

## Samantha

Samantha headed into the upstairs ballroom, which had been taken over for the heirs' info sessions, and nearly groaned when she saw the words illuminated on the projector. The Law of the Sea: Oceans Beyond National Jurisdiction.

By now she suspected that the heirs didn't need to be at this conference at all: that their presence here was purely ceremonial, their lectures meant to fill time while the monarchs did all the real debating and decision-making.

Sam sat at an empty table, then angled away from the rest of the room as she snuck a glance at her phone, buried in her tote bag.

"How'd you sneak that past security?" Alexei muttered, taking the seat next to her. They were all supposed to check their phones at the security table outside the conference room.

"Told them I'd left it upstairs, charging," Sam said easily.

Alexei snorted. "Typical youngest child, flouting the rules. My brother Pieter is the same."

"As if you've never broken a rule!" Sam protested, and shot him a glance. "I bet you're like Beatrice—more selective about which rules you break, and better at hiding your tracks."

A startled, guilty expression darted across Alexei's face, but before Sam could parse it out, a woman with short dark hair stepped up to the podium. The room fell obediently silent.

Sam glanced back down at her phone, which had lit up with a new text from Marshall. Where are you?

Her fingers flew over the screen as she replied. In the most boring info session of all time.

She and Marshall had been texting nonstop since the photo shoot last week. They had only seen each other once, here in the seclusion of Bellevue, because they weren't ready to face the ramifications of going out in public.

Sam knew that, eventually, they would have to discuss all the issues facing them—the fact that Marshall would have to give up everything in order to be with her long-term—but for now, she just wanted to enjoy their time together.

Are you open to playing hooky? I'm outside, Marshall wrote back.

Sam's head darted up; she glanced out the window before remembering that they were on the second floor. Marshall was at Bellevue?

The front gates, he added, and a slow smile curled over her face. Sam quickly covered it with her hand and began making a loud, hacking noise.

Her cough seemed, to her own ears, highly unconvincing. But a few tables over, Bharat and Sirivannavari glanced over in alarm. Alexei just stared at her in obvious amusement. Enjoy, he mouthed, when she stood up and headed toward the back of the ballroom, making it seem like she was just catching her breath.

As Sam stepped into the hallway, adrenaline coursed through her. It reminded her of when she used to slip out of class in high school, to meet Jeff and Ethan in the alley between their campuses—not to smoke, like kids in the movies did, but for no real reason except that it was sunny out and they couldn't bear to be cooped up indoors.

Marshall's car was purring at the front gates. She threw open the passenger door and slid eagerly inside.

"So, where are we headed?"

Her boyfriend grinned. "Somewhere I've wanted to take you for a long time."

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Half an hour later, they were in line at a place called Oyster Shed. It was right on the water and delightfully kitschy, with hand-lettered signs and t-shirts that said SHUCK YEAH! Everyone placed their order at a counter, then wandered over to the plastic tables, kicking off their shoes to dig their bare toes in the sand.

When they showed up, Sam had whispered that maybe this wasn't a good idea, but Marshall had insisted that they could stay under the radar. "Celebrities come here all the time," he'd explained. "It's an LA institution."

So Sam did her best to go unnoticed, her features hidden beneath wraparound sunglasses, her hair tucked up beneath a wide-brimmed hat.

When they reached the counter, Marshall rocked back on his heels. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am. Can we get two dozen oysters?"

Sam choked back a laugh, glancing at him from beneath her sunglasses. He'd adopted an entirely different voice, all vowels and laziness, somewhere between a Southern drawl and a Texas twang.

The woman behind the counter smiled at him, charmed. “What accompaniments would you like? We have Sriracha, horseradish, lime, chimichurri—”

“All of them, thank you very much.”

She managed to hold back her laugh until they’d settled into the farthest table. “Okay, what was that? Why did you suddenly become Mr. Texas?”

“I was trying to go incognito,” he said, as if it were obvious. “I know that in Washington, I’m not as famous as you are, but we’re in my duchy now. People know me here.”

“I hope they know to bring their pistols for the shootout at high noon,” Sam teased, rolling her eyes. “If you were going to do an accent, at the very least you should have done a believable one.”

“I assure you, it could be worse,” Marshall replied, in such a bad Scottish accent that Sam shook with silent laughter.

When their number was called over the loudspeaker, Marshall went to the counter to collect their oysters and a towering pile of crispy fries. Sam eagerly reached for a fry and trailed it through the ketchup.

“Here,” Marshall said, holding an oyster toward her.

“That’s okay. I don’t eat oysters,” Sam said quickly, and Marshall’s face fell.

“Really? Since when?”

“Since always. Everyone always assumes I like them because they’re ‘fancy,’” she explained, making little air quotes around the word.

“They are fancy. Like caviar, a truly obnoxious and snobby food.”

“And people think I’m obnoxious and snobby,” Sam agreed, with a sigh.

“You’re a princess; it comes with the territory. Though if they saw the way you eat ice cream straight from the tub, they might change their mind,” Marshall joked. “Sorry I brought you here. I would’ve picked somewhere else if I’d known about your war on oysters.”

“But this place is so fun!”

Marshall reached for a knife and began shucking them with quick, expert movements, sliding the knife around each oyster to pop its shell open in turn. “I’m making you try at least one, Sam.”

“Nope. There’s only one person who can command me to do things against my will, and that’s Beatrice.”

He laughed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said I would make you do anything. But maybe I could persuade you?” His voice lowered provocatively as he added, “Surely there’s something I can offer you in exchange.”

Heat flooded Sam’s body, and she had to tear her eyes away, because they were suddenly lingering on Marshall’s mouth. She glanced downward, but that didn’t help, because now she was staring at his shoulders and chest, his muscles flexing underneath his old water polo hoodie from high school—

“I know what you could do,” she blurted out. “You could take me to a water polo game.”

“A water polo game,” Marshall repeated, bemused.

“Yes! I’ve never seen one, and I want to understand this part of you. Can’t you take me to the national championships? Or wait! What about your old high school?”

Sam was suddenly desperate for this glimpse into Marshall’s past. She wanted to peek into the corners of his life she hadn’t yet seen, to round out her understanding until she knew all of him. That was impossible, probably; no one could know the whole of a person, not even the whole of themselves.

But she wanted to, because she loved him.

Marshall smiled slowly. “Okay. I’ll take you to a water polo game if you’ll eat one oyster.”

“Deal,” Sam agreed.

With some trepidation, she reached for an oyster and dabbed cocktail sauce in the corner, then lifted it to her lips. Bottoms up, she thought, and tipped the meat of it back into her mouth.

She chewed once, past the salty briny taste, and swallowed. Still as slippery as she remembered.

“Well?” Marshall prompted.

She shrugged. “Sorry, I’d rather have the fries.”

He laughed at that, and slid the platter of oysters closer toward him. “Well, I tried. Not my fault that your tastes are woefully lowbrow.”

“Don’t forget that one of the things I like most is you,” Sam teased.

“I never claimed to be highbrow. In fact, I might be the most lowbrow of all your tastes. Your surfer bro west-coast boyfriend.” With that, Marshall doused another oyster in horseradish before eating it.

Sam leaned her elbows onto the table, because this obviously wasn't the sort of place that cared about table manners. "When can we go to a water polo game? Next weekend?"

"More like next year," Marshall said cheerfully. "It's a spring sport, Sam."

She let out a yelp of frustration so loud that a couple at a nearby table glanced over. Marshall put his hand over hers, evidently torn between amusement and worry.

"I can't believe you! I slurped down an oyster for nothing?" she hissed.

"We can watch my old highlight reel from high school, if it helps," Marshall offered.

Sam rolled her eyes affectionately. "I assume you have it teed up and ready for all the girls you used to impress?"

"Haven't seen it in years," Marshall said smoothly. "Hey, I know—there's a Rams game this weekend. What if we did that instead?"

Sam loved football, which Marshall knew perfectly well. She used to play flag football in elementary school, in a coed league with Jeff, before the world decided that girls were supposed to "outgrow" things like that, and Jeff moved on to an all-boys league instead.

"Your family wouldn't like that," she pointed out. If the Davises didn't want her and Marshall together, they certainly wouldn't throw them out in public at something as high-profile as an NFL game.

"They don't need to know," Marshall said smoothly. "I mean, my family does have a great box, but I'd rather hide in the stands. That's what I did at the last Superbowl."

"What do you mean, you hid?" Sam asked, puzzled.

"Like what we're doing now, being anonymous. I was up in the nosebleed section with my friends, all of us covered in face paint, screaming until we were hoarse."

"Really? I could have sworn I saw photos of you in your family's box..." Sam remembered it well, because it was right when Nina and Jeff's relationship had been outed to the media last year. Sam had trolled through the gossip websites, writing scathing rebuttals to everyone who was cruel to her best friend. She remembered seeing the photos of Marshall up in the box, wearing sunglasses, staring impassively down at the game.

Come to think of it, those photos probably explained why she'd assumed he was standoffish and snobby. Which was why, when she met him at the museum gala, she'd tried to ignore him. Who went to the Superbowl and didn't even smile?

Marshall coughed. "Um. The guy in the box was actually my body double."

“Your what?”

“I hired a lookalike to take my place in the box. Rory helped—she made sure that he didn’t talk to any of the VIP’s, blow my cover. That way I could enjoy my time in the stands in peace.”

“And how did you find this Fake Marshall?” Sam asked, choking back a laugh. “I assume you used a casting agency? Oh my god, wait—was it R.J.?” That would be hilarious, if the actor playing Marshall in the movie about their lives had already played him.

Her boyfriend turned bright red. “Um... not exactly.”

“You hired an intern to scout out the perfect guy?”

“I... well...” He coughed. “As it turns out, Fake Marshall works, um, bachelorette parties?”

It took a moment for Sam to digest this. When she did, she actually howled with laughter. “No way!” she exclaimed. “People hire a Marshall-lookalike stripper?”

“Like I said, this is my family’s duchy, and some people do find me attractive—”

“Oh my god, did Fake Marshall bring his own costume?” Sam asked, delighted. “I hope he does a chair dance while wearing the grizzly bear pelt!”

“That is a family relic, thank you very much,” Marshall said, but he was clearly fighting not to laugh.

“Give me his card. I want to meet Bachelorette-Stripper-Marshall.”

“I will do no such thing,” Marshall said firmly. “Besides, he’s probably retired.”

“I doubt it. You’re more famous than ever—I bet he’s working every weekend!”

She had meant it as a joke, but her words dampened the mood. Marshall let out a breath, his laughter evaporating.

“You’re right. Stripper Marshall is probably raking in the cash these days.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam whispered. She had caused all these problems for Marshall and his family, because of who she was. Because of her last time.

“You’re worth it, Sam.” Marshall scooted his chair around so that he was right next to her, lacing his fingers in hers. “You always have been.”

Sam shifted in her chair, tipping her face up to kiss him.

For a moment everything else seemed to fall away, and it was just the two of them, holding onto each other in the lazy Orange sunshine. As if they were two ordinary people on an afternoon outing.

But when they pulled away, Sam felt it—a shift in attention. A few tables away, a pair of preteen girls was watching them. Their eyes widened, darting from Sam to Marshall and back again.

“Morgan!” One of them grabbed her friend’s arm. “Look! I told you it’s them!”

Morgan gasped dramatically. “Oh my god, you’re right!”

The first girl stood up, raising her voice. “Can I just say, I’m totally shipping you guys. I have been from the beginning.”

Morgan nodded frantically. “We both know you’re into each other. Like, that kind of chemistry?” she waved at Sam and Marshall, still flushed from their kiss. “You can’t fake that.”

Sam smiled weakly, then turned to tug at Marshall’s hand. “I think that’s our cue to get going.”

The girls’ voices had carried over the other tables. As she and Marshall made their way back toward their car, people looked up in curiosity, and then an avid, hungry, possessive sort of excitement—or in some cases, disgust. They whipped out phones, shoved them toward Sam and Marshall, began screaming their names.

And with that, Sam knew, the fleeting moment of privacy that she and Marshall had enjoyed was shattered.