

# Chapter 1

Ahhh. The comforts of home, the anticipation of sleeping under her own covers incited a yawn, but slumber would have to wait because boyfriend trumped bed, and Demi Jones couldn't wait to get her arms around Kal Durango for a night of dinner and dancing. She yanked on the handle of the over-packed suitcase, letting the wheels clunk heavily on each wooden step as she made her way to her bedroom.

"Hey, sis."

She peered over the banister to the open foyer below. Her brother Neil set a bouquet of orange roses on the credenza. Leaning into the mirror, he ran his fingers over the top of his spiked hair then tugged at the lapels of his jacket.

Demi gave a low whistle. "Dressed to impress." She craned the case up one step then another.

He grinned and cut a glance upward. "You look like shit." As if he could smell her from downstairs, he did a quick underarm sniff and approached the steps, taking them two at a time until he reached her. "I need another spray of Hollister. You need a shower and sleep. You smell like you got drunk and crawled into a gutter."

Her brother's brutally honest words halted her ascent up the stairs as he attempted to nudge past her. She set her luggage on the step and leaned on the handrail. "Fuck sleep. I have a hot date with Calvin. He's taking me dancing."

"He'll understand you're too tired. He knows you wrestled taxis, planes, and ferries just to get home."

"I'm not going to blow him off, Neil. I want to marry this guy." She pulled on the handle of her suitcase, letting it thump up each step as she attempted to pass him, elbow out, brushing her arm against his torso, shoving her palm to his cheek and pressing his face away from her, effectively taking the lead. "Whoa." She stopped and placed her hand on his forehead. "You're warm—you're running a fever."

He shoved her touch away from his head and sidestepped toward the wall. "The only fever I have is Island Fever, need to get away for a couple of hours." He took the heavy bag from her.

Before he could move away, she blocked his path, slapping her palms against his chest.

He dodged her and made his way along the hall. Brushing his hand down the front of his jacket, he said, "Don't wrinkle the threads."

She followed. "Neil, you're sick. I'm cancelling on Kal. You tuck your diseased ass into bed, and I'll get the thermometer, ibuprofen, a bottle of ginger ale, and a cool towel." She extended a finger with each item she listed, counting them out. Before she opened her thumb, she said, "I'll have to run to the store for chicken noodle soup." She dropped her hand and pulled out her phone to jot down her list. She opened notes and typed. "And Jell-O. Your fave, lime-yucky-green."

"Oh no, you're not. You're keeping your hot date because I have an even hotter one. I'm taking Heather onto the mainland, so don't worry about me."

"Of course I worry. You're not feeling well."

"It's just a tickle in my throat. I sucked a cough drop and downed some syrup. I'm good to go."

"Neil?"

"Dem, I have to get off this island for a while, and I already promised Heather. She's looking forward to it. We both are, so the house is all yours tonight." He deposited the case next to her bedroom door and disappeared into the larger suite at the end of the hall then suddenly reappeared, sticking his head out from around the doorjamb. "I won't be here to let Calvin in, so hurry up in the shower, and be sure to lock up tonight."

Geez. What was with his paranoia of unlocked doors? Dolphin Island had the lowest crime rate in the entire galaxy. She had always been conscious of the concept of deadbolts and chain stops for safety's sake, but since moving to the island with Neil, he had mentioned it more times in the past year than he had all through college. Actually, the door-locking nagging started soon after he began dating Heather. It must be her doing. "Of course. I'll lock the fucking door. Have fun on your destination dinner."

Dem walked into the bathroom and ran the shower, quickly stripped off her dirties, pitched them toward the clothes hamper, missed, and hopped under the powerful sprays. The warm water wet her hair. She slicked her hair away from her face and cranked the water hotter, letting the steamy wet heat pull the tightness from her shoulders. "Ahhh."

She scrubbed the travelers' grime and funk from her skin, washing away that icky feeling that stuck to her after every business trip. Fortunate to have landed her dream job as an international translator, but nowhere along the lines of learning six languages did a professor warn her about the weariness that came from crossing the International Date Line. She stood blow-drying her long hair into straight, shiny strands, turning the unit off every so often to listen for the doorbell.

She checked her cell phone's screen for the time: twelve minutes left. She slipped into her lavender sundress then slid summer-white sparkly slingbacks onto her feet. As she tossed her ID, lipstick, and keys into her purple-on-purple clutch, the doorbell rang. He was here. She floated down the staircase on a happy cloud, excited about seeing Kal. She reached for the knob and flung the door open wide, throwing herself into his awaiting arms.

Powerful arms wrapped her in love, joy, and fun. "Damn, you're gorgeous." He buried his smoothly-shaved jaw against her neck. "Hmmm. Demi, you smell delicious." He bit her neck. "And edible."

She giggled and slid her palms down his arms to his hands, letting him wrap his large hands around her smaller ones. "Speaking of edible, I'm starving. Feed me."

He took her purse from her and extracted her house key. "First things first." He locked up, pocketed her key, and then pulled her into an even tighter embrace than the first hug. But instead of letting her burrow her head against him, he tilted her chin upward and scolded. "What's the rule about asking who is knocking before unlocking the door?"

She smiled and cut her gaze into his. "The door wasn't locked." She couldn't resist letting the sarcasm drip from her lips since he left himself wide open for it.

"Demi-Anne?" His tone chastised her sass.

She didn't intend to ignite his dark and domineering side, but the sharpness in his voice and the way he barked her full name sent thrilling chills to all her womanly parts. She batted her eyelashes at him. "Kal, I knew it was you—it's exactly seven thirty, and you are the most punctual person I know." Yes, she had heard horror stories of women who opened their homes,

expecting a friend only to find a kidnapper. But not on Dolphin Island. "So if a rapist was out here, you would have saved me by snapping his head clean off."

"True. But what do you mean the door wasn't even locked?"

"Relax. Neil just left."

"Grrrr." He released the stern hold he had on her body, on her mind, and gently tugged her hand, guiding her toward his sleek car, the color of shiny gray pearls. "You'll be the death of me."

At least he hadn't threatened to spank her. Last time she had bounced out of the house happy to see him, his blanket threat had her locking up early all week. She didn't know why her brain told her to follow his instructions. The whole concept of a man spanking a grown woman was simply . . . silly.

He drove along Porpoise Avenue into the setting sun; the road paralleled the length of the island hugging the coastline. The sun cast oranges and corals across the horizon and into the ocean. Every sunset was more beautiful than the one before. And Demi knew because she made it a ritual to go outdoors every evening since the day she arrived on the island to witness the colors. Demi had moved in with her brother after college, and though it'd only been a year, she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. The very moment she had stepped off the ferryboat, she knew she was home. A strange welcoming, almost domesticated spirit settled over her, and then and there, she had planned on building a positive future for herself on the small island. The homey feeling only intensified after meeting Kal, and she knew he was the one she would love for all time, making it seem like she was finally going to get her happily ever after, making her glad that she had failed at what she thought was a well-thought out plan to end her life.

Approaching the end of the avenue, Kal downshifted the R8 Spyder, reducing his speed. The road merged into a narrow trek, and he slowly began the steep ascent up the embankment surrounding the cliffy part of the island. Surely he wasn't heading to the Ocean Breeze, a restaurant permanently featured in the island's guide to lure wealthy tourists? He was. He pulled into the lot, letting his car purr to a stop under the brown-stoned carport. He tossed his keys to the valet then extracted her from the car. With a firm, guiding hand to the small of her back he propelled her through the entrance.

Demi pulled her shoulders back, held her gaze steady, and pretended it wasn't her first time to step foot into the dimly lit restaurant. Love and romance oozed from her surroundings. Sprays of fresh orchids hung from the ceiling, clung to the walls and seemed to dance on the table tops to the soothing melody coming from the string orchestra. Wonderful seafood smells tickled her nose, and her stomach grumbled. No one heard. All ears were on the ensemble strumming romantic love songs for the patrons.

The sights, sounds, and smells attacked her senses. She shivered, catching the romantic vibe of the room and stepped closer to Kal, wrapping her arm around his waist. He pulled her closer, snuggling her to his side.

The pretty hostess greeted him by name and smiled sweetly at Demi and then led them to their table overlooking the ocean. The evening tide gently lapped at the cliffs below.

Dem slid into the cozy half-moon shaped booth, scooting toward the center. Kal slid in next to her, moving so close that his muscular arm brushed her nude shoulder. The touch sent tingles through her body and she smiled up at him. Damn, her man was good looking. She thought about sitting opposite him to provide herself a fabulous view of his handsome face, strong brow, kissable mouth set into his sexy as hell face, but as he ordered wine, he wrapped a

hand around her shoulder, holding her to him, and all thoughts of scooting over disappeared. She snuggled closer, placing her head on his shoulder, and listened as he ordered a bottle of wine.

"Black Stallion, Napa Valley '12." When the waitress left, he turned toward her, placing a light kiss on the tip of her nose. "What do you have a taste for?"

A waiter passed balancing two platters of steaming shellfish. Demi's mouth watered imagining the sweet buttery meat melting on her tongue. "That smells heavenly."

"The shellfish platter it is."

She smiled up at him, loving the way his lips silently begged for her touch. She leaned closer, pecked low on his jaw, for that area on his face was closest to reach. "Keep treating me like this, and I'll let you take me out tomorrow night too."

He lowered his head, burying his nose under her hair near her ear. "It's a date, darling."

Gosh. Her shoulders involuntarily shivered at his sexy drawl, sending tingly flutters straight down to her feminine core. She squeezed her legs together and sent him what she hoped was her most radiant, I'm-in-love-with-this-guy, smile then opened her menu toward him. "What are you having?" No prices. She didn't know the island hosted so many classy restaurants. And she had enjoyed every single one of them. She assured Kal she would have been just as happy with a picnic on the beach, leading him to explain his big appetite and rich palate. When on duty for NASH Global, he could go for months eating nothing but freeze dried meals, so when at home, he capitalized on all the fine eateries the island offered.

His hand on her thigh had her practically panting and concocting highly inappropriate acts to perform on him while in such a lovely restaurant, not that she had ever acted on her sexual thoughts, but when she did think of sex, it was with Kal. And with each passing date, he entered her dreams more and more, almost a nightly occurrence. And if his teeth skimmed her lobe once more, it just might be enough for her to have to sit through dinner in damp panties. "Huuu, Kal."

He pulled away from her. Cool air rushed between their heated bodies. A glazed heat radiated from his eyes, turning them sexy brown, making her feel naked under his stare. He leaned away from her, but not before tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Damn, Dem, you're killing me."

The waitress arrived with their food. Her interruption further tapped down the sensual energy hovering between their bodies. The meal was every bit as delicious as Demi had anticipated, if not more.

She washed the last bite of her delectably soft shellfish down with a sip of wine, wiped her mouth, and nestled into the crook of his arm. The heavy meal combined with the long travel day began to take its toll, sapping her of all energy. Settling her head against his body, she watched as the frothy waves splashed against the cliffs below.

He slid an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in close and watched too, pointing out how the rising moon chased away the last of the day's light. "So, what do you think of the view?"

"The view is fantastic, as was the food." As was he. Demi loved the way he made her feel special and loved, and all warm and womanly inside. She turned toward him to share the intense feelings overwhelming her, but the way he was watching her stole her breath away. She soaked up his loving, lust-filled gaze. Damn. Her man had passion. Heat rushed all her soft, tender spots. She smiled, and said, "Ooooh. I think you're totally in love with me."

He took both her hands in his. "Demi-Anne Jones, I know I'm in love with you. And I want to take you out tomorrow night too and every night after that." He pulled a ring box from his jacket pocket. With a flick of his thumb, he popped the lid. "Dem, will you marry me? Spend the rest of your life with me, have lots of babies with me?"

Sensory overload. All circuits roared to life. Her brain buzzed; her stomach captured and held millions of butterflies; happiness and peace flooded her heart.

She pinched her lips closed lest she say something dumb and unforgiving. She took half a second to process his words. She rapidly replayed his proposal. He did in fact say he wanted her to have his baby. No it was plural. Babies. Her insides swelled with happiness. He wanted children, with her. Having children was a deeply suppressed dream she never allowed herself to entertain, for fear that the mental diseases plaguing her parents would surface and rear. She didn't want to bear the responsibility of propagating bi-polar, early on-set dementia, and alcoholism—that was just her mother. Factor Dad's shit in with it and the kid didn't have a prayer.

Kal's steady hand held the gems toward the light, causing the stones to twinkle like moonlight on the waves. Large diamonds, shiny and bright, made a halo around the huge rock in the middle. Breathtakingly radiant. The middle stone set high and proud above the others, sparkling at her, begging her to answer him.

A tingly, exciting heat rushed her face. She placed her palm over her chest and swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry, very dry. "Kal." The words scraped past parched lips in a husk that sounded bedroommy even to her.

His seriously heated gaze pinned hers, and she fluttered her lashes to tap down the sexual energy. She failed. His mouth inched closer to her face.

Her breath raced; heart pounded. He kissed her, sliding his tongue over her trembling lips and into her mouth, rehydrating and enlivening her senses.

She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close, holding him tightly, as if he might slip away from her upon the moment she voiced how she felt about him. So she kept it to herself, for now, and let his kiss take her to heavenly places she had only dreamed about.

Until he closed the kiss and whispered. "I am so in love with you, Dem. God, the things you do to me. The things I want to do to you."

There were so many ways she could screw this up. To prevent herself from saying something stupid, she clamped her lips together, smiled, and banked the blissfully wonderful moment into her memory, letting his kind and loving words replace the hurtful ones she'd heard while growing up. Her mother's diseased brain especially liked to toss out *worthless* and *waste of space*. And even though it was the sickness talking, hearing it day after week after year definitely took its toll.

His fingertips stroked her cheek; his thumb skimmed across her jaw to trace her lower lip. She closed her eyes and soaked up his gentle caress, a touch she not only wanted to get used to but also wanted to expect and need and crave. He whispered, "Too soon for you, love?" He placed his finger to her sealed lips. "You don't have to say anything just yet." He pecked her mouth. "Think about it. Dream about us, how good it could be. Me and you. You and me. Together forever." He kissed her again and snapped the velvety box closed, making a fist around their future. "Take your time."

*Oh no.* He was getting away. She placed her palm over his hand and demanded her brain to send a signal to her mouth. And fast. Say something. Say anything. Even if it was stupid, and

sure enough, it was. She blurted, "How can you know? It's only our fifth date." She watched his hot-fiery gaze chill. She fought the tears pricking the corner of her eyes. She did love him with everything that she was and will ever be. She knew it was the real thing from the moment she saw him across the sandy beach of Dolphin Island. But if there was one thing she could screw up, it would be his love. And if he gave his love to her, and she lost it, she would die. She would kill herself—and this time, she wouldn't fail.

His hand rounded her soft shoulder and pulled her into his chest. His gentle words whispered, "I loved you from the moment I saw you building your sandcastle too close to the tide."

She melted into him. It was as if they were one because that was the precise moment she fell in love with him. They could spend the rest of their lives arguing over who saw whom first, and that gave her something to live for, but she had noticed his bulky brawn long before his football hit her turret. "I've loved you from the moment you yelled 'Touchdown.'" That was her proof that she saw him first because he was too focused on his buddies' high fives and chest bumps.

He chuckled and kissed her, sliding his tongue over her lips and into her mouth.

She met his tongue, but his hot kisses distracted her from answering his proposal, so she slowly closed the kiss, pulling her tongue from his mouth. She smoothed her palm along his cheek and said, "There's still some stuff about me that you don't know." She prayed her secrets wouldn't push him away.

"I still have a few secrets, too. But I do know you like to dance, so what do you say we put this ring away for now, and let's get out of here?" He slid the ring box under his lapel.

She stilled his hand and took it from him. Head bowed over the little box, she slowly opened the lid. She cut her gaze upward to meet his and smiled. "Yes."

The audacious Asscher cut grabbed the candlelight and sparkled up at her. He took the ring from the box and slid it onto her left ring finger. "You are mine, Dem."

"Yes. Yes. Yes."