



*band on
the run
series*

ONE *more* Chance

NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SAMANTHA
CHASE

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more
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“If you can’t get enough of stories that get inside your heart and soul and stay there long after you’ve read the last page, then Samantha Chase is for you!”

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“Great writing, a winsome ensemble, and the perfect blend of heart and sass.”

*- **Publishers Weekly***

“Recommend Chase to fans of Susan Elizabeth Phillips. Well-written and uniquely appealing.”

*- **Booklist***

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[MADE FOR US EXCERPT](#)

[OTHER BOOKS](#)

[ABOUT](#)

Prologue

Twenty-One Years Ago...

Tonight's the night.

Yeah, that had been the same thought that had gone through Mick Tyler's mind almost every night for almost two damn years. He'd been combing clubs and bars all over L.A. and Hollywood searching for inspiration and it had yet to strike.

He'd left home two years ago in search of pursuing his dream of making it in the music business. Not that he was a musician, but he just wanted to be a part of it in the form of working for a record label or managing a band. So far, nothing had come from either of those quests, but he was hoping tonight would be different.

Hell, he wished that same thing night after night, but eventually, something had to give, right?

It was a little after eleven as he walked into yet another dive. It reeked of stale beer and body odor, and a part of him wanted to turn around and walk

right out and go back to his own crappy apartment that smelled only mildly less offensive.

“Tonight,” he murmured to himself. “Tonight is going to be worth the smell.”

Making his way through the crowd, he bypassed the bar and found a spot just to the right of the stage and settled in for a long night. They were always long. Tonight’s lineup had four bands playing and Mick said a small prayer that he’d be leaving here later with his hearing intact and a band worth representing.

An hour later, the first band hit the stage and after fifteen minutes of bad singing, bad guitar playing, and the bassist vomiting, he turned and got himself a beer. Normally he wasn’t a drinker, but ordering a beer didn’t make him feel like a freak. The few times he ordered a bottle of water, the bartender had looked at him like he had ordered meth.

So in the bizarro world of the L.A. music scene, beer was more acceptable.

It took another thirty minutes for the second band to hit the stage and while they weren’t horrible, no matter how Mick looked at them, they weren’t what he was looking for.

Glancing at his watch, he knew there were another two hours to get through. With a sigh, he looked around and managed to find a lone barstool, which he pulled along with him, and sat against the wall in the shadows. It wasn’t comfortable and it was getting hotter the longer the night went on, but he was determined to see it through to the end.

Several people looked at him oddly, but it didn’t even faze him anymore. He had an image he was trying to project; he wasn’t here to hang out or be

part of the crowd. He was here as a businessman looking to scope out the talent in hopes of signing them. So instead of jeans and a t-shirt, he was in a pair of black trousers and a polo shirt.

Yeah, he certainly didn't blend in with the crowd.

The third band was so awful that people started throwing things at the stage and it was almost a relief when they flipped the crowd off and stormed off the stage.

"Just one more," he grumbled as he started to feel like tonight wasn't going to be his night either.

Time seemed to drag and it was almost two a.m. when the last band finally took the stage.

"What's up, L.A.?" the lead singer called out from center stage and Mick instantly sat up a little straighter. The kid was good-looking, smiling, had a bit of a cocky swagger, and was clearly sober.

That's a first...

"We're Shaughnessy and we know that Angus and everyone here saved the best for last and here we are!"

The crowd went wild and Mick had to wonder why these guys hadn't been on his radar before. A swarm of girls rushed the stage as they started to play and for a moment, he swore he must have slipped into another dimension because these guys were good.

Really good.

Too good to be playing in a shithole like this.

Sitting up straighter, he felt a smile tug at the corner of his lips.

Tonight will be the night.

At the end of their set, the lead singer did the whole introducing the band thing. “On bass, we’ve got Dylan Anders!” And the girls all screamed excitedly. “On lead guitar, Matty Reed!” More screaming. “And on the drums, Julian Grayson!” This time there was a roar of applause from some of the guys in the audience. “And me? I’m Riley Shaughnessy! And you guys have been great! Good night!”

The guys all moved away from the crowd and began breaking down their equipment and Mick knew this was where he had to swoop in. If he waited until after they were done and had come back inside to have a drink, he’d lose them to the girls. Standing, he straightened, shook out his limbs a bit, and then strode backstage like he owned the place.

He caught up with them in the back alley loading their stuff into a van. It was so cliché it was almost laughable, but...you had to start somewhere, right?

Riley turned and noticed him first.

“That was quite a set you put on out there,” he began before holding out his hand. “Mick Tyler.”

Nodding, Riley shook his hand. “Riley Shaughnessy.”

“I haven’t seen you guys playing anywhere before. Have you been in L.A. long?”

“About three months.” He eyed Mick warily. “Are you some sort of scout or something?”

With a casual shrug, he said, “Or something.”

“Yeah, uh...look, we’ve got to get this crap secured, so...”

“How about I buy you guys a couple of drinks?” Mick suggested, suddenly feeling like the world’s biggest creeper.

And from the look on Riley’s face, that was his opinion too.

“Look, I’d like to know more about your music and curious if anyone’s representing you?”

The bassist, Dylan, walked over, resting his arm on Riley’s shoulder. “Representing us?” he asked with a laugh. “Dude, no one’s coming into bars like this. Although, this is actually a step up from the place we played at last week, so...”

Riley looked a little sheepish. “We figured every couple of weeks we’ll move up until we get to play places like The Whiskey or the Viper Room or even The Roxy.” Then he laughed softly. “At least...we hope that’s how it works.”

“How what works?” Julian, the drummer, asked as he joined them and eyed Mick with a hint a menace.

“Moving up the L.A. ladder,” Dylan said. “We need to pay our dues, but hopefully we can pay them fast.”

Matty Reed walked by with an amp and glared at the lot of them. “Yeah, no worries. I got this shit.” He muttered a string of colorful curses before turning back to them. “It would be nice if I didn’t have to do all the heavy lifting, you know.”

This was his opening...

“You shouldn’t have to do any lifting,” Mick said confidently. “You should be playing bigger clubs—like The Whiskey—and have people moving all your equipment for you.” Then he stood a little straighter. “And I can make that happen for you.”

Four pairs of wide eyes stared back at him before Julian snorted and turned away, Matt went back to grab the last of his guitars, and Dylan wandered off.

Only Riley remained.

“You seriously think you can get us into The Whiskey?” he asked cautiously.

“Absolutely.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s the catch?”

“Honestly? It won’t happen overnight, but together, we can make it happen sooner than you doing it on your own.” Pausing, he considered his next words. “Give me three months, Riley Shaughnessy, and I’ll make you a star.”

Riley snorted with disbelief. “Dude, seriously?”

But Mick didn’t take offense. This was the moment he’d been working toward.

“You stick with me, and I can guarantee you that one day, you’ll play the Hollywood Bowl.” He smiled. “So what do you say? Can I buy you a drink and we’ll talk about it?”

Glancing around at his bandmates, he seemed to make his decision. With a smile of his own, he said, “Make it some burgers at the diner and you’re on.”

They shook hands and made arrangements to meet at the diner around the block in an hour.

Walking back through the bar and out onto the strip, Mick fought the urge to high-five himself and jump up and down victoriously. As he began to walk

down the street, he pulled out his cell phone and thought about how there was only one person he wanted to share this news with. This was a big night—the one he’d been working toward for so damn long—and he needed to share the news with someone.

A quick glance at his watch showed it was a little after five a.m. on the East Coast. It was possibly too early to call, but...

He did.

His heart was racing like mad and he wished he was sharing the news in person rather than from three-thousand miles away on a dirty street corner on a cheap cell phone.

“Hello?”

The voice was soft and sleepy and Mick had dreamed of hearing it almost every night since he left home. Sienna Ashley had haunted his dreams and, even though he knew she’d hate this lifestyle, he still couldn’t help but wish she was here to celebrate with him.

“Hello?” she said again, a little more awake.

But he couldn’t seem to say a word.

He’d walked away from her and the life he’d grown up in. Talking to her now would not only be selfish, but a little cruel.

Slowly, he hung up the phone and slid it back into his pocket.

It was better this way.

Sienna had a bright future ahead of her and if Mick played his cards right, some of his own dreams were about to come true.



Seven seconds was all it had taken to confirm that glitter, not pumpkin spice lattes, was the soul-destroying tool of Satan.

“What the hell happened here?” Mick Tyler called out in frustration. His condo was trashed.

Scratch that. His \$5,000,000 *penthouse* condo was trashed.

Raking a hand through his hair, he waded through glitter, confetti, and general trash as he tried to figure out just what had gone on.

As an agent and manager to some of the biggest talent in the music business, he was no stranger to their partying ways. But the current pop princess who asked if she could crash here last night was the last person he expected to blatantly disrespect him like this.

“Oh, Mick, hey!” Libby Milan said as she sauntered out of one of the guest bedrooms. “How’s it going?” Her long blonde hair was a tangled mess, and she looked much older than her twenty-two years.

“How’s it going?” he repeated, motioning to the surrounding mess. “What the hell were you thinking?”

With a shrug, she picked up her weekender bag and hefted it over her shoulder before slipping on a pair of sunglasses. “Yeah, things got a little wild last night. Everybody wanted a little holiday party. Sorry.” Glancing around, she walked over and slid on a pair of shoes that were practically hidden under the coffee table. “Any chance you brought some coffee with you? My head is pounding.”

“Libby, you said you just needed a place to crash last night. You didn’t mention having a party,” he said, trying desperately to hold on to his patience. “Do you have any idea how much some of this furniture is worth?”

Waving him off, she headed for the door. “Don’t be so cringe, Mick. Sheesh. Unclench a bit. It’s the holiday season. Besides, I’m sure your cleaning staff will take care of it.”

“That’s not...”

“I’ve got a plane to catch,” she said before blowing him a kiss. “I’ll see you back in L.A.!” And then she was gone.

Muttering a curse, he looked around in shock. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

As cliché as that phrase was, it was true. He’d been dealing with rock stars and pop divas for twenty years and lately it was becoming abundantly clear that he had little to no patience left for bad behavior.

This condo had been a haven for him. A retreat. It was like having a secret garden in the sky. He had been drawn to it the moment he’d heard about it five years ago. Space like this in New York City wasn’t particularly hard to find—especially in this price bracket—but his was unique. The penthouse was completely glass-enclosed, so he had 360-degree views of the city. It was a contemporary design that was bathed in natural light, and at

over 4500 square feet with five bedrooms and six bathrooms, it meant he could have people over without sacrificing privacy and space.

Space that was now covered in the remnants of a party that he didn't even get to enjoy.

Not that he would have enjoyed it. He didn't get this younger generation, and the fact that Libby had thought to do this in his private home rather than a hotel just burned him even more.

With nothing left to do, Mick pulled out his phone and called the cleaning service he normally used. He offered a hefty bonus if they sent a team over right now to get everything back into pristine shape.

Although he figured he'd be finding glitter everywhere for the rest of his damn life.

He wanted to sit down, but there really wasn't a spot that didn't need to be cleaned. The only room that maybe had a chance was his bedroom—and that was only because he kept it locked and no one was allowed to use it.

"What are the odds that one of Libby's entourage picked the lock?" he muttered as he walked down the long hallway. At the door, he tested the handle and heaved a sigh of relief that it was still locked. When he used his key and stepped inside, he finally felt like he could breathe. He opened all the sliding glass doors to let the fresh, brisk air in before lying down on the bed.

It didn't matter that it was barely forty degrees out, he just needed to air the place out to get rid of the stench of stale beer.

Most days, Mick loved his life. He lived just as well—if not better—than some of the musicians he managed. He'd accomplished everything he ever set out to do, and yet... something was missing.

"How's that for cliché," he said with a sigh.

He knew if he said that to anyone that they'd look at him like he was crazy. They would point out that he could have just about anything money could buy, but... it wasn't like that. It wasn't about shopping for something. It was deeper than that. Lately, he'd become just a little more jaded with just about everything. He'd watched friends and family members meet their forever someones before getting married and settling down. For years he swore that wasn't what he wanted, but... maybe it was.

I'm lonely.

Shit.

Just last weekend, he'd been in North Carolina with the guys of Shaughnessy. Riley, Matt, Dylan, and Julian were all there for Riley's birthday and even put on a surprise concert in the tiny coastal town of Magnolia Sound. They'd played there before, but the amphitheater was tiny compared to the stadiums they tended to sell out.

Still, it had been a good weekend. It had been wild to look at the four of them and remember them as the twenty-year-old punks they were when he first met them fifteen years ago, and then see the family men they'd turned into. Men who found the balance between rock star and husband, rock star and father. They were all amazing, and he considered them to be his best friends—particularly Riley Shaughnessy—but... did he really want what they had? Was that what this was all about?

He could sit here and make himself crazy, or he could pick up the phone and at least talk it through with someone.

His phone was instantly in his hands as he walked over and sat in his favorite chair. The weary sigh was out before he could stop it, and that's when Riley answered the phone.

“Mick! Hey! What’s up?”

“Hey, Riley,” he said, and almost cringed at how tired he sounded.

“Uh, oh. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just got back to the city and I made the mistake of letting someone stay here.” He then explained all about Libby and how this one little favor was going to cost him a couple of thousand in cleaning bills.

Riley’s first response was to laugh. “Dude, you’re too trusting for your own good. It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for you to say no sometimes. I think you’re getting soft in your old age.”

“Need I remind you how I’m only three years older than you are?”

“It might as well be thirty. And the fact that you’ve embraced the whole going gray thing, you just look older. And I say that with love.”

“Some say it makes me look distinguished...”

But now that it was out there, maybe he was aging himself a little before his time.

“Maybe, but I swear, I think you were born old.”

It wasn’t the first time anyone had said that to him.

“So other than Libby trashing your city hideaway, what’s going on? You were just here last week and I know we’re not talking business until after the holidays, so...”

Ugh...am I really going to do this? He wondered. Was he the guy who called up a buddy to talk about his feelings?

“Mick?”

“Okay, so um...this isn’t about business, but...do you have a few minutes? I mean...are Savannah and the kids nearby and need you or something?”

“Savannah’s folks are in town, so they’re all out right now. You called at the perfect time, so...what’s going on? You sound like there’s definitely something on your mind.”

“There is, but...” Groaning, he raked a hand through his graying hair. “Shit. You know what? It’s nothing. Never mind. I’m just in a mood because of this shit with Libby. I’ll talk to you next week.”

“Mick, wait!” Riley quickly interjected. “Look, we’ve known each other for a long damn time and you’ve listened to me gripe about things going on in my life. If there’s something you need to talk about, it works both ways. I’m always here to listen.”

“I know, Ry. You’re a good friend.”

“And as a good friend, I’d like to help. Seriously, man, what’s on your mind?”

“I got back here today and was wading through all the debris and...I don’t know...it just hit me that...I’m alone. It’s not like that’s news, but for some reason today it just hit harder.”

“O-kay...”

Kicking his shoes off, he slouched down in the chair. “How did you know Savannah was the one?”

“Um...what?”

“Did you feel like it was time and you were looking to settle down, or was it something you thought about?”

“Wow, um...honestly, it wasn’t something I had ever thought about. I had no intention of settling down at that point, but as soon as I met Savannah, I just knew. It was a little unnerving, but from the moment she walked through

the door of my house to interview me, it was like I knew she belonged there.” He paused. “Are you thinking of settling down? I didn’t know you were dating anyone.”

“I’m not,” he replied sadly. “Just...I don’t know. Maybe I should be. Maybe it’s time for me to stop being so hyper-focused on the music business and everyone else’s lives and do a little something for myself.”

“Mick, we’ve been telling you that for years. I realize Shaughnessy isn’t the only band on your client list, but almost everyone on it has been with you for a long time. You don’t have to hold everyone’s hands.”

“I know, but...”

“And,” Riley interrupted, “you’ve got an amazing staff who is more than capable of lightening your load. Hell, you really need to delegate more.”

“Yeah, I know, but...”

“When was the last time you even took a vacation? And not one to scout out places for tour stops, but an actual vacation?”

With a loud sigh, he said, “I don’t even remember.”

“I think that’s where you need to start. Some time away might help you put some things into perspective.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” He paused for a moment. “I just don’t know how...how do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Balance it all? You’re just as driven as I am, Riley, and yet you’ve got a wife and kids and a big family and still go on tour and write music and seem stupidly happy. How does that even work?”

His friend laughed hard at that one. “For starters? Savannah is an excellent partner. It didn’t all just fall into place. If you remember correctly, when Aislynn was born, I was a nervous wreck! I didn’t want to leave to go to the studio, let alone go on tour. Savannah had to talk me into that one.”

Mick chuckled. “Yeah. I remember that.”

“It helps that she and the kids can travel with me often. Plus, now we can video chat so I can see the kids and they can see me and the band doesn’t stay on the road for as long anymore.”

“Okay, but...what about the day-to-day stuff? How do you make it work?”

“Like what? I have the studio here in the house that I can go to and write, Savannah has her office so she can work on her own writing, the kids are either at school or in daycare part of the time, and the rest is just regular, everyday life, Mick. Surely you remember your humble beginnings?” he teased. “You weren’t born a band manager. At some point you were just a kid—just a guy—living a life with his family.”

“That was a long time ago...”

“Maybe it’s time to start remembering that. And who knows? Maybe take this time off—go someplace where you can relax and have fun and not be a band manager—and figure out what the next stage of your life looks like. Who knows? Maybe that next stage involves a wife and kids.”

He laughed softly. “Thanks, Riley. I’ll think about it.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” After a moment, he asked, “Are you sure you’re okay? I’m not in a rush to get off the phone.”

Off in the distance, he heard the doorbell ring. “The cleaning crew is here and believe me, you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Remember...it’s not too late. There’s still time for you to have a personal life and someone to share it with.”

The doorbell rang again and he said a quick goodbye.

“I think that ship has sailed,” he whispered as he came to his feet, and was surprised at the ache in his chest.

For the next fifteen minutes, he walked the cleaning staff through his meticulous instructions on what to clean and how to clean it before returning to his bedroom and closing the door. Maybe it would have been easier to just go out, but he didn’t want to. This was his home and where he wanted to be, and if Libby hadn’t treated the place like a college frat party, he’d be relaxing over a glass of wine right now.

Although...he could still do that, but maybe instead of wine, he could have a snifter of brandy.

Quietly, he walked down the hall to the dining room and said a prayer of thanks that he’d locked the liquor cabinet. No doubt last night’s party would have cleaned him out.

Two minutes later, he was back in the bedroom with the door shut, staring out at the city.

Lately, whenever he found himself in this kind of mood, his mind instantly went to a line of “what ifs”. What if he hadn’t moved from Long Island to L.A. when he was nineteen? What if he hadn’t pursued a career in music management? What if he hadn’t put his career and his clients’ careers above everything else?

But the biggest one was...

What if he hadn’t walked away from Sienna?

She'd been young; too young for him. They'd done nothing more than have a single kiss, and yet... all these years later—twenty-three, to be exact—and she still held a prominent spot in his mind.

With all his wealth and connections, the one thing Mick had never done was look her up. He didn't think he'd be able to handle knowing that she was happily married with a bunch of kids and having the kind of life she had wanted with him.

Shit.

Closing his eyes, Mick let his mind wander back to the day he had said goodbye to her. He was so cocky and arrogant—he knew he was going to be a huge success, and settling down in a small town just wasn't what he wanted. Sienna had wanted to go with him, but she was young and somewhat off-limits. The younger sister of one of his good friends. She was brilliant and beautiful and had an incredible future ahead of her. At the time, she'd barely been sixteen, and there was no way she could have gone with him. But if she had, he would have destroyed everything she was working toward.

He could still see those jade green eyes filled with tears as she begged him not to go.

“You’re going to go to college and do something brilliant,” he’d told her. “And I’m going to go to L.A. completely blind. I have no idea where I’m going to work or where I’m going to live, so... really, it wouldn’t be right for you to come with me. Not right now.”

“But... what if you found those things as soon as you got there? Would you want me to join you?” She paused. “Please. Please, Michael. I don’t care about college. I love you. I want us to be together.”

She'd never been shy about her feelings for him and honestly, he thought she'd outgrow it. But that day, as they sat in the gazebo in her parents' backyard, she'd dropped the bombshell on him.

She loved him.

And then she'd kissed him senseless and left him more than a little dazed. He knew the instant she realized he wasn't going to stay, and she wasn't leaving with him.

She'd stood up with all the regal grace of a queen before looking at him one last time.

"Be well, Michael. I hope you achieve everything you've been dreaming of."

Sienna was the last person to call him by his given name. As soon as he'd hit L.A., he'd gone by Mick. It was cooler and much more fitting for the music industry. And as ridiculous as it sounded, it worked for him. Michael Tyler hopped on a cross-country bus on Long Island, and by the time it crossed the California state line, he was Mick.

And Sienna was still... Sienna.

Shaking his head, he did his best to push those memories aside.

Or... he tried.

For some reason, he found himself wondering what life would have been like if he had sent for her. She probably would have hated the lifestyle—it was extremely unglamorous in the beginning. He worked long hours and spent a lot of time in some unsavory clubs searching for talent. In time she would have come to resent him because kids certainly didn't fit into the picture.

But... if he had stayed...

Yeah. There would have been kids.

And maybe he would have come to resent her because he'd given up his dream, so... really... it was all for the best.

"We would have had beautiful kids, though..."

Still... he did the right thing. He gave Sienna Ashley the chance to have everything she ever wanted.

Even if it wasn't him.

All I want is to get out of here...

Yeah, that had been the constant thought in Sienna Ashley's head for the last hour, but apparently, Professor Huntington figured no one in the room wanted to eat or drink ever again. Granted, he was a brilliant scientist and an excellent speaker, but he was also extremely long-winded.

It was the last day of the International Neuropsychology Association conference and his was the last presentation she needed to be at. Once he was done, Sienna was going to practically sprint from the room and go down to the hotel bar and get something to drink.

Something strong.

And maybe something to eat with it.

Sighing quietly, she did her best to pay attention, but her mind was seriously focused on whether she was going to go with a glass of wine or a shot of vodka.

Start with the wine and save the vodka for after you eat.

She hated being logical.

For once, she wished she could be reckless without her brain giving her grief about it. There were plenty of people who wouldn't think twice about going down to the bar and slamming down a couple of shots of vodka on an empty stomach. Sadly, she wasn't one of them. Instead of thinking about how it would be nice to relax after this exhausting conference, now all she could think of was how when you drink on an empty stomach, much of the alcohol you drink passes quickly from the stomach into the small intestine, where most of it is absorbed into the bloodstream. This intensifies all the side effects of drinking, such as your ability to think and coordinate your body movements.

Yeah. This was how her brain worked.

"I'd like to thank all of you for coming today," Professor Huntington was saying. "Enjoy the rest of the conference."

It would be wrong to yell, "*Yippee!*" and run away, so Sienna casually rose and made small talk with several of her colleagues before making her way out of the room. She'd been invited to join a few of them for dinner or to simply walk around Manhattan, but what she wanted most was a quiet table in the bar to just enjoy a drink—and food—before going up to her room and unwinding.

Tomorrow was the first day of her vacation. She had two glorious weeks to herself and still hadn't decided what she was going to do. For some reason, she kept expecting inspiration to strike, but so far, it hadn't.

Right now, she was planning on upgrading her hotel and staying in the city for a few days, playing tourist. There were so many museums and fascinating places to see, but the thought of doing it all alone seemed a little depressing. So, was this really the best use of her precious vacation time?

If she sat and thought on that for too long, she'd say no. Unfortunately, this was something Sienna felt like she had to do. It was time to break out of her usual patterns and mindset and try something different.

She just didn't expect it to be quite so difficult.

When she had originally booked herself for the conference several months ago, the plan had been to come to New York, attend all the lectures, and return home. But a month ago, Professor Eleanor Stefani—a dear friend and brilliant mentor—had sat her down for a rather grim conversation.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to skip the conference this year."

Sienna could hardly believe her ears. "Oh? Is everything alright?"

Eleanor gave her a sad smile. "Unfortunately, no."

The long pause that followed instantly told her the news—whatever it was—wasn't going to be good.

"My cancer is back," she said before exhaling. "I always knew it was a possibility, but I didn't expect it to be this soon."

Eleanor had battled and beat breast cancer ten years ago, and as far as Sienna knew, she had been 100% healthy ever since.

"I don't understand," Sienna said after a moment. "You go for annual checkups. You had the double mastectomy."

With a curt nod, Eleanor reached for her cup of tea and took a sip. "It's my pancreas and it's stage four. I skipped the last two years' worth of doctor appointments because of professional commitments." Then she let out a mirthless laugh. "And, if we're being honest, arrogance. I thought I had this beat."

Reaching out, she squeezed her friend's hand. "Oh, Eleanor. What can I do? What's the prognosis?"

"Three months."

Shock held Sienna immobile for a solid minute. "I...I don't even know what to say. How are you doing? How are you so calm right now?"

Another small laugh was her friend's immediate response. "I'm a scientist, Sienna. I understand what's happening and I've had some time to come to grips with it." Her expression turned thoughtful. "It's you I'm worried about."

That was the absolute last thing she expected to hear.

"Me? Why?"

"Because you're following my path and as I've been sitting and looking back on my life, I see the mistakes I've made. It's too late for me, but not for you. You're still young..."

"You're not that much older than me, El."

"Almost twenty years," Eleanor corrected.

"Still...I don't see where you or I have made life-altering mistakes."

"When was the last time you did something just for fun? Or bought yourself something frivolous?" She paused for a moment. "I wish I had gone and had a torrid affair with a Greek man named Nico, or taken salsa lessons or learned to do the tango." She grinned. "And then had a torrid affair with a beautiful Latino man named Mateo."

Sienna was starting to notice a pattern here.

"I never went to Disneyland or to the top of the Empire State Building. I never sat and binged shows like Sex and the City or gone out for a girls'

night where we went to dinner and a movie to see the latest rom-com.” She laughed softly. “I never let myself fall in love or hold a newborn baby in my arms.” Tears shone brightly in her eyes. “And now...I never will.”

This time, it was Eleanor reaching out and clasping Sienna’s hand.

“Take the trips, Sienna. Dance in the rain, make love to a man with wild abandon, live your life, fall in love...don’t give all of your heart to this job—this field of research. Give your heart to everything this world has to offer. Open yourself to new experiences—not for the sake of learning, but for the memories.” She gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Promise me. Promise me you’ll do it. Tomorrow isn’t promised, and I’d hate to think of you having regrets later on like I am.”

She fought back her own tears. “I promise. I promise you, Eleanor, that I will.”

But in that moment, she wasn’t sure she could actually follow through on any of it.

“Only one way to find out,” she murmured to herself as she waited for the elevator. There were easily a hundred people waiting with her, so, rather than stand in the crowd, Sienna decided the stairs weren’t a bad option.

Even though her feet were screaming from wearing heels all day.

“Just because I’m a neuropsychologist, doesn’t mean I don’t love pretty shoes.”

Stepping out into the lobby, she looked around to get her bearings and spotted the bar. As expected, it was crowded, but she wasn’t deterred.

At least not at first.

After waiting for over twenty minutes just to get near the bar, she glanced toward the lobby and wondered if she should just go someplace else. It was New York City and there certainly wasn't any shortage of places to eat and drink, so maybe she should cut her losses and go.

But because she was an over-thinker, she pulled out her phone to search for what specifically was close by. No need to wander around aimlessly.

That's when she noticed she'd missed a bunch of texts and calls.

"That can't be good."

She smiled when she saw they were from her brother Jason, but then instantly feared something was wrong since he seemed desperate to reach her.

First, she read the texts.

Jason: Are you seriously here in NY and you didn't call?

"Oops..."

Jason: Where are you staying?

Jason: When is the conference over?

Jason: Any chance you're free for dinner? Bree and I would love to see you.

Sighing, Sienna noted that all the texts were from two hours ago before scrolling over to listen to the voicemails he'd left.

"Hey! Why did I have to hear from Mom and Dad that you were in town?" he asked with just the right mix of humor and hurt. "Seriously, I'm sure you're busy with the conference, but we'd love to see you. Call me when you get this."

Looking up, she saw that there was little to no hope of getting near the hotel bar anytime soon and stepped out of the line. Walking over to one of the

sofas, she sat and listened to Jason's second message.

“Okay, so clearly, you're really busy. I'll tell you what, we're having dinner at Carmine's in Times Square. We've got reservations for 7:00. Please try to join us. It's been far too long since we've seen each other in person. Hope to see you then. Bye.”

It was almost five, but that still gave her time to go up to her room to freshen up and change. Standing, she walked over to the bank of elevators and was relieved that there were no lines. Her room was up on the fifth floor, and even though this particular Marriott was massive, her room wasn't overly lavish. It was fine for sleeping, but not a place she wanted to spend her downtime.

The invitation to dinner was a nice surprise and once she was in her room with her shoes off, she tapped out a quick text to her brother.

Sienna: Sorry I missed your messages, but I am looking forward to catching up with you and Bree over dinner. I'll meet you there! xoxo

It wasn't that she didn't want to see her brother and his wife, or that she purposely didn't reach out to them. It was just...

Sigh.

Sienna knew she tended to get hyper-focused when she attended conferences, and it probably would have occurred to her to call Jason sometime over the next two weeks while she was off.

He just beat her to it.

Still, it was going to be nice to spend some time with him and Bree over some good Italian food. Carmine's was a favorite of theirs, and she found it sweet that he made a reservation for them someplace he knew she'd enjoy.

Jason was always sweet. In the sibling lottery, Sienna knew she truly hit the jackpot with having him as an older brother. They were five years apart in age, but because she had skipped two grades in school, they were probably closer than they would have been. He never made her feel weird about her intellect or how awkward she could be at times, and he always accepted how her studying and career sometimes left her too distracted to remember to pick up the phone and call.

Like this week.

Still, she appreciated that he cared about her enough to reach out and want to see her. She couldn't wait to hear all about how his job was going, and catch up with her sister-in-law about what was new in her life, and then hearing all about their kids and what sort of antics they were up to. Whenever she went back to Long Island to visit, it was both enjoyable and exhausting. Honestly, she didn't know how the two of them managed to balance work and home life.

And she really wished she did.

Like...on a personal level.

What would have happened if she hadn't been born with a high I.Q? What if she'd just been a regular, above-average student who wasn't obsessed with research and learning? What if she'd put more emphasis on a social life rather than an academic one?

Sighing, she gently put her phone down because tears began to sting her eyes.

What if she'd allowed someone to get close enough to fall in love and have babies with?

Yeah, that last one was the kicker because she had dated a few men who she could have married and had kids with, but...she never felt a strong enough connection to want to do it.

And now she had regrets.

Lots of them.

Shaking her head to clear it of those wayward thoughts, she sat down at her desk and stared at the large manila envelope she'd been avoiding for days. With a small huff, she reached for it and pulled out the top sheet.

A book.

Back in the spring, Sienna had pitched the idea for a book on her research to a literary agent she had met at a conference in Dallas. It was something she'd toyed with—writing—but she didn't think she'd ever have the time or be brave enough to actually do it. But because she knew she'd never forgive herself if she didn't at least write a proposal, she had forced herself to sit down and do it.

And now there was a publisher who was interested.

It was a project that would take a lot of her time, but it would be something different—a change from her every day, boring routine.

And she desperately needed that.

Hence, the vacation.

“Okay, don't think about this now,” she quietly chided herself. “You can think about this after the vacation.” And with that, she shoved the entire packet back into her satchel. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

For the next hour, she checked her emails and changed her outfit three times until she found something chic and comfortable. Ultimately, she opted

for a pair of black skinny jeans, her favorite ankle boots, and an emerald green, wide-necked sweater. It was fall and the temperature after dark was quite cool, so she knew she'd need to bring her coat too. Even if she took a cab to and from the restaurant, she'd still have to be outside for several minutes.

With one final look at her reflection, she fluffed her wavy hair and applied a coat of gloss to her lips and decided she looked fine for a family dinner. On the elevator down, she used an app to call for a rideshare and by the time she stepped outside, it was there, waiting. Offering a brief smile, Sienna climbed in and spent the next ten minutes scrolling through her phone. The walk would have taken the same amount of time, but she opted for warmth over exercise.

Story of my life...

The drive took less than ten minutes—which was a record in her book—and she watched the sights go by along with the throngs of people. She smiled sadly at some of the couples and families and thought again about her conversation with Eleanor. For years, Sienna had pushed the thought of a husband and children aside, but lately...well...she was thinking about it more than she ever had, and for the first time in her life, she didn't have a solution.

The car pulled up to the restaurant and she thanked the driver as she climbed out. Standing out front, she wondered if Jason and Bree were here yet, but when she looked at her phone again, she saw she was twenty minutes early.

"Time to get that drink I missed out on in the hotel bar," she murmured as she pulled open the massive wood doors and stepped inside.

It was loud and smelled heavenly. For a moment, Sienna simply stood and inhaled deeply and allowed herself to get wrapped up in the total sensory experience. The smell of garlic and oregano permeated the air, but then she detected a hint of espresso before catching an even smaller hint of wine. Her stomach growled on cue, and she knew there would be plenty of time to appreciate the sights and smells around her. She waved to the hostess and casually mentioned she'd be waiting for her party at the bar, even as she kept walking. There were plenty of open seats, and she chose the closest one, pleasantly surprised when the bartender came right over to her.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

It would be wrong to get something overly strong before her brother arrived—and after, because she didn't come from a family of drinkers—so she opted for something safe. "Lemon drop martini, please."

"Coming right up."

Turning in her seat, Sienna looked around and smiled. She wasn't particularly fond of loud, crowded restaurants, but Carmine's was a tradition. Her drink arrived and she slipped the bartender a twenty and then let her attention return to people-watching. It was a Thursday night and the place was packed, but it seemed like parties arriving were getting seated fairly quickly.

Her drink was perfectly tart, and she felt herself relaxing. She grabbed a small handful of pretzels from the bowl on the bar as all the tension of the day finally ebbed away. Now that the conference was over, she could focus on what she was going to do with herself next. Maybe Bree would have some suggestions for things for her to do on her vacation. Or maybe she'd go and stay with them for the weekend and get in some quality visiting time. It

would offer a nice way to ease into her time off, plus she'd get to spend time with her niece and nephew.

I love when a plan starts to fall into place...

Then she quietly groaned. Spontaneous. She was supposed to be trying to be more spontaneous and that meant less planning and more...hell, she had no idea. This was all new to her, and she was still trying to figure it all out.

The doors opened and she spotted her sister-in-law and slowly slid off her chair, picked up her coat, purse, and drink before walking over. She'd gone all of three steps when she spotted her brother talking to someone. His back was to her, and she imagined it wasn't unusual for Jason to run into a friend or colleague here. No doubt he dined here even when it wasn't with their family. Smiling, Sienna made her way through the crowd. Jason spotted her and waved, and then his friend turned.

She froze.

Someone bumped into her, and she dropped her glass and gasped as the beverage splashed her boots and pants. A waiter and busboy were instantly beside her, helping her step around the glass and making sure she was okay.

She nodded, but... she wasn't okay.

Heck, she wasn't even sure she was breathing.

It wasn't just any friend standing there with her brother.

It was Michael Tyler.

Shit.

A large, red, handwritten number '2' with a thick, brush-like texture. The number is slanted to the right and has a slightly irregular, artistic feel.

Mick couldn't believe he'd run into Jason Ashley while waiting for his car to pick him up. He'd just finished a meeting with a potential client—a singer who just won one of those reality show singing competitions—and he was getting ready to head back to his place.

The cleaning crew had done an amazing job of cleaning up after Libby's impromptu bash and now when he walked through the door, it truly felt like home again. Everything was pristine and in its place exactly as it should be. As much as he hated to do it, he made a vow to himself to never let any of his clients stay there ever again, no matter how much he thought he could trust them. Shockingly, the only thing that had truly been damaged was the coffee table. There was a small chip in it and some water rings, so he was sending it out to be refinished.

Yeah, never again.

After the meeting, he had completely resigned himself to a quiet night alone when fate had intervened.

It had been years since he'd seen his friend—ten, easily—and he had to admit it seemed wild to see him now, after just thinking about Sienna a few nights ago. When Jason invited him to join him and his wife for dinner, it was a no-brainer. Go home alone, or have some company for a couple of hours? Um, yeah. He was all for not being by himself. He was seriously getting sick of his own company.

And now Sienna was walking toward him, and Mick forgot how to breathe.

She was stunning.

Not that he expected anything less. She had always been beautiful, but the woman she had grown into was simply...

“Mick, you remember Sienna, right?” Jason said with a huge grin before he pulled his sister in for a hug.

All Mick could do was nod.

“I can't believe you were in town and didn't call!” Then he pulled back with an even bigger smile for his sister. “When mom mentioned the conference and asked if I'd heard from you, I couldn't believe that you didn't reach out yourself!”

“Um, yeah,” she murmured. “Sorry about that.”

He hugged her again. “Nothing to be sorry about. I know how busy you are and how intense those events are for someone like you. I'm just glad that we could make this work so I could see you. It's been too long.”

Sienna pulled back and fidgeted with her hair. “I know, it truly has. I was just thinking...”

“And can you believe I just ran into Mick out on the sidewalk? I mean... what are the odds?”

What indeed.

“Sienna,” he said gruffly, leaning in to kiss her cheek. She was a little wide-eyed, and he felt her stiffen when his lips touched her skin.

He tried not to take offense.

“Michael,” she replied softly before taking a step back. “It’s nice to see you.” She was definitely more reserved than he remembered, but...maybe she was just as shocked as he was right now and unsure of how to react. Fidgeting with her long blonde hair, she seemed more than a little uncomfortable.

He took advantage of how she wouldn’t look directly at him to soak up the fact that she was standing two feet away from him for the first time in twenty-three years.

Her blonde hair was still long and wavy, her porcelain skin looked as smooth as silk, and her figure was downright mouthwatering. She’d been on the cusp of womanhood the last time he saw her, and right now, she looked exactly as he envisioned her in his mind.

And he’d envisioned her a lot over the years.

She still looked young and sexy and vibrant, and he was suddenly regretting his decision to embrace his graying hair and beard.

“Michael?” Jason said with a laugh, interrupting his thoughts. “Sienna, you’re looking at a man who is practically royalty in the music business. He ditched that name years ago!” Patting Mick on the shoulder, he grinned. “Right? When was the last time anyone called you Michael?”

Without missing a beat, Mick looked Sienna in the eyes and said, “May 16, 1999.”

She instantly flushed, and he knew she remembered it, too.

“Ashley? Party of three!” the hostess called out, and both Bree and Jason walked over to see about adding him to the reservation. A minute later, he found himself walking behind Sienna as they all made their way to a table up on the second floor.

He wasn’t intentionally ogling her, but the view of her curvy bottom in snug black denim was impossible to look away from. There was a soft sway to her hips, and he was pretty sure he was on the verge of either drooling or simply reaching out and touching her.

“Right this way,” their server said at the top of the stairs, effectively breaking his trance. Together, they walked to the far corner where a table for four was waiting for them. Jason held out a chair for Bree, while Mick held out a chair for Sienna and smiled as he sat down beside her.

The day had pretty much been a dismal disappointment—particularly the singer—and he had been more than ready to go back to the penthouse and sulk.

But this? This was so much better.

With his arm casually resting on the back of her chair, he was about to ask Sienna about her life, but Jason instantly started asking all kinds of questions about the music industry. Who was he representing these days? Was he heading out on tour with anyone soon? Had he ever met Elton John or Mick Jagger?

As much as it wasn’t a topic he really wanted to be discussing—he hated talking about himself—Mick knew he wouldn’t be able to avoid it. So he

went through his current list of clients and shared a couple of short stories about each of them and watched with mild amusement as Bree's eyes kept going wide.

"I can't believe you get to hang out with so many famous people!" she said excitedly. "I mean...it must be like one non-stop party!"

Reaching for his water, he took a sip. "Not as much as you'd think."

"What's a typical week like for you?" Jason asked.

With a small laugh and a shrug, he replied, "There is no typical week. I work a lot of irregular hours and it changes daily. Most of the time, I need to be available during normal business hours to work with agents, labels, accountants, and lawyers, and depending on who's on tour or where I'm at, it's not uncommon for me to attend live performances in evenings and on weekends. I travel a lot and sleep whenever I get a chance."

"It sounds brutal," Bree commented. "What kind of specific things do you handle?"

He really wanted to groan and change the subject, but he didn't want to appear rude.

"Basically, band managers play a complex and varied role in the music industry. Most musicians envision playing in a band as a creative job; they get to go on stage or into the studio and play music and get paid for it." He shrugged. "Unfortunately, that's just a small part of the overall big picture and basically, enjoying success as a band or singer, is no different than running any other business."

"That sounds a little less glamorous," Jason said with an easy grin.

"That's the part no one likes to think about," Mick told him. "There are contracts to review and sign, finances to handle, and marketing activities that

need to occur in order for a band to achieve success.” He took another sip of his water. “And because most musicians aren’t interested in the business end of things and simply want to focus on making and playing music, they rely on guys like me to conduct business activities on their behalf.”

“What’s it like for a new band versus an established one?” Bree asked.

Just keep smiling...

“Both require a lot of work,” he explained, “but before a band makes it big, there’s a lot more involved. For example, a large part of my job for unknown bands is sending out demos to record labels and live music venues. My team and I spend a lot of time promoting the band, scheduling shows, and growing a band’s audience.”

“How much of that do you still do yourself?” Jason asked.

“I’m not nearly as hands on at that level anymore. Don’t get me wrong, I step in to close any deals that aren’t getting made—like if a venue doesn’t want to give the band a chance—but mostly, everyone working for me in that division knows exactly what to do to get our acts seen.”

“So you’re more hands-on with the established acts,” Sienna said.

Mick nodded. “Once a band has been signed by a label, most then hire an agent who takes care of a lot of the responsibilities of finding new gigs for the band, arranging shows, and working with record labels. I then work with the agent to ensure that all activities are for the benefit of the band, all decisions and materials created support the band’s desired image, and all contracts delivered are in the band’s benefit.” Pausing, he finished his water. “I do have an entire financial department because we also handle band finances, and sometimes counsel band members on both professional and personal decisions. I wear many hats.”

Across from him, Jason nodded. “You’re the agent for Shaughnessy, aren’t you? Besides being their manager?”

Another nod. “I am. They were my first act that I signed, and I did everything for them. Once they got their first record deal, we all sat down and I told them I’d be okay if they wanted to hire a real agent, but they said they trusted me and wanted me to be the guy handling everything for them.” He smiled at the memory and at how young and naïve they all were.

“Oh, my goodness, I am a *huge* fan of Shaughnessy!” Bree exclaimed with a wide grin. “I’ve been crazy about them ever since that first album and, ask Jason, the kids all groan when one of their songs come on while we’re in the car. I always turn the volume way up and sing at the top of my lungs!”

Jason laughed. “Sadly, she’s not kidding.”

“Are they were coming to New York anytime soon?” Bree asked. “Or anywhere in the tri-state area? I don’t mind driving!”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “We’re working on the next tour after the New Year,” he told her. “The guys are all married and have kids now and wanted to be home for the holidays.” He took a sip of wine that Jason ordered for the table that had finally been served. “They’ll go back into the studio first to record new music and the team will start on the tour dates.” Smiling, he added, “And I’ll be sure to get tickets and backstage passes to you.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Bree exclaimed happily. “Thank you! Did you hear that, Jason? Backstage passes! I’m going to be the envy of all my friends!”

Jason looked over at him with amusement. “I’m not sure if I should thank you or not. There will be no living with her after that.” Then he chuckled. “And you might regret letting her meet the guys. I’m not saying that she’s overzealous, but...”

Normally it bothered him when people hit him up for tickets, but... right now he was feeling grateful for them saving him from himself tonight.

“So, Sienna,” he finally said when the topic of his job hit a lull. “What are you doing with yourself these days?”

Ugh... how lame of a question was that?

She gently cleared her throat and gave him a small smile. “I’m a neuropsychologist and doing research at Duke University. Our annual conference was this week, and that’s why I’m in town. Today was the last day.”

“A... neuropsychologist?” he asked and was too embarrassed to admit that he had no idea what that entailed. “That’s... that’s... holy shit.”

Across the table, Jason nodded. “I know, right? Here I am working a fairly normal job in finance, and my baby sister is a brilliant neuropsychologist!”

Beside him, Sienna laughed. “Jason, I highly doubt anyone would call being the CFO of a multi-million dollar corporation a fairly normal job!”

“Still,” he countered, “it’s nothing compared to be a neuropsychologist!” Turning to Mick, he went on, “You probably don’t remember how my little sister here skipped several grades because she was so smart. She could have even skipped more, but my parents wouldn’t allow it. Then she blazed through college in half the time it would have taken a normal person, and now she’s a neuropsychologist! How crazy is that?”

“Okay, can we all just stop saying neuropsychologist?” Sienna said with a laugh. “I’m a professor. It’s not a big deal.”

“Oh, please,” her brother said with an amused snort. “It’s a huge deal. Mom and Dad still put it on every holiday card.” He sat up a little straighter.

“And our brilliant daughter, Sienna, is still at the top of her field, making us the proudest parents ever!”

“Jason...” she whined.

“And then it ends with a less than stellar mention of their not-so-brilliant son,” he went on. “Meanwhile, Jason and Bree are doing well and raising our beautiful grandchildren.” He gave an overly dramatic sigh. “I wouldn’t mind if they boasted about being proud of my accomplishments.”

“And it still makes him pout every year,” Bree teased.

Beside him, Sienna laughed, a sexy, throaty sound that had Mick stopping himself from doing something stupid—like reaching over and touching her to make sure she was real.

Because... yeah. He was still a little shocked that she was here and sitting beside him.

Gently clearing his throat, he asked, “Duke University? That’s in North Carolina, right?”

She nodded.

For years he’d teased the guys in Shaughnessy about how most of them made their permanent homes there or purchased vacation homes, but suddenly, he was seeing the appeal.

“Do you spend any time in North Carolina?” she asked.

Reaching for his wine, he nodded. “As a matter of fact, I do. Riley Shaughnessy, Julian Grayson, and Matt Reed all have houses on the coast there. Last weekend, they did a small show there, and I was in town for it.”

“Too bad you’re not closer to the coast,” Bree said to her sister-in-law. “Just knowing the guys of Shaughnessy live there would have me visiting

you constantly!”

“Good grief, Bree.” Sienna laughed. “Aren’t you a little old to be stalking rock stars?”

“Never too old,” she replied with a wink. “Besides, it’s not like I’m really *stalking*. I’m just someone who loves their music and wants them to know how much it’s meant to me over the years!”

“But from a respectable distance, right?” Sienna said with a wink of her own.

“I know you think it’s weird and you’d never do anything like that, but...” She shrugged. “I don’t see anything wrong with gushing over someone or a group of someones who are incredibly talented and whose music brings joy to millions of people.”

Fortunately, the conversation moved on after that as they all finally looked at their menus.

They ordered appetizers and dinner, and the conversation flowed. It was great catching up with Jason and hearing about his work in the finance industry, his life with Bree and their three kids. He was about to ask if Sienna was married or had kids, but...

“And they love their Aunt Sienna,” Bree said. “You are their favorite!”

“Well, I adore them,” Sienna replied. “And they let me be the fun one without all the responsibility! I get my baby-fix in, and could get them all sugared up and wound up and then leave.” She winked at her brother. “You’re welcome.”

“I would just like to note that if I was the single one, and you had kids, that I would not do that to you,” Jason teased.

“I don’t believe that for a second. It’s the right of the aunt—or uncle. You can deny it all you want, but that’s the way it is.”

“But if you *did* have kids...” Jason started, and Sienna cut him off.

“I believe that ship has sailed,” she said, and it hit Mick how he had said the same exact thing for the same exact reason just a few days ago.

For the rest of the meal, they talked about everything from food to travel and somehow ended back on music.

Not by his choice.

As soon as they had finished dessert, Bree picked up her phone and frowned. “I hate to say it, but we need to get going. Tomorrow’s a work and school day, and I promised the babysitter we wouldn’t be home too late.”

Jason went to pay the check, but Mick reached for it first. “Go,” he said. “I’ve got this.”

“Mick, you don’t need to...”

He held up a hand to stop him. “Please, you saved me from a night at home by myself, so... this one’s on me.”

Beside him, Sienna was still sipping her cappuccino, and he took that as a sign that maybe she wasn’t ready to leave yet.

“I hope the two of you don’t rush off on our account,” Bree said as she stood and slid her coat on. “It was so nice to meet you, Mick.”

He stood and kissed her on the cheek before shaking Jason’s hand. “Thanks again,” he murmured.

“It was good to see you,” Jason replied. “Let’s not wait another ten years to make this happen.”

“Deal.”

Once they were out of sight, Mick sat back down. "So..."

"So," she repeated before placing her cup down and twisting slightly to face him.

There were a million questions going through his mind, but for the life of him, he couldn't seem to utter a single one.

She was smiling at him, and then they both started to laugh.

"It shouldn't be this hard, right?" he asked. "We've been talking all night."

"True, but... Bree is extremely chatty, and I think she sort of dominated the conversation tonight."

It would be rude to agree.

"Still," he commented, deciding to go with brutal honesty, "I honestly can't believe I'm sitting here with you. How are you?"

Sienna ducked her head for a moment before looking at him. "I'm good. Although... you've been hearing me say that all night. I think the real question is, how are *you*?"

"Me?"

She nodded. "Seems a little odd that a big shot like yourself was in danger of being alone tonight. I would think you have famous friends all over the place to hang out with."

Her tone was light and teasing, but it still irked him that she saw him that way.

"Contrary to popular belief, every night's not a party," he told her. "I happen to enjoy the quiet. Especially lately."

All she did was arch one perfectly shaped brow at him.

Shrugging, he figured, go big or go home.

“I’m beginning to feel my age a little. Lately, it just feels like everything is a little... much.”

For a moment, she didn’t say anything, but when she did, it wasn’t quite what he expected.

“I know exactly what you mean. I’ve been a little... disenchanted lately with work. As of four o’clock this afternoon, I’m officially on vacation.” Then she leaned in a bit closer. “Any chance you’d like to spend some of it with me?”

Jaw.

Floor.

Midway through dinner, Sienna decided that—if given the opportunity—she would boldly go after what she wanted.

And she wanted Mick.

Yeah, the name bothered her, but if that’s what he was calling himself, she’d go with it.

The look on his face was near comical, and she knew she’d shocked him.

“If you’re not interested,” she began...

“No!” he said quickly. “It’s not that. I’m just a little surprised, that’s all.”

Reaching over, she finally allowed herself to touch him.

Well... his arm.

His skin was warm and there were muscles under the expensive shirt—muscles she’d love to explore more in private. She heard his soft hiss of

breath and when she looked up and met his gaze, it was just as heated as she knew her own was. It was like they were the only ones in the room, but she was smart enough to know they weren't. So she pushed the sexier images aside and decided to discuss this logically with him.

“Look, the last time you and I saw one another, I basically threw myself at you.”

“Sienna...”

“But,” she interrupted, “I realized almost immediately how wrong that was of me to put you on the spot like that. Even though I was graduating high school two years early, I was still only sixteen and there was no way I could go with you.”

That seemed to make him relax a little.

Squeezing his bicep, she added, “The attraction is still there, though.” Slowly, she pulled her hand away and it was more like an inviting caress. “Of course, I’ll understand if you turn me down. After all, I have no idea what’s going on in your life or if you’re involved with anyone. But from the way the conversation went tonight, it didn’t sound like you were. Still, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask. But... I’ve got two weeks with nothing to do and I just thought maybe tonight you and I could...” She paused and hoped she was giving him a sexy look. “Find something to do.”

Her heart was hammering so hard that she almost thought she was going to be sick. Her palms felt a little clammy and right now she felt like she couldn’t sit still. She’d never been this bold—this sexually blunt—before, and she wasn’t sure if what she was saying came across as seductive or pathetic.

Please be seductive...

Mick's expression was unreadable, and Sienna was just about to backtrack and say she was just joking when he reached for his wallet. His eyes never left hers as he threw a wad of cash down on the table and held out a hand to her. "Let's go."

It was crazy to be this giddy, and yet... she was.

With her hand in his, Sienna did her best not to appear too anxious. They casually made their way across the dining room and down the stairs. Mick stopped and tapped out a text to someone, and she was mildly curious.

"A car," he told her before she could ask. "It's too cold out to walk."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say she didn't care about the cold, she just wanted to get back to the hotel as soon as possible.

"Do you mind if we go to my place?" he asked.

"Um..."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Marriott," she told him. "It was only a ten-minute ride here and..."

He tugged her in close and she felt herself gasp. The hunger in his gaze made her feel a little weak. "We'll pick up your things tomorrow," he said gruffly. "Will that work?"

All she could do was nod because this had been such a long-time fantasy of hers that she didn't want to do anything to jeopardize it.

She had no idea what she expected, but this wasn't it. Maybe. She thought there'd be a little more back and forth; more discussion. She never thought he'd simply take charge of the situation. If anything, she thought that by being the one to put the offer on the table, that she'd be the one in charge. But

she had to admit that she liked where this was going and liked how some decisions were simply taken out of her hands.

In fact, she liked it a lot.

His arm banded around her waist and as she looked up at him, she almost begged him to kiss her. Instead, Mick rested his forehead against hers and whispered, “Soon.”

Loosening his hold on her, he took her hand in his again and led her outside to wait for his car. No doubt it would be a few minutes because there was a ton of traffic, but Mick simply kept walking down the sidewalk.

“Shouldn’t we wait?” she asked.

“No need. He’s here.” He stepped up to a black SUV and opened the door for her.

Climbing in, she was suddenly nervous.

This was it. She was finally going to be alone with Michael Tyler.

Not Mick. Michael.

Although... maybe it would be better for her to think of him as the man he is now rather than the boy she remembered. Since this was going to be relegated to the fling category, it would probably be best if she didn’t let nostalgia and her girlhood crush factor into this.

Not that she really knew what *this* was—a night? Two? The full two weeks?

Oh, God... can I really have him to myself for two whole weeks? Am I being greedy?

“Sienna?”

Turning her head, she realized he must have asked her something and she was too lost in her own head to hear him. “Sorry?”

The grin he gave her was lethal. “I just wanted to make sure that you were... sure about this. Because if you’ve changed your mind, we can drop you off at your hotel.”

Reaching over, he took her hand in his and she nearly melted into a puddle right there. His hand was so much larger than hers and felt so warm and wonderful, and she had to wonder if it was weird that she was already this turned on from such a minor touch.

“I’m serious,” he said solemnly. “If you’re not comfortable...”

“Have I said that I’m not comfortable?” she countered as panic started to trickle in.

“Well... no. But...”

“Are you uncomfortable? Because I’d completely understand if this was weird for you. I mean, it’s been...”

She never got to finish.

Mick wrapped his free hand around her nape and hauled her in close for a kiss that was pure bliss. He didn’t dive in to devour, this was meant to calm her ramblings with just a hint of seduction.

Not that he needed to. Sienna already knew that, as long as he wasn’t having second thoughts, all he had to do was breathe and look at her the way he had a moment ago, and she’d be putty in his hands.

Slowly, he broke the kiss. “Damn,” he murmured.

Licking her lips to savor the taste of him for just a moment more, she let out a soft sigh. “Is that a good damn or a bad one?” she whispered.

“Good. Very good. Too good,” he added for emphasis. “With this traffic, we’re going to be stuck in this car for at least another fifteen minutes and there is no way I’m going to do all the things I want to do to you in the backseat of an SUV.”

Swallowing hard, Sienna’s eyes met his. “You already know what you want to do to me?”

“Sweetheart, for years I’ve thought about the things I wanted to do to you. With you,” he corrected.

That was... surprising. “You’ve... you’ve thought about me?”

The hand resting on her nape gently skimmed around to cup her cheek. “Sienna Ashley, you may not believe this, but... I’ve thought about you a lot. I play that last day over and over in my mind. Walking away from you is one of my biggest regrets.”

Eyes wide, she whispered, “Really?”

His lips hovered over hers again. “Oh, yeah. Really.”

Then he was kissing her again and this time there was a lot more heat and need and urgency. The only reason Sienna was tempted to break it was to scream at the driver to go faster.

But she didn’t because that would have meant stopping what they were doing, and it was just too damn good to allow that to happen. If this was just a preview of what was to come, she wasn’t sure she’d survive it.

For years she had dreamed about what it would be like to sleep with this man. Long before she even knew what sex was, she used to imagine them sharing a bed like married people did. Then, the older she got, her imagination got quite vivid when she thought about the things she’d like to do if ever she got the opportunity with him.

And now that it was actually happening, she prayed she didn't build it all up too much in her head.

Or that she'd be a disappointment to him.

There wasn't a doubt in her mind that he had spent the last twenty years dating and sleeping with beautiful, famous women. Probably supermodels. He lived in a world that was known for debauchery and meaningless sex. Just from some of the stories he shared over dinner, he'd hung out all over the world in the best hotels and on yachts and in castles, and she would bet good money that he didn't sleep alone in most of those places.

Now he was here with her, and she was just Sienna. Plain, boring Sienna, who never traveled, who studied neuropsychology, and typically wore sensible underwear.

Uh-oh...I think I've made a mistake...

Mick slowly broke the kiss and pulled back. "Hey," he said softly. "Where'd you go?"

For a moment, she simply blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

The lopsided grin he gave her was adorable, and he looked so much like the boy she remembered that it made her heart ache. She studied his face and realized he was still so familiar to her—his smile, those eyes... The only thing that was different was the silver threaded through his hair. It looked good on him. Reaching up, her fingers skimmed along his bearded jaw and over his lips and she desperately tried to get the moment back.

"I could tell your mind was wandering," he told her, interrupting her thoughts. "If we're moving too fast..."

Unable to help herself, she let out a low laugh. “Too fast? Two kisses in twenty-three years?” Another laugh. “If that’s how it’s going to go, we won’t have sex until we’re too old to actually do it.”

Sienna had never been shy about sex, but from the look on Mick’s face, she had shocked him.

“Okay, okay... point taken,” he agreed. “Again, I’m just making sure you weren’t having second thoughts.”

She sighed loudly. “Okay, can we please come to an agreement right now?”

“About...?”

“Neither of us is having second thoughts,” she stated. “We both want this and it's going to happen. So maybe we should stop tippy-toeing around one another and just enjoy our time together. How does that sound?”

He seemed to relax a bit and gave her a grateful smile. “Pretty damn perfect.” Putting some space between them, Mick straightened against the seat and was content to hold her hand until they pulled up to his building.

She wasn’t surprised when she saw where he lived. Knowing what she did about him and his career, she expected nothing less than the best for him. But it was hard not to be a little intimidated. Situated on the Upper West Side and parallel to the Hudson River, she knew the view would be spectacular.

It wasn’t until they were inside, and the elevator went up to the penthouse, that she began to feel way out of her comfort zone.

“The penthouse?” she asked with a nervous laugh.

“I’m almost sorry it’s dark out because it has 360-degree views. If you’re an early riser, the sunrise is breathtaking.”

Slowly, Sienna walked into the space and had to keep her mouth from hanging open. It was spectacular and yet comfortable. Obviously, the address was very prestigious, but whoever he had decorate the place made sure anyone who came in could sit and relax.

On her way toward one of the glass walls, she casually put her purse on one of the sofas. Mick came up beside her and slid the “wall” open so they could step outside. It was chilly, but he motioned to a seating area that had a heat lamp and a firepit table. “Would you like to sit down? We can light the fire, have a glass of wine, and maybe just talk for a little while.”

Turning, she faced him before moving in close and running her hand over his chest. “Maybe later. Right now, I’d really like to see more of the inside.” It was hard to believe how brazen she was being, but this had been a long time coming, and the last thing she wanted was to wait another minute. They could have a glass of wine later while talking, if that’s what they wanted, but right now, it wasn’t necessary. They weren’t kids and they weren’t strangers, and back in the car they both admitted what this was all about, so why pretend otherwise? Or prolong it, for that matter?

Wordlessly, Mick took her by the hand and led her back inside. They walked through the massive living room and then down a long hallway. At the very end was his bedroom, and as soon as Sienna crossed that threshold, she knew this was going to happen.

Finally.

Up until this very moment, she still had her doubts—there was even a part of her that thought she was simply dreaming. But as she stepped into the room and inhaled deeply, she knew this was no dream. She was standing in Michael’s bedroom. The space suited him. It wasn’t all dark wood and dark

walls like she was expecting. No, this room was warm and inviting; simple and sophisticated in shades of gray and navy, with an incredible view of the city. And as much as she was tempted to walk to the wall of windows and admire the sights, she knew she could see that later.

Or tomorrow.

Hell, the more she thought about it, the less she cared if she ever saw it at all.

Walking to the center of the room, Sienna slid her coat off and tossed it onto the bench at the foot of the bed. There was still a bit of jittery nerves fluttering in her belly, but she knew they'd dissipate as soon as he touched her.

Which she prayed was going to happen soon.

Meanwhile, Mick stood perfectly still watching her. She saw him clench and unclench his hands and was dying to know what he was thinking.

She whispered his name and contemplated going to him, but... she really wanted him to be the one to close the distance between them.

Desperately.

Slowly, she licked her lips and met his gaze head on. Her heart was pounding, and when he finally took that first step toward her, she almost sagged to the floor with relief.

In the blink of an eye, they were toe to toe and his hand reached up and cupped her nape again. This time when he kissed her, it was brutal—wild and untamed and so damn perfect. They'd waited a long time for this—practically a lifetime—and it thrilled her to know that he felt this much need for her.

He whispered her name against her lips as they slowly maneuvered over to the bed. They fell on it together and sighed with how good it felt. On and on he kissed her—his hands roaming all over her fully clothed body. Everywhere he touched felt glorious and she strained against him, silently begging for more.

Would it be wrong to ask him if they could get naked right now?

Deciding against asking, she simply pulled his shirt from his trousers. He broke the kiss and pushed up before staring down at her. He was breathless and his hair was a mess from her hands. He looked sexier than she could have imagined.

“What is it you want, princess?”

She gasped softly because he used to call her that when they were kids. “You,” she whispered. “Just you.”

“I’m yours,” he said with a low growl before leaning down and kissing her again.

What followed was infinitely more tender than she was expecting.

She’d thought they would be tearing at one another’s clothes, but he seemed to take great pleasure in slowly touching every inch of her body with both his hands and mouth as he undressed her. Sienna silently cursed the fact that she wasn’t wearing sexy lingerie, but he didn’t seem to mind. If anything, when she tried to make light of it, he’d reared up and silenced her with a kiss.

And man could he kiss.

He had her on total sensory overload, and it was the most out of control she had ever felt in her life. There wasn’t time to be self-conscious or to even second-guess anything because every touch, every kiss, every caress, gave

her so much pleasure. She never knew a mouth and tongue could be so sensual, and she never wanted him to stop.

Although...Sienna wanted to have her turn to touch and kiss him too, but he was a man on a mission and she was too weak and turned on to argue.

“Years,” he growled as he rained kisses up her inner thigh. “I dreamed about having you in my bed just like this.” One hand smoothed up her other leg until it rested on her hip. “You’re so much more than anything I ever imagined.”

More kissing.

More caressing.

His beard felt incredibly naughty as he continued his journey, and as she fisted her hands in his hair, she forced him to stop and look at her.

“I’ve fantasized about this too,” she panted. “But in all of those fantasies, you were naked with me. Any chance you can make that happen?”

His grin was a little wicked as he rolled off of her and stripped. He did it slowly, his eyes never leaving hers, and she swore nothing had ever seemed so erotic in her entire life.

By the time they were both naked and Mick settled against her, Sienna felt like she’d been holding her breath for twenty-three years and could finally breathe. It was like she had been simply existing all this time and now she was finally alive. Finally living.

“Tell me again,” he said gruffly. “Tell me again what you want.”

The way his body was moving over hers nearly made her whimper with need. He was teasing, seducing, and she knew he would keep doing this until she said the words to him one more time.

“You,” she told him, her hands going to his hair again. “Just you.”

There was that wicked smile again. “I’m yours,” he repeated as she wrapped herself around him.

And as he finally claimed her—as their bodies finally began to move together—Sienna knew he was totally worth the wait.

Three

“It’s a lot like babysitting,” he said a few hours later. They were in bed and they’d made love twice. Now they were just enjoying being tangled up together under the blankets while they talked a little more about their lives. “Sometimes it felt like I was wrangling cats. Or toddlers. It was hard to look at these men like they were adults when they were constantly getting into trouble that I had to bail them out of.”

“Sounds exhausting.” Sienna’s hand was on his chest, tracing lazy circles. There wasn’t anything overly sexy about it and yet... it was turning him on.

Again.

“And just when one group would grow out of it, there would be a new wave of talent coming in and I’d have to start all over again.” He told her about the incident with Libby Milan at his condo. “And then she walked out like an entitled, spoiled brat.”

“Well, you have to admit, you’re kind of responsible,” she commented.

“How do you figure that?”

Lifting her head from his shoulder, she gave him a bland look. “You cater to their every whim and you clean up after them. Why shouldn’t they act like entitled brats?”

She had a point, but he still didn’t enjoy hearing it.

Especially not right now when she was all naked and warm in his arms.

“Okay, no more about me. Tell me about you. What’s it like being a neuropsychologist?”

Groaning, she fell back against the pillows. “I have a love-hate relationship with my career. I love the challenge and learning new things, and working in the lab is beyond fascinating.”

“But...?”

She sighed. “But... I don’t know. Lately I’ve been... restless.” Then she paused. “No, that’s only partially true.” She told him about her friend Eleanor and the conversation they’d had. “It was like once she put it all out there like that, I was no longer content with my life. She made me look at things in a way I never had before and I’m not sure it was a good thing or a bad thing.”

All he could do was nod.

“That’s why I took the vacation time. I just needed a break; some time to sort of test her theory and just re-evaluate.”

“Where were you going to go?”

“That’s just it. I had no idea. I was just planning on winging it. And believe me, that is a huge deal for me because I am someone who thrives on schedules and lists and a well-detailed itinerary. I kept expecting inspiration to hit, but...” Turning her head, she smiled at him. “Now I’m glad I didn’t make any travel arrangements.”

For a woman who had been incredibly bold all night, she suddenly looked shy.

“Sienna?”

“I was being a little presumptuous,” she explained. “I have no idea what your schedule is like beyond tonight, so I don’t want you to feel obligated to... you know... drag this out if you have other commitments or things to do or... people to see.”

Ah...now the look was making sense.

Rolling toward her, he took her hand in his and kissed her palm. “For the record, I have no other commitments, absolutely nothing to do and no people to see. To be honest, I’m sort of in the same boat as you. Things are a little quiet right now with the business. This is the calm before the holidays and I planned it that way, even though there was no real reason to. It’s not like I had anywhere to be.”

“What about your family?”

“What?”

She looked up at him again. “Your family? Do you spend any time with them?”

That was the when it hit him just how much of their lives they’d missed.

Quietly, he cleared his throat. “Um...my mom passed away last year,” he said, his voice catching slightly. “Ovarian cancer.”

“Oh, Michael...I’m so sorry.” She snuggled closer and placed a kiss on his chest. “And what about your dad?”

Crap. This so wasn’t the conversation he wanted them to have right now, but...

“My father and I haven’t spoken in years. Twenty-three, to be exact.”

Sienna sat up and looked at him in shock. “Oh, my goodness. What happened?”

He shrugged. “He was pissed that I took off to L.A. He wanted me to take over the family business, but you and I both know I never wanted to be an electrician. Hell, I was always extremely vocal about that.”

“I know, but...twenty-three years is a long time to not speak to one of your parents. What about when your mother died? Didn’t you have to see him then?”

“They were divorced,” he told her. “Fifteen years ago. It was the best thing my mother could have done. She had fourteen years of happiness before she died. I finally got to spend time with her and took her on a couple of tour stops with me.” He smiled at the memory. “Turns out she was a huge music fan. Any music, really. She loved the atmosphere and enjoyed seeing the world.” Pausing, he took a moment to get his emotions under control. “I’m glad I got to do that for her. We were in a really good place when she died, and it meant the world to me to be there with her.”

“I don’t even know what to say,” Sienna said quietly as she settled back down beside him. “I hate that you had to go through all of that. Your mother was always so sweet.” She kissed his chest again. “I know you must miss her a lot.”

Nodding, he knew he wanted to change the subject. Needed to.

Placing a kiss on the top of her head, he pulled her in close. “If you want to spend your vacation with me, I would be honored to spend it with you.” Placing her hand over his heart, he said, “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

They lay there in companionable silence and he wasn't sure if maybe she was tired and wanted to sleep, but he knew he wasn't ready for that yet. There was no way they were going to make up for all the years they'd been apart in just one night, but there was just so much he wanted to know about her.

Plus, Mick wasn't someone who romanticized anything; he was always very level-headed and business minded. But this moment right here, right now, was quite possibly the best moment of his life. Lying in bed with Sienna Ashley was everything he had fantasized about and more.

Shifting slightly, he got a little more comfortable, kissing her again, and felt a contentment that he hadn't felt in years. "So why do you think you're restless?" he quietly asked as he went back to caressing her arm and playing with her hair. "Other than the conversation with Eleanor."

She tangled her legs with his and let out another soft sigh. "I honestly don't know."

Tapping a finger under her chin, Mick waited for her to look up at him. "Sienna, you're a brilliant woman. I find it hard to believe that you don't know what's making you feel this way."

With an annoyed huff, she mumbled, "Fine."

Now Mick wasn't sure if he should have pushed or not, because the last thing he wanted was to ruin the mood, but they'd already tackled one incredibly depressing topic and he was too curious to let this go.

"I've spent almost my entire life going to school and doing research. You have no idea how hard I've worked to get to where I am. People treat me a little like I'm a freak because I graduated high school at sixteen and had a master's degree at twenty." Pausing, she shifted beside him. "So I've been

working and working and working, and it's all that I do. I look at Jason and Bree and see how they travel, and they have kids who keep them busy, and there's a part of me that feels like I'm... like I'm missing that. Eleanor's little speech just made me accept the fact that I am actually missing that."

It was getting a little eerie how they were on the same page on so many things.

There was so much he didn't know about her—so much of her life that he missed—but he had no idea how to ask her about all of it.

"I was engaged once," she went on. "He was a fellow scientist, and we dated for five years before he proposed."

He already hated the guy.

"What happened?"

"Apparently, neither of us were overly interested in planning a wedding or a life. Everything just stayed the same—staid and boring. There was no dramatic breakup, we just sort of... quietly walked away."

That didn't fit the picture of the girl he remembered. She was always full of joy and excitement and always up for an adventure. What could have possibly happened to steal that from her?

As if reading his mind, she explained more. "After you left, I sort of... I don't know... shut down. I thought if I could get through college quickly that I would surprise you out in L.A. But the more I studied, the more there was to do. I was excelling in all of my classes and being offered internships and opportunities that I would have felt guilty turning down." She paused and placed yet another small kiss on his chest. "I've accomplished everything I ever wanted career-wise, but I gave up a lot of myself to make that happen."

It would probably sound trite for him to go with, “Yeah, me too”, even though he could completely relate to what she was saying. Instead, he thought he’d go another way.

“If you could go anywhere on vacation, where would you go?”

She hummed sleepily. “I’m kind of happy with where I am right now. I wouldn’t mind staying here for the next two weeks.”

“Sienna...”

The sexy little growl she made was adorable. Pushing up again, she looked at him. “Everywhere,” she said quietly. “I go to conferences all over the world, but I never make the time to see anything. I’ve literally been to a dozen different countries and all I saw was the airport and the hotel where the conferences were at. I mean...how pathetic is that?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s pathetic...”

She snorted. “Please, it’s pathetic. You don’t have to pretend otherwise.”

“Okay, but...”

“Several of my colleagues have mentioned how they love to go on cruises. They even invited me once or twice and all I could think of at the time was how unappealing it sounded because it wasn’t some sort of science or research cruise. I thought it would be a waste of time. Ugh...there’s no way you can say that’s not pathetic.”

He wasn’t going to touch that comment with a ten-foot pole.

“Okay,” he replied slowly. “Baby steps. You don’t have to overthink this. Let’s just take it one step at a time. Where would you like to start? What is one place you want to see more than anyplace else?”

“Do you promise not to laugh?”

His lips twitched, but he nodded.

“Graceland.”

“Wait... seriously? You want to go to Memphis and visit Elvis Presley’s home?”

She nodded. “I’ve always loved his music.”

“Oh, I remember,” he said with a small laugh. “I thought it was just a phase.”

“Nope,” Sienna replied firmly. “Still love his music and I’ve always wanted to go and take the tour, but I felt silly going alone.”

“Then we’ll go to Graceland,” he said before kissing her forehead.

“Just like that? No... planning? No making calls? Just... we’re going?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Her mouth opened and shut several times before she frowned. “That almost seems too easy.”

“It’s not like we’re looking for a private tour or any kind of preferential treatment. It’s just a matter of us getting there and having a place to stay. No big deal.” He kissed her again. “Where else?”

“Where else?”

He nodded. “I’m guessing that Graceland wasn’t the only place you wanted to see. What’s next on your list?”

“Mick...”

“Sienna...” he mimicked.

“O-kay...um...the Grand Canyon.”

“Done.”

Her brows furrowed as she thought for a moment. “The Vegas Strip.”

“Done.”

“The Hollywood Walk of Fame.”

“Done.” Kissing the tip of her nose, he added, “And then we can stay at my place in Malibu for a few days. Unless we have time to see more. Are there any other places you’d like to see?”

“This is ridiculous!” she said with exasperation. Sitting up, she clutched the blanket to her chest. “We can’t possibly do all of that in two weeks! It’s too much! And we’d have to work out airline tickets and plan out all the logistics and...it just can’t be done!”

“Agree to disagree,” he said casually. “If you’re not up for it...”

Her eyes narrowed slightly at the challenge. “Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco,” she blurted out. “And Alcatraz.”

“Naturally. You can’t do San Francisco without going to Alcatraz,” he teased. “Anything else?”

“Disneyland.” Her expression turned a little smug. “But I don’t see how you’re going to make all of that happen in two weeks. It’s not possible. I don’t care how great you think you are with booking tours for your rock stars, this isn’t the same thing. You don’t book tours on a whim. You know all that planning takes time, so...while I appreciate the way you’re encouraging me to do some fun things, we both know it’s never going to happen.”

Rolling toward her again, he couldn’t help but grin as he tugged her back down beside him. “That sounds like a challenge, my sweet Sienna.”

“Does it?”

“Definitely. And there’s something you should know about me,” he said gruffly, as he leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her throat before moving down to nuzzle her magnificent breasts.

“O... oh?” she panted.

“I love a challenge,” he said before teasing one nipple as he maneuvered them into a more comfortable position. “Practically thrive on them.”

“Rea... really?”

God, how he loved making her squirm like this.

“Yeah. Really.” Slowly, he rolled her beneath him and settled between her thighs and it felt like heaven. “Challenge accepted, Sienna. What do I get if I make it all happen?”

Her eyes went wide as he began to move against her. With a throaty moan, her back arched. “Anything you want...”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” he whispered before claiming her lips with his.

She wrapped those silky limbs around him, lifting her hips in silent invitation.

One that he readily accepted.

Sex was something Mick always found enjoyable, but he’d never felt a connection like the one he and Sienna had right now. It seemed to heighten all his senses and everything just felt like...more.

Her nails scoring down his back felt amazing.

The feel of her legs wrapped around him was incredible.

And the taste of her—every single inch of her—was decadent.

She was essentially giving him two weeks, and he already knew it wasn't going to be enough. He'd waited a lifetime for this woman and now that he finally had her—and not just here, naked in his bed—but back in his life, he knew he wasn't going to want to let her go.

“Mick,” she panted when he broke the kiss. “I need...I want...”

“Tell me,” he said with a rough growl as he entered her. “Tell me.”

“This,” she said with a throaty moan. “So much this.”

Yeah, he would never tire of hearing her talk like that. He wanted to show her how much he wanted her, needed her, craved her. Wanted to show her how much he'd missed her.

But more than anything, he wanted to make sure that she wanted, needed, and craved him just as much.

And if that meant making love to her all night long and then taking her on the trip of a lifetime so she could see all the places she always wanted to see, then he was going to make it happen.

He hadn't failed at anything he'd set his mind to, and there was no way he was going to start now.

It didn't seem possible, but at seven the next morning, Sienna was walking back into her hotel room and packing her things. She had already planned to checkout that day, but she had also planned on getting some sleep before doing so.

At least...in her original plans.

She and Mick possibly dozed for an hour—maybe two—tops, throughout the night, and instead of feeling tired, she was energized.

And extremely satisfied.

Letting out a shaky breath, she glanced around the room and made a quick mental plan to get everything packed in an orderly fashion in the next fifteen minutes.

“I think that might be pushing my skills a bit this morning,” she murmured before taking a sip of her coffee. That was definitely a necessity in the morning for her and she made the stop at the hotel Starbucks to grab a cup before coming up to her room.

Mick had his driver bring her here while he took care of packing his things and finalizing travel plans. She still didn’t believe he was going to accomplish all that he was bragging about, but she was sure whatever he came up with was going to be fine.

Moving around the room, she began collecting her things and placing them neatly and systematically into her suitcase. This was all of her clothes for the conference, and most were going to need to go through the laundry. Hopefully they’d stay someplace that offered that service. Still, the thought of lugging dirty clothes all over the country made her twitch a little. She’d need to ask Mick about making a pit stop so she could take care of it.

Walking over to the closet, she pulled out the second suitcase that was actually packed for the vacation part of her trip. Opening it, she glanced at everything she had in there and pulled out a pair of jeans, a sweater, and knew she could stick with the boots she wore last night.

“Thank God I’m an over packer, otherwise we’d have to add shopping to one of our stops.” No doubt Mick wouldn’t have a problem with it, but she hated the thought of missing out on doing something fantastic because she needed to run into Target to buy extra clothes.

Although she wouldn't mind running into a Victoria's Secret and buying some new underwear. Rummaging through her suitcase, she cursed all the cotton panties and knew she was going to have to make a mall run no matter how much she didn't want to. After all the sexy things they did last night, she wanted to *look* sexy.

Not that Mick seemed to mind what she had on, but Sienna knew she'd love to see the look on his face if he peeled her out of her jeans and found something slinky and lacy underneath.

"Yeah...lingerie shopping just went to the top of the list," she told herself as she continued to pack.

A few minutes later, her phone dinged with an incoming text and she smiled when she saw Mick's name on the screen.

Mick: Hey, beautiful. I'm all done here and ready to head over to pick you up.

Mick: We should be there in fifteen minutes. Anything you need?

She smiled at his thoughtfulness and wished it wasn't so early in the morning. Maybe she could have gotten in some shopping before they left.

Sienna: I'm almost done here so fifteen minutes is perfect.

Sienna: Any chance we can do some shopping later on today?

Mick: Tell me what you need and I'll arrange for it to be waiting for us

That made her chuckle. "Um...no. I'm not letting anyone buy my underwear," she said, but figured she'd save that comment for when they were face to face.

Sienna: As much as I appreciate that, I prefer to shop for myself

Mick: Are you sure? Personal shoppers aren't hard to come by and they are very discreet

Yeah, she didn't even want to think about what sort of things he'd probably asked people to buy. It was better if she didn't let her mind go in that direction, otherwise she'd probably chicken out of this trip.

Sienna: Thanks, but...I'm good

Then she waited for him to argue with her a little more, but fortunately, he didn't.

Mick: Leaving now. See you in a few minutes

Mick: And if you change your mind, help is only a phone call away

Mick: xoxo

After she placed her phone down, she sprung into action to finish packing. When she was just about done, she called down to bell services and was relieved when they sent someone right up.

It didn't take long to get down to the lobby and checkout at the desk. As soon as she was done, she stepped outside along with the bellhop and barely had time to look around before Mick's car pulled up. He stepped out and kissed her thoroughly before instructing the driver to load her luggage and then tipping the bellhop.

The entire thing took less than three minutes and then she found herself in the back of the luxury SUV with Mick pressed up against her.

"Are you ready?" he murmured seductively as he placed soft kisses along her cheek.

Turning her head, she gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "I think so."

He let out a low laugh. "You don't sound so sure. Did you get my email?"

She looked at him oddly. "Email?"

"Yeah, remember I asked you for your email address before you left earlier? I wanted you to have a copy of our travel itinerary."

"Oh, um...I haven't looked yet." And as curious as she was, she didn't want to appear too anxious. "I'll check it out when we get to the airport." Sienna was certain they were going to be flying out of Kennedy or LaGuardia Airport and that they'd have time to kill before their flights. A few minutes later, however, she looked around in confusion. "Are we flying out of Newark?"

Mick took her hand in his and kissed it. "No. This is Teterboro Airport," he told her. "I've got a plane here."

Her eyes went wide. "You've got a *plane* here?"

All he did was nod and before she knew what was happening, they were parked and she was being ushered through a small terminal while Mick kept his hand on her lower back and directed her on where to go.

Part of Sienna was certain she was dreaming, because this certainly wasn't her life.

At least... not her real life.

She had promised herself that one night of making love with Mick would be enough. Even if all his talk about traveling together for two weeks was just part of their pillow talk, she would be fine.

But as she buckled her seatbelt on a private jet, she could say with great certainty that the man was true to his word.

And that same man was sweeping her off her feet, even without the promise of travel.

He hadn't taken his seat yet. He was talking to their flight crew and she was glad to have a few minutes to herself to sort of let this all sink in.

They had gotten very little sleep last night, between making love and talking. She loved how he seemed genuinely interested in her life and she was equally fascinated with his. The more they talked, the more she realized he was feeling a little disenchanted with his life. Like her, he loved what he did, but he felt like it had asked so much of him personally that he'd missed out on things.

Like a wife and kids.

Yeah, he'd said it, and it made her heart ache, because there was a time when she wanted to be that wife and wanted to have those kids.

They had grown quiet after that admission, and he'd made love to her so tenderly afterwards that she felt cherished and loved and... everything.

This is crazy! You're over-romanticizing everything!

But... was she?

Sienna knew she was a very analytical thinker and tended to take things at face value. But where Mick was concerned, she was having a hard time being logical.

She pulled out her phone and was about to look at the email he sent her when she got a text from Eleanor. Smiling, she swiped her screen to read it.

Eleanor: Good morning and welcome to your first day of vacation 😊

Eleanor: I hope you're going to do something just for you

Sienna: Good morning! And you're not going to believe this, but I'm on a private plane right now heading to Memphis!

Eleanor: Oh, Sienna! How wonderful!

Sienna: I'm checking some bucket list items off with the help of an old friend

Eleanor: Oh?

Sienna: Long story, but I'll just say that fate lent a hand last night and we ran into each other over dinner

Eleanor: Sounds like a good thing

Sienna looked up and watched as Mick said something to make the crew laugh and she couldn't help but smile.

Sienna: It's a very good thing

Sienna: He's someone I never thought I'd see again, but I'm so glad I was wrong

Eleanor: Embrace every minute

Sienna: How are you feeling today? How's the treatment going?

Eleanor: Let's not ruin your first day of vacation with depressing conversation

Sienna: Eleanor...

Eleanor: Sienna, I'm serious. I am so excited that you're finally doing something for yourself. Let's not mar it with cancer talk

Eleanor: Honestly, I'm sick of talking about myself and how I'm feeling. I'd much rather hear about what exciting things you're going to do on this trip with your friend

Sienna: If we're being honest, he's more than a friend. Always was, and after last night...

Eleanor: You have no idea how happy I am for you! Now go and have a wonderful trip and I'm expecting you to send pictures since I'm living

vicariously through you!

Eleanor: Now go and enjoy the trip and we'll talk soon

Sienna stared hard at her phone for several minutes before putting it away and turning her gaze out the window. It was a beautiful day and she knew how fortunate she was and it made her feel guilty. Here she was leaving for an adventure with a sexy and wonderful man, while her friend's health was declining.

"Are you okay?" he whispered from beside her.

"Hmm?" Turning, she realized she'd never even heard him approach.

"You're staring out the window with a rather intense look on your face," he said, taking her hand in his and gently caressing her wrist.

She was starting to love when he did that.

And not just her wrist, just touching her in general.

He did it a lot, and it made her realize just how much she never enjoyed it before with anyone else.

Only him.

Maybe spending the next two weeks together wasn't a great idea. What if she got too attached? What if she enjoyed herself too much? What if... what if...

What if she fell in love?

Fell? Oh, sweetie, you've been in love with him since you were fifteen. You've already fallen...

Sienna hated it when her inner self spoke so bluntly.

"Sorry," she finally said. "I was just texting with Eleanor, and..."

Nodding, he squeezed her hand. “How is she?”

Sighing, she looked at him sadly. “In typical fashion, she didn’t want to talk about it. She was just excited that I was doing something new and exciting. I feel guilty.”

“Sienna, there’s nothing to feel guilty about. If you didn’t go on this trip, it wouldn’t change anything for her. From everything you’ve told me, she doesn’t seem the type who would want you sitting there with her watching her health deteriorate.”

“I know, I know...” It was a slippery slope here and she was on the verge of tears and knew she needed to get them back on a cheerier topic. “I was actually going to look at your email when I saw her text.”

Pulling back, he smiled. “Check it out and tell me what you think.”

It was the perfect distraction.

Reading over the entire thing, it took her a moment to realize what exactly she was seeing. “Um...Mick?”

“Hmm?”

“How on earth were you able to pull off this travel itinerary so quickly?”

The wicked grin he gave her told her he was a man of many talents.

And he had a lot of connections.

“Travel itineraries are a specialty of mine. Back when I was just getting started in the music industry, I booked everything myself. I didn’t have an assistant, let alone the team of assistants I have now. It was all on me. Even now, there are times when I handle it all myself, because I know exactly what I want and don’t trust anyone to do it.”

“I can definitely relate to that.”

“My assistant handles all the new talent. The only ones I really get involved with anymore—at least on the travel end—is Shaughnessy. They’re all really good friends, and I just prefer taking care of their arrangements because I know them all so well.”

“That’s really nice, Mick. I’m sure they appreciate it.”

He shrugged. “So, what do you think about our itinerary? Did I manage to hit everything?”

“I still can’t believe you got all of that accomplished while I packed up at the hotel,” she murmured.

“Like I said...”

“I know, I know.” Looking at her phone, she couldn’t help but shake her head in wonder. “Hmm... okay, we land in Memphis and are going directly to Graceland. The tour should take five hours, so that’s most of the day. We’re staying overnight before taking off tomorrow at ten and flying to Arizona for the Grand Canyon.” She grinned when she saw that part of the plan. “A helicopter tour with a picnic lunch, including champagne. That sounds very decadent.”

With her hand still in his, Mick kissed her wrist. “I’m not sure how well turkey sandwiches go with champagne, but I figured it was worth a shot.”

Laughing softly, she scrolled. “Then we’re taking a short flight to Vegas and staying at Nobu.” Pausing, she frowned. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that.”

“It’s part of Caesar’s Palace,” he told her. “Close to everything.”

“Oh, okay.”

“What’s after that?” he prompted.

Laughing again, she looked at him. "I thought you planned this."

Another shrug. "I'm just enjoying listening to you go over it. Come on. What's next?"

"We're staying for two days? How come?"

"There's a lot to see, and I thought you might want to see a show or two. We'll look at the schedule and you can pick."

"After that, we head to California and... your place." She gave him a sexy grin. "Three days for Hollywood and Malibu and seeing where you live. I think that could be very interesting."

"It's not nearly as interesting as you're imagining. Trust me." Leaning in, he kissed her cheek. "Then we're off to San Francisco for two days and I throw in a day in Napa. Riley Shaughnessy's brother owns a resort there, and it's magnificent. I thought you might enjoy it."

"Ooo... I'm sure I will."

"And after we're done being grown-ups who go to wine tastings, we'll head to Anaheim and run around like a couple of kids in Disneyland." Another kiss. "Then we'll finish our two-week whirlwind back in Malibu, before you have to head back to the lab."

Resting her forehead against his, she moaned. "You know I'm not going to want to go back to work after all this."

"Yeah, but it will be short. You'll have off for the holidays, won't you?"

She nodded with a sigh. "I got a lot of grief for taking my vacation time now, when I was going to get almost a month off for the holidays, but like I told you last night, I desperately needed the time away."

They both fell quiet for several moments.

“Can I ask you something?” he whispered.

“Of course.”

“What happens if this little break from reality doesn’t help?”

Pulling back, she looked at him like he was crazy. “What do you mean?”

“Look, we all need to get away sometimes. That’s a given. But what are you going to do if it’s more than just needing a break? What happens if you go back and nothing’s changed and you’re still miserable? I’m not trying to be pessimistic, but...”

“No, I know what you mean, and I guess I haven’t allowed myself to think about it. In my mind, this is going to be exactly what I need to sort of refresh and reboot,” she reasoned. “After all, it’s not like I’m looking to change careers. This is what I do.”

“Even if it doesn’t make you happy?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know many people who have jobs that make them happy.” Then she studied him. “Even you—who have a very glamorous job—are finding yourself disenchanted with it all. What would you do?”

“It’s not the job, Sienna. It’s my life. That’s where I’m disenchanted.”

“Yes, because you let your job become your life. What would happen if you took a step back and let your assistant or team of assistants handle things? What would your clients do if you suddenly ran off and take an extended vacation or... or... got married? What’s the worst that would happen?”

Mick let out a long breath as he straightened in his seat. “For starters, I think a vacation and getting married are two completely different things, and would require two completely different mindsets.”

She wanted to hide out of sheer embarrassment. Why had she mentioned getting married? Not that she specifically said marrying *her*, but... still.

“No, I get that, but I’m just saying that you have a team of people to help you and—no offense—it doesn’t look like you really need to work. If your place in Manhattan is just one of many like that, I’m guessing you can afford to take as much time off as you want or even retire.”

“At forty-three?” he said with a laugh. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“Then you could simply cut back,” she countered, and then an idea hit her. She would turn the tables on him. “So, we obviously know what I would do with my time off. What about you? What is it you feel you’re missing?”

Rather than answer, he motioned for their flight attendant to bring them something to drink and snack on. Sienna wasn’t deterred, however. She knew a distraction when she saw it.

“I’m guessing travel isn’t a big deal, because you’ve traveled all over the world with your clients. You’ve probably met all the famous people you want to meet, eaten all the foods you’ve ever dreamed of, and own everything you’ve ever wanted to own. So, what does the man who has everything feel like he’s missing?”

Sienna watched the slight tick in his jaw and had to wonder why.

Before she could question it, she was being handed a cup of coffee and her choice of a blueberry scone or chocolate chip muffin.

With a smile, she accepted the muffin.

“I remembered they used to be your favorite,” Mick quietly said once they were alone again.

It was incredibly sweet that he was going through all this trouble for her; to make this trip everything she wanted.

You're doing it again... It's just a muffin, Sienna.

But it wasn't just a muffin.

It was everything.

In less than twenty-four hours, Michael Tyler had proven that he was still the boy she fell in love with. And now, if anything, she was falling harder because they were finally on the same page. Well, age-wise, at least. Sienna had no idea what his feelings for her were, but she could definitely tell that he cared.

The coffee was perfect, the muffin was decadent, and they had a little over two hours of flight time ahead of them. She was enjoying their conversations and simply reconnecting with him.

The mind-blowing sex was just a seriously pleasurable perk.

Beside her, Mick took a sip of his coffee and seemed to be just staring at his scone. And that's when she knew she needed to push. After all, he was giving her the opportunity of a lifetime to cross some things off her bucket list, while helping her take the break she so desperately needed. Maybe there was something he needed that she could do for him.

She doubted it, but maybe she could at least help him figure out what he wanted.

"Hey," she said quietly as she placed her hand on his arm. "You know how much I love to figure things out. It's just how my mind works. So let's figure out what it is that you're missing."

"I know what I'm missing, Sienna," he murmured.

“Oh?” Well, that was easier than she thought it would be. “And what is it?”

He looked up at her, and his gaze was so intense that it almost made her gasp. “You,” he said gruffly. “You’re what’s been missing.”

The word "Four" is written in a large, red, cursive script. The letters are thick and expressive, with a prominent horizontal stroke at the top of the 'F' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'r'.

Yeah, that wasn't something Mick had been prepared to admit, but in his mind, they'd waited long enough. Twenty-three years ago, Sienna had been too young for him. They'd essentially grown up together through his friendship with her brother, but anything romantic between them back then would have been wildly inappropriate.

That didn't mean he hadn't wished for it to be different—for him to be younger or her to be older or just... anything that would have allowed them to explore a relationship together. Sienna had always been his person—his other half—and after all these years, he didn't see the point in denying it.

"Sienna, I..."

"No," she quickly interrupted. "Don't say anything. Not yet."

That... wasn't what he was expecting.

"Not saying anything doesn't make it any less true," he said, his gaze never leaving hers. "I know you need time to process and think and examine this from every angle, but..." Pausing, he felt like growling with frustration. "I'm sorry if that makes you uncomfortable, but I believe in being honest."

And I'm tired of hiding it, Sienna. I'm tired of pretending it's not the case. We had to do that all those years ago because everyone—especially Jason—would have kicked my ass for even thinking of you the way I did. Half my life is gone. What am I waiting for?"

"It's been less than twenty-four hours," she weakly countered.

"So? It doesn't make it any less true!" Twisting in his seat, he took both her hands in his. "I am not here to pressure you into feelings you don't have, and this has nothing to do with the trip we're embarking on. Just... give me these two weeks to prove to you how I feel. Please."

"But what if..."

"No. No what if's," he whispered, resting his forehead against hers. "From now until the end of your trip, we just enjoy ourselves. We take in the sights, we eat and laugh and talk and make love, and when it's time for you to head back to North Carolina..."

"What? What happens then?"

"That's totally up to you, princess."

"Mick..."

"Nope. We're not going to say another word about this. We're going to finish our breakfast and talk about everything you're looking forward to seeing at Graceland."

For a moment, she didn't look even a little comfortable. But when he released her hands and went back to his scone, she shifted in her seat and picked up her muffin. The hum of pleasure she made told him she was okay.

For now.

The last thing he wanted to do was spook her or freak her out, but the fact that they had found one another again after all these years? Mick took that as a good sign. They weren't ready for one another back then. They'd each had hopes and dreams and goals that they needed to accomplish, and now that they had, maybe this was their time.

And he seriously hoped it was their time.

Finally.

If there was one thing Mick had learned in all his years in music management, it was how to put people at ease. So for the rest of their flight—or even the rest of their trip—he would do everything he could to help Sienna relax and enjoy herself.

And he was thoroughly looking forward to it.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes before she spoke again.

“I know today is already going to be very full, but...any chance there's a mall or something close to our hotel. I'd rather get my shopping out of the way early on rather than putting it off.”

“If you'd just tell me what you need...”

Her initial response was to roll her eyes. “Can you please just see where the closest mall or Target is?”

Phone in hand, he began to search. “Is it clothes? Do you not have enough clothes with you?”

“Mick...”

“Okay, fine. There's a Nordstrom about eight miles from our hotel. We can stop there on our way back to the hotel after the tour. Will that work?”

“Definitely. Thank you.”

He did the math in his head to figure out approximately what time they’d arrive at the store and then sent a text to his assistant to see about a personal shopper being available to assist Sienna so she could get everything she needed in the least amount of time. No doubt she’d reprimand him over it once it was all said and done, but he was willing to take that risk.

Their schedule was most definitely tight—almost tighter than any tour he’d ever arranged—but the good thing with theirs was that if they wanted to change anything, it wouldn’t be a big deal. More than anything, he wanted to give her everything she talked about. Although he had a feeling if she’d had more time to plan, she would have had even more places to see. As it was, they lucked out with most of the stops being on or close to the West Coast.

He loved the thought of taking her to see his home and showing her part of his world.

To what end?

Yeah. That.

There was a very real possibility that this was all going to be temporary; that at the end of the two weeks, Sienna was going to walk away and go back to her life without giving him a second thought.

It would kill him.

Over the years, he has mastered the art of hiding his emotions or keeping his feelings to himself, but just like she had been bold and honest with him last night after dinner, he felt like he should be doing the same. What was the point in keeping how he felt about her to himself? He did that twenty-three years ago and all it accomplished was him not having her in his life all this

time. He was getting too old to play games and pretend that he didn't know what he wanted when he totally did.

He wanted Sienna.

He'd always wanted Sienna.

And he had two whole weeks to prove to her that what they have was real.

Memphis and Graceland had been a hit. It had been amusing watching Sienna gush and spout all kinds of Elvis trivia. He'd remembered her being a fan back when they were younger, but he'd seriously misjudged just how zealous she was about The King.

They'd walked around holding hands and even he had to admit that he learned a thing or two. It was a lot of information and basically after touring the house and the grounds it was a lot of hocking of merchandise, but he had enjoyed watching her buy t-shirts and a few tacky souvenirs. But mostly, Mick enjoyed watching the look of pure joy on her face. The transformation he saw in less than twenty-four hours had been amazing. She was relaxing and unwinding, and it did his heart good to know he played a part in that.

"Should we drop off the luggage first or go straight to shopping?" he asked once they were done with the tour.

"I know the hotel is right next door, but I think if we go in, I won't want to leave," she said with a small laugh. "So let's go so I can get what I need and then we can check in at the hotel and just relax." Smiling at him, she asked, "Do they have room service?"

"They do. And I booked a suite so there will be plenty of room for us to sprawl out and eat rather than having to sit on the bed."

“Hmm...sometimes eating in bed isn’t a bad thing...”

Reaching over, he took her hand in his. “Sure, now you tell me.”

The drive was short and most of it was filled with Sienna gushing about the day and Mick was more than happy to sit back and listen to her ramble on and on about all of it. “When we get to the hotel, I’m going to send a bunch of pictures to Eleanor.”

“What about Jason and Bree?” he carefully asked. “I know your sister-in-law is a huge music fan, but I don’t think she mentioned whether or not that included Elvis.”

“Um...I’m not sure and I’m also not sure I want to say anything to them yet.”

He didn’t need to ask why, and he completely understood.

Sort of.

They pulled up to Nordstrom’s in their rental car and when he parked, she looked at him nervously. “Um...okay. I’ll probably need an hour so...”

He shut off the car and smiled at her. “I’m not waiting in the car for an hour. Come on. Let’s go shop.”

“Mick...”

But he wasn’t going to be swayed. Once they were both out of the car, he took her by the hand and led her inside, where their personal shopper was waiting.

“Good evening, Mr. Tyler, Ms. Ashley,” the woman said with a smile. “My name is Tatianna, and I’ll be assisting you.”

He felt more than saw Sienna’s stare. “What did you do?” she hissed.

“Tatianna,” he said, reaching out to shake her hand. “We appreciate you making the time for us. Ms. Ashley and I are embarking on a two-week trip, and I know she has a list of things she’s going to need.”

“It’s not a list,” she sharply corrected. “There were just a few items...”

Tatianna smiled at them both before focusing on Sienna. “I’ll be happy to help you find everything you need no matter how long or short the list.”

“Thank you so much,” he replied smoothly before taking a step away. “I’ll be browsing and let’s say we meet back here in an hour?”

Sienna was still glaring at him, but once she turned toward Tatianna, she was all smiles. “Yes, thank you. Let’s get started.”

Mick watched them walk away before making his way around the store. Truth be known, there were a few things he could probably pick up for himself and before he knew it, he had several packages of his own. It had been a long time since he’d shopped for himself like this, and it wasn’t nearly as painful as he thought it would be.

He glanced at his watch and saw it had almost been an hour, and when he looked up, he saw Sienna walking toward him with several bags of her own. She gave him a shy smile.

“Did you get everything?” he asked, kissing her cheek.

“Yes. Probably more than I really needed, but Tatianna is very good at her job, so...”

“I’d offer to help with the bags, but as you can see, I did a little shopping for myself too.”

“You don’t need to wait on me,” she gently chided. “I think what you pulled off here was more than enough.”

That pleased him.

Together they walked out to the car and got everything loaded in the backseat since the trunk held all of their luggage. It wasn't until they were pulling out of the parking spot that she spoke again.

"I didn't expect you to pay for all of this," she said, her tone a little less soft than it was a few minutes ago. "I am more than capable of buying my own clothes."

"No one said you weren't. But..." he said quickly, before she could argue, "I was the one who put our plans into play with no real time for you to plan, so I felt I should do this."

"You're already refusing to let me pay for any of the hotels, or flights, or food, or..."

"Okay, okay, okay, I get what you're saying, but you have to know that this is just who I am." He shrugged. "Ask anyone."

"Hard to ask anyone when we don't know the same people," she muttered.

Neither said another word until they got to the hotel. Mick handled getting all of their luggage and bags up to the room. No sooner were they alone than Sienna excused herself and walked to the bathroom with several of her shopping bags. He heard the door click shut and he let out a long breath.

"Shit." He knew she was going to be annoyed with him, but he seriously hoped he hadn't overstepped in any way and now she was going to be pissed at him. How awful would that be if he ruined everything on day one of their trip?

Still, he didn't want to bother her and figured the smart thing to do was let her have some time to herself. They'd been inseparable since dinner last

night, so he completely understood if she needed some alone time to simply either calm down or just not have him right there beside her.

It was something that occurred to him earlier today. Normally he was someone who enjoyed having a little solitude. Even when he was on tour with one of his bands, he always made time throughout the day where he could be by himself with no one talking to him. That wasn't going to happen for two weeks and instead of irritating him, he was actually looking forward to it.

Unfortunately, he didn't know Sienna well enough to know her feelings on this particular subject. Did she enjoy being alone? Or did she prefer being surrounded by friends or colleagues?

"We're definitely going to find out," he whispered before he heard the bathroom door open. Not wanting to appear too anxious, Mick walked over to the bar and picked up the room service menu. "Are you hungry? We should probably order dinner soon because we'll be out of here early tomorrow."

Behind him, Sienna gently cleared her throat and when he turned to look at her, the menu fell from his hands.

"Ho-ly shit..."

Her smile was slow and sexy as hell. "You like?" She was standing in the doorway between their bedroom and living room area of the suite wearing scraps of red silk.

Swallowing hard, Mick tried to find the right words to describe how he felt about what she was wearing. The word like didn't even come close.

Slowly, he stalked toward her, his hands itching to touch her. "Is this what you needed to shop for?" he asked gruffly.

Biting her lip, she nodded. “That’s why I didn’t let you send someone else to shop for me. I needed to pick things out for myself.”

“And judging by the number of bags you had, I’m guessing there’s more than this set?”

Again, she nodded. “I didn’t only buy lingerie, but it was my primary purchase.”

When he was standing in front of her—close enough to touch—he grinned. “Is it wrong how much I love that you did this?”

Her smile was a little shy. “I was hoping you’d appreciate it.”

“Sweetheart, what I’m feeling goes far beyond liking or appreciating. You are...breathtaking.” Reaching up, he carefully cupped her breast and teased her nipple until it hardened. “Perfect,” he whispered, and smiled with pure pleasure when Sienna let out a soft moan.

All thoughts of dinner and room service completely vanished from his mind because he wanted to get this gorgeous woman onto the bed. Mick continued to touch and tease her nipples as he slowly backed her up to the bed. As soon as the back of her legs hit the mattress, they both tumbled onto it in a dirty, ravenous kiss.

He loved the way she moved beneath him and the sounds she made.

But more than anything, he loved that she went shopping just for him.

And as much as he loved the way the red silk looked on her, he was going to love taking it off of her too.

Breaking the kiss, he pulled back, bracing his arms on either side of her. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“Oh, I can feel it,” she said huskily, making him chuckle.

“I thought you’d be tired and want to come back here and rest for a little while.”

“I’ve been doing nothing but rest for far too long. I want to live, Mick.” Reaching up, she raked a hand through his hair. “You make me feel more alive than I ever have, and I want more of it.”

His own hand skimmed down her body until he hooked a finger along the side of her panties. “I know exactly how you feel, princess, because you do the same to me.” He toyed with the fabric. “I want to rip these right off of you and then kiss all the places I expose.”

Her breath quickened. “Do it,” she urged. “Please.”

Fortunately, it didn’t take much, and Sienna let out a little cry of surprise. Mick immediately kissed his way down her body and didn’t stop until he had her crying out his name over and over and over.

“So, the Grand Canyon!” she said excitedly as they settled into their seats the next morning. If it were up to him, they would have slept in a little later or even taken an extra day to just stay in bed, but judging by the look on her face, he was glad he hadn’t suggested it. “This is going to be awesome!”

Nodding, he said, “There’s just been a slight change in the itinerary.”

“Oh?”

“We’re going to fly directly into Vegas and then take a helicopter from there to the Grand Canyon. I hope that’s alright.” His assistant had emailed him late last night with the change and honestly, he couldn’t believe neither of them had thought of it while making the original plans.

Her eyes went a little wide before she laughed. “Alright? Um... why wouldn’t it be? It sounds like it’s more direct than what we were going to do.”

“It is.”

“So... then I’m not seeing where there’s a problem.”

He shrugged. “Some people don’t enjoy last-minute changes to their itinerary. I wasn’t sure if you were one of them.”

“If this were a work situation, I’d probably be a little annoyed. But since this is all about pleasure and it’s actually making for a better use of time, I’m fine.” Leaning in, she gave him a sweet, lingering kiss. He was the one who took it deeper—enjoying the taste of her and the way she relaxed into him. She was quickly becoming addictive, and he was loving every second of it.

If the plane were bigger and offered some privacy, he’d be enjoying her even more right now.

Slowly, she pulled back and smiled. “Wow. I would have thought after last night and this morning that we’d be a little less... needy,” she said breathlessly. “But I’m glad we’re not.”

He growled with a little frustration at their surroundings, but had to agree. “Me too.”

When they had checked into their hotel last night, Sienna had completely blown his mind with the way she seduced him. From there, it had been madness. Even now, he had to remind himself that he owed her some new clothes and underwear.

Just thinking about how that came to be made him smile.

“What about our luggage?” she asked, interrupting his thoughts. “If we’re getting right on the helicopter, who’ll watch our stuff?”

“It will be taken over to the hotel for us, so we don’t have to worry.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Is there anything you don’t think of?”

“After doing this for so many years? No. I’ve learned to think of everything and it’s exhausting.” He was only teasing, but he liked the way her expression softened as she leaned in and kissed him again.

“Poor baby,” she cooed before relaxing back in her seat.

It was on the tip of his tongue to tease her right back, but his phone rang and he saw Riley’s name on the screen and sighed. Part of him wanted to ignore it, but... Riley was too good a friend.

“You can take the call, Mick,” Sienna said. “I don’t expect you to ignore everything and everyone for me.”

That was a refreshing statement. Any other woman he’d ever dated got annoyed when he took calls while they were out. But Sienna just seemed to understand.

Reaching for her hand, he kissed it before answering the phone. “Riley! What’s up?”

It took a lot to make Sienna get emotional, and apparently cresting over the Grand Canyon in a helicopter was something that did it to her.

Never had she seen anything so beautiful; so majestic. It was all so much more than she could have imagined and she couldn’t believe the way unshed tears were stinging her eyes. She and Mick were actually sitting up front in the helicopter next to the pilot and the view was beyond spectacular. Taking

off had been a little rough because she'd never ridden in a helicopter before and had no clue that they sort of drop the nose so you feel like you're going to kiss the pavement before going straight up in the air.

She only screamed for a moment, and it was too loud for the other passengers to hear.

But Mick heard and he had reached over and held her hand for the rest of the trip.

They were landing in the canyon and she couldn't wait to climb out and look around. Mick helped her down and they stood and listened to the instructions from their pilot.

"We have a tent set up over to your right where lunch is served. You don't have to eat right now, but we only have an hour here, so be sure you leave yourselves enough time to take in the sights and get your pictures and enjoy your lunch. Have fun!"

There were two other couples with them and one went to the tent while the other walked away to look around. Turning to Mick, she asked, "So? Which should we do first? Eat or explore?"

"I say we explore for a few minutes, then eat, and then explore again until it's time to go. What do you say?"

"That sounds perfect!" Together they walked around and Sienna must have snapped about a hundred pictures before he reminded her they needed to eat. In the tent, they enjoyed turkey clubs with pasta salad on the side and a fruit cup and glasses of champagne. She normally wasn't much of a drinker however she could tell it wasn't great champagne.

"I promise to order us the good stuff tonight with dinner," Mick promised.

When they were done eating, he took pictures of her and she took pictures of him and they even got the pilot to take a few of the two of them together before it was time to go. Before she climbed into the helicopter, she took one last look around and knew she'd never forget this. Every picture she'd ever seen of the Grand Canyon simply didn't do it justice. Once they were seated and buckled in, she looked over at Mick. "Thank you."

He grinned at her. "For what?"

"I didn't expect this to be so...so...amazing. I was looking at it from a practical angle—like this was one of those places you should see because it's one of the seven wonders of the world. I had no idea how much it would affect me." Her hand was over her heart and she felt tears sting her eyes again. "If this was the last place we visited, I'd still feel like the luckiest girl in the world." Leaning forward, she kissed him. "So...thank you."

After that, it was too loud for them to talk. They all had their headsets on and the pilot talked them through the flight back to Vegas about everything they were seeing. He flew them over the Strip on his way to the airport, and Sienna was in awe of all the massive hotels and couldn't wait for them to get to theirs.

Once they landed, they went into the small terminal and got their commemorative photos of the trip and found a limo waiting for them out front. When she looked over at Mick, he simply shrugged.

"You're creating a monster," she told him. "I spoil easily."

He kissed her cheek before she climbed in. "Somehow I doubt that. If anything, you don't get spoiled enough. Indulge me."

"Isn't that what I've been doing all this time?"

Chuckling, he climbed in beside her. “All this time? It’s only been two days!”

It seemed like so much longer because they had done more in these last few days than she’d done in the last few years. “You know what I’m saying...”

“Look, if it makes you feel any better, I didn’t book the penthouse suite at the hotel, so we’ll just be like regular people.”

She gave him a hard side-eye glare. “Regular people like you or regular people like me?”

His phone rang and he seemed relieved to not have to answer her.

“Dylan! Hey! What’s up?”

Sienna gave him a little space and if she had to guess, the Dylan he was speaking to was from Shaughnessy.

“So you’re all together?” she heard him ask.

After listening to the way Bree had talked over dinner the other night, Sienna wasn’t sure if she’d be any different if she met any of Mick’s famous clients. She’d never met any celebrities and in her mind she thought she’d be completely unaffected should the opportunity ever present itself, but she had to admit when he was on the phone with Riley the other day, she had felt a little giddy.

Just like she was now.

Oh, God...am I a fangirl too?

Her initial response was, Don’t be ridiculous, but...now she couldn’t be sure.

They pulled up to the hotel five minutes later and she heard Mick say, “We can meet for drinks up in our suite, but I’ll call you back and let you know for sure. Thanks, Dylan!”

Sliding his phone back into his pocket, he smiled before they climbed from the car.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask dozens of questions, but instead, she took in the gorgeous hotel lobby and watched the eclectic group of people walking around.

Check in was incredibly efficient and their room was ready, so they were able to go over to the elevators and go right up. She figured the room would be a little more upscale than your typical hotel one, but she was sorely mistaken.

“This is where you think regular people stay?” she asked when he opened the door. Stepping inside, Sienna was fairly certain her jaw was on the floor. “Do you have any idea how regular people live anymore?”

“Um...”

It was a suite with the most luxurious accommodations she’d ever seen. There was a bedroom with a king-sized bed, a living room, a separate media room, a billiard table and a bar area. You almost didn’t have to leave the room if you didn’t want to.

She moved around the suite taking it all in and almost had to stop and pinch herself. There was taking a little time for yourself and then there was living like...well...a rock star. There was a time when she and Mick were equals—they’d grown up in the same small town and had the same set of morals and values—but the way he lived was so much more than she ever could have imagined. She knew it would be fine for this little two-week break

from reality, but there was no way she'd ever feel comfortable living like this all the time. It was just all...too much.

"You're frowning," Mick said, interrupting her thoughts. "If you don't like the room, we can change it."

The thought was too preposterous, and she couldn't help but laugh. "Not like it?" she repeated. "How could anyone not like staying in a room like this?"

"O-kay..." he said slowly as he walked toward her. "Then...why the face?"

How did she even begin to explain it to him?

Taking his hand, Sienna led him over to the monstrous sofa and sat down. "I think it's wonderful that you've made such a success of your life that this is all normal to you. But you have to know that it's not like that for everyone. I look at this and, while it's all beautiful, it's a bit...overwhelming." She squeezed his hand. "I don't need all of this, Michael. I'm happy just to be with you. Hell, I'd be happy if we were staying at a Holiday Inn because I'd be there with you." With a sad smile, she added, "I love that you want to do all of this for me, but...I'm not used to it and it makes me feel a little uncomfortable."

He looked at her as if she were crazy.

"I'm not a celebrity, I don't hang out with celebrities." She shrugged. "I'm just an ordinary girl who lives a normal life."

Now he looked panicked.

"Um...excuse me for a minute. I just need to go and make a call..."

“Mick?” Reaching out to him before he got up and walked away, she gently tugged him back beside her. “What’s going on?”

“The call I got in the limo? That was Dylan Anders; you know, the bassist from Shaughnessy.”

She nodded.

With a nervous laugh, he went on. “So, um...small world...he and the guys are in town, along with their wives. It was a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing and he was calling to see if I wanted to fly in and join them and I sort of told him we were here and invited them to join us for drinks.” Pausing, he seemed to be unsure of what he should do or say. “I’ll just tell them we can’t do it. I really should have talked to you about it first.”

She eyed him warily. “Why are they all here like...as a group? I thought they were on hiatus or something.”

“Matt’s wife, Vivienne, used to be a food blogger and works for an online lifestyle magazine, and they were having some sort of conference here. Dylan and his wife live in L.A. and so it wasn’t a big deal for them to join them. But once Riley and Julian heard how the four of them were getting together, they decided to fly in too. And since I’m kind of part of the family...”

It was really a no-brainer.

Plus, she couldn’t wait to send pictures to Bree.

“You don’t have to cancel,” she told him. “Just know that...this is new to me. Your world isn’t my world, and it’s not just as simple as flipping a switch. I’m a bit of an introvert and...hanging out with rock stars feels a little weird to me.”

His smile was dazzling. Leaning in, he gave her a very thorough kiss. “Trust me. You have nothing to worry about with these guys. They’re all very

down to earth and their wives are a bunch of sweethearts. You're going to love them." He stood and pulled out his phone. "What time should we tell them to join us?"

Ugh...I hate being put on the spot...

"I would kind of love a few hours to just relax. We've been going since early this morning and I was looking forward to just putting my feet up for a little while."

"Done," he said before walking away. Then she heard him say, "Dylan! Hey! We're all set..."

What have I gotten myself into?

"Oh, I absolutely adore him now, but back when Matt and I first started dating? I cringed every time I saw him!" Vivienne Reed was saying several hours later.

"You poor thing!" Sienna said, reaching over to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I don't know if I would have ever been able to forgive him."

"Well, to be fair, he really had no idea who I was and...while he could have taken a minute to actually find out, once I got a taste of what a Shaughnessy tour was like, I started to understand why Mick had to do the things that he did."

"Definitely," Paige chimed in. "I wasn't prepared for the way the female fans pretty much would pop up in the most bizarre places! Only once did someone get into Dylan's dressing room, but it completely freaked me out. Mick really upped the security after that."

Sienna was sitting in the living room of their opulent suite drinking wine with Savannah Shaughnessy, Paige Anders, Vivienne Reed, and Charlotte Grayson—all the wives of the men of Shaughnessy. The guys were all in the game room and there was a lot of laughter coming from in there, but she was enjoying this chance to get to know some of the dirt on Mick.

“I know he always felt bad about it,” Savannah said, referring to Mick’s unfortunate first meeting with Vivienne many years ago. He’d thrown her out of not only Matt’s dressing room, but out of the arena and threatened to have her arrested. “Once you and Matt got together, he mentioned multiple times how much he regretted the way he handled things.”

“He was only doing his job,” Vivienne said graciously, “but...every once in a while, it sort of creeps up on me and I just feel like a fool.”

“You shouldn’t,” Charlotte said firmly. “It’s a strange way of life and I think we’ve all had moments where we’ve wondered what we’ve gotten ourselves into.” She looked over at Sienna. “It’s overwhelming, right?”

“Definitely. And I’ve only been traveling with him for a few days,” she admitted. “Actually, when we first got to the suite a few hours ago, I kind of had a little meltdown because I just see so much of this as excess.” She shrugged. “I don’t need to stay in a penthouse or be driven around in a limo. All I really wanted was to see some sights while I had some time off.”

“And you’re a...neuro...” Paige prompted.

Laughing softly, she said, “A neuropsychologist.”

“And you and Mick grew up together?” Savannah asked.

Nodding, she explained, “He was best friends with my brother, Jason. I always had a crush on him and I practically begged him not to go to L.A. all those years ago. Thank God he didn’t listen, right?”

All four of them looked at her in understanding.

“I think it’s great how the two of you met up again after all these years,” Paige said, “but let’s backtrack for a minute. What exactly does a neuropsychologist do?”

Sienna was so used to answering the question that she rarely had to even think about it. “Neuropsychologists specialize in understanding the brain and how changes to it may affect our emotions, our behavior, and our ability to think. Which is cognition; the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.”

Everyone nodded and so she added the rest of her typical job description.

“Basically, a neuropsychologist is trained to assess and treat people who experience difficulties with memory, concentration, planning, language, reasoning, and other aspects of learning and understanding. It’s really quite fascinating, even though I’m sure it sounds incredibly boring.”

“Are you kidding?” Charlotte asked. “I would love to sit down with you sometime—you know, like when you’re not on vacation—and learn more. I’m a social worker, but I’m always interested in learning more about people and why they might behave the way that they do.”

“I’ll be sure to give you my number before we leave,” Sienna said before smiling at the group.

“Come on,” Savannah said. “I’m sure you have more questions about Mick. So before the guys come back in here, you better ask them.” Then she winked and took a sip of her wine.

“I don’t know...I feel like you’ve already shared so many stories about him and I’ve witnessed firsthand just how crazy organized he is.”

“You don’t have to be shy with us,” Vivienne told her. “You’ve got to be curious about his personal life. And believe me, because the guys are so close with him, we’ve gotten to know that part of his life too.”

“Well...maybe...”

“He rarely dates,” Paige volunteered. “I mean, he dates, but it’s rare that he brings anyone around more than once.”

Everyone seemed to nod at that.

“I think it’s because he likes his privacy,” Savannah said. “But lately he’s just seemed a little...lost. Sad. So maybe he’s not loving being alone like he thought he once did.”

Sienna nodded this time because it was something she and Mick had already talked about, but she didn’t feel right about sharing that with the girls.

However, she did have a question.

“Okay, so...Mick was on the phone with Riley while we were on the plane the other morning and now you all just *happen* to be here in Vegas. I know some things are just a coincidence, but...”

“Oh, this totally isn’t a coincidence,” Paige said and then giggled.

“Yeah, it was my idea to make up a fake conference just in case Mick asked,” Vivienne added.

Savannah raised her hand. “As soon as Mick mentioned that he was going to be traveling for a few weeks with a woman from his past, I was all over that! My husband cannot keep a secret to save his life, so once he told me, I called the girls and...here we are!”

“Thank God for grandparents who are willing to babysit on short notice,” Paige said. “Dylan’s folks absolutely love coming and spending time with our

boys.”

“How many do you have?” Sienna asked.

“Two,” Paige replied with a smile. “Daniel is four and Jonny just turned one.”

“They are the absolute cutest!” Vivienne said.

“My folks were already visiting us,” Savannah said, “so it was easy for us to get away.” She grinned. “I hope you’re not freaked out by all of this. It’s just...well...Mick’s family. Even to Vivienne.”

“Well, now he is,” Vivienne agreed.

“We’re all very close,” Savannah went on. “And for Mick to willingly take some time off and to be traveling the way he has planned, I just knew that you were someone we were going to want to meet.”

Sienna felt herself blush. “I hope I’m not a disappointment. I mean...I’m probably the least likely person you ever imagined for Mick, but...it’s only two weeks, so...”

“Wait,” Charlotte said. “Only two weeks? The two of you are just going to do this trip and say goodbye?”

“Oh, um...we...we haven’t really talked about it, but...my life is back in Durham and Mick’s got a life on the West Coast and...”

“Okay, okay,” Savannah diplomatically interrupted. “No need to put any pressure on anyone.” She smiled at Sienna. “Just know that we think the world of Mick and even though I can’t speak for everyone and I know we just met, but...I think you’d be good for him. He deserves to be happy and to have a life of his own.”

“Agreed,” Vivienne said.

“Same,” Paige said.

They grew quiet for a moment until it became obvious the guys were coming to join them.

“I think we need to make some dinner arrangements,” Dylan said as he strolled in and immediately walked over to his wife and gave her a very passionate kiss.

“You get used to it,” Charlotte said from beside her. “Those two can’t keep their hands off each other. Trust me when I say we’ve all seen a little too much at times.”

Giggling, all Sienna could do was nod. Mick came and sat beside her and wrapped his arm possessively around her. “Having a good time?” he murmured as he placed a soft kiss on her cheek.

“Most definitely. How about you?”

“It’s always good to see these guys.” He looked over at Vivienne. “So, Viv? How’s the conference?”

Her dark eyes went wide. “Oh, um...it’s good. Good. Really good. I’m just glad I didn’t have to speak at anything today so we could come and hang out together.”

Riley walked over and sat with Savannah as Julian sat down beside Charlotte.

And the room got so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Sienna nervously looked around and that’s when it hit her, just how little she’d ever hung out with other couples.

Even when she was part of one.

“Okay, this is just weird,” she blurted out and almost sagged with relief when everyone laughed. “Can everyone just...you know...pretend I’m not here or something? Because I’m pretty sure you all talk and laugh whenever you’re together.”

Beside her, Mick kissed her again. “That’s my girl.”

“What were you guys talking about inside?” she asked of no one in particular.

“Mick was telling us about Graceland and that got us all wondering if any of our houses would ever be made into a shrine like that,” Riley said before laughing. “Can you imagine that?”

Savannah playfully swatted his arm. “Never gonna happen. We live too much like normal people. Nothing to see.”

“Well, Riley’s old place had a spectacular view,” Mick commented.

“Don’t remind us,” Savannah said with a dramatic sigh. “If we could have added onto that house, we’d still be living there.”

“Our place is pretty awesome,” Dylan chimed in. “But right now it’s got way too much kids’ stuff littered in every room. No one would want to tour that.”

“I have to agree,” Paige said.

“I wouldn’t want that at all,” Julian said as he placed his arm around Charlotte. “No one needs to see that part of our lives. It’s private. I don’t care how famous we got, there are things that are just off-limits.”

“Yeah, but if it happened after you were dead, you wouldn’t be there to see it,” Matt countered. “It would be like a museum.”

Julian was already shaking his head. “Nope. Don’t want it, no matter what.”

“Wow, I really thought the whole you were dead thing would have changed your mind,” Matt murmured. “I don’t think I’d care if someone turned our house into a museum after I died.”

“Oh my God, can you stop talking about dying and being dead?” Vivienne said with exasperation. “I mean, just...not right now.” And then she burst into tears and ran from the room.

“Um...”

Mick straightened. “Matt? What’s going on? Is Vivienne okay?”

Matt was already on his feet. “Uh...yeah. She’s a little emotional lately. Pregnancy hormones, and...dammit!” He looked slightly panicked. “We were going to tell everyone tonight, but...hold on. Let me go check on her.” And then he fled the room.

“Holy crap!” Riley said giddily. “Matty’s gonna be a father! How freaking awesome is that?”

Everyone was talking at once, and Sienna sat back in wonder as she watched how animated and excited they all were.

Again, she’d never experienced anything like it.

And the weirdest part was that she sort of felt excited for Matt and Vivienne too, even though she just met them!

You’re a neuropsychologist, Sienna. You should understand where all this emotion is coming from...

“I was wondering why she was just drinking water,” Charlotte commented. “She said she was taking antibiotics for a sinus infection, but

wine wouldn't have interacted with that. This is such good news!"

When Matt and Vivienne came back into the room, everyone got up to hug and congratulate them, and for a moment, Sienna felt like an outsider. Then Mick pulled her into their group hug and she felt herself getting emotional again.

Damn Nevada air...twice in one day!

While everyone continued to talk, Mick made a few calls and somehow managed to get them a dinner reservation at the French restaurant in the hotel.

"Okay, in honor of Matt and Viv, I got us a reservation at Restaurant Guy Savoy at 8:30. So why don't you all head back to your rooms and we'll meet up for dinner then," Mick suggested.

It took almost thirty minutes for everyone to go because there was so much to talk about, but Sienna breathed a sigh of relief when they were alone again. Mick turned to her with a lopsided grin.

"Sorry."

"For what?" she asked.

"I'm just so used to jumping in and doing things like that, and this was supposed to be our night. I was going to take you out on the Strip so you could see the fountain show at the Bellagio and then go for a gondola ride at the Venetian."

Walking over, she gave him a rather chaste kiss. "It was fun watching you in action and I think this is something that was worth celebrating." She kissed him again. "Plus, I'm glad you didn't miss it on my account."

His hands cupped her face as he stared down at her in pure wonder. “I don’t know what I did to get this second chance with you, but I’m so damn thankful.”

Sienna swore she could stand here and simply look at him all night, but there was a lot to do and...

“Oh, no!” she gasped.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I don’t have anything with me to wear to a fancy restaurant, Mick!” she whined. “I have some business casual stuff, but even the things I got from Nordstrom’s yesterday aren’t going to be fancy enough. Shit.”

Dropping his hands, he gave her a cocky smile and she had a feeling she knew exactly what it meant.

“Don’t tell me,” she said with just a hint of sarcasm. “You can fix this, right?”

His smile grew. “Just say the word and I’ll have a dress up here for you in an hour.”

“Ugh...I do not want this to become a thing,” she warned him. “I don’t like the whole snapping your fingers and making things happen. It’s like that scene from *Pretty Woman*. It’s just wrong.”

And still he smiled.

“Fine. Just...do it.”

“You won’t regret it. I promise.” Then he gave her a very thorough kiss and sprang into action.

An hour later, when she looked at her reflection, she had to admit that she was impressed.

The wolf whistle made her turn.

“Damn, Sienna. Red silk looks good on you,” Mick said as he strolled into the room.

She struck a sassy pose. “I believe you told me something like that last night before you ripped my panties off.”

Nodding, he continued to prowl toward her. “It was definitely worth it, and it made me want to see you in it again.” When he reached her, he placed his hands on her hips. “I promise not to rip this off of you later. But I may wrinkle it a bit.”

“Ooo...I’m going to hold you to that,” she hummed, smoothing her hand over his chest. “And might I say that you look very handsome. Very sexy. And I might wrinkle you up a little later on myself.”

He grinned. “I’m going to hold you to that, princess.”

And honestly, she couldn’t wait.



They didn't quite get the next day to themselves.

Matt, Riley, Julian, and Dylan—along with the girls—were still in town the next day, and at some point, he found himself alone with the guys.

“Um...what just happened?” he asked as they were finishing lunch when he realized Sienna and all the wives were gone.

“Our girls are like Ninjas when they want to be,” Riley said with amusement. “I arranged for a little spa time for the five of them so we could talk to you.”

Mick's eyes went wide. “Talk to *me*? About what?”

“Dude, seriously?” Dylan asked. “Come on. Like you haven't sat all of us down when we got serious with anyone?”

Oh, for crying out loud...

“That's completely different,” he argued lightly. “I'm your manager and I need to look out for the four of you. It's part of my job. And if you were going to be adding anyone to the equation, I needed to know.”

“Yeah, well...as we said yesterday, we’re a family and, as such, we look after one another,” Matt said. “We’re just curious about what’s going on, that’s all.”

Mick looked across the table at Riley. “You’ve got a big mouth, pal.”

With the smile he was famous for, Riley simply shrugged. “Considering our conversation last week, the timing is a little...suspect. I guess we’re just curious if this is something genuine or are you just killing time?”

He hated this. It was one thing for him to know about their private business. It was another when the tables were turned on him. He didn’t owe them any kind of explanation, and yet...it was kind of cool how they all dropped everything to fly out here to see him.

Leaning back in his chair, he let out a long breath. “Okay, fine. Is it genuine?” he asked. “To me it is, but...it’s only been a few days. I already put all my cards on the table to Sienna, and I think I spooked her a little, so...”

“But it’s only been a few days,” Julian reminded him. “And before that, how long had it been since you saw her?”

“Twenty-three years.”

They all groaned.

“Mick, dude, come on,” Matt said. “I mean, I kind of get it because I grew up with Vivienne and all that, but...you can’t possibly think that either of you are the same people you were back then. Neither of you are kids anymore and maybe you should slow this shit down and take the time to get to know each other as adults.”

“As much as I hate to admit it,” Riley said solemnly, “I have to agree with Matt. I think the two of you meeting up again is great, but...you know you

weren't in a great headspace and maybe you're just...you know...latching on to some old feelings."

Mick stared at the man he considered to be a best friend and had to fight the urge to lunge across the table at him.

Instead, he did what he always did.

Presented some logic.

"Do you remember when you first got involved with Savannah and how I made light of it and you tried to kick my ass?"

Riley's expression fell slightly. "Uh...yeah."

Then he looked over at Julian. "And you. When you screwed things up with Charlotte, how long had you known her?"

"Um...not long," he murmured.

Then he turned to Matt. "I was freaking over the moon for you when you hooked up with Vivienne!" Then he let out a small laugh. "The time you really hooked up with her, not that night that I threw her out of the arena. I was fucking happy for you!" Then he met Dylan's gaze. "And what about you? What have you got to say?"

Dylan grinned. "Honestly? I think as long as you're happy, we should all shut the hell up. You've never steered any of us in the wrong direction and sometimes you told us shit that we didn't want to hear, but you still said it." He shrugged. "We just felt like maybe we should talk to you and make sure you're okay and that your head's clear." Another shrug. "I'll admit that maybe you should be a little cautious and make sure you're living in the present and not in the past, but this is all new and the two of you are figuring it out."

Looking around the table at the guys who gave him his start in the music business—the guys who were like brothers to him—he let himself relax.

“Is it me or does it seem weird when Dylan is the one making the most logical statements out of all of us?” he teased, and fortunately, it did the trick. Everyone was smiling and laughing, and Dylan took the ribbing in stride. “And I say that with love, brother,” Mick added, just for good measure.

“You know we’re just looking out for you,” Riley said. “I can’t remember ever seeing you look so happy and...like Dylan said, we just want to make sure you’re seeing the current version of Sienna and not the girl you left behind.”

Sadly, he knew what they were saying and...he’d be lying if he said that he was having to make a conscious effort sometimes to make sure they were both living in the present.

“No one’s ever understood me the way Sienna does,” he said gruffly. “As soon as her brother and sister-in-law left us at the restaurant and it was just the two of us, it was like...I knew I could be myself. I didn’t have to be in this music honcho persona, I could just be me.” Letting out a long breath, he nodded. “It’s been a long time since I felt like that.”

“Mick, you don’t have to pretend to be someone you’re not,” Julian told him. “Over the years, I think we’ve all seen different sides of you and I hope you realize you don’t have to be anything but who you are with us.”

“That’s just it; when I’m with you guys—or any of my clients, really—it just happens. Last night we were a group of friends hanging out and celebrating Matt and Vivienne’s big news, and my first reaction after congratulating them was to step away and make arrangements for a dinner and to get reservations someplace fabulous. I was already thinking of press

releases, and last night I was up long after Sienna went to sleep because I was trying to figure out how to work the tour around her pregnancy!”

“Damn,” Matt said quietly. “Even we haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“That’s what I’m telling you! This is just the way I am! It’s how I’m built and it’s like this job has more control over my life than I realized!” Raking his hands through his hair, he growled with frustration. “And it’s not like I hate it. Because I don’t. I just don’t know how to *not* be that guy all the damn time.”

“Okay,” Riley said slowly. “So then maybe this trip with Sienna will help. But you have to make sure you’re not playing band manager to her too.”

He knew he was scowling. “What the hell does that even mean?”

Chuckling, Riley shook his head. “First of all, relax. All I’m saying is that you already set up this fantastic travel itinerary that checked all the boxes that Sienna wanted checked. And you did it all without her even asking you to. I get that you wanted to do this for her—and it’s the kind of thing you’re kind of famous for—but...what about you? You need to be doing something for yourself during all of this.”

But Mick was already shaking his head.

“You don’t get it. You want to know what I’m getting out of this? I’m getting the chance to finally be with the girl I always wanted. The only person I ever loved.” He felt himself getting a little choked up and couldn’t believe it. After a moment, he went on. “I thought we were going to have a night and that was it, but to know we’ve got two whole weeks for me to show her that I’m serious? That I still love her? We have all this time to ourselves.” Then he laughed. “Well, once you guys are gone...”

Luckily, they all laughed.

“It feels like we’ve been given a gift. We have this time alone to explore our feelings. And I get to do something for Sienna—I get to spoil her and take care of her—because it doesn’t sound like anyone else ever has before.”

“Mick...”

“I walked away from her because I had a dream that I needed to chase and there was no way she could go with me. I hurt her. Now I can make it up to her.”

They were quiet for a moment before Julian spoke.

“Okay, but...what happens at the end of the two weeks? What if there is no happy medium? You live two very different lives. Would you ask her to give up her research? Would you walk away from the career you’ve been building for over twenty years?”

“Guys...I don’t have the answers to any of that and believe me, that shocks me as much as it probably shocks you. I’m the one who always has the answers, but this time...I just don’t. In a perfect world, I’d know exactly how this is all going to play out: I’d tell Sienna I love her, she’d say it back and somehow, everything would fall into place.” He let out a mirthless laugh. “Do you have any idea how crazy it’s making me that it’s all out of my control? I mean...I could take her to all the places she wants to go and say all the things I think she wants me to say and she could still walk away at the end of the trip!”

Pushing away from the table, he stood and began to pace.

“Um...guys...I think someone needs to talk him down from the ledge,” Dylan murmured.

“I am a master negotiator,” Mick went on. “I’ve made deals that people said were impossible, but I know how stubborn Sienna can be. I don’t think

that's changed in twenty-three years. What if I'm not the guy she wants? What if—after all this time—she doesn't like the man I've become? What if I can't shut off this music manager guy and she decides to walk? Does that mean I'm destined to be alone? That no one will ever love me?"

"Great," Matt said. "We broke Mick. Nice going."

"We didn't break him," Riley countered, "we just...gave him too much to think about."

"It's not like he hasn't done it to us before," Dylan grumbled.

"Yeah, but...because he's Mick, he knew the right time to come in and give us shit to think about," Riley said wearily before he got to his feet. "Clearly we're not that smart."

Mick was lost in his own spiraling thoughts when Riley stepped in front of him. "What the hell..."

Grasping Mick's shoulders, Riley gave him a hard shake. "Obviously, we didn't think this through, and we never should have ambushed you like this. Don't listen to us because we wouldn't have even one tenth of what we have..."

"Or the wives..." Dylan called out.

"If it weren't for you," Riley finished. "Here we all thought we knew what to say and we'd be returning the favor for all the times you helped us and all we did was freak you out, so...we're sorry."

For a moment, he stood there in total confusion.

"You're the most confident guy I've ever known," Riley was telling him. "And if you have a plan to win Sienna, then I say go for it. Hell, if there's

anything we can do to help you, just say the word and we'll do it. Right, guys?"

"Absolutely!"

"You know it!"

"Anything you need, Mick!"

Slowly, he let out a long breath. "I don't know...you've given me a lot to think about..."

"No! No, we didn't," Riley argued. "Don't listen to us! Our hearts might have been in the right place, but we never should have said anything this soon. You've never steered any of us wrong, so...keep going with your plan and I swear we'll just be there if you need someone to talk to. We're done offering advice."

He stepped away from Riley and sat back down in his chair. "Okay," he said quietly. "Okay. I can do this."

"Oh, thank God." Dylan sighed, slouching in his chair.

"Maybe we should just stick to some safer topics for a little while before you go back and see Sienna," Julian suggested.

Mick nodded.

"Yeah," Matt agreed. "Let's talk about what you were thinking about the tour while Vivienne's pregnant. You know I'm not going to want to be away from her for too long, so...what are your thoughts?"

And just like that, Mick slipped right back into band manager mode as he straightened in his seat.

"So, I think if the album gets done by the late spring..."

It wasn't until after five that Mick finally had Sienna all to himself.

And he'd never been more relieved in his life to see his buddies and their wives leave.

Not that he was going to share that with anyone, but...there it was.

He thought Sienna would feel the same way, but she had been gushing almost non-stop about how much fun she had this afternoon with Paige, Vivienne, Savannah, and Charlotte. It made him realize that maybe she didn't have a lot of close friends at home.

"You want to know the best part of the whole day was?" she asked him as she sat on the couch and put her feet in his lap.

"No, tell me."

"It was when I got the picture of me with the band and sent it to Bree!" Then she laughed. "You have no idea how many texts I got after that! I swear, I was going to ask the guys if they'd mind if I called her so she could talk to them, but I thought that was crossing a line." She sighed happily. "Still, it was great."

He ran his hands over her feet—which were currently fresh from a pedicure and her toes were painted fire engine red. "Love the color you chose."

She smiled over at him. "I thought you might appreciate that."

"Oh, I do." Gently massaging her feet, he asked, "So, what did Bree have to say?"

"Oh, my goodness, there were so many messages and most of them had far too many exclamation points in them." She chuckled. "I knew she was

excited for me—and more than a little jealous—and that’s when I realized my biggest mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“No sooner had I finished chatting with Bree than my phone rang.”

He knew exactly where this was leading. “Jason?”

She nodded. “Jason.”

“And?”

“Well...he said he definitely sensed a vibe between us—whatever that means—and he wasn’t really surprised. He told me to be careful and to tell you if you did anything to upset me, he’d have to kick your ass.”

“Consider me warned,” he said solemnly.

“I know, right? My brother’s never kicked anyone’s ass.”

“It’s a thing big brothers do,” he told her. “Or...threaten to do. Vivienne’s brother did that to Matt and it made for some wild times for them in the beginning.”

“I get it,” she said as she got more comfortable. “It still made me laugh a little because he’s done nothing like that before; not the ass kicking, but the overall stepping in to defend my honor. He’s never had to. I always dated very unassuming guys.”

“To be fair, I probably should have called him, but...”

“It’s only been like three days, Mick. He really needs to calm down.”

He thought about his earlier conversation with the guys and realized how all their friends and family must be feeling the same way.

“Are we crazy?” he quietly asked her.

“In what way?”

“In what we’re doing. Is it wrong that we’re taking this trip? Or that we’re spending all this time together after not seeing one another for over twenty years?”

She sat up a bit. “Honestly? I don’t think we’re crazy and it’s none of anybody’s business. What are we supposed to be waiting for? Neither of us is getting any younger and if we sit around playing the let’s take things slow approach, we’ll eventually be too damn old to enjoy ourselves. We’ve both given our lives to our careers, aren’t we entitled to a little happiness?”

“We are,” he said gruffly. “We definitely are.”

“You make me happy, Michael. I’m loving the things we’re doing together and I’m excited for everything that’s to come.” She shrugged. “So I let my brother make his little speech and I’m not letting it bother me.”

Wow, she was way more logical about the whole thing than he’d been with the guys after lunch. He was seriously impressed.

“So let’s just forget about Jason and anyone else who thinks they have a right to an opinion about what we’re doing and simply focus on us.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Good.” She leaned back against the sofa cushions again. “Okay, so what’s on the agenda for tonight?”

“Anything you want, princess. I think I interrupted our time enough with the band, so tonight we’re going to do anything you want.”

“How about we go see that fountain show and then ride a gondola?” She smiled sweetly at him. “I’ve been thinking about that ever since you mentioned it.”

“I wish we were in Italy and I was taking you on a real gondola ride around Venice.”

“Mmm...maybe our next vacation,” she said with a wink, and Mick’s mind already started making plans.

“This is not my life... this is not my life... this is not my life...”

It didn’t matter how many times Sienna muttered that to herself, it didn’t change the fact that this was indeed her life. They were on day six of their trip, and she was still finding the need to pinch herself.

She didn’t live like this. Her life back in Durham was fairly uneventful. Her townhome was somewhat basic. She got Chinese takeout every Friday night and ate salads every day for lunch. Her go-to snack was chocolate chip cookies, and she tended to be curled up in bed reading on her tablet by ten every night. So the fact that there was no routine, no real schedule, and she was staying at five-star hotels and eating some of the most outrageously delicious food three times a day was just overwhelming.

Mick had pretty much hit the nail on the head that day on the plane when he talked about some people getting freaked out about changes to their itinerary. And while she didn’t mind the change he made, because it just made sense, it was the change to her everyday life that was freaking her out.

It was early. The sun was barely up, and Mick was still sound asleep. They had gotten to his place in Malibu late last night after spending the day driving around Hollywood. He had shown her all the sights she had wanted to see—the Hollywood sign, the Sunset Strip, Hollywood Boulevard, they’d driven by the Capital Records building, she got to see the famous Chinese Theater, and walked along part of the Walk of Fame - and then they had

stopped to eat dinner. By the time they had arrived at his home, she had been dead on her feet.

Today, they had vowed to just be lazy and enjoy a day on the beach. As she stepped out onto the back deck, she realized that wouldn't be hard to do, considering the house was literally ten feet from the sand.

The air was brisk, and she pulled her robe tighter against her as she sat on a chaise lounge and stared out at the ocean. The view was spectacular, but then again, everything about this trip fit in that category. She felt way out of her league when she was alone like this, but when Mick was at her side, it all felt... natural.

Well, sort of natural. It still boggled her mind that people lived like this, that the boy she grew up with owned luxury houses all over the world and could have whatever he wanted whenever he wanted.

Including her.

Okay, that part had nothing to do with his wealth and fame and everything to do with him as a person. The connection had always been there and back when they were younger, they sort of knew all they could have was a friendship.

Until that last day when she'd gotten bold and kissed him.

But even if he had stayed, it would have been years before they could have started dating without everyone freaking out about it.

So now, here they were; making up for lost time and trying to figure out what comes next. Mick already seemed confident in what that was—he had stated it so boldly that first day—but Sienna wasn't quite so sure. Glancing around at the scenery and the house, she wasn't so sure she could fit into this world. It took her years to commit to buying a house and it wasn't even one

she loved, it was one she could afford. Meanwhile, he had his choice of houses in every time zone and barely had to think about the price tag.

They'd talked a little about that last night over dinner. This house he'd owned the longest, but he'd been buying and selling homes around Malibu and L.A. for years. He had the penthouse in Manhattan, a condo in Vale, a flat in London, and a small condo in the heart of L.A., just a block away from his office. Again, part of her wanted to argue that she didn't fit in his world, but she desperately wanted to.

And not just for the monetary perks.

Every day that they spent together, she found more to genuinely like about Mick. They talked about everything, from sharing memories from their childhood to her research on clinical neuropsychology. He'd been very open about his own career and both the struggles and successes he'd dealt with. The more he shared, however, the more she realized that he preferred working behind the scenes and not taking any of the spotlight for himself. And now that he'd achieved the level of success that he had, he didn't know how to just live for himself.

And it made her incredibly sad.

In contrast, much of her life had been spent in a classroom or a lab. There were very few circumstances that put her in any kind of spotlight, but she still spent most of her time locked away from anything enjoyable. She socialized with other scientists and made a lot of good friends, but she couldn't remember ever feeling as carefree as she had this past week.

So what did it all mean?

Mick had kept true to his word and, other than his declaration that first day on the plane, he had put no pressure on her to talk about her feelings. He

certainly wasn't pushing her for anything beyond their two weeks.

Although... she really wished he would.

God, what a mess I am...

For so long, Sienna had made all her own decisions. Because of her intelligence and skipping two grades, she'd been more mature than her peers and had always known what she wanted to do with her life. She didn't rely on guidance counselors or academic advisors. Every step had been planned meticulously by her. Now she suddenly wished for someone else to take the lead for a while. Someone to tell her it was okay to take a step back from her career and take a sabbatical.

Someone like Mick to ask her to stay with him.

She had taken her phone outside with her and she reached for it and captured a picture of the early morning view of the beach and sent it to Eleanor.

Sienna: Good morning from Malibu

Eleanor: Now that is a beautiful way to start the day

Sienna: I don't think I've ever been outside to watch the sunrise like this

Eleanor: Because most days you were either already in the lab or rushing to get to it

Sienna: Very true

Sienna: How are you feeling today

Eleanor: Tired. Very tired. I have a bunch of scans later today

Eleanor: I told them not to bother because it won't change anything

Eleanor: But no one's listening

Sienna: Why won't they listen? If you're against it, that should be your decision

Eleanor: For the sake of research, I'm going to allow it

Frustration built in her and she wanted to say fuck the research! Where had it gotten her friend, huh? All the research that goes into cancer every damn day and it still couldn't save Eleanor.

Closing her eyes, Sienna mentally counted to ten because the last thing anyone needed was for her to get argumentative and make things worse

Eleanor: By your lack of response, I can tell you're upset

Why deny it?

Sienna: I am. I hate that you're going through this

Sienna: And I hate that you're going through it alone. I should be there

Eleanor: No, you shouldn't

Eleanor: You're exactly where you're supposed to be

Sienna: It's hard to feel good about that when I know where you are

Eleanor: And you being where you are is giving me joy, Sienna

Eleanor: I'm so glad you took my advice

Sienna: You always give me good advice

Eleanor: Then I've got one more for you

Sienna: Oh?

Eleanor: Don't worry about me. Everything happens for a reason

Eleanor: Go and start your day on a happy note

Eleanor: Watch the sunrise, walk on the beach, smile, and take lots of pictures

Tears stung her eyes as she silently nodded

Sienna: I will

Eleanor: Good. And send some to me. I'm sharing your adventure with the nurses

That made her laugh.

Eleanor: And they all think you deserve this too

Eleanor: xoxo

Sighing, she placed her phone back on the small table beside her and did her best to get her emotions under control. Closing her eyes, she hugged herself tightly to fight off the early morning chill. "I should have made some coffee before coming out here," she muttered.

"Your wish is my command," Mick said from behind her, and she practically fell out of the chair.

"You scared the hell out of me!" she huffed, her hand on her chest. "I didn't even hear the doors open."

Looking tousled and far too sexy in a pair of gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt, he handed her a mug. "Sorry. I woke up alone and got up to see where you were. When I spotted you out here on the deck and saw that you hadn't helped yourself to the coffee, I figured I'd make you a cup." Leaning down, he gave her a soft kiss. "Wait here."

The warmth of the mug in her hands felt wonderful. A minute later, Mick was back with a blanket. "Scoot forward a bit," he said before draping the blanket over her lap and sliding in behind her on the chaise. His arms went

around her as he pulled the blanket further up and then urged her to lean back against him. “Good morning, beautiful.” His breath was warm against her throat, and Sienna simply melted against him.

“Good morning to you, too. I hope I didn’t wake you.” Over the last week, they had gotten up early each day because they had places they wanted to see, and she just assumed he’d want to sleep in today.

“I thought we were going to be lazy today. Then I rolled over and you weren’t there, so I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

She took a sip of her coffee and hummed with pleasure. “So good.” For a moment, she simply let the sensations wash over her—the feel of Mick, the smell of the ocean air, and the taste of her morning coffee. “I’m used to being up early, and I was curious about the view. It was too dark to appreciate it last night.”

“It’s definitely a good view,” he murmured against her shoulder, and she knew he wasn’t looking out at the ocean. It made her blush. “Are you hungry? Should I get something delivered?”

That almost made her laugh. “Something delivered? Why can’t we just make breakfast ourselves?”

“We’re on vacation.”

“But we still have to eat, Mick. Although... hmm...”

“What?”

“I wish bakeries delivered. After having that chocolate chip muffin the other day, all I can think about is having another.”

“Seriously? Everything we’ve done and all the places we’ve seen, and you’re still thinking about a muffin?”

Glancing over her shoulder, she said, “It was a really good muffin.”

Chuckling, he nuzzled her neck. “How do you feel about early morning walks on the beach?”

“Um...”

“With the promise of a really good muffin,” he added.

“I’m intrigued. I’ve never gone for an early morning walk on the beach that led to muffins.”

Slowly, he came to his feet and held out a hand to her. “It’s not really my thing either. But Julian lived here for a while, and he raved about the coffeehouse down the beach. You want to try it?”

Accepting his hand, Sienna tried to hold on to her mug and the blanket with her other hand, but the blanket simply fell to the floor. “I think that sounds like a wonderful idea.” She kissed him. “But first... clothes.”

“Hmm... now it doesn’t feel like such a wonderful idea,” he grumbled, picking up the blanket and following her into the house.

Laughing, Sienna walked into the kitchen and put her mug down on the marble island. “Sadly, they are a necessity. But the sooner we get back, the sooner we can get back into our jammies. How does that sound?”

Walking over, Mick gently grasped her hips and tugged her to him. “It sounds like a ridiculous word, but as long as it means coming home and crawling back into bed with you, I’m all for it.” And then he was kissing her, slow and languid and oh so tempting to say to hell with the muffin and drag him back to bed.

But she really wanted the muffin.

Dammit.

Sienna broke the kiss and gave him a sassy smile. “The faster we get dressed and go, the faster we’ll be back here and in bed.”

The man practically sprinted from the room.

Fifteen minutes later, they were on the sand and heading down the beach. She was surprised by how many people were already up and out here, and commented on it to Mick.

“There are a lot of surfers the closer you get to town. The beach in front of these houses is more private, but I wish I would have found a place further away. I prefer to sit out on the deck and have peace and quiet.”

“It’s hardly noisy,” she reasoned. “The loudest noise is the ocean.”

“That I enjoy. It’s very relaxing and when I’m overly stressed, I like to sit outside with a drink and just listen to the waves crashing. It’s very therapeutic.”

“I can imagine.” They strolled hand in hand, and Sienna marveled at how tranquil it all was, how serene she felt. “I think if I had this view, I’d be outside soaking it in every single day.”

“Durham’s not near the water, is it?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I’m about three hours from the coast and I never go. I think the last time I went to the beach—any beach—was while I was still living at home with my parents. I went to see a concert at Jones Beach.”

He smiled. “Who did you see?”

“Um... I think it was R.E.M. Jason took me and, from what I remember, it was a good show. We went with a bunch of people and spent the afternoon on the beach, so... it was a fun day.”

“Still, that’s a long time since you’ve put your toes in the sand.”

They were carrying their shoes, even though it was still chilly out, but she had to admit that it felt good. “I don’t think I ever really paid attention to how nice it feels to walk in the sand, but a girl could get used to this.” Realizing what she said, Sienna inwardly groaned. “I’ll have to mark my calendar to check out the North Carolina beaches.”

Mick didn’t comment, and they made the rest of the walk in companionable silence.

They came to a set of stairs that led up to the street, and from there, she spotted the coffee shop right across the way. There was a line practically out the door, but neither seemed to mind the wait. It moved quickly, and before she knew it, they each had their coffees in their hands and Mick had the bag with two chocolate chip muffins, a blueberry muffin, and a slice of red velvet pound cake.

It was safe to say their cake needs were being met.

“Do you want to sit out here and eat or wait until we get back to the house?” he asked, even as they started crossing the street.

“Back at the house. I want to run in and put my jammies back on, and then get back on that chaise with you and the blanket and enjoy our breakfast. How does that sound?”

Beside her, he chuckled. “Like a perfect way to start the day.” Then he laughed again.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Part of me wishes we could run back so we’d get there sooner, but I don’t think running and hot coffee really go together.”

That had her laughing, too. “Definitely not. Besides, I’m not that athletic. Between all the walking we’ve done on our vacation stops, and all the sex, my body is rebelling. That’s why I need the muffin and the chaise.”

“And me?” he teased, playfully nudging her shoulder.

“Oh, yeah,” she replied. “You’re the best part of it all.”

Carefully, Mick put his arm around her and gave her a gentle hug before they headed down the steps to the beach.

Sienna wasn’t lying when she said her body was sore, but she was more than willing to suck it up and deal with it, because everything she was experiencing with Mick was like a dream.

And all too soon, it would be back to reality.

They hadn’t talked about what would happen when the time came, but she was a realist and knew she’d go back to Durham and back to work, and Mick probably had some clients that needed his attention. Of course, they’d keep in touch and would say they would make the whole long-distance thing work, but, again, she was a realist. It was rare that any long-distance relationship lasted. Eventually, one—or both—parties would grow tired of the constant travel and the overall disruption to their lives. In their case, however, she imagined they’d just slowly phase one another out, because they’d end up being too engrossed in their work.

Sad but true...

The thing was, that given the opportunity, Sienna truly believed she’d be open to finding a way to either move closer to Mick or...

“Hey,” he said, interrupting her thoughts again. “You’ve gone quiet on me. What are you thinking right now?”

Dangerous territory, she mused.

Now wasn't the time to get into this particular topic. Besides, they still had another week, and there was always the chance that they'd be bored with one another by then.

She highly doubted it, but it was still a possibility.

"Sienna?"

Pushing her thoughts aside, she turned her head and smiled at him. "I was thinking how much I'm loving the smell of the ocean air, and how much more I'll love it from your deck."

Now it was his turn to smile. "I'll admit that I rarely give it that much thought, but it is a great smell." Then he moved in closer. "But you smell even better."

"I don't know about that. All this fresh air, the coffee, and the freshly baked muffins are the stars of the show right now."

"I disagree." He squeezed her hand, and she noticed they were almost back at the house. She had to stop herself from sighing with relief.

They kept their leisurely pace, but once they hit the stairs that led up to the deck, Sienna walked a little faster. Mick set up their breakfast before following her inside, where they changed.

"You know, technically, we didn't sleep in any jammies. You were naked under your robe and I only threw on the sweats because the neighbors would probably frown on me walking around outside with no clothes."

She stood next to the bed and, with nothing but a pair of panties on, slid her arms back into her robe. "I promise we'll get naked later. First, breakfast."

He walked over and cupped her face. “Deal.”



This was the longest Mick had ever had his phone turned off, but when he woke up and found that Sienna was still asleep the next morning, he figured it might be a good time to just sort of check on things and make sure he hadn't missed anything important.

Three-hundred and forty-seven new emails were in his inbox and he had sixty-four missed texts.

Groaning, he walked into the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee before heading into his office to see what fires he needed to put out. Hopefully it wouldn't take too long and by the time Sienna was awake, they could have breakfast and pack up before leaving for San Francisco later this afternoon.

Opening the laptop, he quickly scrolled through deleting spam messages or any other pointless bullshit that wasn't important. There were several inquiries from musicians looking for representation and Mick forwarded them to his assistant. Next were some invites to a couple of charity events,

along with several requests for him to speak at some of the local music schools.

Again, he forwarded them to his assistant with the instructions that he wasn't taking on any speaking engagements or any other appointments until after the New Year. It wasn't something that he normally did—leaving his calendar so empty—but this last week had given him a lot to think about.

Mostly...working less and living more.

There was a sense of contentment he was feeling that was like nothing else he'd ever felt before. When he closed a deal, there was a high that he got from it. It kicked up his adrenaline and made him hungry for more. When he watched one of his clients in concert or during a performance on a late-night show, it got his creative juices going on where he wanted to see them next. And when they were in the studio creating music, he loved coming up with ways to promote the new stuff in a way they never did before. Each of those things was satisfying and energizing, but what he was feeling right now? It was on a whole other level, and he found that he liked it.

A lot.

More than he ever thought he would.

But then again, Mick never envisioned a day when he would have anything in his life other than work.

His phone buzzed and he saw a text from his assistant asking him to call her. It was barely after seven, so he didn't take it as a good sign.

“Hey, Lynn. What's up?”

“Mick, hey. Sorry to bother you, but when I started getting your emails, I figured you were up,” she said.

“No problem. Is everything okay?”

“Well...that depends.”

“On?”

“I know you’re on vacation,” she began cautiously. “But do you remember Simon Bennett? He was a runner up on *America’s Next Singing Sensation*?”

“Ugh...no, Lynn. No more reality show singers. The one I met up with in Manhattan a few weeks ago was a bust.”

“Just...hear me out,” she said firmly. “He’s been working with Dex Davis and his first album was mildly successful, but Dex doesn’t feel like he can give Simon the kind of marketing and promotion he needs. And he knows you can.”

Raking a hand through his hair, Mick had to fight the urge to say no.

Unfortunately, he was intrigued.

“Hang on, let me look him up,” he murmured.

“Don’t bother, I just sent you a file,” she told him. “It has all the basics—headshot, stats on the album, and links to a couple of videos of him performing.” She paused. “I think he has potential.”

Clicking on one of the links, he kept the volume down so he could talk to Lynn while he was listening. “He’s a little more pop than I was expecting.”

“Dex said that was the label’s doing and Simon was pushing back on it. Basically, it seems that’s why they’re not promoting him the way they should.”

“So I’m supposed to give him a full music and image makeover and re-launch him.”

“It’s what you do best,” she said sweetly.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...flattery isn’t going to work this morning. I’m on vacation and I don’t think I have the time to go and see this kid live.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. It just so happens that he’s performing at the Filmore tonight. I wasn’t going to bother you because you left explicit instructions not to, but since you reached out first...”

“I didn’t reach out,” he said wearily. “I just happened to glance at my emails.”

“And yet here we are talking.” With a small laugh, she went on. “Come on, Mick. Surely you can spare an hour tonight to just go and listen to him and talk to him for ten minutes. Then, if you’re not interested, everyone can move on. Dex is a good guy and he thinks really highly of Simon.”

He thought about his and Sienna’s plans for tonight, and all they were going to do was play tourists and find someplace to eat when they were hungry. They didn’t have dinner reservations anywhere and he supposed it wouldn’t be the worst thing for them to take an hour or two to listen to some music.

“I’m not committing to this yet,” he stated. “I was serious when I said I’m on a break, and Sienna and I already have plans. If she doesn’t mind, then we’ll go.”

“I just emailed you the information and Dex’s number so you can get in with no hassle,” she said. “Call me later to confirm so I can handle things on my end.”

“Fine. But after this, no more business until I’m officially back. Are we clear?”

She laughed again. “Crystal, boss. Now enjoy the rest of your vacation and hopefully we’ll be signing Simon Bennett. My daughter absolutely loves him!”

“Ah, now I know why you’re pushing so hard. Are you sure you don’t want to go up to San Francisco and handle this?”

“Absolutely not! This is too big of a deal for me to handle on my own and I’d hate to have to deal with your wrath if you didn’t like him.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “My wrath? Since when do I have wrath?”

“Okay, you’re usually a big ol’ marshmallow with me, but still. My judgement can’t be trusted in this instance, so...promise that you’ll really consider going.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...I’ll run it by Sienna and see what we can do.”

“You’re the best, Mick! Talk to you later!”

Placing the phone down, he sighed before picking up his coffee and taking a long sip.

It might be fun to take Sienna to experience the business part of his world. So far she’d seen him in action where it came to making travel arrangements and getting them into some fairly impressive places, but she hadn’t really seen him do his job quite like this.

As anxious as he was to find out if she was interested, he wanted to get through the rest of the texts and emails before he went and woke her up.

He sent texts, responded to multiple emails, did a little more research on Simon Bennett and actually considered calling Dex Davis, but when he looked at the time and saw it was after ten, he nearly fell out of his chair.

“Shit!” Standing, he walked out of his office and went in search of Sienna.

She wasn’t in the bedroom or the bathroom and it didn’t look like she’d had anything to eat, so...where was she?

Walking out to the deck, he spotted her down on the sand. She was sitting on a blanket with her head tilted up at the sun and she looked so relaxed that he almost hated to disturb her.

Almost.

He was about to walk down the steps to the beach, but remembered he was only in his robe and figured he should at least put on some clothes.

Five minutes later, in a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt, he strolled across the sand and quietly sat down beside her.

“Ah...I was wondering how long you were going to stay in your office,” she said without looking at him, and Mick couldn’t tell if she was mad or not.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. I woke up early and made the mistake of looking at my emails. I didn’t mean to lose track of time.”

Now she turned her head and smiled at him. “You don’t need to apologize. I’m surprised you’ve stayed off your phone this long. I can’t imagine that your company can run completely on its own without you. Especially since you took off on such short notice.”

“I have a great team and really, most of the stuff they can totally do without me. I was just nosy and wanted to see what was going on. Then...my assistant called and asked if we had time to see someone in San Francisco tonight,” he said carefully.

“Oh? Like a band?”

“More like a singer,” he explained. “He’s a solo act, but I think what he needs is a band and a bit of an image makeover.”

She frowned. “Why?”

Mick explained Simon’s reality show connection and where his career was currently at. “The show and the record label wanted to make him a pop star, but I think he’s edgier than that. Of course, I won’t know until I check him out and talk to him.”

“Okay.”

For a moment, he could only stare. “That’s it? Just...okay? Neither of us is supposed to be working and we had plans for tonight and...”

“Nothing is carved in stone, right? And every once in a while, there’s nothing wrong with changing the itinerary.” She smiled sweetly at him. “You remember the conversation we had about that, don’t you?”

“I do, but...” Damn. How did he explain this? “Look, it’s one thing to switch things up if it’s going to make our travel easier or so we can see more things. But this? This is me taking time *away* from our vacation to work. Honestly, Sienna, I’m not sure I’m okay with it.”

She shrugged. “Okay. Then we won’t go.” Her head tilted back again and she let out a happy little sigh. “I can’t even remember the last time I sat out in the sun like this. It feels amazing.”

Mick tried to do the same and relax, but...he couldn’t.

“It would probably only be like...two hours tops,” he said conversationally. “We’ll go, listen to his set, and talk to him for a bit. If I’m interested, I’ll just set up an appointment to really sit down with him in a few weeks. You know, no big deal.”

“Sounds good.”

It was ridiculous for him to be annoyed, and yet he was. Maneuvering over her until she was on her back on the blanket and he was braced above her, Mick stared down into her shocked face. “I don’t want you to just casually agree with me, Sienna. I want to know what you’re thinking. I’m going back on a promise to you. Doesn’t that bother you at all?”

Now it was her turn to look annoyed. “You want to know what bothers me? The fact that I’m genuinely okay with this mild change of plans and it’s not good enough for you. If you don’t want to go, then you should be man enough to just say so. Don’t put it all on me so then you have someone to blame.” With a hard shove, she pushed him off of her before getting to her feet. And without even sparing him a glance, she marched back toward the house.

He was a little impressed with how strong she was, and it was probably comical for anyone watching to see him try to scramble to his feet so he could chase after her.

Scooping up the blanket, he jogged to the stairs and took them two at a time to catch up to her on the deck.

“Hey!” he said breathlessly—and refused to acknowledge how out of shape he possibly was. “What the hell was that all about? We were having a conversation!”

“No, you were trying to be mister always does the right thing for everyone and was too afraid to make a decision for yourself! You planned this entire trip without asking anything of me and now you’re tippy-toeing around like you think I’m going to freak out if you have something you need to do! Have I given you any reason to think that I’m that kind of person?”

“Um...”

“No, I haven’t,” she answered for him. “If anything, I’ve been pretty agreeable to everything. I hung out with your friends and their wives and didn’t complain even once! And let me tell you something, buddy, that was a big deal for me! I don’t enjoy hanging out with strangers and feeling like an outsider. But I did it because I knew it was important to you!”

“Okay, but...”

“And going to see some singer tonight? That actually sounded like a lot of fun! And do you know why?”

“Um...”

“Because we’d be doing it together! I never go to concerts anymore and to see one with you and see you acting all like Mick Tyler, band manager? I’d love that! But you were so busy being all wishy-washy that you didn’t really bother to talk to me about it.” And with a huff, she turned and walked into the house and went right for the coffeemaker.

“You’re right,” he said, following her in. “This is all new, Sienna, and I can’t help feeling guilty for wanting to see this kid sing when I’m supposed to be on vacation. This trip was all for you and I kind of feel like a dick for taking any time to do business.” Walking over to her, he rested his hands on her hips and slowly pulled her close. “I’m sorry.”

She looked like she was going to argue a little more, but then her expression softened. “I appreciate how much effort you are putting into this trip for me, but you have to know that I never expected any of it. You’ve gone above and beyond anything I ever could have dreamed of. But you should also know that I’m not selfish and I’m more than willing to do some

of the things that you want to do. How awful would it be if this relationship was so one-sided?”

In that moment, Mick swore he couldn't possibly love her more. How could this beautiful, sexy, and selfless woman truly be his?

Swallowing hard, he reached up and cupped her face. “It would be awful, but you have to know that...I'm scared.” His heart was hammering harder than it ever had before at his admission, and Sienna looked thoroughly shocked.

“I don't understand,” she said softly. “Scared of what?”

Deciding that now might be a good time for them to have the talk that he'd been dreading, he took her hand and led her over to the sofa.

“Mick?”

Keeping her hand in his, he did his best to explain. “I wanted every minute of this trip to be perfect for you. I wanted to hit all the places you wanted to see and do all the things you wanted to do. But I also was afraid to do or say anything that would...I don't know...either spook you or make you wish you weren't here with me.”

Her shoulders sagged. “Why didn't you say anything? We've been together for eight days already. Are you telling me you've been walking on eggshells all that time?”

“Not all of it, but...”

Slowly, Sienna pulled her hand away with a stern look. “This is why we need to talk. The last thing I want is for you to be walking around pretending to be somebody you're not. We've waited far too long to have this time together and now you're making me wonder if I've been getting to know the real you or some timid version!”

He saw the tears in her eyes and it gutted him.

She had a point. He wasn't showing her the true version of himself.

Well...sometimes he was, but he knew he was holding a large part of himself back.

"I promise you, Sienna, moving forward, I'm going to relax and be open and honest about everything. This is all so damn new to me, and all I can say is that I'm trying."

At first she didn't say anything, but then her shoulders sagged. "For what it's worth, I get it. I think I'm kind of doing the same thing. But in my defense, it's because I'm boring. I look at your life and I feel like there isn't anything I can possibly talk to you about that would be even remotely interesting."

"That's not true," he told her. "I think you're the most fascinating woman I've ever met. I love talking with you."

She laughed softly. "How do you know? We've both been guarding ourselves a little."

As much as he didn't want to, he laughed because it really was kind of funny. "We've always been in sync with one another, Sienna. Always. And I think this just proves it even more."

"Mmm...I have to agree." She moved closer until she was practically in his lap. "So...I'm not sure if this is really a thing because I never experienced it firsthand, but...this was kind of like our first fight, wasn't it?"

"I don't know if I'd call it a fight, but..."

She moved until she was straddling his lap. "Okay, but if it was a fight, that would mean we could maybe engage in...oh, what's it called...make up

sex?”

Gripping her ass, Mick stood and almost groaned when she locked her legs around him. “It was definitely a fight and we owe it to ourselves to explore the whole make up sex thing.” He nearly tripped over his own two feet in his haste to get them back to his bedroom. The sound of Sienna’s laughter was music to his ears and he laughed with her.

“You know I’m all about the research,” she said as he lay her down on the bed.

“I love the way your brain works,” he said with a wink as he quickly undressed. On the bed, Sienna was disrobing just as fast. And when she was naked and stretched out waiting for him, he gave her a sexy grin. “I’ve heard that make up sex tends to be hard and fast. I hope that’s okay.”

Her smile was equally disarming. “Bring it.”

And he did.

The crowd was infinitely younger than Sienna was expecting and she felt like she and Mick stuck out like sore thumbs. She had a lemon drop martini in one hand while Mick held her other. They were navigating their way toward the stage, and she had to wonder if they were going to go and talk to Simon before the show started.

Which is what she asked.

“No,” he said loudly, making sure she could hear him. Then he tugged her in close so he wouldn’t have to shout quite so much. “I don’t want to distract him before he goes on. I just wanted to come over here and introduce myself to some of Dex’s people so they know I’m here, and so we’ll be able to go backstage as soon as the set is over.”

“Oh! Okay!” she said, feeling silly about shouting too.

He gave her a quick kiss before walking them over to the side of the stage. He introduced her to someone but she didn’t catch his name and rather than strain to hear what they were talking about, she simply turned and did a little people watching.

The crowd was definitely made up of a younger demographic, but there were also some parents there with their kids. The Fillmore was legendary—at least, according to Mick—and she had to admit it was rather charming. It was small compared to most music venues she was aware of and could only hold a little over 1,200 people. She imagined for a musician who was just starting out, it was a large crowd, but if you were a more established band, this would seem rather intimate. Either way, she was still excited to be here. Mick had played some of Simon’s music for her on their ninety-minute flight. She’d never heard of him before, but she recognized a song or two.

Taking a sip of her drink, she hummed with appreciation. It was very good and as she looked around, she realized she and Mick must have been in a VIP section because everyone else was drinking out of paper cups.

Of course it was a VIP section. When haven’t we been in a VIP section since this trip started?

He had booked a suite for them at the St. Regis hotel and it was the most luxurious place she had ever seen. Honestly, if they simply stayed in the room and never went out, she’d still consider it the best trip to San Francisco ever. The bathroom had a massive soaker tub and she already had some serious plans to get Mick to join her in later tonight. He’d been the one surprising her over and over and over, but she had a few tricks up her own sleeve and

tonight she was going to pamper him with some champagne and fresh strawberries while taking a bubble bath.

She'd read about things like that in romance novels and hoped it was as romantic as it sounded.

And that Mick wouldn't think she was ridiculous.

"Only one way to find out..."

Before long, the two of them were led up to the second floor where they had a fantastic view of the stage from the balcony. Simon took the stage and the crowd below went wild. Sienna looked over at Mick and noticed he was intently studying the stage, but he wasn't smiling or even moving a little bit to the music. It looked like he was completely in his own little world and she would love to know what was going through his mind.

Note to self: ask him about his process later.

Rather than obsessing about Mick and what he was thinking, Sienna forced herself to focus on the music. Simon's voice reminded her a little of Ed Sheeran and every once in a while, she caught a hint of a growly little gruffness that told her he wanted to sing something edgier than this kind of music. Hopefully that was something Mick could help him with. She had a feeling he might lose part of his fanbase if he changed his image too much, but no doubt Mick's team would know how to handle all of that.

A server came over and refreshed her drink and that's when she noticed Mick hadn't touched his. She figured he was too busy watching the show and didn't want the alcohol to maybe cloud his thought process at all.

Hell, she was grasping at straws here. No matter how much she kept telling herself not to think about how Mick worked, she just couldn't seem to help herself.

The next thing she knew, Simon was taking a bow and walking off the stage.

“That was it?” she asked when Mick turned and looked at her. “It’s over already?”

He chuckled softly. “Already? He was on stage for over an hour! He’ll come out and do an encore, but in the meantime, we’ll head down to his dressing room. Come on.”

Wow. She had really zoned out there for a while, but it was still a fun experience.

At least...she thought it was.

Down in Simon’s dressing room, she felt mildly disappointed.

“It’s never glamorous,” Mick told her, as if reading her mind. “And the smaller the venue, the less glamorous.”

“I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but...this wasn’t it,” she murmured.

The room was maybe ten-by-ten, had a small and somewhat dirty couch, a desk with a mirror over it, two folding chairs, a mini-fridge, a changing screen, and a small—and very dirty—attached bathroom. As much as she wanted to sit down, she didn’t dare touch anything. Beside her, Mick laughed softly before tucking her in close to his side.

“Don’t worry. I promise we won’t stay long and then we’ll head back to the hotel,” he said before kissing her cheek.

Her plan for that romantic bubble bath was now more of a necessity rather than part of a sexier scenario.

Simon walked in five minutes later and gave them both a nervous smile. Sienna would guess him to be in his mid-twenties and his blond hair was a bit

sweaty and matted and he was a little scruffier than she realized, but it all looked good on him.

“Simon Bennett, I’m Mick Tyler. Dex asked me to come and see the show tonight,” Mick said as he shook his hand. “Great set!”

“Oh, um...thanks. We had some issues with our sound check earlier, so I wasn’t sure how it was all going to go.” He walked over to the mini-fridge and pulled out a bottle of water before looking at them. “Can I offer you guys something to drink? It’s not much, just water really, but...”

“Thanks, kid, we’d love that,” Mick told him before accepting a bottle for himself. “Simon, this is Sienna Ashley. Sienna, Simon Bennett.”

He didn’t introduce me as his friend or girlfriend or even a colleague...interesting.

Smiling, she accepted the water. “It’s nice to meet you, Simon. I really enjoyed the show.”

“Thanks.” He sat down on one of the folding chairs and firmly put his attention on Mick. “I’m sure Dex told you what’s been going on.”

With no other choice, she and Mick sat down on the sofa, and Sienna did her best not to cringe.

“He did, and I have to say that I’m intrigued. Why don’t you tell me what it is that you want,” Mick prompted. “Dex isn’t here, no one from the label is here, so you can speak freely.”

He looked a little hesitant and paused to take a long drink of water before responding. “I don’t want to be a pop star, Mr. Tyler,” he began. “I was relieved when I got eliminated from the show. I never thought I’d actually make it that far in the competition.”

“Why’d you audition?”

“I was hoping to get noticed long before I made it into the finals. As soon as I was eliminated, all kinds of music executives came out of the woodwork—including Dex—and they all had this image of what I was going to be, but no one bothered to ask if it was what I wanted. I figured I’d go along with it to get a deal and then have time to share my ideas.”

“And that never happened,” Mick stated.

“Exactly.”

“Why don’t you tell me who you see yourself being like?”

“Riley Shaughnessy,” Simon told him confidently. “And I’m not just saying that because he’s your client or to sway you. I’ve been a huge fan of Shaughnessy since I was a kid and if you go back and watch my audition tapes from *America’s Next Singing Sensation*, you’ll see that I sang “Suddenly Mine”. One of the judges even said I sounded like a young Riley, but then once the competition got going, we were told what to sing and it was all like bubble gum pop.” He muttered something under his breath before adding, “I hate that shit.”

For a minute, Mick didn’t say anything. And then, without warning, he stood. Sienna saw the nervous look on Simon’s face and no doubt he was thinking he blew it. Hell, she actually felt nervous for him.

Reaching into his pocket, Mick pulled out a business card and handed it to Simon. “I’m going to be away for the next week, but I want you to call my office and speak to Lynn. She’s my assistant. I’ll let her know to be expecting your call. I don’t know what the rest of your tour looks like, but I want to see you in my office by the end of the month. I’m going to work on some

strategy and see what you think of it.” He held out a hand to him. “I look forward to talking more with you, Simon.”

“Wow, um...thanks, Mr. Tyler!” he replied as he got to his feet. “I’ll give your assistant a call tomorrow.”

“Sienna? You ready?” Mick asked as he walked to the door and opened it.

“Uh...yeah. Sure.” Smiling at Simon, she shook his hand. “It was very nice meeting you and I wish you luck with your career.”

“Thanks!”

It was still crowded out in the main area, and Sienna was happy to simply let Mick lead the way out. As soon as they stepped outside, he pulled out his phone to call for a car and once he had it confirmed, he turned to her.

“So? What did you think?”

“Oh, my goodness! I have so many questions!” she said with a laugh.

“Really? Questions about what?” He was clearly amused.

“All of it! You looked so stoic while Simon was on stage and then it seemed like as soon as the kid started opening up to you, you kind of cut him off and prepared to leave!” Laughing again, she shook her head. “I’m completely confused!”

“It’s hard to explain,” he began. “While I’m watching someone perform—especially when it’s for a situation like this—I have to tune everything else out and give it my full attention.”

“That’s completely understandable.” Honestly, did he really think she wouldn’t get it?

“As for backstage, I listened to what he had to say and I watched his expression when he was talking. He’s miserable. I’ve worked with enough

musicians that I know when they're blowing smoke up my ass and when they're sincere." He shrugged. "The kid was sincere. I didn't need to know anything else. I've watched the videos, read his bio, and I think he's someone I can work with. He just finished performing and I knew he was eager to get the hell out of there. Why would I hold him back?"

"Oh, well..."

"Which reminds me..." He held up his hand before reaching for his phone and tapping out a quick text. Once his phone was away again, he said, "Now Lynn knows to expect his call and I don't have to think about this again for the rest of our trip." Leaning in, he kissed her thoroughly. "Thank you."

She wanted to melt into him and kiss him some more, but their car arrived. Once they pulled away, she looked over at him. "Thank you for sharing this with me tonight."

All Mick did was frown.

"We've talked about what you do for a living and we hung out with Shaughnessy, but this was actually very interesting to witness. I was standing there for part of the show, just fascinated watching you and wondering what you were thinking. You're amazing at what you do, and I really love the way you chased after your dream and made it come true."

The lopsided grin was his initial reaction. "Well...you didn't feel that way when I told you I was leaving all those years ago."

"To be fair, I was sixteen and a little selfish. This was your destiny, Michael. Think of all the people you've helped—all the careers you launched. If it weren't for you, the entire landscape of music could be very different right now."

Even in the dim light of the car, she could tell he was blushing. “I don’t know about that.”

Reaching up, Sienna cupped his jaw and forced him to look at her. “I do. And I’m very proud of you.” Leaning in, she gave him a gentle kiss. “And when we get back to the room, I have a little surprise for you.”

His eyes lit up. “More sexy underwear?”

Laughing, she shook her head. “You saw what I was wearing under this outfit earlier, of course it’s more sexy underwear,” she said with a wink. “But that’s not all.”

“Really? So what is it?”

“A surprise, that’s what. And you’ll just have to wait and see.” The look of pure delight on his face did her heart good. She’d never done anything like this before, and she never knew how much fun it could be.

The drive back to the hotel only took fifteen minutes, and they spent the bulk of the ride talking about the show and her thoughts on the music. It was obvious that the music business was Mick’s passion, but she loved how he wasn’t condescending about it or how she perhaps didn’t catch all the nuances that he did. No doubt if she took him into one of her labs that he would feel just as awkward and she wasn’t so sure she would be as gracious as he was.

Of course, that was all part of his job, whereas Sienna’s...well...social skills really weren’t required.

Pulling her phone out, she quickly tapped out a text while Mick was staring out the window.

“I should have gotten a picture with him,” she commented as they pulled up to the hotel. “I could have sent that to Bree too.” Then she giggled.

“Although, I don’t know if she’s a fan of Simon’s, but it still could have been fun.”

“I think you’re having a little too much fun torturing your sister-in-law,” he teased.

“Maybe. But I saw a whole different side of her that night at dinner and it’s the first time in my life that I’m the one out having fun.”

“Sienna...”

“Oh, stop. It’s true and we all know it. Not talking about it won’t change anything,” she said as she climbed from the car. “I know perfectly well the kind of life I’ve been leading, just like I know this is the most adventure I’ve ever had.” When he was standing beside her, she gave him a quick kiss. “Now come on. Let’s go up to the room so I can show you my surprise!”

Their suite included butler service and if it all went as planned, everything she ordered would be waiting for them up in the room. The text was to ensure that the tub would be full and steamy and waiting for them.

She was so excited about pulling this off that she was practically bouncing on her toes and willing to sprint up to the room.

The ride up in the elevator seemed to take forever, but as soon as they stepped off onto their floor, Sienna took the lead, taking out her card and opening the door for them.

“This is your show, princess,” he said smoothly as he walked into the suite. “You just tell me where you want me to be and I’m there.”

“Ooo...I like that,” she hummed. “Follow me.”

With a little extra sway in her hips, Sienna led him into the bedroom and then stopped him next to the bed. She kicked off her shoes and shimmied out

of her little black dress, revealing black lace underwear.

“I knew it was coming and yet it’s still exciting,” he said, reaching out and toying with the strap on her bra.

“I’m glad you think so,” she told him as she began unbuttoning his shirt. “Now let’s see what you have on underneath.”

That made him laugh. “Trust me, it’s not nearly as exciting as what you’re wearing.”

“Says you.”

Together they got him down to his black boxer briefs, but when he reached for her again, she playfully stepped away. “Nuh-uh...not yet. Follow me.” Turning, she walked to the massive en suite and practically squealed with delight that everything was ready. Soft music was playing, candles were lit, there was a bottle of champagne on ice, two glasses, a tray of fresh strawberries, along with whipped cream and melted chocolate. The tub was filled and there were bubbles and rose petals.

“What in the world...?”

Spinning around toward him, she said, “Surprise!”

Mick stepped further into the room with a look of total awe on his face. “Sienna, I...”

“You have done so much to make these incredible memories for me and so far I have done nothing for you.”

Looking at her over his shoulder, he said, “Really? You went shopping for sexy underwear, you make love like a freaking goddess, and you’ve shared all of yourself with me. Anyone can make travel arrangements, but what you brought to the table is so much more.”

Now she was the one blushing. “Mick...”

Holding out his hand to her, he said, “Come on. Before the water gets cold.”

Together, they stripped off the last of their clothes and carefully stepped into the tub. “Oh...I love that it’s still so hot!”

“Hot? Sweetheart, this is almost scalding!” he said and was only partially joking.

“Just give it a few minutes,” she told him as they settled into the water together. “Can you reach the champagne from here?”

“Definitely.” And within minutes, he was pouring them each a glass and then placing the strawberries, cream, and chocolate on the ledge of the tub.

The moan of pure pleasure was out before she knew it. Resting her back against Mick’s chest, Sienna felt very pleased with her plan.

“Can I let you in on a little secret?” he murmured seductively against her ear.

“Yes.”

“This is the first time I have ever taken a bubble bath.”

That pleased her even more.

“Good. I’m glad I’m not the only one living through a bunch of firsts on this trip,” she replied softly.

“So tell me how you pulled this off. I’m normally the guy working behind the scenes to make stuff like this happen.”

Looking at him over her shoulder, Sienna gave him an impish grin. “Remember when you were on the phone earlier with Simon’s people?”

He nodded.

“Our butler came in to make sure everything was to our liking and it just sort of came to me. Well...after I saw this bathroom, I knew there was a bubble bath in my future, then I realized I wanted you in here with me.”

“Very sneaky. I love it.” His arms wrapped around her and they both seemed to need a minute to relax and enjoy the whole scenario. “Would you like some champagne?”

“Definitely.”

Mick handed her a glass before taking the other for himself.

“How do you like San Francisco so far?” he asked after a moment.

“Well...I think this hotel is even more luxurious than the one we stayed at in Vegas.”

He chuckled. “Seriously?”

“Oh, yeah. I don’t know why. Maybe because it’s smaller and a little more...reserved? Is that a thing to describe a hotel?”

“I think that says it perfectly.”

“Everything we’ve been doing, for the most part, has been fairly...loud. Graceland, helicopter rides, Vegas...your place in Malibu was a nice little reprieve and then coming here just sort of helped me stay relaxed.”

“Even after a concert?”

“I’ll admit the screaming fans were a bit much, but it was really interesting to watch.”

He laughed again. “Sienna, I think you’re the first person I’ve ever met to describe a concert that way.”

She shrugged. “Would you have preferred that I screamed along with the crowd?”

He hugged her tighter. “Hell no. The only one I want making you scream, is me.”

His words were low and gruff and sent a shiver of delight through her entire body, and she wouldn't mind if he made her scream right now in this glorious tub.

Instead, he picked up a strawberry and dipped it in the whipped cream and fed it to her. “Mmm...so good.”

“Yes, you are.” His breath was hot against her throat as he began to kiss her. Somehow, he managed to put both their glasses aside before turning her in his arms. The tub was large enough that it was easy to move, but it was still slippery enough that it made her giggle. Mick slowly shook his head. “It's hard to seduce you when you're laughing.”

And for some reason, that just made her laugh even more. Soon Mick joined her and their seductive bubble bath turned into a lot of splashing and laughing and silliness.

And it was quite possibly the greatest moment of the entire trip.

It has been so long since she'd felt this relaxed and happy and so full of joy! And it was all because of this man. This crazy, sexy, wonderful man.

I love him.

For all her big talk earlier about how they needed to be better at talking to one another, Sienna found that she wasn't ready to say those words yet.

Wasn't sure she was brave enough to say them first.

Looking at him, she saw the same level of joy and happiness she knew he could read on her face and she loved the fact that they'd not only found one another again, but that they were exactly what each of them seemed to need.

In her heart, she always knew he was the one for her. Thinking back on some of the things he'd said to her over the last week, she had a feeling it was the same for him.

"Now that we've thoroughly made a mess in here, how about we move this to the bedroom? I think I'd like to use the strawberries and chocolate on some very specific parts of you," he said as he stood, water cascading down his magnificent body.

Sienna could only stare up in awe. He looked like one of those Roman Gods—all hard, chiseled muscles. Swallowing hard, she got on her knees and slowly kissed her way up his body. The sound of his ragged breathing spurring her on. By the time she was standing and pressed up against him, he was incredibly hard and she knew if they weren't standing in this slippery tub, he'd be taking her right now.

"I feel like we're going to have to hit pause on this moment just to get out of the tub," she whispered. "But I promise it will be worth it."

Taking her hand, Mick stepped out of the tub and reached for a heated towel, wrapping it around her before lifting her out of the tub. He grabbed another for himself and quickly dried off before picking up the champagne and carrying it to the bedroom. Then he came back for the strawberries and dips.

Then he came back for her, lifting her into his arms and carrying her to bed as if she was the most precious thing in the world to him.

And by the look in his eyes, she kind of felt like she was.

Seven

They were riding the ferry back from Alcatraz when Sienna asked, “Have you ever had to bail one of your clients out of jail?”

That made him laugh. “Definitely, but fortunately that sort of thing didn’t happen very often. Still...it’s part of the job.”

“What was the worst offense?”

“Mostly drunk and disorderly, but Dylan was involved in a massive accident in Vegas years ago. It was a miracle he got out of it alive. He was drunk and driving recklessly. Hit a car with four guys in it.”

“Oh, my goodness! Did everyone survive?”

He nodded grimly. “Again, it was a miracle. He went into rehab after that and it saved his life.” Looking back, he still remembered how he warred with rage and relief at the time. Dylan was lucky that things went the way they did, but part of Mick still felt a wave of guilt that he hadn’t stepped in and done something sooner.

“It must be hard,” she commented, staring out at the water.

“What?”

“All the responsibility you take on. Most people have a hard time just dealing with their own lives and keeping themselves in check. You do it for a whole list of people.” Turning her head, she looked at him. “It’s got to be emotionally draining.”

They moved to lean on the railings. “You know, while it’s going on, I barely notice it. I just sort of accept that it’s my responsibility. It wasn’t until lately that I realized just how tired I was. Burned out. For so many years, I was just focused on moving forward and keeping things in motion that I didn’t have time to think about myself.”

“You’re lucky. I spent a lot of years with nothing but myself to focus on. Going to college at sixteen wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. I was too young and too hyper-focused on my studies to really relate to any of my roommates or any of the students. I spent a lot of time by myself and I was miserable.”

Damn. Just thinking about it ate him up inside.

“So many times I wanted to beg my parents to come and take me home, but then I realized there was nothing there for me either.” She shrugged. “It just made me study harder and why I ended up getting my degree early.”

Reaching over, he took one of her hands in his. “I’m sorry.”

With a sad smile, she asked, “For what?”

“I feel responsible. You even said that to me not that long ago. You said...”

“Mick, please,” she interrupted. “I know what I said, but that’s on me. Not you. Back then, you never made any promises, so anything I was feeling

was completely my own doing. I never meant for you to take any responsibility for it.”

“Still, I can’t help but wonder...”

“Don’t. Please. What good will thinking like that do? We can’t go back and we can’t keep focusing on what might have been.” Pausing, she stared out at the water again. “I think we’ve both done some great things with our lives and we shouldn’t minimize our accomplishments because it meant we missed out on some other things.”

“Maybe.”

“And...for all we know, if things had been different...it doesn’t necessarily mean that it would have been right for the two of us. I think back then, we would have ended up stifling one another.”

Hadn’t he once thought the same thing?

Looking over at her, he sighed. “I don’t know how to stop thinking about the past, Sienna. It’s there. It’s part of who we are.”

“And I get that. I really do. I’m just saying that maybe we don’t...overthink about it. Does that make sense?”

He nodded, but he still wasn’t sure he was going to be able to do it.

“Let’s change the subject!” Straightening a bit, Sienna smiled brightly at him. “What’s next on our stop today?”

“Hmm...I believe we were going to ride the cable cars through the city and see where the mood takes us.”

“Oh, that’s right. You didn’t trust any of those guided tours I looked up.” She gave him a mock pout. “I suppose you could have done something better, right?”

“I wouldn’t say better, but...I’m not a huge fan of letting some guide tell me what I should want to see. Alcatraz was really going to take up the most time, that’s why I booked us on the early tour. Now we have the rest of the day to run around the city.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“I think we should go to Fisherman’s Wharf when we get off the ferry and go find something for lunch. Then you can decide where you want to go from there.”

“That sounds like a plan.” Pulling out her phone, she added, “I may start looking up some places to eat now. We’re almost back, but I’m starving.”

“That’s because you didn’t want to get up and have breakfast this morning.” Moving in close and wrapping his arm around her, he playfully nuzzled her neck.

“I don’t recall you complaining...”

“Oh, I’m not, but I at least managed to eat a bagel and some fruit. You just...”

Her soft gasp cut him off.

“What? What’s the matter?”

Her hand shook as she covered her mouth. Mick took the phone from her and read the message.

Eleanor: Well, this sucks

Eleanor: The cancer has spread and spread fast. The doctors have told me there isn’t anything more they can do except make me comfortable

Eleanor: I was already against all the poking and prodding they'd been doing, but there was a small part of me that thought something was going to work to slow this stuff down

Eleanor: You know how much I hate being wrong

Eleanor: Just so you know, I'm comfortable and handling the news the best I can

Eleanor: One of the nurses has been printing out some of the photos you've sent and they're all up on the wall here in my room. They make me smile.

Eleanor: Keep sending them, Sienna. I feel like I'm living my last days vicariously through you

Shit.

Gently, he pulled her into his embrace and held her while she cried. He wasn't sure there was anything he could say to make her feel better and thought it was probably best to let her express how she was feeling and take it from there.

Only...he couldn't.

"Would you like to go back to the hotel? We can order room service and you can call Eleanor and..."

But she shook her head. "No. She'd hate that and get mad at me if I cut our day of sightseeing short. Besides, I'm supposed to make sure I have some sourdough bread and tell her if it's worth all the hype."

Chuckling softly, Mick wished he could meet this woman.

"What about us taking a bit of a detour?" he suggested.

"What do you mean?"

“Maybe we should skip Napa and fly back to North Carolina so you can spend some time with her.”

If anything, she started crying harder.

The ferry docked and people were walking past them, and he wasn't sure what to do.

“Sienna, I... um...”

She seemed to pull herself together—wiping at her tears—before she looked at him again. “First, we need to get off the boat. We'll talk more about this over lunch.”

For the first time in his life, he felt completely helpless. He was used to being the one people turned to when they needed help or in an emergency; he was the guy who solved problems and made everything better. But to just stand by and watch this incredibly strong woman crumble like this was almost more than he could bear.

“Would you mind if we just called for an Uber or something?” she asked. “We can maybe ride the cable cars after lunch.”

“Of course.” He picked a random location on Fisherman's Wharf to get dropped off and arranged for the ride.

Five minutes later, they rode in silence, and he felt a little silly when they arrived at their destination in only three minutes.

Sienna must have felt the same way because she laughed softly. “I guess we could have walked, huh?”

“Sure, but...this was easier.” Thanking the driver, they climbed from the car and walked over to the first restaurant they saw and waited for a table. It didn't take long and as soon as they were seated, Mick could tell that she still

wasn't herself. They were scanning the menus when he asked her what she was going to order.

"Um...why don't you order for us?" she said sadly, putting the menu down. "It's like I'm looking at it, but nothing is even registering."

He took a few minutes to look at all the options and then waved their server over. "We'd like to start with the baked tomato bruschetta," he began. "Then we'd like to split an order of the clam chowder in the sourdough bread bowl."

"Excellent choice," their server said. "Would you like to order your entrees now, or wait?"

"Um...we'll order them now, but please don't put the order in until after the clam chowder."

"Sounds good."

"Excellent. I will have the halibut and the lady will have the seared scallop and crab risotto." Handing off their menus, he added, "I'd like a glass of your Sauvignon Blanc and she'll take a glass of Chardonnay. Thanks."

Once they were alone again, Mick reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Talk to me, Sienna."

She let out a long breath while studying their hands and when she looked up at him, he saw the sadness there.

"I knew this was coming," she said quietly. "But I guess I was hoping for a miracle too."

"Of course you were. That's only natural."

"The scientist in me, however, should know better. Eleanor had accepted what was happening and had made her peace with it, and I would never allow

her to see how upset I am right now.” Another sigh. “So...I think I need to do as she asked and...keep with our plans and take lots of pictures. If that’s something that is making her smile, then that’s what I’m going to do.” She let out a mirthless laugh. “If I were sitting there with her, it wouldn’t have the same effect. If my silly little texts and pictures are something she looks forward to, then...I need to keep going.”

He nodded. “You’re a good friend, and I think you’re stronger than you realize. But if it gets to be too much and you want to go back to the room or just...I don’t know...hit something...then that’s what we’ll do.”

This time her laugh was a little lighter. “Hit something? Why would I hit something?”

“I’ve heard it’s a great stress reliever,” he said with a laugh of his own.

“You’ve heard, huh?”

Nodding again, he said, “Yup.”

“Michael Tyler, you are such a liar!” Now her laughter was full blown. “I have a feeling you’ve hit your share of things—and not always to relieve stress.”

“Okay, okay, okay...you got me. I’ve been known to not only hit the bag at the gym from time to time, but...I’ve also allowed myself to be on the receiving end of a handful of punches to help a friend.”

Leaning back in her chair, she eyed him shrewdly. “You let someone punch you so they’d feel better?”

“True story.”

“This I’ve got to hear...”

Mimicking her pose, he crossed his arms and shared his story. “About five years ago, Julian was at a pretty low point in his life. He had a very public breakdown in the form of calling off his wedding and had taken off for three months to find himself. When he got back, he met Charlotte. I knew right away that she was the best thing to ever happen to him, but I knew he was going to screw it up out of some misplaced sense of...I don’t know...punishment to himself. Anyway, he did screw it up and broke up with her, but I was doing some work with her. She was doing a lot of great stuff for the homeless and I got involved.”

“Impressive.”

He shrugged. “Not really. It was all Charlotte. Anyway, I went over to Julian’s place—which is now my place.” Then he paused and thought about that. “Actually, it was always my place, but I let him live there for a few months. Either way, I went over there one day and he was being so damn stoic—like he didn’t give a damn that she was gone and all that crap. So I poked the bear a little. I needed him to snap out of his damn funk and start living again. And ended up on the receiving end of a major ass-kicking. I don’t think I’ve ever been afraid of getting hurt the way I was that day. He broke one of my ribs, but I never told him.”

“Holy crap! Why? Why would you do that to yourself? And what kind of friend breaks another friend’s rib? I actually liked Julian, but now...”

Mick held up a hand to stop her. “I knew exactly what I was doing, Sienna. It was a little unorthodox, but it had the desired results.”

She looked at him like he was crazy and was definitely going to argue some more about it, but fortunately, their bruschetta arrived, along with their wine.

Saved by the food...

“Why don’t you let me get a picture of you with the bread bowl?” he suggested. “Then you can send it to Eleanor.”

“Oh, my face is probably a mess from crying...”

“So? You’re beautiful, Sienna.”

The look she gave him told him she didn’t believe it.

“Fine. Go run to the ladies' room and see for yourself.”

“But...the food...?”

“Will still be here. I promise not to start without you.”

She glanced at the table and then at him. “Two minutes. Three, tops!” And then she was gone.

Mick pulled out his phone and shot a quick text to Lynn.

Mick: I need you to find the fastest way to ship to Sourdough bread from San Francisco to Durham, North Carolina

Lynn: Anywhere in particular in Durham or just the city?

Mick: Ha, ha. You’re hysterical

Mick: I’ll get you an address in a few minutes, but let me know what you can find

Lynn: You got it!

Mick: Thanks

When he looked up, Sienna was walking toward him and looking a lot more relaxed. As soon as she was seated, she pulled the bread bowl toward her before handing him her phone.

“Good thing I don’t wear a lot of makeup,” she said with a small laugh.

“You don’t need it. I told you, you’re beautiful.” Holding up the phone, he took several pictures of her with the soup and then the bruschetta. Once he gave her the phone back, he asked, “So what hospital is Eleanor in? Or is she getting care at home?”

“She’s at Duke. It’s where we both work and she knows a lot of the doctors there. She sold her house as soon as she got the news, so she’ll spend the rest of her time...well...you know.”

He nodded.

“Listen, you can tell me to mind my own business, but...what would you think of sending her a loaf of the sourdough so she can taste it for herself?”

The spoon was halfway to her lips when she paused and frowned. “It would be stale by the time it got there, wouldn’t it?”

“Not the way I do it.” With a wink, he picked up a piece of the bruschetta. “I’ve got Lynn working on it, and I’m hoping we can get it there the same day.”

“Mick...you don’t have to...”

“A picture is great, Sienna. Like she said, she’s living vicariously through you. How much better would it be if she could actually experience even a tiny bit of it herself?”

Her shoulders sagged. “I know she’d love it. I wish I could send her more to make her feel like she was with me.”

“Like what?”

“Sand from the beach in Malibu, the bread, maybe a bottle of wine from when we get to Napa tomorrow...”

“Pfft...easy. Trust me. I’ve had to ship a lot more bizarre stuff. I think we can make this happen. Maybe a gift a day for the next few days. What do you think?”

Her smile was positively brilliant.

“I think you are the most amazing man in the whole wide world and I don’t know what I did to deserve you.”

For the first time in a long time, Mick was speechless. He could have said something trite, but...he didn’t want to ruin the moment.

Instead, he went for something light that would completely change the subject.

“I’ll trade you a piece of bruschetta for a taste of the soup!”

“You’re on!”

Her feet were killing her, she was ridiculously full, and it was amazing how Mick had turned the day around for her.

After her mini breakdown on the ferry, he genuinely went out of his way to not only cheer her up, but Eleanor too. Lynn had found a service that was going to deliver the bread to her tomorrow afternoon, and Sienna still couldn’t quite wrap her mind around it. She wanted to argue about the cost, but for the first time on this trip, she was extremely grateful that he could do something so extravagant and that it was for someone other than her.

When they got back to the suite, all she wanted to do was take her shoes off and soak in that giant tub again.

And not in a sexy way.

Which is what she told Mick, and he immediately went and started the water for her. She noticed that he looked just as tired as she did and it was times like this that she had to remind herself that they weren't kids anymore. Walking several miles a day when she normally stood at her desk in the lab were too wildly different things and her body was reminding her of that fact.

Loudly.

As soon as her bath was ready, she stripped down and climbed in. Mick softly knocked on the door a few minutes later and brought her a hot cup of tea.

"I thought you might enjoy that," he said softly before turning to leave.

"What about you?" she asked sleepily. "What are you doing right now?" He was still fully dressed and yet she could tell he was fighting to stay awake too.

"I made a cup for myself and I was going to get undressed and climb into bed and maybe watch a little TV or read."

"Mmm...both those options sound good. Any chance I can just sleep here in the tub? The bed feels too far away."

Chuckling, he bent over and kissed the top of her head. "I'll come back and check on you in fifteen minutes to make sure you're still awake."

"Or..."

"Or...?"

"You could stay and talk to me to make sure I don't fall asleep."

"Sienna," he said with another laugh. "We've been talking for almost ten straight days."

“We have a lot of time to make up for.” She slid a little further down in the water and moaned with pleasure. “You know, if you just would have called once in a while to let me know how you were, maybe we wouldn’t have so much to talk about.”

In an instant, he looked devastated.

“Are you alright?”

Slowly, he sat on the edge of the tub, but he wouldn’t look at her.

“Mick?”

“I did call you,” he said quietly. “Once. But...I hung up.”

Sienna pushed herself to a more upright position. “You did?”

He nodded.

“When?”

“I had been in L.A. for almost two years. It was the night I signed my first band. Shaughnessy. It was almost three in the morning and I was so damn excited because up until that point, I wasn’t getting anywhere. So there I was on the precipice of something big and I had no one to share it with.”

Then he finally looked at her.

“But I wanted to share it with you.”

“Then why didn’t you? Why would you call and then hang up?”

“I realized how wrong it was to open that door when there was no hope for us at that time. I knew you were upset that I had left and it seemed wrong for me to call and disrupt your life, so...I didn’t.”

So many emotions swirled around in her head, but the main one was anger.

Closely followed by disappointment.

“You know something, I get that you are very good at what you do and I know that earlier we said we were going to stop focusing so much on the past. But here’s the thing, I’m not one of your clients and you had no right to make that kind of decision about what was right or wrong for me. Actually, I find it insulting. I’m an intelligent woman and even at eighteen, I was far more mature than most of my peers. And you knew that. You always knew that. But instead of taking a risk, you just...” With a huff of annoyance, she waved him off. “Never mind. Just...go and read or something. I’d like to be alone.”

And much to her surprise, he didn’t argue or to change her mind. With a slight nod, he walked out of the bathroom, quietly closing the door behind him.

How dare he! She thought. If he had called and talked to her—even just that one time...

Then what, genius? What would have changed?

Nothing, she realized.

Absolutely nothing.

“Well, shit...”

Yeah, she’d just had a little hissy fit and for what?

Probably because she was exhausted and a little emotional today and...she needed to hit something. Instead of doing that literally, she did it with her words, and he didn’t deserve that.

There was no way she could relax in the tub any longer. Carefully, she stood and reached for a heated towel before bending over to let the water

drain. She dried off and slipped her robe on before going into the bedroom. Mick was lying in bed reading something on his tablet. Walking over, she stood beside him and waited until he looked up at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to apologize for, Sienna. I never should have...”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything,” she quickly but quietly interrupted. “You made the right decision. I’m just out of sorts and...I took it out on you. So, again, I’m sorry.”

All he did was nod.

Walking over to the dresser, she pulled out one of her nighties and slid it on. It was the first time she was wearing anything to bed since that first night she went home with him. But she didn’t want them to have sex tonight. They had touched on some real and serious issues today and what they had was about more than just fucking just because they could or because they were trying to make up for lost time.

Tonight, she wanted to be like a normal couple who crawled into bed together and read or watched TV. And be the types who are okay sleeping in each other’s arms and finding a contentment in just that.

So as she climbed into bed, she reached for her own tablet that was on the bedside table, and quietly pulled up something mindless to read. Neither said a word for almost an hour, but then Mick put his tablet aside and shut off the lamp on his side of the bed. Yawning, Sienna soon did the same.

They both gravitated toward one another in the middle of the bed—a tangling of limbs and a couple of soft sighs.

And it was the best night’s sleep she’d had in years.

They arrived at Hugh Shaughnessy's Napa Valley resort at lunchtime, and Sienna was instantly in love. Everything was so peaceful and picturesque that she felt all the lingering tension from yesterday simply easing away.

"This is gorgeous!"

Mick came around the car to stand by her side. "Yeah, Hugh does a fabulous job with his resorts."

"How many does he have?"

"I want to say...twelve? Maybe?" He shrugged. "I've stayed at most of them, but this one is my favorite."

"Tell me why," she said as they walked hand-in-hand toward the entrance.

"Because this is tucked far away from the city and you can come out here and actually hear yourself think. It's very relaxing and tranquil and a great place to unwind."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Great minds," he said before kissing her cheek.

"Mick Tyler!" someone called out and they both turned.

"Hugh! I had no idea you'd be here!" Mick said, walking over and shaking his hand. "Sienna Ashley, this is Hugh Shaughnessy. Hugh, this is Sienna."

"It's nice to meet you," she said.

"Same. Riley mentioned seeing the two of you in Vegas and when I told him we had you down for a suite here for the night, he mentioned how you were on this two-week trip." He smiled broadly and Sienna studied him to see if she could detect any resemblance to Riley, but there wasn't one. Hugh

was definitely more polished and reserved, whereas Riley had an edgier look and a bigger personality. Siblings were always fascinating to observe.

“We’ve been having a great time,” Mick was saying. “And since we were in San Francisco, I knew we needed to come here because you’ve got the best place in the entire valley.”

“Well, I like to think so!” Hugh joked. “Why don’t you get checked in and then join me for lunch? Say...an hour?”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Hugh!”

Check in was incredibly efficient and a bellhop took them by golf cart to their room, which was on the far end of the resort with a magnificent view of the vineyard. It wasn’t quite as extensive as she was expecting and commented on it to Mick.

“Land out here comes at a premium,” he explained. “And Hugh lucked out with this property about fifteen years ago. The resort was already here, but in bad shape. It came with a small vineyard, but he’s worked his ass off to renovate everything and bring in people who know how to tend to the grapes. This is smaller than a lot of the resorts in the area, but I think that’s what makes it charming.”

“Oh, there is no doubt. I guess when I think about places like this, I imagined hundreds of acres.” Then she laughed. “And I have no idea why. It not something that’s ever been on my radar before.”

Their suite was magnificent—just as she expected—and when she stepped out onto their private balcony, Sienna was simply transfixed by the view. “Wow.”

Mick came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I know. Hugh always gives me this room and the view captivates me every single

time.”

“I can see why.”

They stayed like that for several minutes, and Sienna swore she would never tire of the view. It made her realize just how little of nature she saw on a daily basis. Back in Durham, her townhouse had a view of a city street in the front and other townhomes behind her. And her office was even worse. The lab had no windows, and the tiny space she used as an office had a small one that offered a view of the parking lot. She’d never been one to think about scenic views, but she had a feeling it was going to weigh heavily on her mind when she went home.

“I hope you don’t mind that I accepted Hugh’s lunch invitation,” Mick said softly. “If you’d rather it just be the two of us...”

Glancing at him over her shoulder, she reassured him it was fine. “I find the Shaughnessy family to be fascinating. The little that Riley and Savannah talked about made me wish I could observe more of their family dynamic.”

“Really? Why?”

“I come from a small family. Jason’s my only sibling and we pretty much always got along. I didn’t know anyone who came from a family with six kids. I can only imagine what the balance must have been like to have five boys and then, ten years later, have a little girl. Their poor parents!” She laughed. “It must have been wild at times.”

“Well...Hugh’s mom passed away when Darcy was a baby, so...yeah. They definitely struggled.”

Turning in his arms, she felt incredibly sad—which made no sense since she really didn’t know the Shaughnessy family—but...her heart actually ached.

“It’s funny,” he said solemnly. “You and I grew up relatively unscathed. I didn’t realize that until I was well into adulthood and started working with musicians. You wouldn’t believe some of the things people had to overcome. Just as an example, I just told you about Riley’s family. But Matt’s? His mother left when he was just a kid, and his father was an alcoholic who was horrifically abusive to him. Dylan started using drugs when he was fourteen. And that’s just one band. When I was growing up, I thought I had it bad because my father wanted me to become an electrician.” He shook his head with a mirthless laugh. “Goes to show what I know, huh?”

“Just because it wasn’t horrific doesn’t make it any less valid,” she reasoned. “Although, I felt like Jason and I had a rather idyllic childhood, but when I started college and listened to how other people grew up, I felt a little cheated.”

He frowned. “In what way?”

Moving out of his embrace, Sienna sat down on the outdoor sofa. “Okay, but you have to promise not to laugh.”

Sitting beside her, Mick nodded.

“Well...because I was who I was—meaning, a total nerdy brainiac—I never went to camps that were just for fun. They were always science camps or math camps or some other educational thing. When we went on vacations, they were always more learning experience rather than for enjoyment. I think Jason resented it a bit, but he was too nice to ever say anything.” With a sigh, her head lolled back against the cushions. “Everything we’ve done for the last week is completely foreign to me because we never vacationed that way.” Looking over at him, she gave him a weak smile. “Weird, right?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it weird,” he said, reaching out and gently combing her hair away from her face. “There are people who never went on vacations or to camp at all, so...who’s to say?”

“I hate that your friends went through so much.”

Nodding, he replied, “And I hate that you have a friend struggling hard right now.”

That reminded her...

“Do you think the bread got there yet?” she asked as she sat up.

“It was guaranteed by five pm eastern time, so...” Glancing at his watch, he shook his head. “It’s just a little before three there, so I’m sure we’ll be hearing from her when it arrives.”

“I can’t believe you sent the clam chowder too.” Chuckling, Sienna stood back up. “You paid someone to fly a loaf of bread and a pint of soup across the country!”

With a shrug, he stood too. “And I told you it was more than worth it.”

“She’s going to be so surprised, and I hope it gets there before she eats dinner. I want her to enjoy it.”

“Oh, she will. I’m sure of it. Even if she doesn’t eat it tonight, she won’t be able to resist it tomorrow.” Looking out at the vineyard, he let out a long breath. “C’mon. Let’s freshen up and go meet Hugh.”

They walked back into their room and Sienna—as usual—was blown away by it. “You know, I feel like I’ve gotten to learn a lot about you and your lifestyle over the last ten days. Plus, I’ve had the privilege of meeting some of your friends. It makes me wish that I had chosen some places to visit closer to my neck of the woods so you can see what my life is like.” Then she

instantly groaned. “You know what? Scratch that. You don’t need to see that. It’s too depressing.”

The look of shock on his face was almost comical.

“What? What did I say?”

“Why would you say that about your life?”

“Um...because it’s true? Because I don’t socialize hardly at all and most of my friends are really just colleagues that I see at work and my closest friend is in the hospital on hospice. So...yeah. Depressing.”

He took a step toward her. “Sienna, I didn’t mean for any of this to make you feel bad about your life. I just thought...”

She was still feeling oddly emotional and knew it wouldn’t take much to make her cry again. “Look, no more talking about this, okay? This trip has been wonderful. All of it. Meeting all these people has been beyond refreshing, and I can’t wait to have lunch with Hugh and hear more about his family.”

Laughing, Mick walked toward the bathroom to wash his hands. “I don’t know if there’s enough time in the day to get caught up on all of them.”

“Only one way to find out!”

Twenty minutes later, they were seated in the hotel restaurant and being told that Hugh had taken care of the menu for them. Sienna was mildly uncomfortable because this man didn’t know anything about her likes or dislikes, but she decided to do her best to go with the flow.

“So we saw your brother a few days ago and it felt like all we did was talk,” Mick was saying, “but he really only caught us up on what him and Savannah were up to. How’s the rest of the family?”

Leaning back in his chair, Hugh grinned, and that's where Sienna noticed the family resemblance. It wasn't strong, but it was there.

"Okay, um...where should I even begin?" he said with amusement. "Aidan and Zoe are doing great. They've got three kids now—Lily, Caroline, and Zander. My nephew is definitely the hellraiser of the group and he loves trying to do anything his big sisters are doing."

"And how old is he now?" Mick asked.

"Three." He chuckled. "I love watching Aidan try to keep up with him." Then he looked at Sienna. "My older brother is known for being a little uptight, so we're all getting a kick out of seeing him try to rein in a wild toddler."

Laughing softly, she nodded.

"Uh...Quinn and Anna just had baby number four," he went on. "And I'm beginning to fear Quinn's joke about wanting his own baseball team wasn't really a joke!"

"Holy cow! Poor Anna!" Mick laughed.

"Nah, she seems just as happy to keep adding to their family, so...more power to them."

"And Owen and Brooke?" Mick prompted.

"Two sets of twins—the first were two girls, the second was a boy and a girl—and then they just had a baby girl three months ago. I swear to you, I get tired just thinking about it."

"Two sets of twins?" Sienna asked. "That's incredible!"

"Well, Owen and Riley are fraternal twins, so they sort of run in the family," Hugh explained. "But it's highly unlikely to have two sets by the

same parents like that. Owen's a genius—and I'm not just saying that. He's an astrophysicist and before he met Brooke, he was practically afraid of his own shadow. She really drew him out of his shell and I swear, it all just agrees with him. I love seeing the transformation."

"Wow...I can imagine," she said.

"Darcy and Ben have two kids now—two little boys. They're still out in Washington and we really only get to see them once or twice a year, but they're incredibly happy. Ben's doing some wood sculpting for a big resort up there and it's keeping him very busy."

"Nice," Mick said. "I remember the first time I saw his work and was blown away to know how he does it all by hand!"

"Yeah, he's beyond talented," Hugh agreed. "Bobby and Teagan are doing well too. They've got three kids now and Bobby's back on the police force—actively on the police force—again."

"And Teagan's okay with that?" Mick asked.

Nodding, Hugh replied, "I think since Bobby sort of eased his way back onto active duty, she had time to get used to it." He looked at Sienna. "Bobby is Anna's brother, and Teagan is my cousin. Her fiancé was killed over in Afghanistan when she was pregnant with their son. She moved to North Carolina and met Bobby—who is a cop—and she had no interest in dating someone with a dangerous job ever again."

"I can't say I blame her," she said. "But she must love Bobby a lot to take that leap of faith."

"She does. And to be honest, Bobby's one of the best guys I've ever known and if it had been that big of an issue, I think he would have quit the force for her."

All she could do was nod because she couldn't imagine making that big of a sacrifice for someone.

Mick hadn't made it for her all those years ago and she had no idea if it would be an issue now. Or if when their vacation was over, if their careers were going to be a deciding factor on whether they continued their relationship.

"And what about you and Aubrey?" Mick asked, interrupting her thoughts.

His smile spoke volumes, she thought. Hugh Shaughnessy was a man in love.

"We're great," he said. "I'm taking the red-eye home tonight because I can't wait to get back to her and the kids." Pausing, he took a sip of his water. "Connor's eight and he plays little league, and Devin is four and is the most easygoing child I've ever encountered. Aubrey and I say all the time that we're incredibly blessed. I love those two more than I ever thought possible." Then he grinned. "Blessed, indeed."

"And your dad? He's doing well?"

Hugh chuckled. "He's fully retired and he and Martha bought an RV like Savannah's folks have and the two of them have taken to driving around the country. We never know when they're going to show up, but they're having a great time. She's got Zoe running the decorating firm and..." He shook his head. "Let's just say that life is never boring and leave it at that. So what about the two of you? What comes next?"

Sienna smiled over at Mick and let him talk about their itinerary. Right now, her mind was still spinning thinking about everything Hugh had just shared.

Such a large family, and they were still growing.

And for some reason, that made her incredibly sad again. Not for them—she thought it was wonderful how happy they all seemed—but for herself. She was never going to have that. A houseful of kids who were going to have a dozen cousins to play with. Her entire life had been spent in the pursuit of science and research and education, and while that was a wonderful thing, she was just now truly realizing the cost.

Even if she and Mick found a way to make this relationship last beyond their allotted two weeks, it was too late for so many things.

Kids.

Grandkids.

Swallowing hard, she fought off a wave of nausea at the thought of it because she was suddenly envious of people she didn't even know. People she was only hearing about through Hugh.

And the millions of people she knew absolutely nothing about, except that they had found a way to have balance in their lives.

At least, in her mind they did.

Mick and Hugh were laughing about something and Sienna forced herself to smile—all the while wondering how a woman who was seemingly so smart could have made so many wrong choices. It was like she didn't even know herself.

But what she did know was that the life she was leading didn't make her happy.

I want it all.

It was just a matter of figuring out how to make that happen.

Fight

The room was still bathed in darkness when Mick felt Sienna move over him.

He was still mostly asleep, but he felt her body press against him. She was all warm, smooth skin as she kissed her way across his chest and then lower. Lazily, he reached up and anchored a hand in her hair and simply held on.

Eleven days.

They were eleven days into their trip and were leaving Napa in a matter of hours. They had a flight later on this morning, taking them to Anaheim. They'd had more fun than he thought possible, and it was crazy how much he was enjoying playing tourist, but he was enjoying their time alone even more.

It had been hell to keep from talking to her about the future, but he didn't want to put that kind of pressure on her. More than anything, Mick wanted her to have her full two weeks to relax and enjoy herself.

Sure, they'd skirted around the issue, but patience wasn't his strong suit and he was desperate for some answers.

“Oh, God, Sienna,” he hissed softly. “That’s so good...” Her mouth was magic, her touch was exquisite, and if he had his way, they’d wake each other up this way every damn day for the rest of their lives.

Soon...

She knew exactly how to touch him—exactly what to do to make him lose control. In the blink of an eye, he declared that playtime was over and had Sienna pulled up and under him. Her startled gasp was her only reaction before she wrapped those silky limbs around him, pulling him close.

“I thought we were sleeping in a little this morning,” he growled before leaning down and teasing her nipple.

Gasping again, she raked her hands through his hair. “I woke up, and you were so warm and hard, all at the same time... yes, right there!” She let out a low moan. “I couldn’t help myself. Why would I sleep when we could be doing this?”

It was hard to argue with that logic.

“Because we have tickets to Disneyland for later today. How are you going to run around and ride all the rides when I’ve exhausted you?”

Her laugh was low and sexy and hell. “There’s only one ride I’m interested in right now,” she told him as she expertly maneuvered them to change positions. She looked like a glorious, sexy vixen as she straightened above him.

His hands smoothed up over her stomach and up to cup her breasts. “So beautiful,” he murmured. “So damn beautiful.”

She hummed and moved against him in the most delicious way. He loved how she took what she wanted and was damn thrilled that she wanted him.

Soon, he didn't care about their plans for the rest of the day. His focus was on the here and now and what she was doing to him. It was the greatest pleasure; passion like he'd never known, and the more they moved together—the more they climbed that precipice together—the more he wanted.

Needed.

His hands grabbed her hips and held on. It was too good. Too much. She was everything. *His* everything. And before he could stop himself, he said the words he vowed to hold in for a little longer.

“Love you, Sienna,” he panted. “I love you.”

The flight to Anaheim was only ninety minutes, and he was glad they had chartered it because apparently there had been some major delays with the commercial flights.

Eleanor had texted Sienna this morning with a bunch of pictures of her own showing how delighted she was with the surprise they'd sent her. Sienna had cried a little because she never would have thought of doing something like that on her own, and he'd had to reassure her that most people didn't think like that. It was engrained in him because of his job; he'd had to cater to the whims of the rich and famous and sometimes he learned a little something that he could use for himself.

After she had relaxed a bit, he still felt like something was off. He couldn't imagine that she was still upset over some bread sent to a friend, but whenever he asked her if she was okay, she would smile and assure him she was.

But the smile never quite reached her eyes.

Yeah, he was observant too, and he could tell when something was bothering her.

Had always been able to tell.

But they were heading off for their last big stop on this trip and for now he was simply going to attribute...whatever it was that was going on...as Sienna just being tired. After all, they hadn't gotten a whole lot of sleep last night and maybe all this travel was catching up with her too. Mick was used to being on the go like this; hell, it was hard on him when there weren't any tours going on and he had to stay in one place for more than a week.

Feeling better about figuring things out, he reached over and held her hand.

"I have a car picking us up when we land, and Lynn has made arrangements to have my car dropped off at the hotel so we can drive ourselves home tomorrow night."

She nodded.

O-kay...

"Do you think Eleanor will want anything from Disneyland?" he asked. "I realize I don't know much about her, but she doesn't strike me as a person who'd want a pair of mouse ears or a t-shirt."

That made her chuckle. "Normally I'd have to agree, but I think for the sake of keeping things light and cheery, we should definitely buy something like that for me to take home to her."

Home.

Her home, not his.

Dammit.

She hadn't mentioned anything about her travel plans once their trip was over, but he had a feeling she was going to leave on day fourteen because that was the original plan. He wasn't stupid; he knew she had a job to get back to. It was just...he wished she didn't.

Or, at the very least, a job that she could work remotely so she wouldn't have to leave at all.

"Hugh took two bottles of wine with him last night and I have someone meeting him at the airport in Wilmington to take to the hospital."

Turning her head, she frowned. "What? When did that happen? And...how did you even find someone to run that errand? He's landing at like five in the morning."

"Money's a great motivator."

With a groan, she pulled her hand away.

"What? What did I do now?"

This time when she looked at him, she looked thoroughly annoyed. "I want you to stop throwing money around like that! It's ridiculous! I appreciate you wanting to do something nice for my friend, but...I can do things for her that are just as meaningful, you know! It's not up to you to do all this stuff!"

Pulling back slightly, he took a moment to collect his thoughts. "I didn't think it was a big deal, Sienna. Hugh and I were talking and he mentioned that he has a guy on his staff of his North Carolina coastal resort who goes to Raleigh for him a lot." He shrugged. "They deal with a wine distributor there a lot and sometimes Hugh doesn't like to take the trip. It's only two hours away, but when he's back home, he prefers to stay close by. So when I told him about the bread and the soup, and how I figured we'd ship some wine, he

offered to do it. Then I added a little tip for his employee to pay him for his time. It's not a big deal."

"Maybe not to you, but to me it is. I don't...I don't live in this world and your wealth is...it's annoying sometimes. You think things and then you can make them happen. Well, it's not like that for everyone and I hate that you're being a more considerate friend to Eleanor than I am!"

Ah...now they were getting someplace.

"That's where you're wrong, Sienna," he said carefully. "I'm actually being extremely inconsiderate to your friend."

She looked at him in confusion.

"I've selfishly kept you here with me for almost two weeks when I know she probably would have appreciated having you there with her. Our trip might have provided her with some entertainment and a distraction, but...sending her a few things is actually easing my guilt. So...I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was upsetting you like this."

Her head fell back against the seat. "I swear everything's upsetting me lately. It's not just you."

That was new information...

"Sienna, if something's bothering you..."

He never got to finish because their flight attendant came to tell them they were preparing to land. Mick knew they'd be on the ground in a matter of minutes and was smart enough to know that the moment was gone. Now all he needed to do was distract her with a promise of a fun day. And who knows? Maybe it would be the perfect way to turn her mood around.

"So? Are you ready to be a kid again?" he asked with a big smile.

“Again?” she repeated with a laugh. “I don’t think I was ever truly one.”

“I hate that I have to agree but...everyone’s a big kid when they go to Disneyland. So maybe I should have asked if you’re ready to finally be a kid?”

Fortunately, she smiled. “That definitely seems to fit better. And the answer is yes. I’m glad we thought to wear our comfortable clothes and sneakers rather than having to stop at the hotel. I have a feeling once I see the giant Disneyland sign, I’m going to be too excited and want to run toward Sleeping Beauty’s castle.”

“And I promise I’ll run right beside you.” Just the thought of it made his entire body hurt. Until this trip, Mick swore he was in top physical shape. But he had a feeling he was going to need a vacation to recover from this vacation and multiple deep tissue massages to make him feel normal again.

He thought about booking them a couple’s massage for when they got back to his place, but...he’d put that on the back burner as a possibility. For all he knew, she wasn’t feeling nearly as old as he was.

Right now, she was practically bouncing in her seat.

“Oh, and just so you know,” she said with just a hint of playfulness, “My goal today is to get my picture with Mickey and Minnie.” Then she giggled. “Actually, I’d love to get my picture with all the characters, but those are at the top of my list.”

“Duly noted. I believe there’s some sort of pass we can buy where they upload all of your pictures and then you can look at them when you get home and purchase them online. I can look for it on my phone...”

“You don’t have to do that. I think it’s okay to go into this without a plan.”

He didn't fully agree, but he'd let her call the shots on this one.

They were on the ground ten minutes later and gathering their things. When Sienna stood up, she reached for him and gave him a fierce hug.

"Not that I'm complaining, but...what was that for?"

"That's to thank you for today. I already know that I'm going to love every minute of it, and I'm so grateful that you've indulged this silly side of me and helped me experience it all." Her expression grew serious. "I mean it, Michael. I've loved every stop on this trip and the time we've spent together. You're amazing."

"It was my pleasure, Sienna. Believe it or not, I needed this kind of getaway just as much as you."

"Somehow I doubt that, but..."

"It's true," he said gruffly. "And I've loved every stop we made and all the time we spent together too."

She looked at him expectantly and he honestly didn't know why, but the door to the plane opened and he could see their town car waiting on the tarmac. Hopefully when they got to their hotel room tonight, he could ask her what was on her mind. But for now, they had a theme park to conquer.

"Love you, Sienna. I love you."

He never said it again.

Not after they were done making love, not while they showered together, not on the flight to Anaheim, and not while they were standing at the start of Main Street U.S.A. and she was gushing about how magical of a moment it

was. It made her wonder if he'd meant to say it at all, or maybe he was just swept up in the moment.

Which would totally suck.

Hearing Mick say those words this morning had thrilled her, and she wanted to say them back, but she was in the throes of an orgasm and completely distracted. Hell, there was still a small part of her that wondered if she had heard him correctly or had she simply heard what she wanted to hear.

"Love you, Sienna. I love you."

No, she might have been having a mind-blowing orgasm, but she was an excellent listener and Mick had totally said those words to her. Not, "I love this" or "I love that", he had said, "I love you."

And then never said it again or even acknowledged that he said it at all.

And now here they were.

It was hard not to smile at the happiest place on earth, and if she pushed all thoughts of their sexy morning aside, she'd say that she was having a great time.

Even though they had barely gotten through the gates and hadn't ridden any rides.

All around them people were laughing and smiling and enjoying themselves, and there was so much to see and do that she didn't want to miss a thing. It was a bit like sensory overload—the music, the sights, the smells...she wanted to experience every little thing.

And maybe at some point, she could nudge Mick into saying those three little words again...

Taking his hand, Sienna pointed excitedly to a photographer. “Oh! Look! We have to get our picture taken, Mick! It would have the castle in the background and everything! I think it’s like a rule or a law that when you come to Disneyland, you have to get a picture standing in front of the castle.”

“A law?” he repeated with a laugh. “Somehow that doesn’t seem like a thing.”

“Are you already trying to be a party-poopers?”

“Me?” he cried. “I have yet to poop on any party for almost two weeks!”

“But you have pooped on parties, right?” she asked before bursting out laughing.

He nodded. “Oh, definitely. You can ask any of the acts that I manage. They’ll all tell you of at least a hundred different times I ruined a party or something for them by being a buzzkill.”

Stepping in front of him, she frowned. “But you’re not going to be like that today, are you?”

“Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, I think we should we get ears first and then get our pictures taken.”

Her eyes went wide, and even though she knew he was simply suggesting it because he knew she wanted the full Disney experience and he just seemed to know how to make everything better, she was completely on board. “Why didn’t I think of that? Come on!”

Fifteen minutes later, wearing matching Mickey ears, they posed for pictures. They were laughing, and it was completely silly, and she was loving every minute of it.

After walking through Sleeping Beauty's castle, they had decided that they were going to ride everything. Or at least try to. Sienna had no idea if she would enjoy riding roller coasters because she'd never been on one before, and Mick promised to hold her hand and if she hated the first one, they could skip all the others. But what she discovered was that she was actually a bit of an adrenaline junkie. After riding Space Mountain and The Matterhorn, she decided that if there was a thrill ride to be had, she wanted to ride it.

It was Mick who was looking a little green around the gills by the time they finished riding The Matterhorn.

So she took him on It's a Small World and joked how maybe that was more his speed.

"You have a bit of a mean streak, you know that, right?" he said with a pout. "And now this song is going to be stuck in my head all day."

"Oh, stop. It's fun! This ride was at the 1964 World's Fair! Don't you find that fascinating?"

"Not particularly."

"Spoilsport."

After that, they definitely hit a lot of the tamer rides—ones that were definitely kid-friendly—and Sienna enjoyed them just as much. Mick had been right when he asked if she was ready to be a kid because that's exactly how she felt and it was awesome.

But her favorite part of the entire experience was all the pictures they were getting. Besides the ones she took on her phone, they stopped at almost every Disney photographer and got their pictures taken, and every character

she saw, she posed with. Some of them she literally had no idea who they were, but she was determined to learn and then smile with them.

Her nieces and nephew were going to love seeing all her pictures when she got home.

“You know, I don’t think Jason and Bree have ever taken the kids here either. Or the one in Florida. I can guarantee you that once I show the kids all these pictures, they’re going to bug my brother to take them.” She grinned. “And I might have to tag along and act as their tour guide!”

“One day and you’re ready to be a tour guide?” he teased. “That’s a mighty bold statement.”

“Well...I wouldn’t get it perfect, but since I’ll have ridden everything, I can tell them what to expect. That counts, right?”

“Sure. Unless they go to the one in Florida. I don’t think they share all the same rides.”

“Then I’ll just have to ride all of those with them. You know, now that I love all kinds of rides, I can go on the things my brother might be too scared to.”

Chuckling, he took her hand and led her along the path to the Star Wars section. “Okay, I can’t say with great certainty that I’m not going to feel a little sick, but I happen to love all-things Star Wars, so I am riding all of these rides no matter what!”

Sienna, however, wasn’t familiar with the movies at all—other than knowing they existed—and decided it didn’t matter. She was just happy to find rides that Mick was excited about.

As the day wore on, they rode more rides, they ate junk food, and watched the fireworks. Sienna had stared in wide-eyed wonder because it was

the most magnificent fireworks display she had ever seen.

“That was amazing! I mean...the music, the fireworks, the display on the castle...I can’t believe there are people that are creative and talented enough to put such a show together! Don’t you think it was incredible?”

“It was definitely a good show,” he said before yawning broadly, and as much as she hated to admit it, she was exhausted too.

They had stayed until the park closed and then had to join the throngs of people exiting at the same time. Mick had gotten them a room at Disney's Grand Californian Hotel & Spa, so it didn’t take long to get to their room. The hotel was gorgeous and she really wanted to see more of it, but...it would have to wait until tomorrow. Now that they were close to their room, she found she was eager to kick off her sneakers and just sit and relax. Once they were through the door, Sienna collapsed on the bed with a happy sigh as her sneakers went flying.

“That was the best!” Rolling onto her side, she smiled up at him. “I think this was my favorite day of the entire trip!”

Laughing, he sat down on the bed beside her. “Seriously? After all the things we’ve seen and done? We’ve stayed at some of the most luxurious hotels in the country, eaten at world-famous restaurants, and landed in the Grand Canyon and drank champagne! And this was your favorite?”

Doing her best to appear serious, she tried to reason with him. “Um... did you not see me dance with Baloo? I mean... how does anything top that?”

Mick lay down beside her and combed his fingers through her hair. “I can’t believe a dancing bear beat me out.”

Reaching up, she captured his hand. “No. No one and certainly no bear—dancing or otherwise—holds a bigger piece of my heart than you,” she

whispered. “You’ve been nothing but selfless and gave me the perfect vacation with some of the best memories of my life.” Turning her head, she kissed his palm. “I’ve loved every minute.”

She must have used the word love a hundred times today, hoping to prompt him.

She *loved* the rides, she *loved* the food, she *loved* the weather, she *loved* all the fun they were having. But had he gotten the hint? No.

“What about you?” she asked. “What part of the day did you love the most?”

Ugh... I’m pathetic...

“This part right now, where I get to sit and relax,” he said with a laugh before rolling onto his back. “I realize we walked around Vegas, Hollywood, San Francisco, and Napa. But the kind of walking we did today was practically an Olympic sport!” After letting out a rather dramatic sigh, he said, “I’m seriously getting too old for this.”

“Oh, stop. We’re not old.”

“Maybe you’re not, but I am.”

“Please, I’m only three years younger than you. It’s practically the same thing.”

The sound he made sounded like a snort of derision. “Only now,” he grumbled. “Back before I left for L.A., three years was a big deal.” He looked over at her. “If you had been even a little older—eighteen—I would have taken you with me. No matter what plans you had for college or what everyone else thought. I would have begged you to take a chance and come with me.”

Sienna's heart kicked hard in her chest. "Really?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Really." His expression was sad but intense. "You have no idea how much I wanted you with me—to be there at my side while I made something of myself." His head shook as he closed his eyes. "It would have been selfish of me, because you had dreams of your own and things you wanted to accomplish." With a mirthless laugh, he added, "You probably would have hated it. I lived in a really crappy neighborhood for the first few years. My apartment was half the size of this room. It was filthy and had the worst smell, but...it was all I could afford at first. I invested in my wardrobe and looking the part of a music executive. No one knew how I lived, though. Most nights I'd go home and think of how it all would have been better if you were there."

When he looked up at her again, he looked tortured and, more than anything, she wanted to soothe that look away.

"Three years' difference and it robbed us of everything." His voice was so low and gruff that she barely heard him.

"It didn't," she assured him, moving closer and curling up against him. "Not really. There were things we had to do on our own. Had to. Because no matter how much we might try to romanticize everything, the fact is that we both had dreams and we might have been happy for a little while, eventually, we would have resented each other for all we gave up."

"Maybe." But he didn't sound convinced.

"And...if we're really being honest, I was the one who dropped the whole I love you thing right before you left. Because of our age difference, I think we both know how cautious we had to be about our feelings." She wanted to

remind him how he never said those words to her then, and then remind him how he said them this morning, but...she didn't.

“Still...I just wish...”

“We're here now,” she assured him.

His arms banded around her and seemed like he was grabbing her like a lifeline. “Are we?” he asked after a moment. “Because we've been living in the moment, Sienna. We talk about our past, we talk about the present and all the things we're doing, but neither of us talks about the future or what's going to happen at the end of our two weeks. Three more days. Then where will we be?”

Dammit. She had really hoped he'd be the one with the answer.

Hell, she had hoped that he would simply tell her he loved her and wanted her to stay.

When this whole trip started and he talked about how she was the missing piece of his life, she wanted to chalk it up to them being caught up in the moment. She knew he cared about her—knew he had strong feelings for her—but she still couldn't quite wrap her head around all of it. Emotional discussions or expressing her feelings weren't something she was good at. Normally, she was quiet and reserved and...really, Sienna had no idea if that was simply who she was or if it was how she ended up, thanks to her spending so much time focused on her education and career.

Right now, she wasn't sure how to handle such a deep and emotional conversation.

Swallowing hard, she asked, “Where do you want us to be?”

Oddly, he chuckled softly. “Answering a question with a question, princess?”

“Mick...”

“Look, I get it. I’ve respected the fact that you needed this time and you weren’t ready to hear how I felt, but it hasn’t changed anything for me. I knew what I wanted the moment I saw you at Carmine’s that night. And since that night, we’ve been living in our own little world and I don’t regret that, but you have to know that we are going to have to talk about this eventually. Sooner rather than later.”

“I know, I know...and there’s a part of me that feels like we should just do it, but...just like you admitted that you were scared the other night, I am too. I don’t want to say anything that’s going to make either of us uncomfortable for the rest of this trip.”

She realized how that sounded—and even if she hadn’t, the look on his face showed that he took her words as leading to something negative.

“There’s a lot for us to consider,” she said, hoping to put him at ease. “Anything that happens after I go home is going to require a lot of thinking and discussing and planning. Even just saying that out loud makes me want to break out in hives. It gives me anxiety! There’s just so much, and...and...”

“Okay, okay,” he said softly, soothingly. “It’s all going to be alright, Sienna. I promise.”

“I wish I had your confidence...”

Slowly, he rolled them over so he could look at her. “We have one more day here and then we’re going ho...” he paused. “Back to my place. Why don’t we push pause on this conversation for now? I don’t want to ruin the last days of our trip with such a serious topic.”

In theory, he was saying all the right things, but... they sounded wrong to her.

Still... he had a point.

Sort of.

After all, could they really both just forget that they'd opened the door to this and then run around California Adventure tomorrow without a care in the world?

With a sigh, Sienna figured they were going to find out.

Again.

It was amazing what a good night's sleep could do.

They hadn't made love last night, but they had slept all tangled up together and she had to wonder if she'd ever be able to sleep without him beside her again. It was crazy how much she had gotten used to it. The typical rule was that it took twenty-one days to make a habit, but that apparently didn't apply to her.

Great, now I'm a freak when it comes to statistics, too...

Their day had started early and all traces of last night's tension were gone.

There wasn't the same urgency as there was yesterday to see everything, but Sienna had to admit that it was still a great day.

Well, maybe not great, but really good.

Yesterday she had been so consumed with exploring the entire park and riding all the rides and just acting like a kid that she didn't really notice...well...all the kids.

Families.

Several times Mick figured out what she was thinking and then they'd both stood and watched a young girl dressed up like her favorite princess, each lost in their own "what could have been" thoughts. Human emotions and behavior were such a large part of her research that it was like second nature for her to examine the people around them and try to figure them out. But standing back and hearing children's laughter and squeals of delight, or the way their faces lit up when they saw one of the characters or were simply having fun on a ride, hit her differently than any research she'd ever done.

It hit on such a personal level that she didn't know what to do about it.

That had never happened before. For years Sienna could interview patients or just observe people with a sense of professional detachment. But the longer they stayed in the amusement park, the more her heart ached.

They had opted for dinner at an Italian restaurant in the park and the only reason they didn't head back to the hotel was because she wanted to see the nighttime show this park offered. And really, she was glad they did because it was truly a wonderful ending to the Disney portion of their trip.

They were heading back to the hotel a little after ten, when Mick surprised her. "How do you feel about driving home tonight instead of tomorrow morning?"

"Oh, wow. Um...I don't know. I'm exhausted and I know you are too. Plus, it's a two-hour drive and we'd still have to pack." Then she eyed him curiously. "How come?"

He shrugged as they continued to walk hand in hand. "I was just thinking how nice it would be to sleep in our own bed tonight. But I think you're right. I don't know if I'd be confident driving that long, that late, after running so hard these last two days." Smiling at her, he said, "No biggie."

Our own bed.

He'd said it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Although it was awkward, she rested her head on his shoulder as they walked. "Well now I really hate that my practicality is ruining this."

"It's not, princess. There are perks to staying here for the night too."

"Really?" For the life of her, she couldn't imagine what they were.

"Oh, yeah. For starters, we're almost to our room."

They were just about to step into the lobby and she realized he definitely had a point. "Very true. That means I can kick my sneakers off in about three minutes."

He nodded. "And I can give you a nice foot massage...maybe order some room service for some dessert..."

"Keep talking..."

"Then, once you're putty in my hands, I take you to bed and give you a very thorough full-body massage." His voice was like silk and even though five minutes ago she thought she was exhausted, suddenly she was perking up.

They were stepping into the elevator when she asked, "And when you say order some room service, you meant for..."

"Ice cream of some sort," he finished for her. "Or cake. But definitely something sweet."

"Mmm...dessert, a foot massage, *and* a full-body massage?" She sighed happily. "I'd say somebody other than me is going to be getting very lucky later on."

Beside her, he chuckled. "Is that right?"

“Absolutely.” They rode the rest of the way up to their floor in companionable silence and Sienna realized how much these little conversations meant to her. They were silly and sexy and it hit her how refreshing it was to talk about things other than her work.

Actually, this was the longest she’d ever gone without discussing her job, her research, or upcoming projects she hoped to work on.

Hadn’t even thought about it, really.

That’s got to be a sign...

“Hey,” he said quietly. “You’re frowning.” They were stepping off the elevator and walking to their room. “What’s going on?”

“I was just thinking about how this has been the longest I’ve ever gone without thinking or worrying about my job.”

Mick opened the door for her and then followed her in. “And judging by the look on your face, that’s a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I was frowning.” Tossing her purse on the sofa, she turned to face him. “It’s a sign, isn’t it?”

He looked at her warily. “A sign for what? I mean, other than the obvious.”

“What’s the obvious?”

“That you needed this break, Sienna. You’ve been working yourself too hard and needed some serious time away from everything, just like I did.”

“Yeah, but you still worked,” she reminded him.

“I did not!”

“Oh, please! Yes, you did! You planned this whole thing, which is totally in your typical job description. Then we hung out with Shaughnessy...”

“That was all for pleasure,” he argued. “There was nothing...”

“Don’t you dare stand there and tell me you didn’t talk about new music or scheduling studio time because I was sitting right there when you did!” she said with a laugh. “And then there was the whole Simon Bennett thing...”

He held up both his hands in surrender. “You’re right, you’re right. I did mix business and pleasure on this trip. But believe me when I say this is the most time I’ve taken away from my usual schedule. Ask anyone.”

Kicking off her sneakers, she shook her head. “I’m not asking anyone anything,” she said before walking over and sitting on the edge of their bed. “Honestly, I’m just being thankful for everything you did for us and how you allowed me to indulge in things that I never let myself indulge in.”

Slowly, he stalked her from across the room, kicking off his sneakers as he went. When he was standing before her, he pulled his shirt up over his head and tossed it aside. Sienna’s hands instantly smoothed up over his stomach and chest. She loved touching him.

“What would you like to indulge in next, princess?”

She felt her cheeks heat, but she loved their sexy banter.

“Getting naked and having that full-body massage,” she told him, her voice a little breathless.

Mick got down on his knees in front of her and took her foot in his hands. “I believe I promised you a foot massage first.” His grin was downright wicked, and his hands were like magic. “I promise we’ll get you naked soon.”

She moaned with delight before pulling her shirt off, just like he had. Her bra was white lace and she toyed with whether to leave it on or take it off.

As if reading her mind, he said, "Take it off."

And she did.

The man was very good at everything he did, but he was exceptionally talented in the seduction department. While his lips and tongue teased her breasts, his hands kept massaging her feet. Sienna squirmed in her spot on the bed, eager to get undressed, but Mick kept her there for several minutes until she was begging for more.

"Should I order room service now?" he asked, slowly coming to his feet and tugging her up with him. Then he began kissing his way down her body, sliding her jeans off as he went. "Or should we...wait?"

Her hands anchored in his glorious head of hair. "You can think about food right now?" she panted.

"Sweetheart, I have my sweet treat right here." And to prove it, he placed a kiss right over her panties.

"Later," she moaned. "Room service. Much later. Need you. Now..."

She expected it to be wild and frantic, hard and fast. Instead, Mick got to his feet again and gently guided her back onto the bed and made love to her with more tenderness than she ever imagined.

And it was everything.

Nine

They were on the road by eleven the next morning after having a leisurely breakfast in bed. Neither had wanted to get up—well, Sienna hadn't—but personally, Mick couldn't wait to get home. The trip had been amazing and he really enjoyed himself, but he was ready to be back in his own place and know he wasn't leaving for a while.

At least...he didn't think he was.

Getting Sienna back to his place in Malibu was crucial at this point. They had been avoiding having the deep conversation that they both knew they needed to have, and it wasn't going to happen while they were traveling. For all he knew, they were going to give this long-distance thing a try, and he was going to be packing up and heading to Durham with her for a few weeks. He didn't want to lose her and he didn't want to see her leave, but he knew she had a life to get back to.

In his head he knew that, but his heart was another matter.

Just thinking about watching her walk away gave him an ache so deep that it felt like a part of him was dying. He hated the thought of everything

they had built in these last weeks just ending.

Beside him, Sienna was tapping out something on her phone.

“Talking to Eleanor?”

Nodding, she said, “I sent her a bunch of pictures and I’m glad I got her the sequined Minnie Mouse ears because she said they looked like something she would wear.” Looking up at him, she smiled. “I’m planning on wearing mine when I go to visit her and then giving her the ones I bought for her and getting some pictures of the two of us being silly. No one at work will believe it.”

“You’re going to have to send me a copy too. I kind of feel like I know Eleanor already, but I’ve never even seen a picture of her.” He considered asking to fly home with her and using the excuse of meeting her friend—and he still might—but he wanted to wait until they had a chance to talk.

“We never took any pictures,” she said. “I mean me and Eleanor. We’ve traveled to conferences together and worked together for years and there isn’t one single picture of the two of us. I plan on rectifying that when I get home. I just hate that it’s taken so long...and something so sad to make us do it.”

Reaching for her hand, he lifted it to his lips and kissed it. “I’m glad we took so many pictures these last two weeks. I can’t wait to go through them all. I want to get one of those digital picture frames and upload all of them on it so I’ll always have a running slideshow of our trip.”

“Oh, my goodness! What a great idea! I want one too!”

Again, he wanted to point out how she wouldn’t need one of her own if she just stayed with him, but he held his tongue. Instead, he said, “Then I’ll be sure to make one for you.”

“Thank you,” she said sweetly, before yawning loudly. “Oh, sorry! I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

Part of him smiled with pure male pride. Sure, they could blame her exhaustion on their whirlwind trip, but Mick preferred to believe his seductive skills in the bedroom were really to blame.

That’s my story and I’m sticking to it...

“We’ll be home in about forty-five minutes,” he told her. “So why don’t you put your phone away, close your eyes, and rest?”

“As appealing as that sounds, I’d feel too guilty.”

Her words said one thing, but she put her phone away and seemed to twist a bit in her seat to get more comfortable.

“Tell me about what we’re seeing here on this drive. Any touristy spots I should notice?”

Laughing softly, he shook his head. “Not really. We’re going to go through L.A. and you saw a lot of that earlier in the trip. You’ve already seen the good stuff.”

“Mmm...” she hummed softly and yawned again. “And it was awesome.”

“Sleep, princess. I’ll wake you when we get home.”

“No,” she protested sleepily. “Talk to me. Please. I love the sound of your voice.”

He had a feeling all the talking would do was really put her to sleep, but he figured he’d do as she asked.

“Did I ever tell you about the time we were going to get sued because Shaughnessy pulled out of a benefit concert?”

She shook her head.

“It’s a funny story. Well, now it’s funny, but basically it was Paige’s father threatening to sue us. Dylan was all banged up from a car accident...”

“The one he went into rehab for?”

“Sadly, no. This accident was someone else’s fault and it put both him and Paige in the hospital. Anyway...her family owns a big PR firm here in L.A. and Dylan was doing some community service stuff that included a literacy campaign and...”

When he looked over, she was asleep.

And snoring softly.

Just looking at her made his heart ache. She was so beautiful and even though he knew she was only three years younger than him, looking at her now, he’d swear she was much younger. What this beautiful and vivacious woman saw in a graying old guy like him still boggled his mind.

But he wasn’t about to argue it either.

He loved her.

So much it hurt.

A dozen different scenarios played through his mind about what was going to happen once they got back to his place. Obviously he wasn’t going to pounce and start demanding that she tell him how she felt about him, them, and where all this was going, but he also knew that he was done waiting. He had to know where he stood; had to know if she was going to break his heart or make him the happiest man in the world.

Please don’t break my heart...

Music was softly playing and the traffic was its usual nightmare, but he actually found it all soothing. He loved his life here in California—it was

familiar and comfortable—but he'd give it up in a minute for her.

Way to sound needy...

Yeah, he was going to have to choose his words carefully. No doubt if he just let his mouth get away from him, he'd beg and grovel to get her to stay with him. And he didn't care where they lived, just as long as they were together.

His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts, and he saw Lynn's name on the screen. Tapping the dashboard screen, he answered.

"Hey, Lynn. What's up?"

"Hey, Mick. I'm so sorry to bother you, but we've got a bit of a situation here."

Great.

"I know you're technically still on vacation and believe me, we've tried to handle it without bothering you..."

"It's fine. Really. What's going on?"

"Word got out about you meeting with Simon Bennett and we've been getting bombarded with requests for an interview from all the entertainment shows and TMZ," she explained. "We never talked about keeping this quiet, but we also never talked about whether this is something that's actually going to happen. So...how do you want us to handle it?"

He looked at the clock and knew he could have them home in around thirty minutes. Working was definitely not on his agenda today, but he knew he needed to put out some fires and that he could do it swiftly.

"Okay, I'm about thirty minutes from my house, and I don't want to talk to anyone while I'm driving. Set up a call with our team for in forty-five

minutes so I have time to get inside and to my office, and we'll send out a statement to get people off our backs for a bit. Did Simon talk to you and set up an appointment?"

"He did. He's coming in on Friday. Do you think we need to put out a statement, or can we just wait?"

"No, let's put something out and calm everyone down. Forward me any inquiries you've gotten and draft up a statement we might use. I know I didn't give you much to work with concerning what I'm thinking about Simon and his future, so that's on me. I'm sorry you've had to deal with that."

"Mick, please. This is just another day at the office. I'm the one who's sorry for bugging you so close to the end of your trip. How did everything go? Did you enjoy Disneyland?" There was amusement in her voice, and he knew she thought he was crazy for spending time there.

"Actually, I enjoyed it. Way too much walking around and I found out that I can't ride roller coasters like I did when I was younger, but Sienna loved it. I'll have to show you all the pictures when I'm back in the office."

"Oh? There are pictures?"

"More than you can even imagine," he said with a laugh.

"Please tell me you're wearing mouse ears in at least one of them!"

"You'll just have to wait and see." He took a moment to let that sink in. "Okay, set everything up and I'll talk to you in a bit."

"Will do."

"Thanks, Lynn." Touching the screen, he hung up. Glancing next to him, he saw that Sienna was still asleep.

One thing he learned about her was she could sleep anywhere and slept hard. Not to say that he didn't have fun ways of waking her up, but she was someone who took her sleep time very seriously. Mick knew he was going to have to get on this call as soon as they got back to the house and was going to suggest that Sienna just go and lie down in the bedroom and get a real nap in. Hopefully he could wrap things up with Lynn and his team quickly. He hated when the media started speculating about things, but he supposed this was a good way to start generating a little buzz for Simon. If people were reaching out, that meant they were interested and would follow any news of his career.

I love this part of the job...

He loved his job. Period. It had been his dream since he was a teen and while there were times it was challenging and frustrating and mentally exhausting, he still loved it.

Even though it cost him...well...this.

He picked up Sienna's hand and held it again just because he loved to touch her—to have that connection. They had to make this work. He was used to a lifestyle where he was only home for short periods of time, so he knew he could move to North Carolina and travel for business. Ideally, he wished there was a way for her to have the time to travel with him because he found he enjoyed traveling so much more when she was beside him.

Soon.

The conversation was going to happen today come hell or high water.

Once he finished talking to his team, he and Sienna were going to talk.

And they weren't going to stop until everything between them was settled.

This view is everything...

They were back at Mick's house and she was standing out on the deck, lost in her own thoughts. Yeah, Sienna knew she could stand out here and stare at the ocean all day and not get tired of it. It was so peaceful and tranquil, and she knew she would have nothing like it when she was home. And now she wasn't so sure she could settle for not having it.

They had survived the rest of their Disneyland trip—and truly had a great time—and had made the drive back to his house after breakfast that morning. The plan for the rest of the day was to simply relax and have some quiet time together. Tomorrow, she was supposed to fly home and had opted to take the red-eye so they'd have one last full day together.

Great, like those few extra hours were going to make that much of a difference, she thought miserably.

She'd never been away from her job or her home for this long and she imagined there would be at least a little bit of excitement about returning to it. But there wasn't.

And she was dreading it more than she ever thought possible.

Mick had argued that he could charter a plane to take her home, but she had turned him down. He had a life to get back to just like she did, and her flying back to the East Coast alone just made more sense. In the car, she had gotten the sense that he was trying to find ways to come home with her—using the excuse of wanting to meet Eleanor—but...they were going to have to learn to be apart for at least a little while. If things went the way she hoped they would, it wasn't like she was going to move in with him today.

They had kept their word and not talked about what came next, but she knew it was never far from her mind and greatly doubted it was far from his.

Mick was a natural planner, and she knew what kind of self-control he was exercising in order to appease her. It was amazing the way he just...he understood her. She never felt any pressure, or like he was actively frustrated with her need to take things at a different pace. Of course, if they hadn't had such an active and fully scheduled trip, it might have been a different story.

That they were at an amusement park meant there were plenty of distractions and it wasn't hard to find other things to talk about. Even on the drive home, Mick had talked about the sights they were passing and shared stories about some of the towns they drove through. It was another look into his life, and she soaked up every word of it.

Now it was quiet. He'd gotten a call as they walked into the house and was currently in his office. She was outside, alone.

And really, it was a good thing.

Today was the day they were going to have to talk.

Really talk.

And she still wasn't sure she was ready for it.

Logistically, there was a challenge. That much was obvious. Technically, Mick could work from just about anywhere, but... she was tied to her job at Duke. There was no way to work from home in her profession.

So don't work from home. Take a sabbatical.

Okay, there was that, but eventually she'd have to go back to work. She'd come too far to simply give up everything just so she and Mick could be together. Why should he get his career and she had to give up hers? How was that fair?

I am so getting ahead of myself here...

“Breathe,” she murmured as she closed her eyes and forced herself to focus on the sun on her face and the sound of the waves. Once she did that, some of the tension left her body and she could turn her brain off for a little while.

“Hey,” Mick said sometime later. “Sorry that took so long.” Coming up beside her, he kissed her cheek. “I’m thinking Thai for lunch and having it delivered. What do you think?”

“Ooo... that sounds good.”

Mick pulled out his phone, and they scrolled through the menu of a local place he loved and placed the order. “Thirty minutes,” he said before going and sitting on a chaise. Reaching out his hand to her, she joined him.

The feel of his arms around her always helped her relax, and right now she needed it again because she couldn’t put the conversation off any longer. “So...” she said quietly.

“So.”

“What should we do for dinner tonight?”

He laughed softly. “How about we get through lunch before we think about that?”

“Oh. Right.” She sighed and figured it would be best to rip the bandage off. “What’s on your agenda after I go? Any big meetings coming up?”

Nice ripping, genius.

“Nothing earth shattering. With the holidays coming up, most tours are temporarily winding down. I’ll work on some pre-production stuff for Shaughnessy and start mapping things out for next year.” He shrugged.

“There are some acts I’m interested in seeing and potentially signing, but that’s all routine for me.”

She nodded. “Local acts?”

“Yeah. It’s rare that I travel to see anyone. If I happen to be in the city where they’re performing, I set something up. Otherwise, they can send me links to videos and then I decide if I want to see them in person.”

“Gotta love the digital world, right? Everything’s right at our fingertips.”

“Mmm. I guess.

They sat in companionable silence, and Sienna thought she’d go mad. “You want to know something funny?”

“Sure.”

“We’ve spent the better part of the last thirteen days talking non-stop, and now when we really need to talk, we’re both quiet. Why do you think that is?”

She thought he’d say something vague or trivial, but she was wrong.

“It’s like I told you our first night in Anaheim, I didn’t want to bog down what was supposed to be a fun time with a deep topic. I’ve spent a good portion of my life not shying away from things most people don’t want to talk about. I’ve had to confront friends about their drug addictions, affairs, lack of talent... and I’ve never shied away from it. Sometimes I even enjoyed the confrontation because I knew it was for the best.” Pausing, he rested his head against hers. “But with you... I’m afraid to say the wrong thing and send you packing.”

“I’d hardly call myself a flight risk,” she countered, slightly miffed that he was basically admitting to handling her with kid gloves.

“Not that you’re a flight risk,” he repeated. “Just... I didn’t want to scare you with how I was feeling.”

Twisting slightly so she could face him, she frowned. “Which was...?”

“I told you, Sienna. I told you how I felt back then, and those feelings are still there now. Seeing you in New York was like divine intervention or something. Sitting next to you at dinner that night made it feel like no time had passed. It wasn’t awkward, it wasn’t uncomfortable. It was like we picked up where we left off.” Pausing, he gently moved her forward so he could stand.

“I felt the same way,” she admitted, watching him walk over to the railing before facing her. “I couldn’t wait for Jason and Bree to leave, because there was so much I wanted to say to you and I knew I was going to have to be bold or you’d push me away again.”

Raking a hand through his hair, Mick growled with frustration. “There was a reason for that!”

Now she stood. “I know and I understand that now, but at dinner that night, I didn’t want to take any chances!” She let out her own huff of annoyance. “None of this is new information. We need to talk about what happens now. I’m getting on a plane tomorrow night. What happens after that?”

“What do you want to happen after that?”

Mimicking his words from Anaheim, she asked, “Answering a question with a question, Michael?”

She knew the instant he realized what she was doing. “Fine, I want it all, Sienna. I don’t want this to end. I realize you need to go back to North Carolina and that you have a life and a job there, but I want you here with

me, too. There's a lot to work out and I know that, but whatever it takes to make that happen, I'll do it." Slowly, he walked over to her, and those strong, warm hands cupped her face. "I fell in love with you when you were too young for me, and I've been in love with you ever since. I never stopped."

Tears stung her eyes, and she realized that was the greatest thing anyone had ever said to her. Reaching up, she placed her hands over his. "I fell in love with you when I was too young to really know what love was," she admitted shyly. "I thought you forgot about me. When I saw you that night at Carmine's, I was afraid you would confirm that—that all the things we'd shared would be a distant memory."

He shook his head. "Never. I never forgot you." Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against hers. "How could I? You're my other half. You complete me, Sienna. I feel like now I can finally live—finally breathe—because you're here with me."

Then he was kissing her in the most magical moment of her life. It was soft and sweet before turning into their typical wet and needy kisses that she craved like she craved air. His hands moved from her face, down her arms, before wrapping around her waist to hold her close. Sienna wanted nothing more than to pull him back down onto the chaise and make love.

Or maybe I'm turning into some kind of sex crazed lunatic...

That was always a possibility, but that was only because making love with Mick was so much better than she could have imagined. It was amazing the difference love made when making love. Her scientist brain wanted to examine that more, but... later.

As if reading her mind, Mick maneuvered them over to the chaise and sat down before pulling her into his lap. Then he was kissing her again, and it

was perfect.

Although...

Slowly, Sienna broke the kiss and looked at the man she loved. Licking her lips, she took a moment to catch her breath. “Okay, so we know that we love each other, but... it still doesn’t erase the 2,500 miles separating us.”

“I know, I know...” Leaning back against the chaise, he frowned. “I hate the thought of doing the long-distance thing, but I think it’s something we’re going to have to deal with for a while. I can do a lot of my work from Durham, but there are times I’m going to have to either be here or New York or... wherever else in the world I have clients I need to be with.”

Wait... he wasn’t talking about her leaving her job or moving.

He was the one offering to sacrifice... everything.

“Mick, I...”

“I’ll keep this place or maybe sell it and keep the condo in the city for when I have to be in town,” he went on. “I’d like to keep the place in Manhattan because it’s spectacular and now it holds some really great memories.” Leaning in, he kissed her again. “You haven’t told me much about your place in Durham, so we can either live there or find a place of our own that we pick out together.”

“Um, yeah... my place essentially sucks compared to this,” she said with a small laugh. “I’m almost embarrassed just thinking of you seeing it.”

He cupped her face again. “It’s doesn’t matter, Sienna. All this stuff—the houses and all the things I’ve accumulated? That was me filling a void I didn’t realize I had. For years, I just kept buying things I thought would make me happy, but they didn’t. After spending these last two weeks with you, I realized I found more joy in the simple day-to-day stuff—having someone to

talk to and laugh with—and going to all of those silly tourist attractions and just hanging out like a regular couple...”

“Regular couples do *not* stay in \$10,000 a night hotel rooms,” she reminded him.

Rolling his eyes, he laughed. “You know what I’m saying! You showed me that I don’t need all of this shit. Sure, it’s nice, and it impresses the hell out of people, but it’s not what makes me happy. You. You make me happy, and I want to feel like this for the rest of my life. With you.”

“Mick, I...”

“Michael,” he said.

“Um, what?”

“Michael,” he repeated. “Let everyone else in this business call me Mick. But you, my sweet Sienna, I love how you’re the only one to call me Michael.”

A slow smile tugged at her lips. “I kind of love that, too.”

“Say you’ll be mine, Sienna,” he urged. “Say that we can finally have the lives we’ve been missing and that we can grow old together and fill every damn day with great conversations, tons of laughter, and make love any time we want.”

She rubbed herself against him. “I really like the sound of all of that. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Is that a yes?”

Nodding, she smiled so hard her face hurt. “That is most definitely a yes!”

Then they were kissing again.

Several minutes later, when they were both breathless, Sienna realized there was one last thing they needed to clarify. “Um... I hate that I have to head home tomorrow, but I am needed back at the lab. I’ll be off again from Thanksgiving through the New Year. Do you think we can handle being apart for the next two weeks?”

“As long as I know it’s the last time we’ll be apart, I think we’ll be fine.”

And it only seemed right that they sealed it with a kiss.

Ten

He'd never felt so alone in his life.

Even those early years in L.A. when he lived in that shitty apartment and spent almost every hour of every day by himself, it didn't feel like this.

He missed Sienna.

It had only been two days, but it felt like two years.

He'd kept himself busy, had worked twelve-hour days in the office and made sure he had something going on to fill the time, but it wasn't working because as soon as he got home, she wasn't there. Things like this never bothered him before; he'd been single his entire adult life, always lived alone, and never even entertained the thought of a roommate. And yet somehow in the last two weeks he'd gotten so used to having someone with him that he was essentially ruined for living alone.

"Am I just pathetic or dramatic?" he wondered.

Pouring himself a glass of wine, he stepped out onto the back deck and stared out at the ocean. It wasn't until he caught himself sighing for the third time that he concluded, "Pathetic."

The time difference also wasn't helping. When Sienna got home from work, he was in meetings, and by the time he got home, she was going to bed. None of this was working as smoothly as he thought it would, and he was seriously considering packing a bag, chartering a plane, and finding a way to work from North Carolina.

He was about to go back into the house and make arrangements when he remembered...he couldn't.

Sitting down on one of the lounges, Mick thought about the conversation he and Sienna had about this exact topic before he dropped her off at the airport.

"Two weeks, right?"

She nodded. "Technically, it's sixteen days, but...we can do it. In the grand scheme of things, it's not that long. And I'm sure we're both going to be busy catching up on work from our time away."

"Well, I feel like I didn't exactly get to truly be away. You know I've taken calls and met with clients, and..."

"Michael?"

"Hmm?"

"We both know that you normally work much more than that and you essentially stepped away from your job on short notice. I'm sure there is a pile of messages and contracts and emails just waiting for you." She smiled at him as she squeezed his hand. "We survived being apart for over twenty years. Surely we can survive two weeks."

"Sixteen days," he murmured before kissing her hand. The sigh was out before he could stop it. "I really wish you would have let me charter a plane for you. I could have flown with you and then come right back."

This time when she said his name, he could tell she was mildly annoyed.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said. “I’m being a little too clingy. I know.”

“Michael, I love you, but we have to be able to do something like this. We know it’s temporary and we both knew this was going to happen. Whining about it and wishing things were different isn’t going to help. This was why I was so hesitant for the last few weeks. But we talked about it and you told me...”

“I know,” he cut her off. “I know, and you’re right.” There were so many things he wanted to say, but it was all the same things he’d been saying and none of it was going to make this separation any easier.

Sienna looked at her phone and frowned. “I really need to get going. Security is going to be a beast to get through, even at this hour.”

All he could do was nod.

Silently, they both climbed from the car and walked around to the trunk. Mick pulled her luggage out and got it up on the sidewalk before cupping her face and kissing her senseless. It bordered on brutal—like he was trying to put his stamp on her and brand her as his. It was ridiculous and yet...he’d never been so desperate and needy before.

Only for her.

When they broke apart, she was breathless and her smile was sad. “We’re going to be fine. We’re both going to be so busy, the time is going to fly.”

Part of him knew that was possible, but he wasn’t holding out much hope.

“Text me when you board,” he told her, kissing her softly this time.

“I will.”

“And then text me when you land. I don’t care what time it is. Just...”

Cupping his jaw, she said, “I will.”

Then he stood back and watched her roll her suitcases through the doors of LAX and it was like watching a piece of his heart leave.

He’d never been an emotional guy; not like this.

As he’d pulled away from the airport, he swore he was going to be fine.

And dammit, he hated how he wasn’t.

Now, as he stared up at the star filled sky, he knew he had to do something to get out of this funk before he did something stupid.

“I am not going to charter a plane...I am not going to charter a plane...I am not going to charter a plane...”

Fortunately, the universe was on his side and his phone rang. Seeing Riley’s name on the screen, Mick practically sagged with relief.

“Hey, Riley, what’s up?”

“Hey, I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Just a pity party,” he said with a small laugh.

“Uh-oh...”

And because Riley was a good friend, he knew he could share what was going on—including how pathetic he was feeling.

“Okay, for starters, not pathetic. You had an intense few weeks and you’re eager to start the next phase of your lives.”

“Exactly!”

“What you need is a distraction.”

“I thought work would be a distraction, but so far, no such luck.”

“Well, I’m hoping to change that.”

“Ry, if you and the guys started working on new music...”

“Nope,” Riley quickly interrupted. “This isn’t about me or the band.”

“O-kay...”

“I’m going to forward you a link to some videos. Savannah saw them first over on TikTok, some guitarist. At first I wasn’t sure what the big deal was, but the kid’s got hundreds of thousands of views and I think you should check him out.”

“You know I never mind looking, but...I’m really not interested in new talent right now. I met with Simon and all, but that was a favor.”

“Mick, trust me. Watch the videos and tell me he doesn’t remind you of a young Jett Henley. It’s wild. I swear, when I watched the video, it was like watching Jett when he was younger. The kid’s really captured his look and sound.”

“Cover bands really aren’t my thing...”

Riley sighed loudly. “No one’s asking you to do anything other than watch the videos, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” It wasn’t like he had anything else to do tonight.

“Anyway, are you going to be okay? Want to come for dinner tomorrow night and hang out?”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m fine. It just all feels a little weird, you know?” Then he laughed quietly again. “Who would’ve thought, huh? Me of all people, feeling this way.”

“It happens to the best of us,” Riley said with a laugh of his own. “And remember, if you get tired of your own company, we’re here for you. The kids would love to see you. They love their Uncle Mick.”

“Thanks, Ry. Tell them I’ll see them soon.”

After they hung up, Mick forced himself to get up and go back into the house. He was hungry and now his curiosity was piqued about these videos.

First, he ordered some Thai food to be delivered, and then sat down on the sofa with his phone and pulled up the links Riley had sent. He was about to click on the first one when a text from Sienna popped up.

Sienna: Hey, are you free to talk?

As if he’d let anything keep him from doing that.

Rather than texting a reply, he simply called.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said as soon as she answered. “I figured you’d be in bed by now.”

And that’s when he heard it; the snuffle.

“Sienna? What’s going on?”

She sniffed again before responding. “It was just a bad day. Eleanor’s taken a turn for the worse and...and...I’m not handling it well.”

Dammit! He knew he should have chartered the plane so she wouldn’t have to be by herself.

“I can be there by lunch tomorrow,” he said fiercely. “Tell me what you need and I’ll take care of it.”

“I need a miracle,” she said quietly. “I need a cure for my friend. You’re incredibly talented, Michael, but...I don’t think you can do that.”

“Sienna...”

He knew she was crying; he could hear it and picture her so clearly in his mind that it broke his heart.

“I’ll be there as fast as I can. I’ll...”

“No.”

“What?”

“I don’t want you to come. It’s unnecessary,” she told him, softly but firmly.

Was she for real?

“You’re upset and you shouldn’t be alone right now. Let me be there for you.”

“You’re here for me right now. This is what I need,” she reasoned. “I appreciate that you want to come here, but...this isn’t something that you need to be involved in. It’s private, Michael. Can you understand that?”

Actually, he couldn’t.

“Eleanor doesn’t need more people coming in and gawking at her.” She let out a small huff. “I was shocked by how many people just kept coming and going from her room. There’s zero privacy and it was just...it was awful. And if you were here, it would just be another person in the room. It wouldn’t be right for me to do that to her.”

That took some of the fight out of him.

Some.

“Then I won’t go to the hospital. I’ll stay at your place and just be there for you when you get home. I’m not asking you to entertain me or to cut your time with your friend short. I can work from your place and whenever you get home, I’ll be there.”

Silence.

He didn't take it as a bad sign; if anything, it meant she was thinking about it.

"We said we weren't going to do this. We said we could get through the two weeks without finding excuses to see each other."

"These are special circumstances," he reminded her. "I'll only stay for a couple of days." Mentally, he went over his calendar and knew he had a few appointments that he shouldn't reschedule, but he could definitely work around them. "Please."

"I want to say no..."

"No, you don't," he replied softly. "Go and I'll text you what time I'll be getting in. I'll come to your office and get the key to your house and then you won't see me again until you get home, okay?"

"Mick..."

"Michael."

That made her laugh. "Thank you."

"I'll see you tomorrow, beautiful. I love you."

"I love you too."

She hadn't slept.

Not that it was anything new, she hadn't slept well since she got back home. But last night—between her emotions over her friend and then worrying about Mick coming—had kept her awake.

Studying her reflection in the mirror, she groaned. "I don't think there's enough concealer to cover these dark circles."

Still, she did the best she could.

After making the bed, Sienna went through the rest of her boring routine and had a cup of yogurt, put her coffee in a travel mug, and left for work. According to the last text she got from Mick, he was scheduled to land around ten and then had a car picking him up to take him to her office. She had argued that she would come and pick him up and how getting a car wasn't necessary, but he had insisted that he wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Right now, she wished he was being a little more obtrusive.

Hell, she wanted that bossy, control-taking part of him to swoop in and make everything alright.

But, just as she had told him last night, in this situation, there wasn't anything he could do.

Walking down the hall to her office felt a little like an out-of-body experience. She'd been doing this for years and never really thought about it, but suddenly it felt foreign to her. There was no comfort in being here, and she wasn't looking forward to doing any aspect of her job. For now, she chalked it up to still easing back into things after her vacation, and her emotions over Eleanor, and the fact that Mick was going to come crashing into her world in a matter of hours.

"I'm definitely going to need more coffee," she murmured and made sure that was her first stop before going to her desk. There were a few emails she needed to respond to as well as a couple of calls she needed to return, but once that was all taken care of and she was ready to pull up her notes for the project she was currently working on, her cell phone rang. Not recognizing the number, she let it go to voicemail.

A minute later, her phone dinged with an incoming text. Figuring it was Mick, she took a few minutes to finish getting her files open. She gave them a quick glance before reaching for her phone.

Eleanor: Hi, Sienna. This is Debbie, I'm one of Eleanor's hospice nurses

Her stomach clenched hard and she felt her breakfast rising in her throat.

Eleanor: I just tried calling you. She had a bad night and...

Sienna didn't read more, she simply swiped the screen and pulled up Debbie's number and called her back.

"Hey, Sienna," Debbie said softly.

But there was a tone.

She'd been dreading that tone.

Swallowing hard, she asked, "Is she...?"

"You should come. Soon. I don't think she's going to make it through the day."

Tears instantly fell as she nodded. "I'm on my way."

There were so many things she needed to do, and yet it felt like her entire body was disjointed and she couldn't seem to do even the simplest tasks. She knocked her mug onto the floor and when she turned to get it, her satchel fell over and dumped out everywhere. When she went to stand after gathering everything, she hit her head on the corner of her desk.

And then she just dropped to the floor and cried.

It was best that she get this initial meltdown out of the way before heading over to the hospital, but she had a feeling this was only going to be

the first of many today. Hugging her knees to her chest, she let herself cry because her heart was breaking.

And that's how Mick found her.

"Sienna!" Dropping to his knees in front of her, he pulled her into his arms. "What's going on? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Eleanor..."

Muttering a curse, he slowly sat on the floor beside her and maneuvered her into his lap. He didn't offer any empty words or try to tell her how she should be feeling or what she should be thinking, he just held her. As much as she had been telling herself that she thought it was unnecessary for him to fly all this way here and how they should be able to get through two weeks apart, she was beyond relieved that he was here with her right now.

It took several minutes, but she finally lifted her head and looked at him. "I need to get to the hospital," she said, caressing his jaw. "They don't expect her to make it through the day."

Together, they carefully got to their feet and he helped her gather her things. "Is there anyone you need to speak to before we go?" he asked.

Shaking her head, she accepted his hand. "I'll text everyone on the way over."

Silently, they rode the elevator down to the first floor, and she was surprised when she saw the town car waiting for them.

"Um...Mick...?"

"You're not driving," he said firmly, opening the door for her and following her in.

Nodding, she sat and then gave the driver the address for the hospital. Mick held her hand, and it was the only thing keeping her together right now. It was a short drive and as she watched the passing scenery, she almost wished it were longer. But as they pulled up to the hospital, she knew there was something important she needed to say.

Turning her head, she said, "I'd really like it if you came in with me."

When he went to comment, she cut him off.

"I know what I said last night, but...that was just me trying to stick to our agreement of not caving." Sighing, she added, "I thought I would be okay handling this on my own, but now that it's happening, I don't want to be by myself."

"You never have to be," he said gruffly before helping her out of the car.

What came after that was kind of surreal.

Sienna was used to being independent; she had no issues starting at a new school or a new job or going to conferences, conventions, or even to dinner by herself. It was the norm for her, so having someone beside her like this was...different. Comforting. And never in her life had she been more thankful for another person.

Outside of Eleanor's room, she paused. Mick didn't question it, didn't ask if anything was wrong. He just knew that she needed a moment.

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed her. "I'll wait out here so you can have time with her."

"I want you to meet her," she whispered. "And if she's awake, I know she'd love to meet you." It was something they had talked about—she and Eleanor—when Sienna had come to see her when she got home.

“Whatever you think is best,” he said before letting her lead him into the room.

There was a nurse sitting beside the bed, and she smiled when they walked in. “You must be Sienna,” she said.

Smiling, she nodded. “And you must be Debbie. Thank you so much for reaching out to me. I got here as fast as I could.”

They all looked toward the bed. “She’s woken up a few times and asked for you. She’s on a lot of morphine, but hopefully you can talk to her and she’ll know you’re here.”

Moving next to the bed, she reached for her friend’s hand and almost sagged with relief when her eyes fluttered open. “Hey,” she said quietly. “I brought someone here to meet you.”

Eleanor opened her eyes a little wider and instantly focused on Mick.

Then she smiled.

It was just a tiny little lift of her lips, but Sienna saw it and couldn’t help but grin.

“Eleanor,” she began, “this is Mick.”

“Michael,” her friend whispered.

He stepped forward and gently took her hand in his. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Eleanor. Sienna has told me so much about you.”

“It’s nice to...finally meet you...too.”

For the next several hours, they talked as Eleanor slipped in and out of consciousness. Mick left to get them some lunch, and as the afternoon turned to evening, he left again to get dinner. Sienna had little appetite, but he still made sure she at least ate a little something to keep up her strength.

It was almost eight when she excused herself to speak to one of the nurses. Debbie's shift was over and now the nurse on duty was named Leigh.

"Hey," she said as she approached the desk. They had met the previous day when Sienna had been up visiting. "I wasn't sure how late we're allowed to stay."

"There are no rules up here. You're welcome to stay all night if you'd like. The sofa opens into a bed and the chair does as well. I was just getting ready to bring some coffee and cookies in to you."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. Mick brought dinner up a little while ago."

Standing, Leigh came around the desk and gave her a small smile. "That was almost three hours ago."

"Was it?"

She nodded. "He brought dinner for all the nurses too."

Why am I not surprised?

"I just don't want you going through too much trouble just for us. I'm sure you have other patients with families here that need you more."

Her expression turned sympathetic. "Sienna, this is what we do. We're fortunate that there aren't a lot of patients on the floor right now, so for tonight, Eleanor—and you, and Mick—are my only responsibility. Please let me do this for you."

Before Leigh could turn away, there was something Sienna had to ask.

"Um...when Debbie called me this morning, she said that...well...she didn't think..."

"She didn't think she'd make it through the day, right?"

Swallowing hard, she nodded. “But...she’s been somewhat awake at times and talked to us. I mean...she’s not fully alert and I understand because of the morphine, but...”

“There’s no way to know for sure,” the nurse replied solemnly. “Her body is so weak, and I think she’s enjoying having you here to talk to. While you were away, she shared all the pictures and videos of your trip. You have no idea how much she looked forward to hearing from you each day.”

Her heart kicked hard in her chest.

“Most nights she wouldn’t go to sleep until she shared your news with all the nurses who were working. And whoever was off had to be caught up to speed when they came back.” She laughed softly. “You’re a wonderful friend, Sienna, and she’s lucky to have you.”

The familiar sting of tears was back and she forced herself to smile and say thank you before heading back to Eleanor’s room.

When she stepped back inside, she found Mick leaning over the bed, looking as if Eleanor was whispering something to him. She stayed back in the shadows and waited for several minutes until they were done. Having him with her all day had been a blessing. He’d kept her distracted and cared for, and it still amazed her how the man simply gave and gave and gave and she wondered how on earth she could possibly ever do the same for him?

Had anyone ever done the same for him?

Somehow she doubted it.

When he finally straightened. She watched as he gave Eleanor’s hand a comforting pat before he sat back down.

That’s when she walked back in.

“Hey,” she said softly. “Sorry I was gone for so long. Leigh is going to bring some coffee and cookies down for us.” Stepping over to the side of the bed, she smiled down at her friend. “Any chance you want to split a cookie with me?”

Eleanor’s eyes were closed, but her lips twitched. “Chocolate chip?”

That made her giggle. “I didn’t ask, but if you really want that...”

She slowly shook her head and then dozed back off.

“Sit,” Mick said from behind her, and when she turned to look at him, he was holding out his hand.

With nothing else to do, she did as he suggested. “I feel so helpless and it seems odd to be sitting here waiting.”

“Would you rather go? I can call the car and...”

“No,” she said adamantly. “I don’t want to leave her alone. There’s no family, no one else she wanted here. How awful would I be if I abandoned her right now?” Sighing, she rested her head on his shoulder.

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes before he spoke again. “Today was very eye opening to me.”

“Really? Why?”

“You may not believe this, but...this is the first time that I couldn’t fix a problem.” He paused. “I think you may have noticed how I tend to look at what needs to be done and I do it. If there’s a problem, I fix it. If there’s a need, I do my best to meet it. I’ve helped friends with addiction, I’ve helped them through divorces, and losses of family members...but I didn’t know those people. In the last few weeks, I’ve come to know Eleanor, and you have no idea how much I wish I could make this right for the both of you.”

This sweet man had the biggest heart of any person she'd ever met.

"As much as you don't think you've helped, you have. You're here. She wanted to meet you and I know it meant a lot to her that she finally did."

Which reminded her...

"What did she say to you?"

"When?"

"Right before I came back into the room. She was telling you something."

She felt the kiss on the top of her head. "I promised not to tell you yet," he said gruffly. "And I'm a man of my word, so..."

Don't I know it...

"It's okay. I wouldn't want you to betray a confidence."

They got quiet again and Sienna yawned.

"Rest, beautiful. I'm right here and if anything changes, I'll wake you up."

But she shook her head. "I don't want to miss anything."

Instead, she shifted and then pulled her chair closer to the bed and began talking to Eleanor about some aspects of her trip that they hadn't talked about yet. There was no way to know if she could hear her or not, but it made her feel better to keep talking.

Which she did until...

Until it was over.

Eleven

He hated leaving, but...there was nothing else he could do in North Carolina and a list of things he needed to do back in L.A.

Eleanor had passed that night, while Sienna had been telling her about some of the vineyards they had toured in Napa. His heart broke for her, but he knew how much her being there meant to Eleanor.

“Thank you,” she’d whispered.

Mick stood and leaned forward, resting his arms on the bed railing. “For what?”

“For taking Sienna on an adventure.”

He smiled. “Believe me, it was my pleasure. We had a great time.”

She nodded slowly. “I could tell from the pictures.” She had paused for a solid minute before speaking again. “Do you love her?”

“More than anything.”

That seemed to please her. “Good. You’re good for her.”

“Believe me, she’s good for me too. I never thought we’d have this chance.”

Another slow nod and he thought she was dozing again. He was about to sit back down when she spoke.

“Promise me something,” she said weakly.

“Anything.”

“Don’t let that be her only adventure. Don’t let her make this research and this job her life. Make her live,” she said, her voice trailing off.

“I promise,” he whispered back. “You have my word.”

He’d taken Sienna home that night and held her while she cried, and continued to hold her while she slept. If he thought he’d have time to sit and just be with her, he was mistaken.

The next morning, they had gotten up and she had gone into survival mode—she started making calls and handling all the things Eleanor had asked her to. There wasn’t going to be a big funeral. Eleanor was cremated, and there was a small memorial service the following day. Less than seventy-two hours after he arrived, he was making arrangements to fly home. He was all set to stay, but Sienna had been the one to all but shove him out the door.

“You know that I love you and how much I appreciate you being here with me, but I need to get back to the office and take care of things, and so do you.” She gave him a patient smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m already so behind, and I need to make sure I get some serious time in without distraction.”

If it weren’t for the slight tremble in her voice, he’d almost believed her.

“Hey,” he said softly, pulling her into his arms. “No one’s expecting you to jump right back into the thick of things. I heard your supervisor telling you yesterday at the memorial to take as much time as you needed.”

Carefully, she disengaged herself and walked over to pour herself a cup of coffee. “I don’t need any more time. I had a two week vacation and then I came home and worked a couple of half days and then took two days off.” She glanced at her watch. “It might not seem like a good idea to you, but this is what I need to do. Work is going to keep me sane right now.”

Don’t let her make this research and this job her life. Make her live.

He’d never made a deathbed promise before, and he hoped he never had to do it again because it felt like a lot of pressure.

It was a given that he was going to give Sienna the world. Once they got over the next few weeks, things would start falling into place. But right now, he didn’t like this detached attitude she had.

“Believe me, I completely understand the need to work and how much of a distraction it can be,” he said evenly. “All I’m saying is that maybe you ease back into it rather than jumping in with both feet. I can easily take another flight and...”

She let out a long breath. “We’ve been over this. Lynn called you three times yesterday and you have meetings tomorrow you can’t miss.” Her shoulders sagged. “We knew this sort of thing was going to happen and we have to deal with it.”

“I just don’t want you to...”

“I’m not,” she snapped. “I’m doing what I need to do because I need to do it, not because anyone’s making me. And believe me, once I get caught up, I won’t be letting myself get that bogged down again. Trust me.”

There were so many things he wanted to say, but he didn't want to upset her.

Actually, he wanted to share with her the request Eleanor had made, but...that would definitely upset her.

So he held his tongue and gave her a slow, sweet kiss before going back to the bedroom and packing. A car was picking him up in an hour and he'd be working the entire flight back to L.A. As he placed his few meager things into his suitcase, all he could think of was how Sienna was right and they would be fine, but...he had a feeling if left to her own devices for too long that she would completely go back to her old ways.

And so will I...

Yeah, it wasn't completely one-sided, but he had to have faith.

When the car arrived, Sienna walked him out and kissed him soundly before he climbed in.

"Two weeks," he stated, and she nodded. Because of this slight delay, they both had to adjust their calendars a bit. It was like starting over and he hated it, but once they were through it, they could finally start planning their future.

"We're going to be fine," she assured him, kissing him one more time. Taking a step back, she smiled at him as he closed the door and Mick hated driving away from her.

"Work," he told himself. "Get all the work done and don't give yourself any time to think."

Pulling his phone out, he texted Lynn that he was on his way to the airport and to email him anything that needed his immediate attention and he'd deal with it on the plane.

After that, he scrolled through all the emails and messages he'd been ignoring for the last several days and stopped on the one from Riley. He knew from the day he arrived that the drive to the airport was less than thirty minutes and figured he might as well watch these now while it was quiet.

Clicking the link, Mick relaxed in his seat and then felt his jaw slightly drop at the first few notes the kid played. The sound was clean and a spot-on cover of one of Jett's earlier songs. But what really piqued his attention was how much this kid genuinely looked like Jett—the hair, the build, the way he played. If they were to make a movie about the crazy career of rock God, Jett Henley, this kid could play him and people would swear they were seeing an exact replica of him from twenty years ago.

“That is uncanny,” he murmured. And for the rest of the ride, he continued to watch as many clips as he could.

At the airport, there was a ton of traffic and he was relieved he'd been able to charter a flight instead of dealing with the commercial ones. It would have been less expensive, but...he had to admit it being a bit of a travel diva. After all the years of riding tour busses or having crappy seats in coach on flights, he preferred to upgrade whenever possible. And considering it was impossible to get a direct flight from Raleigh to L.A., he considered this money well spent.

He checked in, had some coffee, and within an hour, he was on board and preparing for takeoff. He had his laptop set up on the table in front of him and was looking over his schedule for the coming weeks. After making a few notations, he forwarded the links Riley sent him to his assistant and told her to find out as much information about this kid that she could. He might not

have been looking to sign anyone new, but all that went out the window as soon as he heard him play.

“It might not be a bad thing to discover the next Jett Henley...”

And that was the kind of thinking that put him back in the right frame of mind. There was no way he could function if the only thing on his mind was how much he wished he and Sienna were together, so starting right now, Mick Tyler—one of the biggest music managers in the business—was back.

There were deals to make, contracts to sign, and he already knew the reward that was going to be waiting for him in fourteen short days.

Putting his phone down, Mick rubbed his hands together and grinned down at his laptop. “Okay, let’s do this!”

For the next three days, Sienna worked until she could barely see straight. Not that she was so interested in the research, but she desperately needed the distraction. After being gone for so long, this felt comfortable, and after losing Eleanor, she desperately needed comfort.

And sadly, this was more of what she needed than having Mick with her.

It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate him flying here to be with her—because she did and had no idea how she would have gotten through it without him—but...she also needed her space.

Mick was not great at giving her space.

After spending so much of her life taking care of herself, it was more than a little overwhelming to have someone wanting to take care of everything for you. In time, she knew she’d get used to it, but right now, she was beyond grateful to have the time alone.

It was Friday night and she was walking through the door when her phone rang. She was almost positive it was going to be Mick, but smiled when she saw her brother's name on the screen.

"Jason! This is a wonderful surprise," Sienna said as she put her satchel down on her sofa and sat herself down.

"Hey! I held off calling for a week because I figured you needed to recover from your whirlwind trip! How are you?"

"Oh, uh...good. I'm good."

He sighed. "Okay, how about telling me how you're really doing? Is everything okay with you and Mick?"

"Things are great with us," she began and then told him all about the loss of her friend.

"Damn, I'm so sorry," he said softly. "I know the two of you were close, but I'm glad you got to be with her before she passed."

Eyes closed, she willed herself not to cry. "It was truly an emotional experience. I'm back at work and getting back to my normal routine, but...I'm sad."

"What's Mick doing while you're at work?" he asked with amusement. "I'm sure Durham isn't nearly as exciting as L.A."

"Actually, he went home a few days ago."

"Really? Why?"

She shrugged. "Because I have a job and so does he. We weren't supposed to see one another right now anyway. I'll be off after Thanksgiving through the new year, so..."

“Sienna, I get that you had this whole thing like...scheduled, but why wouldn’t you let him stay for a little longer? Obviously you’re still upset and I would think you wouldn’t want to be alone.”

“First, how do you know I’m the one who asked him to leave? Maybe he was the one who had to cut the visit short?”

He snorted. “Please. You forget how well I know you. No doubt he was hovering and wanting to make sure you were okay and you were the one pushing to go back to work.” Another snort. “In case you didn’t notice, the university and all the research departments didn’t crumble while you were gone. It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for you to give yourself a break and relax a bit.”

“Jason, I relaxed for two weeks,” she said wearily. “And even though I had the best time, it wasn’t exactly easy for me to just let everything go. This is who I am! And believe it or not, Michael’s just as much of a workaholic as I am.”

“So...what does that mean moving forward?” he asked. “Are the two of you going to do the long distance thing?”

“That’s what we thought at first, but...he’s going to move here,” she replied. “The plan is for him to possibly sell his place in Malibu, and he can work remotely. At least...that’s what he says. And I guess we’ll find someplace here. You know my place isn’t particularly big, and believe me when I say it’s beyond inferior to the places he owns.”

Silence.

Weird.

“He’ll still have to travel a bit, and there are times he’s going to have to be in L.A. or New York, so he’ll have to keep places there. I’ll keep my job

so I won't be able to travel with him a lot of the time, but..."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why all of it? Why is he moving to Durham? Why would you still work? I mean...you know Mick would take care of you and you'd never want for anything again. I guess I don't understand why you'd ask him to move."

Feeling more than a little annoyed, Sienna sat up a bit straighter. "Um...excuse me, but once again, you've gotten it wrong."

"I wasn't wrong a minute ago," he mumbled, and dammit, he was right.

"Either way, you've got this wrong. He was the one to offer to move here. I didn't ask. Granted, I didn't think it would be fair for him to ask me to give up my entire life for him, but it never came to that. And you know what? I appreciated that. That's how I knew how much I meant to him, because he's the one making the sacrifices."

"Okay, yeah, I get that, but why does he have to make all the sacrifices?"

"He's not!" she countered.

"So then, what are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you just said he's not making all the sacrifices, so I was curious about what you were bringing to the table?"

She didn't like what he was implying.

"You know what? My relationship with Michael is private, and I'm not comfortable discussing this. How are Bree and the kids?"

He chuckled. "They're fine. Everyone's good. The kids have a ton of holiday festivities at school, so we've been running around like crazy. Which

reminds me, are you coming home for Thanksgiving?”

Ugh...she had forgotten about that with everything that had been going on.

“Um...I’m not. Between the vacation and Eleanor, I’m behind at work. I’ll look at my calendar and maybe I’ll fly up the following week.”

“With Mick?”

“No, why?”

He groaned. “What are you doing, Sienna?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you serious about Mick? Are you planning a future with him?”

“Of course! I love him!”

“Okay, then maybe...you know...stop compartmentalizing him.”

With an eye roll, she sighed. “That’s not what I’m doing, Jason.”

“I think it is. You sent him back to L.A. even though you know if you would have unclenched a bit, it would have been nice to have someone with you while you grieve. You talk about coming here to see your family, but not include him. He’s moving to Durham—Durham, Sienna!—and all you can talk about is how you won’t have time to travel with him. It seems to me like you’re being a little standoffish and...selfish.”

That made her jump up. “Selfish? Selfish? How can you even say that? I have never been selfish and you know it!”

“You are my sister and I love you, but you are just taking and taking and taking from him and he must really be head over heels for you because all he’s doing is giving. I get that you’re used to being independent, but...relationships require a give and take, Sienna. And if you can’t even give

to bring him home to spend a weekend with your family, then maybe...this relationship isn't right. For either of you."

Walking into the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of wine and took a long drink—something she didn't normally do, but desperately needed at the moment.

"Jason," she began calmly, "I appreciate your concern, but I know what I'm doing. This is all new and Mick and I will work it all out."

His sigh was weary and loud. "I just don't want to see either of you get hurt. I know how you are, and...I want you to be happy. You're so regimented and closed off emotionally that I'm not sure you know how to let someone else in."

"I'm not..."

"Just...think about it, okay?" he asked. "Bree just got home with some pizza, so I need to go. I'll talk to you soon, okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, of course. I'll call you next week. Love you."

"Love you too."

Hanging up, Sienna finished her wine and glanced around with a frown. In all the chaos since she'd gotten home from L.A., she's been a little disorganized. It wasn't exactly something new, but she'd been distracted when she got back and now that she looked around, she saw that there were piles of mail she hadn't gone through—not including today's—and she still had one suitcase that she hadn't unpacked yet.

"Might as well make it a super fun Friday night—first, argue with my brother, then, have wine for dinner while unpacking dirty clothes. Awesome."

Taking the suitcase into the laundry room, she pulled out clothes and tossed them into the washer—even the ones she knew were clean simply because they'd been sitting in the luggage for so long. She went through all the zipper compartments and found random socks and hair ties, but when she unzipped the large front pocket and reached inside, she gasped.

Slowly, Sienna pulled out the envelope and walked back out to the living room where she sat down and stared at it in disbelief.

It was the book proposal.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding as she opened it and read over the letter from the publisher.

And then read it a second, third, and even fourth time.

Was she ready to write a book? Did she want to write a book?

Just as she had thought that day back in New York, it was a project that would take a lot of her time, but it would be something different—a change from her every day, boring routine.

And she desperately needed that.

Still needed that—even after her fabulous vacation.

Wait...could this be the solution? Could she possibly take this leap of faith and make this her job—writing—while taking an extended break from her current one? She could write anywhere, which meant that...she could travel with Mick if she wanted to.

And the thought of writing on the deck of his Malibu home was almost enough to make her pack her bags right now.

“Okay, don't be rash,” she reminded herself. “You need to think about this and...”

The doorbell ringing brought her up short.

No one ever came to her door unless it was a delivery and she hadn't ordered anything. Standing, she walked to the door and looked out the peephole and smiled.

"Hi, Mrs. Bailey," she said as she opened the door. "How are you?" Mrs. Bailey lived in the townhouse next door—they shared a wall—and was in her seventies. She reminded Sienna of her grandmother.

"Hi, Sienna." She had a package in her hands that she held out. "This came for you earlier today, but it looked like rain and I didn't want it to get damaged sitting out on the porch, so I brought it inside. I hope you don't mind."

Taking the package, Sienna smiled at her. "Not at all. Thank you! Are you doing okay?"

"Oh, you know me...every day is a blessing," the older woman said. "But just so you know, I'm going to be out of town for a while starting tomorrow."

"Really? Where are you going?"

"A cruise! My girlfriends and I decided it was time to do something fun for ourselves," she explained. "We know it's the holidays coming up, but we all talked about it and felt like it was okay to miss Thanksgiving this year. We'll be home for Christmas." Then she grinned. "The thought of being someplace tropical instead of here where it's cold makes me giddy!"

"I know that feeling well!"

"You're young, Sienna! What are you waiting for? Travel more!" And with a laugh, she took a step back. "Anyway, I need to go. *Jeopardy* is about to come on and I never miss an episode. Have a good night!"

“You too!”

Closing the door, Sienna glanced at the package and the return address and frowned.

It was from the hospital where Eleanor had been.

“Okay, that’s a little odd,” she murmured as she walked back to the sofa and sat down. Staring at the box like it contained an explosive, her heart began to race. And rather than open it, she immediately reached for her phone to call Mick.

“Hey, beautiful,” he whispered, and that’s when she realized he was busy.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “I didn’t even consider the time difference.”

“Uh-huh...” It was obvious he was distracted.

“It’s not important,” she told him. “We can talk tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? I’m in a meeting and then have two more after this and a late dinner scheduled, but...”

“No, no, it’s okay. Really. Like I said, it’s not important. Go and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Okay, great. Bye.”

It was the first time he didn’t say he loved her when he hung up and while it made her heart sink a little, she knew he was just being professional while in a meeting.

It was a wonder he picked up the phone at all.

She had no idea how long she sat there simply staring at the package, but ultimately her curiosity got the better of her and she took it to the kitchen to get a pair of scissors to open it.

After digging through a layer of packing peanuts and then tissue paper, she found a photo album.

Actually, it was a photo album that said *Our Adventure Book* on the cover.

“What in the world...?”

Once again, she walked back to the living room and sat down. Flipping open the book, she found an envelope with her name on it and had to fight back tears as she opened it.

If you’ve got this book in your hands, then you know I’m gone.

How cliché do I sound right now?

This book is a labor of love that my wonderful care team encouraged me to do. After listening to me talk about you and then sharing all the pictures and texts and gifts you were sending me, it seemed like a great idea. So this, my dear friend, is something for us both to remember. Consider it like a gift that keeps giving and promise that you’ll take it off the shelf and dust it every once in a while when you’re feeling a little claustrophobic in your life.

Although, I’d like to think that Michael won’t let that happen ever again.

And can I just add that I know his given name is Michael, but when I look at these pictures, he’s definitely more of a Mick. I can tell he’s got that sexy, rock star swagger.

But I digress...

In these last weeks of my life, you gave me an adventure while you were having one of your own. You have no idea the joy these texts and photos gave me and the wonderful conversations they led to with my doctors, nurses, and even other patients. So for that, I thank you. And to give something back, I

wanted to make sure that YOU remembered this time. Hopefully it will help you see what is really important in life.

The smile on your face in all of these pictures says it all.

I have treasured your friendship and I thank you for sharing such a special time in your life with me. Be well, Sienna. Be happy. And I hope there are many more adventures to come.

With love,

Eleanor

With a shaky breath, she wiped tears away.

And then she got comfortable against the cushions and began to go through the pages. Each one had copies of the texts she had sent as well as the pictures from every stop on hers and Mick's trip. Some messages she barely remembered sending and she couldn't help but smile at the photos. At the bottom of each page was a little note—or observation—from Eleanor, detailing how she felt about seeing these moments from their travels. Some comments were rather generic like, "You look like you're having a great time!", while others were a little more personal like, "Oh, how I wish I could have been there with you to see that smile in person."

Page after page reminded her of how much fun she had, how many new experiences she'd had, and most importantly, it reminded her how good it felt to be someone other than a research professor who spent far too much time tucked away in a lab or a classroom.

The woman smiling up at her from this scrapbook looked like someone else—the imaginary version of herself that she rarely let come out and play because it seemed too frivolous.

Touching a photo of her and Mick from the gondola ride they'd taken at the Venetian hotel in Vegas, Sienna knew that was the person she wanted to be.

Desperately.

It was totally possible. She didn't have to wait for a vacation to be like that. In a few weeks, she and Mick would be together. He was offering her the world on her terms. He was willing to move to North Carolina so that she didn't have to give up her career, but, in her heart, she knew that wasn't right and it wasn't what she wanted.

Smiling down at the now closed scrapbook, she gently ran her hands over the title.

She wanted the adventure.

And she was ready to make some big changes and leave her comfort zone to make that happen.

Twelve

Ten days later, Mick slammed his laptop shut with a growl of frustration. It was like the universe hated him. Suddenly, there was an influx of talent looking for representation, and issues with major venues he'd never experienced before. There was still a mountain of paperwork for him to get through, and a list of calls a mile long. This was normally the sort of stuff that he thrived on, but right now he was having a hard time giving a damn about any of it. He just wanted people to do what he needed done without argument!

A little unreasonable, but he was a man used to getting things done his way, so this was beyond aggravating.

And all of it was keeping him in L.A. way longer than he wanted to be there.

The office walls were closing in on him. He was short-tempered with his staff, less than patient with his assistant, and what was worse was that Sienna was sounding more and more distant with each passing day. She kept telling him she was fine and just a little busy and trying to get her schedule clear

before the holiday break, but he was feeling like maybe she was having second thoughts about things—about them—and he just wanted to be done with all this bullshit so they could be in the same place together to talk things out.

“Who am I kidding? I want us to be in the same place because I’m feeling insecure.”

Yeah, that was a brand new feeling for him and he didn’t like it one damn bit.

The plan was to fly to North Carolina tomorrow night—taking the red-eye like Sienna had when she went home because he hadn’t been able to charter a flight.

Another aspect of all of this that was pissing him off.

Raking a hand through his hair, Mick leaned back in his chair and let out a long breath. He missed Sienna. Now that he saw what his future held, he wanted to grab it with both hands and get started on their happily ever after. Lord knows they waited long enough for it.

Last night, they had been video chatting, and Mick could tell she was just as weary of this setup as he was. She looked tired and he knew she was working too hard, but whenever he asked her about it, she never gave him a straight answer. Part of him reasoned it was because she knew he didn’t understand shit about the kind of research she was doing, but it didn’t matter to him if he understood it or not, he just wanted her to share her day with him. He never pushed, and whenever she asked about his day, he always told her everything in hopes of it prompting her to do the same, but basically all that accomplished was him dominating the conversation.

“Ugh...I’m freaking needy and pathetic,” he murmured.

Then he thought about the end of their conversation. She'd yawned and looked a little sleepy, but when she asked, "Baby, when are you coming home?", it meant the world to him because he loved hearing her word it like that.

"Just as soon as I can, princess. I swear," he'd told her.

Now if the universe would finish crapping all over his plans, he'd count that as a win.

They had made some progress on things, however. They decided not to put any house on the market until after the holidays—mainly because they were going to have to figure out all the logistics of his upcoming work schedule. Sienna had been very vocal about how she didn't want them living in her townhouse, because it was so small compared to everything he owned, and he hated that she felt inferior because of him. He didn't care how small her place was, as long as they were together, he'd love it. Hell, as long as they were under the same roof and able to sleep in the same bed at the end of the day, he'd be freaking ecstatic.

It was crazy how he'd gone twenty-three years without her, and now it had only been two weeks and he was ready to lose his mind with missing her.

His friends would probably laugh at him if they saw him now—carrying on and being all pissy because he missed his girl. Not to mention how he was willing to pack up and move across the country to be with her.

He remembered giving Riley, Matt, and Julian grief when they did the same thing for their girls, and now look at him.

"They'll find out eventually, but... maybe I'll wait before sharing the news," he murmured as he straightened in his seat and picked up the contract he had tossed aside earlier.

There was a knock on his office door, and he looked up as his assistant walked in. “Hey, sorry to bother you, but there’s someone here to see you.”

Mick looked at her like she was crazy. “Seriously, Lynn?” he asked. “You know I never see anyone without an appointment. Especially right now! I’ve got enough to do if I’m going to be out of here in time for Thanksgiving!”

She nodded. “I’m aware, but this is an exception and I didn’t think you’d mind.”

It was unreasonable for him to growl and shove everything off his desk in frustration, but it took a herculean effort not to do just that.

As if sensing his thoughts, Lynn gave him a knowing grin.

“Okay, fine,” he grumbled. “Whatever.”

All she did was give him a serene smile as she leaned against the door.

“I hope I’m not interrupting…”

“Sienna!” He nearly fell out of his chair at the sight of her. “What are you doing here?” Mick was instantly on his feet and had her in his arms in the blink of an eye.

“Like I said, I figured you wouldn’t mind,” Lynn commented before walking out the door and closing it behind her.

There were at least a dozen questions he wanted to ask, but he was too busy kissing Sienna to even ask one of them. Lifting her up, he carried her over to the sofa that lined one wall and set them both down on it. When she breathlessly pulled back and smiled at him, he swore all was right in the world again.

“I don’t understand. What are you doing here?”

“I’m coming home,” she told him.

“Um... what?”

Nodding, she wiggled in his lap to get comfortable. “Several things occurred to me when I got home a few weeks ago,” she began. “First, I really didn’t like where I lived.”

“Sienna... we’ve been over this. We were going to look for something together.”

“No, no, I realize that, but it wasn’t just the townhouse. I didn’t like where I lived in general. I’ve been there for the last ten years and it’s fine and there are a lot of great things about it, but it never felt like home.” Reaching up, she caressed his jaw. “Home is where you are.”

He knew exactly what she meant. “I was coming to you. I was flying out tomorrow.”

“I know, but... this is where you need to be. We both know that,” she told him. “It meant the world to me that you were willing to make the move so I wouldn’t have to, but... it’s unnecessary.”

“But... your job?”

“I handed in my resignation.”

“*What?!*”

She nodded. “Funny story. Remember the night we met up at Carmine’s?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, before I left my hotel, I was looking over an offer I had gotten. For a book.”

“A book?”

“Yes, a book. I had pitched an idea to a literary agent a while ago and received an offer on it. My plan was to think it over while I was on vacation,

but then you came along and the only thing I thought about was you. Us. This.” She gave him a loud smacking kiss before pulling back. “Anyway, a few days after Eleanor’s funeral, I was looking around and realized I still hadn’t put all the luggage away from our trip. So I was sorting through one of the suitcases and found that book proposal packet in one of my bags.”

“You never mentioned anything about writing...”

“Honestly, I didn’t think about it even once from the moment I saw you in the restaurant,” she said softly and he loved how her cheeks flushed at the admission.

“So what happens now? Did you talk to the publisher?”

Nodding, she said, “Of course I reached out to them immediately and profusely apologized for taking so long to get back to them and promptly accepted their offer.” She shrugged. “So, I’m going to work on my book.”

“That’s amazing!”

“It’s something I secretly always wanted to do, but I needed a little nudge.”

He grinned. “And you got one?”

With another nod, she carefully maneuvered off of his lap and walked over to the satchel she had dropped when he lifted her into his arms minutes ago. When she sat back down beside him, she reached into the bag and pulled out a book. “This was my nudge.”

“Our Adventure Book?” He looked at her quizzically.

“Remember all the texts and pictures I sent to Eleanor?”

“Yeah?”

“She turned them into a project,” she said quietly. “A final gift to me.” Reaching over, she opened the book and began helping him flip through the pages. When they were done, she let him read the letter her friend had included in it.

Chuckling softly, he looked at her. “Do you think I have a sexy, rock star swagger?”

Fortunately, she laughed with him. “Oh, no. I don’t think your ego needs stroking that badly.”

There was a dirty comeback on the tip of his tongue, but he kept it to himself.

“The funny thing is that I got this the same night I found the book proposal. I took that as a sign. And the more I thought about it, the more I envisioned myself sitting out on the deck of your house here in Malibu and listening to the waves crashing while I wrote all the words. So... if it’s alright with you, I’d really like to move here.”

He was fairly certain his eyes were comically wide. “Are you kidding? It’s more than alright! When? When can we make this happen?”

With a soft sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder. “I put my place up for sale three days ago and already have multiple offers. I just have to schedule the movers, so...”

This girl...

“When do you have to go back? Do you need to be there to oversee it all?”

“I figured you and I could talk about that tonight over dinner and celebrate.” Standing, she slowly walked around his office. When she stopped, she gave him a sexy grin. “How soundproof are these walls?”

Laughing, Mick shook his head. “No idea. I never tested them out.”

Her smile grew. “Good answer.”

Getting to his feet, he walked over and took her hand in his. “How about we test it out together?”

She giggled. “I don’t want to traumatize your assistant. She seems like a lovely woman.”

“Lynn’s the best and has known me for far too long. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say she’s already a step ahead of us.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning she’s away from the outer office and making sure everyone else is, too.”

“Oh,” she sighed breathily, her hand smoothing over his chest. “In that case, let’s start the celebration right here.”

“I love the way you think.”

Ten days later, Sienna was back in Durham, but this time, Mick was with her.

Taping up the last of her boxes, she realized she felt a little sad. This had been her home for the last ten years and it felt weird knowing she wouldn’t be coming back to it. It was small, and it wasn’t professionally decorated, but it had been hers.

“I think this is the last of it,” Mick said as he walked into the room and looked around. “These guys were great.” He nodded to the pile of boxes in front of her. “Are you ready for them to take these?”

She nodded and he must have sensed something was wrong because she was instantly in his arms. “I’m not regretting this,” she told him. “I guess I’m

more sentimental than I thought.”

“That’s one of the things I love about you,” he whispered. “You made this a home, Sienna. I’ve never done that before.” Tucking a finger under her chin, he gently forced her to look at him. “Promise me you’ll do that for us—that you’ll make it a home.”

“I really love the sound of that.”

“Me too,” he said before kissing the tip of her nose. “Come on. Let’s let the movers finish up. Then we just need to drop the keys with the real estate agent and we can head to the hotel.”

They were staying one more night and then flying back to L.A. in the morning. Mick had chartered a flight for them, and as much as she felt like it was a frivolous expense, part of her secretly enjoyed it.

And clearly, he did too.

On their way back to the hotel, they talked about their travel plans and how they felt everything with the move had gone, and it was just all nice and... normal. It felt good to have this chapter behind them and know that once they landed in California, that they were staying put for a while.

They were riding the elevator up to their floor when Mick reached for her hand. “I figured you would be pretty worn out by the time we got back here, so I made arrangements for room service.”

“Aww... thank you.” Smiling at him, she rested her head on his shoulder. “I really am beat. I know the movers did all the hard stuff, but I think I’m just mentally exhausted. Between our vacation and then prepping for the move and now the actual move, it’s all catching up to me. I’ll be happy to finally settle in at your place.”

“Our place,” he corrected.

That made her smile. “Our place.”

In the room, Sienna immediately started to strip. At the shocked look on Mick’s face, she waved him off. “Nothing sexy about this. I’m just sweaty and tired and desperately want a shower.” She kicked her sneakers to the side as she pulled her shirt up over her head. “Actually, I would have loved to soak in a nice hot tub, but... that’s not gonna happen.”

Even though there were plenty of luxury hotels in the area, Sienna had refused to let him book one. It was already late and they were literally only going to be there to sleep, so she had convinced Mick that it was okay to stay at a regular hotel for one night—without the five-star amenities.

Now she was regretting it.

“You can soak tomorrow night for as long as you want,” he assured her as he walked into the bathroom and turned the shower on for her. “Go and relax and dinner should be up soon.” With a quick kiss, he added, “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The hot spray felt so damn good and as much as she would have preferred a bath, this was doing the trick. And considering that hotels never ran out of hot water, she knew she could stay in there for as long as she needed.

At some point, however, Mick knocked on the door. “Sienna? You okay in there?”

“Um... yeah. Sorry. I lost track of time.”

“No worries, love. Dinner’s on its way up, so I just wanted to let you know.”

“Okay,” she told him as she turned off the water. It took almost ten minutes for her to get out, dry off, and moisturize herself from head to toe,

before she forced herself to leave the steamy comfort of the bathroom. But when she did...

The room was bathed in candlelight. Soft music was playing. There was a beautifully set table with a dozen roses set in a crystal vase in the middle of it.

“What is happening right now?” she whispered.

Mick stepped forward, looking utterly dashing—something she couldn’t quite comprehend since he’d been as big of a mess as she was earlier—and held out his hand to her.

“Mick?”

“Michael,” he corrected with a lopsided grin. “Come sit down.”

She felt ridiculous in her robe, with her hair up in a towel and no makeup on. “What’s all this?”

“This... is dinner.” He lifted the lid over her plate and uncovered grilled salmon, roasted baby potatoes, and broccolini—one of her favorite dishes. “We’ve got freshly baked bread and a nice field greens salad, plus some white wine.” Taking his seat across from her, he grinned as he took the lid off of his own plate.

“How did you do this? I know for a fact this hotel doesn’t have food like this on the menu. When you said room service, I just thought you meant burgers.”

With a serene smile, he poured them each a glass of wine. “I made some calls. Shaughnessy has played in Raleigh multiple times and there were several caterers we used for those shows. I asked if they also did small romantic dinners and it turns out they do.”

“What in the world...?”

“You got your way on the hotel, but there was no way I was going to have us sit down to sub-par burgers and cold fries.” He pointed to her plate. “You’re going to love the potatoes. They’re fantastic.”

After one bite, she had to agree. “So... is this how things are going to be? You’re going to make calls and spoil me rotten?”

“For the rest of your life,” he said solemnly. “Because you, my sweet Sienna, deserve to be spoiled.”

“You could be creating a monster,” she teased. “You’ve been warned.”

“That’s okay, but I was hoping to create something a little different.”

“Oh?” She took a bite of the salmon and almost moaned at how good it was.

“A family,” he said quietly, and Sienna felt like her heart simply stop.

“You want...?”

He nodded. “I really do. I know we haven’t talked about it, and I’ll totally understand if you don’t want to, but...”

Shaking her head, she put her fork down and reached for him. “I... I don’t even know if it’s possible. Obviously, we’re getting started a little late. I know it’s harder to get pregnant at my age, but...”

“That’s okay,” he said, squeezing her hand. “We can adopt or look into a surrogate or foster kids... whatever road we have to take, I want a family with you. I just thought we should open that dialogue.” Then he gave her a lopsided grin. “I was going to wait until we got back to the West Coast and settled in before bringing it up, but...I couldn’t wait.”

It was more than she ever thought she'd have. She remembered how she'd felt that night at dinner with her brother and sister-in-law. "I want what my brother has," she said. "Any chance we can have that right now?"

Laughing, he released her hand and gave her a sexy grin. "Sweetheart, we can practice as much as you want and make appointments to see whatever doctors we need to."

Just the thought of it was a little intimidating, but she knew he was being practical and would make sure she had the best care and would make appointments with the top fertility doctors in the country.

No doubt he'd already researched who they were.

"I don't even know what to say. I'm...I'm a little overwhelmed. Every time I think I've stepped out of my comfort zone or dreamed as big as I could dream, you prove me wrong." Then she smiled at him and she felt the familiar sting of tears. "I'm telling you, I have never been as emotional as I have these last few months!"

The smile he gave her was patient and full of love, just like it always was.

"I love you, and all I want is for you to be happy."

"I am. You have to know that. My life was kind of boring and uneventful before you came back into it, but I'm so glad you did."

"Me too."

"So...we're going to do this? We're going to start a family?"

She nodded eagerly. "Definitely!"

"Good," he replied, but his expression turned serious. "But... I have one request."

"O-kay..."

Slowly, Mick came to his feet and then kneeled down beside her. And if Sienna thought she was shocked before, it was nothing compared to how she felt right now.

“Sienna Ashley, I love you. I am so damn lucky that we found one another again, and that we finally have our chance to have a life together. We’ve worked out logistics and careers and homes, and now... our potential family. But more than anything, I want to have all of that with you as my wife.” He reached into his pocket and held out the most gorgeous ring she’d ever seen. “Will you marry me?”

“You have no idea how much I hate that I’m sitting here in a robe with a towel on my head,” she said with a shaky laugh, “but... yes! Yes, I’ll marry you!”

And in typical fashion, they sealed it with a kiss.

When they broke apart and Mick sat back down, he reached under the table and pulled out a beautifully wrapped box. It was definitely larger than a jewelry box—the size of a shirt box—but when he handed it to her, it was certainly heavier than a shirt.

“What is this?” she asked with a small laugh.

“Open it.”

Sienna studied it for a moment—the shiny white paper and the gorgeous pink bow—it was almost too pretty to open.

“Sienna...”

“Oh, hush. I was just admiring your handiwork.” Then she paused. “Although I have a feeling you didn’t wrap this yourself.”

“Trust me. If I had wrapped it myself, you would have noticed and cringed. I know my strengths.”

“Good to know.” Carefully, she took the bow off and then unwrapped the box. He stood and took the paper from her and immediately tossed it in the nearest trash can. When she lifted the lid and moved the tissue paper aside, she got a strange sense of déjà vu.

And then felt her smile grow.

“Our Adventure Book?” she asked as she looked up at him.

“I figured it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared to start documenting this next phase of our lives. Our next adventure.”

“I really love the sound of that.”

Standing, she kissed him and led him into the bedroom so they could start on that next adventure right now.

Epilogue

New Year's Eve, Las Vegas...

“I never thought I’d see the day...”

“After all this time...”

“I kind of feel like we should be giving him way more shit about this...”

“Knock it off, knock it off. Can’t you see he’s freaking out?” Riley Shaughnessy said to his friends and bandmates as he playfully fixed Mick’s tie. “Now it’s our turn to swoop in and make sure everything runs smoothly.” And with a wink, he took a step back. “You’ve trained us well.”

Mick wanted to roll his eyes, but he was actually very touched that Riley, Dylan, Matt, and Julian—along with their wives—had taken the time to be here with him.

“You sure you’re ready?” Julian asked with a grin.

“More than,” Mick replied. “I’ve waited my whole damn life for this moment.”

“Is there anything you need?” Dylan asked. “Anything you forgot?”

He shook his head. "I promised Sienna that everything was under control, and it is."

"Hmm..." Matt said as he fixed his boutonniere. "Now just to be clear, we're all allowed to kiss the bride after you say I Do, right?"

Laughing, Mick reached over and smacked him upside the head. "No one's kissing my beautiful bride but me."

"Gentlemen?" The wedding coordinator of the Graceland Wedding Chapel walked over to them. "Are we ready?"

"Absolutely," Mick said as he took his spot.

"I can't believe you're letting an Elvis impersonator sing instead of me," Riley grumbled from beside him. "I should be the one singing your wedding song."

With a weary sigh, Mick glanced at him. "We've been over this. You can sing our song later."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

Mick didn't have the chance to say anything else because the music started and... there she was.

His Sienna.

The chapel was fuller than he thought it would be, but between Sienna's family and his, and then the band and their wives, they made a decent crowd. And as their Elvis impersonator-slash-officiant crooned to "Can't Help Falling In Love", Mick watched as Sienna walked up the aisle on the arm of her father.

In a million years he never thought he'd get another chance with her, but now that he had, he was speechless.

It was everything he'd ever wanted, and she was worth the wait.

Looking for where it all began?
Meet Riley Shaughnessys family!!

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SHAUGHNESSY BROTHERS
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One

Why were people so incompetent? It was a question Aidan Shaughnessy asked himself far too many times a day. How difficult was it to follow instructions? How hard was it to read the damn directions?

“Clearly, it’s beyond anyone’s comprehension,” he muttered to himself as he walked through the model home of the new subdivision his company was working on.

The trim was crooked, the ceiling looked wavy, and the paint job was horrendous. Not only that, but when he reached the master bedroom, he saw the paint colors were completely wrong. Pulling out his phone, Aidan called his assistant and left her a message to get the designer on the job to meet him first thing Monday morning. It was already after seven at night, so Aidan knew no one would be around to clean up the mess now. With a weary sigh, he shut off all the lights and was locking up the house when his phone rang. Looking at the screen on his smartphone, Aidan felt some of the tension ease from his body.

“Hey, Dad,” Aidan said into the phone. “I’m running a bit behind, but I promise to have the pizza there by the time the game starts.” He smiled at the thought of having a couple of hours just to unwind and relax with his family. Most men would cringe at spending a Friday night at home with their father and teenage sister, but it was something Aidan looked forward to.

“See that you do,” his father said with a chuckle. “Darcy is having a fit that you’re not here yet. She’s threatening to eat all the brownies herself before you get here!”

That made Aidan laugh because although his seventeen-year-old sister loved to bake, she loved taunting her brothers with her delicious creations even more. “Tell her if she does that, I’ll make sure neither of the pizzas have pepperoni. I’ll load them with mushrooms and anchovies before I let her take away my dessert!”

Ian Shaughnessy laughed hard. He loved that the age difference between his youngest child and his oldest didn’t deter them from bantering with and teasing one another. “Oh, I’ll tell her, but be prepared for her wrath if you are one minute late.”

“Deal,” Aidan said and then called in their order to the local pizzeria.

“Hey, Aidan,” Tony said as he answered the phone. “Your usual?”

Shaking his head, Aidan couldn’t help but laugh. Small-town living. “Hey, Tony,” he said with a smile. “What do you think?”

“Two large pies, one with extra cheese and pepperoni and the other with sausage. Gimme twenty minutes, okay?”

“You got it, Tony. Thanks.” Disconnecting, Aidan turned and looked at the house he had just locked up. At least it was beautiful from the outside. Between the stonework, the colors, and the craftsman style, it made for a very appealing home. Aidan had spared no expense on the materials for the model. Everything was top of the line, and he used every upgrade available inside and out to dazzle potential buyers.

Taking a couple of steps back, he admired the landscaping. The grounds looked ready for a *Home and Garden* photo spread. Everything was perfectly manicured, and all the greenery was acclimating to its new soil and cooperating by staying green and in bloom.

If only the inside were up to the same caliber... “Okay, I have *got* to let that go for tonight,” he reminded himself as he walked over to his truck and climbed in. “Dad will have my hide if I spend the night complaining about work.”

You would think that at age thirty-four, parental disappointment wouldn’t faze a man, but Aidan was different. His father had been through so much in his life, had struggled so much after Aidan’s mother had died unexpectedly, that Aidan swore he would never do anything to cause his father any extra grief.

He left that to his siblings. And they were good at it.

In the years following his mother’s death, Aidan had wanted to do more to help his family out. The day after the funeral, Aidan told his father he wanted to quit college and come home, but Ian had put his foot down. Aidan knew his mother wouldn’t have wanted him to leave college, but at the time, he’d felt so helpless.

When he blew out his knee in his junior year, it officially ended any dreams of a career in the NFL. But he wasn’t disappointed about that now; his life was exactly where it was supposed to be. He had a construction business he had built up all on his own, and he was surrounded—for the most part—by his family.

Some of his brothers had moved away from their small North Carolina town, but Aidan didn’t resent them for it. Quite the opposite. He encouraged them to follow their dreams because that was exactly what their mother would have done. With their father preoccupied with raising a teenage girl after a houseful of boys, Aidan had taken it upon himself to be “the encourager” in the family.

Did he date? Sometimes.

Was he looking to settle down? Maybe.

Were there any prospects on the horizon? No.

Maybe he should do something about that, he thought as he drove through town to pick up dinner. The streets were crowded, but that was nothing new. It was Friday night and everyone was out and about. As his truck crept along Main Street with the windows down, Aidan was able to smile and wave to many familiar faces. This was what he did, who he was. But for some reason, tonight it bothered him.

Why wasn't he walking along the street holding hands with a woman? When exactly was the last time he had done that? Searching his memory, he couldn't even remember when. Was it with Amber or Kelly? Hell, he couldn't even remember their names or their faces. That was a surefire clue it had been too long.

"Nothing I can do about it tonight," Aidan muttered and pulled into the last spot in front of the Italian restaurant. There was a line out the door and Aidan was relieved for the side entrance reserved for takeout orders. As he walked in, he was greeted by the same faces he saw in there every Friday night. But by the time Aidan had paid and was walking back out to his truck with the pizzas, he was feeling a little down for some reason.

Aidan had had too long a day to puzzle out the source of this sudden depression, however; for tonight, he vowed to enjoy himself. He loved catching up with what Darcy was up to and hearing about how she was doing in school. And even though Aidan and his dad saw each other on a daily basis because Ian Shaughnessy was in charge of all the electrical inspections on

new construction in the county, Aidan knew his dad always just liked having him around.

Ian was dedicated to his children, and it didn't matter how old they got or how far away they moved: Ian Shaughnessy wanted nothing more than to see his children happy.

Just as Lillian would have wanted.

Pulling up to his childhood home, Aidan felt a lot of the tension leave his body. This was his haven. No matter what was going on in his life, he still enjoyed coming back here and spending time. Not to mention that right now, the scent of hot pizza was practically making him drool and he had no doubt his little sister was pacing the floor waiting for him to get inside and feed her.

His suspicions were confirmed as soon as he walked through the door.

"It's about time, Aidan!" his sister cried, grabbing the pizza boxes from his hands. "Honestly, a person could die of starvation waiting for you."

"Excuse me, Duchess," he said with a chuckle, "but some of us have to work for a living. We can't all have food delivered on our every whim."

She rolled her eyes at him as she placed the pizza on the kitchen table. "I would love to have a job, big Brother. But you and Dad and the rest of the Shaughnessy bullies won't let me."

"Bullies?" he asked with a laugh, washing his hands and winking at his father as he walked in from the living room where the pregame bantering was on. "There are Shaughnessy bullies? Why wasn't I told of this?"

"Oh." Darcy swatted his arm playfully. "You're the captain of the bully squad."

"Now we're a squad?"

“Aidan!” she huffed, and plopped down into her seat at the table. “You know darn well you have been the biggest voice in keeping me from getting a job. If you would—”

“Darce, we’ve been over this before. You don’t *need* to work right now. You need to focus on your schoolwork so you can get into a good college.”

Darcy looked from her father to her brother and back again. “A good college? Don’t you really mean one that’s close to home?” This wasn’t a new argument, but Darcy was hoping she’d wear them down eventually.

“There are plenty of colleges close to home,” Aidan said evasively, reaching for a slice of the fast-cooling pizza.

“But I don’t want to go to any of them.”

“Can we please have one meal without an argument?” Ian finally chimed in.

“I’m not arguing, Dad,” Darcy countered. “I’m simply stating that there are plenty of great colleges that aren’t within a ten-mile radius of our house.”

“So in answer to your question, Dad,” Aidan said with a smile, “no. We cannot have one meal without an argument.” Normally that was all it took to get Darcy to back down, but tonight she slammed her palms on the table.

“Why won’t anyone take this seriously?” she snapped, looking at her father. “Everyone else was allowed to pick where they wanted to go to college. Why can’t I?”

“Come on, Darce,” Aidan interrupted. “It’s been a crappy day. Can’t we just enjoy dinner?”

If there was one thing Darcy had learned to perfect in her seventeen years, it was the art of the argument. She had even been on the debate team

since her sophomore year, bringing home a trophy or two, and learning some skills that had come in very useful with her siblings. She thought of it as a form of mental self-defense. Unfortunately, she just didn't have it in her tonight. Being the only female in a male-dominated household, there were so many things about her life that didn't seem fair, but she had learned to accept most of them.

Out of her five brothers, she was probably closest to Aidan, even though he was the oldest. He was one of the few siblings who still lived in the area, so she saw him the most and she enjoyed spending time with him. Lately, she could tell something was up with him, even though Aidan seemed unwilling to admit it.

Darcy could think of a million reasons why Aidan's day had been crappy. All he did was work and go home alone and spend Friday nights having pizza with her and their father. *Bor-ing*. She wished he'd find someone and go out on a date. Have a social life. She supposed he was good-looking, but if he didn't go out and find a girl soon, he was going to be old and gray and no one was going to want him. Probably not the best time to bring up the old and gray thing.

"Fine," she grumbled. "Why was your day crappy?"

Finishing his slice of pizza, Aidan went to the refrigerator and grabbed himself the one beer he allowed himself every Friday night. "Oh, you know, it's the same old thing. No one reads the instructions on the job site, things aren't getting done the way I want them, my assistant is asking for an assistant. Nothing new."

"Everything was looking good when I was on site on Tuesday," Ian said. "What changed?"

“The paint job is crap, there’s some trim that’s messed up, and the decorator got all the color tones wrong. I did a walk-through tonight before I left, which is why I was late getting dinner, and I just couldn’t believe my eyes. It was as if I had never said a word about anything. I mean, how difficult is it to follow a set of plans?”

“So what are you going to do?” Ian asked, knowing his son was a perfectionist by nature and wouldn’t rest until everything was up to his standards.

“I’m bringing in a new painting crew, and I’ve put a call in to meet the decorator on Monday morning.” He shook his head. “Tired of wasting my time.”

“Ever think maybe you’re looking a little too closely at things?” Darcy asked, and then instantly regretted her comment when her brother aimed an angry glare in her direction.

“I look at things the way they are meant to be looked at,” he said defensively. “The craftsmanship I put out there is what makes Shaughnessy Construction stand out. If I relax my standards, then what?”

“Sorry,” she mumbled, reaching for another slice of pizza.

“Aidan, don’t take it out on Darcy. All she’s saying is that you have a craftsman’s eye. The typical home owner and buyer won’t notice the things you see.”

“So that makes it right? That makes it okay to just put a crappy product out there? I can’t believe you would suggest such a thing.”

“I’m not suggesting anything of the sort, Son,” Ian said. “I’m just suggesting that you relax a bit.” He looked at Darcy slouching in her seat,

staring at her plate, then back at Aidan, who looked ready to turn the table upside down. “Who’s up for a game of bowling?”

Darcy and Aidan looked up at him incredulously. “Bowling?” Darcy repeated. “I’m not going to the bowling alley with my dad and brother on a Friday night. Forget about it.”

Now it was Ian’s turn to roll his eyes. “Video game bowling.” Ian pulled Darcy out of her seat and then turned to his son. “Don’t make me pull you up too. C’mon. Family bowling in the living room. Now. Let’s go!”

It was the last thing Aidan wanted to do, but he knew it would make his father happy so he didn’t argue. Five minutes later, the three of them were standing in the middle of the living room choosing their order of play. Ten minutes later, it was as if the earlier tension had never even happened.

And that was what was most important to Aidan—his family’s happiness.

Later that night, Aidan sat alone in his apartment. It was late, but his brain wouldn’t shut down enough for him to go to sleep. He was restless. His skin felt too tight for his body. And for the life of him, he didn’t know what to do about it.

Darcy’s comment about being too nitpicky wasn’t new, so he wondered if that was really enough to keep him awake. *Meticulous* was a word that was often thrown around when people talked about him. It didn’t bother him.

Much.

Meticulous could be a good thing if his brothers didn’t add “anal-retentive control freak” to it all the damn time.

He rested his head back on the pillow and let out a breath. If he allowed himself to stop being the big brother for a minute and just be a bystander, he could admit Darcy wasn't asking for anything out of the ordinary. He thought she was probably itching to spread her wings. But there was no way in hell he or any of his brothers were going to let her go off to some faraway college on her own. She'd just have to learn to deal with it. But he supposed there were some things they could compromise on.

Looking at the clock on the wall, he saw it was after midnight. He should be tired.

Instead, he grabbed his cell phone and pulled up Hugh's number. Although Aidan couldn't remember where exactly his brother was this month, he knew it was somewhere on the West Coast, and three hours earlier.

"If you're calling me this late on a Friday night, it can't be good," Hugh said as he answered the phone.

Aidan chuckled. "Maybe I just wanted to hear your cheery voice."

"Yeah, right," Hugh said with his own laugh. "Seriously, everything okay? This is late for you."

The comment burned more than it should have. He was responsible, so what? Why did everyone have to make it sound like there was something wrong with him? "It's not that late," Aidan grumbled. "I just..." He paused. "Something's going on with Darcy."

"Oh shit," Hugh muttered. "That is all on you and Dad, bro. There is no way I'm dealing with a teenage girl. She scares the hell out of me."

This time Aidan's laugh was hearty. "For crying out loud, Hugh, she's a child. And she's our sister!"

"What is it this time?"

“It’s mostly the same song and dance, but she’s getting more...vocal about it. She kind of yelled at me and Dad tonight about the whole college thing.”

Hugh sighed loudly. “Listen, Darcy is going to be pissed because, well, she’s Darcy. She’s a female, and females like to argue. Aidan, look...it’s Friday night. I’ve got a resort filled to capacity—”

“I’m thinking of letting her work for me a couple of days a week after school.”

“That’s brave, man. Very brave. And she’s good with that? I would have thought she’d take issue with having to work with family.”

“I haven’t mentioned it to her yet. I just thought of it right before I called you. What do you think?”

“Like I said, you’re brave.”

“Bravery has nothing to do with it. It’s just that—”

“She doesn’t need to work,” Hugh interrupted. “Our sister doesn’t want for anything, Aidan. Dad takes care of everything for her. Why can’t she just be grateful and...go shopping or something?”

“I agree with you, but maybe she wants to feel like she’s contributing.”

“To what?”

“To her family,” Aidan said. “With all of us moved out, now it’s just her and Dad at home.”

“And you.”

Aidan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t live at home. I have a place of my own and—”

“And you still spend a lot of time at home,” Hugh said carefully. “It’s not a bad thing, Aidan. I think it’s great you’re close by in case either of them

needs you, but don't you ever want more?"

How had the subject suddenly turned to him? This wasn't about him; this was about Darcy. Ignoring Hugh's question, Aidan went back to his original train of thought. "If she has a job, maybe it'll pacify her about the whole college thing, and I can still keep an eye on her."

"And working for her brother is going to accomplish that?"

"It's a start."

"Fine. Go ahead and ask her, but do me a favor."

"What?"

"Have someone record it. I want to see her reaction." He laughed for too long before he realized Aidan wasn't. "Look, man, do what you think is best. Let me know what you need from me and I'll do it. You're the responsible one in the family. You always seem to know exactly what to do and what to say to smooth things over. If you think offering Darcy a job with your company is the answer, then do it."

"But...?" Aidan knew there was more.

"But..." Hugh began, "maybe it's time for you to stop smoothing things over for everyone else and start doing something for yourself."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dude, it's midnight on a Friday freaking night and you're on the phone with your *brother*. And that's after you went and had dinner with your father and sister. For God's sake, go out! Go on a date! When was the last time you were even with a woman?"

"None of your damn business," Aidan snapped.

“That long, huh?” Hugh chuckled. “Okay, fine. Don’t tell me. I can pretty much guess.” He stopped and collected his thoughts. “Just...think about it, okay?”

“About what?”

“And you call me a dumbass,” Hugh said with exasperation. “Think about *yourself*, damn it! Think about doing something on a Friday night that isn’t family related. Think about going out with a beautiful woman and wining and dining her and spending the night with her nails raking down your damn back.”

Aidan hadn’t thought about it that way, but he had a feeling he’d be thinking about it a lot tonight. “Fine. I’ll think about it.”

“Hey, and Aidan?”

“What?” he said grumpily.

“You can call me any damn time you want. Seriously.”

A small smile broke on Aidan’s face. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

“Keep me posted on the whole Darcy situation.”

Aidan agreed and they hung up. He was no closer to any decisions about anything. The only thing that had changed was that he suddenly had an itch that needed to be scratched.

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ABOUT

Samantha Chase is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller of contemporary romance that's hotter than sweet, sweeter than hot. She released her debut novel in 2011 and currently has more than eighty titles under her belt – including *THE CHRISTMAS COTTAGE* which was a Hallmark Christmas movie in 2017! She's a Disney enthusiast who still happily listens to 80's rock. When she's not working on a new story, she spends her time reading romances, playing way too many games of Solitaire on Facebook, wearing a tiara while playing with her sassy pug Maylene...oh, and spending time with her husband of 32 years and their two sons in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

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