



Shadow
HAVEN

AJ Schippers

Chapter 1

JULIA SMILED AT THE MAN she presumed was the captain of the twenty-foot center console. He extended a hand to her, which she shook firmly.

“Julia Quinn?” He raised an eyebrow, as white as his hair and beard. Despite his age, he looked stout and vigorous. “I’m Horace. I was hired by your boss to take you to Shadow Haven.”

“That’s me.” With a smile, she handed him the large backpack that was filled to the brim. He stowed it under a seat before extending his hand again, helping Julia on board.

“There’s a life vest right there for you.” He pointed toward the sleeveless jacket lying on the seat.

“Do I have to wear it? This isn’t my first time on a boat.”

“Afraid so, ma’am. If this was a pleasure trip, then I’d let you decide for yourself, but seeing as I have been hired to bring you safely to your destination, you’ll need to wear it.”

She quickly put her blonde hair into a messy ponytail, then slipped the vest over her head and locked the straps. It was an action she performed quickly, yet quite reluctantly. Wrapping the straps around herself always made her feel a little too good, and when the time would come to take them off, she usually felt an inkling of loss.

“Sit tight,” the captain said as the engines roared to life. “You’re in for a bumpy ride.”

Julia repressed the urge to roll her eyes. The boat sped away, and she instantly regretted the decision to wear shorts, as the lack of sun and the rushing wind made her legs chilly. She tucked her feet under her legs and hung on tightly to the seat as Horace increased the speed. Within minutes, her stomach was churning.

“Fuck,” she murmured under her breath, and gave the man a scolding glare when he laughed loudly.

“So, what are you going to do on a private island? You don’t seem like the adventurous type,” he yelled. Julia was impressed that his voice was louder than the engines.

“Obviously, you don’t know the first thing about me,” she yelled back, hoping Horace wasn’t a conversationalist. Having to raise her voice to match his was only going to lead to a sore throat. She wasn’t quite sure what he meant by “private island” but ignored it as she considered his question, which was one she’d been asking herself.

What *was* she going to do? A week ago, Caroline, her boss and good friend, had taken her aside and had pressed an envelope into her hands. It had contained a plane ticket and instructions for her “mandatory vacation,” as Caroline had called it.

She sighed. “My boss very firmly suggested that I needed a vacation,” she shouted. “She set it all up for me. I have no idea where I’m going. All I know is that I’m under strict instructions to relax and not come back until I’ve achieved that.”

Horace only nodded in response, and Julia decided to focus on the view rather than continue the conversation. The gray clouds gathering on the horizon mirrored her current mood. But as the boat sped along and the wind blew through her hair, Julia started to relax. Despite the gray-blue color, the water provided an astonishing view. If where she was headed was as beautiful as her current surroundings, Julia would be in for the trip of a lifetime.

That reminded her of something Horace had said earlier. “By the way, what did you mean by ‘private island?’”

“Shadow Haven is owned by Alexandra Ortega. It’s one of many private islands in the Bahamas. The island is ninety-five miles from the main coast, and it takes about ninety minutes to get there, depending on the weather conditions. There are some resorts around here for the rich and famous, but the private islands are about fourteen miles further away.”

The corners of Julia’s mouth curled up, her laughter drowned out by the engines. “I have had quite enough of the rich and famous. I could do with some privacy.”

For the next hour and a half, the boat crashed against the white waves. *A bumpy ride, yeah right*, Julia thought. *More like a ride from hell*. Clinging to

her seat, she focused on the open ocean instead of the knot in her stomach. When Julia had told the captain she'd been on boats before, she'd meant cabin cruisers, which were a world apart from this center console.

The dark clouds were now directly above them, and the rain began to fall. She quickly moved to sit under the covered area of the boat. Mist engulfed them, and Julia's perfect view of the ocean was taken away. She shivered in her seat and wiped away some of the raindrops that had landed on her face.

"There'll be a lot more of that where you're headed." The captain roared with laughter. He motioned for Julia to look behind her.

She gasped. When the mist cleared, as if creating a pathway just for the boat, it revealed a stunning, green-covered island. The boat slowed down, and Julia looked back to the captain for a moment. "Is this Shadow Haven?"

"It is indeed. How long did you say you were staying?"

"I didn't." Julia grinned. "Three weeks."

"Well, storm season is about to start and will last two months at least." The old man frowned. "Most of us who charter people won't make the trip during that time. I love the ocean, and I surely could use the money, but I don't have a death wish. During storm season, these waters are treacherous and can turn into a raging ocean within seconds."

She shrugged. "I'm sure something will be arranged. My boss is a meticulous planner. She wouldn't leave me stranded here." Her mouth fell wide open again as the boat maneuvered into a cove. "Wow. This is beautiful!"

Where the gray ocean had been turbulent, the water here was clear and calm. Everywhere she looked, she saw nothing but trees on the hills, engulfed by fog.

The skillful old sailor maneuvered the center console up against the dock, then tied the boat up. It lay low in the water, which seeped through the cracks of the small pier.

Julia raised her eyebrows. "Is that going to hold?"

He laughed. "This is what adventure looks like, ma'am!"

Julia hesitated for a moment as her feet wobbled on the hardboard pier, making sure her footing was steady and she wouldn't slip. Thankfully, she was no stranger to the sensation of having to find her land legs after a long boat trip.

The captain set Julia's backpack on the dock with a thud and then untied the boat. "Well, off you go. Have a great adventure." He waved at her as the engines roared.

"Wait! Where do I go?" Julia gestured around her. "Where's my hotel?"

"You're on a dock... If you go straight ahead, you'll walk into the water. So unless you fancy a swim, I'd turn around and follow the path." He saluted her before speeding off.

"What the actual fuck?" Julia turned around and took in her surroundings. The dark clouds above and the fog surrounding the trees made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She was alone in the middle of nowhere, her clothing soaked from the heavy rain earlier.

This wasn't at all how she envisioned the start of her vacation.

She groaned at the weight of her backpack as she placed it on her shoulders. Caroline had told her that she and Alexandra Ortega had been close friends for a long time. But when Caroline said she knew of the perfect place for Julia to get some rest, she hadn't mentioned that the island was a private one. Why in the world would a private island have a hotel? Didn't that defeat the purpose of *private*?

"You're on an adventure, stop thinking..." Julia mumbled to herself as she made her way up the path. The island was absolutely stunning—lush, green bushes and brightly colored flowers everywhere—and she had to give her friend some credit for finding it. She followed the path for another ten minutes, enjoying the peace and quiet, when she laid eyes on the "hotel."

It wasn't that Julia had quite known what to expect, but this definitely wasn't it. She associated the word "hotel" with luxurious, tall buildings, yet what she saw in front of her was, at best, an oversized cabin. It looked spacious enough to house several guests, though, and Julia was disappointed at the thought of the place crawling with people and having no separate room to retreat to. It wasn't that she minded other people around her; it was just that she had been looking forward to some alone time, and it didn't seem like she would get any of that if the place was filled with guests.

She looked through the windows and frowned when she didn't see a single person. The place looked completely abandoned. A shiver ran down her spine. Where the hell was everyone? For a moment, she wondered if Horace had dropped her off on the wrong island. As much as she had

looked forward to some time by herself, this feeling of complete isolation was the opposite of what she wanted.

“You’re being silly. Stop it,” she told herself. She looked around once more, then made her way to what appeared to be the front door.

The door wouldn’t budge. There was no bell in sight, so she knocked three times instead. When no one answered, Julia looked around, unsure of what to do next. Aside from the wind whispering through the trees, it was completely silent. The knot in her stomach grew tighter when she noticed that the fog appeared closer than before.

“Okay. I’ve landed in some kind of horror movie, and I’m fast asleep... Wake the fuck up,” she murmured. She took a deep breath to try and calm down and let her backpack slide off her shoulders. So far, this really was not her day. She stretched her back, then whipped out the cellphone from her pocket. “Of course there’s no service on an island in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

“Who the hell are you?”

Julia jumped and then snapped her head around at the sound of a voice behind her. “Oh, thank God,” she said. “You must be Ms. Ortega. My name is Julia Quinn.” She held out her hand and offered her widest smile.

The woman in front of her crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “I have no idea who you are, and I do not recall having a session scheduled. Who sent you?”

Julia’s smile faltered, and she let her hand drop as it became obvious the woman wasn’t going to take it. “Caroline arranged the hotel for me? She, uh, said to give you her regards.”

“You are on a private island, and I assure you there is no hotel here. How did you get here?”

“I was—” Julia’s voice broke, and she coughed to clear her throat. “I was brought here by boat. By Captain Horace? Caroline arranged that too.”

“You are spouting names that mean absolutely nothing to me.”

Julia had almost forgotten about the package Caroline had given her for Alexandra. With trembling hands, she reached into a side pocket on her backpack and got out a box. It was small and wrapped in silver paper. Julia had previously wondered what kind of gift could possibly fit in there.

“And she asked me to give you this.” Julia handed over the gift.

Ms. Ortega’s gaze scanned over the little card that was attached.

Panic raced through Julia's body. The woman was clearly not impressed by her presence here, and Julia's heart started throbbing in her throat.

"Excuse me for a minute," Ms. Ortega said. She scowled at Julia before using a key to enter the cabin and slamming the door shut.

"Sure," Julia yelled after her. After she was out of earshot, she muttered a soft "bitch." Tears pricked behind her eyelids, and she massaged her temples, cursing the onsetting headache. This definitely wasn't the relaxing vacation it was supposed to be. Instead, it rather felt like the trip from hell, and that feeling was only intensified by the wind increasing in speed.

Julia stepped onto the covered part of the porch and reached into her backpack again to get out a bottle of water. Gulping most of its contents down, she let out a long sigh as she put the bottle back in her pack. With every minute that passed, she was getting angrier.

Finally, the door opened again, and Ms. Ortega leaned into the door frame. Black, wavy curls fell perfectly around her face. She was slightly taller than Julia, with skin a bit darker than Julia's pale tone. Dark-brown eyes seemed to pierce right into Julia's soul, and she took an involuntary step back.

"Right. You are Julia Quinn." Her gaze traveled over Julia's body, and she arched an eyebrow.

"And you are Ms. Ortega, owner of the hotel which you say doesn't exist." She offered a tiny smile but didn't get one in return. None of this made sense to her anymore.

"My name is Alexandra Ortega, yes. But as I said before, there is no hotel. This is a private island, and I own it. There seems to have been a mistake. Caroline's secretary e-mailed me a week ago to say that I would be housing a guest for three weeks, but in two months' time."

Julia stared at her. "What? No, that's not right. Everything was booked for today. Look," she said and held up her phone, "here's my boarding pass."

"Be that as it may—"

"And hang on—" Julia scrolled through her phone.

"Ms. Quinn, it's not that I don't believe—"

"One sec." Julia held up a hand. "Okay, here it is! See? Here's the e-mail confirming the trip."

Alexandra snatched the phone from Julia's hand and skimmed the screen's contents. "That's not what I was told at all. My e-mail read August

the sixth. Yours reads otherwise.” She pointed to the tiny 6/8 date on the screen.

“Holy shit.”

“Please watch your language around me, Ms. Quinn. I just spoke to Caroline and am seriously reconsidering my friendship with the woman. As much as I understand that this is not her fault, I do not like to be caught off guard. And you...you definitely did just that.”

Julia inhaled sharply. “I’m sorry, but this is all a bit confusing to me. You knew I was coming, but you were expecting me two months from now. Does that mean I have to go back? I mean, there’s supposed to be a hotel here, but there isn’t. I’m supposed to be on vacation, but this doesn’t feel like a vacation at all. I’ve been up since forever, I’m soaked through, and my back hurts from carrying that damn backpack!”

“I am afraid getting back is a bit of an issue at the moment,” said Alexandra. “Storm season is about to begin, and many of the charter companies do not operate during this time. I could probably arrange for a boat to take you to one of the resorts, but by the looks of it, a storm is brewing. For now, you are stuck here.”

The groan came from deep within Julia. “I feel like I’m being majorly pranked.”

“Trust me. You are not. I know this is all quite unexpected for both of us. Perhaps you would like to come in, and I could show you to a guest room. After you are settled in, we can discuss this a bit further.”

She hated the confused, frustrated tears that she couldn’t hold back. Julia quickly wiped them from her eyes. She strapped on her backpack and followed Ms. Ortega into the cabin.

Her eyes bulged at the enormous space and luxuriousness of it all. Giant windows provided a broad view of the island. As she ventured further, she found herself in the living room. A dark-gray, L-shaped couch stood in the middle, with a warm red rug in front of it. It was surrounded by several black chairs that seemed perfect to curl up in for a night of reading. On the wall to her right hung a television of a size Julia could never afford. DVDs were stacked up against the wall next to it, and she noticed what she thought was a gaming console. Her eye caught a painting that seemed to vibrate with dark colors; she had no idea who’d painted it, but Julia

assumed it was an original. Ms. Ortega didn't seem like the type of person who would have a reproduction on her wall.

They moved from the living room, past the kitchen, and into a hallway.

"This," Ms. Ortega said, "is one of six guest rooms." She opened the door and motioned for Julia to step inside. "That door leads to the bathroom. If you want to freshen up, I am happy to give you a few moments."

"Thanks," Julia said. "I appreciate that you're offering me a place to stay, but I'm still worried." She tried to remain calm despite the storm that still was raging inside her.

Ms. Ortega sat down on a black leather couch underneath the window and crossed her legs. "What is it that you do for a living, Ms. Quinn?"

"I hardly see why that matters," Julia shot back.

"Indulge me."

Julia sat down on the edge of the bed. She couldn't help gasping at how comfortable it was just to sit on it. Her fingers dug into the silk covers, and she scanned the room. Ms. Ortega certainly had style, and while the room was gorgeous, it reeked of money and was probably worth more than her entire apartment. Her place might be tiny and run down, but it was hers. All she had on her walls at home were her own photos. Here, yet another expensive-looking painting hung on the wall, this one made of bright colors that reminded her of a forest she'd once strolled through.

"Ms. Quinn," Ms. Ortega said with a force in her voice that startled Julia. "I do not like to repeat myself."

"I work for Caroline's agency. I mostly do PR work for her clients." Julia took a deep breath. "Look, Ms. Ortega—"

"You may call me Alexandra."

"Okay. Alexandra. You've got to understand that this whole thing is just a bit surreal. What did you mean when you said you didn't have a session?"

The smile on Alexandra's face lasted a mere second. "I understand your confusion. With Caroline's agency being one of the best in the country, her clientele varies from actors to high-ranking government employees. And, how shall I put this delicately..." Alexandra folded her hands in her lap. "Are you familiar with the more *esoteric* aims of Caroline's agency?"

"If I knew what *esoteric* meant, I'm sure I could answer that," Julia answered.

Alexandra let out a short laugh. "In this case, I mean confidential; a subject or information only meant for a select few. Simply put, Caroline's clients have needs and desires that they desperately want to keep hidden from the general public."

Julia sighed. "I am aware of that. I do PR. I have to twist so many stories."

"I am sure you do. How long have you worked for Caroline now?"

"Three years." Julia wasn't quite sure why it mattered or why they were having this conversation in the first place.

"Would I be right in assuming that it is Caroline who is paying for your trip?"

Julia's cheeks flushed a crimson red as she nodded.

"I have known Caroline since I was nineteen years old. She likes to reward her employees. If she pays for your vacation, it means she is pleased with your work and you do a good job. You should be proud of that. You are not the first person who has been sent here, but you are the first person who does not know the intimate details of my business relationship with Caroline."

"Which are?"

"Let's say...I am in the entertainment business," Alexandra said. She waved a hand around. "I cater to an exclusively female clientele."

"So, what?" Julia asked. "You're like some kind of high-end call girl?"

"Hardly, Ms. Quinn." Alexandra scoffed. "Look around you. Does it look like I spread my legs for a few bucks?"

"Nothing wrong with people who do," she replied with a shrug.

"Agreed. However, when Caroline's clients come to me, they have a desire to be dominated."

Julia's jaw dropped. "*You*... You're a dominatrix?"

"If that is how you wish to label it," Alexandra said. "As you may understand, in this society, a need to be dominated is something that is still frowned upon. My clients have a need for privacy." Alexandra spread her arms. "And that is exactly what Shadow Haven provides for them. They are flown in, we have a session that can vary from hours to days, and then they fly back to their day-to-day lives."

Julia gulped. She knew this sort of practice happened; she wasn't dumb. But to actually meet someone who was a dominatrix...well, that was an

entirely different thing. “I’m not one to judge,” she said. “Caroline has a successful agency, and if this arrangement works for her clients, then that’s great. I still don’t get why I’m here, though. It seems you use this island for work, so why let me stay?”

A short but gentle smile appeared as the woman’s lips curled up. “That is the million-dollar question, is it not? After her secretary e-mailed me, I had a conversation with Caroline. She informed me that you could do with a vacation, and it seemed this place and its remote location would be ideal for you. I do not entirely appreciate the mix-up of dates, however. As I said, it caught me off guard.”

Julia slowly blinked as she took it all in. It seemed so ridiculous, and the headache that grew stronger with every passing second made it hard for her to gather her thoughts. “Okay. So, to sum up, Caroline sends me on vacation, but her secretary mixed up the dates. You weren’t expecting me, but you’re letting me stay anyway. On top of that, you’re a dominatrix and...” She slammed her fists down on the bed. “Do you not see how completely ridiculous this is? What if you hadn’t let me stay? Where would I have gone?” She took a deep breath. “I want to talk to Caroline.”

“Of course. Follow me.” Alexandra stood up and led Julia to her office.

The walls of the office were painted white, and each one displayed a painting. A dark wooden desk stood opposite a window. The view outside was of a bay that would look even more stunning when the sun was out. Julia sat down in the leather office chair that Alexandra offered her. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Caroline’s gift.

“What’s this?” Julia picked up the bulky phone. It felt like holding a brick in her hands. “Some kind of satellite phone?”

“You may want to hold off on the questions and give Caroline a call while you still can, Ms. Quinn. With the impending storm, it can be hard to place calls.”

“Jesus, fine.” Julia dialed Caroline’s number and turned her back to Alexandra as it rang.

“Alexandra, dear, calling back so soon?”

Julia rolled her eyes at Caroline’s seductive tone. “Yeah, it’s not Alexandra. It’s Julia. What the hell, Caroline?”

“Oh d-dear,” Caroline stammered and cleared her throat. “Someone has a temper. I assume you’re a bit mad at me?”

“That would be the understatement of the year. What the hell happened?”

“Are the accommodations not up to your standards, Jules?”

“Cut the crap, Caroline. You book me a vacation and tell me to go relax, and so far I am anything but relaxed.”

“You should let Alexandra take care of that—”

Julia’s cheeks flushed. “I’m not in the business of being dominated, thank you very much.” She lowered her voice and hissed into the phone, not wanting Alexandra to hear her. “She’s not the friendliest, you know? So, whatever you had planned, it backfired. I am furious at you.”

“It was an innocent mistake, Julia. You just arrived two months earlier than Alexandra expected, that’s all. I apologize for that, even though it was my secretary’s fault. You know how it is. One wrong keystroke, and plans have to be changed and adjusted.”

“What if she hadn’t let me stay? Where would I have gone? You almost put me in real danger.”

“I did no such thing. I understand that you are frustrated, and that everything didn’t go exactly as we had planned. For that, I apologize. But now you’re at your vacation destination, and it’s time for you to go enjoy it.”

“What am I supposed to do? There’s no one here! It’s just her and me, and she hates me.”

“I do not—”

Julia whipped her chair around. “Can I have some privacy, please?”

“Certainly.”

Once Alexandra had closed the door behind her, Julia took a deep breath. “What if she changes her mind, huh? So far, every person I’ve met has talked about the storm season and how charter companies won’t come and collect people. Do you expect me to swim back to the mainland?”

“Julia. Please calm down. I’m sure Alexandra will have no issue with letting you stay. Why don’t you let me talk to her? You’ve had a very long day, and I know you must be tired. I am honestly sorry about this mistake and that your vacation started off like this. Just...just let me talk to Alexandra, okay?”

“Fine,” Julia said. “But I’m still mad at you.” With that, she put the phone down and swung the door open. “She wants to talk to you.”

“Go freshen up, Ms. Quinn. I promise life will look much brighter after you have taken a shower and had a chance to...calm down a bit.”

Julia threw her hands up in the air before stalking off to her room. She emptied the contents of her backpack on the bed, glad that nothing inside was wet from the rain. She took several deep breaths to try and relax. When that didn't work, a shower seemed like the best option. Her entire body felt tense, and it wasn't until the warm spray engulfed her that she began to relax a little.

She tried not to think too much about what was going to happen once Alexandra decided she was no longer welcome on the island. Closing her eyes, she rinsed the shampoo from her hair and coughed when some of the water went up her nose. When her body was warm enough and she felt clean, she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower onto a small rug on the floor.

“At least the shower was decent,” Julia murmured to herself as she toweled dry.

She let her gaze wander through the bathroom and shuddered at the thought of the previous guests that had stayed here. Julia honestly wasn't someone to judge a person for their interests, but the idea that Alexandra was some kind of hardcore dominatrix left her feeling unsettled. And that feeling was only multiplied by Caroline's lack of information regarding this trip. Why hadn't she told Julia about Alexandra's profession? Surely that was something you'd share with someone before sending them over to stay with a stranger? Caroline knew Julia better than anyone, and it infuriated her that she had thought it was okay to do this without giving her all the details.

It wasn't as if she was opposed to spontaneity; she welcomed it, even. But this... This left her anxious, and Alexandra's initial hostility toward her did not help the situation. With a big sigh, she brushed her hair and put on a pair of black sweatpants and a gray sweater before taking off to find Alexandra to get to the bottom of this.



Alexandra sat in the living room in much the same fashion as she had in the guest bedroom. She looked almost regal as she sat in the chair—

her black pants perfectly pressed at the seams, a white button-down shirt perfectly accentuating the curves of her body.

Julia averted her eyes, suddenly feeling shy.

“Are you feeling better, Ms. Quinn?” Alexandra arched an eyebrow.

“Physically, yes. Mentally, not so much,” Julia said. “Can I sit down, or do I need your permission for that?”

Alexandra let out a small laugh. “You may sit. I am not here to dominate you, Ms. Quinn. You are free to do as you wish. Would you like to know the details of my conversation with our friend, Caroline?”

Julia sat down in a chair opposite Alexandra. She tried to sit up as straight as Alexandra’s pose was—she wasn’t afraid of her—but somehow, her pose didn’t end up regal at all. Her shoulders hunched inward, and she found herself looking at the floor, unable to meet Alexandra’s steel-eyed gaze. Julia folded her hands together in her lap to hide some of her discomfort.

“I normally leave the island during storm season. It so happens that this time, I chose to stay, something I discussed with Caroline at great length. She has *royally* compensated me for your expected yet unexpected company. You are welcome to stay here for the next few weeks. Caroline seems to be under the impression that we would get along and that we both could use a friend.”

Julia frowned at the mention of Alexandra having been compensated but only said, “Captain Horace mentioned that the storm season lasts for two months. You said yourself that getting back to mainland is difficult. How long am I staying, exactly?”

“I am not sure. If you decide that you are too uncomfortable and want to leave, I can probably bribe some private contractor to come and get you. But you should know that the weather here can turn in a second, and I cannot guarantee your safety if you decide to go.”

“I have no money to hire a private contractor. Unless Caroline will pay for that as well. On top of that, I do value my life. This whole situation is still awkward to me, you know? I mean, do you even have enough food for two people?”

“I have a vegetable garden and a very well-stocked pantry. When it is not storm season, I have a boat come in for a supply run once a month.

Since I had to prepare for my stay here, and there being no supply runs, my pantry is currently stocked to the brim. There is plenty for both of us.”

“Well, at least we won’t starve. But what about other things? This place is in the middle of nowhere, yet you have electricity. I’m not dumb or anything, but how does all this work?”

Alexandra tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “There is a generator on the island with enough fuel for six months. The diesel tank itself is able to withstand the weather conditions. There is an underwater armored utility cable that runs from here to the nearest resort. It makes it possible for us to have the Internet, though it is not the fastest. We can set up your phone to connect to it, if you wish.” She leaned back in her chair as she continued. “I inherited this island from my grandparents, and while I understand your agitation, I guarantee that you will have every luxury you can think of. There is an indoor swimming pool, and I have a theater room if you want to watch a movie.”

“You have a swimming pool on an island. An island that is surrounded by water?”

“Trust me, Ms. Quinn,” Alexandra said. “When the weather turns and the storms hit, you do not want to be out on the open water. The indoor swimming pool is heaven-sent on those days.”

“And you’re really okay with me staying here? You don’t even know me. I mean, for all you know, I’m a serial killer. For all I know, *you’re* a serial killer...” Julia coughed. That sounded ridiculous, even to her ears.

“I trust Caroline. She would not send a dangerous person my way. I promise you that I am not a serial killer and that I will return you home safely when the time is right. So, yes, I *am* okay with you staying here, Ms. Quinn. The question is, are you?”

Julia was silent for a long time. Truth be told, she was torn. On the one hand, she desperately wanted and needed a break. On the other, she didn’t want to spend her time with some stranger who had been hostile from the very first moment. Yes, that hostility had been replaced by semifriendliness as soon as money had been added into the equation. Still, Julia wasn’t sure how she felt about staying here alone on an island with a stranger.

“I don’t know.” She pushed her hair back away from her face.

“Give it one week, Ms. Quinn. If you are not happy at the end of that time, we will look into the possibilities of returning you home.” Alexandra

stood up and made her way over to Julia. With a smile, she held out her hand. “It is nice to meet you, Ms. Quinn. My name is Alexandra Ortega. Welcome to Shadow Haven. I do hope you will enjoy your time here.”

Julia swallowed thickly as she took the offered hand. “Thank you” was all she managed to murmur as Alexandra’s thumb caressed the soft spot above Julia’s thumb for the briefest of moments before dropping her hand. She caught herself when her gaze dropped to Alexandra’s luscious lips, and for a moment, she could see the appeal in being dominated by someone like this woman.

Chapter 2

JULIA WAS, ADMITTEDLY, QUITE ENJOYING the tour of the house Alexandra had offered her. “Do you clean all of this yourself? I mean, it must be a lot of work.”

“To be fair, if I have a client, it is easy to make them help out. Although I must say, my male clients were much more willing to help than the female clients are. But yes, I mostly do it myself. I do not mind cleaning all that much. It gives me something to do.”

“Do you get bored a lot?”

“Not in the slightest, but between all my work sessions, it *is* nice to do something simple like cleaning. My work requires me to be fully engaged. I cannot, even for a moment, let my attention wander...*that* is when accidents happen.”

Julia watched as Alexandra, with a grin on her face, pointed to a door. She leaned in closer to read the letters on the plaque and snorted as she read them out loud. “Royal Chambers.”

“My bedroom. You are more than welcome to freely roam the house, but I would appreciate it if you would stay out of my room.”

“Of course.”

The next room was the theater room. When she first heard Alexandra mention it, Julia thought it would be a room with a television and perhaps a comfortable chair. Instead, the room was spacious, and the walls were painted a shade of black that almost made it feel as if she had stepped into a universe without light. Six red, large chairs were pointed toward the immense screen.

“These are love seats,” Alexandra said. “Comfort is very important to me.”

“I am... I don’t even know what to say. I’m impressed. Your entire house is just beautiful. It’s hard for me to imagine why you’d share this with total strangers.”

“My clients do not come in here,” Alexandra said. “They are restricted to their bedroom, my playroom, and the living room. I was not kidding when I said that most of them come in for a session and leave immediately after.”

“Still,” Julia said. “This is your private home, and you’re sharing it with strangers. Even the island itself you’re sharing with them. What if they don’t leave?”

Alexandra’s eyes darkened, and her expression became closed off.

Sore topic, Julia thought. She didn’t push for more information when Alexandra turned and motioned for Julia to follow her.



Alexandra sighed as she stepped into the kitchen. With one innocent comment, Julia had been able to change her entire mood. The friendliness Alexandra tried to display at first had now become an overwhelming desire for this tour to be over as quickly as possible. Sharing her home with clients had never been an issue. Well, it had been once, but that had quickly been resolved. Still, that feeling of dread was never far from her mind, and if she wasn’t careful, she would let it consume her. She always made sure she was in control, but this particular memory always seemed to take that control away from her.

“Since you have arrived earlier than I expected, I had no time to ask Caroline for your favorites,” Alexandra said. “So I am afraid you are stuck with what I have when it comes to food. What time do you usually wake up?”

“Six thirty in the morning.”

“Living on the island can be a bit like camping. Sometimes your body adjusts to the sun, meaning you will wake up when the sun comes up and you will want to go to bed when the sun sets. I will make sure breakfast is ready at seven. Lunch will be on the table at noon, and dinner will be ready at six. Feel free to eat your food elsewhere or join me at the dinner table in the living room.”

“Okay, thanks. So,” Julia drawled, “where’s the library?”

Alexandra couldn't help but chuckle. "It saddens me to say there is no such thing, Ms. Quinn. Perhaps that should be my next project. There are books in the living room and in my office, though. Feel free to read them."

"I can't believe that you have all this stuff, but you don't have a library. You should build another cabin and just fill it to the brim with books."

"Not a bad idea. I will put it on my list of things to think about. I take it you like books, then?"

"I do. I didn't have a lot of books when I grew up, but the ones I did have are still favorites to this day. Books are a portal to another world, and I love immersing myself in them. Perhaps it's silly."

"Not at all. If I find books scattered throughout the house, I will make sure to put them in the living room."

"Thank you." Julia smiled. "I appreciate that."



"I would show you this room, but you might have a heart attack, and I am afraid I am not equipped to revive you properly." Alexandra let a finger slide down a dark-colored wooden door. "This room, however," she said as she pointed to another, "I think you might enjoy quite a bit."

The smell of chlorine hit Julia's nose. It wasn't the biggest pool, but it was large enough to allow a good swim. She was looking forward to doing laps here in the morning. "It's beautiful," Julia said.

"Thank you. The pool is heated, so it should bring you some comfort. I often find myself soaking in here for hours at a time." She pointed to a panel on the wall. "The pool stays covered when not in use, but if you press the *off* button, it will automatically uncover. Just remember to press the *on* button when you are done." Walking along the side of the pool, she opened a glass door and invited Julia to step inside.

"Are you kidding me? A sauna?"

"Well, what can I say? I like my luxuries. Besides, it is a surprisingly wonderful setting for aftercare."

"So, what? You hug your clients while sweating out your hard work?"

"Something like that." Alexandra wiggled her eyebrows. "If you wish, I could give you a demonstration," she teased. They stepped out of the sauna, and Alexandra closed the door.

“Look,” Julia said as she followed Alexandra. “You said Caroline paid you money to let me stay here. I honestly don’t care what business you have with her, but if she paid you to take me on as a client or something, I’m telling you right now I am *not* interested.”

“Wait. You think Caroline sent you here as a possible client?”

Julia crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, it certainly seems like it.”

“There is one thing you should know about me, Ms. Quinn. What you see is what you get. I promise you that my behavior is not an act. I *am* a dominant, and the way I speak to you is the way I speak to everyone. I think you are feeling confused or embarrassed, and that is perfectly okay. You have had quite the journey here, and you ended up having to adjust your expectations. I understand it will take you some time to absorb everything that has happened. So I suggest you go do something to relax, and while you do so, I would advise you to take some deep breaths. I will get dinner ready and call you when it is done.” Alexandra turned around and left.

Standing there stock-still, literally gaping in her wake, wasn’t the most impressive response to Alexandra’s exit, but it was all Julia had in her. With a big sigh, she made her way to her own room in silence and let herself fall down on the mattress. Julia buried her head in the pillow. So far, her day had been anything but relaxing, and if this was the way things were going to go for the next week, she couldn’t wait to leave and give Caroline a piece of her mind. To think that her boss and friend had possibly sent her as a client was baffling. And it made her feel betrayed. Alexandra had seemed surprised at the idea, but she hadn’t exactly refuted the statement. Julia made a mental note to question her about it later.

There had to be some guidelines if Julia was going to stay here and feel like she was actually on vacation, starting with telling Alexandra to tone it down a little.

“Yeah, right. Like that’s gonna happen,” she murmured.



Alexandra massaged her temples and groaned. This day had been... trying. It was a strange sensation, having to adjust her demeanor to her recent guest. But Alexandra had been looking forward to Julia’s arrival—in August. The way Caroline had talked about Julia had made her smile. It was obvious that her friend was very proud of her employee and wanted to

give her a well-deserved break from the hard work she had been doing. And Julia was so different from the clients who usually resided with her. They were obedient, eager to please, and asked no questions, whereas Julia was full of questions and full of resentment for having been sent here without knowing all the details of where she would be staying.

It was obvious Julia was angry at Caroline for not telling her Alexandra was a dominatrix. It was something Alexandra could understand, but not something she was used to, and she wasn't quite sure how to deal with it. She couldn't simply put Julia in her place, like she would do with her clients. Instead, she would have to give Julia some time to adjust to the situation and hope that she would soon feel more at ease. At the very least, she owed it to Caroline to give Julia a good vacation, rather than more days like the one they had had so far.

She checked the timer on the oven, hoping that her guest liked lasagna. It was her signature dish, and she hoped that it could serve as a kind of peace offering. Julia intrigued her; there was a mystery about her... While she didn't know the first thing about the woman, she did know there was something interesting buried beneath that prickly exterior of hers, and Alexandra intended to find out what it was.

But for now, she would give them both some space to adjust to this new situation. Julia wasn't the only one who felt uneasy; Alexandra just knew how to hide it better. It was something she had picked up at a young age, and she was an expert at it by now. It helped her in sessions with clients, as if her insecurities fueled her dominance, and for a brief moment in time, her feelings didn't matter. During her sessions, she was in control: both of her client and of herself. But with Julia, she had to learn that who was in control didn't matter. Julia was not a potential client; she was here on a vacation. And Alexandra... Well, she was going to have to learn how to let go of being in control in favor of making a friend.



A knock startled Julia awake. She rubbed her eyes. When had she fallen asleep? What time was it? Another knock echoed through the room, and she groaned.

“Ms. Quinn?”

She got off of the bed and opened the door while yawning. "I'm up, I'm up."

"Wonderful. Dinner is ready," Alexandra said with a smile. "Please follow me."

Julia wondered if this was the first sincere smile she had seen on Alexandra. She took in the view of the table, which had been set up quite nicely. A white lace tablecloth hung evenly over the four sides, and Julia couldn't help but grin back at her. It seemed Alexandra was a perfectionist in every aspect of her life. Silver cutlery shone brightly, and her mouth watered when she saw the glass of red wine.

"This smells good," Julia said, sitting down at the table.

"I hope you will like it. I have *slaved* hard in the kitchen for you, Ms. Quinn," Alexandra teased as she served them both a portion of lasagna.

"I'm sure that must have been a strange sensation for you." A soft moan escaped her as she took a bite of lasagna. "Okay, now *this* makes me feel like I'm on vacation." Julia smiled when Alexandra shot her a quizzical look. "I can't cook to save my life, so going on vacation is always a treat because I get properly fed. Although I do make a mean grilled cheese sandwich."

"Well, if you are open to it, I could give you some cooking lessons while you are here. The least I could do is to teach you how to boil an egg."

This conversation, while light, was a world of difference from their earlier ones, and while she still felt uneasy, Julia appreciated that Alexandra was making an effort. "I wasn't actually planning on doing a whole lot, you know," she said. "I just wanted to lie on a beach, soak up the sun, and read lots of books."

"You can still do all those things, although I really would advise against lying on the beach this time of year. I was not kidding when I said the weather can turn in a second. When I was a little child, I stayed here for a couple of weeks during the summer vacation and got hit in the face by a branch during a particularly heavy storm out of nowhere."

"Is that how you got your scar?" Julia had noticed it earlier. A small and slightly curved scar ran from her hairline down to her eyebrow.

"I had a heavy concussion too, but I learned my lesson, and my family learned that I did not take kindly to orders."

"Is everything out of your mouth a reference to your lifestyle?" Julia blurted out. She regretted the statement as soon as it left her mouth.

Alexandra had been nothing but kind to her during dinner. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I think you did,” Alexandra said. “And no, it actually isn’t.”

Julia’s cheeks reddened with embarrassment at the mild scolding. “I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you use a contraction.” In an attempt to lighten the mood, she flashed her a broad smile.

“My parents were very adamant about me speaking correctly. It helps in sessions as well. It adds a certain *un no sé qué* when you pronounce every word. I am not sure I can explain.”

“I think I get it. I’m sure part of your charm is the capability of using your voice in a manner that leaves nothing to the imagination.”

“Oh, I leave a *lot* to the imagination, Ms. Quinn. But you are correct. I know how to use my voice, and I *do* use it a lot. You are very perceptive.” She narrowed her eyes slightly as she gave Julia a thoughtful look.

Julia’s attention was captured by the way Alexandra gave her wine a small swirl before bringing it to her mouth and taking a small sip. “Did Caroline pay you to take me on as a client?” she asked. It was an abrupt change in subject, but Julia *had* to know.

“She did not. She reimbursed me for having you stay here. I know it may be hard to believe, but I truly think Caroline had the best of intentions in mind. She just went about it the wrong way. We all make mistakes, Ms. Quinn. Do not let this affect your friendship with Caroline; it would not be worth it.”

“I’ll probably hold a grudge for a while; nothing wrong with making her sweat a little. So, why did she think we both could use a friend? I don’t mean to be rude, but we seem to be coming from two completely different worlds.”

“So, someone powerful cannot be friends with someone—”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Julia held up a hand. “You *do* make a lot of references to your lifestyle.” She delivered the accusation mildly, though. “I just mean it’s hard for me to see what we have in common and why Caroline would think we would get along. So far, it’s been...difficult.”

“You seem to handle it quite well, though,” Alexandra mused. “If I were put in your position, I probably would have demanded that someone bring me back to the city, and then I would have killed Caroline.”

"I'm still contemplating doing exactly that. You and the captain both warned me that the seas are dangerous. I have no desire to die just because I want to get back to the mainland. Besides, I've earned my vacation, and I want to enjoy it. I just like to know the details. Winging things is not my style, and it's a big adjustment."

"Can I help you ease your mind somehow? If you have questions, I will probably have answers."

"Why do you call me Ms. Quinn?" Julia asked. She shoved another forkful of food into her mouth and tried not to moan in delight. Alexandra truly was an outstanding cook.

"Remnants of my upbringing. If I call you anything other than that, you are either in big trouble or I feel incredibly comfortable around you." Alexandra let a finger slide over the rim of her glass. "Besides, I don't think you'd take kindly to me referring to you as a slut." She held up a hand when Julia opened her mouth. "I am kidding, Ms. Quinn."

Julia shook her head slowly. Unbelievable. But she had to admit it was funny, and it reminded her of another question she wanted to ask. "Do I have to worry about any of your clients showing up unexpectedly while I'm here?"

"No." The single word was said with enough force to make it a complete sentence.

Even though they'd just met, Julia believed her.

"I have a strict invitation-only policy," Alexandra continued. "My clients know better than to show up uninvited. That being said, I do have friends who may come by."

"You do sessions with friends as well? Doesn't that get complicated?" Julia couldn't imagine being dominated by a friend, only to come back the next day for a casual dinner.

"I never said my friends come over for a session," Alexandra said. "I have friends that I have played with in a casual manner. I can tie a friend up. I can tease them with my equipment. But I will never play with them as I do with my clients. That's a line I refuse to cross."

"Why?"

"Because I crossed it once, and it made things unnecessarily complicated. It was a lesson I needed to learn, though. I do not regret it."

Julia shifted in her seat. "Why did you decide to let me stay?"

“I wouldn’t want to let Caroline down, and I know she would be disappointed if I had sent you back,” Alexandra said. “Not to say that it isn’t still an option, but you were supposed to be here anyway; you’ve just arrived a bit too early. She obviously thinks that we have more in common than either of us can currently see, but I trust her judgment. Perhaps after you’ve had some days to adjust to your situation, the future will look much brighter. So, as I have said before, while your company at the moment is quite unexpected, you are not unwanted.”

Julia teared up and looked away. Unknowingly, Alexandra had mentioned the one word that had haunted Julia her entire life. *Unwanted*. It was the one feeling that had stuck with her as she’d grown up, always moving from one foster home to the next. For Alexandra to mention it now so casually made her feel truly welcome. Julia gave her a quick smile.

“What was in that room that you didn’t want to show me? Is that where you hide all the bodies of play gone wrong?”

“Not quite, Ms. Quinn. But to avoid making our day any more awkward, I would prefer to keep that room private for now. When you feel more comfortable on the island and, more importantly, around me, then I may change my mind and show you what’s behind door number one. That being said, I would like to give you a tour of the island in the morning.”

“I’d like that.” Julia collected the plates and brought them over to the sink. “So, do dominants wash the dishes or dry them with a towel?”

“I am just a normal human being, you know,” Alexandra said as she picked up a towel. “But, I prefer to see other people get wet.”

Julia’s cheek flushed at the statement, and with a grumble, she started washing the dishes.

“So, tell me, Ms. Quinn: why did you need a vacation so badly?”

When the scorching hot water burned her skin, Julia dropped the plate. She reached down and started washing it. “I think for the past few years, I’ve done nothing but work. I practically live at the office, and you can only do that for so long before it just breaks you apart.”

“No one waiting for you at home to help defuse the tension after a hard day’s work?”

“No. I live in a run-down apartment that I rent for way more money than it’s worth. I’m currently not seeing anyone, so I prefer to spend my time at work. I feel more useful there.”

Alexandra offered a small smile. “Your parents must be proud of you. Caroline spoke highly of your work ethic, if only for a brief moment.”

Julia immediately tensed up. She absolutely loathed having to talk about family. As far as she was concerned, she had no family and no desire to talk about her childhood. She took a deep breath and decided to change the topic, hoping Alexandra would let her without asking any questions. “How did you and Caroline meet?”

“I think we met almost sixteen years ago at college. We bumped into each other in line for coffee, got to talking, and we never really stopped. There have been times where we were far apart distance wise, but we always managed to stay in contact throughout. She is my best friend and the best business partner I’ve ever had. I trust her completely, which is another reason why I have no issue letting you stay here.” She held up her hands when Julia was about to protest. “It is why I had no issue with the *original* date of you coming here.”



When the dishes were completely done and put away, Julia thanked Alexandra for dinner and excused herself. She desperately wanted some time to herself to gather her thoughts. Alexandra had mentioned once more that if Julia was dead-set on leaving, she would try and arrange transportation. Julia was starting to feel more comfortable, though, and decided to give this place a chance. Besides, wherever Caroline would send her instead, it would not live up to Shadow Haven’s beauty and seclusion.

Still, she wasn’t completely settled in. Some quiet time reading a book before turning in for the night would help. Perhaps things would be clearer in the morning.

Sitting down on the couch in her bedroom, she tucked her legs under her chin and looked out the window. Even at night, Shadow Haven was truly gorgeous. From this spot, she had a perfect view of the bay, which shone even more brightly with the moon’s reflection, and the trees that gently swayed in the wind. Scenes like this were rare, she thought. At home, when she looked out the window, she had a perfect view of a brick wall. While that usually didn’t bother her, it seemed quite pathetic when she compared it to this luscious landscape.

Taking a deep breath, she focused on the pages in her book, but she found it hard to concentrate on the adventure of her protagonist when she was in the middle of an adventure herself. After having read the same sentence over and over, she put the book aside and got ready for bed instead. While brushing her teeth, she looked in the mirror, the day's events clearly showing on her face. Her blue eyes seemed gray, and the bags under her eyes reminded her of long workdays that never seemed to end. She ran a brush through her hair, put it up in a simple ponytail, and curled up in bed. Whatever was going to happen tomorrow, it would surely be better than today, she thought before drifting off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 3

ALEXANDRA HAD A SMALL CHUCKLE when Julia stopped dead in her tracks.

“You have a car,” Julia said. “You live on an island, and you have a car.”

“I do,” Alexandra said. “A Jeep is essential for getting around. Get on in, and you’ll see.” She waited for Julia to sit down before getting behind the wheel herself. With the brush of her hand, she smoothed out the creases in her pants, then started the vehicle. She loved driving around the island. Even though the dirt tracks couldn’t take her everywhere, they got her to places that were not easily reached by foot. “My grandparents bought the island when I was a little girl.” Years back, her grandparents had insisted on clearing some of the brush to create roads, something for which she was eternally grateful.

“As you can imagine, my family has a lot of money. My grandfather owned a very successful engineering firm. He wasn’t afraid to invest that money and spent some of it by buying this island. I am not trying to show off,” Alexandra said. “I just know it can be a lot to take in.”

“No shit,” Julia mumbled.

Alexandra chose to ignore that statement for the time being. She truly wasn’t fond of swearing, but it seemed that with Ms. Quinn around, it was something she was going to have to get used to. “There is a short landing strip for the plane that brings my clients here,” Alexandra said as they drove past it. “Generally, my clients prefer to fly in. We tried the boat route for a while, but many of them get seasick. The island is mostly maintained by me, but sometimes after a heavy storm, I get help from the outside.”

As they drove further, she pointed out some of the trees and plants to Julia. “That right there is the *Pseudophoenix sargentii*. It’s more commonly

known as the Florida cherry palm, but to me, ‘Pseudophoenix’ just sounds more fun.” She was quiet for a moment. Her grandfather had planted most of these trees, and as such, they were her absolute favorite. He’d died over ten years ago, but she still missed him deeply. Alexandra found solace in his trees; as long as they lived, so would he. “That,” Alexandra continued as she pointed to a bush with red leaves, “is the Berberis bush.”

“Bieber bush, got it,” Julia teased. “So, uh, are there, like, wild animals here?”

“No. Not as far as I am aware. Although, my grandparents did once have a pig that escaped, but I imagine it either drowned or died from starvation. Honestly, nobody knows. It may still roam the island. That being said, you will find a lot of birds here. My grandfather once started a list of birds he encountered, and I have tried to add to it. But I have to admit bird-watching is not something I am very fond of.”

“Me neither. Shadow Haven is absolutely gorgeous, though. I had no idea that it was like this when I first arrived. I mean, I enjoyed the walk from the dock to your house. But this...” she said, “this is just beautiful.”

Alexandra smiled at Julia. She was glad Julia was enjoying herself, rather than being the stressed and exhausted person she’d been yesterday. Not that Alexandra had helped with that. In her defense, she was naturally inclined to be guarded when strangers stepped on her island, mostly because that shouldn’t be possible. Not without her permission, anyway. Not after what had happened.

She willed those thoughts to the back of her mind. “If you go slowly, you can enjoy about an hour’s drive around the island. Some of the dirt roads are not as accessible as others, though, so it takes a while to figure out how to best get from one place to another. Personally, I’d suggest going by foot. There’s a lot more to see that way.” She stopped the car for a moment, and she licked her lips that had dried from the wind coming through the window. “I have said before that you are free to roam around, but I cannot stress the importance of safety enough. Wandering around the island is amazing, and you’ll come across views even I probably haven’t seen yet. But *please* let me know when you are going to explore and in which direction you are headed in case the weather turns, okay?”

Julia nodded. “Absolutely. Safety first.”

Pleased with that answer, Alexandra started the car, and they drove in silence for a while. She took a turn and knowingly smiled at the small gasp she heard beside her. Julia had the exact same reaction as everybody else upon first seeing the cove.

“Wow.”

“This is my favorite spot on the island,” Alexandra said softly. She got out of the car and motioned for Julia to do the same. “It must sound strange, but I enjoy the peace and solitude when I come here. This cove is the perfect place to clear your thoughts and reflect on life.”

“Yeah, I imagine so. This is really pretty,” Julia said, her voice hushed and full of wonder.

Alexandra enjoyed watching Julia’s facial expression change. At first, it was impressed, but eventually it changed to utter astonishment. Somehow, it was important to her that Julia approve of the cove, and to see Julia’s stunned expression upon looking at it made her heart flutter. Julia’s hair had come loose from the hair tie, and so Alexandra took a step forward and reached out to tuck it behind Julia’s ear.

Julia’s hand was quicker than hers, and Alexandra took a step back. The kind gesture had gone unnoticed by Julia, and Alexandra breathed a sigh of relief. She had absolutely no business whatsoever touching Julia’s hair.

“Do you get lonely here?” Julia asked. “I mean, it’s so big, and you’re alone here. I think I would be scared to death.”

“Not really. I practically grew up here. I know every nook and cranny. I guess I like the solitude.” Alexandra’s lips curled up as she winked. “Besides, with all the clients flying in and out, I am never alone for long unless I choose to be. Come on... I want to show you the best part.”

She climbed down a few rocks to get down to the sandy part of the cove and held out a hand for Julia. “The rocks can be slippery,” Alexandra said when Julia raised an eyebrow. “Besides,” she said, pointing to Julia’s feet, “flip flops and rocks don’t really go together.” Her face lit up when Julia playfully rolled her eyes but took Alexandra’s hand anyway.

“Thanks,” Julia said.

Alexandra kicked off her shoes, digging her toes into the near-white sand. Her eyes closed for a brief moment as the bright sun shone on her face, the soles of her feet slowly warming up from the heat of the sand. The water here was so calm and clear that she could see the coral and the fishes

that swam near it. With the wind in her hair and the taste of the salt ocean on her tongue, Alexandra felt absolutely at peace. But that feeling of peace disappeared when Julia spoke; for a brief moment, she had forgotten she wasn't alone.

"I know it's none of my business, but this whole thing you've got going on, it's almost surreal. I mean... I know it happens, but I've never heard of anything like *this*. Isn't it dangerous to let people come to your house?"

Alexandra laughed quietly and sat down near the edge of the water. Julia quickly followed her lead. She was quite the inquisitive one, and it wasn't hard to indulge her with answers. "Just because you have not heard about it does not mean it does not happen. There are many people like me out there in the world, but it stays private." She gestured around her. "I feel safe here, and so do my clients. They are thoroughly screened, and they sign a contract. It would only hurt them if the information got out that this place is more than just a home. I used to have male clients as well, because there is more money to be made with them, but I had a bad experience, and that's when I switched to women only."

"What happened?"

The corners of Alexandra's mouth curled up for a brief moment. "Caroline told me that you are a curious one, Ms. Quinn." For a moment, she hesitated. It was hard to be open and honest about what had happened. It wasn't a situation she liked to recall. Still, Alexandra had promised herself that she would try harder to actually befriend the woman, and that meant opening herself up to conversations that were hard. Her fingers dug a small rock out of the sand, and she brushed off the grains as she spoke.

"One of my clients fell for me and could not deal with the fact that I had other clients. He demanded that I start a relationship with him. I refused." Alexandra looked at Julia to make sure she was paying attention before flinging the rock into the ocean, smirking as it skipped on the water four times, then sank. "My relationships with my clients are purely professional. I accept that some of them harbor *some* feelings, but they know this is strictly business for me. Some of them get jealous, which can be a fun aspect to use in a play session, but if their feelings get out of control, I end all contact with them."

She watched as Julia pulled her knees up to her chest, her head resting on her arms.

“So you’ve never fallen for a client?”

“Never. I have my favorites, of course, and I have clients that I cannot stand. Luckily, the good ones outweigh the bad ones.” She looked sideways at Julia. “You can ask me.” The small flush that appeared on Julia’s neck amused her.

“I guess I don’t really understand how it all works. I mean, how can you be happy with nothing but a professional relationship? Don’t you ever long for more?”

Alexandra was quiet for a moment. “I think that for me there is a clear line between my profession and my private life. My clients are exactly that: clients. As much as I enjoy practicing BDSM, I, too, look forward to the end of my working day.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” Julia said. “So, uh, this whole dominating thing, how does it work? I mean, I know what it means and stuff, but I take it it’s a world of difference from the porn version of BDSM?”

“You regularly watch BDSM porn, Ms. Quinn? I never would have guessed.”

“I don’t,” Julia said. “I’m just wondering.”

“It differs per client. The male clients with whom I used to work were often into hardcore domination. The higher up they were in power, the more they were looking for a situation in which they had no control at all. That’s a bit of generalization, though. Most of my female clients enjoy the simpler things like bondage or worshipping. Some just want to feel loved and wanted.”

“Do you love them?”

“No. It’s work for me.” She looked at Julia as her voice dropped lower. “I am very good at my job, though. If they want to feel loved, I make them feel loved. To a certain degree, that is.”

“So they pay you to feel loved? Wouldn’t it be easier to just find a partner who would actually love them?”

“Perhaps,” Alexandra said. “But they are not just looking for love. Some want to be tied up, gagged, and whipped. Others want to worship leather or latex boots. Others just want to forget, and I am good at making people forget.” Alexandra smirked when she noticed Julia’s grimace.

“I don’t understand why people would pay tons of money to be flown into a private island just to worship your boots. That makes no sense whatsoever.”

Alexandra got onto her feet and offered Julia a hand before pulling her up. “Close your eyes.”

“W-what? Why?”

“Indulge me.”

Julia huffed. “I don’t even know you.”

Alexandra had to suppress another chuckle. It would be so easy to see this as a cat-and-mouse game. “I know. Which is exactly why I want to show you something. So put some faith in me and close your eyes.” She stepped closer to Julia. “The thing is, Ms. Quinn”—Alexandra’s voice dropped to a husky whisper—“worshiping my boots is only part of what attracts people to me. Imagine yourself in a demanding job. Perhaps you are an actor or a senator.” Alexandra grinned. “Or maybe you’re just a hardworking PR employee.”

Julia scoffed, “I’m not—”

“Ssh,” Alexandra whispered. “I did not tell you to speak. You asked a legitimate question, and I am answering it.” She smiled to herself as she watched Julia swallow. “So, for argument’s sake, let’s pretend you are an A-list actress. You’re a movie star, and people worship the very ground you walk on. You enjoy it to a certain degree. You do the job that you love, but when the job is done, you just want to be *you* again. But it’s hard to get out of that mindset because everywhere you turn, people look up to you. You get followed by the paparazzi, who want that *one* shot of you that will make them rich. It’s hard to get away from that lifestyle. Perhaps you have secret desires. Perhaps, for a fleeting moment, you want someone to take away all control from you so that, just for a moment, you can be the woman no one knows. The person no one will judge. So you talk to Caroline. She is your agent, after all, and she knows everything about you. Caroline makes the arrangements, and before you know what’s happening, you meet me.”

“If you meet all your clients the way you met me, they must be in for a hell of a trip,” Julia murmured.

Alexandra laughed. “I will not indulge you with a response. So here you are, an A-list actress, and here I am, Alexandra Ortega, and I do not give a flying *fuck* what your status is in the real world.” She let out a slow and deliberate breath. It was all about control. “Because when you are at my house, *I* am in charge. So we talk. You tell me what you crave, and if I think you deserve it, I will give it to you. It’s a cat-and-mouse game. I pull you in

and draw you close. When you are ready to submit to me, I start the game all over until you cannot take it anymore or until you use your safe word. I attack your senses until you cry out, and I revel in the feeling of making someone feel utterly vulnerable. I love peeling away all the protective layers until there is nothing but bare skin, nowhere left to hide.”

She burrowed a hand into Julia’s hair, which now hung loosely over her shoulders. The blonde curls were soft to the touch, and she delighted in the small gasp that came from Julia. “The thing is, Ms. Quinn,” Alexandra said, “I am intoxicating. I will undress you until there is nowhere to hide. I can seduce you with nothing but my voice, and I can hurt you with nothing but a scolding glare when you do not do exactly as I say. Disappointing me is something you really do not want to do. Do you want to hear something funny?”

“S-sure,” Julia stammered.

Alexandra moved in closer and brushed her mouth against Julia’s ear. “I have no idea what your sexual orientation is. I have no idea what you like, need, or desire. But I know without a doubt that if my hand were to disappear under the waistband of your pants and inside your panties, I would find nothing but wetness, because I am *just that good* at what I do.”

Julia’s eyes snapped open, and a flush crept up her neck.

Alexandra raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Ready for the rest of your tour, Ms. Quinn?”



Julia slouched down on the car seat, absolutely mortified. She wanted to scream at Alexandra that she was wrong...but she would be lying, and since most of Julia’s work consisted of twisting truths, she refused to do the same in her personal life. So instead, she gave Alexandra the silent treatment and kept a firm gaze on the scenery.

“Are you okay?” Alexandra shifted gears. “I hope I did not embarrass you. I certainly did not mean to.”

“Right,” Julia murmured and rolled her eyes. Embarrassment didn’t even come close to what she was feeling. The last thing she had expected was to stand on a beach on a private island with her panties soaked because some woman was whispering in her ear. Yet that was exactly what had happened. Alexandra’s words had slipped under her skin. The promise of

peeling away layers had seemed so...seductive and enticing. But as soon as Julia's eyes opened and she stared straight into black specks in brown eyes, she snapped back to reality and felt nothing but embarrassment.

"I just wanted to demonstrate since you seemed so curious," Alexandra said. "I promise I will not do it again. Heaven forbid that I make you uncomfortable for the duration of your stay here. I would not be much of a hostess if you felt like *that*, now would I?"

"I suppose."

"Relax, Ms. Quinn. You are fine. Answer my question."

"What's the magic word?" She groaned when Alexandra's laughter came from deep within her...and it felt electrifying. Was she fine? Who knew? Certainly not Julia. Alexandra's "demonstration" had thrown her completely off course.

"If you are waiting for me to say 'please,' I regret to inform you that it will not happen. Feel free to answer my question when you are ready. I have all the time in the world."

Julia sighed and wondered when she had turned to behaving like a petulant child. Although, to be fair, that was exactly what she always did when she felt insecure. To her, giving someone the silent treatment meant they couldn't get to her. It was her way of protecting herself from harm or, in this case, embarrassment. She was no stranger to lashing out when she felt attacked; lashing out was something everyone did in foster and group homes a lot. Whatever it was that Alexandra had just displayed, it had left Julia utterly confused. Her body had reacted to the whispered words in a way that her mind wasn't quite able to grasp just yet.

"We should be getting back to the house," Alexandra said. "I am sure you are looking forward to some quiet time to yourself." Her hand rested on Julia's knee for a brief moment, seemingly to get her attention.

As her skin crawled, Julia jerked her knee away. Except that her skin didn't crawl in a bad way. Alexandra's touch felt warm, and it gave her goose bumps.

"Oh dear," Alexandra said with a light chuckle. "I really did a number on you, hmm?"

Julia whipped her head around at the statement. "You didn't, thank you very much," she spat out. She rolled her eyes when Alexandra smiled. Whatever game the woman was playing, she didn't particularly enjoy it.

At least she hoped she would start to believe that, if she kept repeating it enough to herself.



Reading was something Julia thoroughly enjoyed, but ever since arriving at Shadow Haven, books couldn't hold her attention anymore. Her mind kept wandering to what had happened earlier today and how her body had betrayed her. That wasn't an exaggeration. It did feel like that—a betrayal of the highest order. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel Alexandra's breath tickling her ear, could hear her murmuring those words that were now branded into her skin. When they had arrived back at the cabin, Julia had practically fled to her bedroom and hadn't come out for lunch. Now starving, she decided to venture out into the house and tucked her hair behind her ear as she walked to the living room.

She offered a small smile in response to Alexandra's. "That a good one?" she asked as Alexandra returned her gaze down to the book in her hands.

"My favorite." Alexandra held it up for Julia to see. "Jane Austen's *Emma*."

"Am I an uncultured swine if I tell you I've never read it?" Julia sat down on the couch opposite Alexandra and played with a loose string on the sleeve of her sweater.

"I would never resort to such language, Ms. Quinn. If you are interested in reading it, then I shall leave it on the coffee table for you."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that. Do...do you think we could talk for a second?"

"Certainly. What's on your mind?"

It was a good question. Julia had no idea what was on her mind, and yet it seemed as if *everything* was on her mind. "I feel like we got off on a bad start," she started provisionally, letting the words come to her without planning as she spoke. "I know I haven't been the easiest to deal with, but I hope you can understand why. Coming here has been quite an adjustment, and I don't do well with changes."

"That's understandable." Alexandra nodded.

"Maybe we could start again. If I am going to stay, I don't want things to be uncomfortable, and I'd prefer to have an actual vacation, rather than

leaving the island and getting back to work. That is, if we can set some ground rules.”

Alexandra’s eyebrows raised. “What would those be?”

“I haven’t actually thought that far ahead. But I would really appreciate it if you would call me Julia, rather than Ms. Quinn, for starters.”

“That seems fair...Julia.”

Julia smiled. “Thank you. The only other thing I can think of right now is that you have to give me some time. Like I said before, changes are difficult for me, and I need some time to adjust. I am not saying you have to avoid me or anything, just...give me some time.”

“Of course.” Alexandra nodded again. “Perhaps we could have dinner together, but you’d be in charge of your own breakfast and lunch? That way you can spend the day doing whatever pleases you, and we could get to know each other a bit better in the evenings.”

“I would like that.” Julia smiled. “Speaking of dinner, what are we having tonight? I’m starving.” Her cheeks burned up as she blushed. “Skipping lunch wasn’t the smartest idea.”

“I was going to heat up the lasagna that was left over and make a salad to go with it. Living on the island has gotten me into the habit of eating leftovers. But if you’d rather have something else, then I’d be happy to cook for you.”

Julia’s mouth watered at the thought of Alexandra’s cooking. It had smelled and tasted heavenly. “Lasagna sounds great.”

“Remember when I told you there’s a vegetable garden? Maybe you could go out the back and get me some vegetables for the salad. I like to pick them fresh. There should be some tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce.”

“Sure thing.” She sighed a breath of relief. Her talk with Alexandra had relieved some of the tension she had felt in her shoulders. Maybe it all would work out, and she could still have an enjoyable vacation at Shadow Haven.



It turned out that saying she was going to get the vegetables was a whole lot easier than actually getting them. As soon as Julia opened the door of the glass greenhouse, a sea of green greeted her.

“And *this* is why I’d rather go to a supermarket,” Julia sighed.

In the supermarket, everything was easy. Vegetables were chopped and in bags, ready to go, something for which she was very grateful. Telling Alexandra that she couldn't cook hadn't been a lie. No one had ever taught her, and at some point in her life, Julia had lost all desire to learn.

The greenhouse was quite impressive, though. It wasn't hard to understand that a greenhouse was something that was absolutely necessary if you wanted to live in a remote area and still enjoy fresh food. She took small steps forward and looked around for something that resembled lettuce: she didn't want to give Alexandra another opportunity to tease her by accidentally bringing back something that wasn't even lettuce.

She grimaced when a slimy worm slowly wriggled its way from underneath one of the bricks that lay on the ground. "You better stay far from my bed, mister," she told it and grabbed a basket that stood on a small bench at the end of the greenhouse. She figured it was meant for carrying the harvest back to the house. But she couldn't find what she was looking for. In search of the lettuce, she found rows of tomatoes and cucumbers instead.

"It really shouldn't be this hard," she said aloud to the quiet of the garden. "It's lettuce, it's green, and it probably has a million bugs on it."

She felt like quite the idiot when she returned to the kitchen after what seemed like an eternity. Placing the basket on the counter, she sighed and shook her head when Alexandra lifted her eyebrows. "I swear to God, if you make fun of me for bringing back the wrong vegetables, I'm swimming back to the mainland."

"A swim back home seems more like a punishment for you than it would be for me." Alexandra gave her a friendly smile as she rummaged through the basket. "Lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Perfect."

Another sigh of relief left Julia's body. "I'm not going to lie. I was worried for a moment that I would bring back spinach, so it took me a bit longer than I thought." Melodic laughter bounced through the kitchen, and Julia looked up in surprise.

"I promise I'm not laughing at you," Alexandra said. "It's just the image of you rummaging through the greenhouse to find lettuce... There are little signs in front of the vegetables that say exactly what each of them are."

Julia groaned. "I totally missed that."



Alexandra stretched as she leaned back in her office chair. For the past two days, she had been mostly cooped up in her office, trying to give Julia all the space she needed. So far, she hadn't seen much of her aside from the dinners that they'd had together. Alexandra didn't particularly enjoy sitting in her office all day, but it did provide her with the perfect opportunity to do her administration.

She looked at the time and smiled as she opened Skype to see if Caroline was online. Ignoring the red symbol beside her name, she typed a message to her best friend, knowing the response would be quick:

Alexandra: Playing hostess is exhausting. I've been banished from my own home.

Caroline: I'm sure that's not true. You always did like to exaggerate.

Alexandra: Fine. I'm not banished, but I have been staying in my office a lot.

Caroline: Are you being nice to Julia?

Alexandra: Of course. When am I ever not nice?

Caroline: All the time. Is she behaving?

Alexandra: She is reading a lot of books, and she goes for a long swim every morning. I have shown her around the island, so I'm waiting for her to leave the house. We have been trying to get to know each other a bit whenever we have dinner.

Caroline: And?

Alexandra: It's not fair that you've sent me a beautiful, innocent little flower.

Caroline: She would kill you if you called her that to her face.

Alexandra frowned when her Skype started ringing. She pressed the *ignore* button and made a mental note to punish her client later for not asking permission to call first.

Alexandra: I don't think she likes me very much.

Caroline: Just be patient with her, Alex.

Alexandra: I hate it when you call me that.

Caroline: Get used to it. I've called you that for longer than I can remember. I'm not going to change now. Julia is sweet, intelligent, funny, and loyal. She has a lot of qualities that you admire in people. So, if you think she doesn't like you, dial down the attitude a bit.

Alexandra: What attitude?

Caroline: The one where you pretend to be a big, bad Domme.

Alexandra: I AM a big, bad Domme.

Caroline: See? That attitude. You may be a Domme on the street, but you're a fluff ball in the sheets. Anyway, I have to go. Give my love to Julia. Please be nice to her. She really needed a break from work before she had a complete meltdown. You always talk about layers. Julia has a million layers, and you've just seen one. Give her a chance to open up, and keep yourself open to the possibility of a new friendship. Who knows? Wonderful things may happen.

She grumbled when Caroline's status changed to offline. It was something Caroline did a lot when she was convinced the only right way was her way and didn't feel like arguing about it.

Alexandra's Skype rang again, and she glared at the screen. "You are in so much trouble. Get naked and get on your knees." All of her thoughts of Julia vanished when she hissed into the microphone of her headset. "Please remind me what happened last time you told me 'no.'"

Her client's response was exactly why she was one of her favorite people to play with. No one understood her quite like Dorian did when it came to play. While most of her clients understood that a blow to an ass cheek wasn't ill-intentioned, Dorian's understanding went deeper than that. She knew that playing was about Alexandra's pleasure as well, knew her mean streak was just playing with words to enhance the scene. Some of her other clients took the dynamic too seriously. Not Dorian, though. No, Dorian was special because she understood that BDSM was an art and that whenever Alexandra played with her, Dorian was her canvas.

"Listen to me carefully this time, because you know how I *hate* to repeat myself. Get naked, and get on your knees. You have thirty seconds, and I am sure you are aware how *very* generous that is of me. So I suggest you thank me properly while you undress."

She rewarded Dorian with a compliment when she did exactly as Alexandra had asked.

"You know what to do. I want it fast, and I want to hear you. Every little gasp, moan, and mewl." Slouching down in her seat some, she listened as she twirled the wire from her headset around her finger. "Faster."

Dorian's response elicited a snort from Alexandra. "Honestly, Dori. I did not ask for your opinion. In fact...stop. Get your gag."



Julia looked up from behind her camera and tried to telepathically will the bird to sit still so she could take its picture. She had contemplated leaving her camera and laptop at home; it was her vacation, after all. Figuring that this was a hobby, though, rather than work, she had brought them along. Over the last couple of days, she had taken pictures of and around the house—the view from her window and some shots in the greenhouse of a little sign that spelled *lettuce*.

She really wanted to get out and explore the island, but the weather had been constantly changing the last couple of days. One moment, the sun would shine brightly, and the next, she would be soaked from the rain. Still, even in the rain she found enjoyment, running through muddy puddles as if she were a four-year-old.

Alexandra was nowhere to be seen during the day, so Julia felt freer to follow her own path. At night, they would have dinner together and engage

in a casual conversation, but during the day...it felt as if the island were hers. There had been a couple of times when she had started to venture along one of the dirt tracks before reminding herself that Alexandra wanted to know if she was going to explore.

Perhaps, if the weather allowed it, she could go out tomorrow and bring her camera for some awesome nature shots.

Photography had always been her hobby, but it was exactly that—a hobby. She snapped pictures of the most random things. Pallets on the side of the road, a pigeon wandering into a store, or a bug on a green leaf. Rarely did she ever take a picture of herself. She preferred to take pictures of others when they were unaware they were being photographed; that was when you got the most honest expressions. She loved having all those people reduced to a tiny megabyte on her hard disk.

Part of her was eager to photograph Alexandra, but Julia would be damned if she was going to ask her for a picture. No, if she was going to snap a picture of her, it would have to be while Alexandra was unaware of it. And since they were alone on an island, that would prove hard to do. Still, Alexandra was absolutely gorgeous. Her eyes would probably dominate the camera the way she dominated her clients.

Julia sighed. No matter what she did, her thoughts always seemed to go back to Alexandra, who wasn't even aware that she was doing it. She shook her head and focused her attention back on the bird in front of her. "Now listen up, you little shit..."

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