “My girlfriend might be in danger.”

“Darla’s cool,” Burly muttered. “Met her a few times. She seems like the kind of woman who can take care of herself.”

“You met Suzy, too?” I asked.

Burly flinched. “She’s hardcore.”

“My restraining order ended ten days ago with her.”

He cocked his head, one of the chandelier’s lights glinting off his hoop earring. “The master has plans.”

There he was again. This mysterious master. “Whatever master plan the master of the island has, it damn well better not involve Darla and a tunnel butt plug, because those things hurt.”

All three of them stared calmly at me. Then Li Ping said evenly, “Your kink is not my kink.” What the hell did that mean? Her tone of voice was measured and casual, professional and smooth. She really believed it and wasn’t coughing up some line fed to her by her corporate overlord. I liked that.

Hated that fucking phrase, though.

“I’ve located Ms. Bergen. Room 332.”

I took off, Big and Burly right on my heels.

Darla

Waking up in a strange room, wrists and ankles encased in some kind of feathery handcuffs, with a hard ball filling my mouth and leather straps splaying out from the corners of my mouth up and around my ears, might sound like fun in damn near any other circumstance, but right now, my eyes blinking and adjusting to the light, what I saw before me made my stomach clench with pure terror and my juices dry up like I’d been rammed into a Ronco infomercial pussy dehydrator.

Moo fucking hoo.

Suzy and those twins, all three of them looking at me like I was Little Red Riding Hood and they were wolves. Big, bad, non-shifter wolves.

My neck hurt and I couldn’t do anything about it. Breathing made my throat seize up, and I realized I could only inhale and exhale through my nose. The ball-gag thing they’d stuffed in my mouth crashed against my teeth, stuck inside and over my tongue, and because I was on my back the weight of it pressed against the back of my tongue and throat, making it damn near impossible to breathe.

The more I struggled, the more it cut off my air. Visions of Joe and Trevor flashed through me, of my now-bound hand smacking Joe’s beautiful face, and I teared up. That was no good, though, because my throat started to swell with misery and then my nose filled up.

Fuck.

I couldn’t...die...like this. Die? The word made me thrash with terror, and that, I noticed, made the twins light up like Christmas trees, their faces animated with the kind of carnal lust you see when...

Shit.

I'd never seen a face like that, actually, because the look of pure, lascivious control and joy in their eyes was mixed with my own capture, which meant that I wasn't no equal partner here in whatever ravaging they had planned.

I started screaming.

It didn't work. The ball pressed against my uvula and dug deeper into the back of my throat, making me choke and gag, and then bile threatened to come up.

"If you throw up, you'll choke to death on your own vomit," Suzy said casually, like mentioning my shoelace was untied.

"Maybe she likes that?" Twin #1 said. I could only tell them apart because one of them wore a blue bow tie and the other wore burgundy, the same colors they were wearing when I met them near the docks.

In my frenzy, the words clicked on some level where they needed to, and I stopped cold. My muscles needed to be pushed into relaxing by my brain, which was a cyclone of everything spinning round and round. Closing my eyes helped, limiting one of my senses so the others could coordinate.

I was completely helpless.

There was no way out of this, and they'd taken away my one true weapon.

My mouth.

Why? What purpose did Suzy have in abducting me and chaining me up like this? Joe had mentioned she'd done something similar and talked about the restraining orders, but that information had been dragged out of him at a time when I was looped out on whatever they gave me to get through the flight and I thought his story was so crazy it...

Couldn't be true.

If this was true, what else was? What else had Joe told me that I'd blown off and waved away as pure bullshit?

Couldn't talk. Couldn't move. Couldn't defend. Couldn't cry. Couldn't...anything.

My mind went cold.

A long, teasing touch of a finger began as a scratch on my ankle and initiated a slow, torturous path up the inside of my calf. "You like it like this," Twin #2 said. "We're going to give you everything you want."

"How can she say the safeword?" Twin #1 asked Suzy, who carried a clipboard and acted with the air of someone who was in charge.

"She's part of the dubcon fantasy group. Ms. Jennings specifically requested the ball gag, so no worries about safewords." She smirked at me. "And she asked for the forty-eight-hour treatment."

What? What? Dubcon? What's a dubcon?

"Fantasies are the best," Twin #2 said, smiling at Suzy. "Everyone gets what they want."

What in the hell did they want? Whatever it was, I was having none of it. I began to struggle, my voice muffled, gagging be damned. Cold blood shot through me like I'd had slushies hooked up to IVs, my body insane, shifting my mind into a portal of pure, unadulterated survival mode. A tiny part of the leather strap caught in my canines and I began to painstakingly rub the teeth together, hoping I could somehow bite through one strap and then—

Then what?

The leather was quite thin, and as I ground my top and bottom teeth together, I made it millimeter by millimeter through it. Halfway and I had to stop, jaw brutally aching, throat on the

verge of puking.

The hand slid higher, up my gartered thigh. That had been a surprise I'd planned for Trevor and Joe, and my eyes and throat filled with tears at the thought of them, how Simone had suggested the silky undergarment, teaching me how to wear the hose just right, telling me how men go crazy at the sight.

"Oh, God, Gavin, check this out," Twin #2 said to the other. "Garters."

Gavin looked at Suzy. "You did your research. Thank you."

Research? My wet eyes found Suzy's and she winked at me. Winked! Had Simone been some sort of setup? The handcuffs cut hard into my wrists as I pulled, making the bed shake. No way. Nuh-uh. I was not about to be manhandled by two guys who were being tricked into thinking I wanted this. No fucking way.

But what could I do?

For the first time in my entire life, I had no options. No choices. No way out. Sheer force—of body or will—wasn't even available to me.

I was completely helpless, and was about to be taken.

Deep, slow breaths. The leather strap tasted like sweat and dead cow. *Don't think about that*, I snapped inside. *Just keep nibbling, just keep nibbling, just keep nibbling.*

"I love it when she fights," Gavin whispered to his brother.

So I stopped. Joe and Trevor were setting up for the performance by now, probably assuming I was still pissed. Couldn't blame them. Amy was gone, and Sam and Liam were occupied by the prep work as well. No one had any idea where I was, and I remembered the ankle patch.

Ah.

That was why my ankle hurt so much. Suzy had ripped it—and a chunk of my skin—off.

Was this why Joe never talked about her, because she was so batshit crazy he didn't want me to be...what? Contaminated by her? Aware of her? My brain floated off into logical, rational contemplation of his motivations because the alternative was to acknowledge Gavin unbuckling his belt and saying, "You know you want it."

And I would rather dissociate and pretend I live in a *My Little Pony* episode than accept that.

Three-quarters of the way through, I could push the back of my tongue against the ball and feel relief. Almost there. The enamel of my teeth felt like screechy sandpaper and sounded worse in my echoing head, but it was better than the screams of my fear.

Nibble, nibble, nibble.

Gavin's hand was rough as it slid all the way up, finding me panty-less (hey, the garter thing...), and his fingers stopped about an inch before my folds. Any closer and I wouldn't need my annual gynecology exam.

"What the fuck?" He yanked my dress up over my hips and displayed my landing-stripped hoohaw to him, his brother, and Suzy.

"First time being waxed, huh?" she said dryly. "You should take care of that rash." She looked at Gavin. "Does the rash bother you?" she asked, as if I were a showroom model and they were concerned about the color of the car's floor mats.

"That is an amazing tuck job," Twin #2 said.

A *what?* Tuck job? Like, taping your dick up all behind your ass so you hide it? That's what cross-dressers and drag queens do, right? Males who are dressing up as...*ohhhhhhhh.*

They thought *I* was one! Hooray! The one and only time I would ever be glad to be

mistaken for being a man dressed as a woman!

I started to fight, hard, again, because maybe there was a glimmer of hope here. Maybe they expected—

“Shut up, David.” Gavin shoved his hands on his hips and glared at Suzy. “I think there’s been a mistake.”

David walked over to me, making me twist and shriek, the ball gagging me more. Holy fuck, make it all go away. Rescue fantasies of Joe and Trevor bursting in filled my mind, competing with the revulsion caused by David’s fingers on my thighs, parting them.

Whatever he saw made him pull my dress down and immediately reach behind my neck for the ball gag’s clasp, saying, “I’m so sorry, I am so, so sorry, Miss.” His face looked like a combo of mortification and guilt as he freed me. I’d been so close, and now it turned out I didn’t need to rescue myself. The look Suzy shot me told me I wasn’t remotely out of the woods yet, though

“You have a *vagina!*” Gavin shouted. “A real one!”

What’s a fake one look like? I wondered as the ball gag came out and a trickle of blood from chafing at the corner of my mouth leaked onto my tongue, tasting like metal and fear.

The leather strap was off under David’s fumbling fingers and he carefully removed the ball. If he’d yanked it out I’d have cracked teeth. My first words couldn’t come, I was so racked with coughs.

Suzy turned a furious red. “What are you doing?”

“She doesn’t have a cock!” Gavin thundered.

Now I found my voice. “No shit I don’t have a cock! Help! Help! Joe!” I screamed. A dick? They expected me to have a penis? I was saved by my own vulva and vagina? When in my life had being a woman been an *advantage*? Apparently now. Well, praise Jesus for giving me a clit.

Suzy took a pillow and shoved it over my head, my disappearing vision leaving me with a pinpoint of her angry eyes before the world went dark. Air disappeared and I twisted my neck to the right as far as I could, hoping for a thin trickle. A heavy object pressed hard into my cheekbone. It felt like she was sitting on me.

The pillow disappeared as fast as she’d put it on, David’s shaking hands suddenly uncuffing my right wrist. Suzy was a lump at the base of the bed, near the door, very red-faced and livid now. “Oh, God, there’s been such a mistake,” David groaned.

“Joe! JOE! JOE! HELP!” I screamed.

“You can stop with the role-play,” Gavin said to me, stuck between anger and apology. “*She’s* the one who made the mistake,” he thundered, pointing to Suzy. “I’m reporting you to your supervisor. You assured us that this role play was completely consensual and that she was a BBW trans, into it all like we are.”

“You want a chick with a *dick?*” Suzy said, rubbing her hip but not getting up.

“What did you think we said?”

“I heard the BBW part, and...” Suzy looked helpless and cunning at the same time, then shot me a smirk. I couldn’t register much, adrenaline and cortisol pumping through my veins. Just get me out. Just get me out and back to Joe and Trevor. *Out out out.*

“HELP!” I screamed again. David uncuffed my other hand and I sat up, lungs now capable of some sonic booms.

“HELP ME!” I roared.

And then, like a fantasy come to life, the door was flattened, tipping down as the hinges ripped out of the wall, falling perfectly on Suzy as if it were a giant human iron. Joe stepped on the door, his footstep falling exactly on the piece of the door where Suzy’s head was, a sickening

gasp of air coming out of her.

It made me smile, cracked mouth be damned. Sometimes pain felt good for all the right reasons. Motherfucker almost let me...in front of her...she woulda...

“Urgh,” she said as another guy, enormous and dressed like the Men in Black, came through.

Gavin and David looked like twin versions of the *Home Alone* kid, hands on their cheeks like they were silently screaming.

Joe rushed to the bed, his hands on my bleeding ankle, his body shielding mine from the twins. I don’t think he realized he was saying my name over and over, like a mantra.

But he was.

And then Trevor appeared in the threshold, shouting, “Why are you handcuffed?” He stepped on the door and made Suzy shriek.

I smiled a bit wider and felt my body go hot, then cold, with shock.

Joe cradled my face with his hands as Trevor screamed words I didn’t understand at the twins, who were trying to explain to some new, big man in a suit in the middle.

As my hands and ankles gained tingly feeling and my freedom was secure, I felt myself start to just...go. Little pinpricks of white filled my vision as Joe’s hot, unyielding chest pressed against my side and he whispered, “I love you so much. I’m so sorry.”

Joe

I’d like to say that it all ended so neatly there, with me rescuing Darla, punching the bad guys, having Suzy hauled off to jail and out of our lives forever, and we all said our *I love yous* and lived happily ever after.

Right. Only on television.

Instead, I had a sobbing Darla in my lap telling me that she was so glad she didn’t have a penis when she woke up after passing out in my arms. I’m very glad she doesn’t have a penis, too.

We don’t need any more of them in this fucked-up relationship.

The concert was supposed to be the climax of our trip here, the purpose of everything, and Suzy turned it into an afterthought. Big took her away for medical attention and assured me that the master would take care of her, whatever that meant. Suzy kept mumbling something about forgetting her patch and texting my mom.

So what?

Do your worst.

“My penis isn’t here, and it saved me,” Darla said as Trevor knelt on the other side of her, eyebrows up.

“I have no idea what she’s talking about.” Burly came over and explained to us that the twin dudes thought Darla was a willing role-play member in a sex game with transgendered big, beautiful women that involved a fantasy about being taken without choice.

“A *what?*” Trevor shouted, on his feet, fists curled. My body had the same response, and I cradled Darla in my arms, my heart doing an angry dance like an MMA fighter in a cage.

“Your kink is not my kink,” Burly said. “They assumed Ms. Jennings—whom they thought, as well, was a natural-born male—had consented.”

“But I don’t have a cock and balls, so it’s all good,” Darla murmured. “No stones and a stick. No chicken to choke.” I stroked her hair and tried not to laugh through my gut-wrenching anger.

“Suzy set them all up,” I said.

A curt nod from the bald dude was my only reply.

“I am so sorry,” the twins kept saying, and as my anger drained out, the fear of not getting here before Suzy hurt her, the rush to figure it out and the concert—fuck! The concert!—all splintered inside, I mumbled a non-answer and just rocked Darla.

“I love you, too,” she whispered, looking up, makeup smeared and face pale. Trev had stepped aside and I leaned down to kiss her, tasting blood and terror and relief—

And my future.

“Showtime,” she murmured against my ear. “Go break a leg.”

I looked at her scratched ankle and Trevor came over, somber and worried.

“I mean it,” she said, peeling herself off the bed, wincing as her ankles hit the ground. “We have to go. You have to play.”

“After all that just happened? No fucking way,” Trevor said. “We’ll...” He seemed to fight for the right words.

“You’ll play.” Her words were firm and clear. “If you love me, you’ll play.”

And so we did.

And it was awesome.

Chapter Thirteen

Darla

The concert was incredible. No fewer than one hundred guests told me so, dressed in costumes that ranged from their birthday suits to chipmunks to Princess Leia to an impossibly-cute Klingon Dr. Who. Not that I would know whether the concert was any good, unfortunately:

I fell asleep. That's right. Slept through the biggest show Random Acts of Crazy ever performed. Me. The manager. Snoring like a big old lumberjack.

The resort sent a doctor to tend to me in our room, with Trev, Joe, Liam and Sam all racing off to get on stage. I made Trevor and Joe leave, and the security dudes Joe called "Big" and "Burly" stayed behind.

My own bodyguards. A girl could get used to this, especially when one of them looked an awful lot like Mr. Bubbles from *Lilo & Stitch*.

In the chaos of Joe charging in and rescuing me like he was a younger, darker version of Liam Neeson, and Trevor and Joe and the twin kinky dudes talking to me, I didn't see Suzy.

And when the doctor walked in, I realized Suzy was gone.

Uh-oh. "She escaped?" I sputtered, looking at Big.

He frowned, clearly offended by the mere idea. "Of course not. Ms. Bergen has been taken to be held in a secure location."

"Say that in plain English," I snapped at him. One eyebrow lifted but he said nothing.

"Ms. Jennings, I am Doctor Ashwari," the nice, white-jacketed woman said to me, placing an emergency kit on the bed next to me. "I am so sorry to hear of your injuries. Can you tell me what happened?" Her long, dark hair was braided in a beautiful plait streaked with grey and white. Kind, motherly eyes met mine. Her suit under the white coat was a lovely, light grey.

You would think I was getting my tetanus shot updated, and not being tended to on a sex resort where I'd just been mistaken for a man with my penis taped up my ass.

I held up one finger to Dr. Ashwari and finished with Big. "She didn't get away?"

A conspirator's smile spread his scary features into a warm, teddy-bear look. "Oh, no, Ms. Jennings. Ms. Bergen will get exactly what she has coming to her."

That made all my muscles relax, including the ones strained in my earlier ordeal. Now I could look at the doctor and catalog my injuries, starting with my ankle.

"Can you hurry up?" I asked as I yawned wide, my hand so heavy I couldn't cover my mouth. "I have to manage the band." The pillow felt so good. Soft and sweet, like Trevor's inner thigh.

"You've had a tremendous shock, Ms. Jennings. I'm quite certain that the resort staff can attend to the needs of the band," she said, so soothing. My body went limp. Then tense.

"No! When I set up earlier today there was a problem with," – yawn – "one of the...." What was the word? I forgot.

"Mmmm," was all Dr. Ashwari said, taping some kind of salve-covered bandage to my ankle. She moved on to my wrists and damn if that pillow didn't get even more comfortable, like resting between Joe and Trevor's inner thighs.

"The push of adrenaline is fading now, Ms. Jennings, and sleep is your best friend," the doctor said in a voice like one of those new-age tapes my boss's boyfriend, Mike, sometimes listened to in the office when he was there.

"Can't sleep," I said, then yawned. "But when do they start?"

“Forty minutes.”

“I can take a nap...” And I did. For the next three hours.

Damn it.

The next thing I knew, Trevor was leaning over me on the bed as I opened my eyes. He smelled like sweat and excitement and soap, the hair around the edges of his face ringed with wetness, his body pumped and primed.

Yet tender.

“What?” I sat up, confused. Some dream about a chipmunk and a princess having sex gummed up my mind, followed by a twenty-one penis ejaculation salute. “Trevor – huh? Oh, is it time for the concert?” I was still in my shimmery green dress and one ankle had a huge bandage on it. I looked like a mermaid with a gashed fin.

His eyes. So bright and warm as he leaned down and kissed my forehead gently, his hand running down my cheek and over my hair. “No, Darla. The concert’s over.”

I sat up like a shot. “Over?” I screamed. “OVER?” Sliding past him, I stood, my ankle turning in. Limping toward the door, a stream of invective that would make an eighteenth century Scotsman blush on a pirate ship poured out of my mouth.

“Darla,” Trevor said, his voice filled with mirth. “It really is over.”

I was at the door, my hand on the knob, as I turned back and looked at him.

Really looked at him.

He was taking me in, too. Call it sleepiness, call it post-traumatic brain, call it whatever the fuck you want to call it, but my ability to perceive anything changed in those seconds as our eyes just looked each other over. In slow motion, Trevor sauntered across the space that separated us, my mind’s eye etching him in there forever. The torn jeans. The sweaty cotton t-shirt that clung to the ridges of muscle in his shoulders. The look of love in his eyes.

Now, Trevor had plenty of looks he’d given me over the months we’d been together, and I could figure most of them out. This one, though...this one was different.

He reached me and clicked the door back shut. Taking both of my hands in his, he looked down at me, head tilted. Those eyes glittered in the low light like diamonds, and my heart thudded, heavy and out of beat, fluttering and thumping like it was confused.

I swallowed. Something big was about to happen, and it didn’t involve handcuffs or taping a penis under anyone’s taint.

“I love you,” he said, eyes burning with a physical representation of his words. “I love you more than I can show you, and I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you tonight.” His eyebrows went low with a frown, a wince, a tightening of his hands in mine.

“Darla, if something had happened,” he said, voice choking as emotion overtook him. His head dipped down and our skin touched. Each breath I took felt like his essence was mingling with my own, making another kind of love.

“You were great. Both of you,” I murmured, the words too little. Too contained to express what I really felt as my skin flowered with pure joy. My heart took flight and I stood on tiptoe, falling half over when my ankle started screaming. His hands, sure and strong, were about my waist in seconds, lifting me up.

I felt shy. Awkward. Alive and alight because his words...oh, those words.

“I love you too, Trevor.” I looked up and brushed my lips against his jaw. “I think I always have. I just hadn’t met you until seven months ago. But the love’s been there for far longer.”

The kiss he gave me next wasn’t about passion. Not lust. Nor want. It was authentic and timeless, a meeting of the deepest part of me and the deepest part of him. A reaching out to

intertwine and unfurl. To mingle and mix. To be a part of him and allow a part of him in me, so that something bigger than each of us, separate, could exist.

Speaking of which – Joe appeared just then as the door opened of its own accord and I saw the bald heads of Big and Burly bookending him in the doorway. He was in the middle of a conversation with Burly and cut off in mid-word, taking me and Trevor in with eyes filled with more emotion to add to our giant ball of love.

Love was in the air, corny as that sounds.

You live in a relationship, no matter how unconventional, and you know you're wanted. Needed. Cared about and part of the flow. But it's different when the word "love" enters into it all, because that's a word with power. Authority. Dignity. People like Joe and Trevor and me don't make promises we won't keep, and we don't say I love you like it's the emotional equivalent of *How's it going?*

This meant something. *Big.*

I opened my arms and let go of Trevor, turning toward Joe. His embrace was hot and damp, his body trembling from the pounding bliss of performing.

"The concert went well," I said into his smiling face.

"The concert was fucking amazing!" he said. "Best job the band has ever done! You should have seen how crazy the audience went when Trevor played your song."

The look on my face must have been pretty grim, because they both went from stoked to alarmed in less than a second.

"Nice job, Asshole," Trevor said, punching Joe's shoulder. "Way to make her feel even worse."

"No! No! I didn't mean...shit..." Joe muttered, rubbing his shoulder.

"It's okay. I'll see it on video, right?"

Joe lit up. "Yeah! The tech said they were videoing it. Only the stage, only us. No audience members."

While I was sad I missed the live performance, it wasn't like it was my fault. The night got away from me.

Hah. Understatement.

"Since I missed the concert, but got a nice little nap, and because you two look like you just drank nineteen shots of espresso, want to go for a walk on the shore?" I headed out the door, forgetting about Big and Burly.

Trevor and Joe were right behind me when I came to a halt.

"Ms. Jennings? You feeling better now?" asked Big.

"Yes, thanks," I said, heading down the hall to my own room. All four men followed me. If we'd had one of those Cleopatra carriage things I could have traveled in style. Instead, I just limped.

"Mr. Connor, I've been asked to give you this," Burly said, handing Trevor a business card. I squinted to read it.

"Who's Gabriel Dare?" I asked.

Trevor shrugged. "Don't know him." He gave Burly a questioning look.

Big and Burly both raised their eyebrows and gave mysterious looks. "He owns a chain of luxury clubs. Elite?" His voice implied we should have heard of them.

All three of us shook our heads.

"Nope," I said as Trevor fingered the card. A handwritten phone number on the back made my heart pick up speed. That always meant something good, unless it was some skanky ho

groupie trying to get her hole stuffed by one of my men after a concert.

From a guy who owned nightclubs? That could mean a gig.

“You will,” Burly assured us. He pushed his chin forward toward the card. “That’s one number not to lose.” Trevor pocketed the card and gave Joe a curious look as we walked away.

“Wait.” I stopped and turned back to Big. “What happened to Suzy?”

“She’s...” he frowned, “being taken care of.”

“Does someone need a statement from me?”

“It’s more complex than that, Ma’am.”

“Miss. I ain’t no ‘Ma’am,’” I huffed.

“Miss Jennings.” That made him smile. “I am not at liberty to discuss what happens to Ms. Bergen. However, hypothetically,” he said, “The master of the island may give her a choice. Prosecution in Florida or a position, here on the island.”

“A position? As what? A waterboarder?” I snapped.

“Close. A dominatrix,” Big whispered.

“She’d be good at that,” Joe and I muttered at the same time. He reached for my hand and squeezed it. I continued the walk to our room and Big and Burly stood outside as we entered.

Trevor said something to them while Joe escorted me in. Then Trevor came in as I changed into more casual clothes. “They said they’re on orders to follow Darla, but they’ll keep a decent distance.”

“I just love a romantic walk on the beach with four men,” I said sarcastically.

“It is a sex resort,” Joe cracked.

Trevor’s eyes widened and he glared at Joe. “Dude. Look what she’s just been through. Don’t make jokes like *that*.”

“I am not made of lead crystal, Trevor,” I barked. “You don’t have to act like I’m all delicate suddenly just because...because...” My voice faltered. I wasn’t destroyed. Not devastated. Freaked out, sure. But mostly I was exhausted, in that internal way that made me feel like my Darla compass was off, a magnetic field screwing me out of being able to find true North easily.

A normal woman would have wanted time to recover, space to heal and all that psychodramatic bullshit. But normal women don’t get chained to beds by their boyfriend’s ex-fiancee and get mistaken for a chick with a dick at a sex resort.

What I wanted wasn’t privacy, delicacy, or isolation.

I wanted to make sure Suzy didn’t *win*. If I let what she did to me – and make no mistake here, for *she* did that to me. Not Gavin or David. They were hapless, like me – just thought they were part of a game where everyone went in willing and eager. No one with a good heart ever thinks that someone else in a game is an evil puppetmaster until the manipulation is revealed.

And when you realize you’re the target of a malevolent presence who views people as tools for their elaborate game, and who lacks simple humanity, you can’t let them win.

Simple principle.

Love conquers all, but evil can really mindfuck you in the meantime.

Joe’s arm slipped around my waist. He slung a backpack on his shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said.

“What’s that?” Trevor asked, looking at me like he wanted to say something more, but his words were for Joe.

“Just something we might need on our walk,” Joe said. We were silent the entire way down to the beach, the night breeze balmy. No bugs. There wasn’t a single bug in the air, the moon

nice and smiling in the sky, like an admiring fan.

Just then, Joe stopped, the moonlight haloing his head. He looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, Darla," he added, his hand reaching for mine and squeezing. "For making you feel bad with that reporter mess. That's all me. Not you. I should never have treated you like that."

I smiled, the words heard, acknowledged, appreciated and definitely felt. "Thank you." He tucked me under his arm and I pressed my spinning head against his shoulder.

In the shadowed night sky, we three walked hand in hand on the beach. We all wore flip flops and kicked them off, the sand digging between my toes, reminding me I was alive. Not that I didn't know, the press of both men's palms into mine kind of clueing me in.

But I needed something more.

"Since we're here at a place where fantasies come true in whatever form you seem to need them to, you know there's one thing I've always wanted," I said, suddenly shy. On our last night here, after the guys performed and were exhausted, I felt like it was selfish, and yet I couldn't pass up the opportunity to connect with them both.

A kind of reclamation.

Trevor's hand slid up the side of my chest, caressing my breast. He snuggled in closer. "Yeah? Go ahead. Tell us." Joe's palm slid up my thigh. This felt so natural.

And I knew they'd love what I was about to say.

"You know how we...take turns?"

They nodded, both shifting slightly. I knew damn well they were rock hard, and so was my clit. The near-miss with Suzy had us all in a heightened state of...something. And that translated into one thing only when you're twenty-three, away from home, and in a threesome relationship.

Blindingly hot sex.

I needed to get over what had just happened, to tuck it away (pun firmly *not* intended) and to wash it all off with the scent and taste of Trevor and Joe. Suzy couldn't have one drop of power over me. Not one tiny lick. The only way to exorcize Demon Suzy seemed to be to take exactly what she wanted – my happiness – and reinforce it.

To show that love always wins. *Always.*

We took some more steps along the beach, my hands in theirs, with me between them. A strong, warm breeze swept my hair off my face, and I swear I could feel the wind between my legs, as if it sought out the newly hairless skin. Simone's spa treatments seemed worlds away now, and yet I remembered, as a slow simmer built inside, that more than one landscape had changed today.

The world seemed sexually charged. I stopped and kissed Joe, his mouth slanting against mine and burning with need and hunger. Then Trevor, whose kiss was – unimaginably – even more intense.

"I want you both," I whispered.

"You have us both," Trevor said immediately. Joe elbowed him hard in the ribs. "Oh. OH!" Trevor said, eyes blazing. "You want us...*both.*"

We hadn't done that yet. DP. Double penetration. Double entry. Doublemint fun. Nope. Not yet. No sir. I'd been too scared at first, and even though both guys (especially Joe) had encouraged me, I'd drawn a line and they'd respected it. I'd respected my own hesitation.

Until now.

Joe's eyes went hooded and dark, his voice husky with emotion. "Here? Now?" He wasn't asking the surface question, which was easy enough to answer. Trevor's questioning eyes had a little too much tenderness in them, too. This was sweet and all, but if the two of them gave me

these careful, worried looks for much longer I was going to run through the penis and vulva fountain in the main lobby and give myself a bath in it.

I looked around. No one was here. "It is a clothing optional beach," I said, peeling off my clothes faster than I knew I could. Their looks of worry and doubt faded as more of my skin hit the sea air. They joined me, all pretense of going slow abandoned with the intensity of what we three clearly felt.

"Besides," I added, "they waxed my hole." A light breeze came around just about then, reminding me. I puckered up tight. "Get in now while it's smooth, because I am never submitting to that kind of masochism again."

Both guys just kind of looked at me like they didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I probably mirrored their faces. The night was balmy and perfect, but my big ol' mouth couldn't shut up, could it? Ran on and on like a malfunctioned BP oil rig, spewing mindlessly.

"What about lube?" Trevor whispered. Ever pragmatic.

"Got it," Joe said, rummaging for his wallet in his discarded pants.

"You carry lube in your *pants*?" Trevor's voice was filled with awe.

Joe produced three packets. Two were condoms and one was...hot damn.

"You were a Boy Scout, weren't you?" I marveled. "Always prepared."

"Eagle Scout. Order of the Arrow." Then he grabbed the backpack, unzipped a compartment, and unfurled a beach blanket, the kind with waterproofing on one side and thick flannel on the other. He spread it neatly and gestured for me lay down. I didn't need to be asked twice.

"C'mere," I whispered, his mouth hot on mine, muscled legs pressing into my own, with Trevor stretched out on the sand next to me, making a pillow from our clothes. Joe pulled back and I turned to Trevor, who rested on his elbows and then reached up to pull me into a straddle over him. It was like climbing a throne.

And I was their queen.

Oh, the delicious flow of my wet, smooth inner thighs and lips against Trevor's hips. Joe's hands touched me everywhere, cataloguing me with a whisper touch that made me feel wanted and cherished, desired and needed.

It was an expression of love.

The waves behind us crashed against the shore, lapping with the sound of muffled kisses. Nature was our bedroom, our playroom, our friend and foe, giving us a moon that was a silent guard, a beaming, peaceful presence.

Salty air filled my lungs as my men touched me with whispers and sighs, with fingers hot and promising, brushing lips against my skin that catalogued the ways they loved me. Who would have guessed that silly old me would see so much change in just seven months? Christmas was coming soon, with its own set of firsts and wonders. Every week brought a fresh challenge as we worked to find our own path, the three of us.

Right now our bodies were the terrain of new land we journeyed.

Arms taut and body heated, Trevor flipped me, fast, onto my back as four hands caressed me. A pulsing heat took over my mind, driven not by fear – but by desire. Both Joe and Trevor were careful to leave my wrists be, and I thanked them in my mind. An echo of adrenaline from earlier tonight made me falter inside, wobbling just for a second.

Centering myself, I caressed Trevor's shoulders as his muscles moved under my fingers, his head dipping between my legs to brush little kisses everywhere, warming my belly and making me blossom with slickness. The ocean lapped at the shore as Trevor's tongue began a symbiotic

dance of its own, making my hips rise up as Joe's mouth descended on my breast, his wet warmth making me gasp, the heady night air covering us like a cloud.

With shaking hands, I curled my fingers around Trevor's jaw, lifting his head up. His hair shone in the moonlight as a lock of hair fell across one eye. He looked at me with such raw joy my heart expanded as I bloomed with pleasure.

"Come here," I pleaded. Joe kissed me, hard, as Trevor climbed up my body and without knowing who owned which hands, I tipped into another place, thoughts expelled and senses engaged fully. We three became sight, touch, taste, sound and more, my body on top of Trevor's, the familiar sound of a tear, and then I was on him, he in me, full and deep as I watched his hand dispose of the foil wrapper.

Joe's wall of heated muscle was behind me and my body shivered, a hot, thrilling fulfillment that made us all groan with relief and joy. Relief that our thirst would be quenched and joy that we simply were, connected and part of everything in this pinpointed, perfect moment filled the air.

The sound of the ocean made my hips rock forward, as if our lovemaking were in tune with the tides, with the moon, with the stars that peeked out between frothy strands of clouds that stretched across the night sky like lace.

Strokes from Joe's fingertips against my puckered ass made me tighten inside, like a core of the divine. Trevor gasped in mid-kiss, biting my lip enough to come damn close to drawing blood. Instinct made me pull back and he loosened instantly, apologizing with a soft kiss.

"You're so tight," Trevor whispered, his hands transmitting more raw emotion than his voice ever could.

My lip tingled from his bite, the feel of him inside me making me curl under, my hair a fringed curtain around our faces as Joe teased me again, his finger doused in lube, the warmth of his chest behind me, one hand fingering my ass while the other slid up my ribs and tweaked my nipple. It was already hard, but hardened more, his tight, quick pinch making me groan as his finger slipped past my muscle, sending electric shocks through my limbs, from core to toe and finger tips, up my throat and spine. My body burned for more.

Trevor reached up, hips tilting just so, and kissed my shoulder, then took one breast in his mouth, looping his tongue over my nipple. Joe shifted behind me and his finger slipped out, the slick of lube and my newly-waxed nether regions driving me into a hot frenzy.

"Please," I begged, surprising myself. Fear wasn't present – only want. Curiosity and connection and a driving, throbbing call inside me to let my wilder side take over.

Maddeningly slow, Joe's deliberate concentration started with the sound of foil tearing, a few fevered breaths, and then the warm rush of fluid down my ass. His tip pushed against me, Trevor's cock buried deep inside. Where would I find room? My mind asked and then nature answered, my body opening for Joe as he nipped at my shoulder, dragging a teasing tongue tip up to my ear, his wet flesh inside, making me gasp and flush. My climax was so close, and one touch of my clit and this would be over, my body convulsing. If I moved, if I made a sound, if I exhaled, I would lose what was about to happen.

And I wanted this more than I wanted my own release. Both of them, in me at the same time, all three of us united as one.

What I had thought would be so hard was simple, a blinding white pain stretching me as Joe entered, his groan of passion fulfilled making me open like a flower, my hips moving so Trevor could have the full of me, too. We were stunned into silence as our bodies took over.

Love only needs instinct to move forward and deepen the connection.

My orgasm asserted itself as Joe entered me fully, the stretching pain like fire in my belly. A great, wracking series of gasps roared into a bucking orgasm as Trevor caught up, slamming up into me and calling out my name. Joe pressed with a slower, more even movement, the improvised rhythm of the two of them making my body uncertain and erratic, removing logical thought.

I just became, quite literally, a screaming orgasm while having sex on the beach. I had turned into a bartender's drink list at the hands of love.

"I love you," I called out, my cries of passion hard to say, the words weak and unclear. Touch took over, driving us to our own climaxes, each separate but driven together, forged in my body, together.

Whatever I had thought this threesome joining would be had paled in comparison to the reality. The worry of pain and discomfort seemed childish now.

I heard them say it back to me, the words choked and hitched in throats I loved more than the moon – still watching – could ever understand. Sand dug against my knees and a sudden breeze made my skin go to gooseflesh, but as my orgasms subsided I rested, slowly, on Trevor's chest, Joe still inside me. His hot cock beat a steady pounding inside me, as if he had inserted his heart in my body for safekeeping.

A great shiver overtook me as if too much sensation and emotion couldn't be contained. Joe slipped out of me, and then Trevor slid me off him, both out of me and leaving me feeling abandoned, until they cocooned me with their bodies, resuming our heated connection.

Lazy hands played with my belly, my breasts, my hair, as the three of us looked up and greeted the moon with devilish grins.

"You know, I don't need a place like this to make my fantasies come true," I said, wide awake and in love. Trevor and Joe both had their eyes closed, and palm trees behind us made their faces blur with shadow.

"You don't?" Joe murmured through a sultry grin, eyes still closed. His nude body looked like something from an art exhibit.

"No," I said, snuggling in between them both. "I already live the fantasy, back home, without the island."

"Me too," said Trevor.

"Me especially," said Joe.

Both of their voices were fading out from exhaustion. I was glowing. Every cell felt content, every inch of skin satisfied.

I was loved enough.

More than enough.

And how many people can say that?

THE END

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Master of the Island by Lauren Hawkeye (FREE series prequel!)

Random Acts of Fantasy by Julia Kent (The Random Series, Book 3)

Yours Truly, Taddy by Avery Aster (The Undergrad Years, Book 2)

Escape From Reality by Adriana Hunter

Hydrotherapy by Suzanne Rock (Ecstasy Spa, Book 7)

Fight For Me by Sharon Page (Yardley College Chronicles, Book 3)

His Fair Lady by Marian Tee (Soulmates Series, Prequel)

Breaking Free by Cathryn Fox

Hold Me Close by Eliza Gayle (Purgatory Club, Book 6)

Queen's Knight by Sara Fawkes (set in the Anything He Wants world)

How To Tempt A Tycoon by Daire St. Denis (Savage Tales, Book 5)

Dare to Surrender by Carly Phillips (Dare to Love, Book 3)

The Capture by Erika Wilde (The Marriage Diaries, Volume 6)

Rough Draft by Mari Carr (Big Easy, Book 4)

Blurring The Lines by Roni Loren

Return to Sender by Steena Holmes (Return to Sender Book 3)

Pleasure Point by Eden Bradley (San Francisco Doms, Book 3)

Wild Ride by Opal Carew (A Ride Story)

Master of Pleasure by Lauren Hawkeye (The Island, Book 4)

Her Desert Heart by Delilah Devlin

Ivy in Bloom by Vivi Anna writing as Tawny Stokes (Hothouse Series, Book 3)

Thorne of a Rose by Kimberly Kaye Terry

Falling or Flying by R.G. Alexander

Elusive Hero by Joey W. Hill (A Vampire Queen Story)

Captive Desire by Sarah Castille

Delicious and Deadly by C.C. MacKenzie (Ludlow Hall, Book 8)

Pleasure Games by Jessica Clare (A Games Novel)

TBA by Jennifer Probst

Invitation to Eden's other April Releases

Have you read them?

Yours Truly, Taddy by Avery Aster

The year is 2002 and eighteen-year-old Manhattanite Taddy Brill is booked on a Candy Land inspired photo shoot at the island of Eden's Licorice Castle. Three famed French photographers working the set want her to be sexy and playful for the camera. *Sounds easy, right?* Not for this glamazon dressed as Princess Lolly—she's a virgin. Luckily she jetted into this paradise with her two besties Lex Easton and Vive Farnworth for lights, camera and...candy? **Reader warning:** This stand-alone full length novel contains raunchy, new adult humor, sugar-kink activities with three men at the same time, underage champagne consumption and psychedelic drug use. It's a trip. For fans of *The Carrie Diaries* and *Gossip Girl* comes *The Undergrad Years*, a coming of age prequel series offering readers a glimpse into the lives of *The Manhattanites* as they graduate from boarding school. Taking place a decade prior, each stand alone novel is cliff-hanger free and features a happy for now (HFN) ending.

Escape From Reality by Adriana Hunter

When curvy single and struggling romance author Alana Saunders receives a mysterious invitation to spend an all-expense paid week on a tropical island, it's seems too good to be true. Who is responsible for sending the invitation? Why does the envelope smell of dominant male possession? And most importantly, why her? With a string of failed relationships and a career on the downslide, Alana feels she has nothing to lose. But when she arrives at her destination, far away from everything she knows, she can't help but wonder if she made a mistake. That is until she comes face to face with the incredibly handsome Cain Marks, a tortured stranger with dark secrets, and a man who will take without asking. With just one touch he awakens a desperate need within her. Before too long Alana finds herself caught up in a game of irresistible obsession, where truths are exposed, and the dangerously blurred line between fantasy and reality threaten to drive her to the point of no return.

Random Acts of Hope

A sneak peek of the first scene from *Random Acts of Hope*, the fourth book in the Random series:

Liam

The last thing I expected to find when I walked into the kitchen of this Friday night gig was to see eight vibrators twitching furiously on the tile floor in various states of orgasm-inducing glory.

The giant black dildo with huge, egg-shaped bulbous balls at the base was winning. A close second, the pink rabbit with the little clit extenders tried to catch up. Next came a two-inch silver bullet, flailing off to the right but occasionally making a giant leap forward. The other four, a rag-tag assemblage of peach and brown flesh-colored rubbery plastic, seemed to cluster around the refrigerator as if stoned, lolling about aimlessly after getting their hands on a quarter bag and a limitless supply of nachos.

Ah, yes. The famous vibrator races at a sex toy party. I'd heard about this from one of the other bachelorette party strippers, but I'd never actually seen one.

Check *that* off my list.

I assumed that would be the biggest surprise tonight as I hovered behind the crowd in my police officer's costume, ready to "arrest" the bride and handcuff her to my partner Jack, the other stripper, who would then undress and pretend to get teabagged by her.

Yeah—I know. It's pretty programmed, right? But that's what the maid of honor *always* asks for.

And the customer is *always* right.

Tonight, though, was full of unexpected curves (*and I don't just mean the women*). Because when I looked at one of the chicks on all fours, cheering that big old black vibrator to victory, I realized that wasn't just any woman.

That was Charlotte.

My ex-girlfriend.

The one who cheated on me my senior year of high school, got pregnant with another man's baby, tore my heart out of my chest while it was still beating and videotaped herself eating it topless, then uploaded to YouTube and made it go viral on Facebook.

Or something like that. Minus the videotape part.

A quick step back into the shadows and I evaded being recognized. Shit. Of all the nights for Sam to be assigned to a different party. Jack was my stripping partner and he was too new to do the job alone. Besides, he was a babyface and these cougars would eat him alive. Charlotte lowered the average age of the women in this room by five years.

Scanning the room, I took inventory of the bride and her friends. Second marriage, I guessed. Or third. You never knew once the women were over forty. That meant this scene could get down and dirty, because there was nothing hornier than a perimenopausal woman at a bachelorette party with sex toys, an open bar, and permission to get naughty.

Nothing.

"The Determinator appears to be in the lead, ladies!" Charlotte called out. "And you can find the order forms for all the fun toys out in the living room. Twenty percent off on all the twelve-inch models," she added, winking. The pink Rabbit surged ahead, making a last-minute sprint as my dinner threatened to come up.

My eyes were only for Charlotte, though. Four years had made her just get more luscious. God damn. Ass and tits that made the air catch in my throat and the blood flow south. Professional hazard, that—don't ever get a hard on at a job. The women took it as an air traffic controller's signal, like glowing lights pointing them to dock *right there*.

She dressed professionally, wearing a plum-colored fuzzy v-neck sweater that contoured to the swell of breasts I remembered so well, legs encased in a slim pencil skirt that embellished those creamy hips I could imagine naked with a flicker of memory, lips painted fire-engine red and that maniac-inducing fifties pin-up girl look that I'd dismissed as silly when the girls in college wore it—but that made her smoking hot.

Down, boy.

God damn Charlotte had to be here, of all places.

And she had to be so fine.

“Ooooh, honey, you're one big officer,” said a sultry voice behind me. A hand stroked my hip and hesitated before sliding a bit lower, filling a palm with my ass. “Arrest me, Officer. I've been a bad, bad girl.”

With one look at the source of the voice, my night went from *Oh, man* to *Holy shit*.

That voice? That hand?

That was my *mother*.

Pre-order [*Random Acts of Hope*](#) now, coming July 29, 2014!

Random Acts of Crazy

Read the first book in the series, *Random Acts of Crazy*! Learn all about how Darla met Trevor and Joe in this *New York Times* and USA Today Bestseller!

I never intended to pick up a naked hitchhiker wearing nothing but a guitar. A guitar. Really. I don't collect guys like that (don't ask what kind of guys I do collect), but when you spot a blonde, tanned, sculpted man with a gorgeous smile and his thumb poking up and practically begging you to stop—you stop.

And I definitely never thought I'd be staring into the bright blue eyes of Trevor Connor, the lead singer for Random Acts of Crazy, an indie rock star I followed like the slobbering fileshare fangirl I am. How he came to be nude and lost six hundred miles from home is quite the tale, but how we fell in love is even more unreal.

Because someone like Trevor Connor, headed to Harvard Law next year, isn't supposed to want someone like me, a rural Ohio chick majoring in Boredom at Convenience Store University who is all curves and frizzy blonde hair and manners so unpolished they have sharp edges that make you bleed.

But he did.

When his best friend, Joe Ross, the bass player for Random Acts of Crazy and a man who makes Calvin Klein models look like Shrek, drove eleven hours through the night to rescue him, though, it got real complicated. It's one thing to like two different guys and be torn.

What do you do, though, when maybe—just maybe—you don't have to choose?



Random Acts of Crazy is a standalone, full-length novel (300+ pages, 85,000 words) featuring Darla Jo(sephine) Jennings, the 22-year-old niece of Josie Mendham from the Her Two Billionaires series. It has, like many New Adult novels, an exploration of sexuality for the three main characters, doesn't shy away from mature content, and Darla has a sailor's mouth.

Other Books by Julia Kent

Suggested Reading Order

[Her First Billionaire – FREE](#)

[Her Second Billionaire](#)

[Her Two Billionaires](#)

[Her Two Billionaires and a Baby](#)

[Her Billionaires: Boxed Set](#) (Parts 1-4 in one bundle, 458 pages!)

[It's Complicated](#)

[Complete Abandon](#)

[Random Acts of Crazy](#)

[Random Acts of Trust](#)

“Share Me” in [Spring Fling: A New Adult Anthology](#)

[Maliciously Obedient](#)

[Suspiciously Obedient](#)

[Deliciously Obedient](#) (the trilogy is done!)

About the Author

Text JKentBooks to 77948 and get a text message on release dates!

New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling Author Julia Kent turned to writing contemporary romance after deciding that life is too short not to have fun. She writes romantic comedy with an edge, and new adult books that push contemporary boundaries. From billionaires to BBWs to rock stars, Julia finds a sensual, goofy joy in every book she writes, but unlike Trevor from *Random Acts of Crazy*, she has never kissed a chicken.

She loves to hear from her readers by email at jkentauthor@gmail.com, on Twitter @jkentauthor, and on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/jkentauthor> . Visit her blog at <http://jkentauthor.blogspot.com>

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