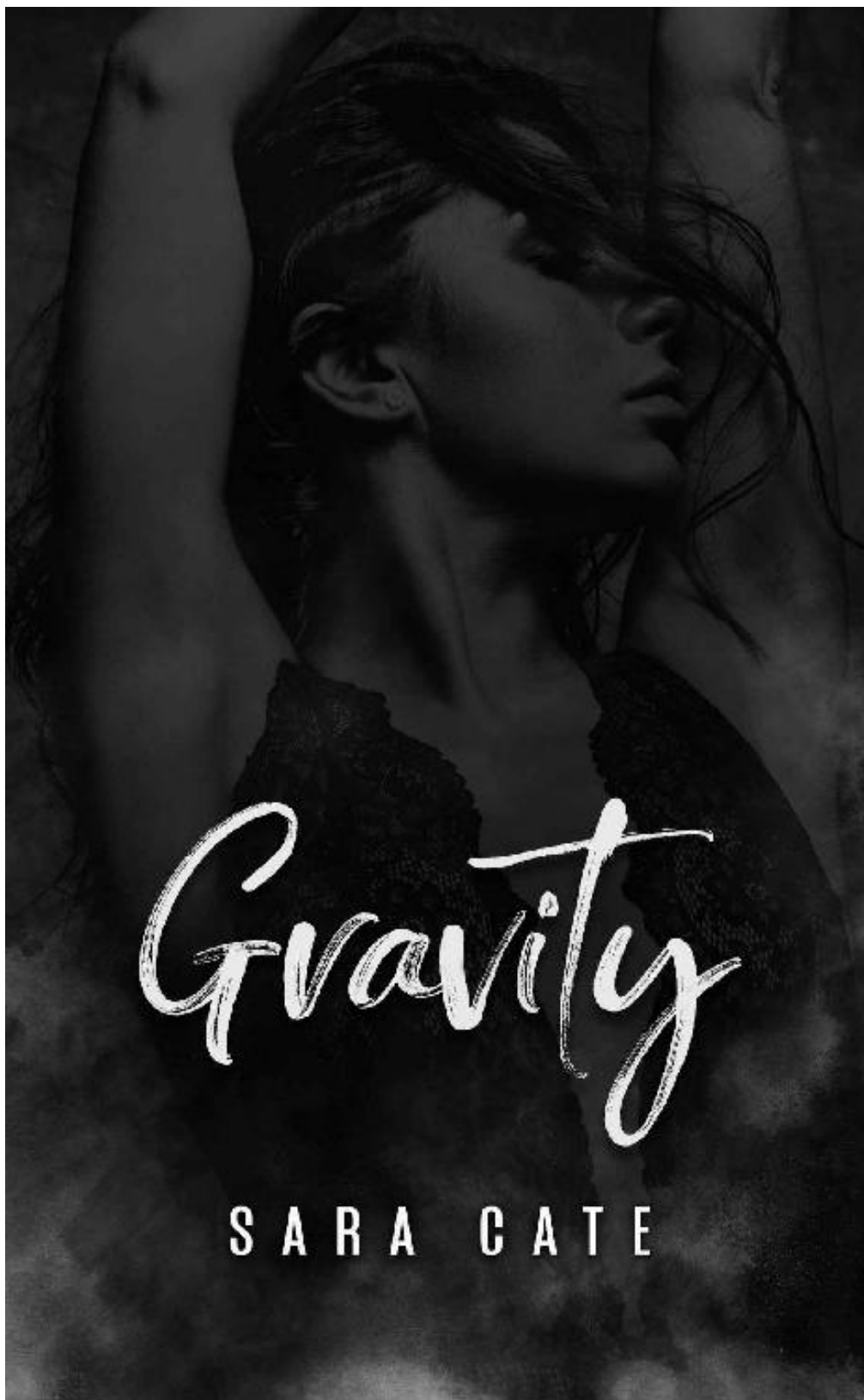


Gravity

SARA CATE



Gravity

SARA CATE

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Freefall](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Beautiful Monster](#)

[Also by Sara Cate](#)

[About the Author](#)

Copyright © 2020 by Sara Cate

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

www.saracatebooks.com

Photographer: Michelle Lancaster

Editing: Amy Briggs of Briggs Consulting

playlist

are you even real? james blake

my tears ricochet taylor swift

can you feel the sun missio

no ordinary labrinth

fine line harry styles

walls kings of leon

someone else rezz

this love taylor swift

fire for you cannons

love me anyway plnk

it's you zayn

girl symi

For my pilot

PROLOGUE



LOVE IS OUR GREATEST WEAKNESS. Nothing will royally fuck you up the way love can, and I swore I would never be such an idiot for another person.

Yet, all I can think as I watch Nash Wilde walk across the sunlit yard from the pool to the house, is that I love him—and I hate him for it. He won't give me the time of day and I can't tell if it's because he doesn't notice me or if he just doesn't like me. After two years of these weekend trips with my sister to her boyfriend's family house on their private island, I realize I've put off these feelings for his brother long enough. It's a risk, but I'm ready to take it.

At first I thought it was a crush. I mean, who wouldn't be beguiled by those ocean blue eyes and chin-length brown hair in that six-three frame? But it's not just his looks that caught me. Nash is a force, and I'm drawn to him like gravity.

Today, I'm going to tell him. It's our last day of our Spring Break trip, and I'm tired of living with this secret. Plus, it feels like fate. He was supposed to be gone today. He and Preston were scheduled to be at the launch party in the city, but in a last minute switch, Emma ended up going instead.

So, this is my chance.

He disappears into the main house, and I make my way over, hoping I'll catch him before he slips away into the bathroom. There is no plan really. I'm just going to go in there with my best flirting skills, and if that doesn't work, I'll throw myself at him.

Like I said, love makes you stupid.

After I walk through the patio door that leads to the kitchen, I nearly slam into him, my heart hammering in my chest. He's shirtless, a thin layer of sweat glistening across his pecs and abs. My fingers glide across the moisture as I peel myself away.

"Sorry," he mutters as he tries to move past me. His hands land softly on my arms.

In a panic, I try to stop him from leaving. "It's just us today. I thought we could hang out."

His eyes rest on my face for a moment, and I want to swim in those blue pools staring down at me. He doesn't move them away, as if he's considering me for the first time. If he asked me to get on my knees at this very moment, I would.

Then a door opens behind him, and we both turn to see his dad walk out of his office. Alistair Wilde normally makes himself scarce while we're around, but he does tend to linger, and I make it a point to be as gracious as possible when I see him. He is letting my sister and I, a couple of nobodies, spend nearly every weekend out here, all expenses paid with fancy helicopter rides on top of it.

After sending him a casual wave, I turn back toward Nash, whose hand is still on my arm, and I notice his curious expression has hardened into a hate-filled scowl.

"Have you heard from Preston? He's supposed to call me before the party, but I haven't heard a thing. They should have landed twenty minutes ago," his dad asks.

"Find him yourself," Nash mutters before turning and huffing out the door in a frenzy.

I'm left alone with Alistair and a look of confusion on both of our faces. I've never sensed any animosity between the two of them before, but there definitely seems to be some now.

Just then, Alistair's phone buzzes and he retreats into his office to answer it. I try to catch up Nash, leaving the house and following him over to the pool.

"Everything okay?" I call, but he turns in a huff, and I see a rim of red around his eyes. In the distance, there's a buzz like thunder growing louder.

Nash looks straight at me, the intensity overwhelming. He's about to say something, and the words hang on his lips as we both flinch from the commotion coming from in the house. It sounds as if someone is hitting a wall or throwing something. Then there's yelling. Alistair's voice slices through the growing buzz of the approaching helicopter that is interrupting our peaceful morning. It's a sound so haunting, it's etched into my memory forever.

Nash and I turn back to the helipad behind the house to see a black and blue official looking helicopter land just as someone hops out and walks toward us.

I look at Nash for answers, figuring this is a business matter or something wrong with their company, but the pale, wide-eyed expression on his face sends chills down my spine.

It's something worse than bad business or money lost.

Alistair rushes past us, yelling toward the people coming out of the aircraft. He's frantic, shouting his questions, tearing at his hair, demanding answers, but his words don't reach my ears. So I stand silent and confused and wait for everything to make sense.

Next to me, Nash is a statue of despair, frozen in place and suddenly pale. He already knows what I'm still trying to understand.

The roar from the blades above us drowns out the sounds, numbing me to my core as everything starts to settle into place. A tear falls across Nash's cheek and lands against the pool deck. I see it out of the corner of my eye as every

emotion-feeling molecule in my body shuts down one by one until I am completely guarded from the approaching pain.



THE CROWD IS ROWDY TONIGHT. Even through the blaring music, I can hear them whistling and yelling my name. But with the bright lights, I can't see a single face across the club floor. When I'm on stage, it's only me and the music.

This is my favorite part. I don't feel a thing except for the momentum when I swing around the pole, my legs locked in place to keep me upright until I'm falling with grace, catching myself with a vice grip between my thighs.

That moment of euphoria as I careen toward the floor is the high I'm chasing. When the bass is so loud it rattles my heart in my chest and I'm thinking of absolutely nothing but the gravity pulling me down.

And I wonder if that's what Emma felt before she died. The hair-raising plummet that sends your heart up into your throat—adrenaline, laced with terror.

It's a terrible thing to think about, but she was my twin—my other half. My mind won't let me escape the thought, imagining how it must have felt to die in that crash.

The club goes wild as I land gracefully on the floor, transitioning with ease to all fours so I can shake my ass for

the front row while I collect their bills in my G-string. After years of strict ballet training, allowing myself to move to the music is liberating. Spinning around to face my waiting patrons, I give the first guy what he wants and shake my tits in his face, before I turn to the next one.

Being low to the floor gives me a moment to scan the crowd a little more. The tables are all full, and there is a horde around both bars at the back. There seems to be a lot of ladies in the house tonight, which is good for me. They tip better.

Just as I start to look back at one of my other front row fans, my eyes suddenly land on a familiar face across the room.

I get regulars all the time. Faces tend to blend after a while, and I try to remember names and details from those I've danced for before. But this face is a different type of familiar. He's not a regular. As far as I know, he's never been in the club, and I've *definitely* never danced for him.

It's a face from an old life I vaguely remember, from when I still had a sister. The world still made sense, and I wasn't broken yet.

Nash Wilde is in my club, and his eyes are trained on my face.

My skin is on fire as I try to finish my set without looking at him again. I have to force a smile as I descend the stairs in front of the stage and greet the rest of my waiting patrons. Some of them request private dances or ask me to come sit with them for a moment. I play it sweet, promising I'll find them after I get a drink. I never do this. I always stick around to get my private dances and extra tips, but right now I have one mission.

I need to get Nash out of here immediately. My cheeks burn under his gaze as I make my way over. He seems to be alone, standing with a drink in one hand. Seeing his face veiled with a scowl, it suddenly brings back memories of him at the funeral. I'll never forget the expression he wore as we said goodbye to his only brother and my twin.

The ceremony was the most elegant event I'd ever been to, but I was too busy sobbing to be impressed by flower arrangements or elaborate catering. Meanwhile, across the aisle, what was left of the Wilde family stared on as if they weren't living the worst day of their lives. As if every breath in their lungs wasn't stained with grief and desperation. I remember searching their features for their sadness, desperate to know that mine was not alone, but what I found was an older man, stone cold and empty, and a son with a brow full of anger and a jaw clenched so tight it looked like it would crack.

It's been two years since I laid eyes on either of the Wilde men, and now the youngest is standing at my place of work, staring at me while I have nothing on but a thong and some pasties.

Instead of making a scene that could get me in trouble, I touch his arm and lead him away down an empty hallway toward the private rooms.

"What are you doing here?" I snap, staring up at him. There's a sway to his movement and a glazed look in his eye as he glares down at me.

"Zara York," he mumbles, his speech slurred.

"Nash Wilde, what are you doing here?"

His lips curve upward as he gazes down at my tits, so I quickly cross my arms. "I haven't seen you in so long." Taking a step toward me, he boxes me in against the wall, and I glance back at the security guard watching from the end of the hallway. Putting my hands up, I gesture to him, so he knows I'm not being threatened or intimidated. I notice the way his shoulders tense as he watches.

"Why are you in town?" I ask.

"Business."

The intensity of his eyes is unsettling. Being this close, the aroma of expensive cologne and cheap vodka fills my senses.

I want to call bullshit on his answer because I know Nash doesn't do business—not anymore. Everyone in the country knows Nash Wilde doesn't have any business. He used to.

Once upon a time, he was a rising star in the industry his father pioneered. But now he only does girls, parties, drugs, and spending all of his daddy's money. He's not celebrity status, but he's popular enough among the crowd of rich and famous trust fund babies that he can get whatever he wants, whenever he wants.

Preston was the partier in the family, and it would seem his surviving brother took up his vacated role. They used to be total opposites. Much like my twin was the polar opposite of me. Emma was the extrovert, with her sunshine-and-smiles demeanor and perfect grades who excelled at everything. I was the girl full of darkness who would never be as good as her twin. Everything came so easily to my sister, and while I loved ballet more than her, I would never be as good.

No matter how different we were, my sister and I were born from the same split egg, like we were two sides of one person—which only makes me feel like half a person now.

“I heard you were a stripper, and I had to see it for myself.”

The hungry look in his eyes should terrify me. In any other man, I'd be on guard and ready to bolt, but this is Nash. We never flirted or spoke intimately before, but for the two years Emma and Preston dated, we saw each other often, and I always assumed he wasn't into me. He was too busy scowling to ever speak more than two words to me.

“Okay, you saw it. Why don't you get the fuck out of here?” I glance around the crowd at the bar, hoping I spot someone looking for him. “Are you here alone?”

“Not anymore,” he growls with a slur. His hands brush my hips. “I want a lap dance.”

Chills race down my spine. He must see the panic in my expression because he leans in, putting his mouth next to my ear. “A private dance.”

He's too close, and my body is on fire with his tall frame crowding me. I barely come up to his chest, so it doesn't take much to feel like he could overpower me.

“All right, that’s enough.” A deep voice cuts in as the bodyguard wraps a hand around Nash’s arm, pulling him back. My mind screams *no*. I know Nash Wilde enough to know he doesn’t react well to being told what to do, and this is going to get out of hand fast.

“He’s fine. He’s with me,” I say, trying to jump in, but Nash is quick to react for a drunk person. His fist flies around in defense, and I cling to his arm as I spot it moving toward the bodyguard.

“Get your fucking hands off of me!”

Jumping between the men, I press Nash toward the exit. “He’s with me, I promise!”

The bodyguard’s nostrils flare and his eyes are full of anger. “You better get him the fuck out of here before I call the boss.”

“I will, I will.” I’m trying desperately to move him toward the door, but he presses back.

“I want my lap dance,” he drawls, his hooded gaze intent on my body.

“You’re going to get thrown out of here, Nash. Where are your friends? Who are you here with?”

His jaw clenches. “I’m here with you.”

Great, he’s alone.

“Let me order you an Uber back to your hotel.”

“I didn’t get a hotel.”

Fuck.

“Nash, where did you plan on sleeping tonight?”

His hand cascades down my body, brushing my bare ass, and I quickly slap it away before anyone sees. I need to get him out of here fast before he gets himself arrested, and this whole night ends with me being on the news.

“Oh my god, you’re Nash Wilde!” A girl who looks barely twenty-one saunters up to us with her phone aimed and at the

ready—which is pretty strictly against the rules. I put up a hand to stop her, but one glance up at Nash and he clearly seems to brighten at the attention. A million dollar smile burns across his face, and his hands tighten around me, hugging me close like we're posing for a picture.

"You're so hot," she giggles as she falls into him. His fingers drift toward her hair, and for a moment I think I'm saved. If I can get these two flirting, maybe I can dump him and let him be her problem. They both look drunk enough to spend the night on the floor of the bathroom.

"We were just leaving," Nash says, and I let out a heavy sigh.

"Nash, I'm working. You need to go home."

Ignoring the girl, he turns toward me. "I'm buying you for the rest of the night."

The blonde's eyes widen, and she sucks on her drink with a smile like she's watching a reality show that resembles my nightmares.

"You can't do that." My hands land on his chest as I push him out of the crowd. He's still hanging over me, impossibly close, and I feel every inch of him against my bare body.

Pressing his lips toward my ear again, he speaks so loudly everyone in a ten-foot radius can hear. "Twenty grand for the night."

My heart stops in my chest. Looking up at him, I search his face for any sign he's fucking with me. Twenty thousand dollars might be chump change to him, but that money could change my life—or at the very least my next six months.

"I'm not a prostitute, Nash," I say a little too weakly. I'm not a prostitute, but twenty grand *is* a lot of money, and I just might be desperate enough. Blondie is still watching us like she's part of our conversation.

"Get the fuck out of here," I snap, and a few people turn their heads in our direction. Dammit, I'm going to get fired.

"I'm not paying you to fuck me, Zara. One dance."

My mind can barely process how bizarre this is. My almost brother-in-law shows up out of the blue after two years, and suddenly wants to pay me twenty grand for a lap dance. I can't seem to wake up from whatever this is.

The bodyguard is still watching us with intensity. Looking around, I realize just how many people are staring. Enough of this crowd recognizes him that I know my face will be all over Instagram tonight, standing mostly naked, with a Wilde.

"You really don't have a hotel?" I ask, but his drunk stupor interprets my words differently, and his face lights up.

"I can get one."

I offer him with a harsh glare. "Give me fifteen minutes, and I'll meet you in the parking lot. I can take you to my place to sober up."

Spinning on my heels, I dash to the dressing room to grab my things. Once I reach the break room, I pull on my sweats over my thong and slip on a T-shirt, rushing to throw my phone and keys into my duffel bag and run for the back entrance so none of our patrons see me in these clothes. I stop by the manager's office to let him know there was a family emergency and I have to run. He rolls his eyes at me as I bolt.

Once I'm behind the club, I find Nash waiting for me. He's holding his phone and leaning against the building for support. "Let's go." I call to him as I huff past, and he staggers behind.

When I reach my car, I open the trunk and toss in my stuff. He grabs the passenger door handle, and I pause, staring at him for a moment. Nash Wilde, the man I considered an actual god for years, is sweaty and drunk. What happened to him? The man I knew was polished and exquisite in a way that made me painfully attracted to him. I wanted him so badly then I could hardly speak around him.

Now, he looks broken.

As soon as I climb into my car, him sitting in the passenger seat, I can smell him. His cologne is overwhelming but still I breathe it in, wanting to swim in it. His hand reaches around to rest on the back of my headrest. With his eyes focused on my

face, I try to keep my hands from shaking as I drive. This last hour has been a blur, and I'm suddenly desperate for this day to end.

My apartment is a short drive from the club, so it doesn't take long before we arrive.

"This is where you live?" he asks, judgement lacing his tone.

My complex isn't that bad, but the valley is expensive, and I'd rather work a few days less a month than stress about something fancier. I feel safe enough here.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Would you like me to drop you off at the Ritz?"

He laughs at my sarcasm as he climbs out of the car. Feeling Nash behind me as we walk toward my apartment, my instincts start to scream at me. What am I doing? I can't have sex with Nash Wilde. First of all, he's so drunk he's hardly in the condition. Second, Nash is a manwhore. He fucks anything that moves, and I hate being a booty call.

Granted it's been over a year since I've been laid, so maybe that's why I'm unlocking my door with him hot on my heels.

No. That can't happen. He'll sleep on the couch. I'm just giving him a warm place to sleep tonight so he doesn't get himself arrested. Emma would want me to do as much.

"How did you end up at the club so drunk in the first place?" I ask.

"I've been at the club all night. Waiting for you to come on."

I spin around toward him. "Are you serious?"

"Yep."

His heavy lidded stare sends bolts of lightning to my belly. Ignoring it, I toss my keys and phone on the table and point him toward the couch. "I'm going to go change. Have a seat."

“I want to watch,” he replies, his voice deep and husky. The apartment is still dark, with only one small lamp illuminating the space. Nash is close behind me when I stop to look back at him.

“Nash,” I warn him, but his hands are on my hips.

“I’m paying for that dance, Zara.” Then, my feet are off the floor and I’m hanging over his shoulder as he carries me to my bedroom. Every siren in my head is going off. I can’t do this with him. I wanted Nash two years ago. But now, having him here in this place brings back every hurtful memory, and it cools my body like ice. His voice, his face, his touch are all constant reminders that I am splintered in two.

“Put me down,” I cry, my voice breaking with threatening emotion.

A moment later, he drops me abruptly to my feet as he falls backward onto my unmade bed. Kicking his feet out, he leans back against his elbows and watches me.

We sit in silence as he waits. “Take off your clothes, Zara.”

I want to tell him to get out. To fuck off. To leave my life and never come back, but it’s Nash, and I’ve been caught in his orbit. I couldn’t get away if I tried.

“Make it twenty-five,” I counter, feeling ballsy. There’s not even so much as a flinch in his expression.

“Fine.”

Fuck. This is really happening. Walking back to my dresser, I flip on my bluetooth speaker and wait for it to connect to my phone. Setting to my favorite playlist, I turn it up loud enough that it will drown out my thoughts while I do this.

In my head, I’m in a private room, and this is a client. Putting on a show is what I do, no emotions involved. For twenty-five thousand, I can do this.

But as I look up, I see his eyes watching me, and he doesn’t look so drunk anymore. He looks sober and ready to devour me. I’m just another girl to him. I know that.

Turning away, I peel my shirt off, letting my long dyed-black hair cascade down my back. Bending at the hips I slide my pants down, hearing his growl at the sight of my ass.

“Come here.”

Warmth pools in my belly. As I step out of the pants, I turn toward him.

This isn't a regular lap dance. That much is obvious. This is my home, not my work, and he's not just any client. So while I would usually dance for a while by myself, I can't seem to keep myself from striding toward him.

Dancing for someone like this is all about chemistry. Without it, it's too stiff and awkward. But there is so much fire in Nash's eyes as I saunter up to him that I can feel it lick through every inch of my body. My blood boils, thrumming in my ears when I assume the position, hovering over him and placing one knee on the bed so I'm almost straddling him.

Like in the club, he keeps his hands back as I rub my chest against him, sliding up slowly. Music moves me as I grind, and for a moment, it feels right. I can't shut my brain off from the warning signs that keep blaring, but I'm able to at least drown them out long enough to do the job that will earn me six months' worth of tips.

But then when I pull his face to my breasts, just like I would in the club, everything changes. It's like something snaps in him. He lets out a hearty growl as his hands take hold of my hips and pull me down so I'm lying on top of him. Without his elbows holding him up, we're horizontal on the bed, and I try to push myself back.

“Nash,” I cry before his mouth latches onto the flesh of my breast, his teeth gnashing at my skin and sending bolts of heat to my core. He only squeezes me tighter, rolling my body until he's above me, dwarfing my frame on the bed.

“Open up for me,” he whispers into my neck. His knee is pressed between my legs, and for a moment, I consider fighting him. But my mind knows it's futile. My body is just waiting for my brain to get on board.

“It was just supposed to be a dance,” I argue. His weight on my body is such a welcome sensation that I realize I don’t actually want him to move off of me.

“Open up,” he repeats, this time lower and harsher in a way that makes my toes curl. Finally, my knees fall open and he grinds his hips against me, forcing his rock hard erection against my clit with so much force it hurts.

When his lips reach mine, I crumble. My fight dissolves. Having his tongue in my mouth makes everything so much more intimate and collides two images of Nash into one—my almost brother-in-law who once ignored me, and this wild, broken man who feels as if he’s crawling into my body for a sense of comfort.

And my body welcomes it.

Touching his face, I run my fingers through his hair as he starts to fumble with the zipper of his pants. Everything happens so fast, we move in a fury. Suddenly I feel his bare cock, against my core, pushing my panties aside.

I barely get my next breath out before he’s inside me. I let out a gasp, overwhelmed with the force of his thrust and how good it feels to be filled again.

But I didn’t want it like this. He’s still clothed, while I’m almost fully naked beneath him. I’m so eager to enjoy it, but he’s stopped looking me in the eye, and he fucks me with his face buried in my neck. Not to mention, he didn’t even bother with a condom. I’m on the pill, but with what I’ve seen in his behavior lately, I have no guarantee that he’s clean.

In a quick motion, he pulls out and flips me around until I’m on my hands and knees. Then he’s back inside me, and I hate the way my body purrs in response. I let out a moan, gripping the sheets between my fingers and silencing every thought in my brain.

Even over the music, I can hear his grunts and the sound of our bodies pounding together. Why am I getting off on this? The way he’s fucking me is something carnal. No foreplay, no

connection, but I'm close, so close. The buzz of pleasure steals my breath as my climax comes crashing through me.

Nash thrusts harder, and I know he's close too.

He grunts as he slams one last time, holding my body tight and spilling himself inside me. We stay that way for a moment, still fused and panting. It all feels so raw, the intimacy gone. My dreams of sleeping with Nash Wilde suddenly seem so trivial now. He's still in his black slacks and navy blue button-up shirt with the zipper open and his erection hanging out. He couldn't even get fully undressed. This was never about me. I was an easy fuck and I didn't put up much of a fight.

I don't know if this means I want my twenty-five-grand or not.

Quickly, he zips himself up, and I move to face him.

"You couldn't even bother with a condom? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He groans. "You're on the pill, right?"

"Of course, but do you have any idea how fucked up that is? This isn't like you."

I try to stomp away to the bathroom, but he latches an arm around my waist and pulls me back to his lap.

"I'm clean," he mutters against my neck. I huff, pulling away. My anger is growing with each passing second, and if I don't get away from him, I know he'll see me cry, and I'm not ready for that.

"Bullshit," I snap, shoving away again. I grab my clothes off the floor and pull them on. Just as I'm about to tell him to leave, he stands up and walks to the door.

"I'm sorry, Zara," he mutters, and I barely got a word out before he's gone.

Just like that, I'm alone. Before my emotions take over, I rush to the bathroom. Once I have to face myself in the mirror, I don't stare too long at the girl in the reflection.

There is no recognition anymore. Shortly after Emma died, I bought a box of store-brand black dye and I erased her from my appearance. Because this wasted girl in the mirror doesn't deserve to look like my sister.



IT'S BEEN two weeks since Nash Wilde came in like a storm. I haven't heard from him since, except for the twenty-five thousand dollar deposit in my bank account the next day. I should be more excited about that, but the whole thing left me feeling used. I knew I was only a pit stop on his little road trip through town. And yet, it still took me days to mentally accept it even fucking happened.

I slept with Nash.

No, I was fucked by Nash.

Now it feels like a dream. Our picture at the club made its rounds on social media just like I knew it would, but I went mostly unnamed. A few people speculated about my identity, but not one person figured out I was his dead brother's girlfriend's twin. Preston didn't live in the limelight the way Nash does. When they died, it was a blip on the radar.

The club is empty for a Thursday night. Still, I find myself searching the faces for a familiar one. He came in so abruptly I expected him to be around every corner now.

“You have a request,” one of the girls says to me as I pass her on the floor. “In number four.”

I don't bother asking who it is, expecting one of my regulars. I sulk quietly over to the last room on the right, quickly fixing my hair and adjusting my corset before I walk in. There's a dark figure standing by the window. He's alone, staring out toward the city lights nestled around the mountain in the horizon. I don't recognize him by his figure alone, so I cross the room slowly, letting the click-click of my heels against the floor alert him of my presence. He doesn't turn around.

The music is softer in here than on the floor so it allows for a little more conversation before the dance. As I approach him, I run my hand along the back of his suit. The material is thick and has the hefty feel of luxury.

“Sorry I'm late,” I say in a low, husky tone as I come around to see his face.

My heart plummets to the floor as my eyes adjust to the dim light.

Alistair Wilde.

Alistair-fucking-Wilde is standing in my club, waiting for a private lap dance. My mind feels like a broken record that can only utter one word over and over again. No, no, no, no.

“Hello, Zara,” he says quietly with that deep tone and those fierce eyes that always look so cool and confident.

As one of the richest men in America, he's intimidated me from the moment I first laid eyes on him. Now, he's standing in my club, and I have nothing on except for a corset with my breasts spilling out the top and a pair of see-through panties. This isn't fucking happening.

Unlike his son, he's not staring at my body. Aside from a quick glance to my face, he keeps his eyes on the window. Is he here for a dance? Or did Nash tell him how easy it was to get between my legs so now he's here to get a piece for himself?

I'm swept away with this feeling of being in trouble even though I've never done anything wrong. If he did find out about Nash and me, is he angry? He's probably here to buy my silence so I don't tell anyone what a hot mess his son has turned into.

"Hello," I reply, trying to look as confident as I can, keeping my hand on my hip and my tits pressed upward. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to stay in character, but the way he greeted me makes me think he's here to talk to me, not get a lap dance.

He raises a glass full of amber liquid to his lips. Silently I wait for his next words. When he finally looks my way, he lets out a sigh and sets down his drink on the table. Then, he quickly shrugs out of his jacket and drapes it over my shoulders, keeping his gaze over my head. My eyes dance over to the cameras in the corners. I should be dancing. I could get in trouble for this, and after the incident with Nash, I'm already on my boss's bad side.

"Don't worry. I spoke to your manager."

"Is this about Nash?" I ask. I'm starting to feel restless and ready to get him out of here.

This time when he turns toward me, he looks me in the eye. For a moment, I'm struck speechless. I'm back at the house, standing by the pool, watching one of the most powerful men I've ever met crumble like ash.

"Yes, it is." Then, he turns and walks to the low velvet couch and sits down, knees wide, putting his arm along the back. In the low light, I can only see his eyes and the silhouette of his features. Nash didn't inherit much from his father except for his heavy brow and harsh, cold expression. They don't look much alike, but they are both attractive in their own ways. What I wouldn't give to have clients like Alistair Wilde all the time. Rich *and* handsome.

He gestures to the couch on the other side of the platform with the pole in the middle. Obediently, I walk over and have a seat, still holding his jacket over my shoulders.

“I know Nash came to see you.”

I assume he knows this from social media, but I still feel the scorch under my skin when I think about Nash in my apartment, pulling my panties aside and owning my body so roughly. I avert my gaze.

“I’m sorry for the trouble he caused,” he says before taking another drink. Did he just apologize to me? The Wildes don’t apologize, and now I see the slightest shift in his behavior, how he’s a little different now. His shoulders hang a bit lower, and there are heavy bags under his eyes. When I saw him at the funeral he looked so unfeeling and cold, but now I can tell the pain has been literally spoiling him from the inside.

That stare of his is intense, and it’s settled on me. I feel like a child in front of him, constantly glancing away because I don’t have the nerve to stare at someone the way he’s looking at me.

“It’s fine,” I say instead of telling him how pissed I was at Nash for almost getting me fired and so clearly using me. It’s not Alistair’s apology I want. But then again...what the fuck is an apology worth? Nothing.

But I understand what this is now. He’s making a proper apology, so I don’t cause any trouble. It seems a little late for that, but I shrug it off anyway. The next few moments pass in silence, and there are so many questions floating around my mind, but I don’t have the nerve to ask them.

After Emma died and we laid her in the ground at a funeral far more extravagant than I could have afforded, I assumed I would never hear from the Wilde family again. There was nothing tying us together anymore.

He takes another drink, still watching me. He dwarfs that tiny couch, and I find myself squeezing my thighs together under his gaze. I never bothered lusting after Alistair before. He’s miles out of my league, but fuck, he’s still nice to look at.

“Nash seems to like you.” His eyes narrow a bit as he says it and I feel like he’s scrutinizing me, wondering what on earth his son would see in me. In my chest, my heart is knocking

against my ribcage, sending bolts of heat to my face, and it's filling my head with fog.

Nash likes me? As what...a pet? A quick fuck? Someone willing to shake her ass in his face for money?

"I'll cut to the chase, Zara."

Jesus, fuck. Please do.

"Nash is in trouble. He's throwing his future away, and he's stopped working altogether. He won't listen to me, and I don't know what to do to help him. If he doesn't get his life together, I'll have to cut him out of the business."

My eyes widen. This feels far beyond me, but saying Nash hasn't handled Preston's death well is an understatement. He's a completely different person. But cutting him out of the business? Nash has always been the one to follow in his dad's footsteps. Preston was the wildcard.

"I was hoping he would meet a girl who he might settle down with. So far, none of them stick around. They don't have the constitution to handle Nash in all of his moods. I believe you can."

"Me?" The question slips through my lips, but the truth is that my brain is falling behind in this conversation. Talking about me and Nash together in terms of settling down is absolutely insane.

"Yes, you."

"But Nash and I have barely seen each other in the last two years. He showed up out of the blue two weeks ago, drunk off his ass, and he caught me in a weak moment. We had sex, but we're not in a relationship."

I catch the way his jaw clenches. "I realize that."

"So, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying I'd like you to pursue a relationship with my son."

I laugh. A real laugh, and it starts small. A quick chuckle that bursts out of my chest at the very idea, but then I can't

stop. Delirium has set in. He responds with a harsh glare and another sip of his drink.

“I’m being serious. Of course, I can offer you compensation.”

My laughter stops. “What?”

“You will come stay with us on Del Rey.”

I am frozen at the mention of that name. The sprawling private island belonging to the Wilde family has been the setting of my nightmares in the past two years. It’s the last place I saw my sister alive and where I learned of her death. And he’s asking me to come stay with them there at that house so I can try to be Nash’s girlfriend.

There are a million questions floating around in my mind, so I try to settle on the one that’s been nagging me since I saw Alistair.

“Does he know you’re here right now?”

“No.”

Then I opt for a statement instead of a question—an obvious statement.

“This is insane.”

“I’ll be frank with you, Zara. I’m desperate, and you’re my last resort.” The deep timbre in his voice sends chills down my spine. I have never in my life heard Alistair Wilde asking anyone for anything. He’s the type of man who commands and people listen.

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“My son doesn’t talk to me,” he says, shifting in his seat.

I want to ask why, but it seems too personal.

“What if he doesn’t want me?”

“It’s worth a shot.” Oh yes, like throwing darts at a bullseye. The only thing at stake is my dignity.

Still...I’m considering this. I don’t know why I am. It’s insane. Moving to Del Rey to try and date Nash in order to

straighten him out. It's exactly the type of thing a guy like Alistair Wilde would do, something that regular people see as insane. For people like us, you can't hire love or happiness, but for people like them, that's exactly what you do.

"Think about it." Suddenly he's standing, downing the rest of his glass, but I have too many questions to let him leave.

"Wait," I say following him to the door.

He turns toward me, looking down at a glowing message on his watch before glancing back up at me. His eyes land briefly on my breasts before quickly darting away.

I should ask him everything right now, like how we will tell Nash about this without it being suspicious or how long he wants me to pretend to be his son's girlfriend or if I'm expected to have sex with Nash and last but certainly not least—how much is that compensation he mentioned.

"I know you have questions," he says as if he can read my mind. "Give it some thought. My card is in my jacket pocket. Call me tomorrow morning, and I'll answer all of them."

I didn't even realize I was still wearing his jacket until he said that. Sliding my hand into the silk pocket, I feel the card there.

By the time I look up, he's standing by the back door, ready to leave without anyone seeing him. Before he goes, he turns back toward me, and with his eyes locked on mine, he adds, "I hope I can count on your discretion, Zara."

Silently, I nod. And then he's gone.



I'M NOT one for TV, but this *Witcher* is hot as hell, and it's my day off.

Henry Cavill's tight buns in those leather pants are about the only thing that can distract me from thinking about Alistair Wilde and his insane offer. Why can't I just spend one day doing and thinking about nothing?

Once upon a time, I hated idle days. I used to have hobbies and a life outside of work. But now my pointe shoes hang lifeless and dusty on the closet doorknob. My yoga mat hasn't been unrolled in months—although my yoga pants have never seen so much action.

And now I can't seem to get either of the Wildes out of my head. I want to decline the offer so bad. In my head, I already have, but it's only that superficial voice of reason that keeps trying to convince me to ignore my gut. My gut is telling me to take the money, and it's screaming.

When my phone buzzes on the coffee table, I simply respond with a growling, "Hmm."

What kind of psychopath calls? Send a text like a real person.

A moment later, my phone pings like it heard me. “Just ignore it,” I tell myself. Eventually, my curiosity gets the better of me. Of course, it’s my boss.

YOU NEED to come in tonight.

“FUCK THAT.” I toss my phone to the other side of the couch and try to pretend I didn’t see it. Before long, it vibrates again, this time with a prolonged vibration like it’s a phone call.

I can’t afford to lose my job. Now they’ve seen me get so much attention from two very rich guys, they seem to be watching me like a hawk.

Of course, if you took Alistair’s offer, you could afford to quit.

His jacket hangs on the back of the chair by the door, taunting me. Inside the pocket is his card, and the questions I’ve readied are scribbled on a piece of paper by the door.

I can’t actually be considering this. On top of every logical reason why this is insane, is the underlying reminder that Nash Wilde sort of scares me. That night in my apartment was downright feral, and I have a feeling it was a version of him he kept restrained. What happens if he really comes unhinged?

My stomach flutters with excitement, and I honestly hate myself for how much the idea turns me on. I want to go crazy as much as Nash, but I have a feeling that’s not exactly what his father has in mind. How can I possibly convince Nash to settle down when all I want is to let him go nuts on me?

Ignoring my still buzzing phone, I walk over to the jacket and retrieve the card. The smell of cologne makes me lean in and take a long whiff of the fabric. I don’t know why I do it, but I pull the jacket around my shoulders and let it engulf me as I walk back over to the couch. Curling up with it, I look at the card again.

Alistair Wilde.

My experience with the Wilde family was carefully cultivated, a few weekends out there with them when Emma was with Preston, including the weekend they died. I never lived there, and I certainly wasn't dating any of them. Alistair mostly kept to himself. Occasionally, he would lurk and seemed to treat Emma like she was a job applicant, asking her about our family and plans for the future. Coming from a very humble background, a dead mother and an estranged father, I was constantly playing the part of the protective sister.

I had Preston pegged for a playboy when they first started seeing each other. He was a notorious partier and seemingly had no interest in the business like his brother and dad. I never fully let my guard down with him.

During those weekends, Nash was always involved with everything we did, as if he was as protective of his brother as I was of my sister. The bond between the two was obvious from the get go, and even though Nash was younger, he seemed to treat his older brother like he had to look after him.

Now Alistair somehow expects me to help Nash. What makes him think I would be any better for him?

Still, my fingers dial his number while unread text messages from work sit in my inbox.

He answers on the second ring.

"I said to call in the morning," he says without a greeting. I'm stunned for a moment, searching for something to say, thinking I need an excuse as to why I haven't done what he ordered me to do.

I don't waste any time with apologies or excuses because there is the one question that will determine the rest. It's the question I guarantee he expects me to ask first. "How much will you pay me?"

"One million for the first three months."

"Three months?" I don't know why that's the part of the statement that sticks out.

“We’ll consider it a trial. If I deem Nash’s behavior an improvement after Christmas, we’ll discuss prolonging your residency, but until then, all of your expenses will be covered, to include the rent at your current apartment so that you don’t lose your home in case things do not work out.”

“What if things do work out? How long will you pay me to be your son’s girlfriend?” The question comes out a bit more bitter than I intended it to, and he picks up on it.

After a heavy sigh, he replies, “I will pay you for up to one year, and to be clear, I’m simply offering you a stipend to come and stay with us, hoping the company will help my son to avoid ruining his career and future. You may judge my methods, Zara, but the prospects of our family’s business is on the line, so I suggest you lose the attitude and accept this is how I get things done.”

The line falls silent, and my blood starts to boil after the first scolding I’ve properly received since I was ten. I hear white noise in the background like he’s in a car or near a helicopter.

It prompts my next demand, ignoring the way he just reprimanded me for having an attitude.

“I don’t fly.”

“Excuse me?” he asks before I hear a female voice in the distance.

“It sounds like you’re in the air, and I thought I should make it clear. I don’t fly. I refuse to get on an airplane or helicopter.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment as I pick at the hem of his jacket, biting the inside of my cheek.

“You do realize it’s an island,” he replies with a condescending tone that makes me grit my teeth.

“Yeah, and I know you have a boat. I haven’t flown in two years, and I don’t plan on starting now.”

The line grows heavy with silence like Emma and Preston’s death is a noxious gas we have to avoid breathing

every time it pops up in conversation.

“Fine,” he says, and I know it’s hard for him to accept giving in.

“What if he finds out?” I murmur.

“I don’t plan on keeping it a secret, not from Nash. He’ll know that I’m bringing you out to keep him company. There will be an NDA as well as a contract settling any disputes regarding payment and expectations.”

“What are your expectations?”

“I’m not paying you to have sex with my son, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Holy shit. This is insane. That rational part of my brain just keeps screaming, but I push it aside because my gut won’t let this one go. I want it. How could I go back to The High Diamond and motorboat some old guy’s face when I had the chance to put one million dollars in my checking account?

Before I can respond, Alistair continues. “Nash might have different expectations, but that’s strictly between the two of you. To be clear, I’m not paying you for that. It will be in the contract.”

“How exactly are you going to gauge whether or not Nash has improved?”

He clears his throat. “He’s expressed refusal to work at our company. I need you to talk him into coming back to work.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

“That’s what you need to figure out, Zara.”

“I don’t see how I can—”

“He hasn’t flown in over a year. You can start there.”

This sounds impossible.

“Something changed after that night he saw you. He seemed...almost happier.”

My head perks up, and I try to remember any version of that night with Nash where he looked remotely happy. He was

drunk, sure, but he wasn't happy. If he liked me so much, then why did he leave without saying goodbye?

Suddenly, this new piece of information changes everything. Now I want to do this job for the money *and* for the opportunity to see Nash and judge for myself how happy he is around me.

"Any more questions?" he asks. My heart picks up speed, and my mind won't stop reminding me this is crazy. I answer quickly so I can't back out.

"No. I'm ready."

I hear him take a drink, the ice clinking against the glass. "I'll send over the contract through email. How long will you need to be ready?"

I look around at my apartment and nothing really stands out to me as essential.

"Tomorrow."

"Perfect. There will be a car at your apartment at nine a.m. tomorrow to take you to the dock. Be ready."

It's silent for a moment, and I don't know if I should thank him or ask more questions, but my hands won't stop shaking. I can't believe I'm doing this.

Before I can say anything, the line goes dead, and I'm left reeling. It's all too much to process, and the sudden feeling of panic starts to set in. Just then, my phone buzzes in my lap.

Looking down, it's another message from work.

IF YOU DON'T ANSWER BACK, you're going to lose your shifts for the weekend.

MOTHERFUCKERS. I'm all too happy to oblige as I pull up the text and type my response.

"How's this for answering back, you asshole?"

FUCK OFF. I quit.



THAT FIRST SWIG of vodka on an empty stomach with a four-day straight hangover is not for the weak. It's enough to kill you if you try hard enough. Or if you're not so lucky, it at least wards off the headache demons and muddles the pain.

The sound of the P-4 Turbine overhead feels like needles in my skull. It only gets louder as it lands on the pad behind the house. So, I guess Daddy's home—and I was having such a good week too. That asshole has the nerve to fly in and out like it's nothing.

Luckily for me, the house is big enough that Alistair and I can both live here without ever interacting, and part of me thinks he flies in and out just to get my attention. Can't ignore the sound of those motherfucking helicopters.

While I am staggering through the house, I hear him come through the kitchen, and I'm smacked in the face with a moral dilemma. I could avoid confrontation and head to the kitchen in the east wing—deemed my wing anyway, or I can put a little damper in his day and give him the silent treatment I know he loves so much.

There's not talking to your dad when you never see him, and then there's living under the same roof and still refusing to utter a word to him. He tries every fucking day to get me to open up, and I take great joy in torturing him with my silence. He deserves it.

So I march my drunk ass into the kitchen and breeze right past him as he watches me. I know I smell like shit, and I hope it makes him sick.

"You might want to go shower," he says right on cue.

Without a response, I open the fridge and take out a cold beer.

"Are you hungry, Nash?" our housekeeper and cook, Astrid, asks as she enters the kitchen, draping her warm arm over my shoulder and pulling me into a hug. "I can make you some breakfast."

"It's after two in the afternoon," the old man gripes, but I answer Astrid with a smile.

"Yes, please. That sounds delicious."

I hear him sigh before he turns and marches toward the hallway that leads to his office. Before he disappears, he freezes and turns on his heel. I make the mistake of looking up at him as he stops and we make eye contact for a brief second. It feels like surrendering something I didn't mean to.

"Nash, someone is coming to stay at the house today. I suggest you shower and make yourself presentable. She'll be here in an hour."

Then, he walks away, and I'm left with the urge to ask who, but I bite my tongue instead. After a few minutes when I'm sure he's gone, I turn to our housekeeper standing by the stove.

"Do you know who it is?" I ask.

She shrugs while whipping up eggs in a glass bowl with a fork. Bacon starts to crackle on the griddle, and my stomach growls with hunger pangs.

“No one tells me anything. I was just told to prepare the guest house for someone staying until Christmas.”

“Mom?” I ask. My mother disappeared to Mykonos with her new husband when Preston and I were teenagers. We never pretended to be a normal family, but since the crash, she has taken estranged to a whole new level. I get calls once a month and a visit once a year if I’m lucky.

“No. A woman, but not your mother,” she answers like it’s nothing. My cheeks burn and for some reason I immediately think about Zara, the last woman I touched over two weeks ago. It’s weird for me to be so stuck on one girl—or any girl recently. The only reason I was in the city was to get away from my dad and meet up with some college friends with suite tickets to a football game—which I ditched before it was even over. Everyone was so fucking happy. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough, and no surprise, I ended up at The High Diamond.

One of my buddies told me about her being a stripper. Said he saw her there and had to do a double take, thinking he had seen a ghost. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.

To be honest, I never looked twice at Emma’s sister. When she hung around while they were still alive, I got annoyed by her constantly dark demeanor. All that black she wore, always in such a sour mood. She never wanted to go on the boat, or the jet-skis, or to the club. It was like she only came so she could keep an eye on her sister, like we were going to kidnap her or something.

Yeah, too bad she failed, and her sister died anyway—in our fucking helicopter with my brother in the pilot seat.

That night at her apartment fucking shook me and not because I slept with her—or because I broke an eighteen month dry spell—but because the way things went down that night was different. It was like I tapped into some deep, hidden urge, and I had to fight with how much I wanted to control her.

Clenching my jaw, I think about her tiny frame, whimpering underneath me. Tied up in my bed. Her gentle throat in my hands. Begging me to stop.

What the fuck.

I don't do that shit. I'm not that guy. But it seems since my brother flew into the side of a mountain I can't seem to get back to normal. Shit just keeps popping up, like suddenly wanting to choke out his girlfriend's twin while I'm fucking her.

Tipping back my beer, I say a silent toast to my dead brother.

Thanks, Pres.

THE HOT SHOWER stream feels better than I want it to. I'm only doing this because there's a mystery woman coming to the house, not because my dad told me to.

I'm not trying to get my hopes up here since there's always a chance it will be some chick for my dad. Once upon a time, I knew he was swimming in pussy, but I'd be surprised if he's even seen one in the last two years.

There's absolutely no reason for me to think it's Zara, although I wouldn't put it past him.

I grab my cold beer off the shower shelf and take a long pull off the bottle, the cold liquid running down my throat while the hot water scorches me from the outside. This wouldn't be a bad way to go. Getting so drunk you drown in the bathtub.

Putting the bottle back on the shelf, I soap up my hair and body and think about her again in that thong and her perfectly round ass cheeks on my lap. I should have let her dance longer instead of fucking her so fast. Why couldn't I just enjoy the moment? Her dim bedroom, that loud ass music, the smell of her perfume, and that silky soft skin against my body.

Fuck, I want to see her again. Grabbing my dick in my hand, I start to pump. Anytime it comes to life is a miracle these days, and the vision of the girl who was almost my

sister-in-law once seems to work like a charm. It's almost like the fact that I'm not attracted to her does it more than if I was.

All I have to do is think about her bent over in front of me, her bare hips in my hands, and I can feel my balls tighten. Then, I hear her call my name, not in pleasure but as a cry, and I'm done. My grunt is louder than I expected it to be, and I hope he fucking hears it.

As I shut off the water, I grab my beer and finish it off. Tossing the empty bottle in the trash can, it rattles against the others I dropped there. I stumble slightly and have to grab the shower glass to steady myself. Suddenly, I hear footsteps outside my door. A sweet voice echoes down the hallway, someone new.

Quickly, I wrap the towel around my waist and head out to see who our new guest is. Whoever it is, they must be getting a tour of the grounds. There's no other reason to be in my wing of the house.

Stepping out into the hallway, I see her turn just before she disappears around the corner. Jet black hair nearly stops my heart, and I can't help myself from running down the hall to confirm what I just saw.

She spins to face me as I reach the turn. Her emerald green eyes stop me in my tracks. I stand there wide-eyed for a moment, and she hesitates before she gathers up the nerve to speak.

"Hi, Nash," she says quietly.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I ask, and even I can hear the slur to my speech.

"Nash Wilde," Astrid says, scolding me. "That's not how we speak to our guests."

"He really convinced you to come, didn't he?" I watch as she bites her bottom lip with her perfectly white teeth, the top two with the slightest gap that I never realized could be so fucking sexy. "He thinks you're going to fix shit around here, you know that?"

I don't know why I'm giving her such a hard time. She probably came here for a free vacation, not knowing what a shit storm she was walking into. It's not her fault my dad is an asshole.

"I'm just here to get away for awhile, Nash." There's something in the way she straightens her shoulders as she says it makes me believe her. At least part of it was true, even if she's leaving out the bit about him convincing her to come.

I don't know how to respond to her, so I lift my still wet arm and tug softly on a long section of her hair that hangs over her right eye. She seems to shudder as I curl it behind her ear.

I'm not going to tell her everything yet, about what he did and why she should never fucking trust him. Chances are he'll be gone all the time anyway.

"Don't get too comfortable, Zara. This place might be beautiful, but it's a fucking prison, and everyone who lives here is miserable."

With that, I turn and head back to the bathroom. Before I shut myself in, I hear her voice carry down the hallway.

"Good," she says. "Then, I'll fit right in."



I REMEMBER my first tour of Del Rey four years ago. It's a twelve square mile island off the coast of the Carolinas, and most of it is hilly sand dunes and rocky marshes. But right along the southern edge is the house. There are five buildings, the main house, guest house, pool house, garage, and hangar a little farther away. Even though I've seen most of it, Astrid is insistent on giving me a tour. Maybe she wanted me to run into Nash again, but she probably should have known I wouldn't be able to focus on anything after we passed his hallway and he came running out dripping all over the carpet wearing only a towel.

Suddenly, I feel the pressure of what I'm here to accomplish. I have to tame Nash Wilde, and that seems like the most impossible thing I've ever been asked to do.

"The guest house is right out this door," she says as we continue down the hallway past where Nash ambushed me. It's a short breezeway to the tiny one room casita. It's the same place I stayed when I was out here before, like a one bedroom apartment with easy access to the landing strip out back. And Nash's room.

Once we enter, I'm flooded with memories. Emma and I sat on that very couch and gossiped about her crazy rich boyfriend on my first night here. I stared out of that giant picture window and watched their helicopter take off the day they never returned.

Astrid stops talking as I zone out, and I feel her arm on my shoulder a moment later.

"You okay, sweetie?"

I swallow down the pins and needles gathering in my throat. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"I'll let you rest then," she says as she crosses the space toward the door. "You have my number if you need anything. Just shoot me a text."

"Thank you," I tell her before she disappears and the door shuts behind her.

My suitcases are already open and waiting on two luggage racks in the bedroom. I guess I'll have to unpack at some point since I'll be here for three months. But right now, I'm exhausted. A moment ago, I was excited and full of energy, but grief is tiring. All I want to do now is sleep.

As I crawl into the giant, king-sized bed with its million thread count sheets, I start to feel homesick immediately. Emma's absence has never been more painful. I'm at Del Rey without her, and it feels wrong.

I don't want to cry. I just want to sleep.

In my dreams, I am falling. Careening toward the earth at full speed, waiting for the impact that never comes. Maybe my body wants me to feel what Emma felt when that helicopter crashed against the side of the mountain. Being her twin sister, my brain won't let me sleep without feeling what she felt. I was a part of her, so if she crashed against that mountain, then in some way, I did too.

IT FEELS like hours pass before my dreams finally drop me back into the bed, and I wake with a start. The room is dim, but not dark. It's probably around four or five in the afternoon.

As my mind starts to clear, and I wake fully, I feel the presence of someone else in the room. Glancing up, I nearly scream when my eyes find Nash, slumped in the chair in the corner, watching me with his hooded gaze and heavy breathing.

“Jesus, Nash. Fuck off.”

“Did I scare you?” he asks.

“Yes. How long have you been sitting there?”

He sits up, propping his elbows on his knees and glaring at me like I'm the target of his interrogation. “How much is he paying you?”

I scoff, glaring at him, but his gaze is so fierce, and it's not moving from my face.

“One million.”

He turns up his nose, scrunching his brow together in disgust. “Oh, come on. You're worth more than that.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“So what's the plan? You're going to get me to fall in love with you? Convince me to forgive my dad and go back to being his perfect, happy son?” There's a darkness in his tone that sends chills up my spine.

“Who the fuck am I to convince you to be happy? I'm just here for the money, Nash.”

It's half-true. I'd really like to make it past Christmas and get as much out of this arrangement as possible, but I'm also not going to stress over it too much. If Nash wants to drink his life away, I'm not going to stop him.

“Good,” he answers, his voice low. I watch as his eyes cascade down from my face to my legs, and it lights up every nerve in my body. It's quiet for a moment, and I start to fidget under his gaze like it's fire.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask. I’m honestly terrified of what’s lurking behind those eyes. I never saw Nash as the kind of guy with dark intentions before, but now I’m starting to wonder what the fuck I got myself into.

You’re not getting paid to sleep with him, I remind myself.

“Just thinking about the last time I saw you,” he answers.

“That was a one-time thing, Nash. You caught me at a weak moment, but it never should have happened.” The slow, eerie smile that creeps across his face makes my stomach turn. “What?” I bark.

“Nothing,” he says, composing himself. “I just think it’s a good idea if you refuse me. I kind of like it.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“That is a good question.”

The air between us is so tense, it could suffocate me, so I stand from the bed and start to move toward the door. He blocks me from my exit, his build so much bigger than mine, and I can’t even see around him as he does it.

“You know what’s funny?” he asks. I smell the alcohol on his breath and the weed on his clothes.

“What?” I ask, trying to tip-toe toward the door. He stops me with a hand around my waist and pulls me against him. I try to squirm away, but he only holds me tighter, pinching the skin of my back. With my hands against his chest, I’m no match for his strength.

I feel like clay in his hands, too easy to mold and control. He brings his lips down to my ear, but keeps his voice and normal volume as he says, “It’s ironic that you’re here to make me better when the things I want to do to you are the worst things I’ve ever wanted to do.”

I don’t feel him let me go or register as he walks out of the guest house. I’m swaying where I stand, drunk on his presence, his words echoing in my ears.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

AFTER TAKING a moment to compose myself, I head toward the main house for dinner. Rather than pass Nash's hallway and risk another run in that'll have me needing to change my panties again, I walk across the yard to the entrance from the helipad. I keep my eyes on the door instead of looking at the small helicopter parked out there.

When I enter the house, the aroma of garlic and oregano hits my nose. I can't even remember the last home-cooked meal I've eaten, and my stomach starts to rumble in excitement.

"Have a good rest?" Astrid asks as I lean against the bar, admiring the spread of food. There's a little pep in her step, and I think maybe having me around has put her in a good mood. I can't imagine there are a lot of guests here anymore. It's like I walked into a haunted house where no one here is actually alive anymore. I'm somehow supposed to bring them all back to life by myself.

I spot movement across the kitchen, which is open to the front of the house. I remember Alistair's bedroom and office being down that hallway—a section of the house that wasn't on the tour. Alistair walks out as if he's also being summoned by the siren song of marinara sauce.

Our eyes meet for a moment, this being the first time I've seen him since I arrived at the house.

"That smells delicious, Astrid," he says to the woman before walking to the fridge to retrieve a bottle of Evian. "I hope you're settling in well in the guest house."

When he looks at me, I almost feel as if I'm shrinking in his gaze. The last time I saw him, he could have fit my entire outfit in his pocket. He was also extremely rude and harsh over the phone, so to hear him being so casual is almost an offense.

"Yes, thank you." I don't quite know how forward I'm supposed to be. He's probably wondering if I've even seen

Nash yet.

“Nash gave her a good scare already,” the housekeeper tells him. Alistair’s eyes meet mine with intensity.

“What did he do?”

“Ambushed her in nothing but his towel straight out of the shower,” she answers.

“Woke me up from my nap too,” I add, playing with my hair, then realizing I don’t want to look too anxious, so I drop it.

“Hmm.” His brow curves upward, but he keeps his thoughts to himself.

“We just talked for a few minutes, that’s all.”

Alistair’s gaze shifts to the hallway where Nash’s room is. “Astrid, set the table for three tonight. I’d like to eat in the dining room.”

I watch as a smile spreads across her face. “Yes, sir.”

“Zara, go tell him he’ll be eating dinner in here tonight. I expect he might actually listen to you.”

My head snaps up to meet his gaze. I hate being bossed around, and I want to argue, but then I remember the contract I signed. I guess I’m an employee here now, and this is my first test. Get Nash to eat dinner with us. It seems like a lot for my first day, but I’m nothing if not stubbornly ambitious.

“Sure,” I reply, then I saunter toward the hallway. My jaw clenched, I realize I just signed on for three months of taking orders from one Wilde while being pushed around by the other.

Stupid, stupid, Zara.

The hallway leads to a den with floor to ceiling windows that look out over the pool and backyard. I spot my guesthouse in the distance, and a bedroom door to my right that I know is his. It’s cracked, and I peek into a large bedroom. I hear the TV playing and spot legs crossed on the bed as I press myself in.

“You should really knock next time,” he says as my eyes travel up his body from his jeans to his bare chest. He’s reclined on the bed, leaning against the headboard with one arm behind him and the other on his phone. I recognize Game of Thrones playing on the television, but Nash doesn’t seem to be paying much attention to it.

“Oh, like you did when you watched me napping?” I retort.

He smiles at me. “This is my house though.”

I simply roll my eyes at him as I enter his space. It smells like cologne with a hint of pot in here. There are no other chairs, so I shove his feet to the side and sit on his bed.

He raises an eyebrow at me as I recline on my hands, staring at him. “What did he send you in here for?”

“To get you to come eat dinner with us.” I figure honesty is going to work in my favor here. I have to make Nash believe he and I are on the same team. Us against Alistair.

Nash lets out a deep chuckle, setting his phone on the side table. “What do I get if I do it?” His eyes travel down my body with a mischievous smirk.

“Dinner.”

His smile widens, creating dimples in his cheeks I suspect haven’t seen the light of day in a long time.

“Are appetizers on the menu?” One of his legs moves to my front, essentially boxing me in, and I have to force my face from portraying the excitement settling.

“You don’t get rewarded until you behave,” I reply.

His smile vanishes, and he moves so fast I can hardly move to stop him. He wrestles me to my back, his legs straddling my body and his hands planted on either side of my head.

I shriek his name, but he doesn’t react.

“How about a kiss in exchange for one family dinner?”

“One kiss?”

I catch him staring at my lips as he answers. “For now.”

I swallow, hoping he doesn’t see how much he unravels me. “Fine.”

My heart flutters in my chest as he lowers himself to his elbows and rests his heavy body on mine. One leg shifts to rest between my thighs, and I gasp. With my lips parted, he attacks my mouth with his.

It’s a fierce kiss, his tongue invading as if he’s devouring me, tasting me from the inside. As he pulls away, his teeth capture my bottom lip, biting a little too hard. I let out a squeal, which he answers by crushing it even harder. When he lets me go, his tongue caresses the place where his teeth marked me.

Nash is not gentle. Even his soft kisses hurt. His touch burns like fire, but the more I fight him, the faster I melt.

As he starts to pull away, I suddenly become desperate for more. The curiosity is unbearable, and I have to know every angle of his kiss. Jumping to meet his lips, I fuse our mouths, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck. A heavy groan rattles his chest, and I feel it deep in my bones.

Letting his weight settle a little heavier, I feel his arousal grinding against my hips. I’m not sure what game I’m playing here, but I know it’s a dangerous one. We will never make it to dinner if we don’t stop now. Fuck, I don’t think I’ll make it to Christmas at this rate.

His lips move hungrily down my chin to my neck. “Nash,” I gasp. “We have to go to dinner.”

“Do we?” he asks, his lips trailing to my neckline and very close to the point of no return. If his lips touch my breasts, I’m done for.

“We had a deal,” I say, forcing the words out through a moan as his teeth take a small nibble on my collarbone.

Just then, I spot a figure in the doorway. I nearly scream when I realize Alistair is watching us, and I push Nash away with all of my strength.

“Dinner is ready,” his father says in a flat tone.

Nash freezes, his warm breath still on the skin of my neck.

“We’ll be right there,” I answer, shoving Nash off of me. This time he actually moves, rolling to the side as I pop up. Next time I look up toward the doorway, Alistair is gone.

Nash has a mischievous smile, and I slap him playfully on the shoulder.

“A deal’s a deal,” he says as he stands, adjusting his pants right in front of me. It’s not like I’m not used to men dealing with erections in my presence, but the way Nash does it, with his intense expression directed at me, I have to swallow down my nerves. This is going to be a very interesting three months.



alister

THERE'S A HOLLOW, gaping hole in my chest. It's always there, but it ebbs and flows like the tide. Sometimes it's dull, and sometimes, it is crippling. I've learned there are things that trigger the pain. Nash's change in behavior being one of those things. The gaping hole turns into a festering, infected wound that throbs and won't let me focus on anything else.

Zara's lips are still red and swollen as she and Nash sit down at the dinner table, but at least my son is in the same room as me. That's a start. There is a gentle tremor in her hands, and I realize I should feel bad. She is the sacrificial lamb I'm hoping will please the angry God sitting next to her.

Nash always took after me, keeping his focus on work and business. Women are distractions, the worst kind, and normally, I wouldn't be hiring one to interfere, but now I'm hoping this one will be able to pull him out of this slump.

As he scoops up a bite of steaming red pasta on his fork, I get a momentary flash of *deja vu*, remembering the gentlemanly little kid who thought I set the sun in the sky every

morning. Once upon a time, he showered me with attention. I was ready to hand him the keys to this kingdom I've built.

But now he wants to embody his dead brother, spending his life and our money partying and hating me. Like Preston, Nash has developed a ravenous appetite for self-destruction. My son is lost—but with Zara around, I already notice a new spark in his behavior. Maybe it's the challenge, or fuck, maybe it's the sex. I don't give a shit if it is, as long as it makes him want to be Nash again.

The dining room is awkwardly quiet as we eat, and every few moments I notice Zara look up at me. I know I intimidate her, and I'd like to keep it that way.

When she used to visit with Emma, the two hardly seemed identical. Even with the same blonde hair, her sister used to shine brighter. But Zara was different. She is the stronger, bolder of the two, and now that she has that black hair, it fits her even better. It's like she's growing into a fierce version of herself.

"The west side of the island has a beautiful view of the sunset. Nash can take you to see it," I say, breaking the silence.

My son doesn't respond as he continues eating like he didn't hear me. Zara glances back and forth between us. Her and I stare at each other a moment. Then, she turns to Nash and touches his arm.

"I want to see it." It's not a request or a question. She's demanding it, and I almost want to laugh. Nash does not indulge anyone. The moment he thinks you want something he will deny it. He gets that stubborn tenacity from me.

The table grows silent for a moment before he looks at me, then her. With a fake smile plastered on his face, he says, "Then we'll go see it."

I know it's to spite me, and that's fine. If Nash lives the rest of his life to spite me, then at least I can use that to my advantage. I'll get his life back on fucking track. I may never

get my son back, but this is better than losing him like I lost Preston.



NASH IS TENSE. Ever since dinner, I can't get him to relax and be the same playful version of himself that pinned me to the bed and nearly kissed the life out of me. Menacing—yet playful. We have to drive to the other side of the island, and it's a part I've never seen before. Granted, it's not a big island, but it is beautiful.

The roads are paved but not well, so we are bouncing around in his Jeep as he takes the turns too fast. I would feel nervous if I wasn't already so afraid of being alone with him so far from anyone else. What if that cruel, harsh Nash from the night at my apartment comes back? What if I want him to stop and he doesn't?

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

"You didn't have to bring me if you were going so grumpy about it."

"I'm not grumpy," he replies. His hard stare, eyebrows pinched tightly, is focused on the road, but I know there are a lot of things going on behind those eyes. I know giving in to his dad's orders was hard and right now he's probably beating

himself up for it. Sure, Alistair phrased it like a suggestion, but everyone at the table knew it wasn't.

When we pull up to a sandy dune where the road dead ends, I can see what Alistair was talking about. With the sun resting heavily on the horizon, the entire sky has turned a bright orange and pink, reflecting on the crystal clear water.

I'm not one to let Nash's grumpy mood bother me, so when he puts the car into park, I hop out and walk toward the dunes. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I sit on the top of the hill and watch as night drapes the sky with darkness. Nash joins me after a moment, relaxing on his elbows as he stares out toward the water.

"Do you ever get used to living on a private island?" I ask. It's not like Nash and I ever really had a chance to have deep conversations while I was here with Emma.

"What's to get used to? No nosey neighbors, no traffic, no noise. Just ocean and sky."

"How long have you lived out here?"

"Our whole lives," he answers like it's the most obvious answer.

"You and I had very different childhoods," I reply, picking at the blades of long grass sticking out of the sand.

"You think we're out of touch, don't you?" There's a deep crease in his forehead as he scrutinizes me.

"No, I don't think that." When I glance up at him, I see something deep in his expression. Something familiar. "Emma and I grew up in the city, but our mom died just before we graduated. It was just us then, and that house felt like an island."

I'm not quite sure why I'm telling him this. It's a stupid thing to do, really.

Nash has no interest in connecting with me. Probably just the opposite, and the more I let down my guard with him, the more I'm setting myself up to be hurt by him. But I can't help

it. Fuck, maybe it's because it's been months since I actually spoke to someone from the heart about anything at all.

We break our gaze and turn toward the water, sitting in silence for a few minutes before he finally asks, "So how the hell did you end up at a strip club?"

He's judging me, and I hate it. I refuse to feel like less than because I make my money the way I do. "A job's a job, Nash."

"Hey, I'm not judging."

"Yes, you are."

"It was just surprising is all. I didn't ever expect that for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, glaring at him.

With his squinted stare focused on the water, he takes a few moments before he answers. "I never thought you were the kind of girl who cared about money."

"Yeah, well...things change."

"I can see that." I notice his enigmatic blue eyes on me as he takes in my face and hair. Then, they drift down to my body. I know how much I've changed since I was out here last. I was more reserved then, never the center of attention. Now, I treat my body like it's something for everyone. As if I've stepped out of my own skin. Life became too heavy, and it became easier to check out and leave what's left of me for the wolves.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, and I'm afraid of the answer.

"You don't want to know."

"Well if it's something dirty, forget about it. I'm not sleeping with you again, Nash."

"Isn't that what my dad is paying you to do?" My head snaps toward him, and I fight the urge to hit him. Instead, I jump to my legs and walk away.

"You're an asshole, Nash."

I don't get far before there's a hand around my waist and I come crashing back into him. His lips are next to my ear as he pins my body against his.

"Then why are you here? Why would he send you, huh? I have plenty of friends, lots of women who would kill for your place right now."

With an elbow to his gut, I break his hold and stomp away toward the Jeep. "Fuck off."

My blood is boiling, but it's not just from rage. It's the fire that burns between us, this constant energy that feels a little too much like hate to be healthy. His words hurt, but they don't create new wounds. It's more like picking the scabs off old ones.

A moment ago we were having a civilized conversation, but that's not us. This is us, this charged back and forth, give and take. Passion laced with anger, hatred, lust.

This time when I run away, I anticipate him catching me. I crave it. So when he snatches me by the waist again and presses me face first against the hood of the car, I'm fighting him because it's the only thing that stokes the flames in my belly. I let out a cry that's laced with pain and desire.

He feels it too, and honestly I've never felt so in sync with anyone. I feared him because he wanted me to. I push him, and he pushes back. When I told him no sex it was because I wanted him to have to fight for it, and that's the most fucked up thought that has ever resided in my head.

"You think I'm interested in being friends with you, Zara? You think I would ever give him the satisfaction of letting him think his plan worked? Fuck no, but that doesn't mean we can't have our fun in the meantime."

He doesn't bother pulling my loose fitting shorts down but yanks them to the side, running his fingers against my sex roughly. I let out a hoarse gasp as he plunges his fingers in. My body won't stop moving, shifting, shaking from adrenaline as I try to both find the pleasure and escape it at the same time. I hate myself for how much I want to come right now.

“Nash,” I cry. “I meant what I said. I’m not letting you fuck me again.”

“Do you want me to stop?” he growls against my ear just as he adds another finger, hooking them at the right angle. My hips are pressed so firmly against the car, it hurts. But the pinching pain only adds to the sensation.

A throaty moan comes out of me as he rubs furious circles around my clit, and I’m practically levitating. “Don’t stop.”

“Admit it,” he says with a snarl, pressing me even harder against the hood. “Admit you’re my whore.”

“No.” Fuck, my heart beats faster, my stomach clenches, and I nearly lose my breath.

“I feel that pussy pulse in my hands. How much is Daddy paying you to be my whore, huh?”

Every second I think I’m about to take flight, he pulls away, and I know he’s doing it on purpose. This is a mind game to him, another form of torture because that’s all Nash knows how to be with people now.

“If you want to come, you have to say it, Zara. Say you’re my whore. Admit you’re just as fucked up as me. You like it when I treat you like shit as much I like being the piece of shit who does it. We’re both fucked up, Zara, so admit it and I’ll let you come all over my hand, then we can go home.”

With his hand still buried deep in my panties, two digits pumping in and out, spreading my arousal all over me, I desperately don’t want him to take his hand away. And I know what he’s saying is right. I never knew Nash was so perceptive, so in tune to everything going on around him. And right now, he has me where he wants me. For the next three months, it’s going to be like this. An unbalanced power dynamic between us where we both get off on being the pieces of shit we are.

Suddenly, I realize just how alike Nash and I are. We both lived in their shadows, and all the feelings of guilt for surviving I’ve been feeling the last two years must be the same thing Nash has been living with.

But how can I help him if this is how we get by? How will I ever deliver on getting him out of his funk if I let him continue to be the worst version of himself? Maybe he'll get it out of his system.

That's the lie I tell myself and I lean helplessly over the front of the car and give him everything he wants. "Yes, Nash. I'm your whore. Now, please—"

His fingers press with so much intensity over my clit I lose my breath. My orgasm hits me hard and fast, and he rides me through the whole thing, never easing up on the pressure or the motion until my body relaxes.

We don't move for a moment as he keeps my body pinned in place, but shame washes over me as my body returns to normal. Even being a stripper for two years never made me feel as fucked up as I feel right now.

"Don't tell me what I can and can't have anymore," he says as he pulls his wet digits out of my panties. As he walks toward the driver's side, he stares at me with a vicious scowl as he licks my arousal off his fingers, and my stomach turns.

I deserve this. Emma would have never gotten off on a relationship like this, but she was different than me—better than me. She didn't know the crippling experience of self-doubt and hatred that I do. I don't hate myself for wanting Nash to force me, own me, hurt me. Maybe I should, but I don't.

I climb in next to him, and he doesn't say a word as he starts up the Jeep. The whole time I can't stop thinking about why Alistair hired me for this. Did he know this is how it would be? Was Nash right and Alistair hired me to be his fuck doll, his whore, someone to take his sick pleasures out on?

And why does this thought hurt more than the others?



NASH HAS BARELY COME out of his room for three days straight. I lay awake every night, expecting him to crawl into my bed, prowling through my room like a predator. When I fall asleep, I dream he is already inside me—in my head, in my body—but I wake up alone.

We haven't touched since that day at the dunes. It feels like a let down after accepting what our relationship truly is to suddenly not see each other. In fact, I've hardly seen anyone all week. I help Astrid with dinner some days and enjoy long jogs around the island. Alistair texted me to let me know his driver could take me back to the mainland for anything I needed, but I haven't had the desire to go back.

Being at Del Rey feels like living in a dream. It's not real life out here, and aside from the hours of reality TV I've been bingeing, it feels like I don't exist in the real world anymore. I like it this way.

So when a boat full of Nash's friends ambush the house over the weekend, I feel ambushed too. He won't talk to me,

but he's prancing around the pool like Mr. Social, flirting with every girl who shows up.

I stepped outside for a few minutes this morning, but no one showed much interest in me, especially Nash, so I escaped, feeling betrayed and rejected. How could we share so much chemistry just three days ago, but now he acts like I mean nothing to him?

"Come outside with me." His drawling voice catches me off guard while I'm watching TV in the living room of the main house. The music is too loud in my room so this is the only place I can find solace.

It would appear drunk Nash has a little more interest in me than sober Nash.

"No thanks."

I expect him to pick a fight, but he doesn't. Looking up at him, I see his expression darken like he's offended, and I don't bother with an apology.

"Go hang out with your friends, Nash."

After a long moment of silence filled only with his heavy breathing and the Real Housewives of somewhere arguing on TV, I glance back up at him and feel the disappointment of his expression.

Then he turns away and stomps away back out to his pool house. When I return my attention to the show, I can't focus with this new sinking feeling of guilt in my chest. He wanted to hang out with me, and he probably didn't want me to refer to someone else as his friends, but Nash has already blurred the lines between us. I'm his whore, not his friend—according to him.

For a moment, I consider following him, but I'm not quite sure what to expect out of this version of Nash. It couldn't possibly be the same as the Nash I get when we're alone, and if it is, I'm not sure I want to be treated like a whore in front of other people.

The music started blaring just after noon, so when the clock strikes eight p.m., I feel unhinged. I have no doubts this

will turn into a full-blown orgy at some point, and I'm really not interested in partaking or witnessing it.

Feeling too restless to watch this mundane, meaningless show, I peel myself off the couch and start exploring the house. I wouldn't say I miss my job at the club, but I do kind of miss having something to get me out of bed each day and putting on makeup and cute clothes. For now, I spend most days in my bikini and something to cover it like a simple sundress, which is what I'm in now.

Padding silently down the hallway, I take a peek around the corner that leads to Alistair's office and bedroom. It's silent, and as far as I know he's on the mainland today. At least I assume he is. I haven't seen him, and if I don't hear his plane landing before nightfall, he normally doesn't return until the next day.

So, I decide to do something really reckless. I walk down the forbidden hallway, wanting to see the king's quarters more than ever. Without him here, it gives me the illusion of power. There's a good chance there are cameras around here, but right now, I don't care. I hope he catches me snooping around his shit.

On the left, there's a bathroom. It's huge, a lot bigger than one man needs. It's sleek, minimal with marble floors and a shower the size of my apartment with like six shower heads all aimed at different levels. Jesus...how the other half lives.

Passing the bathroom, I find a bedroom. I don't know why I enter, but I'm desperate to see where he sleeps, like I need a reminder this larger than life figure is actually human. Walking to his bed, I let my fingers roam the expensive duvet. It smells like cologne in here, and I can't help myself. I pick up a pillow and inhale his scent. It sends a spark of heat to my belly, and I bite my bottom lip. Then, I toss it back on the bed, a little out of place so he knows someone was here.

Leaving his room, I walk a little farther down the hallway. At the end, there is a huge room, which I know is his office. There's a large window that overlooks the yard where his

precious helicopters are parked. His massive desk is situated right in front of it.

There's a dim light coming from the room. I peer around the corner and stare at a wall of books. It's a massive library, and I'm struck by the sight. There is one small reading lamp on the table lit, so I tip-toe in and take a heavy inhale. God, I love the way books smell. I remember as a kid the exact smell of Emma's Babysitter Club books and how I would sneak into her side table drawer to pull one out to press my nose between the pages.

This space has that smell. I let my fingers dance across the spines as I move my way through the room. It's a lot of aviation books, some looking way older than others. When one with a deep red spine and the title *Lost Horizon* catches my eye, I pull it out and open it to the most natural spot. In the dim light, I read a passage.

IF WE HAVE NOT FOUND the heaven within, we have not found the heaven without.

I PRESS my nose to the page and inhale.

“Have you read it?”

I let out a clipped scream as the deep voice coming from the dark corner of the room behind me nearly stops my heart. Spinning on my heels, I stare at Alistair Wilde, sitting in the large leather chair next to an unlit fireplace.

“You scared the shit out of me!”

“Well, you are in my office,” he answers, and I immediately move toward the door. I notice the glass tumbler in his hand seems to be empty except for a single large round ice cube.

“Well, have you?” he asks, gesturing to the book in my hand. I stop before I reach the doorway, realizing I'm still holding it.

“Oh.” I look down at the book and shake my head. “No. I can’t remember the last book I read.”

“That’s a shame.” His voice is husky, with a bit of a texture, like rain falling against the leaves of a tree, almost so busy sounding it’s soothing. Before I can respond, he stands and walks toward me with his eyes on the shelves. Then he stops, his fingers pulling out a thick book. He’s holding it out to me as if he’s demanding I take it.

“Read this one.” I didn’t realize this job came with homework, but Alistair’s behavior is so strange right now I obediently put my hand out to grab it from him.

Taking my eyes off his face, I look down at the cover.

“*The Shadow of the Wind*? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Even if you don’t like to read, you should at least know what book you read last. And you won’t forget this one.”

“What’s it about?” I ask, flipping to the back to skim the blurb.

“Scandal. Mystery. Romance.”

“What makes you think I’ll like it?”

I catch a hint of scotch on his breath. Unlike drunk Nash who is aggressive and temperamental, so far, drunk Alistair seems almost pleasant. Less menacing.

Leaning against the shelf, he stares at me. “I don’t. Just read it and tell me what you think about the love story. I want to know how fucked up you think it is.”

A fucked up love story? He has my attention. I can’t help but smile down at the pages in my hand. “Okay, fine.”

Tucking the book under my arm, I continue to browse the shelves as Alistair pours himself another drink. I stop when I reach a shelf with three framed pictures sitting next to each other. Just as I scan through the little faces in the dim light, a glass of potent amber liquid is placed in front of me.

I love scotch. After two years of being bought drinks in every variation from vodka to Everclear so strong it could peel

the paint off the walls, I grew an appreciation for the drinks usually associated with more class and money. The men who ordered the scotch took their time. They tipped better and watched me differently. When they bought me a drink, I enjoyed it, even though it took me a whole two years to even be able to stomach the stuff.

Now the aroma makes me feel powerful again. Like I'm worth something.

"Thank you," I mumble as I take the glass and lift it to my lips. When it touches my tongue, I slowly sip it in, letting the heat coat the inside of my mouth before I swallow it down.

My chest warms, and my shoulders instantly relax.

"I did not expect you to enjoy that."

"I'm full of surprises," I answer. It feels good to just relax and speak to someone who doesn't have me on edge all the time. Relaxing around Alistair Wilde is not something I ever thought I'd be doing.

Looking back at the photos, I immediately notice the wide smile and bright eyes of a young Nash sitting in the cockpit of a helicopter, a much bigger one than I see them fly back and forth every day. The headphones dwarf his tiny body, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Next to that one is a teenage Preston, leaning against the side of a much smaller helicopter. He's not wearing the same cheesy smile as his brother but a bored-looking, stoic expression. The third picture is an action shot of all three of them on the beach, taken when the boys were still little. The two young boys are holding hands, staring at each other with wide, happy smiles as a wave hits them. Alistair is watching them, and I'm hit with a wave of sadness seeing how much young Alistair looked like the Preston I knew.

Even in the background of that photo, you can make out the aircraft barely cropped out of the picture.

"You like helicopters a lot," I say just before taking a second sip of the liquor. That was a dumb thing to say, I think.

He doesn't respond, just picks up the picture of Nash, smiling in the cockpit. I watch him as he stares at it, as if he's remembering that exact moment, pulling it out of his memory.

"Did you teach them to fly?" I ask.

We're both leaning so close to this one shelf we are almost standing toe to toe, but it doesn't feel uncomfortable. "Yes, I did. Nash learned the fastest. Landed it by himself when he was ten."

"Oh my god," I gasp, looking at the picture again. That can't be legal.

As he sets that photo down, he picks the second one up. "Preston took longer. He didn't have the same passion for it. Didn't land his until he was sixteen."

"That's still impressive." *And probably illegal*, I think to myself without adding that part out loud.

It grows quiet for a moment, and I watch the muscles of his jaw clench as he places Preston's photo back down. I'm desperate for a change of topic so the sadness I feel creeping in doesn't take over.

"You'll learn too," he says as he leans back, letting the dim light from the lamp illuminate his warm olive skin.

"Um, no," I answer, shaking my head.

"It's not up for debate," he adds, his brow pinched in curiosity.

"I told you, I don't fly."

"It's the best way to get over your fear." He says it so matter-of-factly, like I hadn't yet considered that getting over my fear of flying could be solved by learning to fly an aircraft myself.

"That's insane," I laugh. My smile comes easy, and I don't know if it's the scotch or the company. I never felt this relaxed around Alistair before—in fact, I never felt relaxed *at all* around him before. *It's the liquor*, I tell myself.

"We'll start tomorrow."

I scoff. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Then his eyes cascade down my body, and I tense. In a cheap coverall and my bikini underneath, I feel foolish standing next to him. His whole outfit probably cost more than my car. But it’s not my clothes making me uncomfortable. It’s the way he’s looking at me as his lips part and the lids of his eyes hang heavy. I know that look. I’ve seen it every day for the last two years in the men I dance for, who drink in my body like they’re just playing all the things they want to do to me in their heads.

“No,” he says before clearing his throat and looking up at my face. “Tomorrow we go to the mainland and buy you some suitable clothes.”

“What’s wrong with my—” When I glance up from my outfit to see the tight-lipped expression on his face, I quiet. He’s right. Most of my stuff is from the clearance rack at Target. Plus if he wants to shell out the cash for my new wardrobe, why would I argue?

“We’ll even take the boat,” he says with an eye roll as he moves away and takes a seat back in his chair. I’m not quite ready to go back to the living room or my guest house where I know I can still hear the music from the party. So, I plop down in the oversized leather chair opposite him. We both sip on our drinks in silence for a moment.

“Why aren’t you out there with Nash?” he finally asks, the question I was expecting.

I’m not quite sure how to answer it. Honestly? How can I tell him his son gets off on being borderline abusive—and oh yeah, so do I. But we are under no circumstance friends. I don’t want to hang out with his stupid rich crowd.

“I’m more persuasive when we’re alone,” I answer.

It’s still too early to tell if anything will come of me being here, and I’m pretty sure the dynamic between us will only make things worse, but I get paid either way so what do I care?

“What made you decide to snoop around my bedroom?” he asks, his voice carrying across the room like honey. Something in my stomach flutters as it reaches my ears. *Oh fuck.*

He stares at me with a blank, cold expression. My lips part, ready to answer with words I haven't prepared when a louder, less honey-like voice breaks in. “What the fuck are you doing up here?”

We both turn to the figure in the doorway, Nash swaying as he holds tightly onto the door frame to keep from falling over.

“Nash,” I gasp, getting up to move to him. Why? I have no fucking clue. It's not like I'm doing anything wrong, but I still feel as if I'm being caught.

“I take it the party's over,” Alistair adds, moving toward us. As he reaches for his son, Nash jerks away from him without even looking in his direction. His drunk eyes are still boring straight into me.

“Let's go to bed,” Nash says to me. My cheeks practically ignite growing hot as I stare at him in shock. In a flash, he grabs at me, latching his arm around my waist and pulling me tight against him. He's too drunk to hold us both up, so we stumble. My shoulder slams against the door frame, sending pain through my entire body.

“Nash.” Alistair's voice booms through the room, and I feel them struggle, but Nash still has me gripped against his body. Alistair is pulling Nash away, but Nash fights back. The tension grows, and I'm just desperate to get them separated.

“It's fine, Alistair. I'm fine,” I cry, hoping it will settle them both.

Every time his father grabs him, Nash throws his elbows toward him without looking or talking to him. Even drunk, he keeps up his silent treatment.

“Let her go, Nash. You're drunk.” This time Nash throws a fist instead of an elbow, but because of his drunk stagger, he misses, and it sends him to the ground. I let out a scream as he lands at my feet. This is only going to make it worse, I know

it. I've seen enough drunk guys fighting to know they don't give up just because they're at risk of losing.

"I'll take him to bed," I say to Alistair. Finally, I look up at him and I'm surprised to see what looks like regret on his face. In the next blink, it's gone.

"Get him out of here," he mutters before turning away.

I help Nash to his feet. "Come on, let's go to bed," I whisper as I pull him out of the library. I can't bear to look back at his dad standing alone in the dark.

AS WE GET to his bedroom, my skin grows hot, and I pray I can at least get Nash to just fall asleep without a fight. I'm still holding onto my part of the deal—no sex.

I barely get through the doorway of his room before he tosses me onto the bed. My heart hammers in my chest. There is no arousal or excitement, only fear.

"Nash, you need to get some sleep."

All I keep thinking is what if he's too drunk to have restraint? What if he's too rough? Too harsh? What if I can't stop him and he really hurts me? Or worse.

The room is dark, and I crawl to the edge of the bed, my legs hanging over the edge as he pulls his shirt off and nearly falls on his ass when he tries to drag his swim trunks down his legs. This vision of him makes me sad, so I jump up to help him. Yeah, I'm that kind of idiot. Help your attacker out of his clothes.

I hold him upright while he pulls his trunks down his legs. My hand strokes the muscle of his back, and somewhere deep down, my heart breaks for him. How alone he must feel all the time. He must feel so stuck here when he can literally go anywhere in the world, but he stays. Why?

He shoves me again, and I land on the bed with a bounce.

"Take off your clothes," he growls.

My blood turns to ice. "We're not having sex, Nash."

“Just do it.”

I’m frozen, the only sound filling the room is our breaths. He’s standing before me, naked as can be, and I’m considering running out the door. I can’t do this.

I want to sleep with Nash again but not like this. The next time we sleep together, I want him to be able to look me in the eye, but is what I want worth fighting him for? If I lay down and let him have his way what does that make me? Brave or a coward?

“Nash, I’m serious.” I hear the shake in my voice.

As he moves toward me, I brace myself, ready for the impact, but he doesn’t land on top of me. Instead, his hand rests gently against my cheek, and I know he feels me flinch.

“You’re afraid of me,” he says. “I thought you liked it.”

“Not like this.” My voice sounds so small next to his.

“You think I’m a monster, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.”

Standing up, I feel the skin of his body against my fingers. The hard muscles of his chest press against me as my hands drift up to cup his cheeks. Hooking my hand around the back of his neck, I pull his lips toward mine. Our mouths meet in a feather-light kiss. His hands weave around my waist as he deepens the kiss.

While our mouths are fused, I find my mind drifting back to the moment in the library when Alistair asked me how Nash was. That concern for his son was so real I felt the heavy weight of it. This responsibility is about more than sex and money. He’s asking me to save Nash’s life, whether that means keeping him from hurting himself or keeping him from wasting away like some soulless shell of a man.

Then I think about how Alistair asked me how I was. The center of my belly warms as if it’s thawing, and it feels like the first time I’ve felt anything there in a long time. He asked about me with the same sincerity he asked about his own son.

“Take your clothes off please,” Nash whispers against my mouth as he pulls away.

“Nash,” I respond in a warning.

He lets out a frustrated sigh. “I just want you to sleep next to me, Zara. I want to hold you.” Then, in a quieter, deeper tone, he adds, “I don’t want to be alone.”

Without argument, I shimmy my sundress over my head, keeping my bikini on as I crawl into his bed. As if he realizes he’s naked for the first time, he turns away and pulls a pair of boxer briefs out of his drawer and pulls them on.

Then, he crawls in next to me. One big arm hooks around me as he pulls me flush against him. Flipping my body like I weigh nothing, he holds my back to his chest so our bodies curl around each other’s in a natural curve.

I can feel his warm breath against my head, and his thumb strokes back and forth over the skin of my stomach.

Just when his breathing starts to sound slower like he’s fallen asleep, he speaks. “Don’t let me catch you talking to him again, Zara. You’re not here for him.”

“We were just talking.”

“It’s never that simple with him. If he was nice to you it’s because he wants something from you.”

“What could he possibly want? I’m here to help you, just like he asked.”

He puts his lips even closer to my ear as the hand he held at my stomach moves down to cup my sex. “Gosh, I wonder, Zara. What else could he possibly want?” He gives it a harsh squeeze and a shake, and I have to swat his hand away. We were having such a nice moment, I’d hate to ruin it.

“You’re wrong,” I whisper but even I have a hard time making it sound true.

“Be careful with him. He’s not as blameless as you think.”

Before I can ask another question, he rests his head back on the pillow and closes his eyes. There are too many

questions swirling around in my mind to pick just one. So I quiet my mind and try to fall asleep instead. The scotch Alistair gave me helps to drift off, but as I do, I think about him watching me with that hooded glare, as if he knows something I don't.



ALISTAIR HAS HAD a grimace on his face all morning. It was pretty obvious the boat ride put him in a bad mood, but for the most part he stares down at his phone the entire time.

We're shopping in a district of town I would have never even stepped foot on before now. These are designer shops and not even outlets. I didn't even know stores like this existed, but as we walked in together, he only looked from his phone long enough to tell the pretty, young woman who greeted us that I needed a new wardrobe.

"At least one formal dress," he adds just before he takes a call and walks toward the door.

She sends me a terse smile before turning and guiding to the dressing room in the middle of the store. "Please have a seat. What can I get you to drink?"

"I'm fine," I answer, trying to look as confident as I can, sitting here in this luxury store in a pair of shorts that cost me twelve dollars.

She disappears for a few minutes and returns with an arm full of hangers. I spot dresses and shirts, skirts, and a fur-covered shawl. I wish I could say this shit wasn't for me, but I'm all out of shits to give when it comes to my pride. I will take every single piece of clothing she wants to put on me, and I won't feel bad for it for one second.

"Actually, I'll have a glass of champagne?" I say, holding my shoulders a little higher.

"Of course," she replies without a lick of sincerity. She hates me. I mean...who wouldn't? I came in with Alistair Wilde who's offering to buy me a brand new designer wardrobe. Fuck, I'd hate myself if I wasn't the one reaping all the benefits.

Just as she returns with my flute full of bubbly, I take it and glance back at Alistair. He's no longer on the phone, but he glances up from the screen long enough to let his eyes linger on me, smiling back at him.

Then I disappear into the dressing room. As soon as the curtain is closed and I'm sure I'm alone, I stare into the mirror and silently scream. This feels like someone else's life. It *is* someone else's life. This was Emma's life, and I guess I should feel bad that I'm living it now, but I don't. I don't feel anything.

I go through the various outfits. At first, I tell the shop girl they're all perfect, but as the second glass of champagne hits, I start feeling bold. Sending back pants that are too plain and dresses that are too colorful. I demand more black, more class, higher quality.

Coming out in a sundress that hits the floor, I come face to face with Alistair who is sitting on the plush sofa, waiting for me.

"Let's wrap this up. I have a meeting this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," I say with a fake scowl. I'm feeling a little buzzed from the free champagne, but he just looks annoyed. As I turn and walk back into the dressing room, I see his reflection in the mirror and catch the way his eyes linger on

my backside. I shut the curtain and grab the black sequin formal gown on the hook. I saved it for last, but I've been staring at it since I first came in. As I slip it on, I stare at myself in the mirror, and I search for someone familiar.

The dress fits perfectly. The neckline is a little higher than I usually wear, but the back is a see-through fabric with an embroidered design all the way down to my ass. It's so low I can't even zip it up. With it half-zipped, I step out and expect to find the eager shop girl ready to help me, but she's at the front with another shopper. So I level my stare on Alistair who is currently staring at me like he has no idea who I am.

"Help me zip it up," I tell him. I might be toying with him a little, but I don't care. It's shameless, but using my body for power is what I do, and I don't feel bad about it.

"It looks fine," he says averting his eyes and staring back down at his phone. His hips shift slightly on the couch.

"I need to make sure the top fits at my shoulders. Just get up and zip it."

I watch as he clenches his jaw and stands, pocketing his phone. Turning my back to him, I hold my hair back, waiting for him to zip. In the mirror, I notice the slightest hesitation in his hands, his gaze fixed on my ass, the top of my panties showing where the dress dips so low. Then, he pulls the zipper up so slow, I can hardly breathe. In a slight sway, I press my ass back until I'm brushing his body, and he doesn't move away.

As I turn my head, I watch his face and feel his breath on my neck. Then, while he's still standing so close, I rotate until I'm facing him. His eyes are dilated and hooded, lust filled as his gaze meets mine.

He almost looks like he wants me, and I have to force myself to be still as I ask him, "So, what do you think?"

The next thing I know he's pushing me backward until I'm in the dressing room. Turning, he snaps the curtain closed and faces me with a wild look in his eye. My heart is pounding rapidly, but my brain can't seem to catch up with what is

happening. I don't know if he's about to attack me, kiss me, or more. And I don't know how I will react to any of it.

He presses me against the mirror and puts his face close to mine.

“Listen to me, princess. I didn't hire you to try and seduce me, so stop this shit right now.”

“I'm not—” I argue, but he places a hand over my mouth to quiet me.

“You think I don't see what you're trying to do. I saw you working at your club, using this body of yours to weasel men out of their money, but this shit won't happen here, do you understand? I know what women like you want, and you're nothing but a distraction. The only reason you're here is to distract Nash from whatever the fuck is going on in his head. So, let's be perfectly clear, Zara. You don't get more money by trying to fuck me. Just do your fucking job and get my son's head out of his ass.”

As he pulls away, I finally take a breath and bite down my urge to cry. With shaking hands I pull down the zipper of my dress, and I let his words replay in my head as I do.

A moment ago, I felt like royalty in this dress, and now I feel like a whore—Nash's whore.

But one thing is for sure. I will not let that asshole see me cry. So I pull on my cheap clothes, and I fix my hair. Rushing out of the dressing room, I violently bump against Alistair's shoulder as I pass. Leaving him to pay the bill, I stomp out the door and wait on the street.

I may not be rich or classy, but I'm sure as fuck no princess. I'll do my goddamn job, and I'll get my money, and I will never see the Wildes again.



Two years before the crash

“ARE YOU SURE?” Nash asks as I sit on the shore, hugging my knees to my chest.

“Those things are dangerous. I’m just fine sitting here, thank you.” I catch a subtle roll to his eyes before he takes off on his jet-ski splashing water toward me as he crosses the bay. Like specks of light across the water, I watch as he and Preston and Alistair all cross paths, bouncing in the wakes and sending giant waves at each other.

I’ve heard too many horror stories about those things, people losing control, hitting other people or skimming over each other. Those blades are enough to dismember someone. No thank you.

Plus, Emma’s boyfriend’s brother is a little too good looking to make me feel comfortable. I know any other girl would jump on the opportunity to ride on Nash Wilde’s jet ski, but I’m not ready to let my guard down yet. This is still all too insane to me.

I hear footsteps in the sand approaching from behind me. Emma plops down in the sand, and immediately the tension between us fills the air. I broke the news to her yesterday about passing up my ballet internship. She's not just mad at me, she's disappointed, frustrated, helpless. Emma hates being helpless.

My sister, the control freak, wants to dictate my entire life. She expects everything will be as perfect as hers. Be a shining college student, get a perfect boyfriend, follow your dreams, and succeed at all of them. Emma doesn't know what failure feels like. She has no clue what the pressure of achieving perfection feels like for people like me.

"I'll just say one thing and then we can completely move on," she says, holding up her hands. "You're twice as hard on yourself than you are on me. I would never treat you the way you treat you, Zara. If I had an opportunity like you have, you would never take that away from me. So why take it away from yourself?"

"Fair point."

"Watching someone you love throw away their talents is the most frustrating thing I've ever experienced." She's picking at the sand sadly, and it really does hurt to see her heartbreak.

"I'm sorry, Em. I really am, but I'm not as sad about it as you are. I'm at the peak. It's not like I can make a career as a dancer, so I'd rather put my focus on something more practical."

"Like what?" she asks.

"Like snagging me a rich boyfriend with a private island."

She bursts out in giggles, and I clutch her arm as we both try to stifle our screams so as to not alert the men on their jet-skis that we are just common folk and total imposters who do not belong here. When my sister told me she was dating a Wilde, I didn't believe her. But then we boarded a tiny helicopter at a tiny airway for a quick weekend getaway, and I

was sure we were in the plot of the movie *Taken* or something because this kind of stuff doesn't happen to real people.

Except for, of course, my perfect sister—who just happened to charm Preston Wilde after her company was contracted to code Wilde Aviation's big app launch.

"You know..." she teases as she leans back and stares out at the water. "His brother is single."

I simply nod, trying not to let her see how much Nash has gotten under my skin already. Those blue eyes and that dark hair that hangs down to his shoulders caught my attention the moment we arrived. I spotted something ominous about Nash right away, but he seems so guarded.

Then she adds, "So's his dad."

I send her a scowl, and she laughs. "What? Come on, he's hot."

"Yeah, he's also in his forties," I say with a laugh.

"He's forty-six," she answers with pride. "Don't turn your nose up, Zara. You've dated enough stupid boys in your life. What you need is a man."

I can only shake my head. "Would that make me your mother-in-law?"

"If Preston and I had kids, you'd be their grandma and their aunt."

We break out in laughter, high on the excitement of this whole ridiculous scenario. Still, I find myself watching them out there, with their perfect bodies, tanned skin, and glistening white smiles. I'm not made for men like that. How could anyone live up to such perfection?

Just then, Alistair rides toward us and stops before he hits the shore. "You girls ready for a ride?"

"No, thank you," I call, but the words are barely out of my mouth before my sister hops up.

"I will!" In one quick motion, she pulls her cover off and drops it onto the sand next to me. Then she dashes over to

climb onto the back of Alistair's jet-ski. She looks like a natural out here, like she actually belongs.

Only in my dreams could I make a place like Del Rey my home.



“HOLD ON TIGHT,” he says as I try to reach my arms around his broad body. The life jacket only makes it harder, and my arms don’t even reach each other.

“If you kill me, Nash Wilde, I swear to God, I will haunt you forever.”

He laughs, the sound vibrating through me.

“It’ll be a fun death.”

Just then, he hits the throttle and we take off, skimming across the crystal blue water of the bay. At first, it’s nice. The wind rushes through my hair, and I feel secure on the back. The gentle waves only create a slight bounce, but as soon as we get farther out, Nash whips the jet-ski in a circle, making us fly over our own wake. I scream as my ass lifts off the seat, coming back down in a crash.

“Goddammit, Nash!” I shriek, and he only laughs harder.

He doesn’t let up, only going faster and hitting every wake he can hit. The fear doesn’t go away, but after a while, I start to relax enough to enjoy it.

“Are you ready to drive?” he asks as we come to a slower pace without stopping.

“Fuck you,” I snap.

“Come on. Get over your fears. What could you possibly hit out here?”

What is it with these men and their ideas of getting over fears? To be honest, I’ve been avoiding Alistair since he insisted I get over my fear of flying by learning to fly myself.

Plus, Nash has been in oddly good spirits since. I never really asked him to explain what he meant about his dad wanting something more from me. If Alistair was ever interested in me romantically, he sure has a fucked up way of showing it.

The way I see it at this point, I can either drive a jet-ski or go back to the house where I have to face that asshole.

“Fine,” I mutter.

“Yes!” Nash responds as he heads back to the dock where the other death machines are waiting. If this is how I go, then I guess this is how I go. Could be worse.

After he practically tosses me onto the red machine and walks me through the steps of turning it on and where the throttle is, he takes off, leaving me to handle this thing on my own. Fantastic.

I manage to get it away from the dock without incident. As I twist the handle, it takes off a lot faster than I expect, and I let out a scream. In the distance, I hear laughter. The waves make me want to barf as I sit there, so I hit the throttle again. The wind blows my hair away from my face, and I learn pretty quickly that hitting the waves isn’t as scary as I thought it would be. In fact, being in control makes me feel a little more secure. I can stop when I want, and he was right that there really isn’t anything to hit out here.

So I pull back on the throttle and let the jet-ski open up, sending me flying over the water toward the abyss of the open ocean. A vision of my life one month ago comes sailing into my mind as I ride. I was working my ass off at that club,

nearly killing myself every night for a few hundred bucks. I may have been good at it, but it was never really me. I had myself convinced it was though. Not that riding on a billionaire's jet-ski in the middle of paradise is the existential wake-up I needed, but being here has really changed the way I look at my life.

And I hate myself for comparing it to the times I was here with Emma. For the first time in my life, I don't feel like a minor character in my own story. It feels unfair to even think that, as if gaining anything from Emma's absence is like justifying her death.

Something about the noise, the speed, the wind in my face makes my emotions rise to the top, and tears fill my eyes. They fly off my face as I careen over the water.

Suddenly, there's someone riding next to me, and I turn to stare at Nash who is smiling at me. I happen to look down at the speedometer to see that we're flying at nearly sixty-five miles per hour. It feels like a hundred.

Looking back up at him, I smile, and I almost like this happy version of Nash. I'd be lying if I didn't admit, I also like the brooding, callous version too.

Without warning, he spins away from me, and I barely have a second to react before I'm hit with a wave of water so violent it nearly knocks my sunglasses off my face. After I scream his name and slow down my jet-ski, I hear him howling with laughter as he rides away.



WE BOARD the jet-skis on the shore, on the opposite side of the island. This place really does feel like its own world. I've only been here a week and already it feels like you could live your entire life here without seeing another person, and something about that sounds very inviting.

Nash tosses me an ice cold beer from the storage box on the jet ski. We plop down in the sand next to each other and open our drinks. He hasn't been aggressive at all today, and

it's been nice, but also...I almost wish he'd throw me down and cover my body with his. I keep waiting for those lips of his to devour my neck. But there's nothing.

“What were you and my dad talking about the other night?” he asks without looking at me. I was sort of hoping he had forgotten about most of that night, the fight with his dad, how afraid of him I was, and the weird warning he gave me about Alistair.

And I don't tell him about what went down in the dressing room.

“He wants me to learn how to fly.”

Nash scoffs. “Of course he does. What a prick.”

“He told me he taught you both to fly. Said you were a natural.”

“He shoved those lessons down our throats the minute we were old enough to sit up in the pilot's seat.” He gulps down the rest of his beer, and I feel the tension rising between us.

“Are you as good as he says you are?” I ask, hoping to bring the conversation safely back to him before he gets too angry.

Finally, he looks up at me, and a playful, curious smile stretches across his tanned face.

“Of course I am.”

Slowly, he moves toward me, crawling like a predator in the sand. I have to bite my lip to keep from grinning as he snakes his way over my body, stopping when his lips reach my clavicle. My half-finished drink lands in the sand as I lay back, letting him kiss my neck. Heat floods my core as he nestles his body between my legs.

“You want me to take you for a flight?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“No.”

Suddenly, his fingers peel back one side of my bikini revealing my bare breast and his lips cover the pink bud before

I know what hit me. A high-pitched moan escapes my lips as my back arches. His warm mouth on my cold, damp skin from the ocean water feels like heaven.

Just before he switches to the other side, he says, “That’s the deal with my dad, isn’t it? He wants you to get me to fly again.”

My affirmative answer comes out in more of a pleasure cry. I’m not keeping any secrets from Nash. He knows the deal, so he might as well know the terms. At least some of them. He didn’t mention talking to his dad being another of the conditions.

“So, come for a flight with me.”

“I can’t,” I gasp as he grinds his erection against me.

“That’s a pity.”

And just like that, he stands up and walks away, leaving me writhing on the sand like a cat in heat. It takes me a few moments before I can put myself back together enough to stand up and follow him.

“Wait, so if I go with you, you’ll fly again?”

“Maybe,” he mutters as he grabs another beer.

“How long has it been since you’ve flown?” I ask, trying to sound casual and not terrified.

“Two years.” He says it like it’s nothing, and I’m wondering if I’m crazy for thinking that sounds like a very dangerous situation. If he hasn’t flown, isn’t that even more of a hazard?

“It’s like riding a bike, Zara. I’m still a good pilot if that’s what you’re worried about.” He climbs back on his jet ski in the water.

“I don’t fly anymore.” I say it like it’s some unchangeable fact. But to be honest, I’m no match for Alistair’s persuasion, and I already know if he tries to get me in the air, he’ll probably succeed.

Nash is persuasive too, but I get a thrill out of denying him.



alister

SHE'S AVOIDING ME. I mean, I want her to avoid me, but now I feel like she's being a pouty brat about the incident at the store yesterday. It's making it hard to focus. I want to keep things on my terms, and I don't need this girl thinking she can call the shots around here. Just because she can push her little ass against me doesn't mean I'm going to break all of my rules for her.

This is why I gave up dating years ago. Sex became something to indulge in from time to time, but there hasn't been a woman worth sharing any of my money or time with. Since giving all of that up, I've been able to focus on the company and gained double the market share, proving once again that women are only trouble.

The house is silent all morning, and it's not until late afternoon that I hear them both return from wherever they were all day. Peering out through my office window, I watch them laughing together in the Jeep, and she shoves him playfully when they climb out. He responds by snatching her by the waist and pressing her up against the side of the vehicle. His movement is rapid, but she doesn't even flinch. Instead,

she almost smiles at him as he bends down and kisses her neck. Then, she shoves him away and saunters away toward the guest house. My son watches her go, and for a brief moment, he looks like the old Nash. Like there's a chink in his armor.

The rough way he pulled on her in my office the other night didn't sit right with me—not because I was worried about him or her, but because I knew that look in his eye. I know how it feels to wield control over another person.

After the two of them retreat into their separate areas of the house, I watch the guest house for movement. It's not until an hour later that Zara comes out, her hair still wet from her shower. I want to catch her before she goes back to him.

Walking out the door toward the yard, I catch her eye. Her lazy smile disappears when she sees me walking toward her. She freezes.

“Have fun today?” I ask.

Instead of cowering, she lifts her chin a little higher. “Yes, we did. He even told me he'd take me flying.”

Stopping just a few feet in front of her, I tilt my head. “Really?”

“Yep.”

I'm torn between excitement and disappointment. It's better if he takes her. I know that. Then, I can focus, and I don't have to talk to her anymore.

“When are you going?” I ask.

“I told you, I'm not flying. But he offered, so that's something.”

I let out a breath. She tries walking past me like everything is fine, but my nostrils flare as I snatch her by the arm.

She stops, staring wide-eyed at me.

“That doesn't count, Zara. He's testing you. You need to get the fuck over this fear and let him take you flying. Right now.”

As she tries to jerk her arm away, I only hold her tighter. “No way,” she snaps.

“Let’s go. We’re going now.”

A look of terror washes over her face as I walk her toward the aircraft. I feel her pulling, digging in her heels. “Alistair, I’m serious. Stop!”

I realize about halfway there that I can’t actually throw an unwilling person into the helicopter, no matter how much I want to. I’d strap her in if I could, but she’s obviously going to make this difficult.

I know her fear stems from the crash, so I need to be careful about this. Nash’s act of avoiding flight isn’t about fear, it’s about rebellion. He’s not flying because he hates me now. I can’t get him to get over that, but I can get her to get over this fear. And she can get Nash to fly her.

“All right, listen to me,” I snap, letting her arm go. “You’re going to get over this fear, but you can do it slowly. If Nash is willing to fly for you, then we need to get you in the aircraft, understand?”

She rubs at her arm, chewing on her lip and staring daggers at me. “Fine.”

“Don’t move,” I tell her as I disappear into the house. I have a plan that will hopefully work to relax her nerves and get her to calm down in the helicopter. I walk over to the wine rack in the dining room, pulling out a bottle of Napa red. After pocketing the corkscrew, I grab two glasses and head back out to where the green N-4 is parked on the far side.

“What’s that for?” she asks, following after me.

“This is to calm your ass down,” I answer as I hand her the bottle and pull open the door. This is the most spacious model I have on the island, so it’s perfect for what I have planned.

She doesn’t budge and stares at me like a deer in headlights.

“Relax. We’re not leaving the ground tonight. This is just to get you to relax in the cockpit.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” Her confidence seems to be waning as she tries to remain brave enough to fight me.

“You don’t. Now get in.”

Her eyes scan my face, and I see her hesitation. Then, she glances around as if she’s looking for someone or afraid of being caught. Finally, her shoulders relax, and she lets out a heavy sigh.

“Do I have a choice?” she asks.

“No.”

It’s starting to get late, and the sun hangs low in the sky. I haven’t eaten anything today, so this wine is likely to go straight to my bloodstream.

She nods but glares back at the inside of the aircraft. I remember vividly the first day I flew her home. It was the first weekend Preston brought his new girlfriend to Del Rey, and I agreed to let Emma bring her sister. I understood this environment could be intimidating when you’re alone.

She hardly spoke a word to me all that weekend, but she caught my eye. Unlike her sister, Zara seemed to have a wiseness in her eyes, as if she was always watching and picking up on everything. I caught myself staring at her a second too long the entire three days she was with us.

When she climbed into the helicopter for the ride home, I enjoyed her silence on the comms. I noticed the way she watched everything I did, and instead of looking nervous or scared, Zara smiled.

It was like she was a different person without her sister around.

“Let’s make a deal,” I say, watching her breathing start to pick up and the panic set in. “We’re just going to sit in the cockpit today. I don’t have to teach you anything. I didn’t bring the keys so we’re not even going to start it. Just let yourself get comfortable in the seat.”

After a few moments of silence, she nods her head. “Okay.”

She reaches out a hand as I help her in. There are four seats in this model, two in the front, two in the back. After she scoots over to the right seat, I climb in next to her. Reaching across her, I pull the lever to open the opposite door, creating a pleasant cross breeze.

Our eyes meet while I'm leaning over her, and I practically hear the erratic sound of her breath. Sitting back in my seat, I pull out the wine bottle from the floor and begin the work of uncorking it.

"I hope you like dry wine."

"You already know I love scotch. Of course, I like dry wine." Her answer comes out clipped and practically muttered, but it makes me laugh all the same. With a quick pop, the wine is open, and I pour us both a glass.

She looks at me as if she's waiting for permission to drink it.

I may like expensive things and have good taste, but I'm certainly not the kind of guy who fucking swirls and samples wine. With a wink, I toss back the whole glass and watch as a moment later she does the same thing.

"This should help," she says. As the glass comes down from her lips, she stares at it in astonishment. "Holy shit, this is amazing."

I pour her another glass of wine as she chews her lip. I desperately want her to say what's on her mind.

"What were you two fighting about when you got back?" I ask.

She lets out a heavy sigh. "Everything is a fight for control with Nash. He wants me to get over my fear of flying. He wants to make sure he's always in control, so it makes my job a little hard when I'm trying to convince him to do something. Now where have I heard this before?" she says with a smug smile on her face.

"Don't give him all of the control, Zara. Let him think he has it, but don't be afraid to fight him for it."

“And how would you know that?” she asks.

I want to tell her that apple didn't fall far from the tree, but I don't. “I just do.”

“You're a couple of stubborn assholes,” she says, and the space grows awkward and silent between us. “I'm not afraid of him,” she adds, but she won't look at me. “I had clients like that all the time at the club. The ones who didn't like letting go, and honestly, I like the challenge. The payoff was always better.”

My mind takes off, thinking about her in the club, the way she would dance for her clients, using her methods of persuasion to test their limits. This is definitely the wine kicking in because I want to hate her for that, but I don't. Instead, I want to test her boundaries myself. See how much of a challenge she really likes, the struggle, the vision of Zara being shoved against a wall, a hand around her throat, in her hair, against her ass—

Stop.

I swallow the rest of my wine, and it goes down with an air bubble that causes my throat to burn like a motherfucker. My coughing comes out violently, and suddenly she's laughing.

When I glance over at her, her cheeks are as red as her wine, and she's giggling so hard she has to cover her face with her hand.

When it finally subsides and we're left in silence, Zara picks up the bottle and refills her glass. Already she seems more relaxed with me. The shake in her hands is gone, and she's regained the color in her cheeks.

“Nash seemed happier today,” she says quietly. “But I'll be honest, Alistair. I don't know how I can repair your relationship if I don't know what happened.”

“I wish I knew.”

“He just stopped talking to you after the crash?”

I think back to that day and try to remember the last thing my son ever said to me. It's all such a blur. The accident

eclipsed everything else, and just remembering that day, the very moment my world tilted off its axis, hollows out my chest even more.

But there is a vague memory of that morning. Just after Preston and Emma took off, bound for the mainland when I remember Nash coming out of the pool. He glared at me with such anger that I was struck by it. We were always easy on each other. I didn't want to be the strict, uncaring father mine was, but seeing that expression on his face brought out my guilt. Guilt for the terrible thing I had done, although there was no way he could have known.

Zara came out of her guest house moments later, and I let it go. I couldn't face her.

Then the news came in, and nothing was ever the same again. Everyone stopped talking, so Nash giving me the silent treatment went mostly unnoticed.

I feel a hand on my arm, pulling me from my dark memories, and I turn toward Zara, almost completely forgetting the question she just asked.

“We don't have to talk about it.”

I'm so struck by her for a moment I can't speak. It's not just her beauty, those green eyes, that dark hair that cascades over her shoulders, or the soft high-pitched voice like warm honey. It's her grace in everything she does. How can she care so much about me or Nash when it was her own sister who died in that crash? I almost wish she'd hate me as much as my son does. I wish she'd spew repulsion at me for putting her sister on that flight in the first place.

But she doesn't. She touches my arm and shows me compassion, and it murders any restraint I had. Zara is off-limits. I don't need to be getting involved with anyone. I can fantasize about a world where a girl half my age, a girl like her, might be mine, but it has to stay a fantasy.

“I honestly don't know why Nash stopped talking to me, but I assume it's because I grieved his brother's death

differently than he did. Nash responded in anger, and I guess I never really responded at all.”

“Just because you didn’t show it, doesn’t mean you didn’t feel it,” she says, a slight shake to her voice.

Her hand is still on my arm, and I’m desperate for her to both leave it and take it away at the same time.

“Does he talk about me?” I ask, clearing my throat. She pulls her hand away, leaving the warmth of her touch there, a burn marked on my skin.

Her mouth twists like she’s hiding something.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I watch as she takes another gulp of her wine, and I notice the slightly slowed movement of her hands. It wasn’t my intention to get her a little buzzed for anything other than getting her comfortable in the cockpit, but now it almost seems like it will literally loosen her lips, and if it helps my son, I’m not sorry about that.

“He doesn’t like me talking to you,” she says before biting her lip, staring down at her now empty glass.

A familiar sense of shame comes flooding back. I have to remind myself there’s no way for Nash to know what happened before the crash, but just hearing her say that reminds me although I have no intention of taking her attention from him, I might be doing it anyway. I don’t blame him for hating the sight of me talking to the girl he’s with.

I need to stop this right now. Just as I’m about to tell her this, that we can’t be alone anymore, she looks at me and shatters my will again.

“But I can be stubborn too, so he’ll just have to get over it.”

With that, she turns and hops out of the helicopter, leaving me with my guilt and a false sense of hope.



MY HEAD IS in a warm haze as I walk back toward my guest house. I can't stomach the idea of dinner right now. That wine seemed to fill me up.

But there's another sense of warmth there. I don't know what it is, excitement, maybe? Alistair wanted to ease my nerves to get me to sit in a helicopter and I did it. But he's fucking nuts if he thinks I'm going to leave the ground with him.

I know Nash is going to be pissed at me for talking to his dad, but that only rouses more anticipation. Even if he was asleep in his room, I'm sure he heard us talking, me laughing. Fuck, maybe I did it on purpose. Maybe I wanted him to hear it, because I knew I'd be punished for it.

When I walk through the door of the guest house, I feel his presence, looming in the darkness. He's sitting on the bed, his elbows resting on his knees.

Why am I not afraid? What is different about this encounter than before? He's not drunk now. But he's angry,

livid. I can feel it radiating off of him as I stand there and watch him. Waiting for him to pounce.

I am ready to fight. Squeezing my thighs together, my skin tingles with arousal.

“I thought I told you not to let me catch you talking to him again.” His voice is menacing, and it sends a chill down my spine.

“He practically dragged me into that helicopter. He wants me to get over my fear.”

I know my mistake the moment his head snaps up, staring at me with anger. “I told you I wanted to take you flying. You won’t fly with me, but you’ll fly with him?”

“We didn’t fly. We just sat in the seats,” I snap back at him with attitude.

He stands and stalks toward me so fast, I flinch. With a snarl, he backs me against the wall. “You’re mine, Zara. He bought you for me.”

My body screams at me as I melt in his arms. His warm breath in my face sends a flash of fear, but it awakens something in me.

“I don’t belong to either of you,” I argue.

A hand drifts up to my throat, like he’s testing how I’ll react. I don’t stop him. “What are you doing to me?” he breathes. “Why do I feel like I’m losing control every time I’m around you? Because you want me to, don’t you?”

With our eyes on each other, I clench my jaw and ready myself for a fight. A second later, there’s a tic in his eye.

“What’s wrong, Nash? No one’s ever told you no before?”

I must be drunk. *Stupid, stupid, Zara.*

His nose presses against my cheek as goosebumps erupt all over my body. Deep down, I know this is a cruel game we’re playing, but I trust him. I trust him to push me to the edge without going too far. We’re both so desperate to feel something we’re stuck in this sick back and forth.

His hands wrap around my thighs and he hoists me up, wrapping my legs around his waist and carrying me to the bed. As he throws me violently against the mattress, I have to bite my lip to keep from grinning at him.

“All bets are off now, Zara.”

“Fuck you,” I say with smile.

There’s a tremor in my bones as I watch him tear off his shirt. His dark hair hangs over his eyes like a cloak. Standing in front of me in just his gray sweatpants, the outline of his growing erection and the muscles of his chest cascaded in shadows from the moonlight, I nearly pant at the sight.

“Come take my pants off,” he commands.

Moving onto all fours, I keep our eyes locked as I crawl toward him, and as soon as I’m within reach, he snatches up a handful of my hair. My eyes fill with tears from the sting, but I don’t tell him to let go. Instead, I run my fingers along his waistline and watch as his skin reacts with goosebumps.

“Take them off,” he grunts through his teeth.

Pulling the elastic down, his hardness springs free. I know what’s coming, so I look up at him, waiting for his next move. With his hand hard against my scalp, he moves my mouth toward his cock.

“Suck it, Zara.”

Why the fuck does that make my toes curl? Why does being so controlled make me want to do everything I can to please him? I can feel the moisture pooling in my panties.

Emma would never like this, I tell myself because the constant reminder that my sister was better than me lives in every moment of my life.

Well, if I’m so fucked up, I might as well enjoy it. Nash jerks my head forward and I wrap my lips around him, letting out a sweet moan. He lets out a grunt as my tongue circles his head. Thrusting forward, I gag as he hits the back of my mouth.

Loosening his grip, he lets me pull back enough to work his length with my mouth. But then he pumps into my mouth again, saliva dripping down my chin and the taste of his pre-cum coating my tongue.

He doesn't let up, fucking my mouth and barely letting me breathe, and my arousal only grows. His grip tightens on my head, and I clench the bedsheets with my nails. I open my eyes to stare up at him, a fierce look of control on his face, but I see he's slipping. He's about to crack from the pressure, and I wish he'd let go. His expression contorts into pain when I feel him shoot down the back of my throat. He pulls out of my mouth in a rush, and I have the urge to spit, but he clamps a hand over my mouth.

“Swallow it,” he grunts breathlessly, and I obey.

Suddenly, I'm on my back, and his body is covering mine. His hands are pulling my clothes off and my mind is still reeling as his hands reach my soaked panties, pulling them aside roughly.

“Who do you belong to, Zara?”

His fingers zero in roughly on my clit, and my back lifts off the bed. Every nerve in my body is alive. I know this game we're playing is cruel, playing to Nash's insecurities while he plays to mine, but we're both so high on it that we can't stop.

I don't answer him, clenching my thighs together while he teases me with an orgasm that he won't let me have.

“Whose cum is in your belly right now, Zara? It's not his.”

Another high-pitched moan escapes my lips, and he grows even more frustrated. A moment later he tears off my underwear. His mouth lands first on my stomach in a half-kiss, half-bite, and I writhe underneath him, pushing his head downward, waiting for his mouth to meet where I want him.

“Answer me, Zara. Tell me who you belong to.”

His mouth circles my pussy, kissing my inner thigh before finally covering my clit and sucking on it so intensely I let out a scream. His teeth take a bite, and I twist up in a mix of pleasure and pain.

“I’m not letting you come until you answer me.”

Keeping his mouth on my clit, two fingers pump in and out, and I am consumed by the pleasure. My breath becomes heavy, and I can see my climax in the distance, and I’m flying toward it.

Until he pulls away, leaving me cold and waiting. His hand clamps down around my chin, squeezing so tight, I let out a yelp.

“You’re going to answer me, Zara.”

Then, he’s back on my clit, swirling his tongue against it. I’m so close, and when I feel him pull away again, I scream in desperation. Grabbing his hair in my fists, I pull his face back down. Then, I let out in a sharp cry.

“Yours, Nash! I’m yours.”

“Good girl,” he growls before he devours me.

It doesn’t take long before I come hard, shattering every inch of my body. As I come down from my high, his lips are moving up my body toward my mouth. When he finally kisses me, I feel him melt.

It’s in these moments that I connect with the broken Nash. He puts on such a tough exterior, but I know there is so much pain under that shell, and I feel the guilt for toying with those insecurities. But I am fragmented too, and my broken parts match his.

“Stay with me tonight,” I whisper. I don’t know why I want him here so bad, like I need a moment of softness to balance the harsh moments.

He doesn’t answer, but he pulls me against his chest, wrapping his arms around me as we settle on the pillow.

“What were you talking about with him, Zara?” he asks.

My heart feels heavy with the idea that I’m betraying one by being with or talking about the other.

“He’s just worried about you, Nash. He’s not trying anything with me. He wants you to be happy.”

“You don’t know what he’s capable of, Zara.”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Not tonight,” he says, kissing my forehead.

I let the subject go, and rest against his chest. After a few minutes I hear his breathing settle into sleep. I can’t sleep at first. I feel as if I’m drowning in something I don’t understand. The way I feel being punished by Nash scares me, and I think it scares him too. As if we’re punishing ourselves by punishing each other. And our only real crime is being the one who survived.



nash

I OPEN my eyes sometime around three in the morning to a dream of her gasping for air as I come down her throat. What the fuck is wrong with me? Silently, I creep out of her room and walk back to my own.

I know she's fine. She didn't tell me to stop. I mean, she liked it, didn't she? But why the fuck am I getting off on watching her hurt? That's not me. I'm not that guy.

Instead of going back to bed, I get in the shower, turning the water on as hot as I can get it. I can still hear their laughter coming from that helicopter. When I came outside after the day on the jet-skis, I felt good about Zara. Things felt different, like I could actually share a connection with another human being, the first one in a long time.

Then I saw her with him.

He thinks I'm an idiot. I saw the way he looked at her every time she came out before Preston died. I know he's fucking obsessed with her. It's the only reason I had to find her at that strip club that night. I needed to witness the ruin of something he loved. But as she danced up on that stage with

her new black look, she didn't look fucking ruined to me. She looked liberated, like she was finally free, and you know what...I was fucking jealous.

I was jealous of him for moving on after my brother's death. I was jealous of her for moving on after her sister's death. Why was everyone acting like everything was okay? No, not just okay. They were acting like life was somehow fucking better.

Then, I managed to get her ass back to her apartment, and I didn't plan on fucking her, but I wanted to take something he wanted for myself. It was payback.

I sure as shit didn't expect him to bring her to Del Rey. I could have probably moved on, but with her in the house, I was sucked right back into this sick cycle. Fuck with her to fuck with him, and she has no fucking clue.

Still, my mind won't stop replaying the scene tonight. Last time I forced myself on her, I needed three days to get that shit out of my head. I don't want to hurt her, but I certainly don't want to be catching any fucking feelings either.

I need to get off this goddamn island. It's starting to do things to my head, and now it's got me second guessing everything. Like if I can just get out of here for a couple days I can get Zara out of my system. Maybe if I get out of here, I can find a sliver of Preston's energy out there.

Every time I visit a club he loved or get really drunk, it's like I can feel him there. He's still around, and I'm not so goddamn alone.

By the time I get out of the shower, the sun is starting to rise in the sky, and the guilt sets in. It's wrong of me to leave her here, especially if I don't want her falling into his trap, giving in to all his fucking charm.

But then I think, who gives a shit? If she wants him, he can have her. My sloppy seconds. He likes sloppy seconds apparently.

I used to think he was better than this shit. I was wrong.

I grab a bag and toss some of my shit in there, my cell phone charger, some extra clothes, toothbrush. Then, I head for the door. We have a house in the city, and I could use some fucking mainland time with regular people. Well, maybe not regular exactly, but anyone who is not Zara or my dad will do.



NASH IS GONE when I wake up. Not in my bed. Not at Del Rey at all.

Astrid said he must have taken the boat to the mainland for the day, and I'm left with a sudden feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach. The last time Nash and I hooked up, he retreated, quarantining himself like being with me was some kind of sickness. And now he's left me altogether.

My rational mind thinks this could be him dealing with guilt or regret. Things got a little intense last night—okay, a lot intense. But it was all consensual. I would have told him if I wasn't okay. Is he really beating himself up about it?

The less-rational, more emotional side of me is convinced Nash's leaving has absolutely nothing to do with me. I'm so inconsequential to him he never thought for a second to invite me along.

It hurts, and by lunchtime, I'm so fucking bored that all I can do is dwell on my paranoia.

Alistair's tiny, two-seater helicopter is still parked outside, so I know he's here, but he hasn't come out of his office all morning. I've gone swimming, watched TV, and scrolled mindlessly through my phone.

Completely out of things to do, I decide to go snooping back down his wing of the house. I hear his voice before I even turn the corner to his office. He's standing with his back to me, staring out at the yard. I spot the bud in his ear and realize he must be on a call. Every word coming out of his mouth sounds like a foreign language, aviation jargon I couldn't comprehend if I tried.

Instead of knocking, I just slip into the room, and walk over to the bookshelf. The moment I walk in, I'm met with that familiar smell of cologne and books—smoky, woodsy, sexy. I had completely forgotten about the book Alistair gave me to read the other night, but I spot it right away, sitting on the small table between the heavy chairs. Picking it up again, I flip through to the back.

His voice pauses, and I turn around to see him staring at me with that cold, calculating expression. Alistair lives behind a hard exterior of walls he's put up, even before his son was killed in a helicopter crash.

I remember once tuning into a press conference being shared after the crash. They questioned the safety of his aircrafts and outright blamed him for his son's death. Even though the inspectors had all deemed the crash weather and pilot error, he had to sit through a meeting where people basically told him that selling his helicopters was irresponsible. The comment section was even worse, but I distinctly remember that video because of how stoic and calm he appeared the whole time, as if he wasn't even there. The man sitting in front of those cameras was just a shell, a spokesperson. The real man, with real emotions had retreated and disappeared.

He's still hidden as he stares at me now, not sure what to do with me. He's probably wishing I'd go away, but I meant what I said last night. I'm stubborn, and the more my presence triggers Alistair, the more I want to be around him. I like

seeing him so worked up, and I can't help but wonder if I could break down that wall, just a little bit.

I'm waiting for him to kick me out of his office, but he doesn't. He resumes his conversation without another look in my direction, so I go back to the book in my hands. It sounds boring, but he promised me there was a controversial love story, so I plop down in the heavy chair and open to the beginning.

By the end of the first fifteen minutes I decide it is pretty boring, but just as I'm about to toss it back down on the table, the romance reels me in.

Two hours later, I'm lying on my stomach on the floor with two empty water bottles and a half-eaten bag of chips. Alistair doesn't say a word to me the whole time, working tirelessly without so much as a bathroom break.

I'm so engulfed in my book I don't react when his leather shoes step into view.

Finally looking up at him, my eyes widen. "This book is amazing, but this couple...are they really..."

"Mmhm," he responds in his deep tone which sends warmth to my core. Leaning against the doorframe in his white button-up shirt and dark brown slacks, tightly fitted and coming down to just below his ankles, I can't help but stare at him for a moment.

With his dark hair, cut short on the sides and slicked back at the top, Alistair is the textbook definition of dashing. There are crow's feet wrinkles around his eyes and a golden hue to his skin. Alistair and Nash look nothing alike, really. Nash must resemble his mother. It was Preston who favored his dad, but I never looked at Preston the way I'm seeing Alistair today, with those high cheekbones and strong jaw.

And granted, he's a grade-A asshole, so high on himself and his money that it ruins all of his good looks with his shitty attitude.

"I'm not going to spoil it for you, but try to enjoy it for what it is, a really good love story."

I look back down at the book, feeling a sort of fondness for it now. Like I've bonded with it, grown closer to it, and I can't seem to wipe the warm smile off my face.

"So I heard Nash left this morning. Any idea where he went?" he asks, his tone taking on a more serious sound.

"No clue. He was gone when I woke up."

I noticed the subtle way his expression changes when he finds out Nash slept with me last night.

"Well, I gave Astrid the night off. I thought I'd just be cooking for myself, but if you're hungry, I'll have some Osso Buco ready in a couple hours."

Peeling myself off the floor, perched on my bent knees, I cast him a curious glare. "I have no idea what that is."

He lets out a sigh, like he's annoyed with me again. "Come on. I'll teach you."

Following him into the kitchen, I start to get a strange feeling in my stomach. Why do I feel a little excited? There's a subtle jitter in my bones as I step behind him. I'm alone in the house with Alistair Wilde, and it's actually comfortable. So far, we're not trying to kill each other.

"Here, dice these up," he says, handing me two onions and a knife. He's rolled up his sleeves revealing the cords of muscle along his forearms, and it takes my brain a moment too long to process the task at hand because I'm staring at his arms.

Taking the onions, I do as he says. Naturally, the kitchen is massive, so there's plenty of room between us as we work. But I almost wish there wasn't. Emma and I used to cook together at our tiny apartment during college. It was almost cozy, bumping into each other every time we had to cross paths from the sink to the stove.

Behind me, Alistair is seasoning a slab of meat that looks like beef. He moves naturally in the kitchen, and I wonder how often he gives Astrid the day off just to cook a meal for himself.

The house is silent until soft classical music starts to play from the speakers set into the ceiling. When I peek back at Alistair, he's pocketing his phone.

As I pass him the cutting board covered in diced onions, he looks a moment too long at my face. My watering eyes begin to spill over, I freeze as he lifts a knuckle to my cheek, wiping a single tear away. The moment is tense until he lets out a sigh and turns his back.

"So tell me," he says. "How on earth did you end up at that club?"

My cheeks flush pink as I stare at him. I've never felt as if Alistair was judging me, and he doesn't seem to be now, but being here in his billion dollar house on a private island listening to classical music, it does feel a little bit like I'm being judged for taking my clothes off for a couple hundred bucks.

"I'm not implying there's anything wrong with it, Zara."

Leaning my back against the counter, I look up at him. "I know you're not. But it's not really a story I'm proud of."

"Why?" he asks while stirring a pot of red sauce.

This feels like a question I've spent the last two years curating in my head. How do I explain to people what brought me to this profession without it sounding like an excuse? Without feeling like utter shit. Without somehow coming back to Emma. It's impossible. And for the most part, I want to answer that questions with, "None of your fucking business," but Alistair isn't being nosey. It's genuine curiosity, and maybe I don't like answering the question because I don't like how it makes me feel.

Hopping up on the counter, I chew on my lip a moment. "I was a trained dancer. Ballet since I was five. I loved it so much."

Silence fills the room while I wait for him to ask what happened or what that has to do with the strip club, but he doesn't. He waits for me to continue.

“I had an opportunity to join a dance company during college, and I passed it up.”

His stirring hand freezes as he stares at me. “Why?”

“Have you ever loved something so much you were afraid of failing at it?”

There’s a heavy moment of quiet as he stares at me. Why don’t I feel so intimidated by him anymore? The intensity of his eyes doesn’t quiet me the way it used to. It’s almost as if I feel safer in his stare.

“Sure,” he replies.

“I loved to dance, but I was terrified I wasn’t good enough. That I would only fail, and they would criticize me, and ruin this thing I loved so much. My sister was furious,” I say, letting a sad laugh escape my lips remembering the day Emma screamed at me. She didn’t talk to me for a whole week, which was the longest we ever went without speaking, and the only thing that broke the silence was her starting to date *the* Preston Wilde, which was so insane there was no silent treatment that could withstand it.

“I bet she was,” he says. “I would be too.”

“But she couldn’t understand. She was twice as good at ballet as I was, and she quit too. So what’s the difference?” I argue.

“Did she love it the way you did?” he asks, and I go back to chewing on my lip. *Not even close.*

“Why does that matter?”

“Watching someone quit something they’re so good at is hard. When you know they love it, it’s even harder. I see the same thing with Nash.”

That quiets me. Because I understand, and I see the frustration too, but trying to find a reason why those two things are different is failing me.

“But that doesn’t answer my question,” he adds. “How did you end up at the club?”

I scoff. “I waited tables for a while, and the pay was okay, but I missed dancing, and I figured...if I could make some money dancing, then I wasn’t really quitting it. Plus...no one criticizes your dancing when you do it naked.”

I laugh, but he doesn’t.

After a moment of burning under his stare, I straighten my shoulders. “I’m not ashamed of what I do. I like the way it makes me feel.”

“How does it make you feel?” he asks. His voice is quieter, more even-toned and careful. Careful is good. We’re treading into forbidden territory because I have a feeling he knows exactly how dancing naked for men makes me feel, but he’s asking it anyway.

Without shying away from the topic, I look up with a gentle twist of my shoulders. “It makes me feel sexy. Powerful. When I dance, it’s like people actually see me. Like I have control. I’m a more confident version of myself.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, and I continue. “I know you think I ‘weasel money out of men’, but what I do is no worse than what you do. It’s about power, and it just so happens my body is my power.”

As he throws the meat on the skillet to sear, he turns to look at me for a moment, a look of contemplation on his face. Then he steps toward me, stopping when his body is only inches from mine. “Your body is not your power, Zara, and those men don’t see you. I see you, and maybe I shouldn’t say that because you’re with Nash, but I’m saying it anyway. You’re a tough girl, and your body is beautiful, but if you think it’s the most powerful thing you have, you’re selling yourself short.”

As he turns away, it feels like flames are crawling up my spine, scorching my cheeks while I’m left reeling on the countertop. Alistair and I are dancing around something I didn’t see coming. It’s like once I came back to Del Rey, I became a different person than I was before, and it’s making me see things in a new light.

Alistair is constantly forcing me to face things I don't want to... blaming me for trying to seduce him, my fear of flying, the way I put myself down. He's unapologetically brutal in his truths, and I should hate him for it, but I find myself wanting to just be around him. For some reason, I keep putting myself in front of that bullet.

"You know this thing with Nash isn't real, Alistair."

He looks away, focusing on the sauce as he adds the onion. "Of course it is."

"No, it's not. I know you want it to be real, and I'm trying to help him, but I don't feel like I'm doing anything. I mean... he left without me today. Without a word."

He turns toward me again, stepping closer as he seems to be planning his next words. This time, he places his hands on the countertop, framing me between them. I've already lost the ability to breathe, so when he looks up at my face, the air leaves the room.

"I have to tell myself you're Nash's. Do you understand? I'm not trying to scare you, Zara, but I'm giving you a lot of money to do everything you can to bring him around. I know he's rough with you. I know he's struggling with those feelings, and I know on the other side of that struggle, he'll be a stronger man. I see what you awaken in him because it's the same thing in me. My son needs you, but I don't."

His eyes travel the length of my face and neck before he pulls away and goes back to cooking us dinner. With his back to me, it feels as if he's completely shut himself off. Now, I feel like an idiot. So I hop down from the counter and walk out toward the pool.

The night is cool without any wind and not a cloud in the sky. The stars look ten times brighter than they look anywhere else. I can even see the milky way out here, but I'm too distracted by what just happened with Alistair I can't even focus on the beauty of the stars.

He brought me out here to be some emotional punching bag for his son because they are both so fucked up. He doesn't

think I have damage too? Like I want to be the one to help Nash, but what about me? I know I took the job, and I know I asked for this, but it hurts all the same. I never expected Alistair to be nice to me, but the more he pushes me the more I feel something in me shatter. I want to break down and cry, but I won't let that motherfucker see me break. Not for a second.

I'm not about to take this lying down. He wants me to do my job then I'll do my job.

I pull out my phone and search up Nash Wilde on Instagram. It doesn't take long before I see him pop up in stories and feeds. One is time-stamped seven minutes ago, and it shows him at a club in the city having a drink with a couple of guys I don't recognize.

Turning on my heel, I stomp back into the house. As I slam the door, Alistair is turning off the stove.

"You want me to do my job, then you have to help me."

"How?"

"Fly me into the city."

"Right now?" he asks, looking at his watch.

"Yes, right now. Nash is at a club there, and I'm going to find him."

I see the fight in Alistair's expression. He wants to argue, to tell me not to go, and part of me wants him to. As much as I want to eat that delicious smelling dinner, I don't want to be around him for another moment.

He's contemplating it. Clearly stuck in some moral dilemma, he finally nods. After turning off the stove, he leaves the food on the cooling burners, and heads out of the kitchen. "Okay, let's go."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, I want to take it back. The thought of getting in that helicopter suddenly hits me square in the chest. Walking past me, he seems to notice it. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, I have to get over it anyway. And the sooner I can get over my fear, the sooner I can get Nash in the air." I say it,

repeating his words to me from last night. I'm throwing them back at him, but he doesn't react.

Alistair touches my elbow for a moment, his intense dark stare fixed on my face. Then, he moves away, walking toward the helipad.

I make a quick run to my room to throw on some makeup, shove everything I need in my purse. Jogging out to the aircraft, my hands won't stop shaking.

Every nerve in my body is screaming at me to back out of this. As I grip the handle to the door, ready to pull it open, my stomach turns, and I have to bow over. It feels like someone is standing on my chest, and I can't take a full breath. Panic sets in and before I know it, I'm only breathing in short, gaspy spurts.

Suddenly, big arms are around me. I'm pulled away from the plane until I'm flush against his chest.

“Breathe, Zara.”

His chest is warm, and if I hold still long enough I can feel his heartbeat against my cheek, so I try to quiet my breathing just to hear it. His hands rub large circles against my back.

I don't know why I want to cry, but my eyes start to fill with tears for no reason at all. I feel Alistair's head rest against mine. His deep voice vibrates against my face, and I know this is inappropriate, but it's also innocent. So, I wrap my arms around his waist and bury myself against his large body.

Fuck, I've craved this comfort for so long that even as my heartbeat starts to steady, I don't want to let go. Alistair is security. There are no rules in our relationship, only that we shouldn't have one. But everything about him at this moment is drawing me in.

Then, without loosening his arms around me, he speaks. “I know you're angry, but I chose you because you can handle it. You can handle him and me because you know the same pain we do. It was never about you using your body to lure him in, Zara. It was about you and that steel fucking heart of yours.”

I gasp against his chest. But he doesn't give me a second to react. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he pulls away, avoiding my gaze.

"Come on," he says, opening the door and ushering me inside the plane. I try to keep my breathing level and avoid thinking about anything other than each slow inhale and exhale. I keep repeating his words in my head. I have a steel heart, a steel fucking heart. He lets go of my hand and leaves me alone in the helicopter while he goes around to get in on the other side. Suddenly I feel cold and alone. When did Alistair's presence start to have such an effect on me?

As he climbs in, he takes my hand in his. The seats in this are so close we're almost shoulder-to-shoulder.

I try to focus my attention on everything he does from starting the engine to flipping all of the switches. He puts a headset over my ears, and the muffled sound only quiets my senses, making me a little more calm. Then, the blades above start spinning, and it's all so loud, it's like white noise silence in my head.

I have a steel heart.

After a few more switches, the helicopter starts to lift. I grip his leg as we move, and I try not to think about my sister or Preston or anything that happened before today.

Today I'm just a girl in a helicopter with her fake-boyfriend's dad—with my hand on his leg. I clench my eyes closed as we pick up speed on the runway.

My hand squeezes as we get higher.

"Just breathe." His voice sounds like it's in my head now. Calming. To the rhythm of my heartbeat. It feels as if my weight settles against the seat and we're no longer being forced back against the ground. We're floating.

"You okay?" he asks, covering my hand with his. I finally let go of my deathgrip on his leg.

"Yeah," I reply. "I'm sorry." When I try to pull away, he snatches my hand in his, and my heart picks up speed.

Suddenly, we link fingers, and I feel weightless.

“Thank you,” I murmur, although I don’t quite know what I’m thanking him for. He squeezes my hand in response.

We stay like for a moment, gazing out at the black nothing without speaking, our hands linked, and my heart has settled. I’m not panicking, and I’m too distracted by my hand in Alistair Wilde’s that I can’t remember why I was so afraid of this.

Every few seconds he pushes a button or flips a switch, but for the most part, he keeps his free hand on the giant bar in front of us.

“Don’t you need both hands?” I ask.

“Not yet. When we land I will.”

Land. That thought makes my stomach clench. My breathing picks up and grows heavy.

He feels it. “I promise a smooth landing, okay?”

I nod and try to focus on the sound of his voice, the feel of his hand, the scent of his cologne. It’s not for another five minutes until I hear other voices on the headset and Alistair replies with something technical.

I can’t help but notice how sexy he looks, so in control, so experienced.

“I have to let go now,” he says, and I reluctantly peel my hand from his. “You can still hold onto me if you need to.”

Without hesitation, I latch onto his arm, wrapping myself around him without restraining his movement as he puts both hands on the bar and I feel the aircraft start to descend.

A small whimper escapes my lips, and he pats my leg.

It’s not that I’m afraid. I know in my head we will be okay. I know he does this every day and there’s no one I’d be safer with, but the motion triggers something in me. It triggers my dreams—no, my nightmares. It reminds my body I’m supposed to be afraid. Like it takes control, no matter how much I try to fight it, the fear takes over and manipulates me

to believe that what happened to Emma and Preston will happen to me.

It reminds me I deserve it. I should have been the one to die that day. It should have been me.

I clench my eyes closed and try not to think about my sister and about the fear she must have felt. If she felt anything at all. I try not to think about the impact, the explosion, the abrupt ending of her life. But those thoughts come anyway, and I'm gripping Alistair tighter.

Before I know it, the skids touch the ground in a smooth landing. A yelp escapes my lips.

It's too dark to see where we are, but we seem to be in what looks like a backyard much like the one on Del Rey. There are houses nearby and other helicopters parked at the edges of the concrete platform.

"Downtown is only a fifteen minute drive from here. I have a car waiting for you. You can ride back on the boat with Nash tomorrow. I assume that's where he's sleeping tonight, but if not, just tell the driver to bring you back here. The house should be ready for you."

It must be nice to have the world at your fingertips. A helicopter, a boat, an extra house all at your disposal. And I wonder briefly what Alistair or even Nash would be like if it wasn't for all of their wealth. Would Nash be the entitled control freak that he is now? Would Alistair still be as intimidating? As powerful?

"Thank you," I mutter as he walks me to the waiting car. Someone opens the door for me, and I realize this is where I leave him, and something in me starts to panic. Almost like I don't want to leave him.

"Just tell the driver where you need to go. Text me if you need anything."

I turn to find a nice-looking man about the size of an oak tree standing next to a black car that is waiting for me. When did Alistair coordinate all of this? It's insane. I wave to the

man, but as I turn back to Alistair, he gives me one last hesitant glance.

I want to say something to him, and by his expression, he wants to as well, but neither of us speak. As I turn away, I miss the warmth of his arm against mine.



THE DRIVE to the club is quick. I check Instagram again to be sure he's still there, and according to eighteen women under twenty-five, he's still there. In one picture, he's got his arm around another woman who is staring at him like he's a fucking god. It makes my blood boil, but considering that I'm still harboring inappropriate thoughts about his dad, I don't have a lot of room to talk.

It's just sexual tension. I know that. He's attracted to me. I'm attracted to him. Nothing more.

I can still do what I came here to do, and that's keep Nash on the straight and narrow long enough to get him back to caring about his own future instead of throwing it down the drain.

When we pull up to a club, tucked away in a building on the strip, the driver opens my door, and I head toward the front entrance.

"This way, Miss York," Hank, Alistair's security guard tells me, and he nods his head toward the back entrance. I feel very out of place as I follow him through the VIP door,

through a sleek and fancy looking hallway. Music plays in another room, and as he opens the door, I realize we're on the upper level. Below us, there is a crowd of people dancing, hordes around the bar, and lines for the bathroom.

Up here, it's quieter, but the music still plays. There are far fewer people, and round couches in private booths along the wall. Much like our VIP rooms at The High Diamond, just without the poles and naked ladies.

I spot Nash immediately. He has a crowd around him, along with a few other faces that seem oddly familiar, like I've seen them on TV. You can always tell the celebrities from the regular people in settings like this. Not only do they suck all of the attention out of the room like a vacuum, but they just appear more polished, more put together, careful of their every movement. I assume this comes from always being watched or filmed during every moment of their lives.

Nash's eyes meet mine, and his bright, beaming smile vanishes. It's replaced with a brooding frown, and I instantly regret coming.

Squaring my shoulders, I remind myself I'm in control here. Besides, we're in a club. This is my territory. So, I march toward him, sliding through the throngs of onlooking women as I saddle up next to him.

Without saying anything, I lean past him and rest my elbows on the bar. The woman behind it looks at me with a customer service smile.

"I'll take a vodka soda with lime."

She nods, and I don't turn back when I feel Nash's presence, leaning heavy over my back. His lips are next to my ear. I can smell the liquor on his breath.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm yours, remember?" I look back up at him. "Couldn't stay with him all night—alone. I was afraid of what you'd do to me if I did." I shoot him a playful pout, and his eyes narrow.

A hand lands on my hip, and he pulls me closer.

“You might be mine, Zara, but I’m not yours, and you’re really cramping my style.”

Heat flashes under my skin, and I glance back at the girls looking downright livid as I steal his attention. “Oh, don’t let me stop you,” I say, glaring harshly right into his eyes. “I’ll just go back to your dad.”

I try turning away from the bar, but he holds me tightly between his body and the hard surface. “Why are you doing this to me?”

As soon as the bartender places my drink in front of me, I take a long sip, letting the alcohol burn my throat as it goes down.

“I’m not doing anything to you, Nash.”

“You keep pushing me, Zara. You tell me I can’t fuck you, and I think you want me to fight for it. I think you like that idea, but I’m not that kind of guy, Zara. It’s like you want me to be a monster.”

Heat pulses down my spine at the thought. Do I want him to fight for it? I think about what Alistair said at the house... how he sees what I awaken in Nash? Goosebumps pucker along the skin of my neck. We are playing a very dangerous game.

“Maybe I do want you to be a monster because then at least you’ll stop being a loser who hangs out with celebrities and throws his life away for cheap pussy.”

He pinches my hip and grits his teeth, the muscles of his jaw flexing in the green light above the bar.

“You’re not going to change me, Zara. I know he wants you to, and I’ll admit, I’m enjoying having you around more than I thought I would, but I’m not changing shit for you or him.”

“You think I give a shit, Nash? I get my million either way. But you’re crazy if you think I’m not going to try and squeeze a few more months and another million out of your old man, so be as stubborn as you want. You don’t hold as much power as you think.”

Then, his jaw relaxes, and I'm shocked when he starts laughing in my face.

"You really think this is all about me? Don't you see the way he looks at you? You want to squeeze a few more million out of him, Zara, you're spending your night with the wrong Wilde. So go back to Del Rey and leave me the fuck alone."

It's so loud that I barely hear him. There are voices around us, someone ordering a drink right next to my ear, but I see the look in Nash's eye enough to understand.

His jaw is clenched. His eyes are shrouded in pain and laced with anger. I can't help but reach up and touch his jaw, gliding along the smooth skin of his chin and back to his hair. Then I see what's really going on. He's insecure, and he's lashing out to protect himself.

"I thought you'd be happy to see me. I don't understand why you're attacking me," I say.

Without relaxing his chin or shoulders, he argues. "I am happy to see you, but it doesn't change anything."

My fingers run into his hair and along his scalp, and I feel him relax. His forehead falls forward until it meets mine, and I get lost in those crystal blues.

While I'm with Nash, I think only of Nash. It's like I can't see what's out of my line of vision. And when I'm with Alistair...

"I'm real," I say, trying to pull his lips closer to mine.

His eyes search my face, and I know he's looking for honesty. Nash just wants something real, and if I'm only here because his dad is paying me to be, then how can he be sure I'm really here for him? I know Nash doesn't answer well to orders or persuasion, but he wants me, nevertheless. The chemistry between us exists, no matter how much we want to avoid it.

The noisy VIP lounge isn't quite the place for talking so before I can say anything else, Nash pulls me by the hand toward the exit. He waves at Hank in the corner who nods back as Nash and I escape to the elevator that takes us down to

the floor-level entrance. I notice some commotion among the girls as we leave, and I'm sure I'll have a couple death threats by morning.

Once we're outside, Nash walks ahead of me toward the water. I realize that he could have told me to fuck off and went back to his little fan club. He didn't have to leave with me, but even after one week, we're both in too deep. We've opened a door, and we can't just ignore what we've discovered on the other side.

I don't know if he is going to go back to the way he was because I'm here, but I'm pretty fucking sure he's going to change after all of this. I'm pretty sure I am too. But that's what grief does to you. It takes the puzzle pieces of your life and tosses them in the air. Nothing lands back where it's supposed to, and the damn thing will probably never be fully put together again, but that doesn't mean we can just stop living. We've become someone new, navigating our lives without our siblings, the people we started our lives with.

I suspect Nash sort of hates me deep down. I think he loves something about the way we are together and the control I make him fight for. Maybe he sees a new version of himself when he's with me, someone more like his dad and it scares the shit out of him, but the fact that he's here with me on this sidewalk and not in that club means he's willing to see it through.

And suddenly, so am I. And not just for the money. I want to see the version of Zara that comes out of all of this.

"I don't want to care about you, Zara," he says, and I smile. Well, that was brutally honest, but I kind of love it. Somehow, it's fucking sexy.

"I don't want to care about you either, Nash."

When he looks at me, he's wearing a stern, contemplative expression with his eyebrows pinched and his lips pursed. So I snatch him by the arm and pull him closer. Following my lead, he backs me into the brick wall of the old building.

“But you do, don’t you?” he asks, hovering his mouth over mine. I’m lost in the darkness of his eyes.

“Do you?”

“Why do you think I was so desperate to get away from you?” he asks, and I tilt my head in confusion. “You’re caught between us, Zara. You’ve landed right in the crossfire, and you should be very careful about who you fuck with because neither of us play nice.”

“I’m not afraid of either of you,” I answer, looking up at him.

As he leans his mouth closer to mine, he whispers, “I wish you were.”

When our lips touch, I stop thinking. My mind quiets as I get lost in his kiss. When his tongue licks a line across the sharp ridges of my teeth, my vision practically blurs. As he pulls away, I sway where I stand and when he puts out a hand to guide me to the dock where his boat is waiting, I blindly follow.

THE BOAT IS, no surprise, massive. It looks to be about three levels with a large screened balcony on the main deck and a set of stairs that leads to a lower level. It’s dark, so I let him lead the way as we descend. As we pass through the door, I spot the single large bed in the back. I freeze as we both stare at it. I’m sure Nash is wondering what I’m going to let happen tonight, but I already know the answer to that question.

I know what I want. The thought of him holding me down, gripping me tight, punishing me for all of the things that have been going through my head lately, especially about Alistair has my body warming. Arousal pools at my core, and I stand in front of the bed while Nash pulls a water bottle out of the fridge behind me. When I turn around he’s staring at me, looking like there as many thoughts racing through his head as there are in mine.

“I think you were right,” I say, watching the way his chest rises and falls with every single heavy breath. “I want you to fight for it, Nash.”

He sets the water bottle down on the table and walks toward me in slow deliberate steps. Stopping just a foot away, I wait for him to attack. I’m ready for it.

His face is unreadable, and my pulse pounds in my chest, waiting.

“I told you, Zara. I don’t want to be that guy.” There is pain on his face with his clenched jaw and furrowed brow. All I can think is that I need him to release whatever he is holding onto. The pain, the anger, the regret, the guilt. And I realize that I can recognize these things in him because I feel them in myself too.

I reach up, putting my hands on his chest, feeling the blood pump through his heart in a quick thump-thump rhythm against my fingers.

“Nash,” I whisper, avoiding that intense gaze of his. “The pain you feel is the same pain I feel.”

“You have no idea, Zara.”

Looking up at him, the air between us grows thick. For the first time, he acknowledges the thing he’s feeling, and I’m hungry for it. Ravenous. I need it all. I need to heal every ounce of his pain.

“Yes, I do. I know it’s not just grief. I know it’s the guilt eating you up. Guilt for surviving. For outliving them. For feeling like they took the wrong one.”

He doesn’t respond, but there’s a flinch in the muscle under his eye, and I know I struck a nerve.

“I know it’s anger too. Helplessness. And rage because life robbed you and there is nothing you can do to change it. You can’t make anyone pay for what’s been taken.”

My heart pours out of my chest for him. I’ve never said these things out loud, but God how I’ve felt them. These hidden, almost foreign feelings that have had the nerve to

make me so fucking miserable for the last two years without letting me understand them at the same time.

“It’s been bottled up and boiling over, and the thought of going on with your old life seems fucking unbearable because of how unfair it is. So you numb everything. Your pain, your happiness, your entire life. Get drunk, get high, turn up the music, and escape it all.”

He doesn’t move, but his face softens. So I step forward until I’m standing toe to toe with him. My fingers travel upward toward his neck, running against the smooth skin, pulling his face toward me. Just before his lips are close enough to touch, he snatches my wrists in his hands and stops me.

Something pierces my chest as I stare up at him, and it’s like absolutely everything around us fades, evaporating into nothing and the world stops existing until it’s only Nash and me.

My pain recognizes his pain.

Pulling his head down toward me, I latch onto his lips in a crushing kiss. His arms envelope me at the waist as he kisses me back, his tongue caressing mine. Everything between us grows hungry, and we begin clawing at each other’s clothes, him tearing my shirt over my head as I pull apart the buttons of his. When his chest is bare, I run my hands along every ridge of muscles, letting my nails scrape his skin.

I want him so bad it hurts, but I’m hungry for something else too.

Pulling our mouths away, I look him in the eye.

“Take it out on me, Nash.”

A deep, rumbling growl echoes through the room as his eyelids lower, his gaze full of lust. Still, he’s hesitating. I know he wants this, but he still thinks he’s protecting me.

“I want you to.” Pulling his hand up slowly, I place it against the base of my throat, and I hold back all of the emotion bubbling in my chest. “I need you to.”

His restraint snaps.

With a clench of his jaw, he tosses me against the mattress. He stares at me with a feral look in his eyes as he sheds his clothes. Squirming in anticipation, I watch as he unbuckles his jeans, pulling them down until his cock springs free.

In the next heartbeat, his body is covering mine. Everything happens so fast, his eyes on my face as he grabs my wrists, clenching them together in one hand as his other hand bunches the bottom of my dress up to my waist. Then, he rips my underwear away in a quick jerk, the fabric burning my skin as it tears.

I let out a strangled gasp once I'm naked, exposed and laid out before him like a trapped prey. He pauses to take a look at me, my bare sex on the mattress beneath and his eyes turn wild.

“Look at that pretty little cunt,” he growls. His fingers glide through the arousal pooling there, coating me as if he's preparing me, and I can't hold my body still. The need is overwhelming.

When I feel the silky head of him line up against my entrance, I nearly cry. He's teasing me. His eyes are on my face, stone cold and emotionless as he drags each second on, torturing both of us.

With one fierce thrust, he pierces me roughly. It's pain mixed with pleasure, and I let out a guttural cry. His free hand clamps over my mouth as he thrusts again, this time even harder.

“We're not on a private island anymore.”

But I can't keep quiet. I feel restless with a thirst that is unquenchable. I want it harder, faster, deeper. I need all of it, all of *him*.

His movements are slow and forceful, slamming into me one thrust at a time, stopping after each one to measure my reaction. The more he does this the more I squirm and writhe. Then I let out another cry as he hits that spot inside me that feels tethered to my heart.

I can't take my eyes off of him, desperate to memorize this version of him, unhinged and free. He's fucking me like he has a score to settle, like he needs it to survive, and maybe he does.

I know I do. I need this more than I realized. I need him to fuck out every thought in my head, every misplaced desire, every ounce of false hope. If being with Nash means embracing the darkness, then I want it.

"Just fuck me," I gasp. But before I can come, he pulls out, letting go of my wrists to flip me over to my stomach. Yanking my hips back to meet his, he enters me with force again, and I am so dangerously close to shattering.

When his hand lands roughly against my ass, the sting sends waves of pleasure up my spine. I'm not going to last long, but I know he's not letting me come yet.

With a hand at my throat, he pounds into me. My body is torn by pain and pleasure, a fire burning under every spot his skin touches mine. I know his grip on my neck and hips will leave marks, and I'm desperate for it. I want his marks. I want all of his scars.

Then, as I'm chasing my orgasm, another face pops into my mind. I think about my hand on Alistair's leg on the ride over, the sound of his voice in the headphones, the feel of his arms around me while I panicked. Then I think about him behind me, imagining it's him filling me with every thrust. It's his hand on my clit instead of my own. He's grunting and taking my body, and with that vision, I come. My body seizes up, and I'm flying. It's like I'm back in that helicopter, coursing through the sky, weightless and free.

As I fall back down to earth, Nash slows his thrusts, and his hand moves from my throat to my cheek. Gently he pulls my face back until our mouths are fused. The kiss is deep and passionate, but not punishing. In fact, it's like everything in him changes from hard to sensual as his hands move to roam the landscape of my body, kneading each breast while the other arm wraps around me, squeezing me tight.

With his eyes clenched shut and his breath mixed with mine, I feel him jerk as he comes inside me. It doesn't escape me the way he needed to feel my nearness, taste my kiss before he could let himself go.

And shame floods my vision as I think about what made me come.

AFTER WE EACH shower in the tiny bathroom not fit for two people, we crawl back into bed. Something about Nash has changed. Like admitting his feelings earlier brought them to the surface, and I see the weight of his emotions on his face.

Nestling my face against his chest, I run my hands in circular patterns over his body hoping it will relax him.

"How did you get here?" he asks, and I know he's referring to the mainland.

"Your dad flew me over."

He pulls his head back to look down at me. "Really?"

"Are you angry?"

His gaze softens and travels back to settle without focus on the dark room. "No. I'm glad you got over your fear."

"I wouldn't say I'm exactly over it," I reply with a laugh.

After a heavy silence, he adds, "I think you should let him teach you how to fly."

This time it's my turn to look at him incredulously. "But you said—"

"I know what I said, Zara, but I tend to exaggerate a little when I'm drunk. Especially where things with him are concerned."

"I wish you'd tell me what happened between you two."

He runs a hand through his hair and lets out a heavy sigh. "It's complicated."

“I don’t care.”

There’s a lot of contemplation on his part before he finally turns to face me with his elbow resting on the pillow. Then after more deliberation, he says, “My dad and I have always been alike, like so similar it felt like I was just another version of him. *The next Alistair Wilde*, everyone called me. And I was proud of that, but then...” he says, stopping to take a deep breath and swallow down his emotions. “Then, I saw a different side of him. Something...that made me realize I didn’t want to be like him anymore.”

“What was it?”

He lets out a sigh, running his hand through his hair. “I don’t want to say, but the point is...my dad takes what he wants. I used to admire that. Until he crossed a line. I didn’t know what he was capable of.”

“So, don’t be like him” I reply, touching his lips. “But I wish you’d tell me—”

“There are things I have to leave out, Zara. But all that matters is I don’t want to be like him anymore. So when Preston died, I decided I couldn’t be Nash anymore.” He leans back against the headboard, and my heart aches for him.

He turns to me after a moment, sincerity in his eyes. “You know what’s weird, though? I think you’re helping him as much as you’re helping me, and he doesn’t even know it. Having someone to teach how to fly again, having someone at the house balance out all the anger between us.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead before he settles his head on the pillow, pulling me to his chest.

“And I honestly wonder which of us needs you more.”

Before I can say another word, he rolls over, ending our conversation. I’m left speechless.

This thing between me and Nash isn’t like any relationship I’ve been in before. It’s not even like a relationship really. It’s just another way we’re getting through, a band aid for our bullet wounds, and I know it’s not built to last. I see what he needs, and I crave the crazy he can unleash.

But I did not expect this. I can't get over this thought that he knows how much Alistair needs me too, and I didn't even realize it.



“DONE,” I announce, slamming the book closed. I’m lying on Alistair’s office floor, staring up at him while he types away on his laptop.

“And?” he says flatly without looking at me.

“And you’re right. I will always remember the last book I read now.” Sitting up, I stare at the cover, running my fingers along the title.

“You’re not going to read another one?”

“Maybe.” I sort of hate the idea of starting a new story, but I like these casual moments while I’m reading in his office while he works. I know I could take my book to literally a hundred different places on the island, but there’s something comfortable about this. It’s like a cure for my loneliness, and the only person I was ever able to be alone with without feeling the pressure to talk was Emma.

The morning Nash and I woke up on the boat felt like the start of something new. We started to understand each other more that day. We understood this thing between us was about

more than a deal with his dad or the money I would be making. It wasn't about a relationship or love. It was about an outlet for our pain. We found comfort in spilling our secrets to each other, the innermost dark things that we've been feeling since the crash.

But Nash also started a train of thought in my head that night too—about Alistair. Is my presence affecting him too? I glance over at him, no longer seeing the powerful god among men, but a man with flaws like the rest of us. Alistair is hiding his pain behind walls just like Nash and I are, and if what he said is true, that I'm strong enough to handle Nash...am I strong enough to handle him too?

"You need another flying lesson," he blurts out, catching me off guard. It's been a week since I flew with him that night, and I was sort of hoping he'd forget about the flying lesson idea. My shoulders tighten, and I turn to glance in his direction.

"Not going to happen."

"Tomorrow morning," he says, ignoring my protest. "Seven a.m."

"Are you hard of hearing? I'm not learning to fly that thing."

Finally, he glances up at me, and I remember what Nash said on the boat. Teaching his kids how to fly was something Alistair took pleasure in. This was his element, and I know that he probably needs this, but every cell in my body is screaming at me to fight this.

Why do I even give a shit what he needs?

Because it could lead to a few more months and another million in your bank account, Zara, I remind myself. For the money. I can do this for the money.

He's glaring at me, and I see a hint of Nash in his eyes, that headstrong intensity when faced with a challenge. The Wilde men do not like being told no.

I know he's not done with me yet, but in the next breath he changes the subject.

“Thanksgiving is coming,” he says before averting his eyes to his computer. “I’d like Nash to go to my parent’s ranch up north for the weekend. You will have to convince him.”

He’s giving me another task, another challenge, and judging by the cool tone in his voice, this won’t be an easy one. This is his way of scolding me for pushing back on the flying lesson. I stand, putting the book back on the shelf and waiting to hear exactly what he has in mind for me.

“You will go with him,” he adds, and my cheeks flush. The thought of meeting Nash’s grandparents makes me nauseous.

“You want me to meet your parents?” I ask, as if he spoke without really thinking.

“Of course, why not?”

“I’m not really the girl rich boys bring home to meet the family.”

“Why?” he asks, looking up at me. “Because you’re a stripper?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Well, then just try to keep your clothes on when my mother serves the turkey.”

“Very funny,” I snap. “I’m being serious.”

He stands, buttoning his jacket, the motion of his fingers nimbly moving lighting up something in my belly. Quickly, I look away.

“So am I, Zara. Nash hasn’t seen them in over a year, and a normal holiday spent with family will be good for him.” As he rounds his desk, moving for the door, I look up at him as he passes me, brushing the skin of my arm with his shoulder.

“What about you?” I gently ask.

“I’ll be working.” His voice is cold and distant. I suspect there’s something more here that he’s not telling me.

“On Thanksgiving?”

“It’s better if Nash gets time with them without me.”

It's still less than convincing, but I'm not going to pry right now. Instead, I nod. "Sure. I'll talk to him. But I think you should come."

Without another word, he turns and walks out of his office, only turning back toward me to make sure I follow him.

LYING ON NASH'S BED, I scroll through my phone, the smell of Astrid's famous pork roast wafting through the house. The TV is on in the corner, and we're supposed to be watching American Horror Story, but neither of us can relax enough to get into it.

Nash and I haven't had sex or even touched since that night on the boat. It's almost like...we haven't had any aggression to take out, so what's the point?

Instead, we've settled into this routine. During the day, I read in Alistair's office. Evenings are spent lazily watching TV with Nash.

"So, your dad mentioned that we could go to your grandparents' for Thanksgiving."

Nash scoffs. "I bet he did. He wants me to go for him."

"Why?" I ask.

"All they do is talk about Preston. Plus my grandpa and my dad don't get along so well."

"That seems to run in the family," I add, turning to see his face.

"My dad's a hypocrite...you're not the first to notice."

"Still," I say, nuzzling into his arms. "I'd like to go. I don't get to do family holidays very often."

Nash lets out a groan. "We could stay here and pretend it's just another day of the week."

"I've been here for almost a month already. Come on, Nash. I need to get off this island for a few days, and a big, fat

turkey dinner sounds nice. Plus, maybe with me there they won't talk about Preston so much."

"What about *him*?" he asks, nodding his head to the empty doorway, and I know he's talking about Alistair.

"He said he's staying here. Working."

Nash scoffs. "Avoiding his dad."

It's quiet a moment, and I know he's contemplating it. Fidgeting with the case on his phone, he finally looks at me. "Fine, we'll go. On one condition."

"What?"

"I'm flying us there. Just you and me."

My heart races. For a moment I start to feel dizzy thinking about it. That one flight with Alistair was hard enough, but I have a feeling this flight will be a lot longer and Nash is a little out of practice. But Alistair's words come back to me. *You have a steel fucking heart.*

I can do this. For one million dollars, I have to.

"Of course," I reply trying to fake a calm demeanor so he can't see me panic.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, why not? It's better than Alistair trying to teach me to fly. Maybe if I tell him you're flying up north next week, he'll leave me alone."

Nash's brow furrows as he glances over at me. "He's still trying to teach you?"

"I told him to rot in hell...basically." My focus is back on my phone, scrolling mindlessly through Thanksgiving dinner Pinterest boards, my mouth watering already.

"You should let him teach you."

I'm so focused on these images of cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes I almost don't hear him. "What?"

"Just take his stupid lessons."

I glance over at Nash, confusion on my face. “But I thought—”

“Don’t look too much into it. I still think he’s an asshole, but I’m just saying...it might do everyone some good. He likes teaching it and you could stand to learn it. So, just do it.”

I’m still staring at him with my mouth hanging open when Astrid pops her head in and calls us down for dinner.

Nash throws his phone in the pocket of his hoodie and jumps off the bed. In one conversation, he basically admitted he would fly again, and he agreed to something nice for his father. Is this really freaking happening? I’m having a positive effect on Nash Wilde? The idea of staying longer than three months and earning more than a million seemed like too much to ask for, but now I’m feeling pumped at the idea. If I can get him talking to his dad by Christmas, I might actually stand a chance to convince him to start working again after the New Year. As I hop off the bed and follow him down the hallway, I can’t wipe the smile off my face.



MY HANDS WON'T STOP SHAKING. I'm in no way ready to get in this thing again, but after my win yesterday with Nash, I figure I might as well give Alistair what he wants too. Another three months on the island could mean another million dollars for me. I have to at least try.

Alistair walks out, and I'm struck speechless. He has on aviator sunglasses and navy blue shorts with a white linen shirt. Prickles of excitement shimmer through my body as I try to look away. Alistair is too good looking for a fifty-year-old man. Especially a single, fifty-year-old man. I really need to get these thoughts out of my head. When the fuck did this happen?

"Morning," I say with forced enthusiasm.

"Are you ready for this?"

"I thought we could do that thing where we drink a bottle of wine in the cockpit again." I send him a playful smile, but he only grimaces.

“Nice try.” As he steps up next to me, I get a whiff of his cologne again—earthy and delicious. He keeps his gaze off my face when he opens the door, ushering me inside.

My hands are still shaking when he climbs in the other side, but I don’t know if it’s because of the flight anymore. The sudden nearness, shoulder-to-shoulder again has me feeling restless.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to be teaching me this? Don’t you have to be certified or something?” I ask.

A coy smile plays on his lips. “I am certified,” he replies. “Okay, we’re going over the terms first. Pay attention.”

One by one he points at every dial and lever or button in the aircraft, reciting the name and having me repeat it, but I’m already forgetting everything. I’m distracted by his arms, the dark tan of his skin and the muscles flexing against his shirt. I’m thinking about how when I was with Nash that night on the boat, my mind went to Alistair. How dirty I felt when I came with that vision in my head. My thighs clench together at the thought.

“Okay, what’s this?” he asks, pointing to the lever in front of us.

“The throttle?”

He sighs. “Collective.”

“What’s this?” This time he points to the dial on the right.

“Speedometer?”

“Altimeter. Did you listen to anything I said?” He runs through them again, then gives me another pop quiz that I fail immediately. He heaves a heavy sigh, and I actually hear his teeth grind. I hate feeling like I’m disappointing him, and I keep my lip pinched between my teeth as I try to follow along.

He’s avoiding my face, I can tell. He keeps glancing my way, but his gaze bounces back every time it lands on me. If he wasn’t so frustrated with my lack of ability to retain knowledge, I’d almost think he was nervous around me.

“What if I’m just not meant to learn this?” I ask, looking out at the horizon, warming from the rising sun.

“You remind me of Preston.”

My eyes dash over to his face, a little shocked he brought him up.

“How so?”

“He hated learning to fly, and I think he especially hated learning it from me.”

“I don’t hate learning from you,” I whisper.

He rubs his forehead, staring out at the blue sky. “I don’t know why I want you to learn so bad. I forced him to learn, and I regret it. A lot.”

I have to swallow down the knives suddenly gathering in my throat as I reach out a hand and place it on his. I don’t know if he’s referring to his strained relationship with Preston before he died or if it’s the fact he died in the same aircraft he taught him to fly. Either way, pain radiates off of Alistair like a beam of light.

And it’s doing something to me. Tugging at a string tied around my heart, making me want to fix it, heal him, feel what he’s feeling. I don’t feel this way with Nash, but Nash’s pain translates into something different. His is rage and anger that I absorb and reflect, but Alistair’s wounds run deeper, and he hides them better.

“I’m here. Let’s just do this.” When he finally looks at me, the shell we’ve built around ourselves starts to crack. He wraps my fingers around mine, and the inside of the aircraft grows silent.

His hand is warm and soft except for the subtle calluses I can feel around his palm, and I imagine a younger version of Alistair, working with his hands, building machines from the ground up. Another bolt of warmth shoots through me.

It feels like ages while we stare at each other before he finally glances away, clearing his throat and getting back to his instruction. Alistair pulls his mask up so easily to hide his

pain, and I wonder how long he can do that before he cracks. Before the weight of it all shatters him.

Breaking the tension, he puts the headphones on my head, and I hear his voice through them, the soothing, deep tone sending chills down my spine. Once he finally fires up the engine and the rotor blades above us start spinning, he shows me how he manages to make us turn and pitch with the use of the peddles at his feet. We're only inches off the ground, and already, my stomach is clenched and turning. Still, I manage to focus a little better this time, and actually answer his questions correctly. He insists we still go for a short ride even though he will be the one flying.

When we take off, I don't have to squeeze my eyes closed, but I do still have to hold onto him as if his body is grounding me. If I hold onto him tight enough, I won't fall.

At one point, he no longer needs his right hand and our fingers intertwine like before. It feels so comfortable, so real. As if holding hands is the only thing we can do that isn't crossing a line.

His words from the night in the kitchen come back. He admitted to me that he has to remind himself I'm Nash's, and I stored that thought away, assuming he was just attracted to my body. I assumed I was just a young girl trailing around his island in a bikini, another meaningless distraction, but with every interaction between us, I feel it shift. I want to believe it's more than that. Why *on earth* do I want to believe it's more than that?

While we fly, he tries to show me things I need to learn, and I manage to retain most of it, but he still has my hand in his, and my brain is struggling to process anything other than that.

"Nash was a hands-on learner," he says. "He hated all the reading and the studying. One day when he was about twelve, he just took over. Grabbed the cyclic and that was it. He was hooked."

I love hearing him talk about the boys when they were young, but I have a feeling he has a point to this story.

“Go ahead, Zara.” He nods his head toward the black bar in front of me. See, I’ve already forgotten the name of it.

“No way.” I can’t even look at it.

“I’m not going to let anything happen. I can take control over here if I need to, but you should at least get a feel for it. Go ahead.”

I don’t want to tell him that the reason I don’t want to take control is that I don’t want to let go of his hand. I hate to think that he won’t give it back to me when I’m done. Up here, it feels like I can hold his hand, and we don’t have to define it or stress about what it means that we both love the comfort it gives us.

This little crush I’m growing on Alistair is getting seriously in the way of my fear of flying if I’m willing to take one of his hands while he keeps us in the air.

But he lets go of my hand anyway, and I have no choice. I grab the controls in front of me and immediately feel the power pulsing through it.

“I’m going to let go, and I want you to hold us steady.”

“Alistair, no!” I panic.

“I’ve got you, baby. Nothing is going to happen to us.”

My heart is pounding so hard it’s pulsing in my ears but not so loud I don’t hear him call me baby. It falls out of his mouth so naturally I am dying to hear it again. Nash doesn’t call me anything.

Alistair’s voice in my ear gives me strength to take control and before I know it he’s pulling his hands away and all of the power is mine. Every little movement of my hands I can feel in the aircraft. So I make sure to hold very still. Sweat drips down my back as I try to steady my breathing enough to not freak out.

“You’re doing great,” he says, staring at me. The hand that was just interlaced with mine is now on my bare leg, and I’m trying to hold back the urge to pant.

“Don’t let go of me,” I plead.

“I’m not,” he answers without hesitation.

His hand moves to the inside of my thigh, gripping my bare flesh as if he’s trying to pull my leg closer to him. A yelp gets caught in my throat. It’s not a sexual touch, just a strong, affirming grasp.

“Just keep it straight and steady.”

“Okay.” I gulp down the nerves tingling my skin, and it feels like my body is on fire. The vibration under my seat, the hand on my leg, the shaft in my hand. I’m alive, needy, and horny as fuck. If he doesn’t move his hand, I can’t promise I won’t try to fuck it at any moment.

“You’re doing it, Zara,” he says in a potent, deep tone, and it courses through my bloodstream like a drug. His pride and satisfaction pushes me farther, making me feel powerful.

“I’m doing it!” Tears prick behind my eyes. And let’s be real, what I’m doing isn’t actually hard, considering I’m literally doing nothing, but he seems to acknowledge the fact that I was too afraid to even get in one of these a month ago, Now I’m flying it. And I’m not afraid. Not anymore.

“Now, I want you to raise the collective.”

“What the fuck is that?” I shriek, feeling my hands tremble.

A throaty grunt carries through the comms as he points to the lever at my side.

“Okay, okay, okay,” I reply. I refuse to say I’m scared.

Keeping my eyes forward, I pull up carefully on the lever. When I feel the aircraft pitch slightly, coming to a slow rise, I let out a squeal of delight. He actually laughs into the mic and gives my leg an extra squeeze.

Fuck, his hand feels higher on my leg than before. I can’t help but think about his fingers working their way up, pulling the elastic of my panties aside, plunging two in while I fly this helicopter. Just the thought sends a wave of heat through me, and I jerk on the cyclic a little too hard.

He flinches and moves to take control before I relax again. “You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah...your hand,” I stutter. “It’s distracting me.” My voice shakes with nerves as I glance down at his touch.

“Oh,” he responds, but he doesn’t pull away. Staring down, I see out of the corner of my eye as he bites his lip, as if he’s thinking—contemplating his next move.

Then, he dances his fingers along the sensitive skin of my inner thigh as he says, “Best to learn with a little distraction I think.”

I slam my thighs together, locking his hand in place. There’s a beat of silence. He’s touching me, and I *want* him to touch me. My mind is too goddamn overwhelmed up here among the clouds to think clearly because it’s not thinking about all the reasons I should not fuck around with Alistair Wilde. All my brain registers is desire.

“Zara,” he says, drawing my name out. “I want you to keep it steady.”

His hand inches upward past the hem of my loose-fitting shorts, and I flinch, sending shockwaves through my body. “Is this okay?” he asks.

“Yes,” I gasp, the word coming out of my mouth a little too quickly. I’m squirming in my seat, trying desperately hard to keep the controls steady. With my focus on the skyline and keeping this thing from moving too much, I can still hear the heavy raggedness in his breath.

“Fuck, I want to kiss you right now,” he growls into the mic. My heart practically flies out of my chest. His hand is kneading my inner thigh, and I can’t stop shifting in my seat. When his mouth lands on my bare arm, planting warm wet kisses against my skin, I let out a strangled cry.

“Keep us steady,” he commands again as his lips move upward, moving one side of my headphones aside so he can kiss my neck. I can’t breathe anymore. I’m fairly certain at this point we’ve already crashed and I’m dead.

Alistair is kissing me, his lips on my body, and God, I wish I could feel them on my mouth. The risk and the danger only makes this passion burn brighter.

“Move your hand up,” I gasp, and he does, as if he was waiting for permission. He groans through the mic as he slides to the apex of my thighs, massaging his fingers against the moist fabric of my underwear. A high-pitched moan flies out of my mouth. Am I dreaming?

“Are you still scared?” he asks, his mouth next to my ear. My eyes nearly roll to the back of my head from the deep rumble of his voice and the taunting tone of his words.

I shake my head.

“That’s my girl.” He keeps up his touch over my panties, finding my clit and rubbing soft circles there to tease me.

“Take the controls,” I gasp, ready to let go.

“You’re doing great,” he replies before kissing my neck with such force, I nearly scream.

“Wait, can people...hear us?” I ask in a breathy cry.

“No, it’s a closed system.” Then, he pulls my panties aside and slowly pushes a finger in my soaking heat. I barely manage to hold the helicopter steady as a pleasure-laced cry leaves my lips. “God, I wish they could,” he says as he pumps his finger in and out.

“Alistair, let’s land this thing, please,” I beg, my hips nearly lifting off the seat.

“And miss the chance to see you come at ten thousand feet?”

His lips are still on my neck with an eye on the instruments as we course through the sky, making slight turns to circle the island, which I assume he’s controlling since I’m so focused on keeping us level.

I figure out that I can handle the controls with one hand and I quickly move the other to the front of his pants, desperate to touch him. The thick bulge in his pants makes me gasp as I start stroking him over the fabric.

He lets out a husky groan that I feel vibrate through my body from the contact of his lips on my neck. Pulling my hand away from him, he picks up speed with his fingers on my clit.

“Keep it steady, Zara,” he repeats, and I feel myself tensing, struggling to keep my eyes open as my climax races toward me.

“Oh fuck,” I cry as my body fights against the seatbelts, and I slam a hand against the door to gain leverage, coming hard on his hand.

“Holy shit, that was beautiful,” he moans while I try to regain the ability to breathe. We’re still level, in the air and not dead. The adrenaline runs through my body as I reach for him again.

“Take the controls. Do it fast.” I’m manic now. The shake in my hands is intense, and as much as I love him touching me, right now I need him to put this thing on the ground so we can touch each other without dying.

“Okay, let’s land this fucking thing,” he barks before grinding hard against my hand. The helicopter starts to turn, moving us in an easy rotation and circling back around until we’re going the same way we came.

The spark in my belly is now a raging fire. What is going to happen when we land? I know what I want to happen, but I’m not exactly making clear-minded decisions right now.

Once we’re back to going straight and the controls are in his hands, I can spot Del Rey in the distance, and it’s my turn to do the torturing.

My hands roam over his slim fitting shorts, searching for the button while rubbing the bulging erection at his groin. He groans into the headset.

We’re hauling now. I didn’t realize helicopters could even go this fast, and if I wasn’t so busy trying to free Alistair’s cock from his pants, I’d be terrified.

“Jesus fuck,” he shouts once I get his zipper down and my hand around him. His hips jerk as I pump him from the base to the head.

This is happening. I can't believe this is fucking happening. I'm holding Alistair's cock in my hand, marveling at how fucking beautiful it is, so smooth and the perfect shade of pink. Does it look like Nash's?

No, fuck that. I can't think that.

Is he thinking that? Is he thinking about the fact that I've fucked his son twice on top of giving him the wildest blow job of my life? No way. If he is, he's handling it well.

"Please don't stop," he groans, and as we approach the house, a sad feeling hollows out my stomach. Nash is down there. Once we land, we will no longer be in this safe space where only we exist. Nash could see us.

Will he even care? He's said himself this thing between us is not real. But we've grown so close this month, I'd hate for him to be crushed by seeing me with his dad.

I almost panic when it looks like we're going to fly into the helipad way too fast. But we soar right over the house. Then I remember there's a small landing pad on the opposite side of the island by the hangar where Alistair keeps a whole fleet of aircraft.

When he starts to bring the helicopter down, my stomach flies up to my throat. "Okay, lean back," he says, pushing me into my seat. Letting go of his cock, I do as he says. The landing is fast and not as soft as last time, but he brings it down with skill. Once we're on the ground, he does a few quick things, flipping switches as the motor stops and the blades slow.

"Take those fucking shorts off," he barks at me, and I'm quick to obey, shimmying them down my legs in anticipation.

Finally, he reaches for me, and I jump into his arms. The aircraft is tiny, but I'm barely able to climb over until I'm straddling him in his seat. His hands gather my face and he pulls my lips to his in a crushing kiss. It steals my breath as our mouths meet. The soft friction of our tongues sends a rush of heat to my already burning core.

The sudden intimacy of our first kiss stops my frantic heart. We may no longer be in the air, but we're alone in this kiss, and that's all that matters.

My hands are back on his cock, and I squeeze tightly, pumping my hand just to enjoy the way it makes his hips jerk and twitch.

"Fuck, Zara," he pants.

"I need you," I answer him.

"We can't," he grunts, his mouth against mine.

I don't stop working his cock as he reaches his hand under my ass to peel my panties aside. As his finger sinks inside me, I rocket my hips toward him.

"Please, Alistair," I cry.

With his mouth devouring my neck and chest, he lets out a low growl, pulling out one of my breasts out and running his tongue over the pink bud of my nipple. At this point, I've soaked my panties, and he keeps up his movement with his finger, coating me with my own arousal.

"I'm gonna come in your hand right now," he says in a breathy gasp.

His thumb finds my clit, running furious circles that make it hard to breathe. My mouth never wants to leave his lips, loving the way he tastes and the gentle scratch of his beard on my skin. Two fingers dive deep from the back, and I'm no longer swimming slowly toward my second orgasm. I'm flying full speed, accelerating with every touch.

He takes a gentle bite on the flesh of my breast, and I come again, my legs seizing and my spine curling. My body wrestles against the tight space while the prickling heat of pleasure takes over, cascading over every inch of my skin.

Alistair is kissing me, my lips, my neck, my face. "You're so fucking beautiful," he mumbles.

Resuming my work on him, I feel him tighten up, and I know he's close too. He clutches one hand around the back of my neck pulling me close. It only takes a few more eager

pumps of my fist around him before he's coating my hand and the front of his shirt. Still I can't stop kissing him, eating up every groan of pleasure on his lips.

When we both come up for air, we look around and see that the windows are fogged up and the cab is now hot and stifling. Alistair pops open the door as fresh air hits my lungs, cool against the sweaty, goosebumps on my body.

We carefully climb out, and he walks me silently to the garage where we take turns cleaning up in the small bathroom. When he comes out with wet spots on this shirt where he had to wipe off the evidence, his eyes meet mine for the first time.

I want him to kiss me again. Instead, regret colors his features, and his shoulders tense, loading up the burden of what we did.

"Alistair," I mumble, reaching for him.

He simply straightens his shoulders and puts up the wall between us again. Looking away from me, he says, "You'll need to study the manual, learn those terms—"

"Alistair," I call, trying to interrupt him, but he doesn't respond.

"We'll meet up again tomorrow and go over maneuvers."

Then he stares at me as if he's daring me to bring up what just happened again. It cements this idea that I am nothing but a distraction to him. He probably thinks all women are distractions. If that's how he wants to treat me, then what do I care? This is a job. I'm not here to get caught between two men.

I clench my jaw and nod. "Fine."

He turns away and walks back to the helicopter. When he reaches the aircraft, he turns back to see if I'm going to follow him.

"I'll walk," I call as I take off for the beach, which I know circles round to the house. He doesn't try to stop me, and right now I'm so fuming I could use a long walk. I don't know if

I'm mad at Alistair for dismissing what we did or if I'm mad at myself for wanting anything more.



alister

The day before the crash...

HER EYES FOLLOW me wherever I go. Those emerald green pools and dark lashes haunt me in my sleep. I usually don't accompany my boys when they have their friends or girlfriends over, but I make an exception when Preston's girlfriend brings her sister to Del Rey.

Who could blame me? She's gorgeous, somehow even more than her identical twin. It's the intensity in her stare and how she always seems to look content without even smiling. It's in those fucking eyes.

There's a new app launch for the company this week, and I should be focused on work, but I can't seem to get shit done when she's around. I never should have let her come this week.

I notice how she watches Nash. With all of his charisma and charm, it's no surprise. But I need my son to focus on work too. He and Preston should be heading to the launch party in a couple days and this will be their first time appearing as the face of the company together. I need his head

in the game. Trying to make Preston focus is pointless. He'll be more interested in the party either way.

While the kids are out in the pool, I head over to the garage on the north side to clear my head. Besides, I was starting to feel like a fucking creep, constantly watching her, waiting for her to look my way. Preston has been bringing Zara and Emma over for almost two years now. I've never heard of her with a boyfriend, and trust me, I listen. What am I going to do about it? Nothing, but I still want to know.

There is a ton of work to be done in the office, but I can't be there right now. I need a break. So I'd rather be out here sweating my ass off while I sweep out the bays and hose down the aircraft.

Before long I spot movement on the beach, but I ignore it, thinking it must be the kids going for a walk around the island. It's only a two mile stretch. Easily walkable from the north shore to the south on a nice day. Then I hear footsteps come closer.

Spinning around, I try not to stare at Zara walking up to the garage in nothing but a pair of denim shorts with the button open and a bikini top. She freezes when she sees me like she always does, chewing on her lip and avoiding my gaze as if she isn't comfortable with my eye contact.

"Oh sorry," she stammers, turning away.

"It's fine. Come get out of the sun," I tell her. She walks into the hangar, keeping her gaze away from me.

"Did you walk all the way over here?" I ask.

"Yeah, the rest of them are on their way. They stopped to swim for a bit."

"And why aren't you swimming?" I ask, trying not to look at those long legs and imagining them wrapped around my waist or my ears.

Stop it.

"Wasn't really interested." She walks toward the back of the hangar, her mouth hanging open as she takes in the site of

the fleet of birds parked away. “I’ve never been in here before.”

“Come on, then.”

I walk behind her, showing her each aircraft, until she reaches the one in the far back, my first little bird. The original design. She seems to pick up immediately the sentimental value of it as she runs her hand along the nose to the tail. “I read about this in an article online when Preston and Emma started dating.”

My eyes widen, watching her eyes scope every inch of my first helicopter. “You started designing helicopter models at twenty, and this was your first real build. Your own design... and you named it after your first son.”

I hold back any real reaction although my head is spinning, imagining her reading about me, seeing pictures of me online—especially pictures of me twenty years ago. “It’s a modification. I mean, I didn’t do it alone. And my dad was already an aviation engineer. I had a foot in the door.”

“It’s still impressive. Your dad didn’t build a billion dollar empire. You did.”

My eyebrows knot together as I stare down at her. I get interns and fans who love to suck up to me and tell me these things that are supposed to sound impressive, but Zara isn’t any of those things. She’s just a beautiful, smart girl that I don’t hate hearing talk about me like she’s impressed.

“Do you want to learn to fly?” The words fly out of my mouth, and I realize how badly I want to teach her.

She reacts like I expected her to. A smile stretches across her face, but she bites it back then curls her dark blonde locks behind her ear. “Maybe.”

“I’ll teach you.”

Those emerald orbs gaze up at me like a child’s. “*You* will?” She puts the emphasis on you, as if I’d let anyone else.

“Of course. I’ll take you up while you’re here. You guys have a few more days here, right?”

“Yes,” she answers with light in her eyes.

“Perfect.”

There’s commotion outside the garage and soon, the rest of the kids are flooding the space. Emma is walking a little farther from Preston than she used to. When he first brought her around, she was latched onto him at all times.

“Hi, Alistair,” Emma greets me with a bright smile. She doesn’t bite hers back like Zara does.

“Hi, Emma.”

“You should come swimming with us.”

Emma is always inviting me to join like I’m one of them. It’s sweet. I think she’s worried I’m lonely out here. She’s asked me before why I never have any women over like the boys do. Unlike her sister, Emma doesn’t bother with the denim shorts. Instead, she prances around the island with just that bikini on, and I know that if I were Preston, I’d be bugging her a lot more to cover up.

Emma and Zara link arms, and the boys try to give the girls a tour of the facility, but Emma is less than impressed. I decide to head back to the house, but before I leave, I look back at Zara.

“Bright and early,” I say, pointing to her. “Flying lesson for one.”

Nash steps in. “Preston and I are flying to the city tomorrow to set up for the launch party. You’ll have to take out one of these.”

My heart sinks. Fuck, I forgot. Preston wants to be the one to give the presentation on the new app. And I’d rather teach her on that bird than any of these.

As my gaze travels over to Emma with her bright smile and photogenic presence, I realize she should really be the one going with Preston. Hell, she works for the company that coded the app anyway. Let her sit on his arm and the two of them could be the face of the company for one day. I’m lost in my own head when she catches me staring.

I notice Emma blush, biting her lip and curling her hair behind her ear.

Looking at Zara, I reply, “Fine, another time then.”

“Can’t wait,” she answers with a smile.



THE GUILT DOESN'T HIT me all once. It creeps in like water slowly soaking the fabric of my heart. Everything in the moment with Alistair was so intense that it felt unstoppable. It wasn't just lust. It was so much more.

It was need.

It was fate.

It was inevitable.

Once I get to my room, I immediately put on my bathing suit and walk back out the pool. Diving into the water feels like another form of escape. If I could stay under to avoid Nash and Alistair and all of these growing, confusing feelings, I would.

The cool water does nothing to calm the hunger in my body. Alistair may have gotten me off with his fingers, twice, but it wasn't what I wanted. It was beautiful and perfect, but at the same time, I craved something harder, deeper, rougher.

Fuck.

This can't be happening. I can't really be lusting after both of them. I try to talk myself down. This doesn't change anything. I'm still here to do a job, to help Nash. Whatever happens between Alistair and I when Nash isn't around is irrelevant. It doesn't matter.

Floating on my back with my eyes closed, I keep replaying the whole thing in my head. How it started, how it ended, how it felt. My god, it felt so good.

I didn't even know I could be so attracted to a man twenty-five years older than me. I knew Alistair was good looking. I knew he was sexy as fuck, but I had no idea we could connect on such an intimate level. I just assumed there were too many years between us. He's out of my league—on another fucking planet, but we connected anyway.

Why did I have to start things with him? I was the one who opened the door. I invited him to walk through and there is no going back now.

“How was your flying lesson?”

I let out a gasp as I pop out of the water, facing Nash who is kneeling down at the edge of the pool watching me float. I try to hide the tension in my face as I answer him.

“It was good.”

“Uh-huh,” he answers. He's staring at me, his eyes squinted, his lips pressed into a thin line. The white heat of shame courses through me. There's no way he knows what happened, but it feels very much like he does. Or at least he suspects it.

I should tell him right now.

It's not like I cheated or anything. Nash and I are not in a relationship. I have to keep telling myself that. But before I can say a word, he peels off his shirt and shorts until he's completely naked and he dives into the water behind me. My mind is racing.

What do I do?

My eyes scan the ground and the house for Alistair. Is he watching? Can he see me swimming with Nash now? Why do I care?

God, just the thought of Nash touching me sends butterflies to my belly. As he pops out of the water, he swims toward me.

“Who needs a bathing suit when you live on a private island, right?” I ask, trying to kid with him, but his eyes are so serious.

“Tell me about your lesson.” He says, leaning his arms on the pool deck and watching me. He’s teetering somewhere between the laid back casual Nash who binge-watches Netflix with me and the cruel, power-hungry Nash who takes and punishes and satisfies that dark hunger inside me.

“It was fine,” I lie. I can’t do this. I can’t lie to him. I don’t want to be this girl. What the fuck is wrong with me? Emma would have never gotten herself in this situation. I can practically hear her scolding me, her shrieking judgement asking me what I was thinking. Why don’t I ever think before I act? She always yelled at me for that.

As Nash glares at me, his brow furrows. “What’s wrong with you?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I reply, trying to act normal. “What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re acting weird,” he adds.

“The flight was just nerve-wracking, that’s all.” I hate lying. I *hate* it.

Nash stares at me for a moment, and my heart starts to splinter. I have to push down any feelings for him, no matter how strong they want to bubble to the top. *This is just a job, Zara*, I remind myself.

“I hated thinking about you with him,” he says, and I swear my heart stops.

“Why? You’re the one who told me—”

“I know. Calm down. I just...never mind.” He swims across the pool, and I watch his bare back glide through the water as my blood pumps furiously through my veins. When his head pops up, I push him for answers.

“What were you going to say?” I ask.

He flips his wet hair back out of his face, and my eyes trail to the muscles of his arms and chest. “Nothing,” he says. “Just that...something about it turned me on.”

I let out a gasp as he dunks his head back under the water and swims across again. What the fuck does that mean? My eyes are wide while I wait for him to resurface, but I can’t help but feel a warmth brewing in my belly. Something about it turned him on? Something about me being with his dad? I bet if he knew what we were up to he wouldn’t be turned on.

He pops up, repeating the same hair flip as I ask him. “Something about me being with your dad turned you on?”

He laughs. “Yeah...like we’re fighting over you or something.”

“I’m not a fucking prize, Nash. This isn’t some primal mating ritual. Neither of you are going to win me.” I’m really trying to puff out my chest here, but he can definitely see through it all. He smiles and saunters over to me, pinning me against the wall. His naked body presses against me.

“You’re not a prize, but you can be bought, Zara. He bought you with money, remember. What can I buy you with?” he asks, leaning his head down while rivulets of water run down the tan skin of his nose.

I will go to hell for this. But at this point, what the fuck do I have to lose? Nash Wilde wants to fight over me with his dad and right now, I want to let him. Maybe he’s only being playful. It’s quite possible that to him, this is all a game and if he found out what Alistair and I really did, he would be livid, but I have to shut down my emotions and get through these next two months. Maybe longer if I can handle it, but I need that money, and I need something to motivate Nash.

“I have a few ideas,” I tease him back, pressing my tits toward his chest.

In one fluid motion, he lifts me and places my ass on the pool deck. The cool air is harsh against my wet skin, but as he tears off my bikini bottoms, the heat pulsing to my core warms my entire body.

As his lips place a sweet kiss on my inner thigh, I’m no longer cold. “Game on,” he mumbles into the wet heat between my thighs before he draws a long line across my folds with his tongue. I let out a groan, falling slowly onto my back as Nash devours me, sending me coursing straight into my third orgasm of the day.

Why don’t I feel bad about this? Because I’m fucked up that’s why. Because any woman would be glad to be trapped on a billionaire’s private island with two incredibly sexy men who both seem to think they own her, and no one could rightly blame me for this.

Just as I let out a loud moan, writhing on the pool deck, I secretly hope Alistair can see this. In fact, I know he has a perfect view from his office. I imagine he’s in there right now, watching Nash tongue fuck me on the pool deck only a couple hours after I came on his lap.

Like Nash said...game on.



alister

“EASE IT FORWARD.”

The helicopter barely nudges, and I see her fingers tremble.

“Little bit more.”

Her heavy breathing echoes through the comms. Being back in this seat with her bare leg basically pressed up against mine is going to kill me. My dick responded the moment I climbed in. And as much as I want to glide my hand up her thigh again, I’m here to teach her something, and I need her to learn it.

Finally, the aircraft pitches forward.

“That’s it, baby.”

A smile cracks across her lips, and I stare at her profile set against the bright sunlight through the window.

“Promise you won’t let go,” she squeals as she moves us forward a little. We’re not far off the ground today, but this exercise is just to let her get the feel for the controls. I have the

cyclic, and I swore I wouldn't let it go while she got her practice in.

I'm also keeping my hand safely off her leg this time. In fact, there has been no more touching or kissing since our last lesson four days ago. She got in my head that day. Not only in the helicopter but then with that fucking display on the pool deck with Nash. I know what she's playing. And I'm not here to play games. I'm too fucking old for games.

Of course, none of this has stopped me from thinking about her every fucking second since. God damn she felt good in my arms. Her soft lips against my tongue, her thin waist in my hands, those soaking wet panties in my lap.

Fuck, focus.

After a few more rotations and exercises, it becomes unbearable, and I'm desperate as fuck to get out of this cockpit. Carefully, I bring the bird to the ground and cut the engine. There's a thick silence as soon as the blades stop turning.

"Zara," I say in a warning. "What happened the other day..."

"Was amazing," she finishes for me.

"Won't happen again." I have to look away. My body can't be held responsible for what it wants to do while she's looking at me like that, and I need to show some fucking restraint.

She doesn't respond. I need her to agree with me right now. I desperately need her to say she never wants me to kiss her again and then get out of his helicopter so I can hide in the hangar like a teenager and jack off to the memory of her tight pussy around my fingers again.

But she doesn't. She stays quiet, and it leaves me no choice but to look her in the eye again. Which is a big mistake because the second I do, it makes everything I just said sound insufficient.

The look between us says we will absolutely be doing it again.

She's the first to move, leaning forward and wrapping her hands around my face to pull me in for a kiss. Our lips lock, and I let out a groan when I feel her soft tongue press into my mouth.

Everything about Zara is delicious. The softness of her lips and the smell of lavender on her skin. She's devouring me as fast as I'm devouring her. With her hands still on my face, my fingers become desperate to touch her, and they snake their way down to her blouse. It's a loose-fitting tank top, so one swipe of the strap, and it falls off her shoulder. Her bra follows close behind, and before I know it, I'm holding her perfect tit in my hand, and Zara lets out that high-pitched moan of pleasure.

My girl likes her nipples played with. Fuck, that's going into the memory bank for later.

"Let's go inside," she gasps.

It's like ice cold water down my spine. We can't go inside. We can't be doing this anymore at all.

Reluctantly, I pull away. My hands already miss the soft warmth of her flesh, but I pull up her shirt to cover her anyway. When she reaches for me, I hold her hands in mine instead of letting her touch my face again.

My temper starts to build up as the urge to carry her to the bedroom and fuck her until she can't walk straight makes it harder to make any rational decisions. I refuse to be fucking powerless because of this girl.

"Goddammit," I mutter.

Her face falls, and I hate the look of defeat there, but she doesn't fight it. She knows that whether or not she's Nash's girlfriend, I can't interfere with her relationship with him.

She keeps her hands in mine while we sit for another moment in this now-uncomfortable silence.

"What would you do if I crawled into your bed in the middle of the night?" she mumbles, and it feels like a dagger to my chest. She has no idea what the question does to me, the

things it makes me feel. But she wants an answer, and I'm more than ready to give it to her.

"You really want to know what I would do?" I grit out through clenched teeth.

Her lips part as she inhales, her cheeks flushed and her eyes dilated. That's enough of an answer for me.

"I would strip you of every single piece of clothing and stare at your naked body in my bed, committing it to memory forever."

I watch as she swallows but doesn't look away. Her hands squeeze mine, urging me for more.

"I would kiss every single inch of your body. Then I would make you come as many times as I could in one night—with my hands, my mouth, and my cock."

There's a hitch in her breath as I say that word, but she doesn't take her eyes away.

"What else?" she asks breathlessly, and I know I'm done for. Zara has ruined me for all women forever, with that one little breath I know there's not a woman on earth who could make my heart stop and my dick move like she does.

"Then, I would fuck you, Zara. I would fuck you hard because I know that's how you like it."

Her lip lifts in a quirk, and I rub my thumb across the back of her hand.

"I would fuck you hard because that's how I like it too."

She melts right before my eyes.

"Then, I'd hold you all night. I'd close every damn shutter in the house and pretend night never ended so I could hold you more."

"If you don't kiss me right now, I think I might die," she gasps, and I can't help myself. I pull her toward me again, devouring her mouth, tasting every corner, every crevice of it. Biting her lower lip between my teeth to see how she'd react. She responds by biting me back, which doesn't surprise me.

When she pulls away, she keeps her head against my neck and our bodies close like she needs to catch her breath.

“When did this happen? I never saw this coming,” she whispers.

I want to tell her that this happened a long time ago for me. Four years to be exact. The first time she stepped foot on my island, I was ruined. I made a promise to myself that I would never touch her because I knew then she’d fucking ruin me. She would be my downfall, my biggest distraction, and I was right. Even before we touched, I was helpless.

Pulling her face away from mine, I hold her by the cheeks and kiss her softly. God I wish I could take my time and get to know every single reaction and sound she makes in bed. I wish I could take a full-time class in Zara’s body until I knew it by heart.

My head and my body want two different things, and they are very much at war with each other at the moment. I feel myself slipping though, like she’s making me want to spill my guts to her, letting all of my walls down.

“When I’m with you, it doesn’t hurt so much,” she whispers, and suddenly I’m swallowing knives.

She’s in my goddamn head, stealing the words off the tip of my tongue. The pain never fully goes away, but it is eclipsed by the brightness of her eyes.

“I know, baby.”

This is going to hurt like a bitch later, but for now, it’s almost nice. It’s worth it.

Finally she leans back in her seat, and we eventually climb out together, heading toward the house.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. We’re going to your parents’ for Thanksgiving,” she says as we reach the garage, and she says it like it’s nothing, but I stop in my tracks.

“Wait, are you serious?”

She simply nods, her eyes a little wide.

I don't want to know what she did to make this happen, and I really fucking hope it wasn't some sex bartering thing, but I can't help the flood of hope that consumes me. My son hasn't seen my parents in a long time.

"I wish you were coming," she adds.

There's something heavy weighing on my chest. The thought of her meeting my parents, sitting around the table with us, sitting next to me or making faces at me from across it, curling up next to her by the fire.

Fuck, what is happening to me?

Instead, it will be Nash who takes her home. Nash who sits next to her, who cozies up to her, but the fact that she's getting him to go at all is proof my plan is working. She's helping to heal my son, and if that's the case, then I really have nothing to be upset about.

If he needs her, then he should get her. Every single time.



THERE'S something about Nash flying this helicopter. It could be that this is his first time flying in almost two years or that the inside of the helicopter has turned into some instant turn-on for me, but there's a tremor of excitement under my skin.

Nash gets in and starts up the engine like he hasn't missed a day. He's a natural, and it's a sexy process to watch. A sense of pride washes over me, proud of him and proud of me. Something good is coming from this. I got him here.

My rational mind remembers clearly that in two months, this is over, and I go back to my life in the city a little bit richer and probably heartbroken. I have to prepare myself for that.

The flight is about two hours long, and about halfway through, I drift off into a dreamless sleep, my head resting gently against Nash's shoulder. When he nudges me to wake up, I open my eyes to see vast, green fields with no end in sight. Just past the road is a large ranch in the middle of a giant green square. There are a couple horses running around the

pasture, seemingly disrupted by the helicopter, which starts to land on the black helipad behind the house.

“It’s beautiful,” I mumble sleepily into the headset as we start to touch down.

The house is a large ranch-style home with a giant porch. It’s not as big as the house on Del Rey but it’s homier. There is a welcome sign on the door and white rocking chairs on the porch. A man with gray hair and a thick mustache stands from the chairs as we land. He stands at the top of the steps and watches us with his hands on his hips. There’s a worried grimace on his face.

Next to him, a woman with long brown hair braided over her shoulder stands with a bright smile and waits with him.

“Here we fucking go,” he mumbles.

I glance back at Nash and spot the small tick in his brow. There’s so much tension on his shoulders, so I reach out a hand, gripping his tightly. His eyes meet mine for a moment before he flips off the engine and opens the doors.

As I climb out of the helicopter, I wait for him to come around and take my hand so we can walk up together. It occurs to me that Emma might have come here. I didn’t think to ask. Bracing my shoulders, I mentally prepare myself.

“That was some good flying, son,” the old man hollers as we walk toward him. He has the same wide smile as Preston.

“Thanks, Gramps,” Nash says with a smile as the two men collide in a strong hug. By the way the man holds onto him, it’s the first hug in a long time. I notice the way the woman watches them with a broad smile, waiting her turn before she can hug her grandson.

“Hi, honey,” she says to Nash as she comes in for a tight embrace.

She puts her arms around him like she never wants to let go. Like she’s hugging more than just Nash.

“Um...you remember Zara?” he says as she finally pulls away.

They both look at me with hesitance, and all of the awkward sadness lands heavily on our introduction. Of course the only time we have seen each other in person was at the funeral, and we didn't speak one word to each other. They probably see her when they look at me.

"It's nice to see you again, Zara," the old man says, pulling me in for a hefty hug. "Call me, Frank."

I savor the feel of his tight embrace. It's the hug of a dad, and as he pulls back, I search Frank's features for signs of Alistair, suddenly wishing he was here.

When Nash's grandmother turns toward me, I notice the smallest squint in her eyes, like she's searching my features for signs of recognition.

"Welcome to our home," she finally says with a warm smile. Then she takes my hand and leads me up toward the house. "We'll let the boys get the bags."

The inside of the house is cozy. Unlike Del Rey, it doesn't look to have any housekeepers to constantly keep every surface area dusted and clutter-free, but still it's clean and smells like pine and something baking in the oven.

Vera walks me to the kitchen. There are vegetables and bowls scattered on the counter, and it smells delicious. Astrid's cooking is great, but this kitchen has the aroma of many hearty, home-cooked meals.

I did some research on Frank and Vera Wilde before this trip, just so I knew what I was walking into. Frank Wilde was a progeny in his own right. He worked his way up the corporate ladder until he attained the VP of Production at a major aviation engineering company. Second only to Boeing, they were responsible for manufacturing half the helicopters in North America.

I read in an article that he never intended for his son to follow in his footsteps but Alistair saw potential to take his dad's business to a more marketable, private buyership. He wanted to be the next Henry Ford and started his own

business, which made him over ten million in the first year alone. It also led to the rift in their relationship.

“You have a lovely home,” I tell her as she opens the fridge and pulls out a pitcher of tea.

“Thank you.”

I can see that Alistair has her eyes, and it makes me ache with missing him. There are bowls out with chopped vegetables and a turkey in a cooking pan on the counter.

“It’s not as nice as that house out there.” She gestures toward the door, and I know she’s talking about Del Rey.

“It’s ten times as nice,” I reply.

She answers with a grin.

“Can I help you with something?” I ask and she looks down at the vegetables on the counter.

“That would be lovely. I need to get these onions chopped for the stuffing.” Looking down at the cutting board, I’m taken back to that night in the kitchen with Alistair. He’s everywhere I look. How long will this go on? It’s getting annoying.

I hear Nash and Frank come in a few minutes later. The onions are strong, and I can’t help the tears that start welling up in my eyes. I let a couple stream down my cheeks as Nash walks into the kitchen. One look at me and he bursts out laughing.

“Jesus, grandma, what did you do to her?”

Nash wipes my tears while Vera apologizes, taking the onions from me.

“I’m fine,” I say with a laugh, and then I fall easily into his side. He puts an arm around me while we all stand around and talk. Thanksgiving isn’t until tomorrow, but there is still a lot to prepare. Frank tells us how he shot the bird himself and Vera talks about the garden she’s working on in the backyard.

For a while, it’s so normal and comfortable. Even Nash is relaxed. His smile comes easy, and it’s genuine, not the menacing one that I sometimes get. I can’t seem to keep my

hands off of him. Seeing this happy version of the boy I started lusting after four years ago has me feeling all sorts of crazy things. Like how I could happily live the rest of my life like this. How I think this love I'm feeling for him is real.

Then we start talking about Nash when he was little. Frank laughs as he tells me about the time six-year-old Nash managed to turn the engine on in one of his dad's helicopters in the yard while the blades were strapped down. It burned the motor up and caused some serious damage. The way he describes Nash's face at the time and the way his dad reacted by trying to keep his cool but also livid as hell makes me laugh so hard my side hurts.

I watch the way Vera laughs along and how Nash watches her.

"He hated it here when he was little. His dad would drop him and his brother off for the summer, and Preston loved it, but Nash..." She's staring blankly as he speaks, and I see how Nash's smile fades in my periphery. When I look at him, a new sadness soaks in his expression.

"Nash would lie on the cement after his father left, holding that little stuffed tiger while he would cry for hours."

Frank doesn't say anything, but the laughter in the room is replaced by tension.

"The only one who could calm you was Preston," Vera adds.

I squeeze Nash's hand, but it doesn't stop him from pulling it away. The room grows heavy with silence, and I see Vera start to fidget, as if she's regretting sharing that story. There's a shadow cast over her eyes as Frank and Nash start talking about the helicopters and the new builds that Wilde Aviation has planned for the future.

I can't take my eyes off of Vera. She's in deep contemplation, worrying her lips like she can't let it go.

Being here in a home that holds memories of his childhood suddenly feels heavier than I anticipated. Nash doesn't talk

about his childhood much. How his mother abandoned him and his brother. How he felt ignored by his father.

As I get up and start looking around the room, it's like a visual representation of the same feelings I felt. There are pictures of a smiling Preston next to a brooding Nash.

My throat builds with a heavy knot as I stare at a photo of the two boys at Christmas, and I see Nash so differently now. I see myself in that expression of his.

Suddenly, heavy arms wrap around my waist. Nash's chin rests on my shoulder as I cling to his body.

"You okay?" he whispers into my neck.

"Yeah. I'm ready for bed," I answer.

Frank leads us both to the back of the house where the spare bedrooms are. "You two can have this room," he says, pointing to the room with the king size bed and en-suite bathroom. I look at Nash skeptically, but he glances back at the other room.

We're not quite on a room-sharing level yet. Crashing in the same bed after a hookup isn't the same as sharing a bedroom.

"Do you have other guests coming?" he asks his grandfather.

Frank responds by scratching the back of his neck. "If you'd rather sleep separately, you can. We have plenty of space."

"We'll be fine," I answer before the situation grows tense. I pull Nash into the bedroom and thank Frank for his hospitality.

When I crawl into bed, he's already leaning against the headboard, scrolling through his phone. I catch a glimpse of a helicopter on his phone screen. "What are you looking at?"

He closes the screen. "Nothing."

"You okay?" It was sort of a big day for Nash. Flying, seeing his grandparents, introducing me.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” He’s trying to be level and emotionless.

“Thanks for bringing me. I didn’t know if you wanted to introduce me to them,” I add.

Putting his phone down, he turns his head to stare at me. “Why wouldn’t I want to introduce you to them?”

“Because I won’t be here after Christmas.”

There’s a tic in his jaw. He picks up his phone and starts scrolling again, but his expression has hardened.

“Right, Nash? We knew from the beginning that I was here to give you guys some company. Shake things up a bit. You said yourself he bought me—”

“Yeah, I get it, Zara. Enough.”

“Why are you acting so upset about it?” I ask, and maybe I was fishing for this. Maybe I wanted these answers, to face the reality of what this is because lines are starting to blur a little. He doesn’t even know what’s happening with Alistair, regardless of what he said about liking the competition. Things are getting too heavy, and I’m having a hard enough time remembering this is just a job. I need to know where his head is at.

His jaw clenches even tighter.

“You look upset,” I mutter.

“Let’s just get through this weekend,” he says before turning over and clicking off the lamp. The room goes black as we both settle on our pillows, but just when I expect him to turn away, his arms wrap around my waist and pull me beneath his body.

His lips find mine as he settles between my legs. “I don’t need a reminder that this isn’t real to you. I remember it every fucking second,” he whispers against my mouth.

“Is it real to you, Nash? You said yourself you don’t want to care about me, remember? So tell me this is real to you and I’ll tell you it’s real to me.”

“Tell me you haven’t touched him, first.”

It’s like a bullet to my heart.

“Tell me you’d give up the money and stay with me,” he continues.

I don’t answer as he speaks, his body overwhelming mine on the bed. After a moment longer of silence, he leans in. “Exactly. I know whatever this is between us is fucked up, Zara, but I’m so fucking stuck on you anyway. I can’t seem to convince myself to let you go, but where the fuck do we go from here?”

Before I can answer, he pulls my tank top over my head. “I see the way you smile at him. I see the way he looks at you.” I don’t move as his hands roam down my body as he rips my panties off.

“Have you fucked him yet?” he asks as his hips grind against my core. Heat shoots up my spine.

“No,” I answer breathlessly. His eyes close as he lets out a groan.

“Do you want to?” He grinds against me again. I know I could lie, but I don’t. Mostly because I hate lying, but also because this is what he wants. He’s asking me this for a reason.

“Yes,” I moan.

His kisses my neck while his fingers travel down between my legs to swim in the moisture blooming there.

“Do you still want me?” he asks.

My answer comes out quicker this time. “Yes.” My fingers grab onto the waistband of his sweatpants and shove them down. When I feel the warmth of him lining up against my sex, I let out a sigh.

He eases in slowly, and I hold in my moans so his grandparents don’t hear. My eyes close as he thrusts, and I can’t help the visions that surface behind my eyelids.

“Open your eyes,” Nash commands. “Don’t think about him.”

I gasp. “I’m not.”

He slams into me harder. “Yes, you were.”

“Nash,” I answer in a whimper on another thrust. But I realize Nash doesn’t respond to pleas or logic. He responds to honesty. So I sit up on my elbows and put my face inches from his. “If you don’t want me to think about anyone else, then I guess you better be the one to make me come.”

“Oh you little brat,” he hisses as he flips me onto my stomach. My body pulses with fire and pleasure as he slams into me, gripping me hard by the hips and fucking me fast and hard, leaving bruises on my flesh.

When I finally touch myself, it doesn’t take my body long before it explodes with intensity, numb and tingling in every inch.

We collapse together on the bed. As he climbs up to rest his head on the pillow, I lay my head on his chest.

“What the fuck is wrong with us?” he mutters.

“Why do you assume there’s anything wrong with us?” We’re both still breathless, but I feel his voice echo through his chest.

“Because for one nice minute today I felt what having a normal girlfriend would feel like, but then I remember you’re not here to be my girlfriend, and you’d probably be here with him.”

He pulls away from me, and I sit up to stare at him.

“Can you please get over the fact that I’m getting money for one second and just accept that you’re the closest fucking thing I have to family, and today was really fucking nice. And everything between me and your dad is in your head, Nash.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he mumbles.

Turning away from him, I lay back down on my pillow. I don’t understand why Nash shuts himself out so much, why he

denies his emotions, but as I lay against Nash's body I realize that I am calling him out for being closed off when I'm the one who's still thinking this is just a job.



VERA and I are busy making dinner and the boys are watching football in the living room. It all feels so picture-perfect, but I can't help but feel like something is missing. I'm an intruder. Like I came here with Nash but he's not entirely here as it is.

Just after we pull the bird out of the roaster, I hear the distinct rumble I've come to recognize over the last month of living at Del Rey. Vera freezes her hands that are mixing the salad. We both look up and hear the front door slam.

"What the fuck," Nash mutters, and I drop what I'm doing to run out to the living room. Through the giant picture window is the unmistakable sight of Alistair's little bird landing next to Nash's.

"Oh dear," Vera whispers as she steps up next to me.

As Alistair walks up the drive, I feel the flutters of excitement in my chest. He's in dark jeans and a deep gray flannel shirt, rolled at the sleeves. On instinct, I want to cuddle up against him, feel his arms around me, kiss his neck. I need his smiling eyes on me like I need my next breath.

When he reaches the porch, I have to bite my lip to hide my happiness seeing him here. But as he steps up to meet Frank, I remember what Nash told me. Frank and Nash have a strained relationship. It's a long moment of tension with the two staring at each other, having some clipped, quiet conversation that nobody else can hear.

Then Frank puts a hand out and Alistair takes it in a hearty shake. Vera puts her hand to her lips, and I watch her bite back her own tears. Then she bursts forward as Alistair walks in the house. She throws herself against him, wrapping her arms around his neck. I watch, my breath heavy in my chest as he buries his face against his mother's shoulder.

This is a different side of Alistair. The big, intimidating boss has a soft side and apparently it only takes one hug from his mother to make him crumble.

As he looks up, he greets me with an intense glare. To be back in his gaze feels like bathing in the sun. Tears begin to pool against my lashes, and I have to look away.

Immediately, my eyes meet Nash's who's wearing a cold, blank expression, ignoring his father's greeting. I remember what Nash and I spoke about last night. He knows Alistair and I have touched, and he knows that on some level I want him. And I know that on some level, he likes the competition, so I do what I'm aching to do. Leaving the kitchen, I walk to Alistair and wrap my hands around his neck. He freezes, and I feel eyes on me as I whisper, "Thank you."

An hour later, the five of us gather around the large farmhouse table in the dining room with a beautiful view of the back field behind the house. It's really gorgeous out here. Equally as gorgeous as the views on Del Rey, just different.

Alistair sits across from me and Nash sits at my right. Every few minutes, I look up and see those blue eyes staring back at me. We make innocent conversation about dinner, football, and Frank asks me about my family. It's an unsettling conversation, to talk about so much death, so much loss and brokenness. Then I feel a foot lean gently against mine.

Looking up, Alistair's eyes watch me for a brief second, but his leg doesn't move.

A moment later, a hand rests softly on my lap. I put mine on top of Nash's while my foot rests against Alistair's, and I can't seem to understand why I'm doing this to myself.

This doesn't feel like a job anymore. It hasn't felt like a job in a while, but I'm having a hard time admitting that to myself.

I feel more and more torn between them by the minute. To the point where I can't imagine leaving either of them when this over. I've built a bond with Nash that I can't seem to let go of, even if all we do is argue and fight. It's a connection forged by anger, but it's a connection nonetheless.

Then, there's Alistair who sees me in ways no one else does. He pushes me, protects me, makes me feel safe, and I am tired of fighting against something I want so much. Call it daddy issues, I don't care. I can't walk away from him. I just can't.

"Alistair told us you were a dancer," Vera says sweetly as she puts a forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth. Next to me, Nash nearly chokes on his turkey. I send a glare toward Alistair who is the only one not reacting. When the hell did he have a chance to tell his mother about me?

He answers her coolly. "Yes, Zara was trained in ballet. I've been trying to understand why she ever stopped."

I have to physically force my shoulders away from my ears, and Nash is glaring at me with his eyebrows pinched together.

"In fact," Alistair says as he pulls out his phone. "I bought you something."

"Who?" I ask, looking at Nash.

"Both of you." A moment later, my phone pings with an alert, and I pick it up to find a text message from Alistair with a link. When I click the link, my brain takes a moment to register what I'm reading.

TWO TICKETS to the ballet production, Giselle

“WHAT IS THIS?” I murmur, my mouth hanging open.

“Tickets for you two to go to the ballet.”

My chest starts to feel heavy and tears sting my eyes. I can't seem to speak coherent words like thank you or I love it. Does he even know this is my favorite ballet?

“This is tomorrow,” I add, looking at the date on the tickets.

“Yeah. Gramps will let you guys borrow a car for a night in the city.”

Nash is staring skeptically at Alistair, and I can't seem to get past the lump building in my throat. The last time I went to the ballet was years ago. Emma and I went to see Swan Lake in Los Angeles on a weekend trip.

“He should take you.” My head snaps up from staring down at my phone. Nash's eyes are on me, and I honestly don't know if I'm hurt by his words or excited by them. It's not that I don't want to spend time with Nash because I do, but Alistair is the one who bought this for me. I feel like he should be the one to take me. Plus I suspect he would enjoy it more anyway.

“No, I bought them for both of you,” Alistair says, but I notice the tension in his voice. I've learned his moods enough to know when he is walling up emotion, and somewhere underneath that facade, he's hiding the fact that he wants to take me.

“Zara, I don't even like the ballet. I'd be a terrible date. Tell him to take you.”

The table is locked in this awkwardness like a cage as everyone looks at me and Alistair. Finally, setting my phone down, I look up at the man across from me. Softly, I ask, “Will you take me?”

Inside, I'm ecstatic, but I keep my face calm.

"That's fine," he responds, keeping his tone as cool as mine.

We're staring at each other when Frank clears his throat, breaking the tension. "I think we need a good old fashioned football game after dinner." Nash and Alistair both look up at the same time.

"Of course we'll need a fourth," he adds, looking at me.

It's no secret whose spot I'll be filling, but miss out on the opportunity to see the guys running around a muddy field with a football? No chance.

"Sounds fun. As long as I can be on your team," I respond, looking up at Frank. He gives me a hearty smile, and I feel Nash squeeze my leg so hard I yelp. I obviously claimed Frank for my team so that Nash would have to team up with his dad. I see them glance at each other before the room grows silent again.

WE LEAVE the leftovers sitting on the countertop in the kitchen as we all take the field. There's tension among the guys as we get in place. Frank goes over the rules. The fence line is the endzone, two hand touch, and Vera gets the final say on any calls. As Frank tosses the coin, Nash calls heads before it lands.

"Tails," Frank announces.

"You go first," Alistair says as he and Nash huddle up near the line. Nash keeps up his cold shoulder while Alistair gives him instructions to cover me, which he does. Frank puts me in charge of the first throw, which I barely pull off before Nash comes charging at me. Alistair easily intercepts.

They carry it to the end zone, but Frank doesn't look too upset. The next few snaps go the same way, Nash and Alistair dominating, all without Nash uttering one word to his dad.

Frank pulls me in for a huddle. "This time I want you to cover Alistair," he says. "Stay in front of him."

“Okay.”

As I take my place on the line, Alistair gives me a wink that I can't help but smile at. Even as he runs toward the endzone to make a catch, I'm on him, and his eyes are on me. He moves quickly to the right, and I stumble to keep up, watching Nash, waiting for him to make the throw.

Frank could easily stop him, but he's hesitating, and I know why.

Alistair lets out a laugh as he tries to maneuver around me again, but I'm too close for him to get a good catch. Soon, I'm laughing too.

“Dad!” Nash yells, and it's like the game comes to a complete halt. My head snaps back to Nash as the ball comes flying, and I manage to dive in front of Alistair as he tries to catch it, sending us both to the ground in a clumsy tackle.

His hands are locked on my hips as Vera yells from the porch. “Unnecessary roughness!”

We're all laughing as I climb off of Alistair, but I notice the way he gulps, and I don't know if it was from the contact or the fact that Nash just called his name. We don't make a big fuss out of it as we get back to the line of scrimmage. Frank is biting back a smile as the game continues.

Nash and Alistair whip us on the field, and the rest of the game goes the same. Now, Nash is talking to him in the huddle, shouting at him, “Go long, cut right, cover Frank.”

And it feels so good, we're all on top of the world. Even Vera is smiling ear-to-ear.

When we finally call the game, I catch a smile on Nash's face as his dad claps a hand on his shoulder. Everyone is sweaty and muddy, so we park on the patio furniture out back as the sun begins to set. Vera brings us all a pitcher of tea, and I notice the way she watches Alistair carefully.

It's not the first time this weekend that I feel Preston's ghost looming, just under the surface as if everyone is careful not to slip up, afraid his memory will pop back up, ready to bring everyone down. I mostly grieve Emma's death alone, so

I don't quite get this experience of moving on as a family after the death of one of your own.

“Well, I'm ready for my post-turkey nap,” Frank announces as he gets up from the table. Vera follows him with a laugh, patting Alistair on the back as she walks past us. The two men and I are left sitting at the patio together in awkward silence. I don't think either of them are ready to move past everything now that Nash has uttered less than a dozen words to his dad, but it's a start.



TONIGHT, I want to forget about everything. The only thing on my mind at the moment is the ballet and a night on the town, outside Del Rey, away from the ghosts that haunt us. It's just Alistair and me and two tickets to the ballet.

Of course our seats are the best in the house. We're in a private box on the side of the stage. When I wake up in the morning, there's a garment bag hanging outside my door. Inside is the black gown with the embroidered, see-through back I bought that day he took me shopping. As I slip it on, I remember the way he reacted the first time I wore it. That day, I was terrified of him. Not that he would hurt me but that there was something powerful between us. He took one look at me in this dress, and it scared him. Alistair always pushed away women, afraid they would ruin everything he had worked for. He realized that he was no match for me. If anyone could change his mind, I could.

As we walk into the theatre, there are so many eyes on us. Instead of hiding my face, I straighten my shoulders and link my arm with his. We take our seats, and I feel his hand on my back. I want to kiss him so bad it hurts. I know I said I was

going to focus on the ballet tonight and not whatever this is with Alistair, but that was before I saw him in his black tux. I was not prepared for the way he fills out the shoulders or the way his salt and pepper facial hair would look over that bow tie and black on black tux. Even his hands are sexier tonight. The creases around his eyes. The strands of white in his hair.

Any woman would be lucky to claim Alistair Wilde, and tonight, I get to pretend he is mine. In some way, he is mine. They both belong to me—no, we all belong to each other, and it's not about who is sleeping with who or who's dating who. When we're on that island, those rules don't matter, and it's just us. We're a family—albeit a very fucked up family.

Part of me wants to tell Alistair what Nash said, that he likes the fight. I want to tell him that Nash only let me come with him because in some weird way, he likes thinking of us together, as competition.

He looks over at me as the lights fade and the music starts. Perched at the edge of my seat, I watch as the dancers take the stage. My eyes absorb everything—the motion, the movement, the most subtle of flexes in their muscles and the expressions on their faces. And I remember it all.

I remember how it felt to be on stage, and not the kind I dance on now. The beauty, the work, the pain, the agonizing structure that translated into raw grace and beauty. Everything about it hurts to watch and yet, I can't look away.

When did this stop being my place? When did this stop being *me*? It was before Emma died that I gave this up. I can't blame her death for everything. As I watch the dancers, all my age, girls who were trained the same time I was, girls who didn't give up like I did, I ask myself. Why did I give up on myself? Why did I waste my life?

A tear runs down my face as I feel a soft hand brush my forearm and fingers interlace with mine. His lips touch my ear, and I smell his cologne as he whispers, "If you want it, then take it. It's not too late for you, Zara."

Turning toward him, our faces are so close I can feel his breath on my lips. My cheeks are wet, but my eyes are shining

as I nod with a sad smile. “Thank you.”

Then, he kisses me. It’s not a passionate, hungry kiss but a loving touch of our lips. For a short second, we are so connected that a hiccuping sob shakes my chest, and as he pulls away, I stare into his eyes, suddenly desperate to keep this connection.

Squeezing his hands in mine, I rest my head on his shoulder, and he holds me close as we watch the rest of the ballet.

“What’s going on?” he whispers, nodding to the dancers.

“Giselle is a peasant girl, and she falls in love with the prince, but he gets engaged to someone else.”

“What a dick,” he mutters, and I laugh.

“Giselle goes mad and dies of a broken heart. She becomes a ghost.”

“And haunts him I hope.”

I silently laugh again. “Actually, she saves him.”

When I look up at him, our eyes meet, and he brushes a hair away from my face. Then his lips touch my forehead, and I force a breath in my lungs even though they feel like lead. My heart is hoping for something I didn’t plan. I never wanted to fall for Alistair any more than Giselle wanted to fall for the prince, but we can’t help who we love.

As the show comes to an end, I don’t lift my head from his shoulder. I don’t want this moment to end. “One more surprise,” he says, and I smile. Of course, there’s more.

With my hand around his arm, I follow him around the theatre like he owns the place (maybe he does). As he starts going through doors that other people are not going through, I start to panic.

“Where are we going?” I ask, pulling back on him.

“I made some calls.”

My skin is flooded with hot pin pricks as we reach the stage floor and we walk through a door, the security guard

only nodding at Alistair instead of stopping him. Once we pass through, I dig my heels into the floor and stop him.

“No.”

“What are you doing?” he asks, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“This is where the dancers come out. I know what you’re doing Alistair, and I don’t want it.”

Lowering his voice, he straightens his tie and steps toward me. We’re in a long, empty hallway, and there’s no one around to hear us. “I want you to see the stage from down here, and the principle dancer wants to meet you.”

“Why? Why would she want to meet me?”

“Because I told her you were a dancer and a friend of mine, and she said she wanted to meet you.” He has so much confidence it’s unsettling. Why doesn’t he understand this from my perspective?

“I’m not a dancer, Alistair. I’m a stripper. I don’t belong on that stage. You can’t take a stripper to meet the prima ballerina.” My voice comes out in a harsh whisper, and the words slice something in me. As if I’m hurting my own feelings, betraying my own heart.

He snaps too, pressing me against the wall. In the low light of this hallway, I’m locked in almost total darkness against his body.

When I look down, he snatches me by the chin and lifts my eyes up to meet his. His jaw is set and his eyes are fierce. “Stop that. Stop talking to yourself like that. These dancers should feel fucking honored to meet you, do you understand?”

“Why? Because I’m here with you?” I snap back, and it feels like I’m talking back to a parent.

“Yes, because you’re here with me. You think I’d bring just anyone here? You think you’re just anyone?”

“What does that mean? Who am I to you?” I whisper, tears filling my eyes.

Shoving my body against the wall, and pulling my face toward his, he attacks my lips with his as he answers. “You’re everything to me.”

Then his tongue is in my mouth, claiming me and making me cry out. Lifting one of my legs, he positions his body even closer, and I can’t breathe. Fuck it, I never want to breathe again.

He devours me and I let him. I want to belong to him, to be his. I want to give him my body to do with it whatever he wants.

How can I be everything to Alistair Wilde? Why me?

Emma was the brighter burning sun. She was the one with the charisma, the shining personality, the talent, the confidence, everything.

But with the way Alistair is kissing me, I’ve never felt more special to anyone. He grips my body so tight I never want him to let me go. He’s not touching me like he wants to fuck me. He’s touching me like he loves me, and it’s making my head spin. What am I supposed to make of this? What am I supposed to do now?

A door closes down the hall and we pull away, panting. We rest our heads on each other’s while we wait for the ability to breathe again.

“Alistair,” I whisper. I’m not even sure what I want to say, but I know I need to say something.

“I know,” he answers. Then, he kisses my cheek before he turns away and leads me down the hallway again toward the stage door. As we pass people moving here and there, I try to force Alistair’s words into my own psyche. They should be fucking honored to meet me. It’s a ridiculous thought and not something I would ever utter intentionally, but the mantra changes the way I carry myself, my spine a little longer.

“Mister Wilde,” a sweet voice calls as we pass the door that leads to the stage.

Alistair spins and we come to face a beautiful young woman who instantly makes me feel the hot sting of jealousy.

I almost don't recognize her at first in her casual clothes without makeup, but it's Giselle herself.

"Oh, Ms. Thurber," Alistair answers politely, putting his hand out. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

"Likewise," she answers. I feel myself square my shoulders and extend my neck as I stare at her. She embodies grace and femininity, making me feel inadequate instantly. But then I feel Alistair's hand around my waist as he pulls me forward.

"Ms. Thurber, I'd like you to meet Ms. Zara York."

The ballerina actually bows her fucking head at me as I put out my hand, which she takes gently between her lithe fingers. "Such a pleasure to meet you," she says. "Please call me Hanna."

I'm speechless. Finally, after staring at her like a fish for a whole three seconds, I manage to stammer out, "You were amazing."

"Thank you. Did you enjoy the show?"

"Very much," I manage to reply.

"Good. A few of us are headed out for drinks if you two would like to join us," she says with a smile.

I know they want to hang out with Alistair. I know that, but inside I'm still forcing all of that fake confidence.

"Thank you," I reply.

"I think that would be wonderful," Alistair adds. "I'd like to show Zara the stage if that's okay."

Hanna waves her hands toward the stage door, and I squeeze Alistair's hand as he leads me through. There are a few stage hands cleaning up the area, but they mostly ignore us as we walk together toward the middle.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, somehow too interested in him, this beautiful, amazing man who for some reason wants to give me so much more than I deserve. Even if Alistair and I could be together how long would this last? He'd lose

interest after a while, blaming me for getting in the way of his career. I would fall recklessly head over heels for him and it would end in my heartbreak.

“Doing what?” he asks with a furrowed brow.

“Being so amazing to me.”

“I think you know why.” As he looks at me, I’m pulled into his orbit. As he wraps his hands around my waist, he leans his face close to mine again. It’s at this moment I realize just how big things are between us. This isn’t about sex or a fling. Alistiar Wilde is taking down his walls, even if only for a moment, for me. The man who doesn’t date, shoves his feelings away, and tries to buy his way out of anything uncomfortable is offering me his heart.

I can hardly breathe.

“You make me feel good, Zara, and I haven’t felt good in a long fucking time. When I’m with you, it hurts a little less. It doesn’t go away, but I don’t hate life so much when you look at me like you’re looking at me right now,” he says.

The pain etched in his features sends shivers down my spine. Reaching up, I run my fingers along his brow and down his cheek. Now that the walls are coming down, I see the pain underneath.

“Am I allowed to be happy, Zara? Or is this my punishment? Loving you if I can’t have you.”

The world stops turning as soon as I see the tears fill his eyes. I love him. I love him so much I can hardly stand it. And suddenly it feels so obvious. His words cut so deep because I feel them too. Are we allowed happiness? I don’t say it, but I know Nash feels the same way. The three of us are bound by grief. The guilt for surviving the people we loved the most has been eating us away for two years.

Wrecked and broken, we found each other again.

“You should be happy, Alistair. You shouldn’t be punished. None of us should.”

“Parents aren’t supposed to outlive their children, Zara. I shouldn’t be here if he’s not. I should have been—” I press my fingers against his lips to stop him.

I know it’s a terrible thing to think, and I won’t tell him what is on my mind, but I can’t hear him say what I know he wants to say. He wishes it were him on that helicopter. But me? I can’t bear the thought. I can’t fucking bear it.

“You do not deserve to be punished, Alistair. You deserve —”

He pulls me closer as my tears stream across my cheeks. Reaching up, I wipe his away from where they stain his skin.

“What exactly do I deserve? Loving my son’s girlfriend? I don’t deserve anything good.”

Grabbing his cheeks, I put his face in direct view of mine. “I’ve told you, Alistair. I don’t belong to Nash. I love him, yes, and I’m here to help him too, but I belong to you just as much as I belong to him.”

“Do you hear how fucked up that is?” he says with a laugh, and I kiss him.

“I don’t care how fucked up it is,” I mumble against his mouth.

“Neither do I.”



SITTING AT A POSH BAR DOWNTOWN, I'm having a hard time keeping up with conversation. There are six of us, mostly dancers and their partners. I'm suddenly jealous of Alistair's coolheadedness in these social situations, like he's used to looking casual and engaged at the same time. As for me, I'm too starstruck to join in easy conversation. Not to mention, the conversation we had on that stage shook me to my core, and I'm having a hard time acting casual since.

Alistair nestles me close to his side as I sip my red wine. His hands haven't left my body since the theatre, and I love the way I fit so perfectly against him.

"You two are a beautiful couple," Hanna says, looking at us both with a calm expression.

"Thank you," I reply, and when I look at Alistair, the corner of his lips lift in a small smile.

Leaning forward, I kiss him softly and he pulls me closer. I don't want to go home tonight. I know we have to, but I also know that Nash is waiting for me.

I'm not afraid to admit this, but tonight I want Alistair. I want to know his body, his touch, his pleasure. I want it all.

But we can't. Not right across the hall from Nash. Even if Nash was okay with us being together like that, doing it right next door seems wrong.

Looking up at him, I get lost in his eyes. His gaze roams softly over my face to my lips before he kisses me again. This thing between us feels so beautifully delicate.

"I don't want to go back," I whisper.

"Do you want to stay here? At the bar?" he answers quietly against my lips.

"No."

"What if I could get a room tonight?"

My eyes find his again, the weight of his words hanging between us. A night together, truly together. Is that what I want?

Yes, so badly.

But is this wrong? This territory is so uncharted, I don't know what's right or wrong anymore.

"Yes," I whisper before I can stop myself.

He squeezes my side and kisses me again.

"Let's get out of here," he says, and I look back at the group we came with. Hanna is watching us with a gentle smile.

"I'm sorry to be rude, but—"

"I understand. Have a lovely evening, and I hope we can see each other again."

"That would be lovely," I respond, standing next to Alistair.

Outside, the chilly November wind blows against us as we tuck our bodies close together, hustling toward the tall hotel building a block away. Neither of us speak. There's too much to say and not enough at the same time.

As we enter the lobby, there is a woman behind the counter who greets us both like she was expecting us.

“Good evening, Mr. Wilde. Your room is ready.”

“Thank you,” he responds, heading straight for the elevator.

I watch in awe as he hits the button for the penthouse, but I guess I shouldn't be that surprised. When the doors close, I stare up at him. “You were really prepared, weren't you?”

“I called an hour ago.” His voice is gruff but there's a hint of excitement in his eye. As the doors open, I'm left speechless. Slowly, I cross the huge room with its modern decorations and marble floors. Stopping at the floor to ceiling window with a view of the city below, I freeze.

I don't deserve this, I tell myself. It's like I want to keep reminding him that he got me, not Emma. He wanted the gold, but he got the bronze. We look the same but one shines a little brighter.

Then, I shove those thoughts away, and I square my shoulders. I belong here. I deserve this. It feels like a lie, but I say it to myself anyway.

Strong arms wrap around my waist from behind. He brushes my hair aside and kisses my neck. Letting out a soft moan, I pull him closer. Gently, he lifts my coat from my shoulders and he holds me close while we stare out at the view before us.

Then my eyes drift upward until I'm staring at our reflection, and I can't help but notice how natural it looks. Somewhere in the last month, his age stopped mattering. He's twenty-five years older than me, easily old enough to be my dad, but I don't care. This thing between us, the connection we feel, doesn't care about age.

His eyes drift up too until we're staring at each other in the glass.

“We don't have to do anything,” he says, his deep voice rumbling against my back, and I want to swim in it.

“Yes, we do,” I answer. “We’re powerless, Alistair.”

Then, I turn and face him, looking up at the weathered texture of his skin and his beard that’s slowly growing more white than black. He kisses me hard, and I melt in his arms.

All I can think as he pulls the zipper of my dress down is what he said to me at the theatre. *You’re everything to me.* I let it sing like a chorus through my mind as I fumble with his buttons. When I have his shirt undone, I drop it off of his shoulders, running my hands along his bare chest.

I press my lips to the spot over his heart, loving the way his skin feels against mine. His body is still so foreign to me, so I take my time, gliding my hands along the thick muscles of his chest and shoulders. He lets out a husky groan as I suck gently on his neck, letting him feel how hungry I am for him.

Then, my dress drops to the floor and I’m left standing in nothing but my thong. My skin is covered in goosebumps as the excitement courses through my veins. I can’t remember the last time I was this happy, excited for what’s to come.

He kisses my shoulders before letting his mouth move downward to my breasts, pulling each into his mouth and biting gently. My body purrs in his hands as he drops to his knees before me.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he moans as he slides my panties to the floor. I am putty in his hands. He carefully pulls off my heels, taking such care with my body. My bare back touches the glass of the window as his kisses move to the spot between my legs. I hope whoever is looking up at the skyline enjoys this view because I’m too distracted by the way his kisses are moving toward my center.

My gasp echoes across the room as his lips close around my clit. He applies just the right amount of pressure until my spine is curling and I’m clenching his hair in my fists.

“I’m going to come if you keep doing that,” I pant.

“That’s the idea,” he mumbles.

Pulling firmly on his hair between my fists, I make him look me in the eye. “Not yet.”

In one quick swoop, I'm over his shoulder and he's carrying me to the bedroom. I let out a yelp as he tosses me onto the bed. He stares down at me as he unbuttons his pants.

I fidget on the bed, watching him undress too fucking slowly. I need his touch so badly I'm almost in pain.

"Touch yourself," he demands. He leans his head back as he watches me pinch one of my nipples between my fingers. The other hand skims slowly to the spot between my legs, dipping a finger in to feel my own wetness waiting there.

He lets out a growl as his pants drop to the floor. "Remember when I told you what I would do to you if I found you in my bed? I told you I would strip you down and stare at you. Do you remember what comes next?"

Biting my lip, I nod. "You said you would make me come as many times as you could with your mouth and your hands."

"Then what?" he asks, stroking himself while I play between my legs. My breathing has turned into a slow pant as my orgasm starts to build. I could just watch him work his impressive length all day, but I know what's coming, and I want it. "Then, you would fuck me."

"How?" he asks, his own voice growing thick.

"Hard," I answer, high-pitched and on the edge. Quickly he snatches away my hand before I can finish myself off.

"That's my job." Then his hands are where mine was, rough and gentle at the same time. Soon, his tongue is there too, growling against me, and my back arches off the bed. He is relentless, taking me hard and without mercy until my orgasm slams into me, making me cry out his name.

When I'm still catching my breath, he grabs me by the ankles whipping my body to the edge of the bed. The head of his cock presses against my now soaking center, and he barks his command. "Look at me, Zara."

I open my eyes as he teases me, pushing in only an inch only to pull back out. "Alistair," I cry out. Linking my heels around his hips, I try to pull him in, but he wears a sly smirk as he holds out.

“Do you have any idea how much I want to be inside you?” he asks, his voice husky with lust.

“Fuck me, Alistair,” I croak.

I let out a whimper as he slams in. Once he’s to the hilt, I clench my legs, holding him in place, pulling him even deeper.

I want to absorb him, make him a part of me. I want to memorize the way he’s looking at me, like we’re one and I’m no longer alone.

“Don’t move for a moment,” I whisper as he lays his body on top of mine, my lips against his neck. “Just be inside me for a moment.”

“I’m not going anywhere, baby.” He takes my hands and links our fingers, holding them against the bed above my head. Looking up at him, I find his lips and kiss him to fight the tears that suddenly want to spring free. What is happening to me?

I’m not sad. I don’t know what I am, but suddenly the emotion of it overwhelms me, and I grind my hips, urging him to move. Slowly he pulls out before pressing back in with a little more force that makes me yelp. Again and again he strokes, reaching deeper and deeper each time, hitting spots that don’t just make my body sing but fill my heart with something I didn’t expect.

“Alistair,” I cry out as he picks up speed.

Our bodies move in perfect rhythm, and I never want this to end. As he lets go of my hands, his fingers roam my body, one stopping my breast as the other cups my ass. Our bodies melt together until we are one.

“Harder,” I gasp, suddenly hungry for more, and I feel a moment of hesitation as he glances at me. I’m not ashamed. There’s a hit of familiarity there. I’ve seen that look before, but not on him.

Then he answers the call, slamming hard, rutting against me and making it almost hurt until I let out a scream. My nails scratch against his back, hoping I draw blood.

“I’m going to come,” he groans into my neck.

We erupt together, our faces meeting for another fierce kiss as my legs tense around him. I feel his pulse inside me, and I can’t stop the tears that fall onto the bed.

We both come down together, relaxing into the mattress. His lips don’t leave my body until he pulls away to see my tear-soaked eyes.

“You’re crying.”

Smiling up at him, I try to memorize this moment. Pulling his face down, I don’t respond. I press my lips to his mouth and I wish my heart wasn’t being torn in two at the moment.

We don’t move from that spot, and when he finally pulls out of me, I stay on the bed. I don’t want that part of him coming out. I want to keep it.

He pulls back the covers and we move to cuddle beneath them. We’ll have to go back to the house before dawn, but for now, I want to savor every moment. Mostly because I know nothing is going to be the same now.



ALISTAIR FALLS ASLEEP EASILY, and I try so hard to shut my mind off, but it won’t leave me alone. It’s at war with my heart at the moment and neither will give me a moment to rest.

It’s ballet all over again. I’m at the peak, and things couldn’t possibly get any better than they are at this moment, so why push it? What could possibly be waiting around the corner?

Heartbreak. Pain.

This was just a job. That one million dollars was all that mattered, and it’s what I need to move on with my life, but I can’t seem to convince myself of that anymore.

My heart is tied to Alistair, but knowing Nash is back at the house, sleeping alone sends a stabbing feeling to my chest.

Tomorrow I have to tell him everything between us is over. That I'm in love with Alistair and I want to be with him, but the moment that thought crosses my mind a body-wracking sob shatters through me. I can't bear the thought of letting Nash go. We're not done yet. He's made so much progress, looking more and more like the Nash I once knew, but he's not there yet. He still has so much to open up about, and if I leave him now...will I be dooming him to return to his old ways?

He likes the competition, but how far can that go? He won't be happy to find out we slept together. I'm sure he already knows.

He just started talking to Alistair again? What will this do to their relationship? Even if Nash approved of my going to the ballet with his dad, was he ready for me to break things off with him? Did he expect me to return to him?

I can't go back to Del Rey ignoring everything that happened here tonight. I can't go back to the way things were.

Unable to sleep, I get up and walk to the shower. Standing under the hot stream, I try to settle the warring emotions in my head, but they only get louder. These two men are going to tear me apart. They already are.

And what if my presence tears them apart? Will I ruin their already broken relationship?

I can't.

The truth settles painfully on my heart. I can't go back to Del Rey. I don't belong there, and if I go back, nothing will get better. Nash will be resentful. Alistair will be jealous. Everyone will be in pain—mostly me.

I don't have time to cry now. I know if I wake up with Alistair here in this hotel, I'll never talk him into this. He won't let me leave but he has to understand I have to. I have to end all of this before things get worse. For Nash. For him. For this family.

So I slip on my dress and I take his jacket, wanting to bring the one thing I had with me when I started this two months ago. Without another sound, I grab my purse which

has everything in it that I need—my phone, money, and keys to my apartment.

Silently as I can, I take one last look at the man sleeping peacefully in the darkness. As far as he knows I'm still nestled next to him, and I hope he sleeps for a long time with that belief because when he wakes up, he won't be happy. But it's for the best.

Without another word, I leave the penthouse and this amazing life that's not meant for me, and I whisper goodbye to the happiness that was almost mine.



alister

THE EERIE SILENCE of the hotel room when I peel my eyes open will haunt me forever. The sound of her breathing next to me should have been the first thing I heard, but it was gone. Instead, there was only silence.

I shouldn't be surprised. I put my faith in a woman I paid for. I spilled my fucking heart out to her after asking her to help my son. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I almost chase after her too. I'm sure I could find her at the airport. The next flight back doesn't leave for another hour, but what good would that do? She knows how I feel about her now. I spilled everything like a fucking teenager.

Nash is going to kill me when I get back to the house, and yet all I can think on this drive is that we both brought this on.

Why did he let me take her to the city at all? He didn't fight for her. Was he being gracious to me or does he just not care for her enough? Did I put too much faith in him loving her at all?

I've already transferred her the money I promised but not because I want her to think she was only worth a million dollars to us. I don't know, maybe I did it out of spite. If she thinks her job here is done, then she can have what she's owed.

Fuck, I can't bear the thought of going back to Del Rey without her. I just need to talk to Nash. I need to know how he feels about her, for real this time, and then I can make a plan. Either way she's going back to that island. I have to know whether it will be with me or him. If Nash loves her, she'll go with him. I know she will. She loves him. She said she did.

If he doesn't love her and he let her go because she means less to him than she does to me, then I can beg her to come back for me. I hate that I'm hoping that's the case. I hate that my son needs her, but I want her for myself.

He's made so much progress. I can't ruin that, so if I need to stay off the island I will.

As I pull up to the house, I see my son's cold grimace from the porch. It's nearly seven in the morning. Fuck, I should have been back sooner. His expression only grows harsher when he notices the empty passenger seat.

As I step out, he stands.

"What did you do?" he spits at me.

"Why did you let her go with me?" I counter.

"My question first," he replies.

Running my hands through my hair, I don't even feel the biting cold wind through my shirt. Right now, I'm blazing hot anyway. "What do you think I did, Nash?"

He clenches his jaw and turns away.

"When I woke up this morning she was gone, and how can we be surprised? I was paying her to be here. It was never real to her. You let her go like you didn't care about her."

"You're wrong. It was real," he yells back.

“Oh bullshit, Nash. You practically pushed her into my arms, and you knew exactly what was going to happen between us. You just love having something to hate me for.”

“I never run out of things to hate you for.”

“Fine, hate me. But don’t take it out on her. I’m sorry I acted on my feelings, but you’ve been dragging her along, making her think you care about her just to spite me.”

“I do care about her,” he answers through grit teeth. “I didn’t want to, but I do.”

“Bullshit.”

“This is all your fault,” he says, stepping toward me, and for the first time in our lives, I’m waiting for my son to punch me. I deserve it, and if he does, I won’t fight back, but I brace myself for the impact anyway.

“If you really care about her, then I’ll get her back, Nash. Take her to Del Rey, and I’ll leave. Don’t blame her for what happened with me.”

I see his knuckles clench into a fist, but he doesn’t move. He spews hatred through his eyes at me, but before he can move, something in him softens. There are words he wants to say, but he won’t.

“Why would she choose me when she clearly loves you so much?”

“Oh, clearly,” I laugh. “She couldn’t even stick around until morning. I should have never hired her, but fuck, I was desperate.”

I expect Nash to agree, argue with me some more, but he doesn’t. Instead he looks away, giving me a moment’s relief from the hatred in his stare.

“Do you know why I found her at the strip club that night?” he says quietly, and my pulse quickens, thinking about her at that place.

I’m afraid to ask. “Why?”

“Because I remembered how much you liked her. Every time she came to the house with Emma, I saw how you watched her. We all did. You were obsessed with her. I almost forgot she existed and when I needed a way to hurt you, I found her, and I fucked her. I made sure people got pictures of us together and posted them online so you’d see. I wanted you to know I still hated you.”

“Nash.” His name slips out of my mouth as a reaction, like being slapped across the face.

“She always liked me, but I never even considered her. So it was easy to get her to open her legs for me that first time.”

This time I’m the one clenching my fists, and I want to hit those thoughts right out of his head.

“I never expected you to bring her to Del Rey, but I figured it was perfect. I could make you hurt more.”

I can’t react. I’m fucking speechless with this sudden realization I might have brought Zara into this fucked up relationship only to get hurt by my own son.

“Why would you do that?” he asks, his features shrouded in pain, tears filling his eyes. “Why would you bring her for me if you wanted her for yourself?”

“I never wanted her for myself, Nash. I wanted her for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my son. When she was around, you fucking smiled. And not while you were drunk or to bring me pain. For a minute, you looked goddamn happy.”

“I was happy,” he says, and my heart cracks. I took this from him. I came here for Thanksgiving and I stole his happiness, the very happiness I was supposed to give to him. I fucked up.

“Then, I’ll get her back, Nash. She’ll come back for you. I’ll stay away, I promise.”

“But you’re happy too, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be fine,” I reply without hesitation. That’s the parent’s response to everything, right? I’d give Nash everything I have, every ounce of blood in my body, the air from my chest, and I’d promise him the same thing. I’ll be fine.

“Don’t you fucking get it? I told her to get flying lessons from you. I told her to go to the ballet with you. As fucked up as it is, she’s the only tie between us. I know you love her, admit it. Stop trying to spare my fucking feelings and tell me. Do you love her?”

“Do *you*?” I reply.

He swallows, then nods, blinking the moisture away. “Answer me, Dad. Do you love her?”

“Yes, I love her, Nash, but that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Then, bring her back. Bring her back and stay, and let’s just go back to the way things were.”

There’s a new silence around us, different than the silence I felt this morning when I realized she was gone. That silence felt like pain but this one feels like healing.

“But what about—” I ask, but he cuts me off.

“I know you think she was only there for the money, but I promise you, she wasn’t. It was more than that to her. We’re her family, and Del Rey is her home. What else could possibly matter?”

I think I know what my son is suggesting by the way his eyes won’t meet mine, but I have to replay every word to be sure we’re on the same page.

When he finally looks up at me, there’s less tension in his shoulders. “Fuck, maybe we already blew it, but it’s worth a shot. We have to get her back.”

Then, I remember what Zara and I said last night as we stood on that stage and spilled our hearts to each other. She told me she belongs to me as much as she belongs to him, so maybe this has been happening all along and I never realized it. It’s too insane to even think, sharing a girl with my son, people would burn me at the stake for this, but like Nash said.

She's our family and together is our home. There's no one on the island to tell us it's wrong, and if it's what will make him happy, then who am I to argue? I want to see him smile, and it seems he wants the same for me.

All Zara wants is to feel like she's not being torn in two. Whether or not this is the way to do it, I don't know, but he was right. It's worth a shot.



I DON'T KNOW why I call the club the minute I get in the door. There's a million dollars in my bank account right now, so it's not about needing the money. It's about getting the fuck out of this apartment. It's about trying to go back to my life and pretending this past month didn't happen.

After hanging my black gown up in my dressing room, I put on my thong and pasties, ready to hit the stage for the first time in a month. The girls are fawning over the dress, so I offer it to the first new girl who asks me about it. In return she has to give me the yoga shorts and tank top she came to work in.

Why am I acting like this? I don't know. My life derailed, and I want to celebrate how much I royally fucked it up.

"Girl, where have you been?"

"Are you okay?"

"I heard you were seen out with Alistair Wilde."

The onslaught of questions doesn't stop, but I answer them all nonchalantly.

“I was on vacation.”

“I’m fine.”

“Alistair Wilde is not my boyfriend.”

I can’t let my mind go back to last night or the fact that aside from a small nap on the plane, I haven’t slept a wink. I’m wired and anxious, and these Red Bulls aren’t helping. I had to keep talking myself into the decision to leave. My mind understands, but my heart wants to turn around. It doesn’t understand that loving is a stupid, *stupid* thing to do and loving two men—even worse. It doesn’t realize how much it’s going to hurt to choose one over the other so it’s simply best to walk away before anyone gets really hurt.

Still, the thought of Alistair waking up alone after the most amazing night hurts. It stings even more that my phone is silent. He didn’t call. Didn’t text. He just accepted my absence without being surprised or outraged, and he let me walk right out of his life.

I get it. It’s better for him and his relationship with his son if I’m out of the picture. Nash won’t be too upset about my absence. It’s just sex with us. Sex and friendship.

So when my phone didn’t pop up with messages after my early afternoon flight, I shut it off and left it at home. I basically became an emotionless zombie after that. All I can do now is go through the motions, step by step. And this is how the rest of my life will be.

It’s not even dark out yet and the club is packed—holiday weekend and all.

The crowd gets loud after they announce my name and my big return. I should be happy. They want me here. I’m valued here.

But as I take the stage, the lights above me instantly make me think of last night, and for a moment, I let myself believe I could be more. He made me believe it.

Shutting off the pain, I dance. My robe falls to the floor, and the crowd cheers. Being naked in front of strangers again

doesn't feel the same as it used to. It feels wrong, like I'm showing them something that belongs to Nash...and Alistair.

Both of them.

When I drop down to the floor, shaking my bare ass in front of the men in front row, I hate myself. I have to shut my eyes to keep the tears from coming out. Emma would have never let this happen. She loved one man. Why couldn't I just do the same?

Just as I feel someone slip a dollar bill into my G-string, there's a commotion in the club. Then, something heavy is draped over my body. I let out a scream as I'm lifted off the floor of the stage.

"Take your hands off my son," a voice booms from nearby and I look up to see Nash's face next to mine. Alistair stands just next to him, glaring angrily at the bodyguard who's staring at me in concern.

"We're taking her home, so get the fuck out of our way," Nash grits out, carrying me in a cradle hold.

"Put me down!" I scream, struggling against Nash's arms. There's more of a commotion, and I watch as the bodyguards close in on Alistair. I finally manage to claw myself free and stomp away from the men. Nash grabs me by the waist, and I swing at him. There's a struggle, and someone is able to restrain him as I escape.

Why am I fighting him? Tears stream down my face as I leave the ruckus behind me, reaching the dressing room. I can't look in the mirror or in any of the faces that ambush me with concern.

"You," a deep voice booms at me. I turn to see my boss, staring at me with his yellow teeth clenched and a wild look in his eye. "Get the fuck out of my club and don't come back."

"I'm leaving!" I scream. The only thing I have to wear, since the dress is missing, is Alistair's jacket, once again. Snatching it up along with my purse, I hear Alistair say my name, and the tears pour even harder down my face.

When I glance back, I see him and my boss staring daggers at each other. Nash follows behind, wiping blood from his lip.

The room is quiet as everyone stares wide-eyed back and forth between us. I'm not strong enough for this. I just keep fucking up, and I don't know where to go or what to do. All I know is that I'm so fucking tired of being alone. So when my eyes meet Alistair's in the mirror, I crumble. He's so out of place here, this strong, king of a man, who for some reason looks at me like I matter to him. My knees buckle, but I don't hit the floor.

Suddenly, I'm whisked away toward the door. The room is silent as I leave the club, and it's not until I'm dropped into the backseat of an SUV that I can speak.

"What do you think you're doing?" I snap. Nash settles into the seat next to me as Alistair opens the driver's door, climbing behind the wheel.

"We're taking you home," Nash answers me. The jacket is around my shoulders, but I'm still mostly naked.

The car starts moving, and I'm sitting there in shock as I stare at them. There are literally dollar bills hanging from my underwear.

"Stop the car, Alistair. You guys can't do this. You don't own me! I was just doing my job."

"You're never doing that again," Nash says without looking at me.

"Why? Because you don't like it? Because this body is yours? Well, don't you care that your dad was the one fucking it last night?" I'm sleep deprived, hopped up on Red Bull and acting insane. I can see that. It's like I'm seeing myself from the outside looking in, but neither of them really react.

"Someone answer me!" I shriek. "Alistair, stop the car!"

"Let's go to your apartment and we'll talk," Alistair answers as he pulls onto the highway toward my place.

My chin starts to quiver, feeling like I'm being scolded. As we reach my apartment, I burst out of the car, hugging

Alistair's coat around me. It barely covers my ass, and I can feel the cool breeze. The guys are right on my tail as I get to the door.

Huffing in anger, I stab the key into the hole and stomp in. I don't want this. I don't want them butting into my life, trying to control my every move, drowning me in attention. I don't fucking want any of it.

And yet, just seeing them again is making me emotional. I can't want to crawl into Alistair's arms again. Right now, I'd rather tear through walls.

"I'm home. Now you two can leave."

Nash presses past me easily, but Alistair stands at the doorway looking at me with a blank expression. I'm still crying, and I hate myself for it.

"This isn't your home, Zara."

"Yes, it is," I say, my voice shaking.

"Pack your shit. We're leaving," Nash says as I hear a bag hit the floor behind me.

I don't move. I'm staring at Alistair. "Can I come in?" he asks.

Finally, I relent, moving out of the way. "I can't go back to Del Rey. I can't."

"You're going, Zara." Nash is full of rage, not bothering to bite back the anger in the clench of his jaw.

Alistair puts a hand on his shoulder. "We said we were going to give her a choice."

"Well that was before we found out how quickly she would go back to shaking those tits on stage." He's staring at me as he says it.

"They're my tits, Nash. I can do whatever the fuck I want with them." Suddenly, I'm flying at him, and Alistair's hand around my waist stops me before I take two months of frustration and anger out on him.

“We want you to come back to Del Rey with both of us, Zara,” Alistair says with a much more level head than Nash or me.

“I told you, I can’t do it. I can’t choose. And I don’t want to.”

“We’re not making you choose, baby,” Alistair says just next to my ear, and my body jolts in his arms as I look up at him, his words starting to register.

“What?”

This time I look at Nash. His anger has settled too, but he still doesn’t speak.

“I mean it,” I say to him. “I came out to Del Rey for the money. Everything happened between us...it means nothing to me. I just wanted the money.”

Neither of them react, which confirms they can both read right through my bullshit.

“And you’re not going to make me choose? So what? You’re just going to pretend you don’t care when I’m fucking your dad?” I say to Nash. Turning to Alistair, I add, “Or when I’m fucking your son.”

Still, they stay silent, and my heart thrums in my ears. The room begins to sway, and I grab onto Alistair for support. “Wait...” I gulp. “Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?” My eyes are dancing between the two of them, and neither of them are laughing like I am. Suddenly it bubbles out of me, fueled by artificial energy coursing through my veins.

“Del Rey is your home, and we are your family. If you can’t choose, then we won’t make you.” Alistair says it like it’s so easy, like my heart will be protected so long as I don’t have to pick one over the other.

“You’re not joking,” I say, as my laughter turns back into tears.

“No,” Nash says finally. My beautiful, tortured Nash just stares at me, and I know he won’t come out and say how badly

he wants me to come home, but I see it in his expression. Right now, I'm dying to touch him.

"Zara, I never should have made you feel responsible for fixing us," Alistair says, but my eyes are still on Nash. He should hate me for what I did with Alistair, and I keep searching his features to see how serious he is about this crazy idea.

"So, you're not going to be mad when I sleep with him?" I ask, and I see him flinch.

"I might be a little angry," he answers flatly, and I know exactly what that means. We can go back to the way things were. Sex being how we punish each other, punish ourselves. How we shed the years of pain and frustration until all that's left is us.

"And you?" I ask, looking at Alistair. "You don't have a problem with sharing me?"

"I'm just trying to keep my family together." He says it with so much confidence, for the first time I see the father in him.

Any sensible person would turn this down. It's a recipe for disaster. We will only end up hurt and angry and possibly more broken than when we started this whole thing, but I am not a sensible person.

The grief from that crash ricocheted, and it didn't just bring us pain, but it drilled holes in the very fabric of our lives. Relationships, happiness, our futures, our dreams, it's all been broken. So what if we do try to find happiness in this very unconventional way? So what if I love them both and the three of us can only be together this way. So what if this is our family, and this is what makes us happy.

Without a word, I walk to the bedroom, and shut myself in. I don't stop to think as I get dressed, pulling my gray sweats up over a much more comfortable pair of underwear. Most of my clothes are already at the house so I don't need much more but I pack a few extras just for show anyway. As I walk out of the bedroom, they both look up at me expectantly.

“Let’s go,” I mutter as I walk toward the door. No one says a word as they follow me out of the apartment, locking the door on their way out.



nash

I'M NOT LETTING GO of her. From her apartment to the airfield, I keep Zara by my side. I know the deal is that I don't get her to myself, but I get her now. All I see is her on that stage, shaking her ass in some sick fuck's face, and my palm has been itching ever since. It's not Zara's fault, and there's nothing wrong with being a dancer. I know that, but this isn't about right and wrong. This is about her pretending this was just a job. This is about her thinking she could leave me without so much as a goodbye, like what we had meant nothing. It's about feeding something inside of me that only has a taste for Zara. And right now, it's fucking insatiable.

She sits right next to me on the flight home, and I try to calm the racing of my heart. The scent of her perfume fills my senses, and I try to remember the moment everything changed for me. Was it her meeting my grandparents? No, before that. Before the conversation on the boat. Before the pool. Before I found her sleeping in the guest house on that very first day. Everything changed for me the night at the club and I found a girl as broken and sad as I was. A girl who's pain mirrored mine.

From that minute, everything with Zara changed for me.

Looking over at her in the helicopter, I know she feels the change too. She squeezes my hand, squirming in her seat like she can't wait to be on the ground—to be home.

The moment we land, I pull her out of her seat and carry her over my shoulder. She gasps my name, but she doesn't fight. I hear my dad coming in for a landing after us, but we're long gone, down the hall to my room. He had her to himself last night, so tonight she's mine.

As I toss her on the bed, she stares up at me with wild eyes. It's anticipation.

"If you want me to be gentle, you better say something now." My voice is unrecognizable, deep and full of something I've never heard come out of me before. Rage. Passion. Pride.

This woman is mine, and I'm going to remind her of that.

No—ours. She's ours, and maybe if I hadn't seen her on that stage today, I wouldn't feel like this, but even she can't deny that whatever this is, it feels good.

She doesn't respond, and my dick hardens even more.

"Come here," I growl. Slowly she moves to all fours, crawling over to me. Digging my hands into her hair, grasping her at the scalp, I pull her face close to mine. She winces from the pain as I kiss her, gnashing our teeth together as I bite her lips and tongue. A sweet cry echoes through the room.

"Let him hear you scream for me," I whisper against her mouth.

"Nash," she whimpers, and before she can say another word, I toss her across the bed.

Standing at the end, I stare down at her as I unbuckle my belt, whipping it off in a swift motion that makes her flinch.

"You've fucked up, Zara."

Her breath is heavy and her entire body moves with each inhale and exhale.

“You left me,” I say, snapping the belt. Her breath hitches. “You fucked him. Then you stripped for those strangers.” I snap it again. “You want to strip? Then, you’ll strip for me,” I say, crossing the room, belt in hand. Sitting in the chair, I glare at her. Pulling out my phone, I hit the music app and play something so loud, she flinches. It’s not strip club music by any means, but it’s what I want, and right now, I’m getting exactly what I want.

She doesn’t hesitate. Crawling across the bed, she sits up on her knees and pulls her shirt over her head. I’m staring at her bare tits, and suddenly, I’m reminded of that first night. How much I tried to degrade her just to spite him. I never expected her to be like this. To be the bravest fucking person I ever met. She’s not afraid of anything. And it only makes me want to scare her more.

She climbs off the bed, staring at me as I run my tongue along my bottom lip, then biting it so hard I almost puncture the skin. She drives me wild, just looking at her, and with her gaze on me, she mirrors my movement. Then, I unbutton my pants and let my cock spring free. I want her to see what she’s doing to me, and she stares down at it immediately. Lust fills her eyes as she turns and bends at the waist, pulling her pants down to expose her ass to me.

“Panties off,” I demand, and she takes them down too.

She walks toward me while I stroke myself, and when she gets close enough, I wrap my fingers around her throat. “Who do you belong to, Zara?”

“I belong to you, Nash,” she wheezes as I drag her body onto my lap.

“Then, ride my dick like there’s no one else.”

I keep my hands on her throat as she lowers herself, and I thrust in. Her face twists in pain and she claws at my shirt, so I thrust again and again.

“Harder,” she cries, and I can’t help but kiss her. Then, I reach for my belt sitting on the arm of the chair. With it folded in half, I swing it hard against the bare flesh of her ass. She

didn't see it coming, and it makes her whole body freeze as she lets out a scream. The hairs on the back of my neck stand, and I notice the way her nipples harden.

“Again,” she gasps after a moment.

The crack of the belt is louder this time, and her cry is deeper, a grunt from deep within her. The pain mixes with her pleasure, intensifying it. And I guess you draw some comparisons there because it's the pain of our grief that brings out the best parts of our relationships.

With that thought, I swing the belt again. Her body pumps harder on my lap like she's chasing her climax, and I feel her soak my dick every time the belt lands against her ass.

“Don't ever leave me again, do you understand?”

“I promise,” she answers, and when she opens her eyes, there are tears there, bringing out the bloodshot red around her irises. Letting go of her throat, I stand, carrying her against my body as I drop her onto the dresser. The large mirror attached, wobbles and shakes as I fuck her harder.

Staring at my reflection, I realize I may not be the same guy I once was. I'm changing, stronger, and Zara clinging to my neck, her pleasure cries in my ear only add to that image. It was never about hurting Zara or taking something from her. It's about letting our guard down. About discovering the deepest, darkest parts of ourselves.

Her hands are on my chin, clutching my face as she pulls my attention back to her. “Fuck me like you missed me, Nash.”

Tearing her off the dresser, I flip her around and slam in from behind. Her moan is low and guttural this time. I know she's close. My fingers find her clit, circling with pressure and I know I'm about to blow too.

We stare at each other in the reflection, both of us on the verge, and we keep our eyes there until we can't take it anymore.

Sinking my teeth into the flesh of her shoulder, she screams as I come. Every muscle under her beautiful, olive-

colored flesh tenses in my arms, and her knuckles turn white as she grips the dresser.

Her pussy pulses and tightens around my dick, and I let go, tightening my grip on her hips as I fill her.

We give our hearts a moment to return to normal before I carry her to bed. She melts into my arms. Laying her down, I do something I haven't done so far since we've been together. I take my time kissing every inch of her body, especially the areas I marked, red and swollen from my roughness.

She has a hazy smile as I kiss her mouth. After a long ass night of no sleep because she wasn't with me, I'm fucking exhausted too, and maybe that's why I'm feeling so goddamn emotional. As I stare at her, I realize I've never felt this way about a girl before, but Zara makes me wild and settles me at the same time. My dad has always told me women were a distraction, and I know if I keep believing that bullshit, I'm going to end up like him.

I don't know where things are going with Zara or if they'll stay like this forever, but she can distract me all she fucking wants.

Sleep has already claimed her when I curl my body against hers, pulling her head to the crook of my arm. And I decide to just let the words out I'm holding in because I may not be brave enough to say them tomorrow.

"I fucking love you, Zara York," I mumble into her hair.

She wraps her arms around my waist, apparently more awake than I thought. "I fucking love you too, Nash Wilde."



IN MY DREAM, I'm falling. But the crash I'm waiting for never comes. Instead I land softly in a warm bed, surrounded by arms, skin, and lips. It's inviting and comfortable, and when I open my eyes, I'm not afraid of the reality I'm about to face.

I breathe in Nash's familiar scent before placing a kiss on his chin. Last night was intense, the most intense it's ever been between us. He was angry, I could tell, but there was something else there. Fear. Nash was afraid of losing me, and I had to bite back the desire to sob the entire time he was fucking me. Not because he was hurting me, but because we were shedding a layer we had been wearing to keep ourselves protected. We bared our souls to each other last night.

Running my fingers along his brow and down his cheek, I make a promise to myself that I won't ever play with his emotions again. There is a darkness that dwells inside Nash Wilde, and I love him for it. It matches my darkness.

Crawling out of bed, I head back to my room in the guest house to shower. Putting on a pair of leggings and one of

Nash's sweatshirts, I try not to let my mind settle too much on the last forty-eight hours. I'm afraid if I think about it too long, I'll realize how insane this whole thing is.

In the main house, I smell frying bacon coming from the kitchen. I expect to find Astrid standing at the stove, but it's Alistair standing there in a tight-fitting T-shirt and jogging pants, looking so good I pause to watch him.

When he notices me, he greets me with a soft glare. There is still so much between us I don't quite know how to behave around him.

"Good morning," he says, turning back to the food. I desperately hope he didn't hear us last night like Nash wanted. I was too lost in the moment to realize how loud I was. My ass is still sore from his belt, and I'm pretty sure I shook the walls with my screams. But God, my panties are a little wetter just thinking about it.

The only sound in the room is the crackling bacon as I walk to the fridge to pull out a bottle of water. I lean against the counter and wait for this awkwardness to pass or until I think of something to say.

It stays like that for another long minute. Then, he turns the burner off on the bacon and wipes his hands on a kitchen towel. As he turns to me, it feels like my heart is in my throat. He should be mad at me for so many things. Running off after the night in the penthouse, going right back to the club, fucking Nash the first chance I had. And I wait for him to express all of the anger I know he must be feeling.

Instead, he wordlessly takes the water from my hands and sets it on the counter. Then, he pulls me into his arms and I soften against his big, warm body. His chin rests on the top of my head, and I listen only to the beat of his heart.

"You left without a word," he says, and I resist the urge to cry against his chest.

I nod before looking up at him. "It wasn't because that night wasn't amazing."

"Then why?"

“Because I was scared, Alistair.”

Lifting my chin, he makes me look him in the eye. “Scared of what?” His tone is cold and commanding, his brow taut and his nostrils flared.

“Of falling,” I whisper. “When you fall for two men... you’re bound to have your heart broken.”

“So, you left me,” he replies, and it’s not a question.

“Because you scare me the most,” I answer in a soft breath. The kitchen is silent except for our gentle whispers.

His thumb brushes my bottom lip as he leans down to kiss me. “Zara, Zara, Zara,” he whispers. “What have I taught you about facing your fears?”

I can’t help but smile against his mouth, remembering how he had to drag my ass into that helicopter the first time to get me to get over my fear of flying. Now he wants me to dive headfirst into this, my greatest fear of all—love. Which is a hell of a lot scarier than flying if I’m honest.

Hooking my arm around his neck, I deepen the kiss. He tastes like toothpaste and coffee, and I want to start every day like this. Before it can get too heated, a timer goes off, and we pull away.

After he pulls a tray of biscuits out of the oven, he tosses down the oven mitts and stares at me again. Damn, why is a man who can cook so fucking sexy? I’m busy admiring him while the silence takes over again and we stare at each other.

“What now?” I mumble, biting my lip. I hop onto the counter, wincing at the soreness there, and he walks over to me, placing his body between my knees.

He seems to be thinking for a moment, letting his eyes devour me as his hands run up and down my legs. “You call the shots, baby. We do this as long as you want and whatever you’re comfortable with. As long as you two are home, I don’t care.”

I can’t keep my hands from running through his facial hair that’s grown into a cropped beard since I got here. Kissing him

again, I feel a smile stretch across my face.

“This is crazy, Alistair.”

He smiles too, but then he kisses the smile right off my face. I may still be sore from my night with Nash, but I’m already ready to climb back into Alistair’s bed.

“You’re telling me? I heard you all night with my son, Zara. And all I can think is...I can do better than that.” He yanks my hips closer, grinding himself against me.

“This will be the death of me,” I reply as his mouth reaches my neck.

“What’s for breakfast?” a deep voice asks from the doorway. Alistair pulls away in a rush as if we’re being caught, and he busies himself with breakfast. I catch the way he adjusts himself in his pants, keeping himself hidden in the corner.

Nash barely even reacts to seeing me in Alistair’s arms. “That’s my sweatshirt,” he says to me as I hop down from the counter. Then his hand lands hard and loud against my sore ass, and the pain reverberates through my entire body. I let out a gasping scream and chase Nash across the kitchen, but he manages to dodge all of my swings.

“Jesus, Nash,” Alistair scolds him.

I can’t seem to wipe the smile off my face. I don’t know if we’re breaking rules or if there are no rules anymore, but so far, this feels natural. We’re a family, and it might be unconventional, but if we love each other, what else could possibly matter?

THE THREE OF US sit down for breakfast and considering what a mindfuck the last couple days have been, it’s surprisingly neutral conversation. No one brings up the fact that I’ve slept with the both of them in the past two days, and I would like to keep it that way.

“The aviation showcase in Hamburg is coming up,” Alistair says nonchalantly. “Right after Christmas.” I have no

idea what that is, but Nash clearly does because he tenses. There's a subtle tick in his jaw as he scrolls through his phone trying to ignore his dad.

"Would you like to go?" he asks Nash.

When his son finally looks up, it feels like you could cut the tension with a knife. "Who, me?"

"Yeah, of course, you. You used to love to go to that."

Nash's foot starts bouncing under the table. "Well, I'm not a kid anymore."

"Think about it," Alistair says, finally giving up, and I reach across to touch his shoulder. I can't keep my eyes off Nash and I wonder if Alistair can read him as easily as I can. "As for you," he says, pointing at me. "You have to get back to your lessons today."

I feel myself start pouting thinking about it. "We're still doing that?"

"Yes, we're still doing that," he commands, and I hate to love when Alistair acts like my boss again, like he's so in charge of me—which of course, he is. I can't really complain about being back in close quarters with Alistair. I try to hide how much it turns me on by shoving another piece of bacon in my mouth, but apparently I don't hide my excitement quite enough because Nash pushes back from the table and stalks off to the kitchen.

"I'll be in the gym today. Have fun at your lesson," he calls as he disappears down the hallway.

"Ready when you are," I tell Alistair with a smile.

THAT NIGHT I skip my guest house altogether and crawl into Alistair's bed where I read another twisted love story he picked out for me. After dinner where we all actually sat together and no one had to be bribed to be there, Alistair

excused himself to his office for a work call, so I wanted to surprise him here.

This is my first time in his bed, and it's so comfortable I almost don't want to do anything but sleep. Today was the toughest of our lessons and he's trying to get me to memorize all of the emergency protocols, but there are so many, and they just won't stick. Even when he rewarded me with a kiss for every right answer, I wasn't able to retain the information. After a while, I managed to persuade him into just making out with me in the cockpit regardless of how many I got right.

It's past ten when I finally hear him walking down the hallway. He stops and stares at me for a long moment when he sees me in his bed.

"Don't look so happy to see me," I say.

"I thought I missed my chance. You weren't in your guest house."

"I sort of figured this would be a fifty-fifty thing. One night here, one night there..."

He shakes his head like even he can't quite accept that this is happening, but he doesn't seem to complain as he tears his shirt off and crawls across the bed. Tossing my book aside, I welcome him between my legs, wrapping them around him as he settles his weight on top of me.

We only had one night together, and I already love the way his broad hips and heavy frame feel on top of me with my legs caging him in.

When his lips touch mine, all of my worries melt away. It's like I waited for this moment all day, and now that I have finally have him, I don't want to move. His kisses move to my neck, and I pull at the hem of his shirt, desperate to touch him again. First his shirt comes off. Then, he pulls off mine.

"Jesus Christ," he says, his eyes on my neck and shoulder.

"Don't freak out. I'm fine."

I considered this might be a problem, but I guess I thought about it a tad too late. The bite mark is purple now, and there's

some redness around my neck where Nash held me last night. He hasn't even seen my ass yet.

And even though I tell him not to freak out, I wait for him to panic. Instead, he kisses the purple mark first, then the red ones. A deep growl shakes his chest as he grinds his hips against me, his erection like steel against my core. "You like it like that, Zara?" he asks.

"Yes," I stammer, unsure how honest I'm supposed to be about this.

Then, he lifts his body until he's staring down at me. "There are other ways to make you feel good," he says. Being in Alistair's gaze calms me. It feels like home, and every time I look at him now, I feel like I have to pinch myself. When did this amazing, giving, brilliant man start noticing me? When did I start noticing him?

His kisses trail down my neck, then he stops at each breast, taking his time to pull each pink bud between his teeth. He slides my leggings down along with my panties, kissing along my stomach and hips. "I have my ways."

Just when I expect him to kiss between my legs, I let out a gasp that echoes through the room as he hoists me off the bed, carrying me into the bathroom. He sets me down on the counter before turning on the water in his giant, heavenly shower. I'm not going to lie, I'm as excited about that shower as I am about the sex, and oh look...the shower heads are detachable.

I have to grip the counter in my hands as he pulls off his pants, allowing me to indulge in the vision of a completely naked, aroused Alistair Wilde. He picks me up again, carrying me into the shower, and my body becomes warm. Every inch of me is covered with heat as Alistair steps behind me, kissing the back of my neck, rubbing his erection through the crevice of my backside.

Grabbing his washcloth, he douses it with soap and starts to clean my body. His fingers explore every inch, devouring me like I'm his last meal. It's the most erotic feeling I've ever experienced, and when he's done, he pulls one of the

showerheads down to rinse off the soap. Taking his time, my skin starts to sting from the hot water but I don't stop him. I welcome the pain, letting it intensify the pleasure. When he reaches the spot between my legs, pressing the jet pulse against my clit, I yell out, arching my back against his hard body.

Keeping an arm around my waist, he holds me upright as the hot water has me fighting against the contact.

“Too hot?” he whispers before nibbling on the lobe of my ear. His hand reaches out to bring the temperature down on the water, and I'm left panting. The skin is still sensitive from the burn, but the pressure from the stream returns, and it's a sensation I've never felt, a pleasure that tightens something deep inside me.

He doesn't let up as my hand lands against the tile of the shower, and my moans turn deep and feral. I'm so fucking close but this climax builds slowly evading me every time I think I'm about to reach it, and when I feel his cock line up at my entrance, pushing in slowly, I know he's meeting me here in this pleasure.

Keeping the showerhead on my clit, he fucks me until my mind is numb and my body is on fire. His thrusts pick up speed until we're both close. With a simple press of the button under his thumb, he changes the steady shower stream to a quick pulse, and I cry out again.

I come hard, my toes curling against the tile floor. I feel the way my pussy tightens around him, and he lets out a guttural roar too. Our cries mingle together in an echo across the bathroom walls in the longest orgasm I have ever experienced. It's not until he pulls the shower head away that I can finally relax my seized muscles. I nearly collapse before he gathers me up in his arms and kills the turns the handle on the water.

He wraps me in a giant, fluffy white towel and kisses my nose before taking me to bed.

“Holy shit,” I whisper as my head hits the pillow. I catch a smile on his face as he crawls in behind me, his moist, hot

nakedness pressed up against mine.

Before I fall asleep, I turn to face Alistair, our noses touching in the darkness. I run my hands through his wet hair and kiss his lips.

I want him to have the same piece of me I gave to Nash, so before he can drift off, I move my lips against his, speaking so quietly I know he can feel it more than he can hear it.

“I love you.”

His hand around my waist tightens as he pulls me closer. In the moonlit room, I can see his eyes, and their intensity never fades. His fingers stroke my cheek as he kisses me again, then his mouth moves to my ear so I can hear him clearly as he whispers the words back to me each one slow and punctuated to show he means them.

“I love you, Zara.”

Chills erupt down my spine as his voice seeps into my body. He knows how scared I was of love, and he won't let me hide from it anymore.

It may have only been one month on the island so far, but the thought of my life without him suddenly feels terrible to imagine. And the only reason I even think that is because in the back of my mind, I'm afraid that Alistair will be the first one to bail on this plan when things get tough. Why? Because his son is involved, and I've seen the guilt he carries for surviving Preston. Alistair won't hesitate to sacrifice his happiness for his son's.

Maybe he will get comfortable with this and stick around forever. Maybe this will be our new normal and I won't have anything to worry about. For now, I'll take it day by day, drifting off to sleep in his arms because I'm not falling in my dreams anymore. I've already landed.



“I JUST WISH he’d go to that conference,” Alistair says as we make our way across the yard toward the house. He wanted to take me up for an early morning ride before he goes to the city today for business.

It’s been two weeks since we got back to Del Rey, and maybe it’s that Christmas is only a couple weeks away, but things are mostly calm.

Still, there’s something ominous lurking beneath the surface. I can feel it.

Every other night I sleep in Nash’s bed, and everyone is fine with it. We all sit at dinner together every evening, like a real family.

But this morning, Alistair brought up the conference in Hamburg again, and Nash was quick to turn it down this time. I could feel his dad’s frustration. He carried it with him all through our lesson.

“Alistair,” I say, reaching for him before we get to the door. “He’s making progress. I see that old Nash, and I know

you see it too. He needs more time.”

Gently, I wrap myself around his waist and nestle my body against his. His arms envelope me in return. “It feels like he’s throwing away his future just out of spite.”

“Why would he do that?” I ask, my face pressed against his chest.

“Because he hates me.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s trying to find his place in a world without his brother. I know the pain of that.”

His shoulders slump and his lips rest against my forehead. “I pushed him too hard. Is this even what he really wants to do anymore?”

“I’ll talk to him,” I promise as I look up at him, letting his lips land against mine. The air is cold, but his mouth is warm, and I want to get lost in this moment.

“I wish I could get two nights in a row,” he mumbles.

“Don’t do that. Don’t ruin this already,” I reply, pulling away. “If you don’t want to piss your son off, then don’t take his night. Besides...no one is getting any this week.”

“Small blessings,” he says as he opens the door. “Take it easy today. Go sit in the hot tub. Have Astrid make your favorite dinner.”

“I’m not dying, Alistair. It happens every month. I think I’ll be fine.” I laugh as he follows me to the kitchen.

“Good, don’t die because I have another surprise for you tomorrow.”

My ears perk up. I’m already a big fan of Alistair’s surprises, but right now I don’t know if I can handle the unknown. “What is it?”

He smiles as he pours himself a cup of coffee. “Well, I didn’t want to tell you, but I figure it might be important to prepare you. We’re having guests for dinner tomorrow night.”

My eyes light up. “Who?”

“Hanna Thurber and her boyfriend.”

I freeze, my face falling. “Alistair.”

I honestly don’t know if I’m angry or if I should be grateful. Suddenly, I know exactly how Nash feels. Alistair is constantly trying to push us toward these things he knows we should be spending more time on. For me, dance. Nash, his career.

“That was sweet of you, but I really hate to bother her.”

“I invited her for a helicopter ride to my private island mansion for a meal prepared by a professional chef. How put-out would you feel?”

I can’t help the laugh that comes out. “Good point.”

“I feel bad you’re out here without any company of your own. Plus I think she might be a good influence on you.”

“Thanks, *Dad*,” I mumble into my coffee and he snaps his head in my direction.

I wait quietly for his reaction to see if he’s going to be legit offended or find it funny, but he just bites his lip and stalks toward me slowly, pinning me against the counter. Putting his hands on either side of me on the counter, he leans his face down to my ear. “If we’re going to play that game, get it right. It’s *Daddy* to you.”

As he says it, he grinds his hips against mine, and I nearly crumble to the floor. Then he turns away and silently leaves me standing there like a pile of ash ready to blow away.

ALISTAIR IS GONE for the rest of the day, and I find myself thinking a lot about having Hanna over and what he said about me not having anyone out here. I don’t feel isolated. I mean, a couple times a week Nash takes me to the mainland for shopping or to see a movie, but it’s always just us. People still snap pictures of us, and for the most part, I’ve gotten used to it. Being Nash’s girlfriend in public seems like I’m cheating on

Alistair. I know it's not, but I often think about that night with him at the ballet, how natural it felt to be on his arm. The pride I felt when people saw us together and not just because of his money but because of the way it felt to be Alistair's girl.

Nash and I eat leftover Pad Thai for dinner on the couch while watching Christmas movies. He's absorbed in his phone during *It's a Wonderful Life*, so he puts on *Elf* afterward. Once our food is gone, I stretch out on the plush leather sofa with my head in his lap.

"What do you want for Christmas?" I ask.

"You're going to buy me a Christmas present?"

"Of course I am." I look up at him. "Aren't you going to buy me something?"

There's a coy smile playing on his lips. "We don't really do presents," he replies, and my mouth falls open.

"That's the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"Well, we used to..." he says, his face pinching up at the brow to hide the sadness like Nash always does when forced to bring up the accident.

"We are now," I reply, running my hand along his arm. "We're waking up on Christmas morning, and we're exchanging presents like a normal family."

"We are anything but a normal family," he says, his face relaxing.

Just then, Alistair's footsteps approach the living room from the kitchen. He doesn't say anything, but I can see the stress on his face. I can only imagine what he has to deal with at work on a daily basis, but Alistair is always great about hiding it. His office might be right down the hall, but when he's in there it's like he's a million miles away.

"Come watch with us," I say, moving my feet aside so he can sit down. He glances at Nash for a moment before letting out a heavy sigh and walking over to take the empty spot on the couch. His feet land with a thud on the upholstered

ottoman. Setting down the scotch on ice on the side table, he reclines back against the sofa.

After a few moments, I stretch my legs so my feet are resting on his lap. He takes in the fuzzy purple socks on my feet and smiles.

“Want me to turn on the fireplace?”

“Nope. I love my socks. Don’t make fun of them.”

“I’m not.” Then he starts to rub my feet as we all laugh in unison at Will Ferrell getting hit by a taxi to the tune of a Christmas song.

Nash strokes my hair while Alistair’s hand runs circles along my legs. It’s not uncomfortable or weird, all of us being together like this. It’s perfect.

But that nagging question in the back of my mind won’t let me go. How far could this go? What if Alistair’s hands traveled up and Nash’s traveled down? Which one would pull back first? Or would they pull back at all? The thought of both of them taking a piece of me at the same time makes my thighs clench. *Too far, Zara, you sicko.*

“What do you want for Christmas?” I ask Alistair, forcing out the thoughts in my head.

He looks confused for a moment. “What could I possibly need?”

“I didn’t ask what you need. I asked what you want.”

“Apparently we’re doing Christmas morning like a normal family,” Nash adds.

Alistair laughs, but then he squeezes my foot. “What Zara wants, Zara gets.”

Ha. If you only knew.

“Well, if neither of you tell me what you want, I’ll just have to guess,” I say before letting out a yawn.

The three of us relax back into the couch, lost in the movie. I notice Alistair mess with something on his phone just

before the fireplace in the corner flickers on. The room grows warm, and before I know it, I'm drifting off to sleep.



“I NEED TO TALK TO YOU,” I say to Nash after abruptly tearing one of his earbuds out of his ears. He gives me a scowl as he puts the barbell back on the rack.

“What the hell?”

“We’re having friends over tonight.”

“So?” he asks, toweling off his brow. There’s a sheen of sweat on his bare chest, and I almost forget why I came down here. I’m still on my period, but I could still have some fun with this body of his.

“So, they’re mine and Alistair’s friends.”

Nash rolls his eyes. “People have seen us all over town together. The entire world knows you’re with me.”

“I know, but this couple thinks Alistair and I are together, so just...”

“Don’t act like your boyfriend tonight?”

“Please.” I can’t help but bite my lip. Alistair takes the whole sharing thing better than Nash. Nash is territorial. It’s

like an unspoken rule around the house. He's allowed to grope me and touch me in front of his dad, but not the other way around. As if he'll let me sleep with his dad as long as I don't rub it in his face, and having friends over definitely feels like rubbing it in his face.

“So, tonight you will be my dad's girlfriend?”

I knock him with my knee, which he quickly grabs and pulls, bringing me closer to his body. Sitting on the bench, he hoists me onto his lap and kisses my neck.

“Let's not make it weird, okay?”

“Oh, it's definitely weird,” he answers with a laugh.

Then, I press my lips to his, hoping it will help to settle my worries. I don't even know why I feel so uneasy, but I'm hoping it passes soon.

THAT NIGHT, Alistair and I decide to go together to pick up Hanna and her boyfriend in the larger helicopter with the four seats instead of two. As soon as we climb in, I notice all the space this one provides compared to the other.

“Why didn't we do our lessons in this one? So much more room.”

He answers with a smile as he squeezes my knee. Then, he leans over to kiss me, and I hear his voice through the comm set. “Rest assured, baby. I'm fucking you in this helicopter at some point.”

Heat pulses in my belly. I want Alistair to fuck me in every helicopter we can get our hands on.

Once our guests join us in the aircraft, I revel in their expressions as we take flight. I've gotten so used to this I almost forget it's so exhilarating to other people. Then, my gaze lands on Alistair in the pilot seat, and I find it hard to tear my eyes away. There's a gentle crinkle in his eyes, and a looseness to his shoulders. He almost looks happy, and I can't

help but think of that night at the theatre when he confessed to me that he didn't think he deserved happiness anymore. I've never wanted to make someone happier than I have since that night.

I catch Hanna staring at me before I turn back around.

At dinner, we settle into easy conversation. Alistair keeps his hand on my back all night, making me feel comfortable and safe. Nash joins us for dinner, but he stays mostly silent. The guys talk about business for a while when Hanna leans over toward me.

"I have to admit something to you," she says with a sly smile. I start to panic a little wondering what on earth she's about to say. "I've seen you dance."

My mouth hangs open as I stare at her. Across the table, I can feel Nash watching us. I don't know if she means she saw me dance at the club or on some shoddy phone recording of me at the club, but either way, my skin is on fire.

I'm not ashamed of being a dancer, but it pales in comparison to the prima ballerina sitting at our table.

"It took some digging, but I found footage of you at a performance. You have such a vibrancy to your dancing that makes me jealous."

Again, I'm speechless. She's not talking about my strip club dancing, but she saw my ballet performances from college...and she liked them?

"I...um..."

"I'm sorry to stalk you a little, but I think you are so talented, and I have a friend in the city who is running a free ballet camp for girls and you would be such an amazing mentor for them."

The conversation around the table hushes, and I feel Alistair and Nash both staring at me.

"Oh, I can't be a mentor. I haven't danced in years."

"You would be great at that, baby," Alistair says, and I notice the way Nash's eyes dart over to his dad when he hears

him call me baby.

“He’s right,” he adds flatly.

“Please consider it. I know you would be such an asset for them.” Hanna places a hand on my arm and sends me a warm smile when I finally nod and answer.

“Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

Alistair hugs me a little tighter, and Nash glares at me from across the table. Even though we’re outside under a sky full of stars and not a city in sight, I feel as if the walls are closing in on me, and I can hardly breathe.

Nash and Alistair, and this internship and all of these secrets and the weight of my decision I thought I didn’t have to make start to feel like they’re falling directly on my shoulders. Quickly, I stand up, and everyone looks at me.

“Hanna, would you like to go for a walk with me?”

“Of course,” she replies, and we each grab our wine glasses and leave the men at the table. I’m ignoring Alistair’s concern and Nash’s judgment as I walk away.

“I didn’t mean to spring that on you and make you uncomfortable,” she says once we get out of earshot.

“I’m fine, it’s just—” I take a large gulp of my wine, trying to find the right words. “I just haven’t thought about dancing in a long time. I sort of wrote it off a long time ago.”

“An injury?”

“No, I just...quit. I thought I was okay with it, but then Alistair took me to the ballet, and everything came flooding back, and I realized how much I’ve missed it. But what if I missed my chance? What if it’s too late?” It must be the wine that has my lips so loose to be spouting off all of this.

“It’s never too late,” she says. “You can mentor those girls, and I think it will give you the peace you’ve been missing. It’s pretty obvious your boyfriends want you to do it.”

I don’t know if I heard her wrong or what, but my head snaps toward her. She definitely said *boyfriends*.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell...” Her sweet voice paired with that smile makes me want to crawl into a hole and ignore this whole conversation. “But it’s very clear they both care about you a lot. So, who cares what people think? And consider yourself lucky.”

A huff leaves my chest. Lucky? I did consider myself lucky, but now I’m pretty sure I’m in way over my head, and I’m at risk of losing them both.



THAT NIGHT after we say goodbye to Hanna and her boyfriend, I let Alistair take them back home alone, and I escape to my guest house for the first time in a month. I just need to be alone for a minute to think. Nash doesn’t bother me, so maybe it was obvious.

All night I toss and turn, running over the situation in my head. I love having both of them but the casual ease of being with two men is wearing off, and I know my heart won’t let me pretend it’s so easy anymore. This deal has an expiration date, and I know it’s approaching.

I honestly can’t tell if I’m afraid of choosing or afraid I already have.



I WAKE up on Christmas morning in Alistair's bed, but he's not lying next to me when I open my eyes. The house is quiet as I tip-toe through the living room. The lights on the tree that I made the guys put up shimmer in the early morning light. Nash is still sleeping in his room, but I heard him up in the gym well past two in the morning, so I knew he'd be in bed late today.

The yellow helicopter is still parked out back which means Alistair's home. Going into his office, I find him typing away at his laptop furiously in nothing but his boxers. It takes him a few moments before he looks up and notices me standing there watching.

"Merry Christmas," I whisper, and a gentle smile lifts the corners of his mouth.

He closes his laptop and leans back in his chair. "Merry Christmas."

"You're supposed to take the day off," I say, sauntering over and sitting on the large mahogany desk. His fingers glide up my legs past the hem of his oversized T-shirt.

“I’m sorry. You have my undivided attention.” Something sours as he says that, remembering how he once pushed me away because I would be nothing but a distraction to him. Will he resent me for keeping his attention now?

“Good,” I respond with a forced smile as I drape one foot on each side of his chair. Lifting my shirt over my head, I sit in nothing but my underwear on his desk.

Leaning his large body back, he admires me sitting before him like a feast. “Is this my Christmas present?”

“Just the first one.”

His eyes are shrouded with lust as I move my foot over the rock-hard bulge in his boxers. Shifting his hips, he leans into the friction, and we stare at each other for a few moments. Everything between us feels so intense and so real. I’m not asking anything from Alistair and he’s not asking for anything from me. We’re enjoying each other, the togetherness.

I had always imagined myself with someone like Nash, but the more time I spend with Alistair, the more I grow fond of the idea of having him forever.

“Why don’t you take those off?” I whisper.

“Why don’t you get down here and take them off for me?”

Heat pulses in my belly as I move toward him. “Yes, sir.” Lowering to my knees, I run my hands up his legs and stomach to his chest and back down. I watch the way his chest moves quicker with anticipation. When I finally lift the band of his boxers, he pinches his bottom lip between his teeth.

His hips lift as I pull them down, drinking in the sight of him, the hard muscles of his body. I press his knees apart as I move closer, never taking my gaze from his. When I run my tongue along his length, he hisses and drops his head back.

His taste fills my senses when I part my lips and take him into my mouth.

“Fuck, Zara—” he groans.

I am in complete control as I move over him, watching the pleasure cascade through every nerve in his body. Alistair is

like a god among men, a king on his throne, and right now I have him panting my name.

When his hands find my hair, he doesn't pull or push or inflict any pain. He touches me for the sake of touching. I'm not giving and he's not taking. We're just together, as one.

I pick up speed and another guttural moan escapes his lips. His swollen cock tightens in my mouth, and just when I expect him to come, he pulls away from me and I'm carried off the floor in his arms. There's a wild hunger in his eyes as he places me on the desk and tears off my panties.

Hooking my leg under his arms, he pierces me with force. I cry out, latching onto his neck as he keeps up his vigorous thrusting, and I practically levitate off the desk.

"Don't stop," I gasp, my head hanging as my body goes limp in his arms.

With one hand behind my neck, he rights my body, pulling my face to his as he kisses me, his tongue filling my mouth and overwhelming my senses. I'm holding onto him for dear life as tremors explode through me, my legs jerking as he continues filling me, consuming me, making me his.

Then it takes him two more pumps before I feel his cock twitch and he comes inside me. We are panting and staring at each other, and instead of pulling apart, I cling even more tightly to him.

"Don't let me go," I murmur into the crook of his neck.

"I won't," he answers, and I don't know if he means it like I want. I *never* want him to let me go, never.

SITTING on the floor in front of the tree with a cup of coffee in my hands, I marvel at the pile of gifts nestled under the tree. I have always wanted a traditional Christmas morning, and Emma was always the one to pull it off when we were growing up. Mom worked too much, so we would usually

trade gifts with her when we could, but we rarely had this experience.

Alistair is sitting on the leather chair by the fireplace as he watches me with curiosity. This really isn't his thing, but he's humoring me. Nash jumps over the couch and lands with a bounce against the cushions.

“All right, what'd you buy me?”

With a smile I can't contain, I toss him his first gift. You can't really buy anything for men who have literally everything they could possibly want, so I opted for personal gifts that would hopefully put a smile on their faces.

They each unwrap presents from me; a new sweatshirt for Nash since I keep taking his, and a new book for Alistair by the same author as the book he gave me. They each give me a sweet kiss after opening their gifts, even Alistair, and I notice the way Nash watches. He's not angry today, and I wonder if it's because he's getting used to us being together. Of course, I start to worry it's because he's just starting to care less. He's been a little distant since the night Hanna came over, like he's giving up a little after seeing me being so open with his dad.

Each of the guys hands me a gift. I open a beautiful emerald pendant necklace from Nash. Just thinking about him picking this out for me makes me all warm and fuzzy inside. He looks pleased with himself after helping to clasp it behind my neck.

Alistair's present is bigger, a square box I hold on my lap as I open it. Lifting the lid, my chest freezes as I stare down at brand new pointe shoes. “Alistair,” I gasp.

“Hanna helped me pick them out. She said these are the ones she uses, the best you can get.”

The pressure on my chest makes it hard to breathe. He bought these for me because he expects me to wear them, to dance in them. The feel of the fabric against my fingers brings back a flood of memories, and tears spring to my eyes. “Thank you,” I whisper and quickly wipe them away before looking up at him with a forced smile.

“Well, my gift didn’t make her cry,” Nash jokes, but Alistair’s glare on my face isn’t joking. He’s pushing me, challenging me, and I can’t find the energy to be angry about it. He’s not doing this to be cruel but because I deserve this. I deserve more than I give myself. It’s the same thing Emma wanted, and I failed her.

“Thank you,” I repeat, and he nods. I want to kiss him, more than would be appropriate in front of Nash. I want to settle in his lap and hug him, feel his arms around me and absorb the way he’s looking at me right now.

Putting the box aside, I notice there are more presents under the tree and I pull them out, seeing Alistair’s name on one I didn’t buy for him. As I hold it up, Nash mumbles without looking up. “It’s from me.”

My eyes widen as I hand it to Alistair. Even he looks shocked as he takes it. His son bought him a present. Slowly he opens it to find a framed photo I can’t see but Alistair is staring down at it unmoving for a moment.

“What is it?” I ask. After a heavy gulp, he turns it around so I can see what looks like a messy sketch of a helicopter on a thick piece of graph paper.

“It’s my first design,” he mutters quietly, bringing his fist to his mouth. “I did this in high school. Where did you get this?”

“Gramps had it. He gave it to me over Thanksgiving.”

Just the mention of Thanksgiving brings back harsh memories, my first night with Alistair, running away, them coming to bring me back. Somewhere in that weekend, he planned this. The room is heavy with emotion as the two men look at each other.

“Thank you, Nash.”

“You’re welcome,” he responds. I wait patiently, staring at the two of them before they finally stand and embrace in a strong hug. My hand flies up to my mouth, tears pooling again. This is their first hug in two years, and it only lasts for a moment before they both sit back down. Alistair won’t look at

me, he keeps his eyes down on his present, blinking heavily like he's fighting the urge to cry too.

“There's something under there for you too,” he says finally.

I pull out a box with Nash's name on it and pass it to him. He unwraps it furiously and finds a pair of aviators. A smile spreads across his face and he nods as he pulls them out. It's not as personal as Alistair's gift, but I'm assuming he didn't see that coming. Still, Nash smiles. “Thanks, Dad,” he mumbles as he tries them on. They're aviators, matching the ones I always see Alistair wearing.

AFTER WE'RE DONE with presents, I go to the kitchen to start dinner since we gave Astrid the day off. The three of us are alone on the island, and that doesn't happen often. Things are good—almost too good. I keep waiting for the other shoe to fall as it were, but as I stand between the two men who love me, I shove down this aching desire I can't define. All I know is that I'm bursting with emotion for them, and I don't know what to do with it.

After I burn the potatoes in the pan, I'm flooded with relief when Alistair shows up to take over. Standing behind me, he puts his arms on either side of me as he shows me how to do it.

Nash walks in and sits at the counter, watching us as we prepare dinner. We give him a few tasks like peeling potatoes, which he sucks at. Laughing at him, I take them away. Christmas music plays from the speakers, and it's almost too perfect.

Even though I'm content I feel that undefinable fear rising to the surface. What if this is our last happy day? How much longer can this go on? If this is our highest high, what will our lowest low be? For now, I pack that feeling away and try to enjoy what I have, and right now, I have everything.

“Nash, go bring us that bottle of whiskey in my office,” Alistair tells him with a half-smile on his face. As he jumps up and jogs down the hallway, I turn toward Alistair.

“You’re in a good mood,” I whisper. He kisses my neck, sending a warm buzz down my spine.

“Can you blame me?”

Just then, Nash returns, placing the bottle on the counter with two empty glasses. Alistair doesn’t take his lips off my neck right away like he normally does. They linger for a second, and it feels intentional.

“You’re not drinking?” I ask Nash as he pours the amber liquid into only two glasses.

“Not this shit. I’m not an old man. I’m having vodka.” He crosses the kitchen just as Alistair leaves my side to move toward the sink. As Nash passes with the cold clear bottle in his hands, he yanks me close to him, kissing my lips and pressing the icy glass to the bare skin of my legs. I let out a gasp, shoving him away.

They’re not usually this affectionate in front of each other, and as I turn back to the counter to take a long sip of the potent alcohol, I swallow down the suspicion that we’re on the brink of something major.

Once the drinks are poured, Alistair raises his first. “To family,” he says. Nash and I look at each other for a moment before raising ours. “To family,” we echo, and I feel tears prick my eyes. Family. This feels like a family, no matter how fucked up it might look to the outside world.

An hour later, we sit down to eat. Alistair takes up the head of the table with each of us on either side of him. Our bellies are warm from the liquor, and our smiles come easy. Maybe that’s why the drinks keep coming.

“I’m stuffed,” I say, leaning back, rubbing my stomach.

“Me too,” Nash groans. As I stretch my foot under the table to rest on his legs, he winks at me. It’s Nash’s night, and a pulse of heat floods my core from the look on his face. I bite

my lip. “What’s next on the agenda of this wholesome family Christmas?” he asks with a smile.

I turn toward Alistair, reaching out to take his hand. He twists his fingers around mine, staring into my eyes. “I don’t know. What did your family do on Christmas growing up?” I ask.

He lifts his almost empty glass, tossing it down his throat and saying, “Get drunk.”

Nash and I lift our glasses and laugh. “Good plan.”



WE LEAVE the dishes in the sink and move to the living room where the fireplace crackles and Christmas songs play on the speakers. Everything is starting to blur, grow fuzzy around the edges, and I curl up on the couch with my drink.

There are no thoughts in my head, only feelings. I'm swimming in this state of content, and all of those fears of unsettledness from earlier are so distant in my mind that I honestly forget why I was so worried. We can do this. The three of us can be together, and no one has to get hurt.

Someone settles on the couch next to me, and I turn to see Alistair. His eyes have a softness around the edges, no longer tense and serious. As he puts his arm around me, I curl in closer to him. When my lips find his, I get lost in the kiss. The sweet friction of our tongues colliding makes me melt into him a little more until I'm practically on his lap.

The kiss doesn't stop where it probably should, but there are no alarms going off in my head. I'm just a helpless passenger in this moment. My hands drift up his neck, digging

my nails against his scalp, and he pulls me closer until I'm straddling him.

Somewhere in the drunk recesses of my mind I wonder where Nash went. He should be walking in at any moment. Will he be upset when he sees us? Do I want him to be?

Alistair lets out a lazy groan, and I squeeze myself tighter against him. Our kiss deepens until I feel him grinding his hardness against me. Where do we go from here? There's a distant warning sign that we shouldn't be doing this here, but I don't care, so I shove it away.

Suddenly, I'm yanked roughly off of Alistair's lap by my waist, and he lets out a groan as I'm carried away to the middle of the living room floor.

"Dance with me," Nash says into my ear, a command, not a request.

I'm reeling for a moment, looking up at him to gauge how angry he is to find me grinding on his dad like that. But I relax when I take in the lazy grin on his face as he pulls me against him and holds one of my hands in his. There's a distinct stiffness in his pants, and I feel almost breathless as he sways with me around the living room to the tune of "Baby, it's Cold Outside."

His hold on my hand is tight, but I've come to expect that from Nash, a certain level of roughness that for some reason translates to affection. His head dips down to my neck, and when he places a kiss there, I let out a heavy breath. "He's watching us," he whispers. "Don't you see what you're doing to us? You have us acting crazy, Zara."

The hand on my back lowers until he's cupping my ass, pulling my hips to grind against his cock. I let out a gasp. Behind me, there's a distant, deep growl.

"Every time he touches you, I want to make you forget him. Am I so fucked up because I like to watch you with him? Because then I know I get to fuck you harder."

"Nash," I gasp, his lips finding their way to my mouth. We're no longer dancing. Fuck I don't even know if my legs

are holding me up. Then, he breaks the kiss, spinning me around so I'm facing Alistair across the room on the couch.

His eyelids are heavy, and he's staring at me with intensity, his drink clutched tightly in his hands. Nash's mouth is next to my ear again. "Look, he's thinking the same thing I am. You're caught between two alphas, Zara. What have you gotten yourself into?"

My breath hitches, and every thought in my head disappears. There is nothing, only Alistair's eyes locked on mine as Nash's hands reach for the hem of my dress. Slowly, it lifts, and I'm too lost in those dark eyes watching me that I don't expect the hard slap that lands against my ass. A yelp flies from my lips, but before I can breathe again, Nash buries his hand in my hair and twists my face until our mouths are fused. He kisses me hard, and blood rushes down below, making me squirm with need.

His hands gather my velvet green dress, pulling it up, and I feel his fingers snake their way under the elastic waistband of my panties. The moment his fingers make contact with my clit, I let out a cry.

There is no angel on my shoulder today. There's not a voice in my head telling me this is wrong or insane. Everything is electrified with intensity, and I'm lost in Alistair's eyes and Nash's touch. His fingers circle the sensitive nub, and my breath comes out in heavy pants. Lips caress the back of my neck up to my earlobe.

"Who's going to make you come first, Zara?"

My breath hitches, excitement rushing through me. Nash's fingers glide easily through the pools of moisture between my folds, and when he slides in, I shiver.

"More," I whisper, still staring at the man across the room. Nash clutches me tighter, and I want Alistair to see his roughness with my body. I don't know why I want him to watch, to challenge him, to make him fight for me.

As Nash's fingers pump, adding two more digits, there's a tightening in my belly, and I know I'm close. Reaching up

behind me, I hold tightly to his neck, and I'm torn. I want Alistair to touch me and yet the thought of him watching only makes me want to come harder. So I hold out, daring him with my eyes.

By the look on his face, I know he's biding his time. I start to tremble, desperately trying to hold out, but it's too hard. Between Nash's harsh breath in my ear and his hands between my legs, I start to seize up. Just then Alistair stands from the couch, stalking toward me.

I feel Nash pull his fingers away, moving them toward my face and drawing a line across my lips, leaving a trail of my arousal there. With my eyes on Alistair, I lick my bottom lip, sucking it between my teeth. Nash said I drive them crazy, but he has no idea how wild these men have made me.

Alistair doesn't take his eyes off my lips, and he doesn't look so drunk anymore, at least not on whiskey. There's a sternness there that sends a tremor through me, and I know that he is in charge. He calls the shots, and as if I'm surrendering myself to him, I let my head hang back, resting against Nash's shoulder. I'm waiting for his next move, and my heart wants to explode in my chest from the anticipation.

I feel his touch against the hem of my dress, and I gasp as it's pulled over my head in a quick swipe. Nash's fingers fumble with the clasp of my bra before I feel the snap, and it falls to the ground. Suddenly, I'm standing in nothing but my thin panties between these two men.

Alistair grabs my hips, hard between his hands pulling them toward his body. Then his lips are on my chest. Soft, wet kisses travel down, and I'm so lost in the sensation that I don't even feel him pulling down my panties until his mouth is there between my legs, and I'm suddenly weightless.

A moan rumbles through me, and I'm not sure if it was mine or someone else's. Nash's hand is still buried in my hair, and the pain of his pull is the only thing keeping me grounded. His kisses turn to painful nibbles on my skin before he's kissing me again. When I try to reach for him, hungry to feel the hardness in his pants, he moves my hand away.

“Not yet,” he hums against my neck.

When his hands find my breasts, pinching and pulling, I’m not even sure if my feet are still on the floor. I only know that I’m latched onto both of them as I fly toward this climax.

Alistair’s mouth between my legs is ravenous, rough against my sex. And when Nash pinches the pink bud of my right breast, I let out a scream, levitating off the ground. The orgasm hits me like a tidal wave, coursing through my body in surges, and I lose the ability to move as I shake and tremble in their arms.

Before I have a chance to come back down, everything changes. I’m torn away from Alistair, my pussy still pulsing with heat as I’m thrown over Nash’s shoulder. He’s carrying me somewhere, and I reach for Alistair who is staying close behind.

As desperate as I am to be filled by one of them, all I know is that I want him there. I don’t know if I tell him to stay or if it’s only in my head, but he keeps close behind until we’re bathed in darkness. I land hard against a bed, stealing the breath from my lungs. I don’t bother trying to figure out whose room this is or whose bed we’re on. When I hear movement, clothes coming off, I know I’m not drunk anymore, not on alcohol. But my head is still swimming in this darkness.

Alistair kisses me, and I latch onto his face, pulling him close to taste his mouth, my arousal mixed with whiskey. Hands slide the length of my body, and I know by the softness that they are Nash’s. The smooth skin of his face touches my belly.

As Alistair pulls his mouth away, Nash flips me onto my stomach, yanking back my hips until I’m on all fours. Then, I feel him at my entrance, and he thrusts himself in, making me gasp.

The relief of having him inside of me eclipses any thoughts in my head. Right now, I just want to be in this moment, and I don’t want it to stop.

My hands search the darkness for Alistair as Nash moves, slow and forceful. I want to feel him against my fingers, his lips on mine. I need to know he's here, with me. Then, his voice cuts through the darkness.

"You belong to us, baby. You're all ours, and you're never leaving us. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I gasp, reaching for him again. As my eyes adjust, I make out his silhouette standing too far away to touch. A moan of pleasure escapes my lips again. "Alistair," I cry. "I need you."

Then, he's there, and my fingers cascade down his bare chest to his unbuckled jeans. His course hands run along my shoulders and he lifts my face to his mouth, kissing me while I fumble to free him from his pants. The sudden urge to have him in my hands, in my mouth, is overwhelming. Alistair's pleasure belongs to me, and it's up to me to give it to him, to make sure he feels it.

His pants fall to the floor, and I grasp eagerly onto his cock as it springs forth. He lets out a groan as I run my tongue along the underside, lapping up the precum that drips from the head. His hands move my hair to the side as he softly pets my neck and face.

"Zara," he whispers in a groan when I take his length into my mouth.

Nash grunts, thrusting harder, punishing me, and I am lost in the sensation. His fingers squeeze my hips harder, and I know he's sending me a message. This is how he reaches me, hints of pain, reminders that I'm his. *I feel you, Nash*. Then his hand lands sharp against my ass as he thrusts harder, and I respond by pulling away from Alistair to cry out.

Putting my mouth back around the cock in my hand, my body starts to tense and I feel Alistair tighten against my tongue. I reach for his hand, and he squeezes my fingers in his. I let out another moan that vibrates through him. This orgasm hits even harder than the last one, locking my body in a vice. First I feel Alistair's saltiness hit my throat before Nash pulses inside me, both of them filling me.

The three of us pant heavily, and I'm so spent that I collapse against the bed, letting my eyes close. Their hands don't leave my body, and I feel their lips too. Someone kisses my back, then my shoulders, my arms, my stomach, my legs. I can't tell where I end and they begin.

Soon, their weight settles on either side of me, and I face Alistair as I begin to drift off. He brushes my hair out of my face, kissing my lips again. Nash's hands wrap around my waist and I'm sandwiched between them on the bed.

A smile stretches across my lips as I hear them both fall asleep. I'm a fool to think I could have them like this forever, and I know the restlessness still exists, but for now, this is who we are. And people might think we're crazy for it, but they will never know the pain we've felt. This grief binds us, and I wouldn't be who I am without them. We have to walk through this fire together, and I will hold onto them like this for as long as I can.



“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Nash jumps on his bed, landing next to me and snatching my study guide out of my hands. I try to grab the book back, but he only uses it as an excuse to pin me on my back and straddle my body between his knees.

“It’s my study guide,” I reply, trying to grab it back from him.

He freezes for a moment. “You’re getting your private pilot license?”

“Of course I am,” I argue. “I’ve gone through all the fucking trouble to learn. I want it to be official.”

His brow creases as he stares down at me. “I’ve seen you two out there. I didn’t think there was any learning going on. At least not about flying.”

I pierce him with a stern expression and he finally lets me up, but he doesn’t go far. Lying next to me on his side, I feel him watching me, and I start to feel the guilt creep up my

spine. It's been a week since Christmas, and we don't talk about what happened.

On one hand, it was the most amazing night of my life.

On the other, it changed everything. It was inevitable, we know that, but it seemed to just open up any wounds even more than they already were. Nash is different with me since that night, as if he's desperately trying to regain control of the situation.

"Let me help you study," he says, drawing circles on my bare shoulder.

"Okay." I hand him the booklet. "Go over this section," I say pointing to the page I was just reading.

"Now, wait a minute. You need some incentives to do well."

Laughing, I try to bite my lip as he seems to be thinking through something. "Oh, I get a reward for questions I get right?" I ask, touching his chest.

"Seems only fair," he says with a sly smile.

"Don't you guys have to leave soon?" I ask, looking at the time on my phone. They're going to their big expo in Germany today. I'll be alone on Del Rey for three days straight, and I'm dreading it. I haven't been without either of them for months and right now, three days feels so long.

"I have time," he replies. "Okay, answer correctly and get a kiss."

"A kiss?" I scoff.

"Anywhere you want." He raises his eyebrows at me, and I smile.

"All right, first question... What atmospheric conditions reduce performance?"

"Oh that's easy," I laugh. "Heat, humidity, and altitude."

"Well done," he says as he rolls over to lie on top of me, straddling my hips with his legs. "Where shall we start?"

I squirm anxiously beneath him as he leans down to place a warm, wet kiss against my neck, being sure to add a small nibble in just to drive me crazy.

“Next question,” he says, sitting up. “What is dynamic rollover?”

My brain is still foggy from that kiss. Somehow I still manage to get the next three questions right, and before we know it, the book is on the floor, and I’m lying topless on the bed with Nash’s mouth pressed firmly against my right breast. I let out a high-pitched moan when his hands snake their way into my sweatpants.

“Nash, it’s time to go,” a voice calls from the other side of the room. My eyes pop open and are instantly met with Alistair’s gaze on my naked body and Nash grinding himself against me.

“Gimme fifteen minutes,” Nash replies, ignoring the fact that his dad is standing right there. At that exact moment, he slides a finger inside me and I let out a gasp, my eyes still firmly on Alistair.

His nostrils flare and his jaw clenches as he spins and stomps away.

“Nash!” I squeal, shoving him away and climbing off the bed to find my shirt. “That was fucked up.”

He seems to think it’s funny and laughs while adjusting his pants. As we leave his room, I dread looking in Alistair’s eyes again. I feel terrible that he had to see that, especially right before he has to leave.

I walk out back with Nash and find Alistair waiting by the helicopter that they plan on taking to the airport where they’ll get on a private flight to Germany. Nash turns toward me, scooping me up and planting a big kiss on my lips right in front of his dad. I can’t help but pull back. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I didn’t want it to be like this. After our kiss, Nash leaves me to get in the helicopter.

I have a sudden pang of fear that Alistair won’t even say goodbye to me after that. Thankfully, he gets out and walks

toward me, a look of frustration on his face.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“For what?” he asks, and I wish he wouldn’t act like that. Like this is normal and I shouldn’t feel bad for him seeing us together. Like it doesn’t bother him.

He leans down and kisses me, not as deep as Nash but I wrap my arms around him anyway, hoping he can feel how much I’m going to miss him. But he doesn’t squeeze me back. He turns away and walks back to the helicopter.

Sometimes I wish Alistair would fight for me. I wish he’d be braver to touch me in front of Nash, like he’s holding back from what he really wants.

Then, I remember. That’s his son. Alistair will always sacrifice a little bit of his happiness for his kids and I will always come second to them. That’s the thought they leave me with as they pull away and I’m left alone.

I go back to my study guide, but I can’t seem to focus.

Feeling brave, I pull up my phone and type out a text to Hanna. I’m *texting a lead ballerina*. This is insane. I delete it a few times, sounding more and more formal and ridiculous every time. Then it finally occurs to me I’m dating not one but *two* Wildes. And I mean, sure who you date doesn’t really change who you are, but fuck if that doesn’t give me a little bit of confidence. I might as well *be* a Wilde at this point, and I’m only a few hours and one exam away from being a certified helicopter pilot, so why am I acting like she’s so much better than me?

Remembering what Alistair said at the ballet about how they should feel honored to meet me echoes in my mind. It changed the way I carried myself that night. Forcing some of that fake confidence, I type out the text again.

The boys left me here all by myself. If you’re not performing tonight, I could use some help getting through all this wine.

IT'S ONLY a minute later that my phone vibrates in my hand.

Do you have any extra hot pilots? Gio and I broke up.

HANK CAN PICK you up at the airfield where Alistair dropped you off last time. He's pretty cute.

PERFECT. Tell him to be ready in fifteen.



alister

NASH IS GLOATING. He's been acting like this all day, like there is some tension between us, and it's grating on my nerves. And I have to act like that shit in his room yesterday didn't bother me.

I woke up the day after Christmas with a lot more than a fucking hangover. I know that I'm no more responsible for what went down than either of them are, but I still feel fucking responsible. What kind of father am I? I've been claiming my son's girlfriend as mine for long enough, and that night was the last nail in my coffin.

I've been putting off what I need to say to Zara. I need to walk away and get out of Nash's way, but every time I try, she looks at me with those green eyes, and it feels impossible to throw away something like that.

All day at the expo, he acted like he wasn't interested. He used to love this thing when he was a kid. He kept his hands in his pockets and acted bored the entire time. Meanwhile, I'm just itching to talk to Zara. I only got to speak with her briefly

on the phone last night and she was busy trying to recover from her hangover with Hanna in the hot tub.

I'm glad she had a friend over. I'm glad she's over this ridiculous notion that she's not good enough to have friends like Hanna.

I didn't expect to miss her this much. I was supposed to be focusing on our display at the conference, but I was too hung up on texting her and thinking about her. This was the shit I was trying to avoid.

Nash and I skip another night at the hotel and decide to fly home tonight. The pilots are rested, and there's no extra work to be done. My team can handle it from here. I just want to go home to her. As soon as I get on the plane, I hit the button to call her.

It only takes two rings before she answers. She's breathless, and when I look at my phone I realize it's only seven in the morning there.

"Hello," she pants.

"What are you up to?" I ask.

"Umm...just a little workout with Hanna."

"She's still there?" I ask, trying to sound a little less begrudged than I am. I'm glad she has a friend, but I prefer to have her to myself when I get home. In fact, I've been wanting her to myself for a while now, but as I glance over at my son reclining on the seat next to me, absorbed in his phone with his earbuds in, I feel a wave of guilt for even thinking that.

If either of us should have her alone, it should be him. I need to get these fucking thoughts out of my head.

"Yeah, she's still here. Hank is going to take her home after breakfast."

"I'm glad you had a fun weekend," I tell her, hearing her heavy breath on the line, missing the way it felt on my lips. "I miss you."

Her breathing pauses, and I hear her moving and then there's a door closing, the music on the other side of it like she

wanted a little privacy. “I miss you too.”

Neither of us say anything for a moment until she adds, “I really miss you, Alistair.”

“I’m glad it’s my night,” I say, and I don’t care that we’re scheduled to get home in the early afternoon. I’ll be pulling her to bed at three p.m.

“Me too,” she whispers, and my skin grows hot. She’s never said that before, that she’s glad it’s my night. She’s supposed to be equal, happy with whoever she is with that night, but just the idea that she’s glad it’s me goes straight to my head.

“I should get back to Hanna,” she whispers, and I can practically hear the smile on her face. “I can’t wait until you’re home.”

“Me too, baby.”

“Alistair,” she whispers, making the hairs on my arm stand straight up. “I love you.”

I have to swallow something heavy in my throat. Hearing her say that to me feels unfair, and every time she utters those words I’m blindsided by it. “I love you.”

When the line goes dead, I feel eyes on me as I turn to see Nash staring skeptically. I don’t know how much of that he heard, but I ignore him as I pop in my own earbuds and zone out to something relaxing as I try to drift off to sleep.

I WAKE a couple hours later and find Nash sitting up, looking tense. This trip was the first time I’ve really been alone with my son since he started speaking to me again—and definitely since Christmas evening. We are by no means through the worst of it, but we’re getting there. That present sure was proof of that. But I still sense Nash holds a grudge against me for something. It’s my fault we don’t talk enough about feelings or maybe he would have come out with it two years ago. Instead, he’s stewed in his hatred of me.

Much like I stewed in anger towards mine. My father and I stopped talking for the second time almost eight years ago, over Preston. My twenty-year-old son was out of control, and my father never missed an opportunity to remind me that I was not the father he was. I needed to be firmer, spoil him less, put my foot down and threaten to cut him off if he couldn't clean up. It was our image he was worried about, and for a while, I was too. But more than anything, I was scared of losing my son. Scared that if I pushed him too hard, I'd turn into my dad and he'd hate me the way I hated mine. Instead, I gave him credit cards, and cars, and a life of indulgence without limits. It didn't work. He still resented me. We were too different, and I worked too much. And as long as Nash was around to follow in my footsteps, Preston was there to hate me for it.

I always settled for the fact they had each other. At least they had that much.

The only time my son actually calmed down was when he met Emma. I had nothing to do with those two years where he resembled a man instead of a boy. That was because of her.

Before he died, I envisioned all the terrible ways I would lose Preston. Overdose, drunk driving, getting involved with the wrong people. I never expected it would be like it was, a little too much fog around the mountain and a father who should have known his son wouldn't check the weather.

At the funeral, I turned everything off that I could. I didn't think. I didn't feel. My eyes could not absorb the sights, Preston's picture on the stage, the absence of a casket, my parents with tears running down their cheeks, my son engulfed in an anger that would never fade. The girl bawling into her hands across the aisle. There were so many images from that day that found their way into my memory, and her face throughout the service was one of them. I hated the pain she emitted, but I made myself watch it. I wanted to punish myself with her grief.

After the flight attendant brings me some coffee, I move to sit next to Nash. When he ignores me, I knock his knee with mine, until finally he pulls out his earbuds and heaves a sigh, looking in my direction.

“I saw you talking to the reps from that Dutch manufacturer. What were you talking to them about?”

“I was just talking to them.”

“I know the director. They have a good program based out of Amsterdam. Not that you need it, but it might be fun to look into it. They train all of their engineers in house.”

He levels his glare on me before I notice his jaw clench and he shakes his head. “Unbelievable,” he mutters.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My tone has gone cold.

“Where will Zara be while I’m in Amsterdam?” he snaps. When I don’t answer, he adds, “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’d love that wouldn’t you?”

“Zara would be wherever Zara chooses to be, Nash. Where is this coming from?”

“How can I possibly compete with you? Who would want to? You’re so fucking smart. She was mine and you couldn’t stand that. You couldn’t stand me having something you wanted.”

Luckily the one flight attendant on our flight is at the back of the plane and can’t hear our conversation, but still, I grit my teeth and speak quietly.

“You wanted this, remember? This was your fucking idea. And you didn’t seem to have a problem with it a week ago.”

“No one can have an ounce of happiness around you unless you’re the one to thank for it.”

“You know what, Nash?” I argue back. “I think you like the competition. This isn’t about Zara for you. It’s about fighting with me over something, or someone—anyone.” This conversation is getting out of control fast, and I don’t care. He wants to fight, then we can fight. At least we’re talking.

He shakes his head. “Oh yeah, it’s always about you. *You* want all the thanks. All the control. *You* make the plans. We just follow through.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, Nash. Are you high?”

“I wish.”

“Fine, you want me to move out of the way, Nash? Is that what you want?”

“Does it even fucking matter? The only reason I chose to share is because I knew you’d try to fuck her anyway. She’d be sneaking out of my bed to go to yours, wouldn’t she? You clearly don’t care about boundaries where your son’s girlfriends are involved.”

Growing irritated, I lean closer but my volume goes up. “Is this about the night of the ballet? She wasn’t your girlfriend then, Nash.”

When he turns toward me, his voice seething with hatred, my blood goes cold. “I’m not talking about Zara.”

As he pins me with his harsh glare, my mouth falls open. Before I can respond, he puts his earbuds back in and turns toward the window. My mind is racing as everything from the night Nash is referring to comes back to me. I have to fight the urge to throw up as my guilt assaults me again. I thought I could let it go, but apparently someone found out, and not just anyone, but my son.



alister

One day before the crash

IN MY DREAM, Zara's hand is working its way up my body, and as she touches my face, I let out a groan. When I try to reach for her, I can't move.

She leans down and presses her lips to mine. "Wake up, Alistair."

My eyes open with a jolt. The room is dark, but I can still make out the golden tint of her hair in the moonlight. She's kneeling next to me on the bed, nested on her folded knees and staring at me with a pursed lip smile.

"Shh..." she whispers.

When I try to sit up, she presses me back down. "What are you doing here?" I mutter. My brain is still lost in a dream, and I can't seem to process what's happening as her hand cascades back down my bare chest. She bites her lips as her fingers grow dangerously close to my dream-induced erection. Quickly, I snatch her wrist before she makes contact.

"You don't want me to touch it?"

I look toward the door, making sure it's closed and my sons can't see me in here with a twenty-year-old.

"It's okay," she whispers. "No one knows I'm here."

"What—" I move to ask what she's doing here again, but I'm too afraid to ask. If I push her to answer, she might leave and this dream of mine will be over.

"I know you want this. I see the way you look at me, and I've been fighting this for so long. It's crazy, I know, but I want you."

This time when she leans down, I kiss her, attacking her lips with mine. She lets out a sweet moan as I dig my fingers in her blonde locks. Everything happens so fast. Her legs straddle my hips and she grinds against my erection. A husky groan vibrates through my chest.

"Oh my god, you're so fucking sexy," she whispers as she tears her top off. My hands palm her bare tits, and I want to come in my boxers right there.

This is really fucking happening. I have everything I've ever wanted right in my hands right now. It all feels so possible now, having her like this all the time. Who gives a shit if she's my kids' age? The chemistry between us is like electricity.

When she pulls my boxers down to release my cock, I realize she's not wearing any underwear and I feel her bare pussy against my skin. Then, I'm inside her.

And it's fucking heaven.

She's riding my dick, and her moans fill the silent darkness. My fingers pinch the soft flesh of her hips as she thrusts herself on top of me. I watch her silhouette in the darkness as she pinches her own nipples and lets her head hang back.

"Oh my god, I'm going to come," she moans a little too loudly.

"Come all over my dick, Zara."

She freezes. At first I think it's her orgasm, so I try to move her body for her, to keep the friction on my cock, but then her words cut through silence. They cut through my heart.

“Zara?”

I hesitate, trying to connect the dots here. Then I study her face in the moonlight, and everything comes crashing into place. A little too roughly, I toss her body off of me, making my dick ache as it slides out. The heat is sucked out of the room so quickly, I think I'm going to be sick.

“What the fuck?” I snap.

She covers her tits, sitting at the foot of my bed. “You seriously thought I was Zara?”

Quickly I pull my boxers up over my quickly deflating dick and climb out of bed. Trying to keep my voice down, but also wanting to fucking yell these walls down, I face her. “Of course, I thought you were Zara. Why else would I let you—”

I turn my back on her, running my fingers through my hair and wanting to scream. This was an accident. I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't—

“Fuck.” The word bursts through my lips. “My son hates me enough as it is. Why the fuck—”

“Preston and I aren't happy anymore. I know he's cheating on me. I know he has been for a while.” She's crying now, and I'm too fucking mad to feel bad about it.

“So you break up with him, you don't—god dammit.”

“I'm sorry,” she cries.

“Cover up, Emma.” I manage to make it a little less harsh as I hand her the T-shirt she was wearing.

“What's wrong with me?” Her voice is a little louder than I'd like it to be, so I sit down next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. Fuck, I'm not good at this. I need to get her out of here so I can pretend it never fucking happened.

“Emma, you're a beautiful girl.”

“But you want to fuck my sister.” She snuffles.

“Your sister isn’t dating my son.”

A sob shakes through her, and I try to quiet her again. This time I apologize. For what, I don’t know. My dipshit son cheating on her. Her thinking there’s anything wrong with her. The pain she’s feeling. The rejection.

“I thought you liked me. I thought you wanted this,” she whispers as her cries start to subside.

I don’t answer her because I can’t lie to her. I can’t tell her that when I was looking in her direction, it was because her sister did steal my attention. I can’t tell her she is beautiful, but it’s that dark expression on her sister and the wisdom behind her eyes that draws me in.

“Emma, you need to go back to your room.”

“I know,” she mumbles. “You’re not going to tell him, are you?”

The room sits in silence for a moment before I run a hand along her back. “No, I won’t tell him.”

She whispers, “Thank you,” before standing and moving toward the door. “I’m sorry again, and for what it’s worth, he doesn’t hate you.”

I wish she was right.

“Hey kiddo, don’t worry about it, okay? And if you know he’s cheating on you, then you fucking dump his ass, okay?”

“Okay,” she says, her voice cracking. Before she gets to the door, I call out her name.

She turns, hope in her eyes. “Why don’t you go with him to the app launch? You deserve to be there more than he does.”

I know it’s not what she wants, but she puts on a brave face anyway. “Thanks, Alistair.”

Then, she’s gone, and I stare wide-eyed into the darkness.



MY HEART LEAPS when I hear the distant chopping sound of the approaching helicopter. My talk with Alistair this morning has me feeling hopeful. Did he understand what I was trying to convey? When I told him I was excited that tonight was his night, what I meant was that I wanted every night to be his night. Things with Nash have calmed down lately, and I've noticed that with the tension gone, it's just sex between us. I still love him, and I know we will always have this intense connection, but I can't keep ignoring what my heart is telling me.

Either way, I need to be with Alistair tonight.

As they land, I notice the grimace on each of their faces, but I try to ignore it. It's probably just the jet lag. They still don't talk much, but it's all about progress.

I run out to the helipad, not quite sure whose arms I'll run to first. I guess the first one that gets out, which will probably be Nash. My smile fades when I notice him toss the comms on the floor and throw the door open.

When he approaches me, I try to show him my smile, but he doesn't smile back. He pulls me into his arms, being a little more rough than usual.

While hugging Nash, I watch Alistair get out of the helicopter, and I know by the look on his face that they must have had an argument. He looks like he saw a ghost. "What happened?"

Nash doesn't answer my question, but as he pulls away, he holds my face in his hands. "Stay with me tonight."

My cheeks flush and my eyes widen. "But—"

"I need to talk to you, and I need you tonight. Please?"

Holding Nash's face in my hands, I bite back the sudden urge to cry. He looks so much like the version of Nash I found four months ago and not like the confident, happy Nash that left two days ago.

As Alistair approaches, I look to him for help. *Please, say something. Don't give in, not this time.*

"It's fine," Alistair says, and my heart drops. "Just go with him."

My chest heaves with each breath. Why is he doing this? What happened out there?

"Welcome home," I mutter, hoping he hears my anguish as I turn and march toward the house with Nash close behind me.

I shouldn't go into Nash's room tonight. I know that. I'm too emotional, too hung up on Alistair's reaction, too in my head about the whole thing. Does he not care about me? Is this all about sex to him? Why does he treat me like I'm something he can just give away? Why don't I have a choice whose room I sleep in?

All these questions keep rolling through my head as Nash pulls me into his bed. From the first second he touches me and I want to recoil, I should know this is a bad idea and nothing good can come from this.

"I missed you," he mumbles against my neck as he pulls me toward him. He's sitting on his bed, but I'm still

contemplating whether or not I'll get in. I'm not punishing myself anymore. A moment ago, I thought I would be celebrating.

"Nash," I whisper.

When he looks up at me, his jaw clenches, and the air grows thick.

"Don't you fucking do it, Zara. Don't fucking say what I think you're going to say."

Pain builds in my throat as I try to swallow, but I softly pull my hand away from his. Nash's head drops to his hands, and I almost shatter. I love Nash. Why would I want to hurt him? How can I make him understand that if it were just him, I would love him and be happy until the day I die, but it's not just him, and I can't hide the way I feel anymore.

"It's not fair to you, Nash," I mumble as my tears start falling.

"No, fuck you!" he bursts, standing up and pacing across the room. "You don't know him, Zara. You think you want him, but you don't fucking know him. You were mine before he came in."

"No, Nash, I was not yours..."

His fist lands with anger against the door, and I yelp. In response, I run to him, throwing my arms around him, hoping I can calm him and bring back the boy I love.

He lets me hold him as he sways in his spot, his arms wrapped around me. Then, I feel his lips against my neck. And I know I should stop him, but in the moment I'm weak. I do love him, and his touch has started to feel so familiar I seek that comfort.

But I should know better. Nash's touch isn't gentle and before I know what's happening, I'm being thrown onto the bed. He tears off his shirt as he stalks toward me. The look in his eye sends chills down my spine.

"Nash, I'm not playing this game tonight, I'm serious," I say, trying to get up from the bed.

When he grabs me, it's rough—too rough, but his hands are in my hair and I'm being shoved back again. "I hope you're pissing me off because you want me to fight with you, Zara."

His hand is around my waist, and he drags my body toward his. This is what we've been building up to isn't it? A fight, a real one. We were playing with fire, and now we're both about to do something we'll regret.

Tears are streaming down my face, and I start swinging at him, hoping to connect to his face. Sobs shake my chest as I make contact, but he's quick to grab my wrists and he thrusts them against the bed above me. Then, his face is on mine, but I turn my head as he sneers into my cheek. "You're pushing me because you want me to act like a monster, don't you, Zara? You don't want to be the only one that's fucked up."

Fighting against his hold, I don't look at him as I cry. "Nash, you're as fucked up as I am."

"Tell me you give a shit about me, Zara and I won't fuck you against this bed like I fucking hate you." He's fumbling with his zipper, and I can't stop crying. We've gone too far, and I sob knowing that this is the end of us. But I want it. I don't fight him or kick him away. Instead, I wrap my legs around him. Why? Because for a moment, I was happy, and it feels easier to sabotage all of that than lose it again.

"I hate you," I cry, and it feels like I'm drowning in my tears as they cascade down to my hair.

"Oh, I know you fucking hate me. Not as much as you hate yourself, right? Is being with me enough of a punishment for you?" He's shouting now, his loud voice ringing in my ears as he thrusts himself against me. I still have pants on, and he never fully got his cock out, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I know that this is way, way too far.

Then, he's gone, no longer on top of me. Instead he's flying across the room, landing against the dresser with a crash. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Alistair's booming voice shocks me enough to stop my crying.

He puts his body in front of me as he stares down at his son. Sitting up in a daze, my eyes connect with Nash's and I am splintered by the remorse he's wearing on his face. Wide eyed, he stares back at me. Quickly, Nash stands up and stares toe-to-toe with his father.

"Tell her right now. Don't make her choose until she knows the truth. All of it."

Wait, what? My gaze dashes to Alistair's face, and I realize he's avoiding my gaze. Staring up at that warm face that brings me so much comfort, and I never thought he would keep secrets from me.

"What are you talking about?"

He doesn't really love me. Or he cheated on me. These are the only reasonable explanations. I was always just sex to Alistair, and he doesn't want me.

No. After everything, all of the talks and moments we shared, that can't be it.

When Alistair doesn't speak, Nash steps in. "Tell her what happened the night before the crash, Dad. Tell her what you did." After another moment of silence, his voice booms, shaking me to the bone. "Now!"

Alistair finally speaks, but it's so flat and quiet that the words don't really sink in. "I thought it was you, Zara. You should know that first. I thought it was you."

"What are you talking about?" I yell. None of this makes sense and I'm growing impatient.

Nash buds in again. "I couldn't sleep the night before the crash. I was up at two in the morning. Standing right there in the kitchen, I heard someone having sex. I heard the moans. Then I saw her come out of his room."

Alistair flinches, but I feel like I'm hearing pieces to a story, and I can't make any connections. Alistair had a girl over the night before the crash? Why would Nash be mad about that?

“Before she went back to Preston’s room,” Nash adds, and my eyes snap to him.

When the pieces finally do come together, it comes together as a lie. This is all a mean prank or a charade to make me leave altogether. They don’t want me here anymore so they’re making up stupid stories to trigger me.

“I thought it was you,” Alistair says, his voice low and strangled.

“I don’t understand,” I snap loudly.

“He fucked Emma!” When Nash yells those words, I know it’s not a lie. I know by the tears building in Alistair’s eyes and the look of remorse on his face as he stares at me that it’s true.

“No.”

Alistair steps toward me, and on instinct I move away. I search his face for love, comfort, connection, but I only see a stranger. A liar. Hate.

I don’t even hear myself mumbling “no” over and over again. The walls are closing in, and it’s suddenly a hundred degrees in the room. They both reach for me, and I react on instinct. When I hear Alistair’s voice behind me, my open palm moves on its own and slams into his cheek, reverberating down my arm and right through my heart. Then I turn to find Nash, and I swing for his chest, but he grabs my hand first.

He’s still charged and angry as he tries to pull me closer. He’s shouting something about Alistair, but I’m trying to get away from both of them.

There’s movement, an arm flies and the two of them break out in a fight, furniture falling over as fists connect with jaws and bodies are thrown against walls. It all happens so fast, and I scream, but it doesn’t help. Jumping up, I try to pull them apart, my sobs doing nothing to tear them apart. Then, there’s an elbow and I’m knocked to the ground with a scream.

“She’s hurt,” one of them yells as they both drop to the floor to pick me up. There are Nash’s hands on me, whispering his tear-filled apologies and Alistair on the other, inspecting

the red bump on the side of my face with an expression of anger.

I can't stop crying as they both hold me, and all I can think about is that I came here to help them, and I've managed to break them even worse. It doesn't matter how much I love them. My love still managed to tear us all apart.

Alistair is talking, but it's all noise and none of it gets through the barrier I've put up.

"She just showed up in my room in the middle of the night. I thought it was you. I swear to God I thought it was you. As soon as I knew it wasn't we stopped."

"Leave me alone," I say through my grit teeth as I move to stand. "Both of you just leave me the fuck alone."

"Zara," Alistair calls after me, but I wheel around and shove my finger in his face.

"You lied to me." A painful sob wracks through me again, but I can't voice any of the things I want to scream at him right now. As I turn back to the door, Nash is there waiting to stop me. I shove my hands against his chest. "You don't get to blame me for how fucked up you are anymore, Nash! You and I only ever used each other because we were both in so much pain. And you knew about this the whole time, but you never told me? I can't believe I've spent the last three months of my life stuck in some fucked up orbit out here on this island. But I'm done—with both of you. Now, move. I'm going home."

I watch him give up the fight and move away from the door.

As I run to my guest house, I notice how they both stay in the house, and I say a prayer they don't follow me.

Thoughts race through my mind, and I can't seem to make sense of any of them. Alistair had sex with my sister. The night before she died. Why? Did they have a relationship the whole time? I don't believe for a second that she just snuck into his bed and he thought it was me. Lies. I would be an idiot to believe that, and I'm not an idiot.

I never should have come here. When I get to the guest house, the walls immediately feel too confining. I can't find comfort here. I need to get off this fucking island. But I won't get in an aircraft with either of them.

My anger toward Nash equals my anger toward Alistair. He knew the truth and he said nothing. He let me fall for Alistair, and he knew the truth the whole time. They both just want me for their own purposes, and they don't give a real shit about me. It's all a fucking joke to them. I'm a joke. A stupid girl who fell for their lies.

I need to go home. Now. Someone else can fly me. The yellow N-2 model sitting on the helipad shines in the sunlight. Alistair left the keys in it. I've landed it a couple of times, and it wasn't bad. I could do it again.

I'm not thinking right. I'm desperate. Reckless. And I swear to God I think at some point, so what if I die? So what.

Without another thought, I grab my purse and rush through the guest house door leaving it open as I walk toward the helicopter. I don't see them through the window to the house anymore, and I hope they don't hear me because they will try to stop me.

All I know right now is that I have to get off this island and it's time for me to break free. Without another thought, I climb into the aircraft and start the engine. Within less than a minute, I'm off the ground and on my way home.



THE CRAZY THING is that once I'm in the air, my panic dissolves and confidence takes over. I shut off the thoughts in my head about Nash and Alistair, and I do what I learned, what I watched each of them do a hundred times. Nash and I made this flight so often, I navigate the straight path to the airfield easily.

Once I'm up there, and I have a few quiet moments before I have to worry about landing this thing, I think about Emma during that last weekend. Did she ever show signs that she was unhappy with Preston? Did I not notice she had feelings for Alistair?

I make so many excuses for her in my head. She was unhappy, scared, pressured to do it, but the only reasonable answer to any of it is that she fucked up. My beautiful, perfect, shining star sister made a stupid mistake. She wasn't perfect. Nobody is, and this entire time, I've been treating her like some sort of martyr to live my life in comparison to. I've been beating myself up for not being Emma, and now I know that when my sister was trying to live her happiest life, she was just as scared and lost too.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Alistair's familiar red four-seater. I turn straight and ignore him. I figure he doesn't believe I know how to get there or maybe he's just worried I'll make off with his aircraft, but he stays firmly behind me the entire flight.

And it's not a long one. After only fifteen minutes, I see the landing pad in the distance and my nerves start to get the better of me. I've only landed about three times, and that was with Alistair in the seat next to me, giving me the confidence I needed.

"You've got this." His voice comes through the comms, startling me as I start to drop the lever on the side and feel the helicopter lower. *I've got this.*

From there, I just turn off my brain and quiet every stupid voice that wants me to fail. Every voice that has spent the last two years—no, my entire life—convincing me I'm not good enough. *If I'm destined to fail, then why even try? It's better to end on a high note. You may have been trained well, but you have no natural talent.*

Shutting each one of them off, I focus only on the aircraft, the ground, the horizon, everything Alistair taught me, his voice in my ear, and I land the helicopter. It's a bumpy, jerky landing, and I feel it hit the ground a little rougher than I should, but I land safely nonetheless.

Once I'm on the ground, with shaky hands I shut the engine down. My breath is panicked, and bile rises in my throat. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him land near me. When I move to open the door, I find that my legs are shaky and barely hold me up.

Suddenly, he's there. I want to cry into his chest. I just did my first solo flight, and I should be celebrating, but he's ruined that. Anger takes over as he snatches me up and holds me tight against him.

"How could you?" I sob against his shirt.

"I told you, baby. I thought it was you. She crawled into my bed, I was sleep-fogged, I let it get too far. I wanted you so

bad, I let my mind believe it. But I stopped her as soon as I found out it was her. She said Preston was cheating on her.” His voice is soft, full of pain and regret.

“She must have been humiliated.”

He squeezes me tighter. “I’m so sorry, Zara.”

My hands have his shirt clenched tight as the pain manages to find its way to every crevice of my body. “I miss her so much,” I whisper, and I don’t know why that comes out. I hate that I’m crying to him after everything that just happened. But he squeezes me even tighter and buries his face in my neck.

“I miss him too,” he mumbles.

We hold each other for a long time just like that until it feels like I’ve cried every tear I have in my body. When I pull away, I make the mistake of looking at his face. Before I can give into my body’s stupid desire to kiss him, I shove away and march toward the house where I know I can order a car if Hank isn’t there to drive me.

“Zara,” Alistair calls after me, his voice sounding despondent and so much weaker than I’m used to hearing it. When I turn around, I wipe the tears away as I wait for him to speak. “I’m proud of you. You should be too,” he says.

I don’t respond as I spin around and keep walking away from him. With every step, I know I’m in for a long hard road of pain, but I can’t go back now. I can never go back to that island.



Three months later

THREE YEARS. Some days it feels like ten and others it feels like not a day has gone by since I could hear my brother's laugh in the house. Today marks three years since the worst day of my life.

When Zara left, there were no more words to be said between my father and me. He retreated into his life and I retreated into mine. We never discussed what went down, what I saw, or how things between Zara and I got so bad. How *I* got so bad.

I spent the first month hating myself for the person I had become. Trying to trap her in a sick relationship with me because I needed her. Wanting to hurt her so I could feel something, anything. Convincing myself that she wanted it too.

I hated having to tell Zara about what Emma and my dad did. Ruining the image of someone she loved was the cruelest thing I had done to her, and it haunts me the most.

She doesn't answer my text messages, and I've sent a few.

Not because I want her back but because I can't leave things the way we did. But that's the fucking kicker, isn't it? I don't get to call the shots anymore. If she remembers me forever for the way I acted that night then that's just the way it is.

My email pings on my phone, and I pick up to see another reply from the program coordinator about my transcripts. She received everything she needs from me. I start in four weeks.

I haven't even told my dad, but I know I need to. You can't just move to the Netherlands without so much as a goodbye.

Pocketing my phone, I stare down at the gold plaque with my brother's name engraved in capital letters.

PRESTON WILDE

Beloved son and brother

I'M ALLOWED to move on with my life. I know that now. Fuck, I didn't sit through six weeks of therapy for nothing, but they don't tell you how hard it is to do the shit you say you're going to do. I'm officially older than my brother now—my big brother. That thought doesn't settle easily.

It makes me think of Zara, how every birthday since the crash probably feels like hell.

I want to text her and tell her about Amsterdam. I feel like she'd be happy for me, if she and I were the version of ourselves before everything went to shit. Before I turned into a fucking psycho, she'd be proud of me.

There's the scuff of a shoe against the pavement behind me, and I turn to find her standing there, staring at me like I'm a ghost.

"Zara," I whisper, standing up to face her.

Okay maybe I figured she'd come today. Maybe I was fucking counting on it, and I stuck around a little bit longer than I wanted to just to see her.

“Hi,” she replies before stepping forward. She has on a knee-length black skirt and a thin top draped delicately over her shoulders. Her hair is still black but not as long, cut just past her shoulders.

“How are you?” I ask, not knowing what else to say.

She nods, biting her lip and looking as nervous and uncomfortable as I feel. “I’m good. You?”

“I’m good,” I answer, although there is a lot more behind that answer I’m just dying to fucking say. I gesture to the bench, hoping she’ll sit next to me for just a few minutes.

After a moment of contemplation, she strides toward me and stops when we are only a foot apart. Is it too soon to hug her? God, I miss putting my arms around her. Is she still afraid of me?

Without a hug, she sits and faces the plaque. This isn’t the exact spot they died, but it’s the closest we could get. So, this is all that’s left of them, a plaque on a quiet mountain overlook.

It occurs to me that I should probably leave. She deserves a moment alone with her sister, and as much as I hate to do it, I step away.

“Sit with me, Nash,” she says quietly, looking down.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I sit next to her. We’re silent for a while before I feel her head land softly against my shoulder. The contact makes me shudder.

Then it’s like everything I’ve kept bottled up for three months comes spilling out. “Zara, I have to apologize—”

“Nash, you don’t—”

“Yes, I do, please let me say this.”

She looks up at me, sadness in her eyes as she nods and pinches her lips closed in a straight line.

“The way I acted with you was wrong. I used you and even if it was consensual, Zara, it was damaging to you, and I should have known that.”

Her hand reaches out to take mine, and she squeezes as tears fill her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say, squeezing back.

Then, her head is back on my shoulder, and I hear her sniffing. After another long silence, she finally speaks. “You look good. I like the beard.”

I let out a forced laugh and scrub the growing stubble on my chin. “Thanks. You look good too. I’ve been following you online. You look happy.”

“I am happy. Are you?”

“I am,” I answer honestly. Then my news just flies out of my mouth, desperate to tell someone, especially her. “I’m starting a program in Amsterdam next month. An aviation program.”

She lifts her head and stares at me. Her mouth is hanging open and there are tears in her eyes. “That’s great, Nash. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks.” Then, I reach forward and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “What do you think they would say? If they saw us now?”

Zara swallows a pained expression as her gaze follows mine, settling on the view over the city. “Emma would say, ‘Geez, Zar, what the hell took so long?’” she says in her sister’s slightly higher pitched voice.

I can’t help but laugh. “Preston would call me a loser, for sure. He’d tell me to find a hot Dutch girl, and to tell dad to fuck off from him.”

She laughs through her tears. Then I watch as she bites her lip, and I know she wants to ask about him. I wish she would, but I just wish I had more to tell her. I don’t want to have to tell her we’ve gone back to not talking, but now it goes both

ways. I miss the days of hating my dad before knowing that he hated me back.

“It’s good we’re moving on, Nash,” she says, and I don’t know if she means from the crash or the breakup. Then, tears cascade down her cheeks, and I pull her into my arms, letting her cry softly against my shoulder. She sits there like that for a while before the clouds grow heavy in the sky and the rain starts to fall.

I run with her back to her car parked just off the road. As she gets in, I try to hold onto her for an extra second. I don’t want to say goodbye. I’m afraid this will be the last time I see her, and I still have so much to say.

But the moment passes and her door closes. Before I know it, she’s driving away.



alister

“MR. WILDE, are you still on the call?” my secretary says, pulling me out of my reverie, staring out the window of my office, watching my son coming in for a landing.

“I’m here,” I answer blankly.

The board is going on and on, and I’m zoning out every word. These meetings used to excite me. Talking about the future of the company, how we can capitalize on new markets with our extended international reach, but I’ve lost interest.

This is why I never should have gotten involved with her. I was hoping that after she left, I could focus more on work. It was the *only* silver lining in the whole situation, but it’s not much of a silver lining at all.

The only silver lining is my son has finally overcome something. He thinks I don’t know about Amsterdam, and every day I wait patiently, hoping one of us will work up the courage to talk to the other. But I can’t face Nash, not after what happened.

This move will be good for him, a fresh start. He'll have the chance to learn from someone new and he doesn't have to feel so bogged down by what I want for him. And without him taking over anytime soon, I'm still stuck here, no retirement in sight.

I can't fucking retire. I'm not even fifty-one.

"Mr. Wilde?"

"Yes?" I answer.

"We need your approval before we can move on, sir."

"Yes, I'll sign it. Thanks."

"Are you sure you're happy with this proposal?" someone else on the call asks, and I pause.

Happy with it? My mind goes back to that night at the ballet, standing on the stage with Zara, the bright lights illuminating her face as I held her in my arms. That was the first moment in a long time I could claim I was happy. The fear I would never be happy again, *should never* be happy again just dissolved with her. I should have told her then. I should have come clean about what happened, begged her to forgive me, been a fucking man about it.

If I could have done things differently, she'd still be here. I'd still have no fucking interest in this meeting, but at least I'd have her company to make it worth it.

"It's fine, Charlotte. Send it over and I'll sign it."

"Yes, sir," she answers.

The line goes dead. Glancing down at my laptop, I see everyone has left the call, so I slam it closed and breathe out a heavy sigh. Across my office, the book Zara bought me for Christmas sits unopened on the table next to the heavy, leather chair.

I know the board will start talking about my removal before long. If I don't get my head out of this funk it's in, I'm done for. But what could be so bad about that? Live comfortably for the rest of my days out here on the island. Alone.

At least Nash has come out of this better in some way.

I spot him moving toward the house, and I jump out of my seat. I don't know what's changed but I suddenly need to get this shit off my chest.

"Nash," I call as he crosses the kitchen. He stops in his tracks, turning to face me, his eyes wide. I didn't really plan what I would say after this so we just stand and stare at each other for a moment. "Son, I..."

"I'm going to Amsterdam," he says, cutting me off.

"I know. They called me after you applied," I tell him, not wanting any more secrets between us. "I think it's a great move, but it doesn't matter what I think."

"Yes, it does." His tone is so calm, so sure of himself. He walks with a new air of confidence now, and it's slowly culminated over the last couple of months, but I swear I noticed a change after the three year anniversary of Preston's death last week.

"Well, I'm proud of you. I think this is a good idea for you."

"Thank you," he mumbles, his stare meeting mine.

At that moment, I can't help but question if I did the right thing. Was inviting Zara here for him a good idea? He's clearly come out of it on the right side, but would that have happened without her?

"I saw her last week," he says as if he can read my mind. "At the overlook."

Ah, that's right. While I shut the world off and got shit-faced on the anniversary of my son's death, Nash was visiting him at the crash site.

It's hard as fuck, but I try to hide any emotion from my face, like hope or regret. I don't want him to know how jealous that makes me or that I'm desperate to know if she even asked about me. But I don't. More than anything, I have to move on.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, looking at the empty kitchen, suddenly restless and needing to do something with my hands.

“Sure,” he answers, taking a seat on the kitchen stool.

While I prepare us Chicken Cattiatore for dinner, we do nothing but talk. Mostly, he talks, telling me about the program and for the first time in a long time, he sounds excited about his future. When he brings up how Wilde Aviation could run a similar program, I shake my head.

“I think I’m done, Nash. I think it’s time to sell the company.”

His jaw drops. “What? You can’t be serious.”

“I don’t have anything new to offer this company. Why don’t I just hand it over to someone who can take it to the next level?”

When I turn around from my stove, my son is staring at me with his brow pinched in anger. “You tell me I have to move on, and I have to start thinking about my future and you sit there and act like your life is already over. The dad I knew didn’t pass things along or act like anyone could do a better job than him. You built Wilde from the ground up. You knew innovation then, and you can still learn it now. So stop acting like you’re done. You’re not fucking done.”

My eyebrows are raised high as I stare at him. “Shit, okay. Calm down,” I mutter, turning back to the chicken sizzling in the pan.

“And, I think you should call her,” he adds. My shoulders instantly tense.

“No.” I shake my head.

“I’m serious, Dad. She needs to see how fucking bad you are without her.”

Spinning around, I gape at him in shock. “I’m not doing that bad.”

“The fuck you aren’t.”

“Nash, things between Zara and I were... I shouldn’t have —” I keep trying to stammer my way through the excuses, but he’s not buying them.

“Do you know why I agreed to do what we did? When we brought her back to Del Rey, I was jealous, sure, but I kept the whole thing up because Zara was the only thing that kept us together. She was the only thing that kept *you* together, and I liked seeing you so happy—even if I was a dick about it. She was never meant for me, Dad. She was meant for you...”

His words pierce my fucking cold, dead heart, making it hurt like a bitch every time I have to swallow. But I keep the hope away. “She wouldn’t talk to me, Nash. I ruined it and it’s time to move on.”

As I put his food down in front of him, he’s giving me a pleading expression.

“No, we have to leave her alone. If she wants to come back, she knows where to find me.”

Without touching his plate, he slams his fork down. “Find you?” he asks, and I stare at him in shock. “When she left, did you beg her to stay? When I asked to share her, did you even put up a fight? Dad, she’s not going to come find you. She probably doesn’t even realize you still want her.”

Letting out a huff, he jumps up from his stool and walks away.

I stare down at my dinner, standing up in the kitchen, but after one bite, I toss my fork down. I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.



“PLACES, PLACES,” I whisper to the little ones as they line up behind the curtain. Keeping eight little four-year olds focused and in place just seconds before we’re cued to walk on stage is somehow my favorite part of the whole performance. It’s the part that welcomes mess. So as one little boy starts crying that his shoes are too tight and another little girl sneezes so big the rest of the kids start screaming, I can’t help but laugh. It’s a deep belly laugh that hurts my cheeks, and then the music starts and I take the stage, trailed by sixteen little feet bouncing after me.

The crowd does their usual ooh’s and ahh’s while we go through the routine, me giving them their cues and each of them following along in their own time.

We get three quarters of the way through the song before I spot a familiar face in the back of the crowd, standing with his hands in his pockets and a slight smirk. I nearly fall off the stage. Missing my cue, one of the girls elbows me, and I do my best to catch up. The crowd laughs like we did it on purpose, and we manage to smile through it. Inside, my heart is about to jump straight out of my chest.

What is he doing here? No word for four months and then he just shows up at my students' performance? Taking a deep breath, we finish our dance, all taking a bow. When I look up again, I don't see him and almost panic that he's gone.

No, it's good if he's gone. He needs to stay gone. I'm not ready to face him yet. I haven't prepared what I will say if he tries to apologize.

After the show, I walk with the dancers out to where the parents pick them up. They swarm me, offering me flowers and asking to take pictures of me with the kids. It's almost an hour before I'm free, and I feel his presence the entire time.

We're in an almost empty lobby of the theatre before he speaks. "You look beautiful."

"What are you doing here?" I ask, clutching onto the flowers to hide the shake in my hands. He looks so good it hurts. Like maybe he's been working out in the last few months, but it's probably the fact that his beard has grown in even more. He looks like some burly mountain man instead of the corporate man I left after Christmas.

"Nash told me about this. Said he saw it on Instagram. He said he's sorry he can't make it. He's in Amsterdam now."

"I know," I mutter, trying to hide the shake in my voice. All of the things I've been telling myself over the last four months don't seem so strong anymore with him standing in front of me.

You deserve better, Zara.

You shouldn't be shared.

If he cared about you, he'd make you a priority.

He'd fight for you.

Don't run back to his arms just because he shows up.

That last one is the hardest to listen to. I want to run back to his arms so bad. No. Make him earn it. Make him show it.

"Thanks for coming," I stammer, forcing myself to turn around and rush back to the auditorium door. I hear him

jogging behind me as he jumps in front, blocking the door before I can disappear, and he leans his body close to mine. I glance back at the few straggling families and smile.

“Excuse me,” I tell him, but he only leans down with a confident smirk.

“I know I fucked up, Zara. You deserved the truth back then, and I should have fought for you when I had the chance, so I’m glad you aren’t forgiving me right away. Don’t take me back, not yet. Make me work for it, baby”

“I don’t want your money,” I whisper, trying to keep my head held high. He smiles.

“Oh, this won’t be about money.”

I gulp. Then, he just steps away and walks toward the exit, leaving me breathless. As I walk toward the stage, I am in a daze.

“What has gotten into you?” Hanna asks as she meets me with my purse in her hand.

“Alistair was here,” I answer flatly. Her mouth hangs open as her eyes dance around looking for him.

“Are you...”

“No,” I shake my head. “No, I can’t go back there. I said goodbye.”

She’s quiet for a moment, staring at me like she can’t believe it, and I wish she would say something because I’m already second guessing my choice at the moment.

“Well, if you’re not going to chase him, can I?”

I let out a laugh and knock her with the back of my head. “Let’s go home. I need a drink.”

THERE’S a book on my doorstep a couple of days later. As I’m heading toward the studio, I nearly trip on it. Immediately, I recognize the cover, running my fingers over the title as I pick

it up. *Shadows of the Wind*. Flipping it open, I find a note, scribbled in Alistair's handwriting.

THE AUTHOR DIED a few years ago, but I was able to find a signed copy for you.

It was a fucked up love story, but I think you like fucked up love stories.

I CAN'T HELP the smile that spreads across my face. Turning around, I drop the book on the table by the door and rush out. It's just a gift. He'll move on eventually.

He has to understand that while what we had for a moment was great, it wasn't real. It was a fantasy, and we can never get that back now. It would never last. He thinks he wants me, but what about when life gets messy? What if I hold the Emma incident over his head forever? What if every time I kiss him, I think about her kissing him?

No. We're both better off with fresh starts. I want to pretend the three months on Del Rey didn't exist. Of course, I still took the money. It's what afforded me this apartment with Hanna, and every penny is going toward my plan to open my own ballet studio.

For now, I'm teaching for free, but students are amazing. And since they come from different backgrounds, most of these kids couldn't afford fancy dance classes and come from homes like mine, so it feels like my own little island of misfit dancers. Life may not have handed us a private island, but we're making the best with what we have.

When I get to the studio, there is a general commotion in the dusty auditorium room of the city rec center where we hold our rehearsals. The kids are all ripping through boxes, ribbons and tulle everywhere.

"What is going on?" I shout to one of the other volunteers.

Hanna steps up, her hands on her hips and a pretentious smile on her face. "We received an anonymous donation today.

All new uniforms and pointe shoes.”

Heat washes through me as I stare at the mess. “Put them back!” I yell.

“What? Why?” the volunteers gasp.

“We can’t accept these.”

Hanna grabs my arm and steers me away. “This is the nicest thing these kids have ever received. Shove your pride away and let them accept them.”

“He’s trying to buy me, Hanna.”

“No, he’s showering you with love. He’s making an effort.” I try to relax my hammering heart, but I can’t seem to quiet the thoughts racing through my head. “Besides,” she adds. “He didn’t buy anything for you.”

The kids are all pretty ecstatic, and since we just finished our performance, we let them take the rest of the rehearsal to play and be with their friends. When I finally leave with Hanna around eight that night, I somehow know he’ll be out there waiting.

He’s sitting on a bench outside the center, and this isn’t exactly in the best part of town.

I stop as soon as I see him, but Hanna keeps walking on by. “Hi, Alistair,” she mumbles with a smile as she passes.

“Hi, Hanna,” he replies. “Be safe getting home.”

She calls goodnight to me, but I try to pass him to catch up with her. “Let me get you home, please?”

“You’re not going to buy my time, Alistair. Your donations don’t mean I have to do anything for you.” I’m stomping past him, but he turns to keep up with me.

“I know they don’t. I’m just asking.”

“Oh, you ask now? That’s new,” I bark at him. He smiles a smug grin, his hands in his pockets as he walks next to me.

“It’s not easy.”

Hannah and a few of the others aren't far ahead, and I don't exactly feel like having this conversation with them around, so I stop and turn back to him. We're in the parking lot when I spot the black Tesla looking so out of place.

Throwing my hands in the air, I turn toward it. "Fine. Let's go."

After a click, the door unlocks, and I climb in. When he sits in the seat next to me, he doesn't start the engine right away. It's quiet, and I don't know what to say.

"Hungry?" he asks.

"No."

"Did the kids like their costumes?"

"Of course they did."

"Good." Then, he puts his hand on the back of my seat and turns toward me. "I don't want to go back to the way things were, Zara. Before you, when I thought having love in my life would only make my life harder. Now, do you know what I see, Zara?"

I'm finding it hard to breathe. The urge to turn and kiss him is strong. I miss the feel of his lips and the smell of his cologne. I miss the way his hands feel against my skin.

"What?" I whisper.

"I see us. Just us. I see you as my wife, maybe even kids? I see a whole new chapter for us."

My throat stings, and tears well in my eyes. "Maybe if we had done things right, we could have had a chance, Alistair, but we've already fucked it all up."

"Who says we fucked it up, Zara? Even Nash said you and I belonged together from the start."

My head spins to look at him. "He said that?"

"Of course."

I look away again. "Too much as happened, Alistair. I'm sorry." Before I can stop myself, I jump out of the car and start

to walk away. He's there in a second, blocking my path.

"Let me drive you home, Zara." When he touches my hand, I shudder. I can't do physical contact with him or I'll crumble, so I pull it away.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm afraid I'll never be able to forgive you."

His hand drops and his shoulders slump. "Come on."

I follow him to the car, and we don't say anything for the rest of the ride. When we pull up to my apartment, I thank him for the book and the donation, and I leave. The rest of the night, I let the tears fall. I hate myself for not giving in to what I wanted so badly, but I held onto my pride. If I go back to him, am I giving in too easily? Am I setting myself up for more heartbreak? Why does my mind want to fight against what my heart wants so badly?

WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, my head pounds and I feel sick with this heartache. But I have to hold out and protect myself. I can't keep making all the same old mistakes I used to make. Leaving my apartment the next day, he's standing there, leaning up against his car. I stop in my tracks and stare at him, trying not to feel the excitement of his presence.

"You never finished your pilot training. You're only a couple hours short of the forty required to get your license."

"I don't want it," I mutter as I turn and walk down the street, leaving him to follow behind me. *Just keep walking, Zara.* With those long strides of his, he easily keeps up with me.

"I watched you fly that day you left Del Rey. You're a natural, Zara. The way you landed that thing—"

Spinning on my heels, I face him, suddenly overwhelmed by his presence, remembering the way it felt to be pinned down by him, the feel of his beard against my neck, those big

arms wrapped around me. I'm growing weaker by the second, and it only makes me more angry with him.

"What if I don't want you to fight for me, Alistair? I'm doing just fine on my own, and you were right. You should have fought for me when you had the chance, but that chance is gone."

His expression changes from light and hopeful to determined and stern as he backs me against a brick wall and stares down at me. "Don't tell me that chance is gone. It's never too late for second chances, Zara. And I'm sorry I didn't fight for us, but I was scared I'd lose both you and Nash. I admit that now, but you were scared once too. And what did I make you do when you were scared, huh? Now, I know you're off today because Hanna told me. So come get your last two hours and if by the end of the day, you want me to leave you alone forever, I will. I'll let you go."

This version of Alistair reminds me of the harsh, commanding man I first met, and I'd be lying if the deep tone and fierce attitude didn't make my stomach erupt in desire. It takes literally everything in me to keep from biting that lip of his between my teeth just to feel his tongue against mine again.

Somehow I manage to speak. "Fine." It comes out with a lot more conviction than I actually have. I'm about to get back in a helicopter with Alistair, and I'm a fool to think I'll ever be able to walk away from him after this, but I have to try.



IT STARTED in this very helicopter. It's about to end here too.

This time I'm in the seat he was in last time. I stay quiet as he asks me a few questions that I answer flatly without looking at him. "Someone's been studying," he mumbles, but I ignore him. He doesn't need to know that I spent the first month after our breakup drinking scotch while wearing his jacket and reading the study guide he bought for me. Sobbing the whole time, naturally.

His leg is touching mine, and I feel his eyes on my bare legs as I maneuver the foot pedals. This skirt is really not made for this.

When we leave the ground this time, I don't jump or cry like the first time we flew together, so why do I have the urge to hold onto him?

"Let's take it out to Del Rey and back."

"Alistair," I complain. That island is the last place I want to see.

“We won’t land. We can fly there and back since you know the way.”

With a heavy sigh, I do as he requests, heading straight back the way I came four months ago. Once we’re up in the air, it gets quiet.

“I never really told you what happened that night,” he says into the comms and my grip on the cyclic tightens.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, you don’t have much choice now, do you?”

My jaw drops as I glare at him. “Was this your plan? Get me up here so I can’t get away from you? That’s hardly fighting for me. That’s more like entrapment.”

Completely ignoring me, he stares forward and waits for me to stop. “It took a lot of fucking guts to do what she did that night—”

“Shut up, Alistair,” I croak, feeling the tears coming.

“And I can’t change what happened, but I do know your sister was only human. She made a mistake, but she took a chance. It was bold and a little bit crazy, but now I’m taking a chance, Zara.”

A tear splashes against my leg as he speaks, and I don’t bother trying to quiet him anymore. “I’m sorry, Zara. I couldn’t be sorrier for what happened. It was a terrible mistake Emma made, but she wouldn’t want you to keep paying for it.”

“My sister wanted you, Alistair. How could I possibly come back after knowing that?”

“I don’t know, Zara. Love is fucking complicated. But I know your sister was the one who tried to remind you that you deserve happiness as much as everyone else. Now I’ll fucking be the one to remind of that. You deserve all of it, Zara. Every goddamn bit.”

I choke back a sob as I spot Del Rey in the distance.

After a long quiet moment, he finally speaks. “If you want to give me another shot, take this thing home. Land at Del

Rey, and let's figure this out together. Just you and me.”

My mind reels as it grows closer.

“But if the past is all too much, and you'd rather move on without me, I won't bother you anymore. Take us back to the mainland, and I'll give you everything you need to get your license like any flight instructor would.”

The tears start to dry, but my heart won't slow down as we get closer to the island. Everything over the last five years flies through my mind as I try to remember how it felt to fly out here for the first time. The transformation I've gone through, from quiet outsider to the girl on the stage and finally to the woman who knows her worth. It took a long time to get here, but is my journey really over? Is my time with Del Rey and the Wildes through?

Emma was a huge part of this journey but so was Alistair—and Nash. What happened out here wasn't about sex or sharing partners or compromise. It was about family. It was about facing our grief together and walking through the fire, risking the outcome that it could burn us all up. The relationship we started was not meant to last, but it was meant to change us, and it did.

Nash found the courage to face his demons, overcoming them with me. I didn't turn him into anything he wasn't already fighting against, and I wish I had been around long enough to see him destroy those monsters, but that was a fight he had to battle on his own.

But what about Alistair and me? We've both come out of this changed, but is there still a chance for us to be together now, after everything? Will it even work? I'm not that girl he took on that first flight. And he's not the man who showed up at my club and left me his jacket.

Taking a heavy, calm breath, I quiet my mind. I feel the pull toward that island, and it's strong. Even if I could turn this helicopter around, why would I want to? I have someone who will push me and encourage me and love me. And as I start to lower the aircraft, I hear the intake of his breath in my comm system.

His hand grabs my leg, and my heart nearly rockets out of my chest. Suddenly, I can't get this thing on the ground fast enough. As I land the helicopter, Alistair lets out a shout, and a smile splits across my face.

I don't even bother with shutting off the engine, and I unbuckle in a rush, jumping into his lap the moment I hear the click. His mouth crashes against mine as his hands wrap around my body. I'm lost in the sensation of his lips, his scent, and his touch.

"I missed you," I cry against his kiss.

"We're home, baby," he replies, and I smile.

It's not the house or the island that he means. I know that now. This place might hold a lot of memories for us and represent the good and the bad, but this place is not home. He is my home, and I am his.

For so long I felt like I was falling, but this man pulled me in. And finally, I have landed.

EPILOGUE



Two years later

I LOVE WATCHING him with the kids. My tough, brute of a husband sitting at a table with a bunch of fourth graders as he explains how turbine engines work. The after-school camp has been open for six months now, and every chance I get, I come in to see him working. I love the new spark in his eyes.

After handing over the company and assigning basic operations to a new CEO, he promised me it wasn't a retirement. He just needed to find that excitement again, so Wilde Aviation started a youth outreach program that serves the kids in the community. I was just relieved that he wouldn't be sitting at home doing nothing while I was at the theatre. The holiday season could be especially grueling when it comes to hours they need me so I'm glad he has something to keep him busy while I'm gone.

His hearty laugh booms across the room just before he spots me watching. Quickly, he says goodbye to the kids and jogs over to plant a quick kiss on my lips.

"We have to hurry. Nash will be at the house in an hour."

“An hour? That doesn’t leave us much time then, does it?” He winks at me and I shake my head, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks.

“Yes, and I could really use a shower,” I reply, grabbing his hand.

On our way out, he stops to check with the construction crew in charge of installing the memorial fountain in front of the youth center. Waiting for him by the car, I watch as he talks to the crew. He’s been practically obsessive over this fountain, making sure everything is perfect for Emma and Preston.

He’s assertive with the guys without being cruel, and I clench my thighs together, remembering all those days I would read in his office, just to hear him on the phone with his employees. I wouldn’t admit it then, but the sound of his commanding voice gets me going.

“Alistair, let’s go!” I call, and he obeys, jogging to the car.

The drive to the heliport is quiet as he reaches across and takes my hand, his thumb fiddling with the diamond ring on my left hand. I stare across the car at his left hand firmly grasping the wheel, his gold band glinting in the setting sun. Why is a wedding ring on a man so fucking hot?

I keep waiting for this honeymoon period to wear off and for there to come a day when I don’t want to tear my husband’s clothes off every chance I get, but so far, there’s no end in sight. I guess when we officially started dating, I had two Wilde men to keep me busy, but I don’t bring that up a lot anymore. Not because he’s ashamed of it, but because Nash’s nonexistent dating life since me has raised some concern for Alistair.

I’ve assured him it’s because he’s taking time for himself and not because he’s wallowing in jealousy, wanting me back. Nash and I have moved on. We talk daily, but we will always be kindred spirits and in each other’s corner every step of the way. There is no jealousy there, only love.

As soon as we get home, I run to the bedroom, desperate to shed these sweaty clothes and wash up. Nash will be home for the holidays, and I still have so much to do before Christmas. Frank and Vera will be up tomorrow, and this will be my first official holiday hosted here at the house as Mrs. Wilde. I've been trying to hide how nervous I am, but I know Alistair can sense it.

Stepping under the hot water, I wait for the door to open before I start to wash up. And right on time, he walks in, already free of his clothes as he joins me under the hot spray.

This is my favorite part of the day, when Alistair soaps up every inch of my skin just to rinse it all off. In these moments, I feel the most treasured. And I've stopped convincing myself I don't deserve it. Almost two years married, and he has spent every moment making sure I never doubt myself again.

When his lips find my neck, I purr, opening my legs for him. My hands cascade down his chest to wrap around this soft thickness. With one long, firm stroke, I have him growling against my body. Slowly he drops to his knees and I try to stop him.

"We don't have time," I argue weakly.

"It won't take me long." Then he has one of my legs draped over his shoulder as he consumes every inch of me, his facial hair rough against my clit as his tongue darts in and out. I cry out, holding onto him as my eyes squeeze shut. And he was right. It wouldn't take him long. With enough pressure on my clit to make me see stars, I come hard against his mouth.

His mouth moves its way up my body, and just when I can breathe again, I grab his face and kiss him. "Fuck me now."

Without another word, he presses himself inside me, letting out an earth-shattering groan. Grabbing both of my legs, he hoists me up to slide in even deeper. Then, he proceeds to come undone, fucking me hard against the wall, both us moaning and crying out as loud as we want. The moment I feel his body jerk against mine, I squeeze my thighs around him a little tighter. We stand there for a long time,

breathing the same air and when his lips find mine, he pants. “Can I have this every day for the rest of our lives?”

“Yes, please,” I answer, kissing him deeply, wanting to feel his tongue against mine.

“You know,” he says gasping, “I’ve been thinking.” Finally setting me down and pulling out reluctantly, he pushes my hair out of my face.

“What is it?” I ask, concern growing in my gut based on the serious look on his face.

“I’m not getting any younger.”

Oh the age conversation, again. I smile and run my fingers through his graying hair. “Like I told you before. You’re like my very own fine wine.”

He laughs, kissing me again before pulling away. “Well, this fine wine has been thinking about little bottles of wine running around lately.”

I freeze. “And?”

I haven’t brought up the topic of kids for a few reasons. One, I’m not sure I’m ready for kids. Two, I don’t know if Alistair wants to be a father again or if welcoming a new baby would be too hard for him. But since he’s bringing it up, my heart starts to soar a little with the idea.

“And I’d like to avoid being eighty-years-old at their graduation.”

“So...you want more kids?”

He reaches down, taking my face in his hands and kissing me softly on the mouth. “I want everything with you.”

“Now?” I gasp, tears springing to my eyes.

“Ready when you are.”

As I link my arms around his neck, I let everything melt away. The stress, the fear, the grief. It never fully goes away, but when I’m with him, it doesn’t hurt anymore.

FREEFALL

Three years ago, I did something insane.

And it awoke a hunger inside of me.

A craving for something new.

Something powerful.

And I can't ignore it any longer.

[Preorder Nash's story now!](#)

[Add to your TBR.](#)

Coming March 30, 2021

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for reading Gravity. This story was born from a crazy idea that evolved and changed and grew to the book you just read. It never would have gotten there without an amazing team of people.

First and foremost, the biggest thanks goes to my husband for answering all of my helicopter pilot questions. This book kept us connected during a tough time apart, and I know you loved playing a part in this crazy dream of mine. I love you.

Adrian, thanks for listening to all of my insane ideas and reading the messy stuff, and for still coming back for more.

Suzanne, thanks for being the email that always put a smile on my face, even the ones that started with “Remember, I love you.” Are you ready for Nash? I hope so. He needs you.

Amanda, chapter 33 thanks you for giving me the guts to write it. I appreciate your excitement and for being a freak like me.

Rachel, I know I probably *could* make a decision without you, but why would I want to? Thanks for all of your awesome support and for being the best of friends.

My amazing PA, Lori Alexander, who I would be a MESS without.

All the thanks in the world to the rest of my awesome team:

My ARC team of readers and bloggers. I appreciate you every single time.

Jessica Parker of Parker Premades for the guidance and encouragement with this fantastic cover.

Michelle Lancaster for the simply stunning cover photo.

Samantha De La Mar with Talk Nerdy 2 Me promotions.

Amy Briggs of Briggs Consulting, my amazing editor.

Kate Farlow of Y'all That Graphic for the graphic designs.

All of my Sweets in Sara's Sweets for being the best fans in the world.

I hope you loved Gravity because Freefall is coming, and it's going to be...well, wild. ;)

BEAUTIFUL MONSTER



Playboy. Socialite. Frivolous and Wicked.

Alexander Caldwell needs to settle down.

Hence the giant white house he just bought in the suburbs.

The one that backs up to the house filled with three single women living in it.

They all have their sights set on him...but it's *her* he can't get out of his head.

Alexander has absolutely no place getting involved with a teenage girl with the world in her eyes.

But he does.

Tortured. Lonely. Desperate to run.

Sunny Thorn needs to get out of her mother's house.

To do that, she needs money.

Hence taking the job painting a mural in Alexander Caldwell's pool house.

The man whose eyes follow her. The man with the sculpted jaw and commanding presence. The man who is way too old for her.

When Sunny has the chance to get out of Pineridge and start a future of her own, he should let her go.

But he doesn't.

[Preorder now!](#)

Cover reveal coming soon...

ALSO BY SARA CATE

Wicked Hearts Series

[Delicate](#)

[Dangerous](#)

[Defiant](#)

Age-gap romance

[Beautiful Monster](#)

[Beautiful Sinner](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Cate writes forbidden romance with lots of angst, a little age gap, and heaps of steam. Living in Nashville with her husband and kids, Sara spends most of her time reading, writing, or baking.



You can find more information about her at

www.saracatebooks.com

