

Hiding Away

A Beachside Romance: Book 3

Carrie Thorne

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For my grandmother. I miss her like crazy. She always finds the language in my books a bit more graphic than she's comfortable with, the print a bit small, but she is and has always been my fiercest supporter in all things. Not to mention, she's a diehard romance novel fan, since the early days of the original boddice-rippers (I still have a few of her old favorite paperbacks on my bookshelf).



1

8 years ago, Manhattan

In. Out.

Inhale. Exhale.

One. Two. Three. Natalya lowered her gaze, slowly raising her lids as the headlights faded down the dark lane of uppity suburbia.

Now. Four strides and a leap, her heart pounded in rhythm with each step. Like a coiled hinge, she rappelled off the tree, fluid as she caught the branch and swung over. Weightless until the moment of impact.

Feet turned out, the wobble threatening to shake her off like a dead leaf, her arms spread as she rose to stand. One foot in front of the other, she advanced along the branch, legs vibrating in rhythm with its rebellion of her presence.

Knees bent, she vaulted and laced her hands around its elder above. Hand over hand, her gloves sticking like a lizard with each movement, she eased over the top of the fence.

Breath held, she dropped in a silent freefall; knees bent, body shifting as she absorbed the impact. Twelve meters to the house. Scanning the manicured back yard, Natalya froze behind the nearest topiary and ensured the area was clear.

With precise strides, she sprinted over the squishy lawn. Nearing the building, she released off the last step and clung to the wide iron downspout. Climbing swiftly, hand over hand, foot over foot, she reached the third floor.

Shuffling steps below shattered the still of the night, thunderous to her ears although truly nothing more than a murmur within the empty property. She glued her body to the wall. The guard sauntered across the shadowy lawn. He turned left, then right, pulled out his flashlight and spun it like a cowboy practicing his quickdraw. With a peppy twist of his knee and a rhythmic head tilt back and forth, the boogying guard spun and continued his patrol.

Smirking, Natalya waited until he rounded the far corner of the mansion.

Okay, focus. Two meters to the window; too far. The wall was smooth as glass, no way to scale it. Above, the overhang was solid stone. Fueled with the adrenaline of uncertainty, she drew in a long breath as she recalculated her route.

Climbing to the top of the downspout, well above her target, she moved her sticky-gloved grip to the ledge and shuffled her hands until she hung above the window.

Closing her eyes for another count of three, she let out a careful breath. Loosening her fingers, she dropped.

With one hand, she caught the window overhang, her feet just touching the window ledge. Heart leaping into her throat, she swallowed the panic of the close call.

Okay. Made it. That wasn't so bad.

Leaning down, she peered in the window and scanned the room. Empty. The owner was out for the night at a charitable event. Ha. As if. Either siphoning the funds or finagling a selfish tax write-off.

Or so she suspected. Not her job to care.

Okay, so she wasn't exactly Robin Hood herself. She was just here for the data. Correction, she was here for the fat paycheck.

While her peers were muddling through their freshman year at college or earning pennies interning for their parents' companies or gaining life experience through volunteer programs, Natalya was making hand over fist. A few more jobs, and she would be set up for the next few decades. For life, really, if she invested well. She wasn't one for extravagance anyway, not like her parents. Give her a beach house, a camera, and some privacy. Maybe a fast car. Otherwise, that's it. No fancy parties or expensive dogs or... topiaries.

Pulling out her phone, she punched in a series of codes and held the device up to the locked window and initiated the program she lovingly called, *Open Sesame*. Not very clever, but it was better than her second choice of *B&E*. And... click. Okay, so the electronic lock didn't actually click, but the light did flash green.

Sliding her fingers into the crack, she pulled. Tugged. Ground her teeth and heaved.

Argh. The stupid window was jammed; she was not going in through the ductwork again. She may be petite, but the resulting claustrophobia still ate at her. Carefully squatting down on the narrow ledge, she squinted... and the window had been painted shut. Who did that, anyway? Slackers.

With her pink pocketknife, she sliced through the dried paint, closed it, and slipped it back into her pocket. Bingo. The window slid open without further argument.

In the midnight blackness of the room, she crossed to the computer. With her gloved fingers, she fired up the slick PC. Connecting her device, she ran her program. She was tempted to tap her foot and hum while she hacked the system, but that would be too droll.

Finally.

On the home screen of the asshole's PC, she dug for the files she was looking for. Huh, this must be it. What kind of idiot names their illegal deeds folder *Eyes Only*?

Encrypted, but retrieval was all her employers were paying her for. If they wanted a full hack, they'd have to dish out a hell of a lot more. Not that she even wanted to know what tripe these politicians were trying to dig up on each other.

With a few quick keystrokes, she loaded the file onto her data card. They'd wanted her to start sending everything to the cloud immediately, but she knew better.

It was almost too easy. Natalya loved her job. And she was damn good at it. Ought to be after all the uppity private academies her parents had shoved down her throat since she was in preschool, the years of gymnastics. Joke was on them when she didn't make the Olympic team, when she used all those advanced programming classes for theft rather than getting on at a high-profile tech company like her instructors had dreamed.

Quickly shutting off the computer, not leaving a trace, she climbed back out the window. No sign of the guard below. Perfect.

Shit, how was she going to get down? Well, a few hundred thousand was worth risking a fracture or two.

Lowering so she dangled from the ledge by her fingertips, she let go to slide down the wall to the second-story window below. Slipping with the full force of gravity, the slick wall not

providing a scrap of friction, she swallowed a squeal and scraped her gloved hands in a fruitless attempt to slow the freefall.

Landing on the overhang with a thud, balancing precariously on her toes that screamed from the impact, she held her breath and quickly crept to the side. Okay, that was a terrible idea. Pulse pounding through her limbs, her stomach roiling at her stupidity, she clung to the wall as she calmed down enough to figure out how the hell she was getting down the last two stories.

Louder than the ringing in her ears, resonating through the window, she heard a blood-curdling scream.

Still running on the adrenaline of the near fall to her death, the terror in the next room sent her heartrate through the roof. Sealing her eyes shut, she couldn't look. Blinded by fear the unknown threat, she held tight, hoping she was concealed enough to not attract the sort of attention that could trigger such a terrified sound.

Grinding her teeth, she kicked herself for being the spoiled brat. Dammit, someone was in danger.

Easing over, ignoring her trembling lower lip, she peeked in the room. Lights illuminated the opulent guest bedroom.

Dressed in a formal tuxedo, the owner of the house shoved a woman inside. He slipped off his jacket and laid it neatly on a chair, then rolled up his sleeves without a care for the woman stumbling backwards, catching herself on the bed.

Bracing herself against the fluff of the bedding, the woman snarled, "You're a monster."

"Sometimes." He strolled toward her, cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders like he was settling in for a casual chat.

"Please." Nowhere to go, the woman scanned the room like a mouse surrounded by traps. His indolent approach might almost seem seductive, but the menace in his eyes told a different story. Head held high, the woman took a deep breath and wrapped her hands around her middle. "I worked for you for ten years, but I can't do this anymore. I'll leave quietly. You'll never hear from me again."

"You're right. I won't." He drew a handgun from his back waistband and shot the woman so fast, so carelessly. The woman's head wrenched back, her body following from the sheer force of the blow, blood trickling from her skull as she instantly lay lifeless on the bed.

Natalya's vision darkened as she so violently comprehended the true meaning of the phrase, *in cold blood*. Nausea clenched her stomach into a jagged knot. Panic rocked through her; she shook her hands to wake them back up, the numbness coating into her bones.

Inhaling one, two, three. Out four, three, two, one.

Carefully pinning herself to the wall, she ensured she wouldn't be seen.

Scanning the area, she searched for a quick exit. If not for her own safety, she needed to do what she could for the dead woman.

The guard was nowhere in sight. The bedroom light flicked off.

Two floors up, garden mulch below. Lowering herself so she dangled from the window ledge, she dropped to the ground.

Razorblades spiked through her feet, her knees as she hit the ground. Steadying herself, checking the sightlines, she took off across the yard. Sprinting along the fence, she aimed for a boulder, the highest point along the fence line. She rocketed atop a boulder and used the momentum to vault over the fence.

Landing on the other side, she rolled when she hit the loose gravel over asphalt. Ignoring the ache in her hip that would be black and blue, the limp as she shook off the impact, she eased to

her feet and took off down the street. Rocks imprinted into her hands, she brushed them against her pants with each stride.

Holding it all in, not the time to collapse, she kept up the agonizing pace until she reached her concealed car. Sweat beaded on her forehead, breath refusing to slow in the safety of her car, she edged out of the shadows and hauled her ass home without breaking a single traffic law.

Her adrenaline plummeted, hollowing out her gut as she finally turned up the final hill toward home. She rolled into her usual spot in the alley carport behind the house, then quickly changed into innocent looking jeans and a t-shirt, tucking her black gear under the seat.

Forcing a cheerful smile, just in case, she strolled across the backyard. Lifting and sliding, she jimmied open the glass door.

Holding back the terror, the tears; just a few more seconds and she could crash on her bed and let it all out. If her parents wondered at the red eyes in the morning, she'd claim it was a boy. Not the mangled skull of the woman she'd seen murdered, her blood seeping into the blankets.

How could she call the police? What would she say, *While I was burgling this asshole, I saw him murder someone?*

"Welcome home, darling," her dad's voice dripped with sarcasm. He sat at the foot of the stairs, his broad shoulders taking up the path, his stern expression sending all the adrenaline that had detoxed from her blood straight back into her veins.

"Dad. Hey," she forced the angsty teen head flip she'd rehearsed so many times when her parents would ask about her future or her friends. It had come pretty naturally since blowing it at the Olympic trials, but tonight... she wanted to curl up in a ball and wish it all away, but getting past her dad was no easy hurdle.

"Have fun?"

"Yeah. I know, I shouldn't sneak out," she bobbed her head up and down as she struggled to keep her shit together.

"No, you shouldn't. Where were you?" His dark eyes drilled into hers. Lucky thing he'd taught her well, smooth talking bigshot that he was.

"With friends."

"What friends? From what your mom tells me, you haven't talked to any of your friends since graduation."

"You're right. I talked to Nel earlier, and a few of them were in town for the weekend." Couldn't he just give her a break? She'd been the perfect daughter, the perfect student, the perfect athlete... until it had all come crashing down.

"When are you going to realize how important your future is? I can get you an entry level clerical position if you truly need to put off college. It's not too late; I can make a few calls and get you into any Ivy League you want." His eyes softened.

"I know. It's been a weird night and I'd like to sleep on it. How about I think it over and we can talk more tomorrow? I was considering going overseas, you know, travelling a bit before college?" The night was crashing down around her, and she needed to get out of there before she lost it.

"Sure darling, let's talk more tomorrow." He rose from the stairs and pulled her in for a bear hug like when she was a little girl.

What the hell? Heart thundering in her chest, she feared he could tell that "weird" was a massive understatement. For a man that hugged so rarely, the overdue affection worried her more than getting caught. Like he was planning a full interrogation tomorrow, or he was buttering her

up for something big. The manipulative warmth certainly worked on her mother, who never seemed to anticipate, or maybe not care about, the inevitable duplicity.

She bit her lips together to block the waterworks from starting. The hug worked; she wanted to tell him everything, only holding back because she knew he'd flip if he found out about how much trouble she'd gotten herself into, probably even more than her career choice.

A jarring chime bellowed from the doorbell. Stiffening, she struggled to catch her breath as her heart leapt out of her chest.

Deep creases formed in her father's brow as he scowled at the door. He moved to open it.

"No, wait—" she grabbed his arm to stop him, unsure if it was the cops or the psycho murderous asshole that had found her. Shaking her off, he swung open the door.

Two men in bullet-proof vests and dark blue jackets with FBI printed in big yellow letters stood outside, holding up their badges. "Special Agents Huong and Dawson."

Natalya shrunk back. Agent Dawson looked barely a few years older than she was; not intimidating like she would have imagined as his eyes landed on her. He flashed her a mournful smile, "We need to talk." Must be the good cop.

Her father's head whipped around, and his eyes grew wide as he assessed her petrified expression. "Weird night, huh?"

"Alone," the agent clarified. His partner, Agent Huong, quite the opposite with silver hair, eyes creased from seeing too much, yet equally *safe*, not the bad cop so far, held back in silent observation.

"She's my daughter."

From just outside the doorway, Agent Huong leaned to make eye contact around her father and raised an eyebrow, "How old are you?"

Exhaling heavily, crossing her arms so they couldn't see how bad she was shaking, she said, "Nineteen."

He shrugged casually, "I'm going to need you to come with us."

Shit. She flashed back to the woman bleeding out on the bed, her brains splattered across the damn blankets. Natalya should be relieved; she was doomed to spend the rest of the night worrying over whether to do the right thing for the woman murdered in front of her eyes, risking prison herself, or keep quiet and think about the stupid Ivy League her father promised... without anyone ever knowing the dark secret she carried. At least now the decision was made for her. "Okay," she nodded, swallowing the bile that burned her throat, envisioning her orange jumpsuit.

No. She righted her posture and faced the FBI guys. Whatever her crimes, this woman deserved vengeance.

Shoving her hands in her pockets, she thought about the data. She was willing to bet whatever she'd stolen would incriminate Peterson, but if he was already going to be arrested for murder? Okay, so maybe she could be a little selfish and *not* add to her prison sentence. Or, better yet, she'd have an ace up her sleeve if it came down to it. No one needed to know. "Can I go grab a jacket first?"

Pushing past her father, Agent Huong gestured for her to lead the way. He nodded, an apologetic smile breaking through his poker face. "Of course, let's go."

The FBI agents followed her up the stairs, her father nipping close at their heels. He growled, fists balled at his sides as he spewed threats. "I'm calling my attorney. You are not taking my daughter from her home in the middle of the night."

Her mother came tearing out of the bedroom, clinging to her bathrobe as she wrapped it around her silk pajamas, her voice weak as she demanded, "What? No." She shook her head

back and forth, her sleepy curls swishing over her face as she struggled to catch up, the waterworks already flooding down her face as she stood stupefied in the hallway.

While they were distracted, heart thundering in her throat, Natalya slipped into her bedroom and into the closet. Reaching up on her tiptoes, she slid the data card into a crevice between the sheets of drywall over the inside of the closet door. Quickly lowering and turning, she grabbed the nearest coat from its hanger.

Dawson appeared a moment later. "Better grab a few changes of clothes while you're at it."

She nodded softly as she calmed her breathing. "Okay." Without a word, she stuffed some basics into her old school backpack, holding back the searing hot tears that welled behind her eyes.

Maybe they weren't arresting her after all? She'd be well clothed in that orange jumpsuit if they were here to drag her to prison.

She didn't dare ask. Not in front of her father. Roaring across the house, his voice shook the walls with increasing threats of legal action, adding how he would personally destroy their careers.

She followed Dawson back out of her room while Huong was attempting to calm her parents, "We just need to ask her a few questions. She'll be safe with us."

At the end of the hall, she saw her brother's door crack open, his little face peek out. She waved gently and mouthed, *Be good okay? Love you.* Her heart broke at his big eyes, his lips turned down with a pitiful quiver. Xander was such a good kid, his nose always in a book or in front of the computer or playing in the street with the neighbor kids.

Slinking behind Huong to keep a safe distance from her parents, knowing either of them would latch on and make it worse, she followed Dawson down the stairs. Part of her wanted to throw herself in her parent's arms and never let go. Let them stand up for her and hire an attorney so they couldn't take her away.

But that would only make things worse. For everyone.

Especially the woman who was probably being buried under one of those topiaries right now, the sheets being washed or burned or buried along with her.

Enough of her recognized she'd been a selfish idiot. Crashing around her like shattered crystal, her invincibility was gone. She'd never lacked for self-esteem. Maybe she should have, just a little, and she wouldn't have dug herself in so deep in shit.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her father scowled past Huong, adding a disappointed head shake for her. Was it because she'd gotten herself in legal trouble, or because she was taking the high road and going with the agents?

Never showing his back to her father, Huong followed her down the stairs. Filing behind Dawson out the front door, Natalya held her head high as she accepted her fate, refusing to let her parents see her fear, her guilt, her regret. Huong reassured her parents one last time as he backed out the door, her father's expletives threatening the foundation beneath him.

Still, her parents didn't look half as crestfallen as they had when she'd blown the Olympic trials. That had been a lifetime of their investment in her, and in one failed landing, she'd proven she wasn't the gifted athlete she'd been raised to be. Her last hope at representing her country as an Olympic gymnast shattered. Disappointment. Wordless head shaking.

There was nothing she could do about fixing that day, about changing the outcome.

But she could make amends in this.

Dawson slid into the driver's seat while Huong climbed in the back next to her. Huong spoke directly to her for the first time. "We followed you from Peterson's. Natalya Haldon?"

She nodded, trying to find her voice through the frog lodged in her throat. “Yeah. That’s me.” She bit her lips together to hide the tremble.

“What were you doing there?”

Inhaling deeply, watching her neighborhood fade in the distance, she gritted her teeth and laid it all out, finding that attitude she’d flipped her father. “Trying to rob him.”

From the front seat, she heard Dawson chuckling, shaking his head. Huong let the corner of his mouth turn up, but otherwise maintained a straight face. “I appreciate your honesty. You’re not under arrest at this time.”

“I’m not?”

“Look,” he sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. He exuded the calm confidence of an experienced agent. “We’ve been tracking Peterson for a while now. Tonight, a woman went home with him, hours before he was to have left a fundraiser.”

She blinked desperately but could no longer clear the watery grief from her eyes. Couldn’t shake the image from flashing in her mind over and over again.

“Imagine our surprise when we watched you bailing over the fence, minutes after his arrival.”

She shrugged, wiping away the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

Huong continued, “We thought you might be her at first, but she’s built quite differently than you are. Tell me, do you know anything about her whereabouts?”

Swallowing the hot lump in her throat, Natalya nodded. The agents fell silent, waiting for her answer. Clearing her throat, she answered, “He shot her.”

Huong’s eyebrows drew together as he took in the information, but he held his calm. She glanced ahead and saw Dawson’s knuckles turning white on the steering wheel. “You’re sure? It was Peterson himself?”

“Yeah, it was him alright. I was climbing up the building to get to his office, but I stopped when I heard the scream at the second story window.” She described the scene as precisely as she could. Of course, she mentioned she’d been on her way *up to* his office, not on her way down with stolen data. If she wasn’t under arrest, she may as well not give them any reason to consider it.

“Dawson?” Huong asked his partner.

“Yeah, I know. We’re not going back to the office tonight.”

The drive was interminable. Where were they taking her? She didn’t dare ask. Asking might give her an answer she didn’t want to hear.

As they drove further into the night, her eyes grew heavy. She should be terrified. After what she’d seen, she was grateful to be in safe hands. Even if just for the night.

~

Boston

Scowling at the three microscopic blank lines, Aiden grimaced. Resigned, he raised his hand and caught the professor’s attention. “It says to provide an explanation on the attached page if you need more room, but there is no attached page.” Oh boy. Off to a great start.

“Mr. McAllister, right?”

“That’s right.” And now he would permanently be known as the guy who had a record. A few of his fellow law students looked his way and snickered, already done with their perfectly

above-board background checks. Across the room, Ev, his ex-girlfriend, and only friend in the program, rolled her eyes and winked.

Clearing her throat, his professor sauntered toward him with a ream of white paper. “And how many pages do you require?”

“Just one, thank you professor.”

She cleared her throat again as she slid a blank page onto his desk and strolled back down the aisle. Maybe she needed a lozenge. Or she just enjoyed passing not-quite-silent judgment.

While his classmates all handed in their paperwork and left, he scrawled the last of his *additional information*. Nothing serious, he just... come on, you couldn't tell him that every lawyer out there hadn't experimented a bit. That every one of them hadn't found themselves on the wrong side of the law a few times. He'd be willing to bet half the damn med students across campus had some condition that had turned them onto medicine from an early age. Why would it be different for law students?

Ignoring another throat-clearing from his ancient professor, he set the completed form on her desk. Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, he steadied his pace so it wasn't obvious how terrified he was that that ridiculous sheet would get him kicked out before he even started. A dirtier record than his own, maybe his buddy Chase would get him a job deep-sea diving. No way was he working on the boats at his dad's fisheries company.

As he neared the door, she cleared her throat with a finality that drilled into the last of his confidence. “Mr. McAllister?”

Cringing as he turned back, he nodded, “Yes, ma'am?”

“Nobody wants a lawyer that makes them feel judged.”

He angled his head in question.

“If you've got a good head on your shoulders, a decent heart, and a window into what it's like on the client's side of the bench, you're already miles ahead of your peers.” The corner of her wrinkled mouth twitched as if she was considering smiling.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“And watch you're not saying *yes* all the time. Can't win them all.”

He flashed her a self-effacing smile, “Yes, ma'am.”

She shook her head and actually completed the smile. “Keep your nose clean.”

Not a problem, there. Those days were done.

As he stepped into the hall, he found Ev with a group from the class, already making friends as he knew she would. “Hey, Aiden. If you're done brown-nosing, we thought we'd head out for drinks.”

Nodding, he followed them into the sunny afternoon. Still wound up from the fucking bizarre interaction with his professor, he begged off to drop off his backpack first. In his shoebox apartment, he dumped his bag, and splashed cold water over his face.

His phone buzzed as Ev hurried him along. Rolling his shoulders, he locked up and strolled down the block to the bar. A local favorite watering hole from the looks of things; it was doggy enough to be unimposing with its dim lighting and weathered wooden tables, yet was clean and packed with familiar faces from campus.

Glancing down, he double checked that his white t-shirt was unrumpled, the fly on his jeans was up, and he smoothed down his walnut-brown hair that he'd had trimmed a few days ago. All good. He passed through the chattering crowd and waved to Ev and her new friends. Stepping up to the bar, he ordered a pint.

A juicy-lipped blond in a lacy black top and tiny skirt that barely covered her ass sidled up next to him. “Buy me a drink?” she asked, eyes wandering along his arms like she wanted to lick him, then hanging on his lips.

Inhaling cautiously, he shook his head. “Sorry, but I’m meeting some friends.”

Tucking that plump lower lip into her teeth, he couldn’t tell if she was pouting or purring. “Maybe next time, then. You seem really sweet.”

For all the five seconds she’d been around him? She must be an excellent judge of character. The bartender slid his beer over. Aiden replaced the frothy glass with cash and backed away.

“Have a good night,” he nodded to both.

Parking on the stool at the high-top table Ev had saved for him, Aiden took a welcome sip of the fizzy brew.

She raised an eyebrow, “Not your type, huh?”

He groaned, “Hell no. Hot, but looking to pull the old ‘I got you through law school’ divorce in a few years.”

On his other side, one of the guys, Stan? Yeah, that was it. He couldn’t keep track of everyone’s names yet. Anyway, Stan air-saluted before downing his gin and tonic by half, “You can tell that from one come-on? Be my wingman?”

Chuckling, Aiden shrugged, “I can show you the ropes.”

From across the table, he felt high heels link around his leg from another classmate. Not a word, just a wink.

Goddammit.

At his side, Ev laughed out loud and slapped him on the back. “Looks like you’re the one that needs a wingman.”

Last year, Seaview, Maine

“You wanted me to come out more? I’m out. I don’t know why you seem to think I was hiding. I’ve been working eighty-hour weeks to get my practice off the ground,” Aiden snorted as he followed his sister into Winter’s Tavern.

Spring was still chill on the air, but the tavern was toasty inside. Not that he would call the ambience warm; well, it was, but not in a homey way. It was more due to the relaxed atmosphere, full without being crowded, by people who were here to burn off the edge from the work week and chill with friends. Most were laughing over a beer at billiards or cozied up in cracked-leather-seated booths with surprisingly tasty comfort food.

Waving from the far side of the tavern, Maddy’s friend Payson flagged them down. She was munching on a plate of nachos that must have just arrived; steam wafted from the cheesy mass. At his side, Maddy, his sister and tormentor... and, well, his best friend, waved wildly back and met him halfway. “Hey, you’re normally the one dragging my ass out of the house. My turn to make sure you engage in the world of the living.”

“Sure. Or, you’re trying to set me up with your friend.” He waved politely to Payson. She was gorgeous; silky straight auburn hair, green eyes that knew your next move before you did.

Shrugging, Maddy smiled. “Of course not, Mr. Hotshot attorney can find his own dates. Go grab us a pitcher?”

Rolling his eyes, he headed for the bar. Aiden came in with his folks on his many visits home over the years, and was always amazed how Winter, the seemingly immortal white-haired, owner-operator, seemed to know everything about everyone.

Winter waved with one hand while his other rested on the tap and filled a frosty glass with an amber brew, “I heard you were back in town. On this side of the law now.” He chuckled and slid the beer to a young fisherman at the end of the bar.

Aiden didn’t recognize most of the crowd, but there were definitely a few older fishermen that had worked for his dad over the years, a few others from high school. Still a tight-knit town, but Seaview had grown up in his absence. “Damn right.” He parked on one of the few open stools.

Winter grabbed the next check and began to pour a pair of rum and cokes. Keeping his mind on the conversation, Aiden tried to ignore the petite blond next to him that was absorbed in a book. A whiff of coconut, and, was that lime? Something refreshing and tropical cast a compelling air around her.

Passing the next two drinks, Winter worked the queue. “Your partner in crime coming back, too? Your sister’s back, you’re back, maybe we’ll even see the mysterious Ronan McAllister one of these days, and we’ll have the whole McAllister clan.”

Aiden smiled at the reference, an easiness settling over him, as clearly, anyone that knew the McAllisters considered Chase to be one of them. Hell, he’d spent more time at the McAllister

home than his own, and Aiden thought of him as more of a brother than Ronan. “Chase will be back soon, actually. Not a chance in hell that Ronan will grace us with his presence anytime in the next decade, if ever.”

Winter chuckled and moved to the back of the bar.

Inhaling the yumminess of the woman next to him, Aiden felt the stress of the long week fade away. His forearms settled on the bar, his feet rested on the ring at the base of the stool, his body melting, eyes struggling to stay open, and his knee accidentally bumped into her.

Like shoving his fingers in a light socket, he was electrified.

Glancing down in genuine surprise, he lost all train of thought at the view. Distressed jeans with more holes than denim, her toned, tanned leg held against his for a whisper of a moment, enough to singe his skin, the heat radiating through his veins and setting his heart into an erratic rhythm... only to pull away and leave him cold.

“Sorry,” he apologized, his voice no more than a whisper, as the ability to speak had flown away with his brain.

“No worries,” she muttered, her eyes not veering from her book. Clearly, she was underwhelmed by the connection that had rocked the fuck out of him.

“Good book?” Okay, so he was rusty at pick-up lines, but he was curious what could draw her in, leading her to ignore him so fully. Even if she wasn’t interested, well, that was fine, but... she smelled so damn good he wanted to sit and breathe her all night.

Exhaling sharply, he mentally smacked his forehead against the table, avoiding the exaggerated idiot gesture for real. Okay, so he hadn’t been with anyone in way too fucking long... after the bar exam, grinding to get some experience with a big-city firm, and now starting his own one-man-practice and building a client base... she was way more than he could handle right now, and she didn’t even care that he existed.

“Uh-huh,” she murmured. Her teeth clenched tight, a wisp of blond wave fell from her messy bun and curled around the curve of her jaw. Okay, so she wasn’t interested. He was good with that.

At his other side, he felt a leg press up against his left leg, not a trace of zing like he’d gotten from the woman on his right. Glancing down, a long, slender, excessively uncovered leg didn’t shy away from his. Following from ankle to thigh, astonished at the vision that had parked on the stool next to him, he choked on his own tongue as he realized those weren’t panties that her short skirt failed to cover. Eyes wide, his gaze shot straight up to the ceiling. Holy shit. He really, really, really... really shouldn’t know that she had endured a thorough wax job a few hours ago.

“Hey,” slutty-skirt laughed, taking her plump lower lip between her lip, pricelessly amused as if their meeting right here and now was the best, most fortuitous coincidence of her life.

“Hey,” he nodded, keeping his eyes no lower than her nose.

“I was going to ask if you were new in town, but I’d know those ice blue eyes anywhere. Aiden McAllister. How are you?” Expression brightening, she seemed to relax. No longer on the prowl, but equally interested.

He stared for a moment. Lightbulb. “Kelli? Wow, how long has it been? How are you?” She’d certainly... developed since he’d seen her last.

“Great, now that you’re here.”

The mysterious woman on his right slid a neat pile of cash across the bar, then rose from her barstool, her shoulder brushing against his as she scooped up her backpack. Lightning bolts jolted through his arm at the light contact; she whispered a polite apology. Then without even a glance back at him, she stalked out of the tavern. Mourning the loss of the mouth-watering scent,

the simple warmth of her presence, he watched her saunter out the door without a care in the world.

Clearing her throat at his side, Kelli was smiling when he turned back toward her. They politely caught up for a bit, before Winter finally passed his pitcher across the bar.

Scooping it up, he muttered, "Bye, Kelli," and escaped to join Maddy and Payson.

He slid in next to Payson. "Make a new friend at the bar?" she asked. No fire there. Pity, Payson was hot.

"Not exactly. The title *dog meat* comes to mind."

Maddy swallowed a hefty bite of gooey nachos, her voice still muffled when she said, "Are you kidding? I'll be surprised if she doesn't find her way into your bed tonight. Remember when you woke up with Lori Donner wrapped around you on your first trip home from college?"

He set the pitcher back down before pouring, afraid to spill at the memory. "Don't remind me. She cried when I told her to go home." Shaking it off, he grabbed Payson's glass first and started pouring. "I think this woman was more interested in her book than me."

Payson looked back to the bar, then back to Aiden, her brow scrunched. "Oh, you mean Natalie. No, you don't stand a chance with Natalie."

He cringed, "Oh, you meant Kelli. Yeah, been there, done that. Not interested."

"That's harsh," Payson pulled the glass from his hand and finished pouring the rest before the foam completely took over. Admittedly, he had been a bit distracted.

"Not interested in a woman that once tried to convince me she was allergic to all condoms?"

"Aw. The woes of Aiden McAllister," Maddy teased with the sarcasm only a little sister by the nominal eighteen-months could produce, brushing her wild chestnut hair out of her eyes. "Do you radiate something that says, '*Jump me and I'll rock your world*' or something? Or do they see Mr. One-Night-Maximum as some sort of invitation to flash you?"

He groaned, "You know I have terrible luck with dating. Even avoiding those with fabricated condom allergies and clever come-ons, I still end up getting trapped and cheated on and... I'm just done with it all."

"Now we're speaking the same language. Why bother?" Maddy air toasted.

Green eyes flashing, Payson scowled. "Listen to you two. You sound like a bunch of whiny ninnies that had a few bad relationships and are convinced it's all a bunch of bullshit. You can't blame all your woes on partners you haven't even passed more than a few words with. Would you stop going out to eat because you'd found a hair on your food once? Or stop travelling because you hit some turbulence? The right person will change your minds in a heartbeat."

Aiden shoveled in a bite of nachos to avoid answering that one.

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