

The Beach House

The beach house she'd rented for the summer was not at all what she'd expected. For one, it was much bigger than she'd envisioned. She'd pictured a quaint little cottage, but this was a *house*. It was also much closer to the beach than she'd thought it would be. The backyard was basically thirty yards of sand and then Atlantic Ocean.

And it apparently came with a half-naked man.

She definitely hadn't been expecting that.

Missy could only see him from the chest down. The rest of him was underneath the sink in the kitchen. But the expanse from his hard chest to the low-riding waistband of his dark blue denim jeans was bare. And awesome. All of him, even the denim clad part, was awesome.

So yeah, the place was pretty much perfect. She could stay here forever with her shoulder propped against the doorframe between the kitchen and living room. Watching him. Well, watching half of him.

For just a moment, she felt a little creepy, ogling him without him knowing it. Then he reached and shifted and muscles bunched and rippled under tan skin and she simply couldn't feel bad enough to stop watching. She was on vacation. She was on the rebound from a big heartbreak. She'd practically been left at the altar.

She deserved to ogle a hot guy for a few minutes. Or all summer.

Suddenly, the idea of sitting on the back porch watching a whole bunch of hot guys walk the beach or, if there was a God, playing sand volleyball, all summer seemed like the best thing to happen to her in a long time.

She was going to get over everything. That's why she was here. Feeling a shot of lust for another man was a great step in that direction, in her opinion.

Missy ran a hand over her chin just to be sure she wasn't actually drooling.

Dang. When had she last seen a half-naked man anyway?

Mr. Swanson. Last Saturday when he'd been mowing his lawn. And that had been *nothing* like this.

Other than her seventy-eight year old neighbor, she couldn't remember. It was, obviously, Blake. She hadn't been with anyone else in three years. Okay, in her whole life. She'd met Blake when she was sixteen. He'd been her first boyfriend. Her first everything. Her *only* everything. She'd been with him since he'd smiled at her after the District Championship football game where he'd scored the winning touchdown.

But they hadn't had sex in almost three months. Which meant they hadn't slept together for two months and three weeks before he dumped her.

That probably should have been a red-flag. Missy rolled her eyes. Yeah. Big red flag. But she'd been so caught up in wedding plans that she hadn't really noticed how long it had been. Or that he'd been acting distant. And weird. And unable to write his wedding vows.

After being together for eight years, writing their wedding vows should have been the easy part. But it hadn't been. For either of them. Speaking of red flags...

"Dammit-fucking-sonofabitch!"

Missy jumped as the man under the sink swore and something metal clattered to the floor.

And a sense of foreboding washing over her. That voice sounded familiar.

But no. It couldn't be. She was three hundred miles away from home. There's no way she knew the guy under the sink.

"You cocksucker," the guy muttered.

No. No way. It couldn't be. How? Why? Missy groaned. But it was Jared. Jared had been doing home and car repairs around her parents' house since he'd turned twelve and gotten his first tool set from her parents for a birthday gift. She'd heard that word said exactly that way easily a hundred times. It was her dad's favorite too.

Something about that made her heart feel kind of warm.

The word cocksucker made her heart feel warm?

She was definitely losing it.

What the *hell* was he doing here?

"*Jared?* What the hell?" Missy stomped further into the kitchen.

She heard the dull thud of something hitting something else—like a skull hitting a pipe under a sink.

"Fucking sonofabitch," he muttered. Then he slid out from underneath the sink.

Oh yeah. It was definitely Jared.

But it was... a really hot guy too.

Missy swallowed hard as he got to his feet, his abs and shoulders flexing as he moved. Holy crap.

But... she'd seen Jared half-naked before. He'd been playing football and running through sprinklers and doing yardwork—all without a shirt— at her parents' house since she'd been five. She wouldn't have missed *this*. The muscles, the skin, the scruff, the... hotness.

She'd been attracted to Jared since junior high when her best friend Heather had developed a crush on him. Listening to Heather talk about him and watching her flirt with him—and him flirt back a little—had made Missy realize that, while it felt like he was one of her brothers, he wasn't actually related to her. And that he was good-looking. And sweet. And funny. And charming.

But yeah, this holy-shit-hotness was new.

Probably.

Of course, ever since he'd shot her down three years ago—on the night of her engagement party as a matter of fact—she'd blocked any thoughts of Jared being anything more than her brothers' annoying friend.

It was easier that way.

"You're early," were his first words to her.

He didn't look happy to see her.

But Missy wasn't sure she cared. His light brown hair was ruffled, like he'd just rolled out of bed, run a hand through it, and gone to work. He hadn't shaved. In maybe a couple of days. The scruff on his jaw and the loose fitting jeans and the streak of dirt on his left pec and his left cheek should have made him look like a slob.

They so didn't.

The scruff made her palms itch with the urge to run her hand over his jaw. The jeans rode low enough that she could see the outline of every ab muscle and the dirt just made him look manly.

Dammit. Jared couldn't look manly. Or sexy. Or hot.

He was *Jared*.

And, most importantly of all, he didn't want her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. Or tried to demand. But demanding kind of required frowning and looking displeased. Which was hard to pull off when her gaze was wandering all over his body.

"I came down to make sure the place was good to go before you got here," he said, shoving a hand through his hair.

He was about six-two. She knew that. But suddenly his height, and the width of his shoulders, and the size of his... hands... seemed like new revelations.

What the hell was going on? She saw him without a shirt and she was suddenly a quivering mass of hormones? She'd known him her entire life. She'd overheard him talking about other girls with her brothers—and none of those guys would be accused of being gentlemen. She'd seen him hungover, and sick as a dog, and pissed off, and sad.

And, most of all—He. Didn't. Want. Her.

He'd turned her down. In no uncertain terms. Made it clear nothing could happen with them. Painfully clear.

And right now she was reeling from being dumped after giving a guy eight years of her life. And she was feeling... restless. Lost. Unsure. Scared. She was three hundred miles from home, trying to plan how to start over, trying to tell herself that she was loveable and desirable and valuable.

Getting worked up over Jared was so not the way to feel any of those things.

In that moment, she realized that Jared's rejection had gotten to her even more than having her fiancé of three years, the man she'd been with since her sophomore year of high school, tell her that he didn't want to marry her.

Enough red flags already. She and Blake were over. And she and Jared were never going to start.

Missy forced herself to concentrate. Jared was here, messing with her mind and hormones, because... "You came down to fix this place up?" she asked.

Jared was in construction. In fact, he'd started out learning from and working for Missy's dad. Neither of her brothers had wanted to go into building, but Jared had loved working beside her dad, Ben, ever since he was a little kid.

Clearly going out on his own and working his ass off to get his business built up had also built his body up.

Damn.

“You’re going to be here for two months,” he said. “Had to be sure it was okay.”

Missy frowned. It was true that Jared had been around, fixing things, taking care of things, checking on things, for her and her family all his life. Her dad had been like his father. His dad had left Jared’s mom when she got pregnant and had then died in a motorcycle accident when Jared was three. Jared had been Missy’s brother, Drew’s, best friend since pre-school and Ben had taken him under his wing. Missy, four years younger than Drew and Jared, had never known a time when Jared wasn’t a part of her family.

But this beach house was three hundred miles from home. And Jared’s mom, Kay, had set this up for Missy. Kay knew the owner. She never would have sent Missy to a run-down shack.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she told him.

“Yeah, I did.” He didn’t say it with enthusiasm. It was more like he was annoyed that he’d had to do it.

She crossed her arms. “Drew made you come?”

Jared frowned. “No.”

“My dad?”

“No.”

“Your mom?”

His frown deepened. “No. Damn, Miss, I don’t need someone to make me come make sure you’re okay.”

Then why was he acting all pissy about being here? “Well... thanks, I guess. Are you done?”

“Not quite.”

Missy thought she saw something in his eyes with that answer. Something that made it seem like those words meant more than they seemed to on the surface. But she shook her head. She was tired. It had been a long drive and she was emotionally exhausted and she’d only had Pringles, M&M’s and diet root beer so far today. There was nothing in his eyes. It was all in *her* mind.

“So when will you be done?” she asked.

“Day after tomorrow.”

The day she was supposed to get here if she hadn’t gotten her stuff wrapped up and decided to hit the road early. She just couldn’t handle being in their small home town one more minute. Everyone knew everything about everyone else there. She and Blake had both grown up there. She couldn’t go to the store or the post office or take a walk without getting sympathetic looks.

She didn’t want sympathy. Blake wasn’t good enough for her. She was better off.

Yeah, so she’d wasted eight years of her life...

She did *not* need sympathy.

“You were going to be done before I got here?” she asked. He didn’t seem thrilled to see her now, so it made sense that he hadn’t been expecting to see her at all.

“That was the plan.”

“But I’m early.”

“Yeah.” He definitely didn’t seem pleased about that.

In that moment, a streak of... something... went through Missy. Annoyance. That’s what it felt like. But it also felt like hurt. She’d rented this beach house from Kay’s friend. Missy wasn’t an idiot. She wouldn’t just go off somewhere that she didn’t know would be safe. She’d done her homework here. But Jared had thought he had to come check up on her? And *before* she got there. He’d planned to completely avoid actually seeing her or spending time with her.

Well... fuck him.

“I could have handled it.” She gestured toward the sink, where the cabinet doors beneath were still hanging open.

He gave her a look that said *really?*

Okay, so she knew nothing about home repair. She’d grown up with a dad who was a contractor. She’d never needed to fix so much as a loose screw.

“I could have called someone,” she amended. “I’m a big girl.”

“I handled it,” Jared said firmly. “I only have a couple more things to do.”

“Jared—”

“Miss, the place is nice. But your typical forty-five minute showers would have turned into an hour and a half with the water pressure in the bathroom. You would have tried to lock the back door and realized it only had a hook and eye lock and would have freaked out about being murdered in your sleep. You would have heard the back shutter slapping the house in the wind and would have tried to climb out there and duct tape it to the window or something and broken your neck. You would have tried to put half of your left over Chinese food down the disposal in here and would have clogged it up the first night. I’m just taking care of a few little things.”

Missy stared at him, unable to breathe.

Holy... crap.

He was right about every single one of those things. And he’d taken care of all of them. Little things that no one else would have thought worth fixing, but he’d known they would be a big deal to her.

Missy felt tears stinging her eyes. This was so unfair. She’d put herself out there. Right after Blake proposed and she’d asked for twenty-four hours to think about it—yeah, yeah, another red flag. She’d done too many Blow Jobs... the shot, not the actual jobs... and told Jared he could have her if he wanted her.

He’d said “I can’t.” It had been a short, direct, very clear answer. A very heartbreaking, humiliating clear answer.

But now he was here—taking care of her and showing that he knew her better than anyone did and, more, that he *cared* about her. And looking like sex personified. She couldn’t forget that part.

This was not cool. Not cool at all.

This, *he*, was the last thing she needed right now. The guy she’d thrown herself at within hours of being proposed to by another man. The other man who had, ultimately, broken her heart and humiliated her further.

Definitely not cool.

“You drove five hours one way to fix a sink,” she said, trying to sound like she thought that was the stupidest thing he’d ever done. Instead of what she was actually thinking—that it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her. “That’s crazy.”

“Yeah well, that’s not new,” he said, shoving a hand through his hair again—no wonder it was perpetually mussed— and looking as mixed up as she currently felt.

Mixed up? That made her ask, “What do you mean?”

“My being crazy because of you isn’t anything new.”

Something coursed through her at his words. Something that felt like desire. Or panic. Either way, they were both very unwelcome emotions where Jared was concerned.

He hadn’t said “crazy *about you*” but her stupid tired, Pringle-laden mind was making it kind-of sound like that. She could *not* read stuff into his expressions and words and body language. She could *not* handle being rejected and embarrassed. Again.

Missy started to back up, needing some space suddenly. “I’m going to—um—go to the store.”

“The store,” he repeated.

“Need... supplies.”

She’d buy water. And fruit. That would help purge her body of the salt and sugar and carbs and preservatives that were, apparently, making her stupid.

“Supplies?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got a list all made up. The store was going to be my first stop anyway.”

He wasn’t buying it. She could tell. But she needed to get away. At least for a little bit. Like as long as he didn’t have a shirt on. Or as long as he was *here*.

She headed for the closest exit—the back door.

“You coming back?” he asked.

Missy didn’t look back at him. “Of course.”

“Today?”

If she had to. And she did. She didn’t know anyone here and she didn’t have anywhere else to stay. She’d paid for this place. “Of course,” she said again, trying not to act like she was fidgety and too warm and imagining pushing him back against the fridge and unzipping his jeans and...

She’d see if he said “I can’t” then.

“Miss—”

“I’ll be back,” she said quickly, putting her hand on the back screen door.

“Missy—”

She pushed... and the entire door fell onto the back steps.

Missy stood, her hand still up in front of her, staring.

“Haven’t got that finished.”

Jared had come up behind her and she lurched forward, away from the body heat and the voice that seemed to rumble through her and the temptation to do something really stupid.

“No problem, I’ll call someone,” she said, already at the bottom of the three steps and on the back patio.

“No, you won’t,” he said firmly. “I’ve got this.

Yeah, well, at least one of them could say that.

Missy definitely couldn’t. She didn’t have this. She didn’t have anything. Everything was out of control and up in the air and spinning her around. With the wedding, she’d been in planning mode, organizing and orchestrating, for the past almost-a-year. Before that even, she’d had a plan. She’d known how things were going to go. She and Blake were going to finish school, get jobs, buy a house and get married. Everything was falling into place.

Then the job thing had proved elusive and Blake had wanted to wait on the house—red flag number four-thousand-and-two—so they’d settled on an apartment. And then Blake had come to her, told her he couldn’t choose a tux for his groomsmen or book the plane tickets for their honeymoon or any of the other things she’d put on his to-do list. Because he didn’t want to marry her. He didn’t want to be with her anymore at all.

So, now, she was jobless, homeless after the summer rental was up, fiancé-less and plan-less.

But she would *not* make an idiot of herself. She would *not*. She couldn’t handle anything else not going her way. She just couldn’t. This summer was about getting a new plan and feeling a semblance of control again. So far, her plan was to get up every morning, walk on the beach, have coffee, read a book, take a nap, walk on the beach again and then have wine.

She was absolutely positive she could make all of that happen.

But she had to get rid of Jared first.

Missy cut across the back of the two houses next to her, not even able to stop and appreciate the gorgeous view of the ocean. She walked fast and with intense focus—no pausing, no thinking, no fantasizing.

Ten minutes later she was pushing a cart through the tiny general store.

She grabbed apples, peaches, raspberries, bottled drinking water and then, because she was a realist, she added coffee, wine and chocolate cupcakes.

“Hi, find everything?” the checker asked as Missy unloaded her cart on the conveyor belt.

“Yep. No problem.”

“You just here for the summer?”

Missy looked up. The woman was in her fifties, a little gray dusting her hair, her smile wide and bright. Her name tag read “Marjorie”. For some reason, her friendly, pleasant face made Missy take a huge, deep breath and she felt some tension leave her shoulders.

She returned the smile and nodded. “Yes. I’m renting the Parson place.”

“Oh!” Marjorie’s eyes got wider. “Emily told me she was renting the place this summer. So you’re the one that Jared is fixing it up for.”

And the tension was right back. Slowly Missy nodded. “You’ve met Jared?”

“Oh, sure. He’s come in each day he’s been here. What a nice guy.”

Missy couldn’t argue with that. Jared was nice. He’d always been nice to her. Except, of course, when he’d crushed her heart the night she’d gotten engaged.

“Yes, Jared’s... a good friend,” Missy said.

“A friend?”

It didn’t escape Missy’s noticed that the woman had yet to slide one item across the beeper-thing that would start this whole check-out process. “Yes. I’ve known Jared all my life.”

“Oh, that’s nice. No wonder he’s been working so hard on the place.”

Missy frowned slightly. “How hard has he been working?”

“He’s been here for about a week,” Marjorie said.

“A week?” Missy repeated, stunned.

That would mean that he left to come down here the very next day after Blake broke their engagement. Of course she knew the entire town had known all about it immediately. It was a very small town and that was big news. But he'd left immediately?

Blake had broken up with her at nine p.m. By ten the next morning Jared's mom had called and offered Missy a chance to get away for a couple of weeks. Missy had asked about a couple of months. By noon she'd rented the beach house until mid-August.

And, apparently, Jared had hit the road.

"So there's nothing going on between you?" Marjorie asked, finally sliding the container of berries over the scanner.

Missy had to swallow hard. No, there was nothing going on between them. But hearing it, and admitting it, made her heart hurt. *Stupid, stupid*, stupid as that was. She shook her head. "He's like a brother to me."

Marjorie smiled. "There are several single young women around here that will be happy to hear that."

Missy was sure that was true. And that made her heart hurt even more. *Stupid!* "He's met some of the other people in town?" she asked. She had to make small-talk didn't she? It would be rude not to.

"Oh, sure. We're a tight-knit community other than the tourists," Marjorie said. "Newcomers are always noticed. And when they look like Jared does, they don't just get to sit at the bar with a burger and beer, you know?"

Missy wasn't sure she did. Or that she wanted to. "He's been going out with someone?"

Surely not. He was here for a week. He was leaving. He lived far away...

But Missy knew that didn't matter. Jared's longest relationship had lasted about two months. One week would be quite comfortable for him. Especially if he could then put three hundred miles between him and the girl he let down with a "I'm just not in a place where I can be what you need." She'd actually heard him use his classic line in person one night at a street dance.

Still, she thought maybe it sounded better than "I can't."

"Oh, he's just been flirting," Marjorie said. "I don't think he's even danced with anyone."

Missy felt a insanely intense wave of relief hearing that.

Like it mattered to her. It had nothing to do with her. Nothing. At. All.

“Brittney keeps asking though.”

Missy pivoted as someone behind her spoke. The blond smiling at her was very pretty. She was, actually, exactly Jared’s type.

He liked women of all shapes, sizes and colors, but he did seem to have more notches in his bedpost that were blond with blue eyes and big breasts.

Missy had reddish-brown hair, brown eyes and had more butt than boobs.

“Brittney?” Missy asked. Unless this girl talked about herself in the third person, she wasn’t the one asking Jared to dance over and over.

“My sister,” the girl said.

“They’re twins,” Marjorie added.

Missy barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “He keeps saying no though?” she asked.

The girl shrugged. “Yeah. We figured he must have a girlfriend.”

He didn’t. He’d never had a girlfriend. Missy frowned as she thought about that. But it was true. Jared had never had a real girlfriend. At least not by Missy’s definition—someone he was with for two consecutive major holidays, who’d met his family and hung out with his friends. Someone he knew well enough to know that every unidentifiable noise after ten p.m. meant a serial killer was coming for her. Someone he would drive three hundred miles to check on...

She shut that down as she handed Marjorie her debit card. Why did she keep doing that to herself? This wasn’t a crush, this wasn’t an I-wonder-what-would-happen situation, this wasn’t a maybe-he-feels-the-same-way. She knew what would happen and how he felt. She had to quit torturing herself like this.

She needed to sit in her quiet, quaint beach house alone with ice cream and romance novels and get over Blake and make a new plan for her life. She needed to give herself a chance to regroup, a chance to mourn the end of all of her dreams, a chance to wallow a little.

There was only one thing wrong with all of that.

She kind of felt like she was already over Blake. She didn't feel like mourning or wallowing. And she wasn't sure she wanted a plan.

Missy wandered along the boardwalk in front of the shops with her bag of groceries, checking things out but not really take note of any details. She was too lost in thought.

She was already over Blake and wasn't sure she wanted a plan.

That should have felt like a huge revelation. It should have felt weird. Wrong even.

But truthfully, she'd never had a plan.

She'd had Blake. She felt like she'd planned and organized and made it all work. But really, it had all just fallen into place. Or snow-balled. That was probably more accurate.

Cute boy liked her and she liked him. They dated. They had no reason to break up so they kept dating. They dated so long that it just made sense to get engaged. So they got engaged. And then once they were engaged, it made sense to plan a wedding.

And then Blake had gotten brave. And honest.

He'd been the one to say it wasn't what he wanted. To admit that, in spite of eight years and no major problems, they shouldn't get married. No one had cheated. No one had fallen in love with someone else. They hadn't fought, they hadn't disagreed, they hadn't stopped liking each other.

They just weren't meant to spend their lives together.

And if Blake hadn't been brave enough to say that, she would have been walking down the aisle on Saturday.

Missy sighed as she realized she was back in the front yard of the beach house.

She was grateful to Blake.

She should probably tell him that sometime.

But for now... she couldn't go back in that house. Not if Jared was still in there. She looked around and didn't see a vehicle. But she hadn't noticed one before either. She didn't know how he'd gotten here and she really didn't care. She just needed to be *sure* he was gone now.

Missy headed up the porch steps but she didn't even have to open the front door to know he was there. Through the open front window, she heard the sound of a power drill. Terrific. That meant he was still working. Which meant he probably still didn't have a shirt on.

She set the grocery bag down on the porch in the shade. It wasn't that hot out and fruit grew outside in the heat anyway, she reasoned. It would be fine. Or she'd throw it all away and go back to the store. Whatever.

Right now, peaches and raspberries were the last thing she needed.

Five minutes later she was bellied up to the bar. "Do you know how to make Blow Jobs?" she asked the bartender.

He gave her a grin. "I know everything there is to know about Blow Jobs, darlin'."

That's what she needed. Flirting with a good looking bartender. But when thinking of blow jobs—both the drink and the act— her mind wouldn't leave the image of Jared. Without a shirt. Four blocks away.

Missy put her forehead down on the bar and thumped it a couple of times.

This beach house was *definitely* not what she'd been expecting.

Two hours later, Jared threw his wrench into his toolbox with excessive force.

Missy still wasn't back.

From the fucking grocery store. There was *nothing* in this town that would take two hours. Where the hell was she?

He wiped his t-shirt over his face and took a deep breath. He shouldn't want to see her. He *didn't* want to see her. Except that he did. Badly.

But he wasn't an idiot.

Being here fixing up the beach house for her stay was coming on strong. That was why he'd intended to be gone by the time she got here. Why hadn't his mom warned him that Missy was on her way down? He knew his mother knew. Missy would have told her family and his. That's just how they did things.

So his mom absolutely knew that Missy was here. And she'd absolutely had time to warn him. Which meant, she'd chosen not to.

And he knew why.

His mom wanted him and Missy together. Hell, everyone wanted him and Missy together.

Including him.

Jared sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. He'd fucked up so badly three years ago and he knew that Missy hadn't forgotten—or forgiven him. She'd offered him everything and he'd panicked.

He flashed back to that night. Jared still remembered where he'd been when he'd heard that Blake had proposed to her. He'd been on a roof, pounding shingles into place when her brother, his best friend Drew, got a call. He'd listened to whoever it was, then disconnected with a simple, "Okay." Then he'd sworn under his breath.

"What's up?" Jared had asked.

"Blake proposed."

Jared could still feel the way his stomach had twisted and the combination of alarm and anger that had coursed through him. Anger. At himself. He'd waited too long. He'd missed his chance. He'd chickened out.

He had wanted Missy even then. But she was a forever girl. Mostly because he was a part of her family, and vice versa, blood or not. Her brother was his brother in every way that mattered. Her dad was his in every way that mattered. Missy's mom was his second mom.

The only thing that didn't quite fit was that he did not feel brotherly toward Missy. He cared about her. He was protective of her. He was totally comfortable around her. But he'd wanted to *marry* her, for as long as he'd been aware that he wanted to marry anyone.

So he knew he couldn't mess around with her. If he so much as kissed her, he would have needed to put a diamond on her finger. He hadn't been ready. Neither had she. They'd been young and had some living to do before settling down.

Or so he'd thought.

Then her boyfriend, Blake—who Jared had never taken seriously—pulled the diamond out first.

He should have taken Blake seriously.

"What did she say?" he'd asked Drew, holding his breath for the answer.

"She's thinking about it."

At that, something else had rocked through him—relief. And hope. She didn't want to marry Blake. If she had, she would have said yes. They'd been dating for several years at that point. She shouldn't have had anything to think about.

And Jared had known that he had to go find her. He had to talk her out of marrying Blake. She was young. She'd never dated anyone but Blake. She hadn't really lived. She shouldn't settle for Blake. He was a nice guy but... that was it. He was a nice guy. That was the epitome of what he had to offer her.

And, most of all, Missy was *his*.

Jared hadn't even cared what Drew would think when he'd thrown his tools together and moved to climb down from the roof.

"Where are you going?" his friend had asked.

"Something I have to do. Now."

Jared hadn't even paused. He'd descended the ladder, got in his truck and driven straight to the bar.

Missy had been at the bar by herself. It was only four in the afternoon and the bar hadn't filled with the after-work crowd yet. Jared had stalked across the bar.

"You okay?" he'd asked.

She'd turned to look at him, her eyes soft and slightly unfocused. "Hi."

He'd caught the bartender, Travis', eye. "How many has she had?"

"That's number four," Travis said, pointing to the shot glass in front of her.

She'd been only twenty-one and hadn't quite figured out that the sweet shots she'd just discovered snuck up on sobriety faster than the beer she was used to drinking drunk at river parties.

As if fearing he'd take it away, Missy grabbed the shot and tipped it back.

Four shots. Fuck. She was drunk.

"Don't marry him," he'd said anyway.

Missy had blinked at him. "Why not?"

"You don't love him."

She shook her head, then held her glass up for Travis. Travis approached with the bottles of Irish Cream, Kahlua and Amaretto. He looked at Jared. "You driving her home?"

He nodded. Then he looked at Missy. "Give me your phone."

She frowned. "Why?"

"No drunk dialing anyone." Like Blake. And saying yes.

She handed the phone over without any further prompting and Jared knew she was on her way to plastered. He quickly texted his mom to let her know that Missy's phone would be off and that Jared was with her. That way no one would worry. Then he tucked her phone in his pocket and gestured for Travis to fill her glass.

Travis topped it with whipped cream and Missy gave him a smile as if he'd presented her with a tiara and Miss America sash.

Jared waited while she shot it back.

She swallowed, then turned to him and said, "I do too love him."

Jared started to shake his head, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. "I do. I don't love him as much as I love you, though."

He'd frozen. She was drunk, but he knew her. She was telling him the truth. He'd leaned in. "You love me?" His voice had been gruff but he was sure she was too far gone to notice. Or realize what it meant— that she'd just rocked his world.

She nodded. "I do. I want you. I've always wanted you. But you don't want me. So I kept dating Blake. Because..." Her forehead wrinkled as if she couldn't quite come up with the reason. "Because, Blake is a nice guy."

Blake was most definitely a nice guy. Who would make someone a great husband. But not Missy.

"You can't marry him just because he's a nice guy. You need more than that," he said huskily, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Just a strand. Behind her *ear*. But it was the most intimate touch they'd ever shared. Because Jared had known that he wouldn't want to ever stop touching her intimately once he started.

High fives, a quick hug, a hip bump here and there. But that was it. And never when they were without their families around and when she'd just told him she loved him.

"I need you," she'd said, looking up into his eyes like he was the answer to everything.

He wanted to be the answer to everything for her. And that was the problem. He was twenty-four. He didn't have his shit figured out. He was getting there, but he wasn't ready for the huge responsibility of loving Missy.

She deserved the best. She deserved someone who would do anything, give anything, fight any obstacle for her. And not just because she deserved that, but because her brother and her dad and her mom deserved it. They deserved to know that Missy was with *the one*. The guy who would do anything, be everything, stop at nothing.

He wasn't there yet.

He would be. He'd be that guy. He'd make her happy. But just... not yet.

But she had to stay single until he could get his business figured out, get his bank account built up, and get his debt to her dad paid off. Ben had loaned him money to get started and Jared couldn't owe the man thirty-thousand dollars *and* sleep with his daughter. Oh, and he had to figure out how to tell his best friend that he wanted to sleep with his sister.

"Miss... you're... drunk," he finally said weakly. "This isn't a good time to talk about this."

That much was true. He was not going to tell her how he felt about her with her blood alcohol level where it currently was.

"You can have anything you want from me," she said, squeezing his arm. "You have to know that."

Jesus. There was no way he *couldn't* react to that. His imagination ran, his body heated, and his heart pounded. And for just a second, he considered kissing her.

Then, somehow, he pulled back. Probably the whiff of amaretto that had it him. Not. The. Time. For. This.

She was twenty-one. Why couldn't she just *wait*? Not forever. Not even that long. Maybe a year. Two tops. He'd have things taken care of by then.

"Let me take you home," he'd said.

"Yes." She'd spun on the stool suddenly and hopped down. Or tried to. She slid off awkwardly and her knee buckled, throwing her against Jared.

He'd caught her, keeping her upright, and holding her against his body. They'd stared at each other, both breathing harder. Then she'd licked her lips.

Jared had groaned.

Then she'd made it worse. "Anything you want," she'd repeated.

All he'd been able to think about was how bright and shiny his halo was going to be in heaven for resisting this tempting angel.

"Time to go home."

"Yes. To your place," she'd said.

"No," he'd told her firmly. "Your place."

"My parents are there." She'd seemed confused.

"Right. Because you live with your parents."

"But we can't have sex in my bedroom with my parents there."

Jared had rolled his neck, breathed deeply, and ignored his cock. Somehow. "You're going home. Because you're drunk. No sex. With anyone," he'd added.

He'd managed to get her to his car and to her parents' driveway before she said anything else.

"Jared?" she'd asked quietly.

He'd kept the car running, but intended to get her out of the passenger seat, in the house and at least onto the couch before leaving. He turned to look at her. "Yeah?"

"Kiss me."

Shock and want and regret had slid through him—in that order.

He'd gotten out of the car, half-walked/half-carried her inside and to the living room. He'd lowered her onto the couch, then backed away.

"Jared?" she asked, watching him with wide, dark brown, puppy-dog eyes that had his heart squeezing and his mind screaming *take her! Do it! She's yours!*

But his conscience overruled it all. *You're not ready to be what she needs.*

"I can't."

He saw the hurt in her eyes and his chest felt tight. His hands itched to touch her, to hold her. "I love you, I want you, never mind" were all on the tip of his tongue.

But he'd backed up, heading for the door.

The next day she'd said yes to Blake.

Jared stomped toward the front door of the beach house.

He wasn't doing this anymore. That was three years ago. He had his shit together now. His business was up and running, his bank account was okay and he'd paid Ben back, with interest.

And she was single again. It wouldn't have mattered. Even before the breakup, he'd had every intention of going to her and begging her not to marry Blake. But there had been one thing he'd had to do before he could do that. Tell his best friend.

Then Blake had broken up with her and she'd decided to rent a beach house for the summer.

The minute he'd heard Blake had called off the wedding, Jared had gone to Drew. He'd walked into Drew's office, handed him his favorite sub sandwich and said, "I'm in love with your sister and I'm going to the beach to make sure she's okay."

Drew had said, "Thank God."

Jared had hit the road to the beach an hour later.

Now here he was. Fixing up the house. And making it known around town that the beautiful girl who was going to be living in Emily's house until August was spoken for.

Missy could have her summer off far from home. She could have her break from the gossip and pitying looks and running into Blake all over town. But she'd never lived alone and Jared hadn't wanted her worrying or scared in the beach house. And he didn't want her having a rebound summer fling.

She was coming home eventually. And Jared was going to be there. Waiting. Ready.

His phone vibrated in his pocket as he slammed his truck door shut and started the engine, planning to drive all over town if he had to.

"Hello?"

"Jared, it's Marjorie."

Marjorie owned the general store where he'd been shopping for everything from frozen waffles to nails and wood glue. "Hey, Marj."

"Your girl's in town I see," Marjorie said.

"Yep." He'd already told Marj what he was doing in town and that Missy was on her way down.

Marjorie was the kind of person you spilled things to that you didn't mean to spill. But he didn't mind. He wanted the world to know how he felt about Missy.

“Well, she’s getting toasted at the bar. Thought you might want to know.”

The bar. Awesome. Jared was sure that Nick, the bartender, knew how to make Blow Jobs. And knew how to flirt with pretty new girls.

“Thanks, Marj, I owe you one,” Jared said, pointing his truck for main street.

“Nah,” she said. “You’re a nice guy, Jared. You deserve to be happy.”

Jared squeezed the steering wheel. “Thanks. But Marj?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not that nice of a guy.”

She laughed. “Good. That’s what you need when you’re fighting for your true love.”

Yeah. And trying to convince a stubborn girl that he was over being an ass. He thought about that as he drove the few blocks to the bar.

He’d been a nice guy. Too nice. He’d respected the fact that Missy was Drew’s little sister and Ben’s only daughter. He’d waited until he could give her the perfect life.

He shouldn’t have done that. He should have sucked it up and told Drew and Ben how he felt. He should have taken the chance that he and Missy could be happy even if they’d had to eat Ramen noodles every other night.

He shouldn’t have been so nice.

Jared strode through the doors of the bar and immediately honed in on Missy. She was at the bar, as expected, but she only had two empty shot glasses in front of her.

He approached her, contemplating what he was going to say. He hadn’t planned on seeing her until she came home at the end of the summer so he hadn’t yet rehearsed what he was going to say about... everything. He’d figured he had two months to figure out how to grovel and convince her he was sorry and that he’d grown up. That it was time.

But looking at her staring into the empty shot glass, her soft brown hair falling against her cheek, her shoulders slumped as if the weight of the world was bearing down, he knew that it was way past time.

He’d messed up. Big time. He’d missed three years with her. Loving her, making her laugh, taking care of her, having her make him laugh.

Not to mention, kissing her from head to toe and learning her favorite positions and making love to her in every room in his house.

Yeah. He was an idiot. He wouldn't blame her if she didn't forgive him. He wasn't sure he was going to forgive himself. But he had to get over the regret. It was time to go forward.

A nice guy would also tell her how he felt and then back off. He'd go back home and give her time and space to think about what he'd said and make a decision.

Jared was a nice guy. But he wasn't *just* a nice guy.

"Dance with me."

Missy swiveled quickly on the stool. "Jared."

He stood, just watching her, his hand outstretched. The girl always had a plan and he figured maybe she needed to be shook up a little. He wanted to see how she responded when it was pure instinct and not thought out. How she responded when she was being pursued by a guy who wanted her with true passion. When she was being romanced and seduced by a man who was madly in love with her, rather than just being stuck with a guy who'd fallen into being her boyfriend after a stupid high school football game.

Missy wet her lips and his gaze followed the motion. He let her see the hunger in his eyes, the want that he'd been hiding all these years. And he saw that she knew what she was looking at. Her pupils dilated, her eyes widened and she leaned in and, most importantly, she took his hand.

He pulled her onto the dancefloor and up against his body. She came willingly, and sighed when he ran his hands up and down her back.

And when she laid her head on his shoulder and he felt the way they fit together, Jared realized he was the one who was getting shook up. He'd come to fix up the beach house. He'd intended to be gone by the time she got here. He knew this was too fast, too soon after her breakup.

But he now also knew that he was staying at the beach for the summer as well.

She pulled back slightly and looked up at him. "I'm glad you're here."

He could have said "me too". Or "I want to strip you down and do very dirty things to you." Or, "I'm in love with you."

Instead he said, "They have great pasta at the Italian place down on the pier."

The words were clearly not what she'd been anticipating. "Oh?" she asked.

He nodded and moved his hands to her hips. "Let me take you out for dinner. Tomorrow night. We'll both dress up. I'll pick you up. I'll bring you flowers."

Missy lifted an eyebrow. "You brought me flowers when I broke my ankle in seventh grade."

"I know."

"And we've eaten pasta together about a million times."

"I know."

"But we've never had dinner together just you and me."

"I know."

She looked at him for a long moment. "Is this a date?"

"Yes." It was that simple. And that complicated.

She pulled in a long, slow breath. When she let it out, just as slowly, she said, "Will you kiss me goodnight?"

Jared had to work not to squeeze her too hard. Or growl. Or say, "all over your body, twice, before I take you in the first of about seventeen positions." He nodded, reigning in his desire and said, "Definitely."

Because that was what a nice guy would say.

But he would show her what a not-nice-all-the-time guy would *do*. Tonight.

She gave him a bright smile at that. "Our first kiss on the beach under the moonlight. Sounds perfect."

This time he did squeeze her hips. "Too bad," he told her.

Missy blinked up at him. "What?"

"I'll kiss you on the beach under the moonlight," he said. "But that won't be our first kiss."

"Oh." She frowned slightly. "I don't think that kiss on New Year's five years ago should count as our first."

"I don't either." Jared lifted his hand to the back of her head, sliding into her silky hair. He tipped her head slightly and leaned in. "But there's no way I can wait until tomorrow night."

As his mouth met hers, Jared knew, without a doubt, that this was the woman he was going to be kissing for the rest of his life.

He just needed to date her for the summer first.