

**LBRIS**

We know  
books

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*People  
We Meet  
on Vacation*

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**BERKLEY ROMANCE**  
New York

## PROLOGUE

*Five Summers Ago*

○ N VACATION, YOU can be anyone you want.

Like a good book or an incredible outfit, being on vacation transports you into another version of yourself.

In your day-to-day life, maybe you can't even bob your head to the radio without being embarrassed, but on the right twinkly-light-strung patio, with the right steel drum band, you'll find yourself whirling and twirling with the best of them.

On vacation, your hair changes. The water is different, maybe the shampoo. Maybe you don't bother to wash your hair at all, or brush it, because the salty ocean water curls it up in a way you love. You think, *Maybe I could do this at home too. Maybe I could be this person who doesn't brush her hair, who doesn't mind being sweaty or having sand in all her crevices.*

On vacation, you strike up conversations with strangers, and forget that there are any stakes. If it turns out impossibly awkward, who cares? You'll never see them again!

You're whoever you want to be. You can do whatever you want.

Okay, so maybe not whatever you want. Sometimes the weather forces you into a particular situation, such as the one I'm in now, and you have to find second-rate ways to entertain yourself as you wait out the rain.

On my way out of the bathroom, I pause. Partly, this is because I'm still working on my game plan. Mostly, though, it's because the floor is so sticky that I lose my sandal and have to hobble back for it. I love everything about this place in theory, but in practice, I think letting my bare foot touch the anonymous filth on the laminate might be a good way to contract one of those rare diseases kept in the refrigerated vials of a secret CDC facility.

I dance-hop back to my shoe, slip my toes through the thin orange straps, and turn to survey the bar: the press of sticky bodies; the lazy whorl of thatched fans overhead; the door propped open so that, occasionally, a burst of rain rips in off the black night to cool the sweating crowd. In the corner, a jukebox haloed in neon light plays the Flamingos' "I Only Have Eyes for You."

It's a resort town but a locals' bar, free of printed sundresses and Tommy Bahama shirts, though also sadly lacking in cocktails garnished with spears of tropical fruit.

If not for the storm, I would've chosen somewhere else for my last night in town. All week long the rain has been so bad, the thunder so constant, that my dreams of sandy white beaches and glossy speedboats were dashed, and I along with the rest of the disappointed vacationers have spent my days pounding piña colodas in any crammed tourist trap I could find.

Tonight, though, I couldn't take any more dense crowds, long wait times, or gray-haired men in wedding rings drunkenly winking at me over their wives' shoulders. Thus I found myself here.

In a sticky-floored bar called only BAR, scouring the meager crowd for my target.

He's sitting at the corner of BAR's bar itself. A man about my age, twenty-five, sandy haired and tall with broad shoulders, though so hunched you might not notice either of these last two facts on first glance. His head is bent over his phone, a look of quiet concentration visible in his profile. His teeth worry at his full bottom lip as his finger slowly swipes across the screen.

Though not Disney World-level packed, this place is loud. Half-way between the jukebox crooning creepy late-fifties tunes and the mounted TV opposite it, from which a weatherman shouts about record-breaking rain, there's a gaggle of men with identical hacking laughs that keep bursting out all at once. At the far end of the bar, the bartender keeps smacking the counter for emphasis as she chats up a yellow-haired woman.

The storm's got the whole island feeling restless, and the cheap beer has everyone feeling rowdy.

But the sandy-haired man sitting on the corner stool has a stillness that makes him stick out. Actually, everything about him screams that he doesn't belong here. Despite the eighty-something-degree weather and one-million-percent humidity, he's dressed in a rumpled long-sleeve button-up and navy blue trousers. He's also suspiciously devoid of a tan, as well as any laughter, mirth, levity, etc.

Bingo.

I push a fistful of blond waves out of my face and set off toward him. As I approach, his eyes stay fixed on his phone, his finger slowly dragging whatever he's reading up the screen. I catch the bolded words **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**.

He's fully reading a book at a bar.

I swing my hip into the bar and slide my elbow over it as I face him. "Hey, tiger."

His hazel eyes slowly lift to my face, blink. "Hi?"

"Do you come here often?"

He studies me for a minute, visibly weighing potential replies. “No,” he says finally. “I don’t live here.”

“Oh,” I say, but before I can get out any more, he goes on.

“And even if I did, I have a cat with a lot of medical needs that require specialized care. Makes it hard to get out.”

I frown at just about every part of that sentence. “I’m so sorry,” I recover. “It must be awful to be dealing with all that while also coping with a death.”

His brow crinkles. “A death?”

I wave a hand in a tight circle, gesturing to his getup. “Aren’t you in town for a funeral?”

His mouth presses tight. “I am not.”

“Then what brings you to town?”

“A friend.” His eyes drop to his phone.

“Lives here?” I guess.

“Dragged me,” he corrects. “For vacation.” He says this last word with some disdain.

I roll my eyes. “No way! Away from your cat? With no good excuse except for enjoyment and merrymaking? Are you sure this person can really be called a *friend*?”

“Less sure every second,” he says without looking up.

He’s not giving me much to work with, but I’m not giving up. “So,” I forge ahead. “What’s this friend like? Hot? Smart? Loaded?”

“Short,” he says, still reading. “Loud. Never shuts up. Spills on every single article of clothing either of us wears, has horrible romantic taste, sobs through those commercials for community college—the ones where the single mom is staying up late at her computer and then, when she falls asleep, her kid drapes a blanket over her shoulders and smiles because he’s so proud of her? What else? Oh, she’s obsessed with shitty dive bars that smell like salmonella. I’m afraid to even drink the *bottled* beer here—have you seen the Yelp reviews for this place?”

“Are you kidding right now?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Well,” he says, “salmonella doesn’t have a smell, but yes, Poppy, you are short.”

“Alex!” I swat his bicep, breaking character. “I’m trying to help you!”

He rubs his arm. “Help me how?”

“I know Sarah broke your heart, but you need to get back out there. And when a hot babe approaches you at a bar, the number one thing you should not bring up is your codependent relationship with your asshole cat.”

“First of all, Flannery O’Connor is not an asshole,” he says. “She’s shy.”

“She’s evil.”

“She just doesn’t like you,” he insists. “You have strong dog energy.”

“All I’ve ever done is try to pet her,” I say. “Why have a pet who doesn’t want to be petted?”

“She wants to be petted,” Alex says. “You just always approach her with this, like, wolfish gleam in your eye.”

“I do not.”

“Poppy,” he says. “You approach *everything* with a wolfish gleam in your eye.”

Just then the bartender approaches with the drink I ordered before I ducked into the bathroom. “Miss?” she says. “Your margarita.” She spins the frosted glass down the bar toward me, and a ping of excited thirst hits the back of my throat as I catch it. I swipe it up so quickly that a fair amount of tequila sloshes over the lip, and with a preternatural and highly practiced speed, Alex jerks my other arm off the bar before it can get liquor splattered on it.

“See? Wolfish gleam,” Alex says quietly, seriously, the way he delivers pretty much every word he ever says to me except on those

rare and sacred nights when Weirdo Alex comes out and I get to watch him, like, lie on the floor fake-sobbing into a microphone at karaoke, his sandy hair sticking up in every direction and wrinkly dress shirt coming untucked. Just one hypothetical example. Of something that has exactly happened before.

Alex Nilsen is a study in control. In that tall, broad, permanently slouched and/or pretzel-folded body of his, there's a surplus of stoicism (the result of being the oldest child of a widower with the most vocal anxiety of anyone I've ever met) and a stockpile of repression (the result of a strict religious upbringing in direct opposition to most of his passions; namely, academia), alongside the most truly strange, secretly silly, and intensely softhearted goof-ball I've had the pleasure to know.

I take a sip of the margarita, and a hum of pleasure works its way out of me.

"Dog in a human's body," Alex says to himself, then goes back to scrolling on his phone.

I snort my disapproval of his comment and take another sip. "By the way, this margarita is, like, ninety percent tequila. I hope you're telling those unappeasable Yelp reviewers to shove it. *And* that this place smells nothing like salmonella." I chug a little more of my drink as I slide up onto the stool beside him, turning so our knees touch. I like how he always sits like this when we're out together: his upper body facing the bar, his long legs facing me, like he's keeping some secret door to himself open just for me. And not a door only to the reserved, never-quite-fully-smiling Alex Nilsen that the rest of the world gets, but a path straight to the weirdo. The Alex who takes these trips with me, year after year, even though he despises flying and change and using any pillow other than the one he sleeps with at home.

I like how, when we go out, he always beelines toward the bar,

because he knows I like to sit there, even though he once admitted that every time we do, he stresses out over whether he's making too much or not enough eye contact with the bartenders.

Truthfully, I like and/or love nearly everything about my best friend, Alex Nilsen, and I want him to be happy, so even if I've never particularly liked any of his past love interests—and especially didn't care for his ex, Sarah—I know it's up to me to make sure he doesn't let this most recent heartbreak force him into full hermit status. He'd do—and has done—the same for me, after all.

"So," I say. "Should we take it from the top again? I'll be the sexy stranger at the bar and you be your charming self, minus the cat stuff. We'll get you back in the dating pool in no time."

He looks up from his phone, nearly smirking. I'll just call it smirking, because for Alex, this is as close as it gets. "You mean the stranger who kicks things off with a well-timed 'Hey, tiger'? I think we might have different ideas of what 'sexy' is."

I spin on my stool, our knees *bump-bumping* as I turn away from him and then back, resetting my face into a flirtatious smile. "Did it hurt . . ." I say, ". . . when you fell from heaven?"

He shakes his head. "Poppy, it's important to me that you know," he says slowly, "that if I ever *do* manage to go on another date, it will have absolutely nothing to do with your so-called help."

I stand, throw back the rest of my drink dramatically, and slap the glass onto the bar. "So what do you say we get out of here?"

"How are you more successful at dating than me," he says, awed by the mystery of it all.

"Easy," I say. "I have lower standards. And no Flannery O'Connor to get in the way. And when I go out to bars, I don't spend the whole time scowling at Yelp reviews and forcefully projecting *DON'T TALK TO ME*. Also, I am, arguably, gorgeous from certain angles."

He stands, setting a twenty on the bar before tucking his wallet back into his pocket. Alex always carries cash. I don't know why. I've asked at least three times. He's answered. I still don't know why, because his answer was either too boring or too intellectually complex for my brain to even bother retaining the memory.

"Doesn't change the fact that you're an absolute freak," he says. "You love me," I point out, the tiniest bit defensive.

He loops an arm around my shoulders and looks down at me, another small, contained smile on his full lips. His face is a sieve, only letting out the smallest amount of expression at a time. "I know that," he says.

I grin up at him. "I love you back."

He fights the widening of his smile, keeps it small and faint. "I know that too."

The tequila has me feeling sleepy, lazy, and I let myself lean into him as we start toward the open door. "This was a good trip," I say.

"Best yet," he agrees, the cool rain gusting in around us like confetti from a cannon. His arm curls in a little closer, warm and heavy around me, his clean cedarwood smell folding over my shoulders like a cape.

"I haven't even minded the rain much," I say as we step into the thick, wet night, all buzzing mosquitoes and palm trees shivering from the distant thunder.

"I've preferred it." Alex lifts his arm from my shoulder to curl over my head, transforming himself into a makeshift human umbrella as we sprint across the flooding road toward our little red rental car. When we reach it, he breaks away and opens my door first—we scored a discount by taking a car without automatic locks or windows—then runs around the hood and hurls himself into the driver's seat.

Alex flicks the car into gear, the full-tilt AC hissing its arctic

blast against our wet clothes as he pulls out of our parking space and turns toward our rental house.

"I just realized," he says, "we didn't take any pictures at the bar for your blog."

I start to laugh, then realize he's not kidding. "Alex, none of my readers want to see pictures of BAR. They don't even want to read about BAR."

He shrugs. "I didn't think BAR was that bad."

"You said it smelled like salmonella."

"Other than that." He ticks the turn signal on and guides the car down our narrow, palm-tree-lined street.

"Actually, I haven't really gotten *any* usable pictures this week."

Alex frowns and rubs at his eyebrow as he slows toward the gravel driveway ahead.

"Other than the ones you took," I add quickly. The pictures Alex volunteered to take for my social media are truly terrible. But I love him so much for being willing to take them that I already picked out the least atrocious one and posted it. I'm making one of those awful midword faces, shriek-laughing something at him as he tries—badly—to give me direction, and the storm clouds are visibly forming over me, as if I'm summoning the apocalypse to Sanibel Island myself. But at least you can tell I'm happy in it.

When I look at that photo, I don't remember what Alex said to me to elicit that face, or what I yelled back at him. But I feel that same rush of warmth I get when I think about any of our past summer trips.

That crush of happiness, that feeling that *this* is what life's about: being somewhere beautiful, with someone you love.

I tried to write something about that in the caption, but it was hard to explain.

Usually my posts are all about how to travel on a budget, make

the most of the least, but when you've got a hundred thousand people following your beach vacation, it's ideal to show them . . . a beach vacation.

In the past week, we've had approximately forty minutes total on the shore of Sanibel Island. The rest has been spent holed up in bars and restaurants, bookstores and vintage shops, plus a whole lot of time in the shabby bungalow we're renting, eating popcorn and counting lightning streaks. We've gotten no tans, seen no tropical fish, done no snorkeling or sunbathing on catamarans, or much of anything aside from falling in and out of sleep on the squasy sofa with a *Twilight Zone* marathon humming its way into our dreams.

There are places you can see in their full glory, with or without sunshine, but this isn't one of them.

"Hey," Alex says as he puts the car in park.

"Hey, what?"

"Let's take a picture," he says. "Together."

"You hate having your picture taken," I point out. Which has always been weird to me, because on a technical level, Alex is extremely handsome.

"I know," Alex says, "but it's dark and I want to remember this."

"Okay," I say. "Yeah. Let's take one."

I reach for my phone, but he already has his out. Only instead of holding it up with the screen facing us so we can see ourselves, he has it flipped around, the regular camera fixed on us rather than the front-facing one. "What are you doing?" I say, reaching for his phone. "That's what selfie mode's for, you grandpa."

"No!" he laughs, jerking it out of reach. "It's not for your blog—we don't have to look good. We just have to look like ourselves. If we have it on selfie mode I won't even want to take one."

"You need help for your face dysmorphia," I tell him.

"How many thousands of pictures have I taken for you, Poppy?" he says. "Let's just do this one how I want to."

"Okay, fine." I lean across the console, settling in against his damp chest, his head ducking a little to compensate for our height difference.

"One . . . two—" The flash pops off before he ever gets to three.

"You monster!" I scold.

He flips the phone around to look at the picture and moans. "Nooooo," he says. "I *am* a monster."

I choke over a laugh as I study the horrible ghostly blur of our faces: his wet hair sticking out in stringy spikes, mine plastered in frizzy tendrils around my cheeks, everything on us shiny and red from the heat, my eyes fully closed, his squinted and puffy. "How is it possible we're both so hard to see *and* so bad-looking simultaneously?"

Laughing, he throws his head back against his headrest. "Okay, I'm deleting it."

"No!" I fight the phone out of his hand. He grabs hold of it too, but I don't let go, so we just hold it between us on the console. "That was the point, Alex. To remember this trip how it really was. And to look like ourselves."

His smile is as small and faint as ever. "Poppy, you don't look anything like that picture."

I shake my head. "And you don't either."

For a long moment, we're silent, like there's nothing else to say now that this has been settled.

"Next year let's go somewhere cold," Alex says. "And dry."

"Okay," I say, grinning. "We'll go somewhere cold."

*This Summer*

POPPY," SWAPNA SAYS from the head of the dull gray conference table. "What have you got?"

For the benevolent ruler of the *Rest + Relaxation* empire, Swapna Bakshi-Highsmith could not possibly exude any less of our fine magazine's two core values.

The last time Swapna rested was probably three years ago, when she was eight and a half months pregnant and on doctor-mandated bed rest. Even then, she spent the whole time video-chatting with the office, her laptop balanced on her belly, so I don't think there was a ton of relaxation involved. Everything about her is sharp and pointed and smart, from her slicked-back high-fashion bob to her studded Alexander Wang pumps.

Her winged eyeliner could slice through an aluminum can, and her emerald eyes could crush it afterward. In this moment, both are pointed squarely at me. "Poppy? Hello?"

I blink out of my daze and skootch forward in my chair, clearing my throat. This has been happening to me a lot lately. When