

TWENTY-NINE



VAUGHN WANTED HER TO MEET HIM for dinner near the shore. He set up a blanket on the sand, with flickering torches pitched into the grainy mound. He set a bucket of crab legs in between them and an empty one for shells.

“What’s all this for, Vaughn?” she asked him, picking up the first one and breaking it.

He slid the crabmeat out keenly, sliding it into his mouth before he spoke. She slowly reached for her beer bottle.

“This is your going away dinner...”

She watched his face closely as if she were waiting for him to say, “*I’m just kidding!*” But the expression never crossed it.

She was initially stunned as to the origin of such a cruel notion, but felt a little eased when he dropped his head momentarily, then raised it again with his trademark casual smile.

“I don’t understand,” she replied meekly.

“Loren,” he began, sounding more like a concerned parent than her employer. “Have you ever taken a moment to wonder why I moved all the way out here?”

The thought had never crossed her mind – but she refrained from saying it aloud.

“There were some things and people that I purposely left behind in Charleston,” he began, taking a sip from his beer bottle. “And I regret it every day...I don’t think it’s necessary for me to go into detail about it...”

She didn’t think she wanted him to.

Vaughn reached into his pocket. “As a quiet observer, I have to say that while your work is commendable, it simply isn’t good enough...”

“I still don’t understand, Vaughn...”

He handed her a small slip of paper.

“What is this?”

She unfolded it, and gasped.

“It’s a check,” he told her quietly.

“Vaughn, I can’t accept this...”

She attempted to hand him back the check, but he shoved it back.

“Go home, Loren,” he advised. “Take this money and start a new life...consider your time in San Diego as a chance to renew yourself. But you don’t belong here...you belong in sweaty Charleston...that’s where your heart is...your time here is done...”

The following week, she received her homecoming invitation by mail:

You are cordially invited to witness the union of:

Mia Gabrielle Tate

to

Evan Harold Gordon

**Saturday, June 12, 2010 Grand Lawn View, Kiawah Island Resort,
Kiawah Island, South Carolina Five o’clock in the Evening**

Sure it seemed like a clichéd response to say that she felt as though she had just arrived the other day, and had barely adjusted herself to her new situation.

But she never really belonged, did she? But would coming home be as easy as running away was?

She told no one but Joey; and he stood by the security line at the airport, waiting for her.

When he wrapped his arms around her, and felt the tears rumbled up her throat, she refused to cry.

And as she rode alongside him in his 4Runner, she wondered who was living in her old apartment, who’d taken over her old job, who Oliver was seeing...

She wondered how different her life would be now that all variables had changed.

“You don’t have to go to this wedding next week if you don’t want to,” Joey reminded her as they walked up to his apartment. She was thankful for the spare bedroom, and her everlastingly loyal best friend.

Loren sighed heavily and bounced her shoulders up and down. “I know...but I feel like I need to.”

“Fine,” he replied. “Just know that I didn’t force you this time...”

She smiled. “I love you, Joe...”

“I love you, too.”

A week later, she was slipping a strapless sundress up her body, and pinning half of her black hair to the crown of her head. She dabbed her cheeks with a little bit of blush; she believed that if her face was presentable, maybe people wouldn’t shudder at how much weight she’d lost.

Joey waited for her on the couch in his living room; she wasn’t ready to look for her own apartment and he understood. Besides, she enjoyed the company.

And at four-thirty, her nerves kicked in as Joey coursed along the 26; the smell of the open highway in stale low country heat was intoxicating. She took a few deep breaths and turned up the dial on the radio; she’d missed her favorite radio station.

She tempered her nerves – she hoped people didn’t notice how long she’d been gone.

Joey pulled onto the quiet causeway and reached for her hand, enveloping it in his. The sights, sounds and smells of the Kiawah she grew up with made her a little dizzy; she could see the emerald green grass, lopped atop white sand dunes, sea oats dried and golden, willows swaying, moaning the lazy summer rhythm, and navy water with white-tipped swells, cascading gracefully into shore.

He pulled into the resort, and she could see the lawn stretched out to sea, with a humble trellis laced with white and yellow roses in the forefront of what appeared sixty chairs. They exited the car; the amber sun had moved to nether skies, and a silky breeze leapt from the ocean’s surface, sweeping past her face. She inhaled deeply. She

reached for Joey's hand, and pressed her lips into the side of his face. She'd forgotten how handsome he looked in his casual buttoned down shirt, bright blue tie and jeans, and his short black waves brushed just right.

"You'll be fine," he whispered, sensing her.

A few of the guests glared at her as if she were a ghost.

She suddenly wished that she and Mia Tate didn't share so many acquaintances.

She and Joey sat in the back.

The ceremony was smooth, short and beautiful, though pure disbelief crowded her brain. She never would have thought in a million years that Evan Gordon and Mia Tate would ever sustain a relationship, let alone manage to seal the deal in holy matrimony. But Loren sighed as the preacher proclaimed them husband and wife.

Hmm, perhaps Mia, in her lascivious ways, may have been searching for her soul mate all along...

"She sure does look happy, huh?" Joey leaned in to whisper. She nodded hypnotically, watching Mia and Evan kiss in dappled sunlight.

And just before twilight, as the sun smeared the waves beyond the lawn, she sipped from a glass of red wine. She watched the bride and groom dance their first dance.

There was something hauntingly beautiful about the song that played.

And when Mia invited everyone to join them on the makeshift, hardwood dance floor, Joey tugged at her wrists.

"Come on, you bitch," he chuckled. "We need to liven this shit up...that's why we were invited!"

She couldn't help but laugh.

She slid her wedges from her feet and placed them by her assigned table before allowing Joey to twirl her around at least three times; maybe he forgot that she still had her wine glass in hand...thank God for up-tempo songs.

And while Joey belted out the words to the song, she laughed to the point that her chest and belly ached.

She realized that he wasn't trying to liven the reception up; he was trying to liven

her up.

And the song changed again.

“Aw, hell,” Joey sighed, waving his arm. “I was just getting into it...”

“I think you were feeling it a little *too* much,” she teased.

“Wouldn’t you if you had three glasses of wine already?”

She rolled her eyes. “I guess some things never change.”

“You’re right,” he said, pulling her closer. He planted a kiss in the middle of her forehead. “Like the fact that I love you with all of my heart...and I missed you...”

“I missed you too, Joe,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “Don’t ever do any dumb shit like that again...I’ll be back...I’m going to get some cake before Audrey eats it all...”

She watched Joey head toward the buffet table. And just as she headed back toward her own table, there he was.

She hadn’t really calculated in her head what she’d say when she saw Nicholas Grey again.

And maybe she didn’t really have to – they sauntered toward each other slowly. His eyes never left her face; she swallowed thickly as she trickled her fingers around the base of his neck, pulling him into her bosom.

She could feel his lips lightly graze the space behind her ear as they started to sway.

“Welcome home,” he said.

She smiled. She could feel him squeeze at her waist. “I never really left...”

“I’d like to think so too,” he whispered.

“You look great,” she replied. “You look...peaceful...”

“I am...”

He pulled apart from her; his deep hazel eyes still magnetized her.

“I anticipate that things in your life are going smoothly now?”

He nodded. “After months and months of hard work, frustration and a few tears,” he admitted.

His voice was still deep and even. “I realized that I could make it through something without you around,” he said. “That was a big step for me.”

"I knew you could do it," she said, sounding steady.

"Sadie and I got our marriage annulled," he conceded. He lowered his eyes momentarily.

She reached up, pinched up at his chin, and directed his eyes toward hers.

"That was very brave," she assured him.

"What about Avery?"

He sighed. "For my time and my money, the judge awarded me partial custody which I'm grateful for since the real father wanted nothing to do with her...or Sadie..."

"The father?"

He nodded slowly. "You remember Kingston James?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious? How?"

He shrugged. "I didn't really want to know...I just wanted to get out of that situation as fast as possible. These past few months had shed a new light on Sadie Vansant that I never saw before. And I'm glad that I did it before it was too late. So, I guess I have you and Oliver to thank for that. If it wasn't for Sadie's blinding jealousy, I never would've been set free."

It was now that Loren lowered her eyes. "Well, apparently I was too chicken to stick it out."

He cupped her face in his hands. "I'm to blame for that...and I'm sorry...I'm sorry for every bad thing I did to you...we just wanted two different things...and we were too stubborn to see that it changed..."

She nodded.

"I realized something a long time ago," he said. "I realized that I could never make you as happy as *he* did...and I've known you half my life. I know that you loved him far more than you ever loved me. And I'm okay with that. This is as good a time as any to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?"

"I'm moving to Atlanta," he said. "Found the perfect architecture firm down there that loved my work on the museum in San Diego. I'm leaving tomorrow."

"And what if I never came home? What would you have done then?"

He sighed. "I would have called you, told you that I loved you, and I would have

invited you my way when the dust had settled. That's how you and I have always been, Lo..."

She pursed her lips; the answer had satiated her.

She scoffed a laugh. "What will I do now that you're not going to be in Charleston anymore?"

For Nicholas was Charleston, and Charleston was he. She could feel her throat swell.

"It's simple, Lo," he said. "You can be who you've always been. And you can move on now that I'm not in your face all of the damn time. And I know the perfect place to start..."

His face turned slowly and she followed his eyes curiously; there Oliver Russo stood, wearing nothing more than a casual suit, his dark hair a little shorter than the last time she saw him.

She quickly diverted her eyes back to Nicholas, smiling once, walking over to him slowly.

She stood before him; he still appeared displeased.

"So the rumor is true," he said plainly, crossing his arms at his chest. "*The Loren Aida Soto* is back on low country soil again..."

"Did you put money on it?"

"Didn't think I should waste my time," he said. "I've done so much of that in the past whenever your name came up..."

"I suppose I deserve that," she sighed. She gazed at him earnestly. "Walk with me, please?"

"Again, Lo," he said. "Why should I waste my time? What will be different this time, that hasn't been different the past two years?"

She walked a little closer to him; she could smell him sweetly from her vantage point, diverting her conscience to every single memory shared between them...good or bad.

"I can't promise much," she murmured, attempting to reach for his arm. He snatched it out of her grasp.

"But I want you to know that I've done a lot of thinking about some things," she

said.

“That’s just *it*, Loren,” he said.

His voice was a little louder than the last time. “You’re always fucking thinking...you’re always thinking about what everyone else wants, who everyone else wants you to be. Instead of focusing on being Loren Soto...why should I give you my time if I can’t trust that you’ll stick around the next day? What about the next week? The next month? The next year? Tell me why I should put my trust in that unstable situation? Tell me why I should put my trust in *you*?”

Then he walked away.

She found him sitting along the shore, with his knees curled into his chest, sand caked between his toes, his hair, sun-streaked and soft, sailed with the breeze. She sighed, hesitated, and joined him on the sand, mimicking his position. She followed his gaze out toward the blood-red sunset; he still smelled like coconut.

She exhaled deeply before she spoke; she could feel the heat of his skin evanesce into hers.

“You told me once to leave it all behind,” she whispered. His head tilted in her direction subtly.

“And it took me a long time to realize what that meant,” she continued. “I don’t expect for you to forgive me for a long time...but I’m praying that you try...I’m praying that you see through my utter foolishness, and realize that we’re still great together...that...that we’ve *always* been great together...”

Oliver shook his head vigorously, and got to his feet, storming toward the water.

“You and I both made mistakes,” he said quietly. His arms were raised above his head, pinned down to the crown forcefully. “But I owned up to mine...you just pretended as if you’d done nothing wrong...as if we both weren’t to blame for what went wrong between us. But I was willing to start over then...I can’t say the same now...”

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her voice was now delicate, fragile.

He shook his head and lowered it this time. Her stomach was in knots.

“I came back for you,” she admitted.

“Don’t do me any favors, Lo,” he said. She approached him cautiously from

behind, whispering, "I need you, Ollie...damn it, I need you..."

He turned to her.

And then he did something that caused her to scream; she snatched her waist, grabbed hold of her tightly, and lifted her into his arms. "Now, come on..."

In a flashing second, he was rushing toward the water, and the salty liquid splashed onto her face as she squealed.

And then Oliver Russo threw Loren Soto into the water, and he dove in after her.

And when she swam to the surface, he was there waiting for her, his hair slicked back, his dark skin gleaming, his narrow slits of eyes pressing into hers. She swallowed thickly, as his face melded against hers, lip to lip, nose to nose, tasting him.

"Don't do it again," he said.

Her fingers were hooked around his neck, her legs wrapped around his waist as they bobbed along the waves.

"I won't," she mouthed back.

He kissed her again.

"Ollie?"

"Hmm...?"

He was studying her face spellbindingly, she could tell. He was tracing his fingers along her loosened, wet black curls. She liked when he was distracted; it made it easier to tell him things.

"Marry me?"

Now, he was focused.