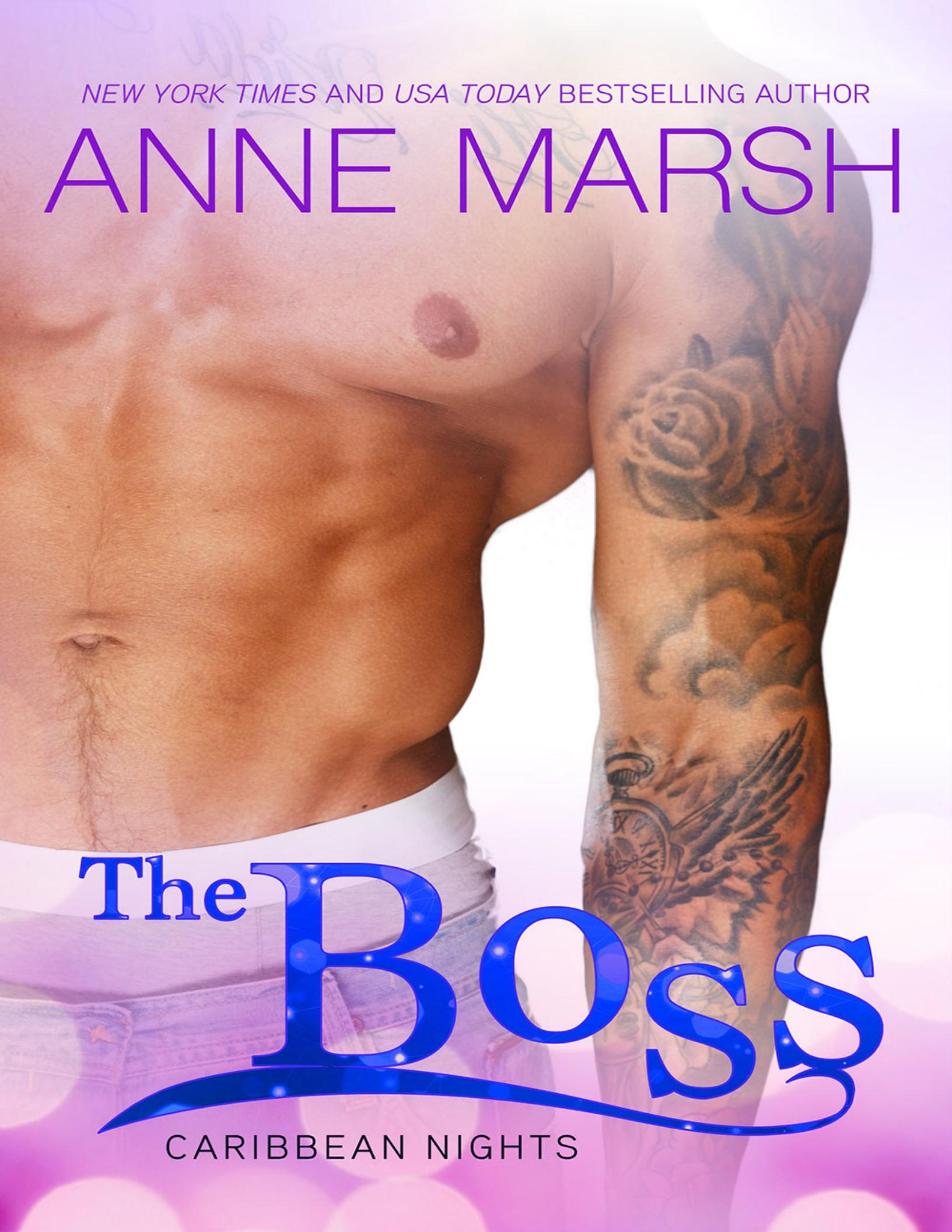


NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNE MARSH

A close-up photograph of a shirtless man's torso and arm. He has a large, detailed tattoo of a rose on his upper arm and a pocket watch with wings on his lower arm. He is wearing white briefs.

The BOSS

CARIBBEAN NIGHTS

THE BOSS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The events in this novella take place six years before *Player*, *Baby Daddy*, and *Heartbreaker*.

CHAPTER ONE

HINDI

IT'S SURPRISINGLY DIFFICULT TO WIN A WET T-SHIRT CONTEST. YOU NEED ASSETS I hadn't considered when I signed up.

Boobs.

Butt.

Balance.

The first two gifts are Mother Nature-given and there's not too much I can do to augment my birthday presents from her at this late date.

Ordinarily, I'm perfectly happy with what I've got. Since winning this wet T-shirt contest, however, means the difference between stopping in at the grocery store and loading up on food versus driving past and making do with tonight's rather skimpy dinner buffet (peanuts and cocktail fixings I've snagged whenever the bartender glances away), I'm motivated. Right now, if I had a gift receipt, I'd trade in my size Bs for a pair of double Ds. I'd add a curve and some sass to my ass, too, or at least spring for a pair of smoking hot Daisy Dukes.

I'm Contestant Number Four.

I'm also broke, barefooted, and... I mentally search for another B word. Bawdy? Beautiful? Bold?

Bold works for me. It's what I'd like to be.

I have arrived at a point in my life that I've decided to call *empowered*. If you were looking for synonyms, however, I'd also volunteer *broke*, *shameless*, and *why the fuck* not? I'm here in Angel Cay to sell the itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny private island I inherited from my grandparents, but until I find a buyer, I'm cashless. You can't eat sand, the coconuts that fall from my own personal collection of palm trees are less than filling, and I

suck at catching fish. If gyrating on a bar earns me cash, count me in.

Wet T-shirt contests get a bad wrap from the feminist crowd, but I've always been more of a live-and-let-live person myself. Until tonight, I've never felt the urge to compete, but I've also figured it was none of my business why other women chose to do so. And if hot guys—maybe of the US Navy SEAL or Marine Corps persuasion—wanted to do their part for women's rights and feminism, I'd be happy to watch while they gyrated their way down a bar in a wet T-shirt. That's the best kind of equal rights, and the right to be obnoxious, cheerful, sexual, good-natured perverts has to be part of what they fight for overseas.

It's also nice to know that we live in a country with a complex judicial system that has a million rules and laws—but all of which say that if I'm unlucky enough to get busted, my penalty for stealing a white T-shirt will be relatively mild (rather than, say, having my hand chopped off in a public place). It's a sad fact of life that, boobs and butt aside, I actually do not possess the necessary costume to participate in a wet T-shirt contest. My white cotton Hanes size XXL wifebeater is purloined. Stolen. Boosted. One hundred percent *not* mine.

When I pulled over for a pee stop earlier today, I parked next to a Jeep by the side of the road. The shirt was hanging over the roll bars, but the shirt's owner was nowhere in sight. His decision to take a swim or a walk on the beach without safeguarding his possessions seemed like a sign. A giant *take me, use me* sign. It's not even like I could pull a Hermione Granger and leave money under the chicken coop (or on the dash) for my stolen loot because I am completely and utterly broke. Besides, what's the going rate for a used shirt?

The current contestant is performing a complex cheerleader/stripper combo move that I have absolutely no hope of emulating. She has enormous boobs, and if I had the cash to bet with, I'd double down on the fact that she's really, really ruing the lack of bra support. The scoop-necked, white tank top clings to every generous inch of her girls and she looks spectacular.

“Give it up for Bree.” The cheerleader contestant sashays down to the far end of the bar to pose with the other two contestants for the title of Ms. Tiki Hut Tits. Yes, that's the job title I'm competing for. Since it comes with a paycheck, I'd be happy to win. A thunderous cheer goes up from the forty

or so assembled bar patrons (all male except for the odd girlfriend), along with more than one pornographic suggestion. Ms. Cheerleader smiles and waves as if she's already the winner and someone's popping the Titty Tiara (yes, that's what they call it) on her head.

"Next up is Hindi."

The bartender's bellow is all the warning I get. As soon as he yells my name, an icy cold blast from a hose hits me square in the chest. I shriek. The patrons cheer. Holy. *Gods*. I feel like I've been transported to Siberia in the heart of a cold snap when instead I'm standing on a beach in the Florida Keys in July. Five minutes ago, I had sweat rolling most unattractively down my back, but now I'm shivering, and my nipples are tight, hard points beneath the soaking wet cotton.

I'm totally going to rock this contest.

I'll buy the world's biggest cake and a gallon of milk and tonight will all be worth it. And then after I've downed a million and one calories, I'll figure out what to do with the rest of my life. And if I don't come out on top tonight, something will show up. It always does.

The bartender's assistant boosts me up onto the bar, and the third quality required to participate in tonight's contest comes into play. *Balance*. The bar is sleek, made out of some really nice teak. I get a little bit of traction because all that gorgeous wood is more than a little sticky, but as I cautiously take one step and then another, I start to slide. The music blasts louder, my audience roars, and... screw it.

I dance as if my life depended on it.



R O H A N

THE TIKI HUT TITY QUEEN TIARA CONTEST IS NOT MY USUAL VENUE. NOT THAT I don't appreciate a gorgeous pair of tits—I absolutely do—but I'm supposed to be meeting someone here. A business someone. My intel says that the owner of the small private island I want to buy planned on showing up here tonight, and since I haven't been able to reach Hindi Alvarez by phone, email, or through canvassing of Angel Cay to discuss purchasing her

property, I'm here as a last resort.

About to witness a bonus wet T-shirt contest.

Tonight's contestants are supposed to dance "on stage" while the bartender sprays them down with cold water. The ice bath tightens their nipples into greedy points and makes the girls shriek. Fun times for all unless you're trying to pick an unfamiliar face out of the yelling, cheering crowd. Worse, I've managed to arrive in the middle of said contest, so the noise level can probably be heard on the Florida mainland.

What kind of fucking name is Hindi? I scan the crowd of cheering, drinking, staring patrons and try to pick out someone who looks like his (her?) name could be *Hindi*. I draw a blank. The Tiki Hut is your average Florida beach bar. The patrons are shorts-wearing, T-shirt-sporting, sun-bronzed guys with the occasional female who looks like she's come along either under duress or for the free drinks. It's a far cry from my last post in Afghanistan.

The difference is part of the reason why I want to purchase my own private piece of the Florida Keys. The first day I was here, I drove past the simple sign staked into the ground at the end of a long, palm-tree-lined gravel road. *For Sale By Owner*. I had thirty minutes until I was supposed to meet my realtor in Angel Cay, and it seemed prudent to rule out all of the possibilities. So I turned right. I grabbed a flyer from the envelope tacked to the sign, drove down that road—and I fell in love. The small island is fucking gorgeous, and it needs to be mine.

Since I arrived here, however, the sale's been an exercise in frustration. The island may be for sale by owner, but the owner's nowhere in sight, and I've only got two weeks left on my leave. That doesn't give me much time. I could leave instructions with my realtor and deputize an agent, but I'd prefer to tie up my own loose ends. I don't leave things to chance.

I just didn't plan on doing business in a bar while watching tits balance. Sometimes, you have to adjust, though. Roll with the punches and come up with a new plan of action.

A guy wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the Tiki Hut logo helps a soaking wet contestant number four up onto the bar. I arrived too late to catch her name, but it doesn't really matter. She's pocket-sized, curvy, and brimming over with enthusiasm. Her hair's a stripy gold-brown color as if The Big Guy Up There couldn't decide which color He preferred and then

went fuck it, I'll give them *all* to her. She's added stripes of blue and violet as well, so the effect is that of a mismatched, vibrant rainbow. It's shoulder-length and chopped into about a hundred different layers. She's also got those bee-stung, pouty lips that make a man think about kissing. Kissing—and other, more southern explorations. For just a moment, before I catch myself and exert some fucking self-control, I imagine her slick pink lips wrapped around my dick performing some serious suction action.

The music blasts from a set of speakers set in the sand and Number Four is a go, launching into action. From the beginning, it's perfectly clear that she can't dance. At all. She has enthusiasm working for her, along with an ability to... *bounce*. Great tits, too, although they're definitely on the smallish side, and I'm not entirely sure she's of legal drinking age. I'd put her at twenty. The crowd cheers her on enthusiastically, and she gets into it, bobbing and weaving with consummate lack of skill. I get the distinct impression that this is her first time in the wet T-shirt rodeo.

She waves her hands over her head, swaying to a completely different beat than the one coming out of the speakers. It's been years since I witnessed a wet T-shirt contest firsthand, but even I know she's supposed to dance. Shake her ass and her tits. Smooth her hands down her belly and tease the ever-living fuck out of us, all with the possibility that her fingers keep heading south until we get the show of a lifetime. Maybe she thought it was a belly dancing contest? She's sporting enough necklaces and bracelets for an entire harem. Or maybe harems are naked?

No. Not going there. Not thinking sexy thoughts in a goddamned tiki hut while some probably-not-entirely-legal girl prances around on top of the bar wearing an old white shirt and a pair of hot-pink shorts that cup her ass. The bartender turns the hose on her again as the song cranks into the chorus, she squeals, and the patrons roar their approval. She's red-hot in an all-American way you have to appreciate. As the music crescendos, she finds her groove and starts swinging her hips in circles. First slowly, then faster, as if she's working out an orgasm right there in front of everyone.

That's when I spot the problem. I'm entirely okay with the public orgasm-in-progress. That's not my issue. Nope. It's her outfit. She's wearing an old wifebeater—a man's shirt that's far too large for her. Despite a neck full of necklaces and being soaking wet, the cotton slips and slides, exposing most of her spectacular tits. The view's awesome. The problem is

the shirt.

A *familiar* white shirt.

That's my shirt. I thought I'd lost it. When I came back to the Jeep after finishing my three-mile swim this morning, it was gone. I checked the bushes, the road, and even up in a palm tree or six. No shirt sighting. Eventually, I gave up and went with a spare.

All white T-shirts look alike, right? How can I know beyond a doubt that this one is mine? Good question. This shirt has three small holes on the front near the hem and an unfortunate tear from where the shirt caught a blade in hand-to-hand that somehow still missed my skin. I'll bet if I look in the neck, I'll see my nametag, too. My guys nicknamed the shirt Lucky because it took the brunt of that night's action. I'd prefer to simply call it *mine* because I don't believe in luck. Preparation's what counts.

I keep an eye on my girl as the contest winds to a close. She loses but congratulates the winner and then proceeds to teeter precariously on the edge of the bar, seconds from face-planting in the sand.

Fuck. Me.

I dive across the sand, and she lands heavily in my arms. A few things register. My front is soaking wet—which is still not enough of a deterrent to stop my dick from leaping up in a *pleased to meet ya* move. She's laughing. She smells fucking amazing.

“My hero,” she shrieks, throwing a wet arm around my neck and waving to her fans. Who roar in approbation. She may not be wearing the tiara, but she's won their hearts. So parting with her stolen goods isn't going to be that much of a loss, is it?

“You're wearing my shirt,” I growl.

Her eyes widen. “Oh shit,” she says, and I agree.

The trouble with SEALs is that we're fighters.

We hang onto what's ours.

And we always, always win our battles.



HINDI

AND THERE'S THE B WORD I HAD HOPED TO AVOID... *BUSTED.*

I worry my lower lip with my teeth. Shoot. *Don't do that.* You don't want me on your team if you're playing cards, although you definitely want to play poker against me. I'm constitutionally incapable of hiding my glee—or my chagrin (and it's usually chagrin)—over the hand I've been dealt.

I'm also not the kind of woman who drops her panties without reason.

The man holding me is one hundred and one reasons rolled into one delicious, grumpy, surly package. He's a big, dark man with a short buzz cut and brown eyes. Irish maybe, or maybe he's got a Cajun bad boy heating up his family tree. Either way, I want to lick him from head to foot, with a long detour to the impressive erection digging into my butt. He's short on smiles, but I've always been a sucker for trouble, and this man has *danger* written all over the hard planes of his face.

I'm getting him all wet—and not in the naughty way. The water from my shirt (*his* shirt) soaks into his T-shirt, the dark stain spreading across the Navy trident on the front. A silver chain glints around his neck. I could hook my finger in that chain, pull him close, and distract him from his grumpy mood.

He sets me down, and I give him bonus points *and* a gold star for making the whole catch-and-release seem effortless. He's built, with the kind of arms that don't happen accidentally, so maybe he truly is used to hauling heavier things than me. Or maybe he's gotten in so much practice at rescuing damsels in distress that it's nothing, just another day at the office, and shoot he could do it two or three times without breaking a sweat.

My rescuer's staring at me.

Shoot.

"You want your shirt back, don't you?" I yank the soaked, clinging fabric over my head and thrust the wad at him. See? Reparations made. No harm, no foul.

"The shirt? No." His dark gaze drops from my face to my hands. Moves slowly back up my body, pausing only briefly on my boobs. His jaw tightens and you know what? I think I like him paying attention to *me*. I may not have won, but I'm naked, I'm wet, and if he had a tiara to gift, I'd be the lucky wearer.

"It's yours. Take it." I jiggle the fabric at him. This has the added bonus of making my boobs dance. As a future lingerie designer (just as soon as I

earn enough cash to fund a field trip to New York City), I know my white bandeau bra is every kind of sexy awesome. The front is heart-shaped and held up with quality toupee tape and a whole lot of luck. The lace is almost see-through thanks to my recent hosing, and I can see the shadow of my nipples when I look down. What red-blooded man could resist?

Naturally, Mr. Stoic stares at back at me, his face completely unfathomable.

“So you admit to theft,” he says slowly. The din around us is starting to die down, and I fight the urge to squirm beneath his stern gaze. I’ve got plenty of practice being in the hot seat, and I won’t let him know that I care if he’s pissed. It’s easier to pretend the whole thing is a joke.

Except I really did steal his shirt. I don’t think I’m out of misdemeanor territory—after all, how expensive can one white shirt *be*?—but I’m not home safe, either.

“Are you going to arrest me?” Because I could be convinced to play a game of Good Cop, Bad Girl.

“Not part of my plan.” The corner of his mouth quirks up. God, Mr. Stern is so lickable. I could lean up, plant my hands on his shoulders, and have my wicked way with his mouth. Lick him, suck him, *bite* him.

I blink. Or I get lost in my fantasies.

Because he moves and I don’t see him do it. One minute he’s standing there all stern-and-avenging-angel, and the next minute he’s closed the distance between us and he’s whipping his T-shirt off over his head. The next minute he’s closed the distance between us and white cotton descends over me cutting out the bar and my audience.



R O H A N

MY MYSTERY DANCER IS ALMOST NAKED. FUCK ME, BUT KEEPING MY HANDS TO myself is difficult. I mentally count to twenty in Swahili and then disassemble and reassemble my combat assault rifle. Twice. I can come back later tonight to track down my elusive seller. Right now, I need to leave before I give in to the pornographic fantasies parading through my

head. Me, bending Mystery Dancing Chick over the bar, dragging down her panties, and slamming into her. Or maybe she's not wearing panties. Her pink shorts are plastered to her truly spectacular curves, and I don't see any evidence of panty line. I could shove the cotton to one side, slide my fingers into her slit, and...

Stop. It.

I yank my T-shirt down over her head, covering up the most gorgeous body I've ever seen.

"Are we done talking about your shirt?" She sounds hopeful as she wiggles her arms through the sleeve holes.

"No." I look down at the wet shirt in my hands. "Absolutely not."

She's totally wrong for me. I don't do one-night stands and she's fucking irritating. I know this after the sixty seconds I've spent in her company. She's impulsive, loud, and way too colorful for this SEAL.

"What were you planning to wear?"

Surely she didn't arrive here dressed only in my shirt and her panties. She must have dry stuff stashed somewhere.

She blinks at me. "I have clothes. Somewhere."

She waves a hand toward the far end of the bar.

"Get them," I suggest.

She sighs (she's clearly not big on orders or even suggestions), but then she trots toward the far end of the bar. Two minutes later, she's wriggling into her dry stuff in the middle of the goddamned bar. I mentally disassemble and reassemble that rifle a third and fourth time because my dick thinks the best plan of action right now is to jackhammer through the front of my pants and see if we can convince her that we're her consolation prize for losing the contest.

Naturally, her dry clothes don't stay dry, nor are they a huge improvement on her almost-naked state. She still looks totally fuckable. Her baby blue shirtdress has buttons that beg to be undone, and she's wearing a pair of black and white leopard-print booties. In Florida. In July.

Is she for real?

Her stomach picks that moment to growl.

"Cover for me," she whispers loud enough to be heard over the music. "Make sure the bartender doesn't look this way."

And then she nips behind the bar, grabs a napkin, and starts shoveling

teeny-tiny plastic skewers of bright red cherries and pineapple into a napkin. I've stood watch countless times, but this is a first. When the bartender looks our way—he's clearly onto her—I flash a twenty and set it down on the counter. She doesn't even notice, because she's too busy assembling her fruit salad.

“Thanks,” she belts out, sashaying back out around the bar,
And even though I hate stating the obvious, it just begs to be said,
“You’re trouble.”

She beams up at me. “The best kind. I’m an overachiever.”

Jesus. Christ.

And then she pats me on the chest and flounces away.

CHAPTER TWO

ROHAN

I DIAL THE NUMBER ON THE LARGE, WOODEN FOR SALE SIGN NAILED TO A PALM tree at the entrance to the island.

No answer.

I leave what feels like my four hundredth voice mail and decide, fuck it, I'll check out the island again. I have eleven nights left on my shore leave, and then it's back to base. From there, I'll undoubtedly ship out overseas in the next couple of months. As I drive in, I can't help but think that this could all be mine. That pothole, that palm, that amazing fucking view of the ocean at the end of the road. You know. If the owner would ever answer the goddamned phone. You wouldn't think it would be so difficult. He wants to sell. I have cash. Hello, match made in heaven. There's no way this doesn't work out—as long as he hears my offer.

The island isn't large, but it's perfect. A cluster of rundown cottages huddle at the end of the palm-lined gravel road, and the ocean is visible through the trees. As I pull up at the end of the road, my phone vibrates with an incoming text.

Cmnh.

I check the number and it matches the number I just called, so my Mystery Seller has surfaced. Color me unsurprised that the man who has returned precisely none of my phone calls also sends cryptic texts.

I decide to assume that he's en route to show me the property and start the process of taking my money. I text back. Sometime today?

I hate to be overly optimistic.

The answering text comes a few minutes later while I'm leaning against the Jeep completing my visual assessment of the cottages (new roofs,

windows, and paint jobs top the immediate list): Yz.

Two minutes later, wheezing breaks the silence. The broken-down monstrosity of a van that comes lurching down the road shouldn't run. Not only does it threaten to shed parts as it goes, but it's painted a fluorescent green usually found only in Play-Doh. Vines and flowers cover the sides. Hindi's name suddenly makes way more sense.

He is a *she*—and a fruitcake. I'm not dealing with a business-minded person who just sucks at returning phone calls. I'm about to try and work a deal with an artist, a free spirit, a goddamned hippy. I don't have time for this. I have a deadline and a team to return to.

The asthmatic van grinds to a relieved halt beside my Jeep. I wouldn't be surprised if it never starts again. Before the driver can get out, turn around, or otherwise attempt to escape, I'm moving, hand outstretched, ready to close. Now that Hindi's here, we can strike a deal. The driver throws the van into park, and a puff of smoke escapes from the back exhaust pipe. There's no way this vehicle is road-legal. I tap on the window, the driver rolls it down, and...

“You,” I snap. Not my finest moment.

Last night's dancer blinks up at me.

“Oh, hi,” she says. As if it's perfectly normal for her to be driving down a private road on a private island. With her cell phone in her hand.

Like so many things in life, there is an obvious answer. If two plus two is four, then there is only one logical reason for Mystery Dancer to be here—and it's worse than my dealing with some New Age hippy who somehow owns a small private island in Florida.

“Hindi?” I keep my voice level. No profanities. It absolutely doesn't matter that I want to fuck my seller in the most intimate way possible. I'm in control. I'm calm.

“Yes.” She beams. “That's me.”

I'm so fucked.

“Rohan MacCarthy.” I shove my hand at her and she takes it. Not in a handshake—because that would be too easy and way too normal. Nope. She wraps both her hands around mine and sort of presses. My dick leaps up, wanting to get in on the handshake action, and just the thought of those slim fingers squeezing me has me almost coming in my pants. *Fucking fall back, sailor.* I tug, she lets go, and I back up a few strategic steps. This has the

added bonus of allowing her to hop out of the van.

I go on the offensive before she can notice the boner tenting the front of my cargo pants.

“I called you. Several times.” Sixteen times, to be precise.

Something tells me, however, that Hindi doesn’t mind approximations. Or generalizations, vague hints, or impressions. She floats past me, barefoot and looking as if she doesn’t have a care in the world (and she should definitely be worried about her van—that thing’s gonna need resuscitation before she’s getting out of here). In fact, she keeps on going until she’s knee-deep in the water, the pink fabric of her skirt bunched up around her thighs. Her tanned, toned, way-too-familiar thighs.

I saw her almost naked last night.

She wore my shirt—and then she gave it back to me.

Business. This is a business deal. I lay my cards on the table. “I want to buy your island.”

Instead of eliciting a counter offer, punch list of terms, or any opening salvo in negotiations, Hindi frowns. “You do?”

“I called,” I point out dryly, strolling down to the water’s edge. I draw the line at wading in after her in my boots. “Multiple times. You never answered.”

She plucks her phone out of some unseen pocket in her skirt and waves it at me. While standing in the middle of the goddamned ocean. I’ll bet the warranty people hate her. “It’s broken.”

And yet she can still text—badly—to me?

I hold out my hand. “Give it to me.”

She wades a little closer and drops her phone into my palm. Naturally, her passcode is 1234, which completely fits the purple bedazzled case. In less than three seconds, I’m in, whereupon I’m confronted by her wallpaper. It’s some kind of be-feathered, ribboned corset thing wrapped around a mannequin. I’d rather see it on Hindi.

Damn it.

I look at the side of her phone, and sure enough, she’s got the ringer turned off. I flip the switch up and hand it back. “All good.”

“Wow.” She stares at me for a moment, slides the phone back into its pocket, and claps. Like I’m a performance she’s watching and the show’s over. “You’re good.”

She has no idea how bad I want to be.
Fortunately, she sloshes toward me, kicking up water as she goes.
Droplets spatter my pants and my boots.
“Oops.” She grins as if we’re a pair of five-year-olds about to launch a water fight. I resist the urge to dive in and take her with me. I’m a SEAL. I’m a strong swimmer. I could take her down, take her under, get her soaking wet. My brain veers directly into porn territory, which does nothing for the erection I’m sporting.

Hindi proves she has zero instincts for self-preservation, because she doesn’t stop moving until she’s toe-to-boot with me. I’m bigger, heavier, and far meaner. Plus, we’re alone out here, she has a car that barely runs, and she gave me her phone. Someone needs to point out the sheer stupidity of that, and it looks like I’ve been nominated.

I open my mouth to inform her of these failings because old drill sergeants never die. Apparently, they just take shore leave in Florida. Except she spots my dog tags before I can bark out a single word. Her fingers dance up my chest—does she ever sit still?—and skim over the tags. Lust detonates inside me with more force than a coalition bomb hitting an Iraqi compound.

She peeks up at me. “Yours?”

There are very few circumstances in which a soldier would wear another man’s tags—and those usually involve commemorating the dead and happen only after you’ve left the service. The whole point of the tags is to give the medical team a means of identifying either your blood type or your body, so wearing someone else’s tags would defeat the purpose.

“Mine,” I agree dryly. “U.S. Navy SEAL and Lieutenant Commander MacCarthy at your service.” Mentally I’m chanting *don’t you dare fucking kiss her* as if it’s my new mantra and she’s my guru. Yoga. She looks exactly like the kind of woman who would do yoga and be fantastically flexible. This launches a new fantasy in my stupid head, one where Hindi is bent over in the downward dog position absolutely naked. Or better yet, with her skirts flipped over her head.

Desperately, I launch into an explanation of dog tags. I manage to cover the materials used (noncorrosive metals), the reason for the duplication (so you can leave one on the body and collect the other for notification of next of kin), and the next steps in dog tag development (I always wanted a chip

in my ass, didn't you?). When I wind down, I don't think I've advanced my cause any.

"Huh." She packs a whole lot of emotion into that one syllable. "That's quite the speech. Maybe I should call you professor."

Her mouth curls up in an irresistible grin. *Irresistible* because it makes me think about kissing her. Again. Maybe I don't need an island in Florida. I should fall back, get in my Jeep, and drive like hell to some Hindi-less spot on the mainland.

"If you're active duty, what are you doing here?" she asks.

That one's easy.

"I'm trying to buy an island, but someone's making it difficult."

I'd chosen the Florida Keys because I'd had a couple of weeks, I'd spent more than a few childhood summers here, and part of me knew that eventually I'd be ready to leave the SEAL team and I'd need a place to go. A purpose. It's important to have a plan, even though I have no intention of retiring from active duty for years. Real estate prices will only continue to rise, though, so it makes sense to buy now.

So I'd driven down here armed with the number of a highly recommended real estate agent and a sheaf of listings. All of the places so far have been too expensive, too isolated, not isolated enough, or way too decrepit. Hindi's place wasn't on that list. *For Sale By Owner*. FSBO. Those four letters give professional realtors the hives, and looking at Hindi I can understand why. She doesn't understand the rules of buying and selling—and more importantly, she doesn't care. She'd posted a sign at the end of her road announcing her intent to put the place on the market, and then she hadn't even answered my goddamned calls. And I don't think it was some kind of manipulative plan to drive the asking price up by playing hard to get, whetting my interest and then teasing me. It's just how Hindi is. I've known her for less than twenty-four hours, but her face is a billboard for what she's thinking and feeling. Right now she looks curious.

I attempt to hand her an envelope. The manila 8x12 contains copies of my offer letter, inspection contingencies, and proof that I have sufficient funds to cover both the good faith deposit and the full purchase price. In cash.

Hindi looks as if I've just attempted to pass her a snake of the poisonous variety. "What's that?"

“My offer for your island.” I give her my most charming smile. *Nada.*

“I haven’t decided if I want to sell yet,” she says.

“Your sign said you did.” I fight the urge to scowl at her. Right now, she has the upper hand.

She waves a hand toward the cottages, the grove of palms, and the beach. “Details and totally TBD. So you want the tour?”

“Absolutely,” I say. Helmuth von Moltke, a German field marshal who served during World War I, once said that no plan survives first contact with the enemy. I’d planned to come out here, track down the island’s owner, and make my offer. I still want to buy this particular piece of paradise, but I need to adjust the plan. Hindi’s uncertain. I’ll just convince her to be certain.

As we walk around the small island, she tells me about how she and her sisters used to come here with their parents. The island has what used to be rental cottages. Now the four buildings are dilapidated and weatherworn. The roof needs to be replaced on at least two, and when we climb the porch of the one closest to the beach, my foot goes straight through the second step.

“We played Barbies right there,” she says, pointing to a lopsided palm that lists toward the roof of cottage number two. One more tropical storm, and that tree will take up residence inside the house. It needs to come down now.

“Exactly how big is the property?” Hindi’s property flyer was big on adjectives—beautiful, sweeping views, perfect white sand, blah blah blah—but numbers were entirely absent. Based on the distance from the highway to the cluster of cottages—three-quarters of a mile according to the Jeep’s dashboard—I’d put the island at twenty acres.

“Thirty minutes,” she responds, as if that makes perfect sense. It probably does in the Hindi-verse, but I need actual units of measurement. That way I can determine the cost per square foot and if buying this particular island is a sound financial investment.

I look down at her. “Give me more words. Ones that include acres, miles, or square feet.”

“I’m crazy,” she announces. “It’s perfectly fine to tell me that.”

She looks simultaneously ashamed and defiant, as if I’m not the first person to call her on her waffling. I don’t want to upset her or make her feel

bad, though—I just want to buy her goddamned island. Today.

“How long does it take you to walk a mile?” I ask, instead of growling at her.

She thinks for a minute. “Fifteen minutes?”

I do some quick math in my head. “So maybe you’ve got two square miles here. Okay.”

She flashes me another quick smile, one that seems warmer and happier. “Impressive.”

“So I’d still like to make you an offer,” I tell her.

Her gaze flickers over me. “Maybe.”

I have never declared myself to be an expert on women. That honor goes to another of my SEAL teammates, Finn Callahan. That man hasn’t met a woman he couldn’t charm—or that he didn’t like. But that’s fine. I’ve dated and I’ve hit a home run in the sex department on plenty of occasions. None of which appear to have prepared me for Hindi Alvarez.

I hate feeling out of control, and I really fucking hate chaos.

“Do you want to sell this place or not?” I’m pretty sure I growl the question, which is not good business sense. At all. Hindi holds all the cards at the moment.

She flits across the porch and leans on the decrepit railing, staring out at the sea.

“Maybe. Probably.” She lifts one shoulder and flashes me her high-wattage smile. “Now you can tell me that I’m indecisive and that I get things wrong.”

Something about her smile bothers me. She’s glowing, beaming, all but breaking her face with that smile—but it doesn’t go to her eyes. That smile is all lips and teeth and no heart. The difference is night and day from the other smiles she’s given me. I take a pained moment to realize that I’ve mentally categorized them—and the category is *mine*.

I’m in the market for an island.

Not a girlfriend.

Not Hindi.

She’s so not part of my plans, short-term or long-term, and I’m the kind of guy who always, *always* has a plan. Whether I’m storming an insurgent stronghold in some too hot, too foreign desert or perusing the take-out menu at the local barbecue pit, I have a mental list of next steps. I have checklists

and action items. Why do I hate spontaneity so much, you ask? That's an easy one. We can blame dear old Dad for my dislike of the unplanned. My old man routinely accused my mother of lacking spontaneity because she worked two jobs and wouldn't go down to the bar for a drink. Dad's *spontaneous* card games, drinking binges, and casual affairs, on the other hand, made our collective lives hell. Spontaneity is an excuse for doing what you want, when you want.

Therefore, my trip to the Florida Keys is carefully planned. I have an itinerary, a real estate agent, and a full week of property visits planned. I have a timeline. A budget. A long-term vision for a canine-training facility where I can do something meaningful *and* earn the money to pay my electric bill when I someday leave the SEAL team. No one's a SEAL forever, so it's only prudent to start planning now.

Hindi's not an action item, a deliverable, or even a dependency in my project plan.

She's the fucking soda you knock over onto your keyboard when you're not paying attention, the pink neon *oh shit* Post-It marking a cost overrun, the big fucking blip in my schedule.

All of which means I should march back to my Jeep and drive straight to my realtor's office. Pick a different property to fall in love with because this island is going to be too expensive. I can't afford it.

And yet I kind of, sort of, fucking love it.

The island, not Hindi.

People don't fall in love at first sight. That would be ridiculous.

"How about this?" I move closer. Carefully, because falling through the fucking porch now would be inconvenient. Boards creak as I near my target. She must weigh half what I do—and she's wearing far less clothing. Not that I object about the almost-naked part of things. And since she clearly gives zero fucks about acting professional, I give myself permission to cheat just a little. I bring my arms down on either side of her, caging her in place. "We'll make a deal. Give me a chance to convince you."

There's a little breeze blowing off the ocean, and it sets her hair to dancing around her pretty face. When I inhale, I catch the scent of something exotic and unfamiliar.

"How?" Now she sounds suspicious.

"However you like." I lean in closer. Who is this guy with his arms—

almost—around Hindi? I don’t recognize him at all. He’s... flirting. With the enemy.

Hindi settles back against the railing, crossing her arms over her chest. Since the new me is no gentleman, I don’t look away. Her tits overflow the top of her shirt. She’s got cleavage I could get lost in for weeks—and I’m damned certain she’s bra-less. One good tug and, boom, her shirt comes down.

“Prove it,” she says. “Prove you love it.”

Oh, I love *it* alright.

She taps me on the chest, making me wonder if my face isn’t quite the blank slate I’d hoped. “Angel Cay. Prove you love my island and it’s yours. I sell. You buy.”

If you want to prove to a girl that you’re into her, you don’t need to find the perfect line. You don’t have to be Super Man, Super Love, Super anything. You just have to mean what you say and do what you mean. Sure, the end goal is getting her naked. You tell her she looks hot and that she turns you on. You make her feel safe, so she’ll strip down, get naked, and take a chance on letting herself be vulnerable with you. You take care of her, you level with her, and you own up to her sexiness. And if you’re a SEAL in port, sometimes you spring for the luxury hotel because hotel sex is a winner every time.

These are not strategies I’ve ever thought to apply to real estate.

Step one? Total fucking honesty. “I like your island.”

My fingers flex and tighten on the railing when she tilts her head as if she’s trying to read my face for some hidden answer. My arms brush hers because we’re so completely, inappropriately close.

“But do you love it?”

“You believe in love at first sight?” I counter. I’m not big on subtext—I prefer words to have one meaning and for everything to be perfectly clear. Hence my love of a well-conceived action plan. After all, if you’re clearing an enemy compound, you don’t want any misunderstandings about who’s doing what to come up after you’ve thrown the first flash-bang grenade and knocked down the front door. Once I commit, I’m in one hundred and ten percent.

Hindi surprises me by shaking her head. Not even slowly, like she has to think about it. Just an oh-my-God-he-can’t-be-serious jerk of her head as

my words roll over her. “Not a chance.”

Well. Okay then.

“How do I prove I love your island, Hindi?” I’m so close now that my mouth almost brushes hers. *Déjà fucking vu.*

“Camp here. Stay here. Show me you care,” she declares, and then she frowns and I want to kiss away the little wrinkles puckering her forehead. Jesus. Christ.

What’s happening here? In the less than twenty-four hours that I’ve known her, one fact has emerged. Hindi drives me crazy—with irritation, lust, and a desire to protect her. She’s a mystery and an earworm and so fucking alive.

And if I’m hungry to get to know her and her island better, she’s hungry, too.

Just not for me or my cash.

For my food.

Her stomach growls again. I look down, which is a mistake. Hindi’s clearly embraced the island vibe—she’s wearing a crop top and a long skirt that floats around her like a cloud of fucking pink.

Her stomach growls louder and she shrugs. “I’m hungry.”

Yeah. Me too—just not for food. Unfortunately, the food problem is the one thing I can fix.

“It’s not like I’m a date or a dog,” she says hopefully. “You can feed me with no strings attached. I promise to leave you alone afterward.”

And you know what? I kind of don’t want her to keep that promise.



HINDI

I’M AN IDIOT.

I’ve spent years in therapy learning how to reclaim myself. To *live* for myself. And then this too-large, grumpy, all-tell-and-no-ask SEAL shows up, and I roll over like a kitten begging for tummy rubs. Not that I’d object to his big hand stroking my stomach or parts further south.

That’s my first problem.

It's why I'm screwing with him now and not in the let's-go-to-bed way, either. I'm totally going to sell him my island. If I'm lucky, his offer won't be contingent on four million inspections and mortgage approvals. I sign, he wires the money, and I hit the road to New York City. That's my fantasy, and I bet I could be there within a week if the offer is good enough. Two tops. I don't need him to prove his *love* for anything—the balance in his bank account works for me.

Okay. The potential pay day isn't the only attraction here—I'm pretty hot for my SEAL. He's so deliciously uptight about his plan and his next steps that I can't help teasing him just a little.

I bet I could make him kiss me.

I bet he'd be *fabulous*.

Orders turn me on, and he's clearly the king of giving commands. And because he's fundamentally a nice guy, he'd make sure I come. No, the problem isn't the mattress time—it's what happens before and after we have sex. After I left home for the last time, I promised myself I'd never put myself in another situation where someone told me what was wrong with me and why. I know what my faults are—I don't need someone to enumerate them and rub my nose in them like a misbehaving puppy... and I'm not sure Rohan could resist letting me know when I've gone wrong. Which is part of the reason why it's so much fun to torment him with my *prove you love it* plan—because it drives him crazy. Plus, he's actually not my only would-be buyer. He's just my only all-cash offer, at least according to his frequent voicemails, and who doesn't love instant gratification?

My stomach growls again and Rohan's gaze narrows. "When's the last time you ate?"

There's no point in not telling the truth—he can hear my stomach and the man must come with a built-in lie detector because he's sniffed out the majority of my bullshit so far. "Last night at the bar."

I'd made myself a to-go snack from the cocktail fixings. He knows this because he was there. If he's as clever as he likes to think he is, he'll change his all-cash offer to my weight in Cheetos. I'd totally cave.

"They have grocery stores in the Florida Keys," he points out in reasonable tones. "And restaurants, snack shacks, an ocean full of fish, and more fruit and avocado trees than one place needs. You shouldn't be hungry."

Right, correct, dead on, and so not wrong. He's all of those. He's also back to giving orders and making statements. I'll bet he's an awesome commander. I'll bet his SEAL team works together flawlessly, responding immediately and perfectly to his commands. I'm not one of his men, though, so I shrug as if it's no big deal. As if sneaking into someone's yard and pilfering the fruit from their trees hadn't occurred to me. The problem is the Green Beast is perilously low on gas. The contents of its tank are even more meager than the contents of my checking account.

He moves away from me, headed toward his Jeep. "I'm supposed to prove I love your island. Maybe you can spell that out for me on a full stomach."

I think about it for a moment, but free food is free food and I'm not in a position to be picky about where my calories come from. So I hover by his Jeep as he starts pulling things out with ruthless efficiency. Since one of those things is a big red plastic cooler, I decide I can let him take charge. Just this once.

"Can I help?" I ask.

"Sell me your island," he counters.

Right. I roll my eyes. "We're having a probationary period, remember? Where you prove your undying love, yadda yadda. You're not the only man interested in my island."

"Competition." He nods thoughtfully. "I'm a SEAL. Kicking ass and winning battles is in my job description."

He sets the cooler on the sand underneath a palm tree and then round-trips to the Jeep for more crap. Rohan is clearly the guy to be trapped with during a natural disaster or Armageddon, because I've never met anyone more prepared. He sets up a fire ring, positions two of those campfire roasting logs you buy in the store in the center, and then reaches for a book of matches. When it comes to me and matches, the matches have me beat. I strike out every time, wearing those stupid little wooden sticks down to flameless nubs. Rohan gets it in one go.

He slips a frying pan over the flames, rocks back on his heels, and looks at me. It kinda feels like he's checking things off a big long mental list, but as long as I get breakfast, I'll make do.

"What brought you here?" He fires off the question.

I've been living on my own since I was sixteen, alternating between

fucking things up and fixing things up. Usually, I keep the fucked and the fixed in proportion. Balance is important, after all. Since my checking account is completely *unbalanced*, however, I'm temporarily living in the van while I wait for the island's sale to happen. It doesn't hurt, though, that I've got a primo view of the ocean—and my own private island. The island is kind of an accident. I inherited it from my grandparents, and sooner or later Uncle Sam's going to realize I haven't paid any taxes on my windfall.

"Change in circumstances." I flash him a big smile. I'm between jobs and that doesn't help, although it's my reason for being here in Angel Cay. I had just enough gas to reach the Florida Keys and a place to park the van, so I came. Plus, there's just something about the ocean. The waves come in, go out. I breathe in, breathe out. It's hard to stay upset or worried when I've got my toes in the sand and my eyes on the horizon.

"Unemployed?" He interprets.

"Uh-huh." I've had plenty of practice with disappointed glares, gazes, and smirks. Surprisingly, none of those makes an appearance on Rohan's face. Of course, I'm also the gal who owns the island he wants to buy, and nothing about him screams *stupid*. He'll play nice until he's got what he wants.

"Plus, hello?" I gesture toward the ocean. "I own an island with a beach. How could I not come here?"

He returns his gaze to whatever he's doing over the campfire. I make a mental note to learn how to cook, because something smells amazing. "So why do you want to sell?"

"Aren't you trying to *convince* me to sell?"

"Humor me." He flashes me that smile of his, the one that shows up way too infrequently but that makes him look ten years and two wars younger. He's so serious all the time—it makes me want to hold him down and tickle him. See if I can coax a grin and a laugh out of him.

Instead, I make a show out of looking around me. "Well, the job prospects on my private island are rather thin pickings and we've established that I prefer eating to not-eating."

He nods. "You make an excellent point. You have career aspirations beyond coconut picker and driftwood gatherer. I applaud your ambition. So what does Hindi Alvarez plan for her next trick?"

He cracks eggs into a frying pan with quick efficiency as he says this,

which gives me a moment to admire his culinary skills while I try to come up with an answer. It sounds silly and impossible and more than a little vain to speak my dreams out loud.

He nods. “You want me to guess.”

“Are you good at guessing?” I’ll bet he is. I’ll bet he’s the best—and only partly because Rohan’s made it clear that he’s Mr. Competitive. He wouldn’t do anything without giving it one hundred and ten percent—he’s a winner, the guy who comes out on top, the man who makes it through BUD/S training and not only becomes an elite US Navy SEAL but becomes the *leader* of that pack. He’s not just the top of the mountain—he’s the clouds wrapped around the pinnacle and I’m standing at the base looking up.

“Let’s find out,” he suggests.

“Three guesses.” I’m tempted to suggest a forfeit when he loses, but I’m in no position to bet. And there’s always the small, eensy-weensy chance that he hits on what I want to do with my life. I hold up three fingers. “Go.”

“Administrative assistant.”

Hah. As if. “Been fired from that job three times already,” I admit. “My filing days are officially over, sir.”

I swear his eyes darken.

“You don’t look like a nurse,” he says, his gaze raking over me. “But feel free to make my day and tell me that’s what you are.”

“Fantasize much?” I have a few fantasies of my own involving a hot doctor, but we’re not talking about my catnip.

He gives me that smile again. Twice in ten minutes. *Winner*.

“So second guess... Teacher.”

“Can you keep a secret?”

He holds up two fingers and nods. “Scout’s honor.”

“I’m not good with rules. No one in their right mind would put me in charge of kids. I also had an unfortunate and very short-lived stint as a substitute teacher in the fine state of Georgia. I was most emphatically invited to seek an alternate career.”

He shakes his head. “Third guess... retail clerk.”

I make a face. “Been there, done that, got fired from that. On multiple occasions. I try not to repeat my mistakes because there are so many new ones to make.”

I think he might actually be speechless.

"Why those three things? I'd like to think I look more exciting than that."

He shrugs. "Those three things represent some of the most common occupations for women according to recent surveys. They were a safe bet."

I mock-pout. "I would have picked way more exciting jobs for *you*."

His eyes crinkle up at the corner. "But we both already know I'm a SEAL."

"A SEAL on vacation," I emphasize. "You could moonlight. Or decide you need a permanent change. It could happen."

He gives me a look. It's deliciously stern and makes parts of me quiver. *Naughty parts.* "I have obligations. I've made promises. I'm a SEAL for the foreseeable future."

"Then why do you want an island in the Florida Keys? For sekkrit SEAL trainings?"

"Someday, I'll stop and I'll need something else to do. I'd like to have a canine training facility, and this is the perfect place. Imagine it," he coaxes. "Your island could be producing dogs that make our country safer."

Oh. Wow. He's taken my *convince me* challenge seriously—I practically expect him to break out into the national anthem next (although I do like the idea of it being a doggie school).

"I want to be a seamstress and designer. Make handcrafted lingerie." I have no idea why I'm telling him this. "I have an invitation to show my work in New York, but getting there is a problem. And maybe they won't want me once they see me."

Problem is an understatement. Just getting to New York City is a massive hurdle. The Beast can't make that kind of trek, at least not before hell freezes over. Plus, it takes money to live in the city. Lots and lots of money. And what happens if I get there and the show's a bust? What if no designer wants to sign me?

He shoves to his feet in a sleek, powerful move. "They'll want you."

"There is no way, Mr. Logical, that you can know that."

He sets a plate in my hand. "Feel free to give me a fashion show, and I'll give you my honest opinion."

He has no idea how very, very good I am at what I do. I imagine sashaying out here in some of my very own, very personal creations. Like

the entirely see-through corset that plumps my boobs up to my ears. I bet he'd like that. I'd bet we'd...

Oops.

I covet the SEAL.

I look down at my plate because a) I need the distraction and b) I'm starving. Breakfast does not regularly fall from the sky—or magically appear in the hands of a hot SEAL—in my world. I plan to enjoy this. Except... we apparently need to discuss the definition of *breakfast*.

He's slaughtered half a herd and parked it on my plate. I have bacon, sausage, a circle of pink flabby stuff, scrambled eggs, and an unidentified something swimming in a sea of tomato. Maybe it's supposed to be Mexican? We are vaguely close to the border, after all.

"I don't eat meat," I announce. "Unless it's bacon. Bacon is the exception to every rule."

He looks down at the plate in my hand. "How can you not eat meat?"

"It's easy. I don't insert. I don't swallow."

"Fuck. Me." His voice sounds hoarse.

I'm pretty sure that's not a literal offer. My stomach growls again, so I plop down on the sand with my plate and go to town on the tomatoes. And the bacon.

He moves away, but whatever. A girl has to have her priorities, and eating is definitely mine right now. I'm working through the tomatoes when more vegetables appear on my plate.

I'm impressed. He *is* good.

"You really don't eat meat?" He looks pained.

"Bacon," I remind him, but he shakes his head.

"Bacon belongs in a special category of its own. Of course it's an exception."

"You're not wrong," I offer.

We finish our meals in companionable silence, and then he does it. He looks at my plate, sighs, and extends a cardboard box toward me. A white box with a familiar red and blue logo. *Twinkies*. Twinkies are manna from heaven, the food of the gods, and a general panacea for all ills. I'd probably sell him the island for its weight in Hostess products (that, and Cheetos), if we're being honest.

He shakes the box at me and I pluck out a package. "I thought you were

Meat Man.”

“They put them in the boxes they mail to the armed forces,” he mutters.

Wow. “Excuse me?”

He rolls his shoulders as if he’s feeling awkward. “Strangers mail us care packages, to show their support for the military and the work we’re doing. They’re kind of addictive.”

Now there are two things we can agree on: the life-changing importance of bacon and Twinkies.

After we eat, I do the dishes (hello ocean-that-doubles-as-a-dishwasher) while Rohan gets his gear out of his Jeep and makes camp with a single-minded efficiency. I’m not sure what I thought would happen after I invited (commanded) him to camp out on my island. Camping is simple. You grab something to sleep in and something to sleep under—and unless it’s raining or it’s bug-a-palooza, I’m usually happy sleeping under the stars. Or the palm trees (although I do check for coconuts first). There’s no rent, no reservations, no front desk, and no check out times.

Rohan has gear. Specialty gear. The kind of stuff you take survival camping where *survival* means more than living through badly cooked camp food. He has a tent. A sleeping bag. A duffel bag packed with survival supplies. Everything slots into place on the beach as if he’s working from some well-known mental checklist.

I mean, honestly, the man’s a work of art, and I’m sure I can learn something since my current housing is a pile of blankets on the floor of The Green Beast. The tent goes up and then he adds a sheet of something that looks like plastic. Then the sleeping bag. I bet he could fit two in there—I’m short, he’s not, but we’d work it out.

And when he’s done, he returns to our main topic of conversation with single-minded efficiency.

“Are you ready to sign?” he asks.

Oh, the temptation.

“I’ll think about it,” I tell him, giving into the devil sitting on my shoulder. That devil whispers we should make him stick around for *just a* little longer. He’s hot, I’m single, and I’m bored. Plus, I should also confess that I’m downright terrible at commitments. I don’t make promises. I don’t talk about tomorrow. About the only thing he can count on when it comes to me is that I’ll change my mind. Or so I’ve been told for as long as I can

remember.

I press the last half of my Twinkie against his mouth. “You should lighten up.”

His mouth is so, so close to mine, his arms loosely braced on either side of me. He doesn’t actually touch me, though, and I fight back the urge to whimper. He’s more delicious than any stolen mango could be.

“Promise me,” he whispers roughly, proving he knows how to play dirty too. I can feel his words on my lips, and I fight the urge to sway toward him, melt into him. He’s the wrong kind of man for me, and I don’t do relationships. My father called me his butterfly, flitting from one thing to the next without a care, and maybe he was right. Because this man is hot as hell and he’s almost touching me, but all I can think about is the inescapable fact that he’ll leave. He’s here on borrowed time, and when it’s up, he’ll get back in his Jeep and return to doing important stuff like defending our country and our freedoms.

He’s not a butterfly.

He’s a hawk, a predator, an alpha wolf leading a pack that fights for all of us. Consuming him like a Twinkie? Licking all his sweet cream?

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

“Convince me, hot stuff,” I whisper back. And then I abandon my beach to my loaner SEAL and fall back to my van. It’s going to be a long, lonely night.

CHAPTER THREE

ROHAN

THE DAY AFTER OUR BREAKFAST DATE, I'M INSPECTING THE COTTAGES. I LIKE working with my hands. I always have. Fixing broken shit satisfies something in me, plus I prefer having everything in order. Chaos sucks. Even in the heat of battle, when guys are running, firing, dying, there's a pattern to what happens, and I've got the plan mapped out in my head. I know what to do and when to do it. Follow through and follow up. Those are two good rules.

The same can't be said for my camping companion. Where my campsite would pass any snap military inspection, Hindi's is a disaster. I pushed her beat-up van down onto the sand when she couldn't coax the engine to life, and she's thrown open the big side door. The seats were apparently sacrificed sometime in the past, because the van's interior is an explosion of pillows and blankets. When I recon, it seems like half of the small space is devoted to sleeping—and the other half is some kind of demented workshop. She's got two sewing machines, stacks of fabrics, and loads of decorative crap. Lace is apparently a staple in the lingerie business.

I fed her dinner, too. *After* I made a run to the grocery store and stocked up on rabbit food. Now I've got a second cooler full of fruits, vegetables, and grainy things like quinoa that I don't recognize but the store clerk promised me were manna for the vegetarian crowd. Hindi's not going hungry on my watch.

Hindi sits on the top step of the porch while I move in and out of the largest cottage, making notes on a notepad. This place needs significant work, but it's not a teardown. I could actually do most of the work myself, although it would be quicker to hire a team of contractors. I make a note to get some local recommendations.

When I step outside for the hundredth time, Hindi looks up from her sketch pad. For the hundredth time. No matter what she's doing, she stops

and watches me when I'm near her, as if I'm the most fascinating thing she's ever seen. It's kind of addictive, so I've been making way more trips outside than I need to.

"I should do something to thank you," she says. "For the food, at the very least. And your shirt. The van."

She ticks her various infractions off on her fingers. An impish grin plays around her mouth, and I'm certain she's not at all repentant. My dirty mind promptly suggests that we indulge in a little fantasy spanking. Teach her what happens to bad girls who steal shirts.

Danger: I've got a dozen filthier, sexier, naughtier ideas jostling for prime position in my head. This is not what she means at all.

She eyes me as if she's attempting to take a mental snapshot of my exact proportions. A certain part of me promptly gets bigger, and I have to stop myself from making a few suggestions. This is not professional. This is *definitely* not what she meant when she made demonstrating my love for Angel Cay part of any real estate deal.

"Throw in an island and we have a deal," I say lightly.

Of course she ignores me.

"I have some ideas for a thank you present," she continues, tapping a finger against her bottom lip. Fuck. Now I'm staring at her mouth. Her lips are plump. Lickable. Bitable. I'm apparently compiling a lengthy list of things to do to her mouth. With her mouth.

"I could make something for you," she says, and I have to think for a moment to remember what we were talking about. Right. Her gratitude. Of which I'm the target.

Help. Me.

"Thought you were an underwear designer?" Until I get my fashion show, I'm a skeptic. It's entirely possible that Hindi is just trying to screw with me.

She grins and hooyah... she makes a box out of her hands, holding it up in front of her face as if she's framing me between her fingers. "Silk boxers? Crotch-cupping, ass-hugging briefs? Pick your poison, big guy."

She's cross-legged watching me. The real estate contract I've brought is sticking out of her sketchpad, but I can count the number of seconds she's spent reading it. I'm up to twelve.

"Read the contract," I say gruffly.

She pouts but obediently pulls the contract of her pad. I drop down beside her because I'm no fucking saint and she's an irresistible temptation. And because I'm taller and hunkered down, I have a perfect view down the front of her white romper. I know it's a romper because she corrected me earlier when I asked if she was wearing her pajamas. I was observing and not complaining, but she didn't see the distinction. It doesn't take genius to figure out that someone's done a hatchet job on Hindi's self-confidence, and it takes all my self-control not to volunteer to go beat some sense into the idiot.

She's wearing one of those bikini tops that are two triangles of fabric on a long string. Her top is red with white polka dots, the soft fabric cradling her tits.

"You sign here, here, and here," I tell her helpfully. My arm brushes her shoulder.

She shoots me a sidelong look. "I'm not stupid. I'm not signing something I haven't read. You could ask for anything."

Please.

"My intentions are strictly honorable. I pony up cash. You turn over the deed."

"Are we living in the nineteenth century?" she asks playfully.

I tap her on the nose. "Read it."

She reaches over to root around in the enormous bag by her feet. *Hello.* Bent over is my new favorite position. The move hikes her romper bottom up her ass, a perfect frame for sweet curves and toned legs. I can see the outline of a bikini bottom that matches the top, and the lower half is as skimpy as the upper. My fingers itch to release the string tied in a perky bow at the base of her neck. One good tug and she'll come undone. I make a plan of exactly how it could play out. I could move in front of her for an optimal view and then reach around her and tug. The string would slide. And all my fantasies would come true.

"Got it!" She shrieks in triumph and sits up so fast she almost smashes into my face. Because I'm leaning in, ready to make a move and totally in her space. She holds up a pen with a smile. The pen is purple. It sparkles in the Florida sunshine. It's the least professional, most ridiculous pen I've ever seen. Pens are black, blue, or sometimes red. Purple is for crayons and magic markers.

I consider going to my Jeep and getting her a real pen, but then I pay attention. Her eyes twinkle. The corners of her mouth twitch. Yep. There's one logical conclusion—she's fucking with me. That means I have permission to tease her, too. I run my hand up the straight line of her spine and curve my fingers around the back of her neck.

"Behave," I whisper with my mouth against her ear. I use my lieutenant commander voice. The one that's low and sure and says *hell, yeah, you're taking my orders*. Usually, my next line, when I'm this close to a gorgeous woman, is *strip or spread them*, but I'm playing the long game today.

"Rohan MacCarthy, you're no fun."

I shrug. "I'm a busy man. Places to go, things to accomplish."

"Before lunch?"

"There are only twenty-four hours in a day. I use them wisely."

Then I brush a kiss over the soft, vulnerable skin at the nape of her neck. This is completely gratuitous and just for me. At some point, I'm going to kiss her everywhere, but that point needs to come *after* she's signed our contract. She can be my special thank-you treat.

I spend the next hour finishing up inside the cottage and transferring my list of repairs to my phone. Later I'll break out the laptop and create a real project plan, but for right now, I just need to know what I'm looking at. The short answer: an extremely long list of repairs. Although the asking price painted on the *For Sale* sign seemed shockingly modest at first glance, it's making more sense now. While the private island itself is gorgeous and hasn't sunk into the sea yet, all of the man-made structures are perilously close to giving up the ghost. There's too much here for me to tackle alone, so I'll have to hire a crew.

While I work through the repair list, mentally estimating the damage to my bank account, Hindi doodles next to me. Or maybe this is her version of working. She's the one who claimed to have fashion industry aspirations as a lingerie designer—and those male bodies she's inking aren't wearing much. From upside down and five feet away, my first guess would be *loincloth*. If there's a market for that stuff, it's not male. This is the kind of ridiculous shit women buy for boyfriends and then laugh their asses off when the poor fools actually wear it.

I'm halfway through my review when Hindi sets the sketchpad down and stretches, the romper creeping up her ass yet again. She wanders down

to the water's edge and shoves the romper down her body. My mouth goes dry. My dick points out that we should really, really follow her. Take a break. Do something, *anything*, that puts us within touching distance.

I have work to do.

A schedule to keep.

Ten minutes.

While Hindi splashes and plays in the water, I finish up my lists. And then, because it's almost lunchtime, I do the logical thing. I make lunch while pretending not to stare at Hindi. Since my non-breakfast cooking skills are minimal, this means I flip open the cooler, rummage around inside, and pull out the sandwiches I picked up earlier.

The deli doesn't do vegetarian sandwiches. Apparently, their usual customers like their meat. So I've had to improvise. I remove the meat from her sandwich, strip the vegetables from mine, and recombine like with like. Voila. A vegetarian sandwich. Lunch is served—you're welcome.

Hindi wanders back up the beach and stands next to me, dripping water on my bread. Her bikini's even more devastating now that it's wet and clinging to her gorgeous, golden skin.

"Are you familiar with the story of the ants and the grasshoppers?" It's always good to set expectations up front. I have every intention of feeding Hindi, but I'm gonna enjoy teasing her too.

She frowns. "I think I've seen the movie."

"Uh-huh." I tap the end of her nose. "The ants work hard storing up food for the winter. The grasshoppers run around like it's Spring Break, and then they show up and expect the ants to feed them."

She sighs. "This story doesn't end well for the grasshoppers, does it?"

"Nope." I take a big bite of my sandwich. Chew and swallow. "They get their asses handed to them by a bunch of tiny little bugs. If you don't work, you don't eat."

"You're the little itty-bitty bug in this scenario?" Her eyes travel down my body. "Because I don't see anything small."

"Good answer." I nudge her sandwich toward her.

"I have others," she says cheerfully. "For example, I believe I could make a compelling case that I get to eat because I'm scenic."

She runs a hand down her wet, bikini-clad body, and disagreeing with her is impossible. I shake my head, snapping out of my lust-filled

daydreams. Sexual chemistry, no matter how good, is not buying me this island. I have a sneaking suspicion that would be illegal, anyhow. I hand her a towel to go with her lunch, she wraps herself up, and for a few minutes we focus on putting away our carbs.

“I gave you homework.” She stares at me expectantly over what’s left of her sandwich. Her eyes are inquisitive and dancing with excitement, and I can see that my answer is actually going to matter. The problem is that I don’t actually have a list of reasons why purchasing this place is my goal, and I don’t think she’ll accept the list of repairs in lieu.

So I stall.

“Right. The *prove you love my island* ultimatum.”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” she says, devouring the rest of her sandwich. I’m not sure where she’s put it, but that was twelve inches of bread. I’m impressed.

“The location is good, the price is right, and I’m only in Florida for two weeks.” I lead with the obvious points.

She gives me a stern look. “*Love*, Ro. Give me good reasons.”

Not too many people abbreviate my name. Most people call me *sir* as in *sir, yes sir*. From her, though, I don’t mind it. There’s nothing wrong with the short list of reasons I just handed her, however. In fact, those are the best reasons to purchase a piece of property.

“Give it up,” she says, gesturing with her hands.

I’ve reached a point in my life where not too many people get to give me orders. My superior officers. The president of the United States. It’s a select group. I should set her straight, because our real estate transaction is cash-based. Emotions are not tradable commodities.

“I fucking love it, okay?” Yes, I sound gruff. And more than a little grouchy. I don’t have a laundry list of reasons. I can’t rank order my feelings for this small, scruffy, rundown, absolutely perfect island, and I’ll never memorialize every palm tree the way she has. But this is a place I’ll happily come back to, a spot I can hang onto when I’m back in the field and shit’s not going so well. I want it.

“Ding, ding, ding,” she says quietly, an impish smile lighting up her face. “Some things can’t be turned into lists.”

“Are you a Yogi now? My Jedi master?” I don’t want lessons or morals or some kind of fucking personal growth moment.

I want this island.

And... Hindi.

It's like buying the house and insisting the owner throw in the furniture, too. It's not that weird—everything works and looks right, so why change anything? Hindi belongs here.

I meet her eyes. "Sell me the island."

"Probably," she says, way too cheerfully.

I narrow my eyes. "Maybe we can skip the tease part, and you can just tell me what I need to do to make this happen."

I can't go up much higher on the asking price, but I have some wiggle room.

"Let me think about it," she pleads.

As if she hasn't been thinking about it since the day she put up the *For Sale* sign?

"Okay. Then meet me halfway."

She eyes me suspiciously, proving she's every bit as smart as I think she is. "Name your terms."

If I can't have the house, I'll take the furniture. "Go out on a date with me. I'll buy you dinner."

"We just had lunch," she points out. I have no idea why she can be so logical one minute and completely off-the-charts illogical the next. It's a gift—or a curse intended to drive me insane.

I shrug. "If I can't have the island, I want you."

She laughs, but I'm unexpectedly certain I'm serious. "You are aware that we're living in a modern century, right? I'm not property. You can't just take me."

Take is my new favorite word. It inspires all sorts of fantasies—me carrying Hindi back to my tent, laying her down, and eating her up. Or I could take her to a really nice hotel, and we could have an afternoon of hot vacation sex accompanied by some creature comforts.

"We're practically on a date right now," I point out. "I offered to feed you. You accepted my offer. How is dinner in a nice place with actual tables and silverware any different from this picnic?"

She shakes her head, stubborn to the last. "It just is."

"Then spend some time with me tomorrow."

"I have errands to run." She sounds indecisive, so I go for the kill shot.

"I'll loan you my Jeep"—because her van is never, ever moving again,

and I'll have to bury its carcass here on the island—"and then I'll take you out. On a date."

"Or?" Her question is breathless.

"Or you can sell to me right now, sign the papers, and we're done. You don't have to see me ever again."

"I don't know."

Her indecision is hardly flattering, but by now I've spent enough time with Hindi to have figured out a couple of things. First of all, we have chemistry. Sex with her will be amazing, and she knows it. That's not the problem. The issue is her inability or her unwillingness to make up her mind. Ever. It's like she's just wired for indecision.

"Pick one," I tell her, and she caves.

"Fine. I'll go out on a date with you." Now she's the one who sounds grumpy.

CHAPTER FOUR

ROHAN

WE'RE SUPPOSED TO MEET IN DOWNTOWN ANGEL CAY. I OFFERED TO PICK HER up at the island, but she turned me down. It wasn't date-like, she said. Plus she had "things to do" that were "related to selling the island." Maybe she really does have other buyers on the hook. I did the only thing I could: I loaned her my Jeep, reminded her to follow all traffic laws (not just the ones she liked—she's made her position on speed limits clear), and sent her on her way. It's not like she could walk, and her big green beast is officially in the graveyard. Plus, I don't mind the quick run into town—I can't afford to get soft in my downtime.

Angel Cay isn't a big town—it has a couple of streets and you can see the ocean from just about everywhere you look. Peach, blue, and yellow are the colors of the day, and almost all of the houses and shops on the main drag are trimmed with elaborate white swirls of decoration that make me think of gingerbread. Strange as it seems, it feels like home. I can imagine coming back here in a few years, making a place for myself.

I've rented two bicycles and stocked the basket of mine. My plans for tonight include champagne and a sunset. Unless, of course, Hindi is late.

Which she is.

The sun has gone down, and I've done hundreds of sit-ups and push-ups. Then I get out my phone and organize a construction crew for my new island. With an open-ended start date since Hindi hasn't signed the contract yet. But she's going to. We both know it. I've exhausted my to do list and am giving serious consideration to the possibility I've been stood up when she pulls over beside me in my Jeep.

I stride over to the Jeep and look down. She folds her arms over the steering wheel and beams up at me. Instead of reading her the riot act or grilling her on her whereabouts, my eyes are drawn first to her incredible smile. And then, okay, lower. Her denim shorts stop pretty much at her

pussy. Faded and thread worn, they look like they'd come apart if she bent over, and I'd sing fucking hosannas if they did. Her halter top's tied around her neck and lower back, two skinny strings holding up a whole lot of blue and white crochet. And since I'm already staring, I look all the way down and take in her shoes. The wooden platforms are cheerful fuck-me shoes, and I'm not sure which I like better—the little ribbons tying them to her ankles or the leopard-print.

She makes a face. "I'm late."

No shit, Sherlock.



HINDI

ROHAN'S DARK HAIR IS BUZZED SHORT, WHICH DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE STERN line of his cheekbones. A black T-shirt stretches over his powerful shoulders and he's wearing cargo pants and boots. He looks ready to storm a beach or an enemy stronghold.

If I were the beach, I'd be screaming *take me now*.

God's honest truth.

He's shockingly hot. I want to untuck, unbutton, and undo him—and that's only partly because the look on his face is stern and more than a little remote. He was focused on his phone when I pulled up, but unlike the rest of the Western world, he wasn't playing Angry Birds. The man's probably organizing world domination on his phone. He makes every minute count. It's like his life is one enormous, organized, well put together to do list. If he had a fridge, I bet he'd have one of those magnetized paper lists where you write down stuff as you use it up so that when you hit the store, you don't leave without what you need. I'm not like that. I should stop teasing him and sell him my island, except I'm having too much fun. There's just something about Rohan that pushes all of my buttons.

Today's errand was bogus, of course. I'm too broke to go jaunting around the mainland and I've already compared the offers I've received for my island (no surprise that Rohan's is hands down the best), but I needed to get away and Rohan offered me the Jeep. So I took it, drove a hundred

miles to the north, and then turned around and came back. I need the money, but right now I'm enjoying playing with Rohan more—and a couple of days aren't a deal killer for me. He, however, may blow a fuse, and it's entirely too much fun to witness.

He runs a hand over his head. The dive watch on his wrist is so darned sexy it should be illegal. "Is your phone broken again?"

Oops. First clue? I should have texted him. "No," I admit.

"You were in the one spot in Florida with no cell phone reception?"

"That would also be a no."

"You were stuck in traffic with a cop immediately behind you, making calling or texting an impossibility?"

I give up. "Do I earn a spanking for being late?"

He leans in and brushes his mouth over mine. "Come on out," he says. I can't help but notice that's not a *no*.

God. This is why I can't stop teasing him.

"Are we still dating?"

He's silent for a moment, but then he shakes his head and smiles at me. "You're a challenge, Hindi Alvarez."

"And you thrive on challenges?" Shoot. I sound hopeful.

"I'm a SEAL," he says, and I take that as a *yes, ma'am* and get out of the man's Jeep. He repossesses the keys and shoves them into his pocket, then gestures toward a pair of bikes leaning against a nearby palm. "I had planned a sunset and champagne, but sunset occurred twenty-seven minutes ago."

"I thought you could fix anything," I tease, and he swats my butt.

"Change of plans," he announces. "Now we're star-gazing with champagne."

He's not mad. He's... rolling with it. With *me*. Most guys encounter my brand of crazy, turn, and head the other away. Unless I'm putting out, of course. In which case, they stick around as long as they're getting some, but they're never happy with me. I'm late, I don't like commitments, and I see plans more as suggestions (or events happening in a parallel universe) than as definitive next steps. Leave it to Rohan to be different.

"I like stars."

"Good." He grabs the bag of stuff from the bike basket and *then he grabs my hand*. Not my boobs or my ass (swat notwithstanding) or even

my waist. He just threads his fingers through mine and leads me toward a grove of palm trees and the beach.

One of the best things about living in the Florida Keys is that the place is one big beach. Walk left, find a beach. Stroll to your right? Spot an even better beach. This beach, however, gets the gold star in the beach category. Tonight's full moon—and somehow, I suspect Rohan of planning that—spills a road of silver light down the dark surface of the ocean. The palm trees rustle overhead, the sand's white in the moonlight, and the only sound comes from the waves.

It's perfect.

Rohan stops when we're feet from the shore and drops my hand. For a moment, I consider repossessing his hand, but then he starts pulling crap out of the bag as if he's some kind of magician or Mary Poppins. I had no idea you could fit that much stuff in eighteen inches by eighteen inches. He unfolds a picnic blanket and anchors it. Then he produces bread, cheese, and champagne. He's got chocolate mousse. I could love this man.

Rewind.

He's here today, gone tomorrow, which is just how I prefer my men—love makes things sticky. Fly trap sticky—not wedding-ring-and-joint-mortgage sticky.

He eyes me with amusement. "Sit."

Right.

"Do you use that tone of voice with the K9 dogs?" I can't help but be suspicious.

Instead of answering, he drops to the blanket and pops the cork on the bottle. That means the answer is yes. I still take the bottle when he offers it to me, though. Hello. Free champagne is nothing to pass on. I can give him shit about his dating skills later.

"I couldn't locate flutes," he confesses. "I have red Solo cups, but—"

I upend the bottle and swallow. The guys I've dated have always been broke or cheap or holding out for someone better than me. They bought cheap champagne, the kind you buy by the case for a New Year's Eve party when you don't have much money and are willing to sacrifice quality for quantity. Ro treats me like a queen, and I'm afraid I could get used to it. The label on this bottle is yellow and covered with unpronounceable French words. Not only am I a cheap date, I'm an uncultured one.

Not for the first time, I wonder if it's time to change.

To grow up, settle down, start playing by the same rulebook everyone else seems to have memorized. I'm twenty-two, I have half a college degree, and I've visited four of the seven continents. None of this has been able to erase certain memories of my father screaming at me, however. I was the baby, the accident, the screw up, and the never-ending mistake. Whatever I did, I did it wrong. Or so my dad claimed. I've moved past agreeing with him, as well as trying to do the exact *opposite* of whatever he'd urged. Now I'm just trying to figure out what I want—and do that.

Rohan repossesses the champagne bottle before I can make a serious dent in its contents and passes me a plastic plate with bread and cheese. He's just the hostess with the mostest tonight, isn't he?

I flop down on the blanket and stare up at the sky. He's right about the stars, too. I'm aware that he's usually right. He's made a career choice out of it, unlike me, who has specialized in screwing things up, getting fired, and moving on to the next gig. Tonight, though, I'm the beneficiary of his expertise, so I'm not complaining. When a plane wings by overhead, I nudge his shoulder and point. "Shooting star."

He looks up and identifies the object with lazy ease. "Commercial plane out of Miami International Airport."

"Martians invading Earth," I counter. "Soviets on a secret spy mission. Iron Man running to the corner store for Cheetos."

He shakes his head. "The US government has its eye on Mars, and that's not where your extraterrestrial hotbed of activity is. The Soviets no longer exist, but the Russians are far more subtle. And Iron Man's a genius—he'd be going for Doritos and beer."

"He's like a billionaire," I feel compelled to point out. "He can afford two bags. And maybe he has a date and *she* likes Cheetos."

The level in the bottle dips lower and lower as we lie there, pointing out the stars to each other and squabbling amicably about which constellations are where. Naturally, Ro has them learned all by heart—and he has an iPhone app to back him up.

"Did you learn about the stars as a SEAL?" I ask him as I finish his champagne. It's all too easy to imagine him moving silently through some unfamiliar jungle or desert, using the stars overhead as his own personal GPS.

The grin he gives me makes my panties melt. “I discovered in high school that the ability to point out constellations gave me a good reason to slide my arm around my girl and pull her close.”

He suits actions to words, tugging me into the shelter of his arms. I rest my head on his chest, my cheek pressed over his heart. The steady beat echoes the rhythm of the waves. He’s so damned dependable. Everything he does is logical, well-planned, and strategic—except possibly for his being here with me and wanting to buy a tropical island. I mean, the island fantasy makes sense—lots of people have those. That’s why the companies that make calendars sell so many with pictures of Tahiti and Fiji. We all want our piece of paradise, and sometimes it’s comforting to think that all it takes is money. A shitload of money.

“How did a SEAL earn enough money to buy an island?”

My island’s small and not the most expensive island in the world, but he’s still able to plunk down three hundred thousand dollars in cash. I’m almost entirely certain the military doesn’t pay that well, no matter how good he is or how long he’s served.

“I’ve been very good with my enlistment bonuses,” he says. “Next awkward question?”

Since he’s asking, even if the dry note in his voice says he’s not *really* inviting me to pepper him with questions, how can I resist?

“How old are you?”

Dating has a rulebook. For example, there are questions you can ask on a first date. Typically, you limit those questions to what do you do, what kind of music do you like, Italian or Mexican food? Nothing too deep, not early on, but enough to let you know if you’ve got anything in common or if you’re hopelessly different. Ro and I aren’t really on the same page. Or even in the same book, series, or library. These are questions I should have asked earlier, but I’ve been distracted by his cover.

And I like him and he likes me. There’s that. A guy doesn’t even have to open his mouth to tell you if he’s into you. His body gives him away. I’ve had enough first dates to know my man book. The way he smiles is the first clue. Does he smile with his teeth, his mouth open and nothing held back? If he’s got those little crinkles around the corners of his eyes, his forehead lifting, then he’s giving you one hell of a smile, one he means one hundred percent.

“Thirty-two,” he tells me, jolting me out of my fantasy world. I sit up and give him the once-over. “You don’t look like an old guy.” He grins up at me. “What does an old guy look like?” Ro has ten years on me, and apparently I have a new thing for older men.

He frowns, as if the logical counterpart question has just occurred to him.

“Twenty-two,” I announce smugly. “Old goat, meet spring chicken.”

“Christ. You’re a baby.” He lets his head fall back on the sand, looking visibly pained.

“I’m fresh,” I counter. “New. Shiny. Although I have to admit that I’m not untouched. Somebody’s already licked this cupcake.”

“Christ,” he repeats, and now it sounds like a prayer.

“Do you want me to lie for a good cause?”

“I’m scared to ask,” he says dryly.

“I could round my age up if it makes you feel better. Or I could confess all my sins. I’ve done plenty of living, so you’re not really that much older than me.”

He winces. “Terrified.”

Leaning close to him, I start to enumerate my more recent sins. “Arrested twice. Fired three times. Forty college credits. Two maxed out credit cards. Four continents visited. I could go on, but trouble is timeless,” I conclude virtuously. “I’m practically an octogenarian myself when it comes to sinning.”

He smiles slowly and his thumb strokes a slow, sensuous pattern over my bare shoulder. “So you’re willing to date an older man.”

“Absolutely. Plus, I’m all about taking one for the team, and you’re a bona fide hero, right?”

His age doesn’t matter to me. So what if he has ten years of extra living on me? He’s a soldier, a sometimes killer, and a man who takes and gives orders. He’s a leader, a lieutenant commander, and a SEAL—he’s physically and mentally the best our country has to offer, and I’m down with that.

“No complaints?” He gives me a sidelong look, amusement curling his mouth. Damn him. He knows he planned the perfect date—twice. I wonder if he also knows that I want to fuck with him—in every sense of the word—

because he's so deliciously alpha and sure of himself. It's like confronting the Sunday crossword puzzle when you've got the whole morning in front of you, a box of pencils, and a pitcher of margaritas (yes, I do my puzzles less than sober). He's a challenge I need to figure out, to fill in the ciphers.

"One." I hold up a finger, and then *he* surprises *me*. He nips the tip of my finger and sucks it into his mouth. When he releases me, it takes long seconds before my brain grants me the power of speech again. "What's taking you so long to make a move on me?"

He rolls, a smooth rush of muscles and weight, and pins me to the sand. "Fast enough for you?"



R O H A N

"I NEED TO BE HONEST WITH YOU," I TELL HER. I SOUND FUCKING DESPERATE, which is also one hundred percent accurate. She's ten years younger than me, for Christ's sake, and being too old for her is only one of my problems. "I have less than two weeks until I deploy, and a relationship is the last thing I have time for right now. I really like you and we've got kickass chemistry, but I'm leaving when my time here is up."

She grins happily at me. "That's perfect."

It is?

"I'd just screw a relationship up." She pats me on the arm. "But I'm really good at sex. We can do that."

My brain stutters to a halt. The plan went like this: ask her out, show her a good time, kiss the girl. Repeat the process three or four times on non-consecutive days so she knows I'm not just trying to convince her to drop her panties. Which I totally am, it's just that I *like* Hindi when she's not driving me crazy. If I kiss her one hundred percent of the time, she won't be able to say things like this. I think about that. For approximately three seconds. That's actually not a bad plan. And since I'm really good at assessing and improvising on the fly, I go with it.

I kiss her.

With my eyes wide open. She doesn't have hers closed either, and when

our mouths meet, I'm holding her gaze. It's poetic and soulful and hot as shit—because she doesn't even try to hide the way I make her feel. For just this moment, Hindi Alvarez is an open book. Her mouth moves against mine, teasing and tempting, and I'm done turning down her invitations. I want to turn the page in the Hindi book and read the next page and the next and the next more than anything I've ever wanted in my life.

She runs her hands up my arms and over my shoulders, and I'm gasping hoarsely as if it's the most erotic touch I've ever been the recipient of. Because it *is*.

Our kiss is one-of-a-kind. Special. The kind of embrace you see on the big screen, except those kisses are scripted and directed, with a million people standing just out of sight and coaching the kissers on what to do next. For the first time in forever, I don't have a plan. I'm winging it.

I cradle her face in my hands and kiss the ever-loving fuck out of her mouth. Her lips press back, her mouth opening, warm and wet and sweet as sin. She kisses as good as she gets, wrapping her arms around me and holding on. Her hair's spread out on my blanket, her body spread beneath mine, and we move together like the waves on the sand. She clings and pulls and teases. I press deeper, harder, faster. *This kiss.*

CHAPTER FIVE

ROHAN

WE WALK BACK TO MY JEEP. SINCE HINDI CONSUMED MORE THAN HER FAIR share of champagne, I'm good to drive. I'd never put her in danger, and drinking and driving is about as stupid as it gets.

Ten minutes has never seemed so long.

Hindi reaches for the radio as soon as she slides into her seat, before she's even fastened her seatbelt. A song comes on, a bumping, grinding club number that blasts out into the sleepy streets of Angel Cay. Jesus. We're definitely not flying under the radar now. Still, I leave the radio alone. Instead, I reach over, pull her seatbelt free, and buckle her in. I'd like to keep her safe.

"Behave," I whisper against her mouth while I have her pinned in place. I thread my hands through her hair, pressing a hard, quick kiss against her mouth.

"Uh-oh." She glows up at me. "You're asking the impossible, big guy."

It takes an eternity to reach our respective campsites. There's a brief pause while I consider our options. Sex on the beach. Sex in the belly of the Green Beast. Or sex in my tent.

"Your place or mine?" she asks in a throaty voice that makes my dick jerk in anticipation. I fist her hair in a long tail and tug her head back for my kiss.

"Mine." I've got an air mattress. She's got—floor mats? Whatever. There's no contest.

I drag her back up against my dick, rubbing against her ass, cupping her gorgeous tits in my hands. Her halter top lives up to its promise—she's braless beneath it. Two quick tugs, and it's on the ground. I tear the shorts open, shoving them down her pretty legs, and she steps out. She's wearing a pink thong and her sandals. Jesus. I'm a lucky man.

She's the most beautiful sight on this island, and I take a moment to

drink her in. She's a tiny, curvy package with all my favorite things, including surprisingly long legs, a generous ass, and tits to match. She's not skinny, despite her checking account-enforced diet, but she's not soft, either. She raises her arms over her head and slowly pulls her hair free of its ponytail. Runs her fingers through it.

God. I'm all hers.

"Your turn," she sighs, half-stepping, half-dancing toward me. Together we haul my T-shirt over my head, and then Hindi's fingers are at my waist, unbuttoning and unzipping. I shove my shorts off and scoop her up into my arms.

"You should be illegal," she says.

I'm a SEAL—I'm one of the most legal people I know. I've got rules and plans and codes of conduct... none of which, thank God, are going to stand in the way of me getting inside her. I unzip the tent and drop her gently onto the mattress.

She smiles up at me, her face shadowed in the moonlight, and I wonder briefly if she ever does anything but smile. If tonight goes according to plan, I'll learn what her O-face looks like, but she must get sad, mad, frustrated... She reaches for me and I abandon logical thinking. Instead, I spread her knees, making space for myself. She comes up on her elbows, watching as I unbuckle her sandals and toss them to the side.

This is supposed to be a vacation hookup, sex without strings, a strange friendship with benefits—I've had sex with plenty of people on far too many occasions, and it's been good, great, middling, and more rarely, mind-blowing. Here in this tent, as I lower myself onto Hindi, I know exactly what to call tonight. *Special*. She's gonna ruin me for anyone else, and even so, I'm reaching for her.

I run my hands over her sensitive arches and up her legs. Follow with my mouth. My kisses are the opening band for a really great concert, and she's certainly applauding me as I move up her body. She moans my name, shifting restlessly, her small hands pulling me closer, harder, *nearer*. Yeah. I love that last part. I lick my way higher and higher, drinking her in.

When I slide a finger underneath the thin ribbon holding the sides of her panties together, she moans loud enough to be heard in downtown Angel Cay, and I'm not much quieter. Her pussy is slick and indescribably hot and wet, and she fascinates me. Or maybe it's the wicked panties that make me

fantasize about tearing the little wisp of fabric from her body. For the first time, I believe she really *is* a lingerie designer.

Since it would be a crime to destroy her panties, I take them down to her thighs and leave them there. She gives a choked cry, but I'm coming back. I'm going nowhere but inside her. *So fucking perfect.* I drag my fingers through her slick folds, craving more. She cries out, and I part her with my thumbs, kneeling between her knees.

I take my mission seriously. It's not a secret that most women don't come just from penetration. Paying attention to her clit is a good way to get the job done, but I don't just suck her into my mouth and go to town. I don't even make her ask. I just cover her with my mouth and eat her up.

No two women are alike. What turns one on can be an absolute turnoff for another, so I pay attention to everything her body's telling me. I give her long, wet kisses, open-mouthed kisses, and the sure rasp of my tongue over her swollen folds. I start off light and then add more pressure as I run my tongue around her clit.

Her fingers tear at my hair, twist the dog tags around my neck. That's my *yes, please* and *do it like that again, right there.* So I do. I could happily do this all night long, because my mission is to make her scream, to make her come. She eases her thighs wider, making room for me, and I settle in to love her.

She's whimpering my name long minutes later, her nails digging in as her thighs clench. That's my girl. I give it to her the way I now know that she likes, rubbing and kissing, pumping my fingers into her tight, slick heat. *Heaven.* Who knew I'd fucking visit heaven in the Florida Keys?

Her release is close, real close. She tightens, milking my grip and giving it all up. She comes undone, her body demanding the pleasure she craves, and I give it to her. She's beautiful, from the soft, swollen folds of her pussy to her face with her eyes glazed, her teeth biting into her bottom lip as she strives for release. So fucking gorgeous. I tuck the mental picture away in my head, because I don't want to lose this moment. This woman who shies away from commitment is all in with me right now, right here. She's letting me lead, trusting me to make it good for her.

So I do.

I kiss her over the edge, and there's nothing sexier than the way her pussy flutters, little spasms milking my fingers as she comes for me. She

bears down hard, and I catch her. Hold her.

Fucking awesome.

When she comes down from her high, relaxing into the bed, I catch her around the waist. There are a million and one different positions we could do this in, but this first time? Turns out I'm a traditionalist. I roll on a condom and push inside her missionary style. Sure, it's the most common sex position in the world, but it feels fucking awesome, and it's guaranteed to make her come so hard she sees stars.

"How do you want it? Slow? Hard?"

I'm not one for directions or orders, but it's fucking sexy when a woman has a wish list.

"I want it *now*," she growls at me.

Message received. I drive into her fast and hard, burying myself in her sweet pussy. Hindi arches up and shrieks my name. Knew she wouldn't be quiet—she practically deafens me. They might hear her in downtown Angel Cay.

She follows the shriek up with her nails digging into my shoulders.

"Hurry... up."

Her wish is my command.

Not like I jackhammer into her, but I screw myself deeper in a long, slow grind, circling my hips against hers. Three o'clock, six o'clock, nine o'clock, *jackpot*. I press against her clit when I complete each circle.

I lose myself in our rhythm, pushing in and then pulling out. She's so tight, squeezing me hard enough that I feel each tiny flutter, each new spasm. She's gonna come again, and I fight to stick to my plan, to deliver each thrust just a little harder, a little faster, when what I really want to do is drive myself into her until I explode. And then she grabs my ass, yanking me against her and using me as if I'm her personal dildo.

"I'm coming," she announces at the top of her lungs.

Be. My. Guest.

Ladies first. That's my one and only rule when it comes to sex. Most people don't look so pretty when they come. O-faces come in many flavors, most of them weird as shit. Squinty eyes. Closed eyes. Facial contortions. Like someone served up lemonade without the sugar and you're permanently puckered. When Hindi comes, she comes apart in slo-mo. Her face relaxes and her lips part. "Oh," she breathes. And then "Ohohohoh."

She melts into me, letting go, giving everything up. Her face is a work of art. Forget the Mona Lisa—if I took a picture of Hindi now, they'd hang it in the place of honor at the Louvre. And while I watch, she comes squeezing my dick almost hard enough to hurt, and just enough to send me over the border of orgasm land.

It's amazing.

Best Ever.

Possibly... life-changing.

We collapse back on the mattress, which is when I notice the hissing sound. I'm not sinking from well-earned exhaustion. We look at each other and then we both burst out laughing.

"We broke your bed." She sounds gleeful, as if she'd like to pin a medal to her chest—or mine. Works for me.

I scoop her up. "Change of venue."

"As long as I don't have to walk," she sighs. "Because I think you killed me."

"You got it," I tell her and take her back to the Beast. I'd carry her anywhere, because I'm not done with her. I've got plans for tonight and she's my star.



HINDI

I CAN'T SLEEP.

I don't want to sleep.

I'm so awake now. Every nerve ending in my body is singing the happy song, and I'm full of energy. Ro, on the other hand, is sprawled on my makeshift bed like a big, sleepy leopard. Or a tiger. A jaguar. Something lethal and gorgeous and not-tame. After we killed his mattress, he carried me to my place and proceeded to demonstrate that he knew more than one position. After we did it doggy style, we had slow sex. Then more quick-and-dirty sex. It was fabulous, amazing, a whole list of adjectives I haven't used in reference to my sex life in... forever. I'm deliciously sore and all wrung out—and sleeping is the last thing I want to do.

When I roll out from under the hard arm draped over my hip and belly, the arm's owner proves he's not asleep, either.

Ro grunts as I stand up. "Where are you going?"

"Swimming." It's two in the morning. It's pitch black. All sorts of creatures come out at night—urchins, sharks, octopi. It doesn't matter. I have to burn off some of this energy.

I sprint over the sand naked and into the water with a loud splash. One of the advantages of owning the island is that I get to make the rules, and I've decided to declare this beach clothing-optional. The sand still has kept some heat from the sun, but the water is refreshingly cool. I sink beneath the surface for as long as I can.

When I come up, Ro's emerged from the Beast. He strides toward the water's edge, a pair of shorts riding low on his hips. His dog tags glint in the moonlight. So hot. So determined. I float on my back in the shallow water and wait.

He stops at the water's edge and assesses. I don't know if Ro ever stops thinking. He's got a master plan for everything life tosses at him, up to and including sex. I wonder if he has a plan for me, or if it even covers more than tonight. We made no promises to each other, he and I, but it's not as easy to imagine walking away from him now that I've made a personal acquaintance of his dick.

I have feelings, damn it, and they're absolutely inconvenient.

At the water's edge, Ro nods, as if he's come to a conclusion. I float some more, wait some more. And then he's shoving his clothes down his muscled thighs and wading into the water with powerful strides. He moves so effortlessly that it's a pleasure to watch him. As a SEAL, he has to be comfortable in the water, but I'd never realized what a thing of beauty the body could be.

Or how *right* it could be to wait for him to come to me. I'm more of a *body in motion stays in motion* girl. I don't stop, don't pause, don't halt. When he reaches me, I wrap my legs around his lean hips. His body's the most gorgeous map of places he's been, things he's done, all hard, cut ridges and muscles.

"How do you feel about sex in the ocean?" I whisper against his ear.

"Hooyah," he growls, and then he proceeds to show me he's every bit as good in the water as he is on land.

CHAPTER SIX

ROHAN

ON TUESDAY, HINDI PROMISES ME SHE’LL GIVE ME AN ANSWER ON MY PURCHASE offer in another day. Then we officially have dirty sex. She’s pointed out that since we’ve started *doing it* (her words), we haven’t done it the same way twice, and that must mean I’ve got some mental checklist of sexual positions I’m working through. I don’t, but I’m certainly game—and Hindi’s every bit as creative as I imagined she would be. I’m gonna have to break out the Kama Sutra soon, just to keep her challenged. We take the Jeep back to the beach where we had our first “date” and do it in the back seat.

I put the top up, strip her bare, and make her scream. All guys have their favorite car porn scenes that they replay when they’re spanking one out. In her daddy’s car, on the front hood of the convertible, up against the side with her knees around my hips. Sex is like beer. Even when it’s lukewarm, it’s still pretty damned good. The risk of being seen is a thrill that Hindi apparently enjoys—she comes hard and fast.

Afterward, we drive back to the island, and I’m already making plans for round two. I’ve got some real creative ideas for the side of the porch and parking her on my dick.

“Do you really love it?” She’s staring out at the ocean, her arms wrapped around her knees. Today’s the rare rainy day. The wind whips off the ocean, driving raindrops inside the Beast and my tent, so we’ve retreated inside the main cottage. Someday, this will be the office for Search and SEALs. I’ll run my dream canine-training business from here, and every time I sit down at my desk, I’ll remember Hindi here.

So it’s not hard to tell her the truth when she gestures at the island and the surrounding sea. “Yeah.”

She turns her head to gaze at me. “You mean that?”

I say the first thing that comes to mind, and it’s so fucking true, I

immediately want to take it back. “With all my heart.”

I should make a joke, but this is one of those moments that feels like something more. We’ve fucked like bunnies (filthy, dirty, exhibitionist bunnies) and there’s no part of the island we haven’t christened. I love sex. I love having sex with Hindi. And yes, I love her goddamned island and I have every intention of making it mine.

The problem is that my feelings may not be limited to the island. Also? Hearts, in my limited experience, are targets. Things you shoot at because a clean kill shot’s always the best. In the Hindi-verse, hearts take on a whole new meaning. It’s scary and amazing at the same time. She’s wearing a pair of cutoffs today and one of my T-shirts. She steals them at every chance she gets because, she claims, old habits die hard. Last night, however, she gave me a private wet T-shirt contest to compensate, so I’m not complaining too loudly.

Especially since she’s not wearing a bra. Pretty sure we abandoned that by the side of the road when we gave the Jeep a work out.

For the first time in days, it’s not a hundred million degrees out, and her nipples poke at the cotton in stiff little points. I drool just looking at her. She looks tousled and sexy and satisfied. She’s smiling, that little cat-in-the-cream pot smile she gets when everything’s gone right and she’s finally not worried.

I hold up two fingers. “Scout’s honor. I love everything about this island.”

She leans into me, trailing her hand down my chest and then cups points further south. She strokes my dick, and screw the island, the sale, and the fact that I have to leave in three more days. I’m almost out of time, and there’s no miracle or plan that can buy me more hours.

We kiss for a long time, her lips pressed against mine, my mouth pressing back. When she pulls back, she cups my cheek for a long second. Then pats it.

“Okay,” she sighs. “Yes. I’ll sell you my island.”

Mission fucking accomplished. We spend the next thirty minutes signing and going over details. I make a couple of calls and she does the same. I’m right on schedule and it feels good.

It also feels kinda like something is missing, but I’m ignoring that. Hot sex, an island in the works, a handful of days left on my leave. What more

do I need?

“I should pack up my stuff and go,” she says.

Light bulb.

“I’ll share.”

It will take several days for the wire to clear and the title to transfer. And I don’t want her to go anywhere.

Ever.

She smiles and shakes her head. “I can’t stay here forever, Ro.”

“Then what are you going to do?” We both know I’m headed back to my SEAL team. My future’s mapped out for the next two years, but Hindi’s is a big black hole. “Now that you’ve got all my cash?”

“Shoes?” She grins at me, though, and I don’t think anyone could buy that many shoes.

“Seriously.” I lean back against the wall and pull her between my legs. She rests her head against my chest and wriggles around, getting comfortable.

“I have this crazy idea,” she says finally.

“Color me shocked.” Yes, that came out drier than was probably wise, given that I want to have sex with her again tonight.

“I could shoot for membership in the mile high club,” she teases. “Streak in public. Take a pole dancing class.”

“All laudable ambitions,” I agree. My plan here is to wait her out. Eventually, she’ll open up and share with me. Sure enough, she sighs.

“I want to go to New York City,” she admits. “Do some dream chasing. See if I can launch that design career I talked about. Since I’m pretty sure it costs an arm and a kidney to rent so much as a cardboard box there, that’s what I’d like to do with the island money.”

“You’re gonna rock the fashion world,” I tell her and I mean every word. I know about as much about fashion as she does about disassembling an assault rifle, but I’m still certain. It’s like knowing that if you pull the trigger, a bullet comes out and shit happens in that general direction. Hindi’s amazing. There’s no way she doesn’t take New York City by storm. I’m just kinda sorry I won’t be there to see it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROHAN

PHAETON THOUGHT HE HAD A PLAN. WHEN HE BEGGED HIS SUN-GOD DAD, Helios, to let him borrow the chariot of the sun, he believed one hundred percent he could control the immortal steeds. Take them out for a spin, enjoy the ride, and return home triumphant. Nobody would get hurt. Phaeton would have a good time.

Easy-fucking-peasy.

Of course, when Phaeton took the reins, he was certain that everything was working according to his master plan. He was enjoying the ride and things were going well. *Look at me. I'm in charge of my destiny and I rock.* And then his lack of experience made itself felt, the horses bolted, and all Phaeton could do was hang on and hope like hell he didn't get his stupid ass tossed out of the chariot because it's a long fall to the ground when you're riding through the heavens. Better yet, Phaeton's out-of-control zigzag through the sky started burning up the better part of Africa, so Zeus stepped in and fried him with a lightning bolt for the greater good.

In case you're as slow as I am, I'm Phaeton in this scenario.

I was so dead certain that I had my shore leave sorted.

Come to Florida. Buy an island. Have fun, meaningless vacation sex with a hot girl (who happens to be selling an island that I want equally badly, but that's just a bonus). Go back to my SEAL team.

It sounds like a great plan, right?

Except, like Phaeton, I'm suddenly not in control of my ride. I hopped on, so fucking certain that I knew how everything was going to play out—and it was going to play out great. And at the beginning, I'm right.

When Hindi and I hook up, the sex is awesome. I'm Phaeton on top of the world, the view is incredible, and nothing can possibly go wrong. I'll be home before dinner, no harm, no foul.

And then I lose control.

Sometime in the last ten days, *feelings* crept into this, and not the lust-filled, you're-smoking-hot-and-I-need-to-bang-you-now kind, either. I mean, I've got those. In spades. But there's something else, something more. My heart's yanked the reins from my hands and my logical, well thought out plan?

Out the fucking window.

I love Hindi Alvarez.

I'd always suspected that love was a pain in the ass that defied all logic, and now I've got confirmation. I have the island, but I've also got a commitment to the SEALs that will take me away in a matter of days, a heart full of brand-new, unfamiliar, uncomfortable feelings, and zero idea of how to share any of this with Hindi. Let alone convince her to wait for me and take a chance on this SEAL. Like Phaeton, I'm in the process of crashing and burning—and I don't like it.

I don't know how love snuck up on me. We've had nine days together, which is way too fast for any rational person to be certain he's met The One and he wants to settle down with her for the rest of his life. Admittedly, as a SEAL, the rest of my life could end up being unexpectedly short, but that doesn't mean I don't plan on treasuring all the time I've got. And somehow Hindi's gone from being in the Awesome Fuck category to winner of the Diamond Ring Award. I want to wake up with her every morning that I can. I want her to keep me, and I damned sure don't want to give her up.

I think about Hindi when I'm with her. I miss her when we're apart. It's like my brain and my heart tuned into the Hindi Alvarez channel, and I'm playing her twenty-four-seven. She's hot and wickedly funny and I respect the shit out of her design skills and her balls-out approach to living life. She drives me crazy, too, the way she can't show up on time for anything and her complete resistance to planning of any sort. She hates commitment and someone's destroyed her self esteem, but she's Hindi. I don't need her to change—I just need her to love me.

We've got the top down on the Jeep, we're parked at an awesome beach for the sunset, and I've bought Hindi ice cream. This last decision is because I'm a masochist. With each slow lick she takes, my dick gets harder and harder. Wonder if she could be persuaded to try a little sex in public? Maybe my *I love you* declaration would sound better after she's limp and happy wrung out from an orgasm. I need all the help I can get, so I'm

seriously considering the orgasm-and-then-confess plan when my phone goes off.

The Jaws ringtone actually makes me fucking jump.

Shit.

No.

It's the mobilization alert. The thing about shore leave is that Uncle Sam reserves the right to call your ass back to the fold if there's an emergency and your team is needed in the field. I've had guys called back from their honeymoons, the birth of their firstborn, or just the dentist. You pack up, you head out, and in a matter of hours, you're back on base. In twenty-four hours, I'll be headed out of the US. I'll go where I'm needed, and that I don't regret.

It's just that I also need to know that I can come back. To Hindi. Despite the days and nights I've spent getting to know her, my head promptly empties of all retention strategies. I just know I want more. I want all of her, and I want her to know she's got all of me. Or at least, all of me that hasn't made prior promises and commitments to Uncle Sam. I should have told her this sooner, but I didn't know how. I should have figured it out, because now I'm under the gun, and while I'm one of the best under pressure, this is Hindi we're talking about.

There are always guys who think they can have two girlfriends, and, at least initially, they're not wrong. You can score the dates, timeshare yourself between them, and at least at the beginning, no one's going to bust you. When it's just sex and a convenient hook up, there's no problem. Is it unethical and immoral? Depends on what you've disclosed to your girls, but long-term, it doesn't work. Once feelings get involved, one or both of them is gonna want you full-time, and then what do you do? How do you explain to one that the other has a claim on your time and you can never be hers one hundred percent? I've made promises. I took an oath of enlistment. And I keep my promises. This is why so many SEALS opt out of long-term relationships. We know we only have so much to give, and women like Hindi deserve the whole fucking pie and not just a slice.

I go for the direct approach. "I have to go."

She nods and licks her fingers. She doesn't get it yet. Or maybe she does, and I've misunderstood this thing we have and she doesn't care. Then she takes another slow, torturous lick of her cone and my balls tighten. We

could go back to our place and have sex.

We could go back and make love.

If I can get the words out.

“What’s up?” she asks.

I check my phone quickly for confirmation (yes, I’m fucked) and give it to her straight. “I’ve been redeployed.”

She frowns. “I thought you had three more nights?”

“Not any more. I’ve been recalled.”

“Well fuck.” She looks at me, looks back at the ice cream that’s now running down her fingers in sticky rivulets, and tosses the cone out the open window of the Jeep and into the bushes. The seagulls will love her.

“That’s about it,” I agree.

I’m about to say something—although I’m still figuring out what—when she launches into speech.

“That’s bullshit. They can’t just yank your chain and expect you to come running.”

Part of me’s glad she’s not all *yeah, see ya, don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out*, but the rest of me realizes I’ve just walked into an unexpected firefight. She wants her three days, and I can’t give them to her. For the first time, I have to say no to Hindi. I have to tell her that even if it kills me, I can’t give her what she wants.

“Plans change.”

She curls up in her seat, glaring at me. “You and your plans.”

“What does that mean?”

She waves a hand in the air, and I’m pretty sure that’s her middle finger staring front and center. “You have a plan for everything. You don’t pee without planning out how you’re going into the bathroom, lifting the seat, and doing your thing.”

I laugh, which is a mistake. “Some things are second nature. They don’t require a plan. Take a deep breath, and we’ll figure this out.”

Take a deep breath. Yeah. I’m an idiot. I should have wrapped her in my arms and whispered the truth into her ear. That I miss her already and don’t want to go. That the only thing making this bearable is the possibility that maybe she’ll be here waiting for me when I come back. If I come back. Because while I’ll do my best, even I’m not infallible. Phaeton had great intentions, but he died when Zeus’s lightning bolt struck him. I’m going out

to fight. There are thousands of ways to die in a firefight, no matter how well prepared you are. And then there are freak accidents, weather-related accidents, or hundreds of other ways for a mission to go wrong. I can promise to try, but I can't promise to succeed.

"Figure it out?" She snaps the words out like a drill sergeant. "There's nothing to figure out here, sailor. You're done. You're gone. Have a nice life."

"Are you worried about the sale?" I ask, solidifying my status as Idiot of the Century.

"No, I'm not worried about the fucking sale!" she screams. "I'm sure you've got everything set up like clockwork. I'm worried about *you*."

"I have responsibilities," I tell her, sounding exactly like a pompous dick. Great.

"So go." She launches herself out of the Jeep, strips down to her underwear, and then pauses. Looks at me. There's challenge and defiance written in capital letters on her face. I should go. Even though it would be ungentlemanly, I should turn the key in the ignition, go back to our island, and pack. I have to roll at five a.m. to meet my deadline—and that's if I don't leave now. I could go back, pack up, and call someone to pick Hindi up. I could...

Not plan.

I get out of the Jeep and storm the beach. She flips me the bird.

"Try using your words," I advise her. "Makes things much clearer."

"Fuck you," she growls. "And the horse you rode in on."

That's certainly much clearer.

"Sending your soldier off with a kiss? How very patriotic of you, Ms. Alvarez."

"*Sailor*," she hisses at me, and then she flicks open the clasp of her bra and shrugs it off. Shoves her panties down, turns, and wades into the water, treating me to a spectacular view of her mighty fine, entirely pissed off ass. It's a hell of a way to end an argument—but she doesn't get the last word. Not today.

"We're not done here," I grit out. I'm pissed, I'm out of control, and I'm fucking out of time. I don't know what I'm going to do next, and I'm strangely okay with that. I just know that I'm doing it with Hindi Alvarez.

"I'm going for a swim," she announces, without turning around.

She doesn't invite me to join her, but it's not like a hostile sends a SEAL an engraved invitation and waits for the RSVP. I get out and strip down. I consider leaving my boxer briefs on, because this is a public beach after all, and getting arrested now for public indecency would make meeting my deadline impossible. A quick recon tells me, however, that we're alone.

Fuck it.

I yank my boxers off and add them to the stack, and then I hit the water. I catch up to her in four swift strokes, snaking my arm around her waist and yanking her back against me.

"You're naked," she growls.

"So are you," I point out. "And I'm not done with you. With *us*."

And then I kiss her. I kiss her with everything I've got, rough and tender as if I'm trying to eat her up, put a piece of her inside me. It doesn't make any sense, and it sure as fuck doesn't fit into a master plan. But the way our mouths meet, ours tongues tangling, says everything that needs to be said right now. *I need you. I want you. Hold me. Hold me forever.*



HINDI

"SO WHAT'S THE PLAN?" I ASK FINALLY. WE BOTH KNOW HE HAS ONE. RO HAS A plan for every occasion.

"I don't have one," he says, and I snort. As if I believe *that*.

"Of course you do. I'll bet you had a plan for the day you were born."

Naturally, Ro rolls out a list of suggestions about how he would *like* the night to go. He's polite, he's creative, and he's still leaving me in the morning. Not that I got to keep him forever. I knew the deal going in. It's just that... he's leaving.

"But it's not a plan," he finishes. "It's more of a suggestion."

"You drive me crazy." Unfortunately, this comes out more sigh than snap. It's still true—but my complaint is missing its teeth.

"The feeling's mutual," he promises me, and I believe him.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" he asks. This is the last question on earth I'd expect to hear from Mr. Plan-Ahead-SEAL.

I shake my head emphatically. “Not a chance.”

“I think I do.” He hesitates. Maybe he really is flying blind without a plan. Granted, most of us do this every day of our lives, but Ro prides himself on being organized. “Fuck. There’s really only one way to say it, isn’t there?”

He groans, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “I love you.”

Holy fuck, Batman.

“Repeat that?”

Because there’s no way I heard correctly. No way Mr. I’m-a-SEAL-and-I’ll-do-my-duty just claimed to love me. It’s not that I’m unlovable, but we’re so entirely wrong for each other that for a moment I just laugh.

“I’m serious.” His arm tightens around me, and I lean back so I can see his face. Okay. He doesn’t look like he’s making a joke. It’s just that he’s been adamant that our time on Angel Cay is temporary. Stolen. An aberration. My favorite kind of fun because it involves no rules and no promises, other than a promise to end. And if I’ve wondered about what could happen if we stretched our time, stretched our chances and stole just a little more time (forever comes to mind), well, that’s one more example of how I’ve never met a rule I didn’t want to break.

“I love you,” he repeats. “It’s crazy. I have to go, and you’ve got your New York gig. I can’t make forever promises right now, but I also can’t leave you behind without saying something. I’d like to ask you to wait for me. I’d like to ask you to love me.”

His words hit me hard. He’s still talking, talking, talking, telling me everything he thinks is so outright wonderful about me, but how can I listen to him? Okay. How can I *believe* him? He lives for the future, doing the protect and defend, but I live in the moment. I don’t look back—and I never, ever look forward. One plus two plus three—the end number is the same. Forever. All I can think is that forever is a long time.

I’ll miss him.

I want more.

I want it all.

Because yes, goddamn it, I don’t believe in love at first sight, but I might just believe in love at first chance. And the trouble with SEALs is that they know how to fight with all their hearts for what they believe in.

“I love you,” he says, resting his forehead against mine. “That’s not

changing today, tomorrow, or every day I'm gone.”

“Are you going to keep saying it?” I know the words come out sounding like a complaint, but it’s a question that I mean. I don’t do relationships. Men don’t take chances on me, and they definitely don’t give me their hearts to have and to hold. I’m more of the loaner penis girl you let play with your junk, share a few laughs and good times, and then every one goes home happy after the play date.

“Until you say it back,” he promises me. His hands slide down my face, over my throat. As if he’s memorizing me, holding me close and then closer still. God. He feels so perfect.

“I told you I don’t do commitments.” I wrap my legs around his hips and look down pointedly. “And you don’t *feel* like you want to renegotiate the terms of our agreement.”

We can keep on having sex.

We don’t have to change.

“You live to break rules,” he coaxes, cupping my butt in his big hands. His gorgeous dick teases me in all the right places, even though I now know that having sex in the ocean is harder than anyone ever tells you. The good stuff is always hard. “Break this rule with me. Tell me you’ll be mine. That you’ll wait for me. That you love me.”

I lean back, lift up, and take him. “I’ll give you two out of three. I’ll be yours as long as you’re mine. I’ll love you. But no way am I waiting.”

EPILOGUE

ROHAN

HINDI MEETS ME ON THE BEACH.

In fact, she's goddamned early.

She wasn't kidding about not waiting around for me. When I pull up in my Jeep at five a.m., she's already there. Twenty minutes early. The justice of the peace beside me hums in approval. Apparently, Hindi already has a reputation in these parts for taking liberties with timetables. I had to pay the guy a small fortune to drag him out of bed this early, but it's worth it.

Hindi chose an orange pleather mini-dress as her wedding attire. The dress has a high collar, no sleeves, and stops just short of her ass. She's barefoot and a white tulle veil flutters from her head.

She's fucking gorgeous.

"I wrote my own vows," she whispers to me as the justice of the peace pulls out the longest list of words I've seen in years. He proceeds to intone an impressively flowery set of promises. I'm pretty certain she raided the thesaurus for this one.

I am more to the point. I promise to love her, to honor her, to cherish her, and to always come back for her. And since she has tears in her eyes when I finish making my promises, I figure that's good enough.

As we're doing this spur of the moment, I didn't have time to strategize rings. It's also not as if reputable jewelers are open in the middle of the night—it's the Florida Keys and not Vegas. I made do and made art. Hindi's wedding ring is a little fluted seashell I found on the beach last night. Dr. Google explained how to thread it onto a twist of gold wire from our champagne bottle. The shell is pink and white and used to house a scallop, although now it has a distinctively greenish cast I hadn't noticed before.

"Oh." She breathes in and runs a finger over the ridges as the justice of the peace pronounces us man and wife. We kiss quickly, and he leaves us alone on our beach. He's promised to file our paperwork and mail me the

certificate. Our loose ends are all tied up.

"I'll get you a real ring," I promise her, sliding my arm around her waist so I can pull her in close. "Just as soon as I can."

She shakes her head, holding her hand out to admire her ring.

"This one is perfect."

"When our kids bring home presents from kindergarten, you're gonna be a happy woman."

She laughs. "Are we pregnant?"

"Do you want to be?" Starting a family with Hindi now would be crazy. I have almost two years left on my current tour of duty. I can't promise to be home at all, let alone often. And while fatherhood is a new idea for me, I already know it requires more than a sperm donation.

I'd like to try.

I'd like to be that man, that husband, that father.

For today, however, I'm focused on the first two.

"Someday," she says, looking wistful. "Maybe not someday soon, but..."

"Some day *good*," I say.

We have to get going. She's offered to drive with me to the base before continuing on her way to New York City. I've offered to set her up in my apartment, but she wants her shot at designing, and I can't blame her. Still, we're down to hours when eternity wouldn't be enough. The sun's coming up over the ocean, and there's just a hint of heat and warmth. I lean down, cupping Hindi's face and brushing my mouth over hers. She's so fucking beautiful. I can't believe I'll have her by my side, in my heart, forever.

"Some day *best*," she whispers, and then we're kissing.

The End



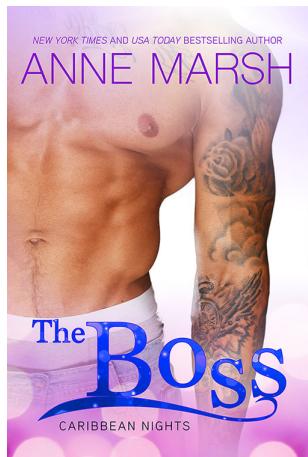
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