

A romantic scene between a man and a woman in a tropical setting. The woman, with long dark hair, is wearing a white button-down shirt over a black top and is leaning towards the man. The man is shirtless and has his hand on the woman's shoulder. They are standing in front of a large tree trunk on the left. The background is a soft, hazy tropical landscape with palm trees and a warm, golden light. The overall mood is intimate and sensual.

a Topica Bay novel

One More *night*

LOREN BEEESON

One More
night

LOREN BEESON


Copyright © 2023 by Loren Beeson

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.

Cover designed by KiWi Cover Design Co.

Edited by Silvia Curry (Silvia's Reading Corner)

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A Note From the Author](#)

[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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Loren Beeson Books](#)

[Playlist and Pinterest Inspo](#)

[About the Author](#)

For my husband.

I love you.

*Thank you for not divorcing me after what these two a-holes
put my brain through.*

Topica Bay



Drawn by
Michal Kozub

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One More Night was, without a doubt, the most difficult and challenging story I've ever written, and there are so many I need to thank for getting me through it.

There were times I loved Heather and Marcus so much I wanted to cry. And then there were times I felt stuck between two feuding toddlers. There was also an unlimited supply of 'life happens' moments during the writing and editing processes that damn near broke me. But I kept going, and in the end, I think their story ended up as perfectly imperfect as they are, and just as beautiful as I hoped it would be.

My husband. As mentioned in the dedication, I'm so grateful you didn't ditch my ass for all the ups and downs I put you through with this one. The late nights, early mornings, extra chores, keeping the kiddo entertained—honestly, it's a long ass list, but I'm so grateful for your love and support. You never let me quit, no matter how many times I said I wanted to, and I'm forever grateful to have you in my corner.

Murphy, Letty, the Keyboard Wh*res, Eliza, Kassi, Mary... Every damn one of you held my hand through this story, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank and love each of you. You made the lonely times a lot less lonely.

My editor, Silvia, thank you doesn't do you justice, but dammit, I'm so grateful for you. You truly were a rock for me through this entire process, and I couldn't have done it without you.

Jessica, I love you. Thank you for talking me up, fighting my doubts alongside me, and loving me harder than I could ever love myself.

As always, my readers. You make me a better person just by supporting and cheering me on. Writing is my greatest dream, and it would not be possible without you guys.

I hope you all love and enjoy Heather and Marcus just as much as I have.

Xoxo, Loren Beeson

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There are several chapters in this story in which a festival I've named *T'slasta* takes place. It completely stole my heart while writing it, and holds many attributes from different cultures that have influenced me creatively in the best of ways.

But I feel it's necessary to reiterate that this festival is shadowing no specific culture. It's a beautiful melting pot of wonderful traditions and celebrations from around the world that spoke to me, and I feel honored to create a beautiful world for them all to be showcased.

I hope you enjoy the magic as much as I did!

Sincerely, Loren

***Some readers may find some of the content in this novel sensitive or uncomfortable. A full list of trigger warnings can be found on my website at lorenbeesonbooks.com*

CHAPTER ONE



Heather

The chances of me leaving the safety of dry land to fly to a tropical island are slim. Practically none, if I'm honest. But to be kneeling behind a row of monstera leaves, with dirt smudged on my cheeks, and sweat sliding down my ass crack? Outright ludicrous.

Yet, here I am, doing exactly that while readying my *Luster Magazine*-issued Nikon for the shot of a lifetime starring the man of my dreams.

Do most of those dreams consist of punching Marcus Matthews in his stupid, pretentious face? Abso-fucking-lutely.

But I digress.

Heather Sinclair does *not* fly anywhere that enormous blue beast is involved. No matter how badly I've always desired to travel or how beautiful the destination. In fact, there are a few rules I've put in place over my twenty-four years, and avoiding smooth-talking actors, double whip cinnamon lattes, and large bodies of water top the list.

I inhale a long rush of air through my nose before releasing it, nice and slow.

Alice was adamant that this story would be a make-or-break-it shot for my journalist career, as well as for *Luster*. And given my job is the only thing keeping me from a lonely life with a myriad of cats for companions, I knew better than to turn it down.

Besides, arguing with my hardass editor rarely ever works out for me.

“Show. Me. The money,” I whisper, raising the viewfinder to focus on the enormous glass building across the parking lot.

The words, Tauntuma Rehabilitation Center, fill the tiny square of my camera before I shift the shot lower to the revolving door in search of the famous *Fang For Hire* star. The vampire hunter’s growing popularity has swept the nation with his six-pack abs, bad-boy vibe, and all-night partying.

In the last two years, he’s successfully managed to light a fire in America’s proverbial panties.

Luckily for me, I’m not wearing any.

A tall, broad man approaches, holding the dainty hand of a woman whose blazing red dress rises with each step they scale. She sobs dramatically, and the sound ricochets across the parking lot, piggybacking the salty breeze while she blots her eyes with a handkerchief.

I instantly recognize the actress and her manager, and my twitchy fingers tighten around my camera.

Maria Zanza is widely known for her years starring as Dr. Ricardo Santiago’s crazy ex-lover on one of the most popular telenovelas in the States. Though, as of late, she’s gained more of a reputation for her love affair with powdered sugar.

And not the sweet kind.

Counting my lucky stars, I snap several images of the pair walking toward the entrance, when in a flash of movement, Maria whips around and shoves the man backward.

He stumbles down two steps, flapping his arms wildly as they shout. Rushed garbled Spanish flies from their mouths, giving me ample time to capture a few more shots.

Bellowing a final curse, he marches up the steps, and clamps a hand over her wrist before crushing his lips to hers. Her fists pound at his back and shoulders, and then, all at once, she’s melting into him.

A smirk cracks my usually cool exterior as I continue clicking. These two aren't the reason I'm miles from Chicago, hiding in a bush like a stalker, but the bonus drama is sure to make Alice giddy.

I'm scrolling through the photos when I hear footsteps sifting through the mix of dead leaves and fine sand I'm still crouching in. Despite the warmer climate, the hairs on the back of my neck rise to alarming attention.

Busted.

“Sinclair.” A smooth, British accent slips from the mouth of a man I hate almost more than the one who's yet to arrive. “I don't believe my eyes.”

I peer over my shoulder at the arrogant asshole with his hands resting in the pants pockets of a designer suit. “Bugger off, Turner. I'm busy.”

Smug as ever, he bends to pluck a piece of dried foliage from the top of my head, tugging a few perfectly gelled strands free. When he catches sight of my rental bike, he arches a brow. “Traveling in luxury, I see.”

I fuss at the spot, flattening it back down. “It's called being inconspicuous.”

“Yes. Between the shrubbery and dirt, how will they ever know it's you?”

With an exasperated huff, I turn on him. “For your information, I'm here to—you know what? Never mind. I'm not giving classified information to a traitor.”

The stab doesn't bother him near as much as I'd hoped. Dammit.

Like a cat with a fat mouse in its paws, he grins.

“I'm well aware what's brought you here.” He flicks his cocky gaze toward the building, missing the daggers my narrowed eyes are throwing by half a second. “And it appears that... Ah, yes, just missed him.”

Wide-eyed, I spin on my heel, readying my camera. But when I find the lot and the front of the building barren, I

realize too late he's fucking with me.

"Bastard," I grumble loud enough for him to hear.

"I'm sure I'll be seeing you," he croons in response, offering a wink before turning for the opposite parking lot.

"Can't believe Alice actually boned that guy."

A sexy accent can only lower one's standards so far. And apparently, her's are lower than a record-setting limbo bar.

Journalism is all about the five Ws. The who, what, when, where, and why.

When a story goes live without all those boxes checked, it can be disastrous for business. *Luster* has Ellis Turner to thank for a staged photo he gave Alice long before I ever came on with them. It ruined their rep, and even though it was their duty to double- and triple-check their sources, I stand by them, hating him all the same.

With a groan, I stand on numb, wobbling legs. Now that he's swaggered back to the fiery pits of hell, I sigh. I've been fighting the thought since earlier this morning, but after hours of sitting out here, I'm starting to think maybe our intel was wrong.

Marcus was rumored to appear at the Apple Awards ceremony held at the Double Palm resort last night. It's been two weeks since his hospital stay and accident resulting in a DUI, and already, he's flying to an exotic island to attend a fancy event.

It's that kind of behavior that fuels my sweet, torture-dealing dreams. Except, I scouted every inch of the hotel grounds, questioned numerous servers and hotel staff, and still never found him.

Anticipating Alice's eventual demand for an update, I double-check my phone. Relieved to find no new messages, I remove my trusty black baseball cap and matching black glasses from my backpack, secure my camera in its case, and then guide my rental bike along the median until I'm able to make a break for a more secluded spot.

A rusty green dumpster catches my eye on the side of the building, and I scurry toward it with my head on a swivel. When I approach, I prop the handlebars against the dented metal box and creep around the back.

I peer up at the corners of the building in search of any overhead cameras, only to have my feet nearly fly out from under me.

My hand claps over my mouth, silencing a scream as I'm tangled up in the legs of a man lying on a mound of cardboard. Half of whatever had been in the cup he's holding is now spewed across his living space.

He groggily opens one eye.

"Sir, it's imperative that I borrow your dwelling for a moment." I pause my hurried whispering with a nervous laugh. "I'm tracking down a very important person for a story ___"

With that one glassy eye wide open, he cuts me off with a rumbling snore.

I purse my lips, staring at him a moment longer. "Alrighty, then."

My cell phone hums from my pocket. The name Alice 'The World's Best Editor' scrolls across the screen, and I press the button to answer before hesitantly raising it to my ear.

"Have you seen him yet?" my editor barks.

Classic Alice, always cutting to the chase, never bothering with a formal hello.

"Um." I glance at the sleeping man curled up by my feet.

"That'd be a no."

"You didn't even give me a chance to respond," I whisper-hiss, stepping around the older man.

"No answer is answer enough."

"Look—" I peek around the dumpster's edge for any more wandering Brits with overinflated egos. "There's been a bit of a situation."

I can almost see her pinching the bridge of her nose as she sighs. “Dear God, Sinclair, tell me you weren’t seen.”

“I... wasn’t seen.”

There’s shuffling over the line, followed by a round of muffled curses and banging.

My lips thin as I nod. “That’s it. Mm-hmm. Get it all out.”

“Do you think this is funny?”

Maybe.

“It was Turner. The asshole snuck up on me while I was keeping watch.”

Alice clicks her pen a couple of times. “Unsurprising. He probably has a whole group of paparazzi with him, too. The man’s an incurable virus that refuses to die. Herpes personified.”

In the privacy of a homeless man’s dwelling, I allow myself to smile.

“Tell me I didn’t waste money sourcing the rehab intel just for it to blow up in our faces.”

My psyche prods me to do what I do best. Come up with a solution, and fast.

“Just because he no-showed the event doesn’t mean we’ve failed.” I glance up at the afternoon sun and decide I’ll wait here all day if I have to. “I’ve got a plan that’ll make whatever Turner scrounges up about Marcus look like amateur hour.”

Alice is silent long enough to have me checking our connection.

“Ugh, I hate him,” she finally mumbles.

Remembering the way he used her, I offer a consoling, “I know.”

“There’s something else I need to tell you.”

I pause, my ears perking as I wait for her follow-up. I’ve worked with the woman for three years now, and not once has that tone failed to deliver some hot gossip or bad news.

“Hit me,” I say, dropping the camera bag that’s been weighing my shoulder down with a *thud*.

More pen clicking, only this time, it’s fast and uncharacteristically nervous. “You remember Leah Matthews?”

I can’t help but cringe. “Marcus’s dead sister?”

Admittedly, turning her funeral into a gossip piece may not have been the moral highlight of my career, but it was the first article I’d ever written for the magazine, and one of the highest-ranking in their history.

I sift through an endless cache of files in my head. “She was a renowned model who passed away a few years ago. Drug overdose they say, though I was never quite convinced. You know that family keeps their secrets locked up tighter than Alcatraz. And on top of that, they’re impossible to interview.”

And I would know. I’ve been waiting for Marcus to slip up ever since he sabotaged my meeting with him.

“That’s just it,” Alice says. “I’ve got a hunch she may not be as dead as we originally thought.”

The very idea gets my blood pumping.

“That’s absurd. I was there when they lowered the casket into the ground.”

That funeral story is the reason I now hold the title of lead journalist, and it’s one of my greatest accomplishments after getting my journalism degree.

The only downside? Having to keep up with all things Matthews.

My phone vibrates, and when I unlock the message, I hold my breath as my eyes fly over the information she’s sent me, absorbing every finite detail.

MARCUS MATTHEWS CRASHES LAMBORGHINI AFTER WILD NIGHT OUT. WILL CLIFFHART STUDIOS STAKE THEIR LEADING VAMPIRE?

An inebriated joy ride gets the Fang For Hire actor suspended from the show, and it's going to take a lot more than holy water and apologies to get the vamp in director Gregorio Giovanni's good graces again. Our sources say the vampire-turned-vampire-hunter is laying low in an undisclosed rehabilitation center. But can another stint in rehab save Matthews's career?

The image below the snippet is one I've seen plenty of times, but when comparing it to the image Alice just sent, I notice something different.

Captured in what appears to be a few frames after the photo I used for that article, is Marcus, sitting in a wheelchair while using one hand to prop open the rear door of a limousine. His face is beat up and bruised with scratches and nicks marring his forehead, the bridge of his slightly crooked nose, and cheeks.

"What are you showing me?" I ask Alice. But then I see it.

There, in the backseat, blurred by shadows and bad lighting, is the silhouette of another body. There're hardly any details I can make out besides the subtle glint of a diamond bracelet.

"Leah," I say, awed by this discovery and how it's yet to light a fire through every media outlet known to man.

"Bingo." Alice's response is a rumbling, scandal-loving purr.

Anyone who'd ever seen Marcus's sister photographed would recognize that bracelet. The words 'Baby Doll' are encrusted with rare red and crystalline diamonds and linked by two thin, solid gold chains. At the time she bought it from a silent auction, it was worth a cool \$6.2 million dollars.

The piece was as iconic as Kelly Clarkson's striped, highlighted hair in the early 2000s, and Leah was never seen without it.

I shake my head, blinking once. How have the Matthews managed to not only fake her death, but also successfully keep her hidden?

“Okay, this is insane. Where the hell did you find this?”

“Don’t you worry about that,” she snarks.

I groan, “Alice.”

“Dwayne and I have a mutual understanding of our relationship,” she counters defensively.

“Relationship? Last time I checked, it was called putting out.”

She sniffs, then clears her throat. “You know as well as I do that some sacrificing is required with this gig.”

“Oh, yes, especially when that *sacrifice* is a photographer with an eight-inch lens.”

Her laughter is short-lived to the pregnant silence that follows.

“I’ve been given permission to extend your stay.”

“I’m sorry?” Surely, I didn’t hear her correctly.

“I need you to get this story, Sinclair, whatever the cost. That family has some deep, dark secrets, and a breakthrough like this could clear our name for good, putting *Luster Magazine* back in the number one spot.” She pauses for effect. “Where we belong.”

I squeeze my phone the way I’d like to wring her neck.

“You tricked me.” My stomach knots to the point of pain. “Chasing that pretty boy around this island for the unforeseeable future was *not* part of the plan. One weekend, that’s what I had agreed to.”

But she knew damn well once she got me here, I wouldn’t be able to resist a scoop like this.

My suspicions are confirmed when she doesn’t bother denying it.

“You’ll stay as long as you need.”

“But—”

“No buts, Sinclair. Since you’ll need somewhere more comfortable to stay long-term, we’re moving you from the

Double Palm to a ranch in Augustine. It's a bit off-grid, but it's cozy. Think of it as a paid vacation."

She waits for me to realize that I've got nothing left to argue about. There's little more for me back home than a mostly empty apartment void of any personality. No pets, no friends. Nothing but my love for journalism and hard-hitting stories.

I was a foster kid. And as pathetic as it is, my job and Alice are all I have.

"*Fine,*" I agree at last.

A flash of movement behind the rehabilitation facility steals my attention.

Holy fucking shit balls.

My sight zeroes on a familiar face attached to a too-familiar body that's making a break for an unmarked vehicle. The only thing remotely hiding his identity is a gray hat.

"Subtle," I murmur, but adrenaline courses through my veins, hijacking my nervous system when I realize he's not alone.

I make out a classic feminine hourglass frame, dressed in dark clothing, waiting for Marcus to open the door of a blacked-out sedan.

Has he been inside the building the entire time? And if so, how could I possibly have missed him?

"Heather, did you catch any of that?" Alice asks, but I'm already on the move.

It's not that I don't enjoy writing celebrity gossip. It's just that sometimes I miss the thrill and grit of journalism. The kind from my interning days that required a bit of sleuthing and getting my hands dirty.

This is the shit I live for, baby.

I snag my camera bag off the ground, secure the strap across my chest, and then throw my leg over the bike seat. "Take a rental car to the property, send you any expense

reports during my stay, and whatever I do, keep away from the paparazzi. Got it.”

I’ll worry about anything I may have missed later. Right now, Marcus is sliding into a vehicle with a woman who may be his undead sister, and I’m not about to lose them.

“Take care of yourself, Heather.”

I grin at the warning wrapped around my first name. Alice is the closest thing to a friend I have, and the soft spot I’ve got for her has grown awful squishy over the years.

“Always,” I say before disconnecting the call.

Air slides in and out of my lungs as I pump the pedals, guiding the bike to the edge of the drive to duck behind a palm tree. The sedan carefully rolls out of the parking lot, and I let them get just the right amount of space ahead of me before taking off.

A warm breeze kisses my cheeks, and the aroma of various street foods mingle with the scent of sunscreen and tanning oil. I take the designated crossway to the bike path across the street. There’s no sense of time, no pain in my straining muscles, as I push harder to keep up with Marcus and the mystery woman.

Tauntuma is the largest on the island, and I’m amazed by the sky-scraping architecture that reminds me of my home in Chicago.

Miles of beach peeks through buildings and rental shops to my left, while a bustling, concrete jungle towers to my right. Exhaust clogs my nose as I follow the car through the heart of the city, stopping at each red light with enough distance to keep me irrelevant.

I self-consciously tug the bill of my hat lower onto my forehead. The last thing I need is for the driver to notice me tailing them.

It’s rumored Daddy Matthews has some serious muscle working for him, and they’d probably dispose of my body with as little as a blink.

My head swims with unease as we travel deeper into a more industrial part of Tauntuma. An overwhelming stench of fish rides the wind, and in the distance, foghorns sound low, alternating ominously across the bay.

“A shipyard?” I wonder aloud.

The clicking of bicycle spokes echoes through towers of rectangular C-containers. They’re stacked high enough to blanket the area in shadows while whispering a chill through my bones.

I park my bike next to one of the sea salt-worn metal boxes, watching as the driver pulls up to a silver SUV. Quietly slipping off my pack, I reach inside for my camera case and slowly unzip it. After stringing the bag over the handlebar, I take a second to adjust the shutter speed and lens, then raise it for a better view.

I rotate the lens to zoom in, blood whirring in my ears as I wait for them to exit the vehicle. With the windows tinted black on both vehicles, it’s impossible for me to assess who’s driving, but I snap a few pictures anyway.

The back passenger door of the sedan pops open, and through the viewfinder, I capture Marcus emerging. He glances around—no doubt double-checking that they weren’t followed—then reaches in and helps the woman to her feet.

He cups her shoulder, speaking to her carefully, and I absorb every detail about her I can, from her black hair to the sunkissed tan of her skin, but I’m shocked still, unable to move.

The man graces multiple tabloids a month—and many of my own articles. I’ve even gone as far as studying his likes and dislikes for our digital team to create those obnoxious *How Well Do You Know Marcus Matthews* quizzes women just can’t seem to get enough of. But being this close to my archnemesis in a creepy, desolate shipyard while waiting to unveil this woman’s identity is almost too much for my brain to compute.

As quickly as they went offline, my thoughts come rushing back, screaming at me to get the damn shot before it's too late. Excitement lights a fire through me. Day two, and I've already got a jump on the assignment.

Ha! Maybe I won't be staying in Topica Bay as long as Alice thinks.

But right as I press the shutter, a red- and white-striped umbrella flies open, blocking my view and cocooning the two in privacy.

"Dammit!" I continue filling my SD card with image after image as they move.

They make their way toward the vehicle opposite the sedan, and Marcus carefully tucks her into the back before taking the driver's seat for himself.

Defeated, I lower my camera as their ghost driver takes off.

My thoughts spin out of control, and a sinking sensation pits my stomach while Marcus puts the car into drive and heads in the opposite direction of the previous driver.

"Hey, you!" a man wearing tattered coveralls and muddied boots shouts. "What are you doing over there?"

Two men flank his sides as they barrel after me.

"Time to go." I don't waste another second before cramming my camera into its bag. Zipping it as fast as I can, I sling it over my shoulder, then pedal my way through a maze of junk piles and containers.

When the pounding of boots against wet concrete finally subsides, and I've hit an open, empty stretch of road, I cleanse my lungs with a deep breath.

I don't know what Marcus is up to, and after what I just witnessed, I'm nervous to find out. But if I've learned anything about curiosity in journalism, it's that it either leads to an incredible story or an immense amount of regret.

CHAPTER TWO



Marcus

By the way, do you have any idea how annoying this thing is?" Penelope pipes up from the backseat before stripping out of her disguise.

"Annoying, but necessary," I say sternly. "If I get caught, I'm not taking you down with me."

I glance at the umbrella shoved between the console and the passenger seat. There's no such thing as being too cautious where the media is concerned.

In the rearview mirror, her long brown hair tumbles out of a thin cap.

When her reflection raises a scolding glare, I smirk. "Oh, come on. It can't be that bad. Besides, it's not like I'm asking you to pretend to be my girlfriend or anything."

The black wig smacks my cheek, and I toss the mangled hair on the seat beside me.

"Barf." She wrinkles her freckled nose. "I can see the headline now, 'Marcus Matthews caught kissing his cousin.'"

I huff a laugh. "We can add it to the family's ever-growing list of scandals."

I've lost track of them all at this point, anyway.

"Do you think anyone saw us?" Penelope asks.

"I don't think so. But as long as no one follows us to Augustine, we're good."

The locals there are our second family, and I'll stop at nothing to keep them safe.

She leans forward, to get a better view of the countryside. "I'm pretty sure if there were any stragglers, you've lost them by now."

Augustine is nestled in the most rural part of Topica Bay, and about an hour south of Tauntuma. Tropical forests give way to lush farmland the farther we travel from the city, making this area in particular ideal for livestock and horse breeding.

The mountains scale high enough to brush low-hanging clouds, and bountiful patches of land have been preserved for various crops at their bases.

A sense of nostalgia washes over me as we pass a cluster of cottage-style homes, like those surrounding my uncle's ranch. I check the road behind us, finding nothing but billowing dust as we bump along toward our home away from home.

The old red barn we used to play in as kids sits high on a hill, encompassed by miles of acreage for Uncle Patrick's collection of horses.

"He's really kept this place up," I murmur more to myself than to my cousin.

"You know, being the CEO of a massive application company like Triggerz has been great for him and Mom, but this is the only place I've ever seen him at peace." She leans back against the seat. "They're not happy about missing *T'slasta* this year."

After everything that's happened to bring me back to our childhood playground, I'm eager to immerse myself in the annual celebration in a couple of weeks. It reminds me of a different time; one where Penelope and I were pimple-faced teens, parting with our innocence by kissing our first crushes and stashing liquor bottles in bushes while we danced with friends under the stars.

I smirk at the memories. “I’m sure they’ll be just as happy once they get to London for the international branch launch.”

When we make it up the long drive, Penelope stares, awed by the impressive twelve-stable building just beyond the rear side of her father’s home.

“I forget how much I miss it here,” she murmurs.

“You don’t visit?”

Pen lives in Keerah, a separate part of the island connected to the mainland by an enormous bridge. It’s about three and a half hours from where we’re headed, but still, I’m surprised she hasn’t been back in so long. I assumed Augustine was the reason behind her getting dual citizenship.

“Occasionally.” A frown pulls at her usually dimpled cheeks. “This place just doesn’t have the same sparkle without you guys, I guess.”

An inkling of guilt pinches my gut. “I’m sorry for dragging you out here, Pen.”

“Just be grateful that the judge let you choose your rehab facility because she wants to sit on your face,” she teases, and the visual I get of the elderly woman makes me cringe. “Besides, who else would risk busting your pampered ass out of there?”

“Pampered,” I scoff, but we both know the answer is no one.

If it weren’t for Pen’s connections at the facility, I’d be singing songs in AA meetings and reading pamphlets about drug and alcohol dependency.

“Your ex didn’t give you too much trouble, right?” I ask about the prick who broke her heart. She moved to the farthest city on the island just to get away from him, and asking her for this favor didn’t come easy. “I don’t care what kind of pull his father has, I’ll kick his ass if I need to.”

“Nah.” She shrugs. “He owed me one.”

Deciding not to dredge up the past, I offer our ranch hand, Russell, a wave and grab my suitcase before following Pen to

the front door.

From the top of the property, miles of land littered with trees and far-off houses reflect the orange glow of the setting sun. Incandescent purples, pinks, and blues strike through the sky, and just beyond the horizon lies a crystalline ocean.

A black- and red-striped bird flies from the roof of the barn, and I note the faded red paint, various holes, and the overgrown grass around it.

“Dad’s gonna tear it down soon,” Pen says.

“What?”

“It took some weather damage about a year ago and has been empty ever since,” she says nonchalantly, as if that barn doesn’t hold some of our best childhood memories. “He says it’s an eyesore.”

I don’t believe what I’m hearing. There’s no way in hell I’m letting him tear it down, though I don’t tell Penelope that just yet.

She changes the subject as she takes the steps two at a time. “The folks around here will be happy to see you. Cat and the girls will be, too.”

“We’ll see about that,” I mutter.

My sister Leah and I used to live here for summers at a time when we were kids and pre-teens. Mom couldn’t go more than a few months without traveling to see her sister Lucy or her nieces, Penelope and Carrie.

But a lot’s changed since the last time I visited, and I’m anxious to find out if I’m still welcome.

Pen smiles thoughtfully, trailing her finger over the purple color Aunt Lucy insisted on painting the door all those years ago. Once we enter the living room, I inhale the thick, rich scent of wood and leather.

A set of dark couches fill the main living space, and to the right of the kitchen is a built-in bookcase that frames the top and sides of a stone fireplace.

I drop my belongings in the entryway, heading straight for the wall-to-wall entertainment center. Kneeling to open the glass case below the television, I swipe my palm over a dusty black game console, then remove one of the controllers.

“Our old Nintendo 64.”

With her arms crossed, Pen bumps my hip with hers. “I guess there are worse ways to serve your sentence.”

My smile slips at the reminder. *The crash... the tabloids... the blame...* I stare at the three-pronged, yellow remote until my vision blurs out of focus.

“Hey.” Penelope places a hand over mine. “It’s okay. We don’t have to talk about it.”

“Good, because there’s nothing left to discuss.” I hate the hard edge in my voice, but there’s no hiding it. The whole fiasco is still so raw. “What’s done is done.”

She plucks the remote from my hand. “Why don’t you get unpacked, and when you’re finished, I’ll destroy you in *Diddy Kong Racing*.”

The corner of my mouth twitches as that lick of anger settles. “You’re on.”

I return to the entry and drag my shit to the master bedroom.

A low, rumbling *woof* comes from the rug at the foot of the bed when I open the door.

“Jango. You’re still alive, buddy?”

Patrick’s fawn-colored mastiff chuffs from where he lies on the floor, but his tail starts whapping the minute I’m within petting range.

A groan rumbles from the mutt’s barrel chest as he flops onto his back, hamming it up the same way he always has while begging for a scratch.

Mid belly rub, that rumble travels under my palm, lower until I hear a near-silent *pfft*.

His tail goes limp and those wide eyes flick to mine as if he's hoping I didn't notice.

"Jesus Christ," I grunt. "You'll be sleeping in the barn if you keep that up."

Jango howls softly, adding another round of tail wagging as I step into the bathroom and flip the lights on. I strip down inside the stark white room, and instead of dipping into the garden tub, I opt for the wood-tiled luxury shower.

The rain feature hums to life, sprinkling a steady stream across my head, neck, and shoulders. My eyes drift shut as I listen to the trickling sound of water sliding down the drain.

'Marcus! Marcus! Can you give us details of the crash? Was anyone hurt?'

Even though my eyes are closed, I bat an invisible recorder out of my face.

"Fuck off," I whisper.

'Rehab again. Does this mean your career is over?'

'Marcus!'

I pound my fist against the wall. Once. Twice. Three times, before I finally open my eyes.

Resting my forehead on my arm, I ride the wave of nausea making my stomach roil until I'm able to take several calming breaths. Once I'm sure I won't vomit, I wash up and quickly shut the water off.

Droplets fall from the tips of my hair, and I brace my palms against the wall, watching each one plop between my feet.

I'm thankful to my uncle for letting me tend to the ranch while he prepares to leave for London, and beyond thankful to Pen for helping me out. But this isolation, the ache of being alone and cut off from the world, is almost worse than if I'd stayed.

Once I'm dressed, I rummage through the bag containing my woodworking tools. A buddy of mine taught me the trade,

and I've been obsessed ever since, creating and selling pieces any chance I get.

I could drown myself in the welcoming heat of any woman or drink and use until oblivion welcomes me, but working with my hands is the only thing that truly gives me solace.

Carefully, I remove the cloth-wrapped gift I made for my uncle last Christmas, tracing the intricate curves and swirls of three wild horses running through a pasture of tall grass before placing it on top of his dresser.

My ass hits the bed after I swipe my wallet from my discarded pants, and I unfold the picture stuffed inside it. Studying the young faces staring back at me, I wonder what's the use of torturing myself. Nothing's going to change, so why do I bother continuously agonizing over it?

I drop the picture into a hidden drawer, and then make my way through the kitchen to the fridge. The tab of a Miller Lite cracks loudly, and I guzzle it down in three large gulps before reaching for another.

Soft footfalls travel across the tile to where I'm leaning over the sink.

I don't bother glancing over my shoulder. "What?"

"You shouldn't be drinking," Penelope warns.

"It's been a long day. I just want to take the edge off some." Helping myself to another sip, I turn to find the keys to Uncle Patrick's work truck dangling from her fingers. "Where are you headed?"

She nibbles the edge of her lip with a wince. "To Mom's hideout."

"What's up with you?" I ask.

"Um."

I lower my arms. "Out with it, Pen."

"Dad called while you were in the shower, and I've been instructed to stay."

“For fucks’ sake, I don’t need a nanny,” I snap, whirling on her. “Go back home, I mean it. When the dust eventually settles, and the studio is ready to talk, I’ll head back to the States, and all will be well.”

“Absolutely not. As your manager—”

I snort. “You’re not my manager.”

“I need to be here to strong-arm the media. Gotta make sure they don’t come sniffing around the place.”

“You mean,” I lift her arm by the wrist and give it a little flap, “these arms?”

Her lips thin as she snatches her hand from mine. “Argue all you want, but as long as you’re *recovering*, I will remain.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“This house is plenty big for the two of us to have some privacy, if that’s what you’re whining about.” Turning on her heel, she sifts through the keys, heading for the patio door. “Besides, who’s going to welcome the woman renting the mother-in-law suite? *You?*”

A flicker of unease has me scowling. “What woman?”

I’m shoed with one hand while the other twists the knob. “Don’t worry. She’ll be far enough away that you two won’t even notice each other.”

When she swings the door open, I can just make out Aunt Lucy’s house in the middle of the pasture.

“This isn’t a good idea.”

“Mom insisted. And you and I both know we could use the money.”

That sickening sensation rises once more. She says ‘we’ like my problems are her own.

“I won’t let her get within fifty yards of this place.” She flexes to emphasize my need to be protected.

“This is turning into less of the quiet vacation I wanted, and more like a stint in prison.”

“Marcus.” Penelope’s features soften, and after a beat, she adds, “Something’s gotta give if you want anything to change.”

Her words stamp themselves all over my brain, annoying and unwanted. Still, they can’t keep me locked up. I’ll lose my ever-loving mind, and then where will we be?

Jango’s nails snick across the floor as he leisurely strides toward me. The old dog plops his butt half on the floor, half on my boot, and pants happily.

“Okay,” I concede. “But if she asks about me, I want you to lie to her. Tell her I’m a grumpy old fuck who cusses and yells and doesn’t like to be bothered. I don’t want her poking her nose around here.”

A smile creeps onto her face as she smarts, “Where’s the lie in that?”

I ball up the kitchen towel closest to me and chuck it at her giggling form as she slips outside.

The minute she’s gone, a hush falls through the house. Jango whines quietly while a clock ticks in one of the spare rooms, yet the near-silence is somehow louder than any party or A-list event I’ve ever attended.

A crushing, suffocating sensation claws at my chest.

Before the walls cave in, a slow, high-pitched squeak sounds from Jango’s back end. I yank my foot out from under him, stomping toward the back door to holler at Penelope, “And take this damn dog with you!”

CHAPTER THREE



Heather

The early morning air prickles my skin with goosebumps as I send the final touches of a story to Alice.

My laptop shuts with a *snap*. “And, done.”

Almost instantly, my phone vibrates with a text.

ALICE ‘THE WORLD’S BEST EDITOR’

Maria Zanza, huh? Nice work.

I welcome a tendril of pride before tapping a heart icon on the message, then send her a picture of my surroundings, followed by:

Could be worse.

She responds to my message with a matching heart, and I relax back in the rickety chair, listening to cows mooing and chickens clucking in the distance.

Several multi-hued horses plod through an adjacent pasture, and I decide ‘beautiful’ doesn’t quite describe this view. No, this place is the epitome of picture-perfect.

Raising my camera, I snap a few photos of the dark and light green mountains, which make a stunning backdrop for the surrounding pasture. The shutter clicks on a mother and baby horse wandering between my house and the one on the hill, but I halt on the dilapidated barn that fills my viewfinder.

Compared to the shiny new stables on the far end of the owner's property, the barn is weather-worn and could use some tender love and care, but it gives the place character. Like a generational treasure that the owner couldn't bear to part with.

Beside it stands an equally stunning ranch house, with a small fenced area where more horses graze, tails whipping at flies and hooves stomping lazily.

The sun rises, coating the field in hazy sprays of pinks and yellows. It's more than I could ask for in terms of comfort and relaxation. The only downside is that I'm far away from the city, adding to the difficulty of figuring out where Marcus ran off to.

I open my laptop again and click the folder on my desktop labeled 'M. Matthews.' It takes several scrolls to find the funeral article I wrote about his sister Leah, and once I open it, I split the screen with the image Alice sent me yesterday.

My eyes dry out after studying them both for so long, and I rub them with a frustrated sigh.

There's no mistake. That's Leah's bracelet in this new picture, but the detective in me can't shake the feeling that something isn't adding up. Her autopsy report was never open to the public, leaving the rest of us to guess what had been the cause of her ultimate demise.

The media pushed the narrative that she was a wild child, printing masses of photos showing her partying in clubs and drinking with friends. It was easy to assume she may have overdosed, but every friend and acquaintance I managed to question after her death all had the same things to say.

Leah was level-headed, smart, and took her job too seriously to fuck it up with drugs.

I scrub a hand down my face, wincing at the black mark on my conscience. That was the first time in my career I ever wrote for the hype and not for the facts, and I swore I would never do it again.

Reflecting on Marcus and the woman I saw him with yesterday, two things stand out to me the most.

Leah Matthews was an international model. She was tall and thin, not on the shorter side and shapely, like Marcus's unidentified woman. And though she could have dyed it since, her hair was a soft shade of ash-brown, not the jet-black I'd gotten a split-second peek at.

Commotion across the pasture tears my attention away from my research before I can investigate further. A yellow dog, the size of a miniature horse, charges down the hill, heading straight for me. It barks, deep and loud, and in a panic, I slam my computer shut and scramble to stand.

"Easy, mutt!" I holler at the beast, thrusting my palms out to stop it, but it's got that look in its eye. One that tells me the minute it reaches me, I'm going to be tackled.

"Jango," a woman hollers from the bottom of the hill. She's already halfway across the field, shaking her fist above her head. "Get your mangy ass back here before you break a hip!"

The mastiff pays her no mind. Instead, he climbs the steps of the wraparound porch, panting furiously before collapsing in a heap at my feet.

"Um. Hello," I greet him with a touch of caution.

He flops onto his back, tail wagging furiously, and the corner of my mouth quirks.

"Oh, I see. You just *look* scary. Isn't that right, you big softy?"

His butt wiggles excitedly when I bend to pat his belly. Gray hairs are sprinkled throughout the fur covering his chin and the wrinkles around his eyes.

The woman who was chasing him clomps up the steps, then rounds the side of the house, and plants her palms on her knees. "Damn you, dog."

"He's not bothering me," I assure her.

The brunette's smile is brighter than the morning sun. Her tattered flannel hangs off one shoulder and her jeans are smeared with dirt.

"Give it a couple of days. You'll be wishing you never scratched that belly."

She straightens to nudge Jango's rear, and like a turtle on its back, he awkwardly rolls over to standing before showering my legs in dribbles of drool with a shake of his head.

Standing about the same five-foot-five height as me, I'm face to face with a pair of amber-brown eyes and a freckled nose.

"Name's Penelope," the woman offers. "Are you Barbara?"

At my instant confusion, she adds, "Sorry to assume. That was the name I saw on the reservation."

"Heather." I quickly give her hand a shake, cursing myself for using my real name—like a fucking rookie—and not giving an alias as Alice must have. "Barb's just a friend."

Dear god, please stop talking.

"Well, you're going to love Augustine." She motions to my robe and messy bun. "Sorry we interrupted you."

Tightening the plush belt around my middle, I wave a hand. "No worries. I was just enjoying the view."

Penelope nods toward my laptop. "You're a writer."

I double-check that it's still closed before asking, "What gave me away?"

"Coffee, legal pad, laptop. I know a wordsmith survival kit when I see one."

Huh. I think I might like this chick.

"Sort of." I scramble for a plausible occupation as I gather my things. Alice didn't prepare me for *people*. "I'm a... travel blogger. Blogging and traveling. That's what I do."

With a smirk, Penelope picks up my camera, turning it this way and that. “Fancy.”

I steel my panic before promptly reaching for it with sweating palms. “I’m not a big deal or anything, it’s more of a hobby.”

Five minutes. That’s how long we’ve been talking and already, I’ve given up my real name and let a stranger touch my camera.

Penelope steps around me to yank on the screen door handle and I follow her inside. Jango makes himself comfortable on a worn spot on the floor while I drop my equipment in a pile on the breakfast table.

“Do you own this place?” I ask.

With a small kitchen and dining nook which opens to the living room, and an upstairs loft, the space is more than enough for two to live comfortably.

“Actually, we’re on my father’s ranch. I’m just helping with the rental while I’m in town.”

I arch a brow, nosing for information like it’s second nature. “Ah. He must be the one in the fancy house on the hill.”

“This is my mother’s getaway spot for when she and Dad are here,” she says, avoiding my question and fiddling with a statue of a naked woman on the shelf behind the couch. “She likes to rent out her ‘woman cave,’ as she calls it, whenever they’re traveling.”

I grab a distressed wooden frame and study the couple in the photo. The man glances away from the camera with a laugh wrinkling the corners of his eyes, while the woman stares ahead with the same unfiltered joy on her lips. They must be somewhere on the island given the tropical background and their beach attire.

“Your parents?” I guess.

“Yup. That’s them in Tauntuma about five years ago.” She grins fondly. “Look at those goofy outfits.”

Most days, I'm able to keep the past buried. Keeping myself busy with working out and researching non-stop helps. But in instances like these, a sense of loss blooms until I'm forced to remember I have no mom with funny quirks to tell people about.

I have no family. I have no one.

Replacing the frame, I peruse various trinkets and knick-knacks littering the shelves. They're accompanied by a hoard of books with titles ranging from 'Embracing the Female Orgasm' to 'How to Organize Your Life' and everything in between.

"She's got good taste," I say, reaching for the one about orgasms. "Might have to crack this one open later."

How long has it been since I've allowed myself the simple pleasure of getting off?

Penelope's laugh is warm and inviting, lighting up the room. "No, no. I've got a good friend who can hook you up with something spicier than this."

My ears burn at the thought.

"Hey," she says, placing the book back on the shelf and clasping her hands together. "Since I'm here, why don't I take you into town and give you a tour? I bet you could get some amazing shots for your blog, too."

Alice would probably advise me to tell this woman to eff off, but something about her attracts the dark and pathetically lonesome parts of my soul.

"I know we don't exactly know each other, but since you're staying for a while, you may as well get familiar with the area."

She waltzes into the kitchen, perfectly comfortable in her mother's space, and lowers a mug from the cabinet. After helping herself to a generous amount of coffee from the pot I brewed earlier, she cocks a brow at me.

"Oh, actually," I stammer. "I really should finish the blog entry I'm working on."

First rule in journalism: Trust no one.

I can't afford for anyone to find out what I'm really doing in Topica Bay, but her offer is too tempting. I've always wanted to explore and travel, but my fear of the water holds me back from venturing too far.

Her head tips sideways, mouth popping open to question me further, but I've already talked myself into it. Alice did say it was a paid vacation, after all. Might as well embrace it.

“Actually, I'd love a tour.”

“You would?” She beams like a kid on Christmas morning. “I mean, yes! Of course.”

After downing the rest of her coffee, she sets the mug in the sink and snags a pen out of a jar beside the fridge. “Here's my number in case you ever need me.”

Jango meanders toward her gingerly when she calls for him. “We'll give you a bit to get ready. I'll pick you up at ten?”

I walk over and swipe my camera off the table. “I'll be here.”

Half an hour later, I'm riding shotgun, windows down, and Jango at my side in an old work truck. Hot drool slips down my arm, and I swipe at the spot, narrowing my gaze at him.

Penelope pauses singing long enough to give an apologetic shrug. “He gets sad when I leave him behind.”

I can't help but grin at their matching puppy dog pouts, and when we roll into a parking lot across from an elementary school, I'm shocked to find what I assumed would be a barren, country town teeming with life and color.

“Is that... a goat wearing a top hat?”

Penelope shifts the truck into park. “Oh. That's Jingles, the mayor.”

“Augustine's mayor is a goat?” I watch the creature mindlessly nibble the edge of a picnic table.

In the middle of unclipping Jango's leash, Penelope blinks at me. "Oh my god," she snorts, cackling as she rolls the windows up.

Her cackling morphs into a fit of laughter and for a second, I question whether letting someone I just met escort me into unfamiliar territory was really the best idea.

I've filtered through at least twelve different scenarios of escape before she finally clues me in. "Jingles is the mayor in the school play."

She slides out of the truck with her mutt not far behind and points to the schoolyard where a group of kids are rehearsing.

"Oh." I cautiously trail after her.

"Hi, Penelope!" the entire group shouts and waves.

"Hello, my loves." She bumps Jingles's backside. "Keep Mr. Mayor in the yard, please."

"Yes, Penelope," they collectively singsong.

"I love kids," she says, her gaze heavy with affection as she waves back at them. "It's been a while, but I try to volunteer at the school or bring some of the kiddos from the group home around the ranch anytime I'm in Augustine."

My heart trips through its next beat. "Group home?"

"Yeah, you know, for homeless kids or those waiting for a foster family." Penelope ribs me with her elbow. "The real mayor implemented an order to rebuild and expand the shelter years ago. I wish we didn't even need one, but I'm glad they have a safe place to sleep at night."

Most of my youth was spent bouncing around foster homes. I may have had more than a cot in a shelter, but sleeping in a stranger's house where I knew I didn't belong—where I was the outcast, no matter how they treated me—felt just as lonely.

Her hand around my wrist melts the scowl right off my face.

I look to Jango for help figuring out why she grabbed me, but he's squinting up at the sun, huffing happily at our sides.

I'm not used to people openly touching me, but Penelope succeeds in tugging me along regardless.

We pass several storefronts with dresses and bags strung from braided ropes hanging outside. Most of the items appear handmade, with a surprisingly modern twist.

I'm swept up in the fantasy that is Augustine, snapping a few pictures with my Nikon as we walk along a path full of broken tiles and bricks which have been grouted by hand. The buildings we wind through are all different sizes, teeming with color. Giant bushels of pink and purple flowers kiss the tops of our heads as we pass between a narrow walkway, which leads us through a throng of family-owned restaurants and cafés.

Jango barks excitedly whenever we're greeted by locals of all ages with deep tan complexions and dark hair. They scratch his ears and meet Penelope with smiles, laughter, and hugs as if they haven't seen her in ages, and not one of them hesitates to squeeze my hand in a warm welcome.

It's a stark comparison to the bitter loneliness of Chicago. There aren't cars honking, people shouting, or tourists jamming up the intersections. In fact, while I spot a few foreigners, I'm the minority here.

"You know all of these people?" I ask, following her to the front of a humble corner coffee shop with a slew of terracotta pots lining the steps and giant plants overflowing from their centers.

"Most of them have known me and my cousins since we were children. My dad was obsessed with the island and the magic he claims to have found here. He spent many years living in Augustine, and in that time, he fell in love with the residents and their culture."

The tangy aroma of freshly brewed coffee saturates the air, making my bloodstream tingle with the demand for caffeine. "Do you take care of the entire property on your own when he's traveling?"

Penelope glances around as if looking for someone when we stop short of the shop's white doors. Intricately hand-painted swirls and patterns blend across their surface, and in the bottom right corner, the name Catalonia is scrolled in a pretty, deep lavender.

Giving up her search, she says, "We have a ranch hand and farrier of course, and some of the townsfolk help from time to time if needed. But when I'm visiting, I like to give Russel a break. Besides, it's nice working with my hands every now and then."

Penelope pauses, interrupted by the vibrating coming from her pocket.

"Shit," she mumbles after removing her phone. "It's the school. Be right back."

"Of course." I give a tight-lipped smile, watching as she and Jango trot off down the street.

The sun greedily laps at my fair skin as curious eyes catch mine everywhere I look. Their sudden attention makes my face hot, and I quickly duck inside the coffee shop, only to stop dead in my tracks.

In a quaint window booth, across from a beautiful woman with long raven hair, sits the very man I've been following—and *wow*, he recovered from his accident well. They speak freely in the comfort and intimacy of the café, but gorgeous as she is, I can't stop staring at his mouth, stretched in a relaxed smile.

Straight teeth flash through a grin only Hollywood money could procure, but his hair is uncharacteristically unkempt, like maybe he'd been driving with the windows down or couldn't bother gelling it as he normally does. And the white T-shirt that's clinging to those ridiculously fit shoulders, speckled with dirt smudges around the front and collar, makes me instantly suspicious.

Okay, now I'm gawking. But he could have the decency to wear something less form-fitting. If the three elderly ladies in

the back get heart palpitations when he flexes and one of them faints, then what? Instant lawsuit.

I almost work up the nerve to tell him as much before realizing with sharp clarity that not one person in the room is batting an eye at the infamous vampire hunter.

My hands quiver with adrenaline as an invisible force tugs me farther into the shop and closer to Marcus. Time moves painfully slow with each step as I watch him reach for the woman's hand across the table.

Lovers perhaps? Or maybe she's the woman whose identity I've yet to uncover.

For all the obvious amount of rubbernecking I'm doing, I can see she fits the profile. But unless there's a hidden resort somewhere, I can't imagine why someone as rich and famous as Marcus Matthews would be hanging around a charming little town like Augustine.

"*Bonita,*" the man behind the counter says, startling me. "Welcome. What is it I can get for you?"

His accent is smooth, if not somewhat stilted around each word. With those loose black curls brushing his cheeks and sultry, green, bedroom eyes, he's the kind of guy a woman would beg for a nightcap.

"Hi, I'll take a vanilla latte with two shots of espresso, and chocolate sprinkles if you have them, please." I half pay attention as I give him my order while continuing to spy on my subject.

"Anything else, beauty?"

I've got an eyeroll locked and loaded when I glance back at him, but I pause at the cheeky smirk on his full, dusky-tan lips.

Okay, fine. He's cute.

Flattening one palm over his chest, he bows his head. "My name is Ernesto."

From my periphery, Marcus and his gorgeous companion move to stand. They embrace in a hug that's too familiar to be

casual, and I glance down at the camera still slung around my neck, unsure if I should be relieved to have found my target or terrified.

It's been two years since we last saw each other, and while I'm almost positive he won't remember the 'media roach' as he once branded me, part of me worries he might.

"Nice to meet you." I shake Ernesto's outstretched hand, admiring that he doesn't withhold his firm grip just because I'm a woman.

"Are you new to Augustine?" he asks, gesturing to my camera.

No time for small talk, Sinclair, my inner Alice prompts.

Maybe it's Penelope dragging me so far out of my comfort zone or maybe the island sun has temporarily melted my inner ice queen, but for some reason, I struggle to revert to my usual indifference where charismatic men are concerned.

"Oh, no. I'm on vacation." I spare him the effort of asking when I'm leaving. "Won't be here too long, though."

Ernesto places his hands on the counter, then hits me with a panty-dropping grin-wink combo. "If you'd like, I could give you my number. Show you around?"

Surprisingly, his bravado makes me laugh in a foreign, flirty manner.

"No thanks." I gesture to his black T-shirt where the word *Ernesto's* is printed across his pecs. "But I know where to find you if I change my mind."

He raps his knuckles on the counter. "I look forward to it."

The moment Ernesto turns away, an ominous blur of white glides behind me like a shark in the water. I freeze, barely breathing as my pulse pounds in my ears.

Marcus posts up next to the pickup area, leaning his shoulder against the wall while distractedly tapping his thumbs on his phone screen. And I look anywhere and everywhere that isn't his lower half fit in a pair of worn, faded jeans.

Had he even placed an order?

I shake my head. It doesn't matter. Penelope will be back any minute, and I need an excuse to cover me ditching her for an emergency stakeout session.

"Double shot vanilla latte," a woman calls my order, halting me mid-step.

My gaze flicks from the exit to Marcus, who's still absently scrolling, then to the coffee sitting innocently on the edge of the counter.

"Just grab it and go," I whisper as I duck my face and gingerly walk toward the cup.

I halt mid-step when his hand swoops down and picks up *my* drink. Without missing a beat, he starts for the door.

"You've got to be shitting me," I grumble.

Of course, he wouldn't bother checking the order label. I'd expect nothing less from someone who has a team of ass-kissers dotting on him day-in and day-out. But I'll be damned if the man who once broke my confidence walks off with anything that belongs to me.

My hand shoots out the minute he's within striking range, fitting around his bicep before I can make heads or tails of what the hell I'm thinking.

"That's mine," I grate, nodding at the cup dwarfed by his long fingers. I notice the same color dirt that's on his shirt splotches his knuckles.

Marcus blinks, stunned by the fire behind each word. Staring at the hand still clutching his arm, he says, "Excuse me?"

Instead of releasing him, I jerk my chin up and squeeze him tighter. "Get your grubby hand off my coffee."

A batch of rusty synapses rapid-fire in my brain. Specifically, the ones that swoon at the muscles flexing beneath my touch.

Christ on a cracker. They sure know how to build ‘em in LA.

“Um,” he says, wide-eyed, as if his arm may catch on fire. “Listen, lady—”

I release him with a hiss. “*Lady?*”

I don’t intend to stare, but there’s something about those eyes. They’re livelier and more brilliant than I remember with tiny flecks of gold floating along the outer edges and a deep cerulean at the center.

There’s also not an ounce of recognition in their depths.

“Would you prefer I call you sir?”

It shouldn’t matter that he doesn’t remember me, but for reasons I refuse to untangle, it does.

I’m suddenly two feet tall. Just like the first time I ever met the jerk.

I’ve never been more embarrassed in my life. But honestly, I should thank him. If not for that interview—or lack thereof—I wouldn’t have grown the thick skin I needed to survive in this business.

When I swipe for my drink, the bastard pulls it out of reach.

“Funny.” Unfortunately burdened with the knowledge of his usual order, I add, “You’re not going to like it.”

Marcus drops his stare to my Nikon with a puppy-esque head tilt. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

My fists clench. As much pleasure as it would give me to gloat about my accomplishments to him, it’s not worth jeopardizing the mission. After all, revenge is best served printed in black and white.

“Nope. No one for you to worry your pretty head about, *vamp*.” I open my palm expectantly, enjoying the surprise on his too-perfect face. “Hand over the stolen life juice and there won’t be any trouble.”

The initial shock of being recognized gradually converts to mischief, making me regret not dashing out of the café when I had the chance.

“You mean, this?” Raising the cup in question, he inspects the outside. “Just as I thought. No name. No label. How do you know it’s yours?”

I peer at the men behind the counter who are sloppily throwing orders together while shouting each cup’s contents. It’s like coffee roulette back there as one of them slides various unmarked drinks across the counter.

“I mean, for all I know, it’s *you* who’s thieving.”

“It’s a vanilla latte with chocolate sprinkles,” I say, annoyed by his mocking smile. “Take off the top and see for yourself.”

“Take off my top?” His voice is intentionally too loud, and my stomach plummets when he follows that up with, “You’ll have to buy me dinner first, *sir*.”

“Not you,” I hiss, my cheeks heating unbearably. “The coffee.”

My eye twitch deepens when Marcus ignores my request and brings the cup to his lips instead. He helps himself to a nice long sip before smacking a couple of times as if trying to decode the flavors.

If looks could kill, he wouldn’t be six feet under—he’d be hogtied to a cinder block at the bottom of the ocean with my maniacal laughter the last sound he ever heard.

“Sorry for your wait, Marcus,” an older gentleman behind the counter says, completely unfazed by his celebrity status. He sets it on the counter with a wink. “Freshly brewed House Black.”

I gawk as he shoves my defiled drink in my hand.

A Cheshire grin parts his mouth. Then he leans in close enough that I get a whiff of dirt and hay entwined with warm winter spices.

“Guess you were right,” he rumbles before circling back to grab his cup.

Swaggering back by for the exit, he gives me an arrogant wink.

“What—Where do you... *Oh!*” I squeeze the cup hard enough that the lid plops onto the ground and hot liquid spills over my fingers.

He doesn’t spare me a second glance as his impeccable, Levi-clad ass makes its way out the door.

I spin for the napkin bar with a frustrated growl.

Oh, it is *so* on.

If I wasn’t fully committed to seeing this article through, that little display just fortified my mission.

Breaking news: Marcus Matthews is going down.

CHAPTER FOUR



Marcus

You're not going to be difficult now, are you, sweetheart?" I smooth my palm over a warm curve before smacking it across her backside.

Her skin ripples as she swings her head to the side, snorting through her nostrils.

Sure, pal.

Sparrow, my uncle's newest mare, whinnies with a shake of her black mane. She stomps her left foot, ears flipping back and forth as I gently secure the saddle belt under her speckled belly.

"Who am I kidding? You're the epitome of difficult."

She reaches back to nip me, and I jump out of the way in time to avoid a bite.

"Easy," I scold.

Uncle Patrick's voice travels from my phone's speaker, which sits on the ledge of her stall. "What have I always told you?"

"Never let a horse scent your fear," I recall his decades-old sentiment.

"That's right. You'll doom your bond with her."

If only this one didn't have that wily look in her eye.

"She knows who the boss is around here, and it's not me."

He chuckles at that.

The blue roan's willful nature reminds me of the American woman I met in Ernesto's shop yesterday. Even their vicious glares are similar.

I'm curious to know what brought her this far south of the city. The fairness of her skin and her honey-blond hair, with its deep shade of gold, clued me in that she's not a local. And though the occasional foreigner visiting or even staying in Augustine for some time isn't rare, it's not exactly common, either.

I can't resist a smirk, remembering how she stood up to me.

Was drinking her coffee a dick move? Probably.

Distracted by flustered texts from my mother, I grabbed her order by mistake. But something in the way she planted her feet and raised that stubborn chin made me want to see how far she'd let me push her.

Vamp.

Clearly, she recognized me. But unlike back home, she didn't fawn over me the way most people tend to. She appeared annoyed, almost angry.

Blood pulses beneath my skin, ghosting to the surface in the shape of her palm.

That woman would be a challenge in every sense of the word, especially in the bedroom.

I clear my throat, willing away intrusive visions of her in my bed. As my uncle gives me a rundown of updates he's made around the property, an older mare named Bertha peels her lips back and bares her teeth at Sparrow.

When the horse kicks the stall door, I give her a low command to cool it.

"Penelope told me about your plans for the barn," I say eventually.

"Marcus, I..." his voice withers with a sigh.

It stings, honestly, but I understand. Why keep something around that's lost its use?

"I think it's the best way to spend my time here."

Sparrow hangs her head, whipping her tail as if sensing my agitation mingling with hers and Bertha's.

"I know the barn means a great deal to all of us, but even if you could restore it, what would I do with it? That stable has more than enough room for all the horses and plenty of storage."

"I'll figure something out, I promise."

Keeping my hands busy is exactly what I need to survive, but I already know what he's going to say. That big, bleeding heart is too predictable.

He'll tell me that the wreck has our family petering on edge with no room for added chaos. That I need to take it easy until the dust settles and to give my father some time to work with the lawyer and judge to ease up on the rehab sentence.

Only, I don't give him the chance.

"I'm not any happier about this situation than you are, but for all the times I could've, I've never asked you for anything. Can you just give me this?"

There's a long, silent pause before he finally agrees. "If repairing the barn is what will help you find peace, then I'm happy to hand it over to you."

Closing my eyes, I battle an intense wave of homesickness. Not for my true home, but for the home and fatherly guidance he gave me as a child.

Once we hang up, I reassuringly rub Sparrow's sides. I'm given a soft chuff in response, but she lets me secure the reins over her face without argument.

"Attagirl," I murmur, sliding my hand up and down her face before checking the saddle one more time. "Nice and easy."

Sparrow cants sideways as I lead her past Bertha, calming her with soothing murmurs.

Six stalls line each side of the corridor, all filled with my uncle's most beloved animals. Each one has a unique story, but none are as special as Sparrow's. Maybe that's why I have more patience for her than Russell or Penelope do.

She was tied up and left to the elements for days, abandoned by her owner, and I guess I've come to learn that kind of heartache. Not in the sense that I was abandoned, but that I know what it's like to be isolated and hopeless.

When we exit the stable, I give her one last pat before placing my foot in the stirrup and grabbing the saddle horn. I hike my leg over, and once I'm situated, I pat Sparrow's neck with a relieved laugh. "See? Not so bad, is it?"

She prances while tossing her head about, but I take the reins and urge her forward with a few clicks of my tongue. I guide her toward the front of the house and down the dirt-packed drive which leads us to the barn.

"Whoa, girl." She halts immediately, and I rub her shoulder before climbing down.

A childish sense of wonderment unfurls from the deepest parts of my soul as I stare at the white-edged double doors. Sparrow plods behind me as I step forward, and with one hand, I unlatch the tarnished lock and force the rolling doors open.

I take a deep inhale of stale hay mingling with dirt.

The stairs to the loft are shot, with cracks and holes in the boards, but the flooring above appears to have held. I can practically hear Leah's giggles bouncing off the walls, hole-ridden as they are.

"She used to drag me up there to play Barbies with Penelope and Carrie," I muse to the mare. "But Penelope always wanted to be Ken, so I was usually stuck with whatever friend Barbie had available."

I swallow the knot building in my throat and drop the reins.

When I check the two large stalls on either side of the barn for wear and tear, I find them surprisingly sound. But the wall beneath the loft has two gaping holes, likely from the weather damage Pen had mentioned, but it's not impossible to fix.

A long-forgotten memory tugs my gaze toward the ceiling, where the rope we used to swing down from still hangs.

I hear her voice as clear now as I did when we were kids.

'Come on, Marcus!'

She had made a knot for her skinny bare feet to grip as she stood on the edge and prepared to jump. The beam above the loft was thick enough to hold her weight, but my sister was one of the clumsiest people I had ever met.

'No, Leah. You're going to get hurt, and no amount of crying will make me feel bad this time.'

But of course, I regretted letting her attempt it when she let go too early and rolled across the barn floor in a tangle of limbs.

'I told you this would happen,' I scolded.

Her arms and legs were covered in cuts, and she was going to be a walking bruise, but I did what any good brother would do and sat her on the bench beside the utility sink to clean her up.

'Pinky swear you won't tell Mom.'

That was the summer Leah's missing teeth were almost finished growing in, and her face was freckled, just like Penelope's, from spending all day out in the sun. But despite the awkward stages of her prepubescence, she was beautiful and funny and everything I aspired to be.

Inside my memory, the younger version of myself wraps his pinky around hers, but I'm already gunning it for the exit, grabbing Sparrow before I lose myself in a tidal wave of grief.

I slide the doors closed harder than I intended, and a board pops off the face of the barn, hitting the top of my head before falling to the ground with a *thud*.

Sparrow bobs her head up and down with a high-pitched neigh.

“Yeah, keep laughing,” I warn her. “We’ve still got exercising to do.”

Her whiskered nose lifts to mine as she snorts, and I playfully shove her face before cramming my boot in the stirrup, then haul myself up onto the saddle.

Sparrow easily ambles the rest of the way down the hill leading to the pasture. It’s been many years since I’ve ridden, but every movement and command comes back to me like riding a bike.

Her hooves *clomp* through the rustling grass, snapping stray twigs and kicking pebbles as she heads straight toward the metal gate along the tree line. Behind it, a river runs from the north side of the island down to this portion of Augustine. My uncle placed a fence of barbed wire around the forest’s perimeter long ago, which extends all the way down the rest of the property. But it’s not only used for keeping predators out.

“Don’t even think about it.” I tug on the reins. “I’m not in the mood for a swim.”

She yanks her head down defiantly, but before I can correct her, a blur of movement passes through the trees on the other side.

Sparrow’s head shoots up and her ears flick nervously as she takes a couple of nervous steps to her left.

“Easy.” I keep my tone clear and low as I search the trees covering the path to the river for a threat.

We’re both startled as a bird the size of a turkey pops out of a rustling bush several feet from the fence.

Sparrow rears back and the reins slip from my grasp, giving me less than a second to stuff my hands into her mane before she takes off like a bullet.

“Sparrow,” I grit, but she’s too far gone in her fear to hear me.

I grip her coarse hair between my fingers, hips rocking as the world spins by in various shades of green. My throat grows raw from shouting, but the words are garbled, lost in the wind.

I've heard that in periods of panic, the brain slows down its surroundings to allow the body enough time to make an escape. We're given a single moment of clarity to make a life-saving decision.

There have been plenty of scenarios in my life where that theory has proven true, but in none of them did I fly ass-over-head, only to land at the feet of my maker.

Holy heaven.

I blink through a mass of black spots clouding my vision to find a feminine blur racing across the field.

Turns out, God's a woman, and she's fucking sexy.

I groan at the pain radiating from my ankle to my hip, and I fight it with everything I've got before a strangled shout crawls its way up my throat.

Sparrow lowers her snout to my face, sniffing and nudging me with her soft nose.

"Yup. I'm sending you... to the dog food... factory." I attempt, and fail, to sit up.

The mare rears her head back, whinnying and lightly stamping her feet.

"Holy shit," the woman's voice breaks through the void of pain.

Wait. I know that voice.

I blink a few more times for good measure.

I recognize that face, too.

A plush pink robe flutters in the breeze, giving me a perfect view of supple, squeezable thighs. Her hair is loose, curtaining her cheeks when she falls to her knees beside me. And now I'm groaning for another reason entirely.

She doesn't seem to notice that from where I lie, I'm getting a full glimpse of her black lace panties.

I force my eyes shut, threatening my dick to behave and to stop pumping filthy activities with our hot new neighbor directly to my brain.

"Sir, are you—" The rest of her thought freezes on her tongue as she clamps it behind a pair of pretty pink lips. I shouldn't be staring at her so intently, but where her hair was tightly pinned back yesterday, it flows in dark golden waves across her shoulders today.

She yanks my hat off my head. "*You.*"

Just like at the café, disdain and irritation drip from the word, but I'm still clueless as to what I've done to provoke her.

"Me," I grit through the throbbing in my lower leg.

Sparrow's tail swishes from where she stands, eying the woman innocently as if she didn't just throw me from her back and possibly break my ankle.

"How?" Light brown brows cut over a pair of sinfully rich brown eyes. She shakes her head. "What are you doing here, I mean."

This time, my efforts to sit are successful.

I mean to answer, but as I pat myself down and further assess my injury, a hiss slides between my teeth.

"Careful," she says, shocking the hell out of me when she reaches to support my leg.

The thick robe she wears soaks up the heat from the afternoon sun, gracing my lower half with warmth as her middle brushes across me.

"Shit." The curse word chinks her icy armor. Fresh citrus filters through my lungs, hijacking my senses before slamming into my groin. "I should call someone."

"Don't bother." I shift, but she pins me in place with a hand above my knee.

“A woman named Penelope lives nearby. Maybe she can help.”

It’s hard to conceal my surprise at the mention of my cousin. She must have already introduced herself, but there’s no way in hell I’m calling her. Pen won’t ever let me live this down, and I don’t need her mothering me any more than she already does.

When the woman moves to stand, I instinctually grab her wrist, my pulse pounding at the contact. She turns a curious brow, but I won’t relent. “No.”

Her shoulders droop on an exaggerated exhale. “Don’t be ridiculous, Marcus. You need medical attention.”

I’m stunned when my name slips so casually from her mouth.

“What? I don’t live under a rock,” she says coolly.

When her fist swiftly thumps my sternum, my heart thunders around the imaginary weapon.

“Did you just...?”

“Slay you?” She jerks the invisible stake from my chest with a wrinkle of her pert nose, and I swear she’s trying hard not to laugh.

Dumbfounded, I gawk at her. Probably longer than socially acceptable, but damn. It’s hard not to enjoy a brief moment of normalcy with a woman who isn’t treating me like an object to be fucked, preyed upon, or fought over.

It’s only once the amusement fades that disappointment settles in the pit of my stomach.

Had I really hoped she wouldn’t recognize me?

There is no normalcy for me, and as long as I carry the weight of my family’s burdens, there never will be.

With my mood souring like curdled milk, I rock my weight to my good side and hobble to standing.

“Whoa, wait a second.” Her hands fly out, offering a source of stability.

“I’m fine,” I mutter, but the second blood starts sliding downward, I reluctantly grab her.

I both loathe and enjoy the cockiness in her tone when she smarts, “That’s what I thought.”

I’m shocked again when an arm carefully winds across my back.

“Will your horse be all right out here by himself?”

“Sparrow is a female,” I grunt, slinging my arm across her shoulder as we test out a few steps together. “And like me, she’ll be just fine.”

The tips of her nails tighten on my waist when I try to turn.

“If you want to act like Mr. Tough Guy, fine. But unless you plan on walking back up that hill, I’m all the help you’ve got.” Each word riding her lashing tone is more enticing than the last. “At least let me get you inside where we can assess your leg, and we’ll go from there.”

She doesn’t wait for a response before dragging me along. And even though I’ve got about four inches on her, she holds me steady with a determined set to her jaw.

“And you have experience with this sort of thing?” I ask skeptically.

When she yanks me forward harder than before, my mouth curves into a grin at the growling little slayer.

CHAPTER FIVE



Heather

Sweat gathers under my arms while I pour Marcus a cup of coffee. I'd hoped changing out of my robe into a comfortable shirt and cotton shorts would ease my nerves, but my hands are unsteady as I sneak a glance at the man whose forearm is slung across his eyes, head back on the couch with his injured leg sloppily propped up on some pillows.

Marcus fucking Matthews is in my house. Well, it's not my house per se, but I'm still reeling over fate catapulting me into this situation.

"May I ask why you're stirring a coffee with no cream or sugar?"

My hand freezes, silencing the *tinkling* sounds of the spoon hitting glass. I drop the utensil into the sink, trying to shake out the nerves which had me reaching for it to begin with.

Heat creeps up the back of my neck as I cross the living area, and when I shove the cup into a hand almost large enough to wrap around it, I grumble, "Are you always so pleasant to be around, or do I just bring out this sparkling part of your personality?"

Marcus glares at the liquid as if I poisoned it.

"Oh, please. I didn't roofie it so I could cut off locks of your hair once you pass out and sell them on the internet."

Wide-eyed, he lifts one hand toward the silky brown locks, fuller on top than around his ears.

“I mean, if that’s what you were thinking, anyway.”

“That’s entirely too specific not to be true,” he says, studying me in a way that has me fidgeting.

And I don’t like being fidgety.

I jab a finger at his foot. “Take your boot off while I grab some ice.”

“Aren’t you going to say please?” he drawls.

“I’ll say please when you thank me for aiding your stubborn ass in the first place.”

He sweeps an arm down his leg theatrically. “For this? This is nothing. I had everything under control.”

Folding my arms across my middle, I snort.

Actors.

“Believe me, I’m regretting helping you by the minute.” Then, because irritating him might be my new favorite hobby, I add sweetly, “Thankfully, you won’t be my problem much longer.”

A hint of annoyance flits through his hardened expression. “And what, may I ask, is that supposed to mean?”

After his earlier reaction to the suggestion, I’m not about to tell him I’ve already texted Penelope. If he needs serious medical attention, I have no clue where a hospital is around here. And given she’s my only lifeline in Augustine, I didn’t have much of a choice otherwise.

My smirk is nice and defiant, irking him further. “Boot. Off. Now.”

Marcus’s complaining follows me to the kitchen, where I snag a first aid kit from the cabinet above the sink and search its contents. Tucking an Ace bandage into the crook of my elbow, I open the freezer and scoop several handfuls of ice into a plastic baggie.

“Guess I should be glad you’re not some psycho fan,” he says as I zip the top of the bag and grab a towel from the handle on the stove.

“Funny how that whole ‘not everyone is obsessed with you’ thing works,” I retort on my way back to the couch.

I halt just inches from his foot, swallowing thickly at the sight of Marcus’s bare skin.

An image of what the rest of him might look like unbiddenly burns its way through my brain.

Annoyingly smug, he says, “What’s the matter, slayer? I thought you said you knew what you were doing.”

The nickname makes my stomach do a mini flip.

Lifting my chin, I carefully settle myself onto the floor and tuck my legs under my butt. There’s no visible discoloration around the joint, but there is some swelling on the inside of his heel.

“I never said that.” The moment my fingertips touch the bump, he jerks back. I wait for him to relax before considering the injury further. “Although, I was a girl scout for a couple of months once upon a time.”

“Forgive my ignorance,” he says impassively. “I wasn’t aware of your caliber of skill.”

I sit back on my heels. “Do you want my help or not?”

“Not,” Sir Dick Head offers, but then waves me on before shifting toward the window.

While he watches Sparrow nibbling the grass in the yard, I contemplate various forms of strangulation.

“Thought you only drank cinnamon lattes?” I’m not sure what possesses me to ask—curiosity or the simple need for answers.

His eyes fall to his untouched coffee mug, perched on the windowsill. “And where did you come up with that tidbit of information, an online quiz?”

My pulse flutters wildly. “N-no. Absolutely not.”

He doesn't appear convinced.

"I read it in a forum," I say too confidently for someone who regrets opening their mouth to begin with.

Marcus's lips twitch. "A forum, huh?"

Cocky bastard.

"Yeah. Tough crowd in the 'Murder Marcus Matthews' chat room," I reply drily.

"Where a latte is an accomplice in their plans for my untimely demise?"

Ears burning, I grab his leg and yank it toward me with more force than necessary, but damn him, it's impossible to disguise my irritation. I don't know how to respond to his relentless teasing.

Where's the smug, selfish Marcus who acted like a complete ass during our interview? He may be deflecting for unknown reasons now, but I didn't learn his coffee preference from a stupid quiz or from a made-up forum. I learned it by paying attention to detail.

"Be a doll and grab that cinnamon latte for me, will you?"

He nodded at the high table beside him and gave me one of those cool, devilish smiles.

Naïve to his true nature, I smiled back while a makeup artist dusted translucent powder on his cheeks. "Sure thing."

Marcus agreeing to meet with me was huge for Luster. He and his agent hadn't accepted an in-person interview request since Leah's passing just one year prior.

He lazily inspected my body, even modest as I was in black slacks and a tightly buttoned blouse.

"No. This isn't right." He gagged and pointed at the cup with a sneer. "I wanted a double whip. It's the same order every time. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

Confused, I glanced around the set, unsure why he was asking me about his drink preferences. "I'm sorry, Mr. Matthews, but I wasn't the one who ordered that for you."

Agitated, he thrust it toward my hand and waved me on. “Well, then. If you’re not going to be useful, let’s just get this over with.”

My jaw ached from biting back a snarky remark, but I was a professional. I’d dealt with plenty of diva celebrities in my short time as the lead writer, and I would deal with Marcus, too.

I pulled out my notepad and signaled my cameraman before starting with the string of questions I stayed up late preparing and perfecting the night before.

They were easy things, like how it felt to be named People’s ‘Sexiest Man Alive,’ and what direction he was hoping the next season of Fang For Hire would take.

He entertained me with half-assed answers, but by the fifth question, his demeanor changed significantly. Marcus sat forward and placed his hands on his knees. The stench of stale alcohol wafted from his breath, and my heart sped at the lifelessness in his eyes staring back at me.

“Time for you to run along now, little roach.”

I froze and stammered a pathetic, “W-what? But we’re not finished.”

“You’re lucky my agent convinced me to do this interview in the first place.” He dropped his voice, low and controlled. “I hate all of you media roaches, and my sister hated you, too.”

Renewed anger and hurt mix with a heavy dose of confusion as I reinsert my thoughts into the present. Should I chalk the subtle changes in him up to the fact that he’s a Gemini—charming psychopaths, every last one of them—or has something else mellowed the vamp out?

I note that even staring at me as keenly as he is now, an emotional disconnect remains. Only, it’s lost its previous intensity, somehow softer than when we were face to face before.

“I want to know why you hate me,” he says, abruptly popping my thought bubble.

My lips snap shut. I don't appreciate that glittering interest gracing a face too handsome for his own good.

"You won't like the answer."

"Try me," he dares.

If only to knock him down a peg, I relent. "Arrogance and irritation aside, for starters, you could have killed someone when you wrecked, and that's not cool."

A muscle jumps beneath his eye, and I ready myself to hit him with a slew of driver's education stats.

"You're right. That wasn't cool," he says solemnly.

Okay, that was unexpected, but I'm on a resentment roll, and I'm not stopping now.

"Secondly, you're a player. And I spare no interest for a man who refers to the woman he's dating as the 'flavor of the month' or who breaks up with his girlfriend for her best friend."

The scandal with his co-star and long-time girlfriend, Bianca Richards, couldn't fly off my computer and onto the press fast enough. I'll admit, there may have been a middle finger neatly written between the lines of that story.

I expect him to fall back on the couch with a huff, not tilt his head as if he has no idea who I'm talking about.

The longer he studies me, the more restless I become. "Forgotten her so easily, have you?"

"Of course not," he scoffs. "You just happen to know a lot about my life for someone who claims not to be interested."

Sitting up, he leans close enough that we're within breathing space, and despite my deepest hopes that his breath will smell as awful as he is, it's sweet with hints of mint and surprisingly, void of alcohol.

"I read celebrity gossip just like everyone else," I say while laying out the supplies I need to secure his foot and ankle.

His gaze turns scrutinizing before he finally puts some distance between us. “And do you always believe everything you read?”

No, but with the exception of Leah’s death, I do believe everything I *write*.

Getting back to the task at hand, I unravel the wrap.

“So... is it true? About Bianca,” I question him after a heavy moment of silence.

I keep my eyes and hands busy so I don’t have to acknowledge his unwelcome attention on me.

“Yeah.” His voice is gravelly, yet resigned.

“That’s pretty shitty, don’t you think?” My hands hold a tremble I pray is undetectable.

From the corner of my eye, I catch Marcus watching my working fingers.

“I found out she was cheating on me.” He clears his throat, shifting to help me when I need a better reach around his ankle. “With that same best friend.”

I still mid-wrap. *Holy hot take*.

“So I took the heat from the media so they could date in private.”

Except the pair ended up outing themselves two months later, meaning he would have taken the blame for weeks on end for nothing. But the question is, why?

“Admirable,” I say, but it’s soft and delicate instead of the sharp stab it was intended to be.

He’s staring out the window again when I finally get the courage to lift my gaze. “Were you on some kind of trail ride around here?”

“You sure are nosey,” he mutters dully.

“Am I not allowed to ask questions?”

“The less curious you are about me, the better. In fact, do yourself a favor, and forget this ever happened.”

I'm not sure why I'm surprised at the wall he's slamming down between us, but then, this is the same man who called me a roach.

"I'm just making conversation," I grit.

"Well don't."

I plop the bag of ice on top of his ankle, earning a stiff grunt, but I don't give a shit. "Forget it."

After tucking the pack inside one of the layers of the bandage, I push to stand, only to be halted by his hand snapping around my wrist.

"Wait." Marcus's deep sigh slides along my arm, raising goosebumps in its wake. "I'm sorry, okay?"

I yank my arm from his grip with a frown. "If I'm nosey, then you're equally touchy."

Sparring words with him is a surprisingly cathartic outlet for my contempt, but instead of firing off another smartass remark, he stutters my defenses with a laugh.

"I'm not used to people," he says. "Normal people, that is."

I can't tell if he's saying this because he's been caught off guard, or if he's acting.

Because that's the thing with actors, and the obvious reason I won't ever trust one. How could I ever know which version of him was real when they lie for a living?

"Normal," I scoff. "That's cute, considering moments ago you thought I *drugged* you."

My quip softens the corners of his eyes. "Tell me something unnatural about you, then."

*Rule number two of journalism: Never get personal with the target. Emotionally or—*I flick a glance to the edge of his lifted shirt—*otherwise.*

"I don't think I will."

"No?"

I must be losing my mind to think he sounds breathy. But he swivels toward me, carefully lowering his hurt foot to the floor so his knees are on either side of mine.

We're not touching. Hell, I'm not even that close to the man, but I'm struggling to keep my cool as I say, "Think I'll let you wonder."

Three hard knocks sound from the front door, startling me.

"Fucking Christ," Marcus groans in a rush.

I stare at where I've kicked his ankle and my mouth pops open. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry!"

A stern, female voice says, "Heather, you in there?"

"Penelope," I gasp.

"Great. Now you've done it." Marcus flops back onto the couch with his eyes screwed shut as I scurry to unlock the door.

When I swing it open, she's vibrating with anger that is far too personal for them to be estranged.

"Where is he?"

For a tiny moment, I'm afraid I may have made a mistake in texting her.

Is Penelope Marcus's secret woman? I thought maybe it was the one he was with at Ernesto's, but is it possible he's playing them both?

Curling my lips between my teeth, I point in his direction like a tattling child.

"What the hell were you thinking, Marcus?" She whops the side of his head while I stare, speechless.

"Pen, hear me out."

But she charges on before he gets a chance to state his case. "I'm gone for a few hours and already, you're sneaking over here, trying to get in Heather's pants."

My heart stutters at that ridiculous notion before flatlining when she reveals my name.

If I don't die first, Alice will thoroughly enjoy murdering me over this.

"She doesn't want you slinking around trying to... to sow your wild oats or some shit," she finishes.

He balks. "Aren't you at all concerned that this could have turned into some version of *Misery*?"

"Hey," I say to his reference of me being a crazed fan. "I already said I wouldn't cut off your hair."

Marcus pinches the bridge of his nose, clearly reaching capacity for putting up with the two of us. To Penelope, he says, "I wasn't bothering her. Or trying to have *sex* with her, for that matter."

A visual I didn't need, but will now be unable to part with, thank you very much.

"Something spooked Sparrow near the woods during our ride, and she decided to dump me here."

When Penelope turns to me for confirmation, I bob my head rapidly. "It's true. No fornicating commenced, scouts' honor."

Marcus narrows his gaze when I hold three fingers up in a scout's salute.

She twists back to him, just now spotting the wrap on his lower leg. "Oh my god, are you hurt?"

"Very kind of you to notice, cousin, but as I was telling Heather, I'm fine."

I don't know what throws me more, the man saying my name, or learning Penelope is his cousin.

"Nice work," she says to me before squatting and rotating his foot gently. "I think we should have the doc come see you at the house, though."

"If I agree, will you get off my ass?"

I laugh to myself when she wiggles his toes, offering a sarcastic, "Will you stop being one for more than two seconds?"

Hooking her thumb toward the door, she says, “I brought the four-wheeler. We can come back for Sparrow once I get you back up to the house and settled in bed.”

Marcus’s rebuttal falls on deaf ears with the realization that we’re neighbors. I listen to them bicker with excitement vibrating my bones.

While they argue, I quietly back up to the kitchen table to unlock my phone.

I open the recorder app and hit the button just as Penelope complains, “This is just fantastic. Who’s going to help me man the ranch now?”

She pulls him from the couch to standing, then helps him distribute his weight to his good foot.

“We’ve got Russell,” Marcus says, adjusting his arm over her shoulder. “I’m sure he won’t mind picking up some slack.”

“About that.” Penelope grimaces. “Russell’s been given a paid vacation.”

His head whips toward her. “Excuse me?”

“What? I thought it’d be fun for the two of us to tackle the ranch together. You know, like the good ol’ days.”

A shadow slides over Marcus’s face before he crams a hand into his pocket.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

He fishes out his phone and mashes his thumb over the screen. “Calling the rehabilitation center.”

“Marcus,” she protests.

He waves the screen in her face. “You’re trying to kill me, woman!”

“Guys,” I interject.

When their heads swing my way, I’m quickly reminded of the third rule in journalism.

Don’t make rash decisions while undercover.

Much like ensuring the facts are straight before submitting a story, every good journalist knows that jumping the gun undercover can lead to dire, sometimes irreparable, consequences.

But logic doesn't exist when this whole room smells like *him*. That woody spice seeps through my skin, clogging my lungs and warping my senses until my fingertips burn to be rid of it.

Alice was adamant that I do what it takes to get this story, and am I really going to look this gift horse in the mouth?

"I can help," I blurt.

They exchange curious glances, but it's Marcus who stiffens with a cocksure grin. "You're aware that being a girl scout doesn't mean you know everything, right?"

I flip Marcus the bird, shocking him silent and Penelope snickers.

"I like her." She beams at him before turning back to me. "Do you have experience with horses or farm animals in general?"

Um... "Sure I do."

Marcus's lips purse, reading right through my bullshit, and by the grace of baby Jesus, I resist sticking my tongue out at him.

Penelope's smile brightens the room. "Great! Why don't you ride Sparrow on up to the stable while I get this jerk-face home."

My toes scrunch inside my slippers. Sparrow? As in that giant gray behemoth who just catapulted a grown man off her back not even an hour ago.

"Absolutely, I can." I smile a touch too enthusiastically. "I'll head upstairs for my boots and bring her up in a bit."

She squeaks happily as she wiggles free of an unappreciative Marcus, and then barrels into me with a hug.

“Oh, um. Yes. You’re welcome,” I ramble with my heart slamming against my sternum.

Penelope, I’m learning, is one of those people with zero boundaries.

Once she leaves to bring the four-wheeler closer, I risk a peek at Marcus.

He broods by the door, leaning against the jamb on his good leg while studying me from head to toe. I wait for him to tell me I don’t know what I’m doing or ask why I offered to help in the first place, but he just stares.

Sharp, yet curious.

I rock on my heels, floundering for control of my nervous system.

Penelope pokes her head in from outside. “Sparrow’s tied to the railing out here, and I already adjusted the stirrups for you.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, though the very idea of mounting that animal makes me want to pee my pants.

I can only imagine what Alice would say in a moment like this.

Don’t let him get the best of you, Sinclair.

So, I straighten my spine and meet him head-on.

The quad’s rumbling engine echoes around the space as they turn to leave, but not before Marcus tosses over his shoulder, “Good luck, slayer.”

CHAPTER SIX



Marcus

The doctor insisted that a sprained ankle needs at least a couple of weeks rest before I can walk on it again, but only three days after the incident, I'm agonizingly restless and my fingertips burn to be rid of this pent-up energy with some manual labor.

Penelope stands beside me in the barn, watching as I test the firmness of the ankle brace doc gave me inside my boot.

"See? Perfectly stable." I'm hoping a broad smile will strengthen my case.

But Pen's bullshit sensor is usually pretty spot on.

With a hiked brow, she crosses to one of the stable doors and knocks on the paint-peeled top to test its integrity. "You're really that determined to restore this place?"

"Absolutely." Starting with the workbench, I grab a beat-up waste bin and start filling it with stray parts, trash, and rusted cans. "Uncle Pat's already given his blessing."

"Why?"

Hostility heats the space between my shoulders, then the base of my neck. "He trusts me with the job, I guess."

"No," she answers quietly. "Why are you doing this, Marcus?"

My hand freezes around an empty can of WD40. When I turn, the genuine perplexity on her face pries open an already

seeping wound.

How can she question me, knowing what this place means to us? What it means to me, at the very least.

“I think you’re asking the wrong question.”

Pen’s hand falls from the door, and she crosses her arms defensively. “All right. Just say what you need to say, then.”

With a flick of my wrists, the can bounces around the bottom of the bin. Sorrow clutches me in its unforgiving fist, but by the time I stalk toward her, she’s already meeting me halfway.

Here, it’s as if we’re kids again, gearing up to fight the way we used to.

It didn’t matter that she was a girl or that I was a boy. We settled disagreements the old-fashioned way—rolling in the dirt and beating the hell out of each other.

And her finishing move? Pulling my fucking hair.

My tone yields a sharpened edge. “Maybe you should ask yourself why you would agree to have it torn down.”

Heather chooses that moment to step in front of the open doors. “Uh, anybody home?”

Penelope’s gaze flutters to the ground where she finds a smile for our guest.

My shoulders deflate as regret assails me. “Pen, wait.”

“Hey, come on in,” she greets Heather, ignoring what would have been an apology with a discreet middle finger behind her back.

Heather cranes her neck, looking around the inside of the barn curiously. “Wow, it’s a lot bigger than it looks.”

“That’s what she said,” Penelope snorts.

They share a laugh, but I find it impossible to force the smallest amount of amusement.

Propping an elbow against the empty stall, I follow the dip of Heather’s thin, baby-blue tank top which frames her

cleavage. The workout leggings she wears are equally thin, making me shake my head.

Not exactly working attire, but at least she was smart enough to wear boots.

Penelope clears her throat before shoving a piece of paper into Heather's hand.

"I'll be in town helping make props for the upcoming school play, then popping over to the group home to help Mrs. Sanchez with dinner for the kiddos." She side-eyes me. "Marcus has insisted on working in here for the time being, so he shouldn't be a bother."

"Perfect," Heather says, clasping her hands in front of her hips and accentuating her cleavage.

Penelope leaves us with a melodic, "Call me if you need anything."

Before she exits the barn, I holler, "Better turn your ringer up."

Ha! I pivot, waiting for a retort, but my grin fades when I find Heather too busy rereading her list to mind me.

She rolls the corner of her lip between her teeth, crinkling the paper in a death grip. So, as any mature adult man would, I snatch the list from her grasp.

"Hey, give that back!" She rises on her toes, jumping for the paper which, in turn, brings those generous breasts of hers temptingly close to my mouth.

Blocking her swatting hands with my forearm, I recite each chore, "Feed the chickens, muck the stalls, tend the garden." I pause when she lands with a huff. "Got any girl scout patches for these?"

The blush coloring Heather's cheeks gradually climbs to her ears, giving her a rare, but adorable, innocence.

Interestingly enough, I think I may enjoy making her blood heat.

“Laying feed for chickens? Pshh. Easy. Besides, I took a botany class in college for extra credit. How hard can watering some plants be?” She grabs the handle of an old muck rake. “And I’m not afraid of getting dirty.”

My lips curl indecently. “Now *that*, I believe.”

I stare at her mouth, popped open in shock. Her bottom lip is fuller than the top, but both are a sensual shade of pink.

She hasn’t the slightest idea how much money women pay for lips like those in Hollywood.

“Do you get off on being so vulgar?” Heather asks.

“Hmm.” Feigning consideration, I scratch the stubble along my jaw. “Actually, a bit of bondage and rough sex tends to do it.”

Unsurprising, she answers with a haughty, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Beams of golden sunlight spill through the holes in the roof and walls of the barn, catching flecks of dust that dance across her skin.

I stare long enough for Heather to duck her face away from mine, but not before I catch a betraying hint of interest.

I almost can’t believe it. Beneath all that venom and frostbite, some fraction of her—minute as it may be—finds me attractive. And the discovery has my blood thumping with awareness.

“I saw you walking Sparrow up to the stables the other night,” I say to avoid the intrusive, yet vivid, image of me sucking her lower lip roughly between my teeth. “Maybe you should just admit you have no idea what you’re doing and head back to the guest house.”

The tip of that proud chin juts up like a defiant toddler. “Never.”

My god, she is such a priss.

If she thinks a couple of innuendos or crude remarks are offensive, then she better hope pushing me to the point of

wrapping my hand around her jaw and kissing her fucking senseless stays locked up inside my brain and far from reality.

Eager for space, I step around her. The brace in my boot makes my gate uneven, but the second the sun hits my face, I inhale as much fresh air as my body can physically stand and push forward.

Outside, with the scent of horses on the wind, and the earth crunching beneath my feet, I can think clearly enough to see how unimpressed I am by Heather's hourglass shape.

Or the wispy way her hair frames her heart-shaped face when she leaves it down.

And that full ass of hers is, well, it's too goddamn full.

Gravel grinds loudly as Heather jogs to catch up.

"Why are you following me?"

"Why are you suddenly so cranky?" she fires back.

Probably because I can't stop picturing you naked and, ideally, gagged.

I stop outside of the stable entrance to turn on her, but instead of stopping with me, we collide.

"Fuck," she utters breathily, digging the tips of her fingers into my sides to steady herself.

My hands fly to her wrists, but mistaking my growl for anger, Heather jolts backward with a fumbling apology.

The brief contact stokes a slow-burning need I've neglected for too long. It's pathetic how easily her touch singes my veins, drying the inside of my mouth and tongue with an unquenchable, ashy thirst.

But I clear the gnawing sensations with a shake of my head. I came to Augustine to disappear, not to play with fire. And this woman is exactly the kind of temptation that's going to get me in trouble.

Heather dusts her hands down the front of her shirt before puffing a lock of hair away from her eye. "It kills me to say this, but I need your help."

I glance left, then right. “I’m sorry, but you do remember who you’re speaking to, right?”

She shoves my shoulder, and because I’m caught off guard—and *not* because she’s a hell of a lot stronger than she looks—I stumble.

“Knock it off, Marcus. I’m serious. Penelope’s going to expect me to ride one of those beasts soon enough.”

Wanting to hear her finally admit it, I shrug. “And?”

“I don’t know how to saddle one, okay?”

I grin with satisfaction and fold my arms across my chest. “I knew you were a dirty little liar.”

Eye twitching, she mirrors my stance. “Congratulations, Detective Matthews. Now, are you going to show me what to do or not?”

“I’ll consider teaching you after you tell me why you offered to help us in the first place.”

I told Penelope on the way back to the house it was a bad idea to let her loose on the property. No matter how enticing Heather has proved to be, the truth is, we don’t know her. And given the delicacy of my situation, I don’t have much room for an error in judgment—but naturally, Pen insisted.

Heather points to my foot.

“In case you’ve forgotten, you’re injured. And while I can’t begin to fathom why Penelope puts up with your arrogant ass,” she says, punctuating the last two words with a ballsy jab to my sternum, “I’m not the type to leave someone in need.”

The urge to bend her over my knee and show her what true arrogance looks like throbs through me. Would she squirm and struggle as I spanked her ass raw, or would she lean into each smack before begging for more?

A muscle twitches along my jaw as I attempt to regain control of myself and where the hell these thoughts are coming from.

“Let’s get this over with.” Shouldering past her, I head inside the stables and straight for the saddle rack. “We don’t have all day.”

Just once, I think she may let me have the last word. But I barely make it two steps before she pipes up from behind me, “Um, hello? That’s exactly how long we have.”

Smartass.



Practicing with one of our more docile horses, I walk Heather through a few rounds of saddling and unsaddling before bolting.

She’s a fast learner for someone who doesn’t have much experience with horses. Which is a bonus for me because, as Jango and I head for the barn, I can’t seem to get away from the woman fast enough.

With more force than necessary, I place both palms against the withered doors and pry them open. The rolling system squeals and grinds as it slides, and when I brush my hands against my jeans, I focus on the dried paint specks littering the dirt at my feet.

Jango *woofs* before biting at one of the edges.

“Couldn’t agree more, buddy.”

The doors have to be replaced at some point, but today, I’m working on gutting the place.

By mid-afternoon, I’ve ditched my shirt, and I’m drenched in sweat from ripping out any rotting, damaged wood I could get my hands on. Not even the fan I’ve plugged into the generator can keep me cool enough to go another couple of hours.

A trip into town for wood, a new roller assembly, and paint is next on the list, but I’m satisfied with the progress I’ve

made.

“Shit.” My ankle joint screams when I attempt to stretch it.

Jango ambles over to sniff my boot.

“Pen’s going to be pissed, isn’t she?”

He answers me by hanging his head and half-covering his snout with a paw.

“Great. She and Heather can join forces with the psychos online who are busy plotting my murder.”

After rinsing my hair, face, and arms with cold water at the utility sink, I pull on my shirt and grab a clean towel from my workbench.

I’m examining the busted window above it when, on the other side of the lawn, I see Heather dragging two buckets of feed toward the chicken coop.

Her boots are caked with a questionable brown mixture, patches of skin are visible through the various tears in her leggings, and half of her tightly bound bun now lies over her right shoulder in a tangled mess.

“She’s fine.” Swiping the towel over my ears and neck, I double down. “She doesn’t want my help.”

But am I really going to stand here and watch her struggle?

I’ll call it ‘morbid curiosity’ which has my throbbing ankle forgotten as I hurry outside.

Jango trots toward Heather, circling her with his whole ass swinging happily.

Even clearly exhausted, she spares the mutt a thoughtful smile. “Hi, handsome.”

“Here, let me get those,” I offer, bending for the feed. “These ladies tend to be a handful.”

The buckets drop between her feet, missing my hands by no more than an inch.

“I think I can handle a few flightless birds.”

That sweet, mocking tone grates my nerves as crosseyed, I glare at the finger jabbing the center of my forehead. Maintaining pressure, she waits for me to stand before giving me a push.

“You little—”

Reaching for the latch to the run, Heather scurries to unlock it before slipping inside. Buckets in hand, she sticks her tongue out just as the screen door slams shut.

“Fine, have at it if you think you’re so tough.” Palm twitching, I watch her fumble over empty bowls as the chickens swarm. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

They peck at the pellet mix spilling around her boots, clucking excitedly.

“I don’t know what you’re going on about. They’re kind of cute.” A nervous laugh shakes her voice when she gets ready to pour. “Easy beasties.”

What a black hen, double the size of the others, bobs her way down the small wooden ladder, the smirk on my face plummeting.

Highest in the pecking order, Svetlana has a reputation for being a mean bitch. She knows better than to try her shit with me and Pen, but Heather?

She’s fresh meat.

“Slayer,” I warn.

“I can’t hear you,” she singsongs, but by the *clink* of the first pellet dropping, Svetlana’s wings are flapping, her claws are out, and all hell breaks loose.

With a screech, Heather ditches the buckets, pitching them into the air and showering the coop with feed. Through a flurry of feathered bodies, I hear more than see her struggle with the vicious chicken.

“Just had to do it your way, didn’t you,” I mutter, debating whether she needs rescuing or not.

If I asked her, she'd probably vote *not*, but Svetlana's assault quickly stirs the rest of the coop into a frenzy.

I yank the flimsy door hard enough that the hinges whine while Jango barks frantically at the commotion. Behind the voracious flock pecking away at each spilled morsel, Heather's fallen on her butt with her knees pulled up to her chest.

The fat black hen victoriously climbs a heaping food pile to claim as hers.

"Svetlana," I growl, but she only bobs her head, clucking pure innocence.

Heather's hair is matted with feathers and debris while that same finger she poked me with earlier is now aimed at the temperamental bird. "She attacked me."

When she unfurls her legs, her thin shirt is torn almost clean through the middle, fully exposing a light pink sports bra.

I thought those things were supposed to be ugly—not accentuate those lethal weapons with a triangle cut and straps thick enough to raise them to her chin.

Shifting my gaze to anything but her rack, I offer my hand.

She swats it away. "You set me up."

"Actually, I tried to warn you."

Heather pins me with an accusing glare. "Warn me? I think I would remember if you'd told me these chickens were tiny, feathered demons with a craving for flesh."

I laugh, amused by her blustering. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up."

"Why would I go anywhere with you after this?"

Reaching for her again, I take an immense amount of pleasure in popping her bubble. "Because you're sitting in chicken shit."

Cursing both me and the chickens under her breath, she reluctantly takes my palm. I can all but feel her angry gaze

licking up one side of my back and down the other as she follows me into the house.

“Remind me the rules of your NDA again?”

After Penelope told me about Heather’s hobby, I had her draw up a contract. The last thing I need is for some travel blog to go viral because she’s plastered my face and family home all over the front page.

She perches a hand on her hip as if I completely exasperate her.

“No pictures of you or the house, and zero mention of you on any media outlets.” Mocking me now, she walks her fingers between our faces. “Especially the part about you sneaking out of rehab.”

My gaze narrows, but the moment she turns to face the living room, she gasps. “Marcus, this place is *amazing*.”

For the first time since meeting the woman, that guard of hers slips, and an almost innocent type of wonder parts her mouth, softening all her sharp edges.

I slip my hands into my front pockets, watching her take it all in.

She’s not wrong. My aunt and uncle do have great taste. But what’s got my wheels spinning is the way her approval slides over me, pulling my shoulders back with pride. Maybe it’s the way she gawks at the twenty-foot ceilings or how her fingers fidget as if to pilfer through my aunt’s collection of books.

Whatever the reason, an uncharted part of my soul rouses beneath it.

“My gilded cage,” I grouse.

“Penelope mentioned growing up here with her cousins. Were you one of them?”

Careful not to reveal too much, I correct, “Only during the summers.”

“Well,” she says, tucking her hands under her arms, “this is far more than I could have ever hoped for as a kid.”

There’s an isolated longing wrapped around her words, and part of me hates that I’ve diminished her excitement. The other obnoxious, and increasingly hard to ignore, part of me wants to ask her what she means.

“Besides, it has to be better than AA meetings and cafeteria food,” she muses.

When Heather twists back to me with the hint of a smirk, I trace my gaze over her small nose and the tip which turns up slightly. Her cheeks are freckle free, but a dark beauty mark graces the round top of her left cheekbone, and I appreciate the fine, untouched lines which wrinkle the edges of her eyes.

“You make a compelling point.”

I drop my attention to the three angry claw marks beneath her collarbone, accompanied by several more slashed diagonally across the soft swells peeking through her torn shirt.

“Ouch.” She flinches when I brush the edge of my thumb near the highest scratch.

“Stay here,” I command, but true to her stubborn nature, footsteps echo mine all the way to the master bath.

Under the sink, I gather the supplies I need to disinfect her wounds. “Didn’t I tell you to stay put?”

When I rise, producing a cotton pad and some rubbing alcohol, she shrugs. “Guess I’m not very good at following directions.”

A gentle hum buzzes through the bathroom from the vanity lights. Two different worlds clash between our stares as we wait for the other to give.

It’s been incredibly too long since a woman has been this straightforward with me. Most of the time, I never know when they’re being genuine, and that makes having any meaningful relationships outside of sex difficult.

Finally, breaking the silence between us, I press the saturated tip of the cotton to the deepest mark. “How silly of me to think you’d obey.”

Her breath catches at the sting of alcohol. “I’m not a dog to heel at your call.”

My eyes flick to her neck, imagining how she’d look in nothing else but my hand for a collar.

“No, I don’t suppose you are.”

Her skin pebbles with goosebumps, and curiously, the more I touch, the more I don’t want to stop. So instead of hurrying to treat the area, I do something I hope I won’t end up regretting later.

“This house belongs to my aunt and uncle. Penelope’s parents.”

Her head tips up when I offer their names, and a pair of soft brown eyes flood with amazement. “Patrick Vance. As in, The CEO for Triggerz?”

“I take it you’ve heard of him.”

She waves a hand. “*Pfft*. Who hasn’t? The man started what’s now a multibillion-dollar corporation in his basement.”

Ah, yes. The basement rumor.

“He didn’t start his business in his basement. A former colleague bet him two million dollars he couldn’t beat him in a one-on-one horse race, and he won, bareback.”

“I don’t believe it.” When I nod, her eyes roll. “You see? This is why I’ve learned not to trust anyone. There are too many lies and not enough truths.”

Now that, I won’t disagree with.

Trading out the soiled swab for a new one, I dab another group of cuts. “After the DUI incident, he offered me a place to stay on the condition I would look after this place.”

Heather considers me thoughtfully, unnervingly. “How did Penelope end up with you?”

“She had a nasty break up last year with her shithead boyfriend and hasn’t really been herself since.” I shrug. “I figured getting her out of Keerah and back to Augustine would help, and she helped get me out of spending weeks in a cold, lifeless building.”

“Even if it meant keeping a constant eye on you?”

A brittle smirk finds my mouth. “Believe it or not, she actually thinks I need her protection.”

“I’ll admit, I’m surprised the two of you are alone.” Her words brush across my wrist as she speaks. “Figured the place would be crawling with guards.”

I pause to watch her pulse, thumping away at her throat. My family name graces the covers of tabloids and magazines weekly. I’ve heard nearly every rumor, but more than anything, I wish I could tell them all the truth.

But the truth would be a lot more devastating than my silence.

Unsure what more I should say, I finish soaking the last of her wounds and grab a tube of antibiotic cream off the counter.

“I was thinking—” The first swipe of ointment stops her with a sharp hiss.

Fuck. These little noises she makes... I could listen to them on repeat.

“Maybe you should have Penelope bring the kids from the shelter out here to help you with the barn,” she finishes.

“What makes you think I need help?”

“You don’t, but they might,” she retorts, but it loses heat as she watches my hand travel lower. “This ranch is the perfect spot to let them exercise and, I don’t know, do something stimulating.”

Though her sudden interest surprises me, I murmur, “Not a bad idea, slayer.”

Contrary to popular belief, I consider myself a gentleman—a real noble guy if anyone cared to ask—but the second she

takes her eyes off mine, my gaze falls to the mouthwatering peaks teasing me below.

Those lashes pop up not even a second later to catch me ogling them.

“Whatcha looking at, vamp,” she pops the ‘p’ light enough to stir my blood.

A few lousy inches separate us as blood pounds lower.

“I...” *Have no words, apparently.*

There’s not a single thought bouncing around my skull other than putting my mouth directly on the spot where my stare burns.

“You?” she asks throatily.

An ear-shattering *clang* ricochets around the bathroom, jolting us apart. Heather grabs the edge of the counter with a shriek as Jango pads after the metal bowl he dropped on the tile.

He plops his butt down between us before releasing a low, pathetic *woof*.

She takes two boundary-erecting steps away from me and yanks her torn shirt together.

What the fuck am I doing?

“Here.” I grab the bottom of my shirt, shirk it overhead, and then toss it at her.

I scoop up Jango’s bowl, but I don’t miss the way her eyes flit across my bare torso before zeroing in on the barbell piercings through each of my nipples.

Heather sputters as she holds the shirt away from her body. “What is this?”

“A shirt. Wear it.”

I step out of the bathroom while thoughts of her in nothing but my shirt have me glaring at the bed. God, I need to get a grip. I’m acting like a horny pre-teen instead of the twenty-eight year old man I am.

“I don’t need it,” she argues.

I stop at the doorway, half turning to cock a brow at the tattered remains of her top.

She grumbles, mutters, and spews complaints, but a ridiculous amount of male pride pricks my chest when she finally tugs it on.

“Satisfied?”

Hardly.

“If my satisfaction is what you want, then you can start by getting some proper work attire.”

The intentional vulgarity has her fuming as she shoulders past me. “Thanks for reminding me why I find you so infuriating.”

I watch her stomp down the hall with all the grace of a charging bull.

Had there been a moment when she hadn’t found me irritating?

As far as I know, the woman despises me. There hasn’t been a single instance since we’ve met that she’s held back her contempt.

Except for when she was caring for me, and now I, for her.

The mere possibility of Heather enjoying my touch shifts something inside me. Something more than just curiosity that will do nothing but lead to complications.

A man like me can’t offer anything to a woman like Heather. And not just because of the rumors, the acting, or the secrets.

Because, as it’s been proven time and time again, I’m not worth the trouble.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Heather

I t's been three days since the Russian attacked. Every muscle in my body aches on a dreadful, bone-deep level, but I'm not giving up. I'm determined to prove myself to Penelope and her overbearing, pompous—

Fingers pausing above the keyboard, I grin at my dramatics. “Tell me you’re a writer without telling me you’re a writer.”

I hold the backspace key until the paragraph disappears from my notes, then shut my laptop. Outside, the sun gradually rises behind the east mountains, and I know if I don’t get moving, I’ll hear an earful from Penelope.

By the time I wobble down the front steps and toward the foot of the hill, I hesitate. I’m sore as hell, and while my body is exhausted from days of intense labor, my subconscious is utterly spent from having one nightmare after another.

The ominous dream of Sparrow throwing me from her back into a black void of stagnant water lingers. Vivid flashes of me struggling to swim to the surface, thrashing for help as liquid filled my nose and poured into my lungs are still fresh in my mind when I enter the stable.

That earthy scent I’ve come to associate with the horses mixes with leather and a sharp hint of freshly cut wood. I check the stalls, making sure they each have fresh feed and water.

Most of them are still shaking off sleep, but not Sparrow.

A soft snort rumbles from her snout when she hangs her head over the stall door to spy on me. It dissipates in a thin white puff against the cool air, and in the contrasting light, her coat appears coal black.

Marcus's ceaseless goading still chaps my ass, and being alone in such a tight space with him did nothing but give me emotional whiplash. First, he's standoffish, if not annoyed by my offer to help around here. Then, he's watching me, touching me, and caring for me.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I trot down the corridor to the saddle rack and grab a fawn-colored western saddle and a wool-lined pad.

My arms strain to carry the forty-pound hunk of leather toward Sparrow's stall, but by the time Marcus makes it to the stables, I'm going to have that headstrong mare saddled all by myself.

Are you actually insane or just showing off?

I rise on the tips of my toes, lifting the saddle to show Sparrow my intention. When she merely stares at me, I mutter, "Can I come in or what? This thing is heavy as hell."

The mare shakes her dark mane with a low whinny, but thankfully, she eases back enough for me to get one hand on the door latch and unlock it.

Sparrow's muscles flick and shudder involuntarily while I gawk at how unbelievably massive she is.

"Christ on a cracker." I plaster my spine against the wood-paneled door, immediately regretting this decision.

"Don't give me that look," I say as her round belly expands with a deep sigh. "You're four times my size, at least."

Sparrow tosses her head, pawing at the blond bed shavings beneath our feet.

"No, that wasn't a fat joke." I pause. "Why am I talking to a horse?"

After hanging the saddle over the stall door, I remove the pad and take two careful steps forward. Marcus was adamant I control my fear around these creatures, but when Sparrow swings her head around with those big nostrils flaring, there's no doubt in my mind she's whiffing a heavy dose of fear funk.

The rectangular pad fits over her spine snugly, with the top set at the hump just above her shoulders, and when the backs of my fingers brush her warm coat, a tiny, triumphant smile tugs my lips.

"Nice horsey," I grunt, hoisting the saddle on top of the pad.

Sparrow neighs loud enough to startle me, but instead of moving, I slam my eyes shut and chant, "Please don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me."

I pop one eye open to see her black-tipped ears twitching and flicking curiously. A tuft of her raven-colored mane lies over her forehead, and once I'm positive she isn't going to charge me, I brazenly reach out to touch the strands.

The tip of my pointer finger explores a swirl of short fur in the center of her long, speckled face, and the longer we study each other, the more comfortable I become.

Touching her velvet soft snout sprinkled with coarse whiskers, I tease, "I know a lady who can get rid of this 'stache, if you're interested."

A hot, disapproving puff vibrates my palms, bringing a smile to my lips.

I give her neck a firm pat. "All right. Let's get this thing secured so I can rub it in Marcus's stupid face."

The leather cinch dangles beneath her belly, and when I swipe for it, she prances out of reach.

"Hey, will you stop?" I scold as the troublemaker playfully nips my boots.

Tongue snaking out, I concentrate on the dragging strap while chasing the mare in a circle.

She halts instantly, releasing a boisterous snort when my head bumps straight into the side of her ass.

“You know, my face has been called many things,” Marcus muses from the other side of the stall, “but stupid is a first.”

I groan, rubbing the heel of my hand against my forehead. “What do you want, vamp?”

He helps himself into the stall, carrying a pail full of sweet pellets. “I was grabbing the spare toolbox when I heard you struggling.”

Heard as: I caught you talking to an animal like a crazy person.

The second I grab the cinch, Sparrow lurches forward to cram her face inside the bucket. The leather whips my palms on its way after her, and I glare at the culprit.

“Pellets are her favorite treat.” He smooths his palm along Sparrow’s twitching skin. “She’s much more agreeable when she’s eating.”

“Aren’t most females?” I ask offhandedly.

Wait, that was a bit too casual. And this vamp and I are not, and never will be, casual. But my insides turn all scrambly when his wicked mouth curls into a sly grin.

“Go ahead.” Relaxing against the wall, Marcus nods to the straps still dragging along the ground. “Show me what you’ve learned.”

It’s the way his voice dips, and that subtle up-tick of his brow, that makes my belly flutter. Just like it had when he’d thoroughly cleaned the same scratches now flaring to life beneath my shirt.

Choosing to ignore any sensation other than the hot burn of hatred, I quickly get to work readjusting the saddle.

This odd change in him doesn’t make any sense. He went on an alcohol- and drug-fueled rampage through the streets of LA, totaled his car, and was slapped with a court-ordered stint in rehab, yet he’s out here playing cowboy as if none of it ever happened.

Regardless of what the magazine is expecting from me, I'm dying to know what Marcus is hiding.

Rolling my hand down Sparrow's stomach to let her know exactly where I'm at, I grab the thicker band off the ground. The skinnier cinch belt slides through the buckle as I wrap it a few times before moving to secure another strap around her front.

"How's the ankle?" I ask once I'm finished.

Shoving off the wall, he swaggers toward me to inspect my work. "Good as new."

I doubt that, but now I'm hyper-aware of every prick of energy zipping between us once he reaches my side. If he notices his hip brushing mine as he bends to check the buckle, he doesn't let on.

Scratchy nibbling, followed by muffled crunching noises, fills the stall as Sparrow gingerly eats her feed.

And because I'm not totally blind, I might sneak one subtle peek at Marcus's ass.

I might also silently give thanks to the person who designed those Levi's.

"Watch her breathing right here," he says, pointing behind Sparrow's elbow at the base of her ribs. "See how she can't fully expand to get a good breath?"

Raising my fist, I sputter through a cough. "Yeah, totally."

Get it together, I warn my awakening libido. *He's not that cute.*

Marcus loosens the strap by a couple of inches, then pats the mare's shoulder. "Overall, not too bad for a rookie."

My palm glides over the worn seat, tracing the dirt-stained leather as I laugh softly. "I haven't been in a saddle since my ninth birthday."

He grabs the horn, a look of relaxed curiosity flitting across his face. "It was one of those fat party ponies, wasn't it?"

That birthday was one of the few memories from living in and out of different homes that brings me joy.

“My foster mom bought me a poofy gold dress and a pair of sparkly pink sandals.” Despite myself, I smile. “You have no idea how ridiculously excited I was when I saw they matched the highlights in the pony’s hair. I loved them so much that I wore them every day until my toes started curling over the edges.”

Marcus’s answering smile wavers. “You were in foster care?”

Dropping my hand, I shrug it off like I always do. “Yeah, but it’s no biggie. I turned out all right.”

Having gone to therapy for most of young adulthood, I learned that sometimes people grieve relationships as much as death. And as I tuck away those memories of the family I believed would never turn their back on me, I know it to be true.

He helps me remove the saddle so we can leave Sparrow in peace, but I’m suddenly self-conscious, unable to look at him. For some mystifying reason, I don’t want to see the same pity I’ve received from others in Marcus’s gaze.

But instead of pity, I find a shimmer of understanding as he nods.

It was a mistake to let my guard down, but now that those blue eyes fall to my lips, having Marcus’s undivided attention on me, and only me, conducts a foreign sort of thrill along the length of my spine.

“Come on.” After unlatching the door, he extends his palm to guide me to the main corridor.

My nose scrunches. “Mm, I don’t think so.”

“Just trust me.” He flexes his fingers impatiently.

“I’d rather pull my hair out one follicle at a time.”

Freshman year in high school, a boy I refused to kiss at the back of the bus dubbed me an ice queen, and it stuck until I graduated. But instead of crying, I embraced the title, erecting

an impenetrable forcefield around myself that I never quite let go of.

I trust no one. I love no one. That's the way it is.

With an exaggerated sigh, he grabs my hand and tugs me after him.

“Wait!” Pulling away from him proves useless as he breezes through the entrance of the building. He pauses to grab the beat-up, old toolbox he mentioned earlier before dragging me toward the barn.

“I thought we addressed your touchiness.” I stop short of two enormous piles of withered wood, tarnished metal, and trash debris.

The past few nights, I've sat on the front porch swing to respond to work emails and keep up with *Luster* remotely, but watching him lug supplies in and out of the old building has proved to be a distraction.

Clearly, he's obsessed, but as I follow him through a set of brand-new doors, I'm astonished by what he's accomplished in just a matter of days.

Marcus releases me, taking a healthy step toward Penelope.

I watch that same hand open and close at his side, and a slither of awareness darts up the back of my neck.

“Took you long enough.” After swiping her forearm through the sweat beading her brow, she reaches for the metal box, and it's then that I spot a group of children—ages ranging somewhere from six to eleven—scattered about the barn.

“You brought them?” An instantaneous sense of awe hits me.

Marcus gives me a modest smirk. “Pen thought your idea was good.”

“*Genius*,” she corrects, then leans closer and lowers her voice. “Honestly, I'm contemplating sending him to the shelter and keeping these guys here.”

“I heard that.” He knocks her shoulder with his as he heads for the workbench.

She turns, hands on her hips. “They’re better company than your cranky ass.”

Marcus stretches both arms up, flexing his defined shoulders before flipping her the bird behind his head.

Six sets of youthful eyes swing my way, bringing me back from a vivid reminder of what his naked chest and piercings look like. One could say it was finely sculpted... maybe even lickable.

If one was paying close enough attention, that is.

Various tools drop in succession, and their worn shoes smack the freshly packed dirt as they descend, forming a circle filled with radiant, youthful faces.

“Easy, guys,” Penelope gently cautions as they squeeze past each other.

“Hi!” a young boy with deeply tanned bumpy skin greets me. “I’m Tobias.”

“My name’s Yennifer,” the youngest girl says beside him.

One by one, they offer their names with eager smiles.

“Heather.” I take my time shaking each hand. “I see you guys have been hard at work.”

“Yup!” Yennifer beams. “We’re pretending to be pirates, and Marcus is our captain.”

In the middle of rolling a thick length of rope, he gives them a hearty, “*Aye.*”

They giggle, answering him with a resounding, “*Arrghh!*”

Penelope wears a proud, motherly smile. “These guys are getting good practice for helping with *T’slasta.*”

“We get to gather wood for the bonfire thish year,” a boy by the name of Rhydan whistles through a mass of crooked teeth.

“What’s lah-sta?” I ask, testing each syllable on my tongue.

Tobias’s hands move excitedly. “A great, big, amazing com... commem...”

“Commemoration,” Penelope finishes sweetly.

“Yeah!”

“It starts nexshht week,” Rhydan says. “You sh-should come.”

Their eagerness to include me melts my insides like putty, but going to festivals or getting any more acquainted with Augustine than I already have risks damaging my mission.

Marcus slings a bundle of plywood over his shoulder and promptly inserts himself into our circle. “All right, back to work, ya bunch of *scallywags*, before I make ye walk the plank!”

Speak of the devil.

The younger kids squeal with laughter when he squints an eye and curves his finger in the shape of a hook.

“I’ll go get us some water,” Penelope says. “Think you can co-captain the ship for a bit?”

Marcus props the plywood against one of the stalls he’s reframing before making sure each pirate has an age-appropriate task.

“Yeah,” I half-mutter. But by the time I pry my eyes off him ruffling Tobias’s hair, she’s gone.

Marcus walks back over to the wood pile and kneels beside it.

I blink. Just where the hell did he get that toolbelt from, and more importantly, what am I doing ogling him in it?

With a thin sheen of sweat covering his forearms and triceps, he lines each plank against the two-by-four skeleton of the first stall. And all the while, handyman stripper scenes flicker through my mind like one of those cheesy scripted pornos.

Only, Marcus would deliver his lines with that same stoic perfection the public adores him for. A dull heat thumps at the apex of my thighs as I clearly envision him unraveling the same rope from earlier to bind my wrists and ankles. Then, just as he unclips his toolbelt to reveal a raging—

Yennifer grunts, dragging a cordless nail gun with both hands past my line of sight and toward the very man I was fantasizing about.

“Whoa-ho there, matey.” I snag the heavy tool from her hands while trying to get a hold of myself. “This here be for captains only.”

She ducks her chin bashfully when I give her a wink, then scampers off to help the older boys paint over a hole they just finished patching.

“Terrible with chickens, yet fluent in pirate.” Marcus shifts his weight onto the balls of his feet. “I think that counts as your unnormal thing.”

There’s something charming in the humor gracing his lips, and in a moment of temporary psychosis, I’ll admit he’s tempting. If I hadn’t already sworn off players and actors alike, I might say, in those dirty jeans and an equally filthy shirt, he’s downright sexy.

I add dragging him into his lavish bathroom and leisurely washing the grime from his body to the porn scene which follows the first, then lock the abomination inside a steel box in the darkest recess of my mind.

“The only unnormal one around here is you.” Careful not to let my fingers touch his, I offer him the next plank in the stack.

He nods at the nail gun in my opposite hand, doubtfully. “You know how to work that thing?”

“Um, duh.”

It’s obvious he doesn’t believe me, and that’s fair because I have no fucking clue how to use this thing. But he doesn’t push. Instead, he says with authority, “Get down here then.”

Okay, maybe it's me, but that sounded dipped, flipped, and whipped in a whole lot of sexual.

I gulp, suddenly nervous to be so close to the man I was just starring in an adult film with. Not that he knows that.

“Knows what?”

Baby Jesus in a manger.

Embarrassment blazes a trail up my neck at my audible rambling as my knees fall to the packed dirt. “Nothing. Scoot over.”

I ignore his low chuckle while I carefully aim toward the bottom of the wood between his hands. The first nail hammers straight through and to the side of the beam behind it.

“Dammit,” I hiss before sucking the tip of the finger that got pinched in the trigger.

He tsks, but the gentleness in his voice rattles my inner ice fortress. “It's okay to need help once in a while, you know.”

“Easy for you to say. When you've been on your own as long as I have, you get used to relying on yourself for everything, even the small stuff.” Without meeting his gaze, I reposition. “If I can't take care of myself, then who will?”

I squeeze the trigger and miss, again.

“You're not the only one who's had to rely on themselves to get through the tough shit life throws us,” he says. “It's not easy being a loner. I get it.”

A disbelieving laugh escapes before I have a chance to stop it. “And what would you know about being alone? You're surrounded by hundreds of friends and adoring fans at any given moment, any day of the week.”

“And besides Penelope, where are all those people now?” Marcus glares at me as if the rest of what he wants to say is on the tip of his tongue. Deciding better of it, he huffs through his nose. “I know more than you think.”

Bile rises in the back of my throat at my cattiness. Keeping people at a safe distance has always been my first line of

defense, but right now, it feels more like I'm kicking a tortured man while he's down.

"All right, you win," I mutter, limply handing him the nail gun. "Show me how to do it."

My pulse flutters when instead of taking the tool, he shuffles behind me—his front only an inch or two from my shoulders.

"Hold it like this." The deep timbre of his voice stands the hairs at the base of my neck on end. "Now, place your other hand on the bottom, and only one finger on the trigger."

I grow lightheaded with his tantalizing, spice-rich scent wafting around us while he cups his hands over mine and helps me line up the nail gun.

The fan pumping fresh air into the barn helps keep the temperature bearable, but there's a sharp barometric shift in the atmosphere. A sensation strangely charged with static, and I'm acutely aware of how hard my heart is pounding.

Can he sense my body's unsolicited reaction?

"Flex your wrist so the gun stays steady."

Marcus's breath tickles my neck when he removes his hands to grip the wood we're attempting to pin. I depress the lever, nailing the plank exactly where we want it.

Still chest to back, he murmurs against the shell of my ear, "Good girl."

Two words, seemingly innocent, yet they hold all the promise of a man who knows how to please a woman.

I shake my head, standing in a rush and nearly knocking him over. "Thanks for the lesson," I squeak too loudly, too awkwardly.

Striving for casual, I prop an elbow on top of the unfinished structure as every cell in my brain screams, *What the fuck was that!*

He gradually rises to stand, watching me the entire time.

Holy. Tool. Belt. Marcus Matthews has a hard-on... for *me*.

Shock obliterates any manners I possess as I fully, and openly, gawk at the bulge straining his zipper.

I cast a nervous glance toward the back wall where the children are busy chasing each other with paint-soaked brushes.

“Will you put that thing away before one of the kids sees it?” I whisper-hiss, sputtering as I point an accusing finger at the rather impressive offender. “And don’t ever do *that* again.”

I don’t know which unnerves me the most, his total lack of embarrassment while he tactfully adjusts himself, or that naughty, roguish smirk he gives when he catches me still staring.

“Marcus?” Penelope calls from outside.

We drift apart in enough time to appear busy, and I note she hasn’t returned with the water she said she was going to get.

“Hey,” I greet her while concentrating on the tiny pile of sawdust I’ve gathered on the lip of a piece of wood.

She gives us a half-hearted smile before hollering at the kids to meet her at the van, and Marcus strides over to her with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

Penelope hands him a phone. “You should take this.”

“Bye, Heather,” Yennifer says, stunning me with a tight hug around my thighs. “I hope we see you again soon.”

My guard dissolves almost instantly as I slowly lower my arms around her. For the first time in far too long, I allow myself to absorb the simple comfort of a hug.

I wave goodbye to the rest of the kids, but Marcus and Penelope don’t utter another word as he takes the device from her and ushers them all outside.

The minute I’m alone, I nibble the tip of my thumbnail and wrestle with my conscience.

Helping on the ranch while Marcus was injured was supposed to mean getting closer to the target. And getting closer to the target should equal ample opportunities for me to snoop around. But allowing Marcus to slither his way past my defenses is unacceptable.

I was practically *mind-fucking* the man, for crying out loud.

“All right, Sinclair. Time to focus.”

Steeling my nerve, I poke my head outside the barn in search of Marcus.

Whoever was on the other side of that phone call had both of their hackles raised, and I want to know why.

I make it a single step before I hear Penelope speaking quietly from around the east facing wall.

Quickly pressing the record button on my phone, I stuff it into my pocket and crouch in a patch of stringy weeds beside the opening of the barn. Up the drive, the kids amble into a white van as they wait for her, but as I brave a peek around the corner, I see both Penelope and Marcus are squared off with each other.

“That’s not the point,” she says.

Careful not to make a noise, I lean my shoulder against the crusted red paint and dig my fingertips into the grass beside my feet.

“Are you suggesting I fly home and tell them I’m done then?” Marcus’s cross tone has the hair on my arms standing on end.

Does he mean the producer of the show?

He can’t quit now. Partying and self-sabotaging aside, he’s at the height of his career with so much more potential.

She doesn’t back down. “Not exactly, but it’s a start.”

“I won’t leave my family drowning in debt with those assholes pulling the strings. If this is what doing my part looks like, then I’m going to do it.”

Dread drags its talons along both sides of my neck.

The Matthews are in debt? And from the sound of it, with some bad people.

Keeping my breaths shallow enough not to be heard makes me dizzy, but I can't wrap my mind around what I'm hearing.

"How much longer can you keep this up? I love you, Marcus. The last thing I want you to do is lose sight of who you are."

He scoffs, sounding more like the old Marcus than the one who was just laughing and acting like a pirate to make a few kids happy. "This *is* who I am."

"It doesn't have to be if you'd just fight for once in your life."

After a beat of silence, he gives her a frail, "No."

"Rebuilding this barn isn't going to bring her back any more than you trying to fix everything all the damn time." Penelope's voice wobbles with emotion.

Their silence nearly suffocates me as a piece of the puzzle clicks into place.

They have to be talking about Leah.

Which means I can safely deduce Penelope was the woman he was with in Tauntuma.

"Don't you think I know that?" She's pulled into his chest as he wraps his long arms around her, and adds, "I'm not trying to bring Leah back, Pen, and I'm sorry for speaking to you the way I did about restoring this place. But I can't let them down."

My body rocks with the forceful discovery that Leah is truly dead. But now finding out *who* wants him to do *what* jumps to the tippy top of my priority list.

"I leave tomorrow at noon."

"Fine," she counters. "I'm coming with you."

“And leave Heather to watch over this place by herself? Absolutely not.”

His mocking laugh cuts straight through me, and when Penelope doesn't come to my defense, the wound deepens.

I suppose I can't really blame them for not wanting to put a stranger in charge of their property. But it's more that Marcus doesn't think I'm capable of handling it which has my teeth grinding.

Opening the palm he'd held just hours ago, I stare a hole straight through it, bothered by why the smallest part of me cares. I should have known underneath this whole sexy, sentimental bullshit was the *real* Marcus Matthews.

“Okay, but just because you're invisible in Augustine doesn't make you less visible there,” Penelope warns.

“I'll be as quick as I can. Pearl beach, then back to the ranch.”

I press the stop button on the phone's recorder before slowly rising to stand, and with renewed resolve, I smile at the saved file.

Pearl Beach, huh?

Looks like I've got plans for tomorrow.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Heather

Holding a pair of binoculars in one hand and my phone in the other, I give Alice the skinny on the notes I emailed her.

I sent them yesterday evening, right after texting Penelope that I'm under the weather and won't be able to help today.

Or be completely useless, apparently.

"You're living next door to him," she repeats in disbelief. "Do you know what this means?"

"That your star journalist is going to nail this story."

Just to be on the safe side, I've been staking out Marcus's house for the past five hours. He mentioned noon for his secret rendezvous, but I'm not risking the chance that he may have changed his mind.

"You need to seduce him."

Gasping hard enough to choke, I mutter, "That's not gonna happen."

"Admit it, you may hate him, but he's fine as hell," Alice practically purrs.

Don't think about his boner. Don't think about his boner.

My head is already shaking as I reach inside the door and snag a small wad of cash and my keys off the counter. That bastard had the gall to laugh when I was attacked by that demon chicken. He's infuriating, pompous, self-centered—and

in the light of day, I'm ashamed that a pair of tight jeans and a toolbelt nearly derailed my mission.

I'd let myself imagine what it might have been like to give in, even the tiniest bit. But that was before reality slapped me in the tits and refocused my efforts.

"This isn't a nineties rom-com, Alice. I don't need to use my vagina to gain information. I've got a brain for that." Pausing to remind her of the document I attached to our email, I add, "And what about the non-disclosure agreement? Aren't you the least bit worried about that?"

"Nah. It isn't the first time we've had to work around one and it won't be the last. I'll handle it," she says, brushing me off. "But remember, Marcus didn't earn the title of playboy for no reason. So, if you're not going to fuck him, then don't let *him* fuck *you*."

Apathetic, I drone, "Are we done here? I've got a vampire to hunt."

Her chuckle is positively diabolical. "Go get 'em, Buffy."

I disconnect our call at 11:59 a.m., and true to his word, Marcus jogs down the front steps of the ranch house toward his SUV at 12:00 p.m. on the dot.

Pulling on my trusty black hat and matching shades, I ready my backpack to tail him.

My butt hits the seat of my rental, and I give him a few minutes' head start before rubbing the bill with my thumb and forefinger for luck. "Please don't let me fuck this up."

Pearl Beach is one of the many beaches that surround Scarlet Gulf. I've only ever seen photos of the deep pink waters, but in person, this Topican gem is disturbingly beautiful.

I bump along one wooded area after another until I reach a busy park filled with gaggles of tourists swimming and playing in the brightly colored water. Having lost Marcus around the last turn, I lean over the steering wheel and scour the parking lot for his SUV.

“Where are you?”

All night long, I picked apart his conversation with Penelope to figure out why they would risk this type of exposure. Being caught in public when he’s supposed to be locked up is going to cause a major uproar in the tabloids.

And I’m not about to let someone else steal my story.

I slam on my brakes the moment I catch sight of a shirtless Marcus, his abs stretching with an elbow propped up next to a shower stall in the center of four giggling females. He wears a seductive smile while chatting them up as if they’re old pals.

“What the hell is he doing?” I grit, scanning the area for paparazzi or anyone inconspicuous.

Thankful not to spot Turner hanging around, I hurry and park my rental. Next, I double-check my red lips and dark eyeshadow I applied en route. I’m no Jane Bond, but hey, it’s as good a disguise as any.

I fall into job mode, grabbing my camera and snapping several shots of the numskull flirting with them. Zooming in, I capture him hugging the petite redhead as she trails her neon yellow tips across his pecs. *Click*. Then a deeply bronzed female squeezes his biceps as she whispers something that makes his head tip back with laughter. *Click*.

There he is. This is the Marcus Matthews I know, not the enticing, arrogant one who makes ruffling my feathers an Olympic sport.

Pain radiates up both sides of my jaw from how hard I’m clenching. I sit back, frowning down at the twisting knots inside of my stomach.

Am I... jealous?

One of the girls takes his hand, tugging him toward the beach, and like watching a train wreck, I slap the steering wheel. “Don’t go, you idiot!”

A minivan sputters to a halt directly in my view, and by the time I drop my camera to the floorboard and jump out of the vehicle, they’re gone.

“Shit.” I worry my lip between my teeth.

It’s one thing for me to sneak a few pictures—I mean, Marcus *is* the entire reason I’m on this stupid island to begin with—but who knows the kind of stories someone else would spin.

I’m gathering hard facts here. This isn’t going to be some willie-nilly gossip piece; it’ll be an article to covet. One that breaks down every secret the Matthews harbor, exposing them for who they truly are.

With not a cloud in sight, the sun beats against my skin to the point that I’m certain my makeup is melting. The heady scent of suntan lotion and citrus float on a gentle breeze as I sneak across the sand-sprinkled parking lot. I slip behind one of the striped changing tents beside the shower where I had last spotted him.

“Who are we spying on?”

“Christ on a cracker!” I gasp, slapping a hand over my heart and spinning around in a rush.

“Red looks good on you, slayer.” A cocky smile curls the edges of Marcus’s lips. His delight in spooking me intensifies when he glances at my tattered old hat. “Not so sure about this, though.”

“Stop calling me that.” I seethe, still furious with him, but there goes my pulse fluttering like mad again.

“Care to explain why you’re stalking me?”

The hum wisping around his question beckons a swirl of heat deep in my pelvis.

Naturally, I opt for cynicism. “Contrary to what you may think, not everything revolves around *you*.”

“Is that right?”

I nod through the flutters brought on by my earlier jealousy.

“*Liar*,” he purrs.

“Just who do you think you are calling me a liar?”

He catches my wrist before I can shove him.

“All right, I’ll bite. Let’s pretend that you *didn’t* overhear me and Pen talking while you were in the barn yesterday.” He’s goading me. There’s no way he could have known. “What are you doing on this oddly specific part of the island?”

“I-I...”

“You,” he drawls, mockingly.

Think, Sinclair.

My gaze flies around the beach before landing on a pier with shops and restaurants extending out over the blush-colored ocean.

I deserve an Oscar for the steadfast shrug I give, considering I’m practically vibrating with anxiety. “All my blogger friends say Pearl Beach is the perfect spot for shopping. I came to buy some clothes.”

Friends, my psyche snorts.

Marcus doesn’t bother looking toward the area I’m pointing at. Instead, he bats my hand out of the air and says, coolly, “If it’s work clothes you’re looking for, you won’t be finding what you need in any of those boutiques.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but in a panic, I raise my chin and lie right through my teeth. “Actually, I need a dress.”

A rush of smug satisfaction slithers through me when his smile fades. “A dress?”

“Mm-hmm. For a date,” I blurt, followed by, “with Ernesto.”

Oh boy.

Marcus cocks his head, his eyes narrowing as I give him my most innocent smile. “And since you think I’m so *incapable*, I’ve decided I’ll no longer be helping on the ranch.”

A hint of anger flickers in those blues.

“That’s not what I meant,” he says, but I’m distracted by a glint of refracted light.

My face scrunches as if someone has a mirror and they’re shining it directly into my eye. I blink at the wooded area behind the parking lot, but when I raise a hand to block the irritation, my body freezes in place.

“What is it?” Marcus asks without a trace of humor before placing his body in front of mine.

I calculate how many steps it’ll take to get us inside the yellow-striped tent. There’s no time to explain that in a matter of seconds, a photographer will have a slew of pictures for any greedy magazine or tabloid willing to pay.

A shot of Marcus’s face will sell for thousands, but there’s nothing paparazzi hate more than a blocked shot. In their world, they’re practically worthless.

“Move,” I whisper, stepping in front of him and giving him a push.

Scowling, he digs in his heels, refusing to budge. “What the hell are you doing?”

Infuriating man.

Quick on my feet, I slap both hands over Marcus’s cheeks, making sure my back is to the camera.

“Kiss me,” I say in a rush.

“Wha—”

Knowing we’re out of time, I haul his mouth down to mine, hoping my hat and body will block him enough to be unrecognizable.

At first, he’s shocked still, his lips unmoving but luxuriously warm.

With his mind otherwise preoccupied, I’m finally able to get his feet moving backward into the sand until we’re tripping through the entrance of the tent.

Lucifer’s balls, these lips are just as pillowy soft as they appear.

Once we're safely tucked inside, a dam breaks loose. He moans, and it's the most decadent sound I've ever heard. "I've been dying to do this."

Dying? I'm reeling over his admission when one hand swiftly winds across my neck. Marcus hauls me into him and grabs my chin with the other, and the pinching grip tugs my jaw down enough that I open for him.

I don't have a moment to think before his tongue effortlessly slips inside my mouth. He licks and lures every nerve ending along my responding tongue to the surface.

Yes, yes, yes. A sleeping goddess awakens, and she's ravenous.

Hot lava sluices my veins, accompanied by a delicious throb between my legs.

Kissing Marcus is like jumping into a hot spring, naked. Every heated stroke and swipe become my undoing, but warning bells blare behind the haze of sensory overload.

It takes the last ounce of effort I have to pry myself off him, disconnecting the kiss.

Thankfully, the movement knocks some sense into us both, and hands slapping, we scurry apart from each other.

"What the *fuck* was that?" he demands with wide eyes as if I've bewitched him.

I wipe my wrist across my mouth, hating myself for enjoying that more than I should have. The throb between my legs only irritates me more.

"You're welcome."

He swings his arms out. "For what!"

Embarrassment floods my face as I cross my arms defensively. "There was a photographer across the street. I-I didn't want them to get a picture of you in public, so I tried blocking their shot."

Marcus's eyes are wild, not with anger, but with a heavy, unmistakable dose of desire.

His jaw clenches as he places his hands on his hips to catch his breath, but I'm too afraid to speak. I can't believe I did that.

But do I regret it? Now *that's* the question.

"It was the paparazzi," he corrects me, and I don't dare tell him I know the difference. "How many did you see?"

"Just one," I say, finding my voice at last. "What the hell are you doing out here in the first place? Are you trying to cause a scene or are you that desperate for attention?"

For the life of me, I can't understand how he takes me from being so blindly and intoxicatingly turned-on, to spitting mad and wanting to smother him in his sleep.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Enlighten me," I counter.

While he scrubs a hand down his face, my gaze daringly falls to the twin barbells, piercing his nipples.

Never in my life would I think they would turn me on, but the mental image of crossing the tent and testing the weight of each one against my tongue has my clit pulsing.

Would they be heavy and cool, or light and warm with the heat from his body?

"Heather, are you listening to a word I'm saying?"

He snaps in front of my face, and I know by the time I leave this island, I'm going to break a tooth.

"Pardon me, your excellence," I croon. "What did you say?"

"How the hell are we going to get out of here?" he repeats.

I pull the tent flap open enough to peek out at the beach. He's right. We're likely trapped, and where one of those paparazzi lurk, there's bound to be plenty more.

"We need some sort of cover," I suggest. Like the umbrella Marcus hid behind when I followed him through Tauntuma. "Better yet, a diversion."

I spot a boy in bright orange swim trunks walking past our hideout while casually licking an ice cream cone.

Waving erratically, I whisper-shout at the freckle-faced boy, “Hey, kid! Come here for a second.”

“This is a terrible idea,” Marcus grumbles over my shoulder.

The boy spins around, takes one look at my half-shielded face and flapping hand, and says, “Uh, sorry, lady. My mom has a rule about me talking to crazy chicks.”

Marcus snorts behind me as my gaze slits. “You’re eleven, tops. What would you know about women?”

I catch an elbow to the ribs, and with a grunt, I try again. “Listen, *sweetie*.” Attempting my best smile, I add, “I had a bathing suit malfunction, and I don’t have my clothes.”

The brat sizes me up while crossing his arms. “You’re lying.”

“Am not.”

“Are, too,” he retorts, and I’m given another bruising bump to the side from the pain in my ass at my back.

A line of melted pistachio cream dribbles down his forearm before I finally relent. “*Fine*. Look at the lot behind us.”

Thankfully, he does so without argument.

“Do you see anyone hiding in the bushes?”

The freckles on his nose and cheeks scrunch as he surveys the area. “You mean the people with the cameras? Looks like there’s four of ‘em.”

“Shit,” I mumble.

He changes his tune, searching my face excitedly. “Are you famous or somethin’, lady?”

I all but feel the egotism pulsing from Marcus when he starts, “Actually—”

The back of my hand slaps over his bare chest to silence him.

“Here’s the deal, kid.” Removing my hand from Marcus’s skin, I cram it into my pocket and fish around for what American cash I managed to grab before I left the house. “I’m going to give you ten bucks to distract that crew over there so we can get out of here. Whatever you’ve got to do, just give us five minutes to escape.”

“Let’s add manipulating children to your endless list of skills, why don’t we?” Marcus’s hurried whisper is laced with annoyance, putting those devil lips dangerously close to my ear.

“Will you shut up?” I mutter.

“Make it twenty, and you’ve got yourself a deal,” the kid says, trying to sneak a peek inside the tent.

My fingers waggle at Marcus for more cash.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he complains before clapping the bills in my palm.

After handing it over, I nod. “Thanks, kid. I appreciate it.”

He makes a *pfft* noise. “Whatever, lady.”

I wait for him to scurry off before grabbing an old, bleached beach towel from the small bamboo stand in the corner.

With a nudge, I offer one of the ends to Marcus, but he shakes his head skeptically.

“This is never going to work.”

I drag my end up, shielding us from view, and give it a wiggle. “Do you have a better idea, vamp?”

He growls before snatching his end and reluctantly stretches it to shoulder level.

“That’s what I thought.”

With the towel held lengthwise and blocking our upper bodies, we sneak around the backside of the tent.

I scan the parking lot for our pint-sized decoy and find him several yards away, jumping up and down in front of the paparazzi while wiggling his butt and sticking his tongue out. When a woman moves to swat at him, he snatches her camera and starts firing off pictures with a shit-eating grin.

“That little devil,” Marcus scoffs, but the look on his face is nothing short of appreciation for the prankster.

My smile matches his as I tug on his arm. “Come on!”

We duck and dive behind palm trees and bushes until we finally find our way back to his car. Beneath the shade of a large palm, we lean against the heated metal, heaving with laughter.

“I’ve got to give it to you,” he says, lolling his head my way. “I didn’t think that was actually going to work.”

I tip my face up to his, noting for the first time that the curve in his naturally imperfect nose has been straightened. His cheekbones are sharp as ever, though, and when I glance at his full, seductive lips, I try, and fail, to forget how velvet soft they’d been against mine.

Shifting my stare to the waving palms above us, I eventually mutter, “If I’m anything, I’m resourceful.”

“Shit, to your left.” He points over my shoulder, but when I whirl around, there’s only a flock of seagulls picking at a pile of discarded food on the ground.

“Made you look.” His face is bright with humor, and too close for comfort.

I shove him before taking a good couple of steps back. “You’re insufferable, did you know that?”

I’m no closer to solving what possessed him to come to Pearl Beach, and phony kiss aside, I’m damn determined to figure it out.

He opens the driver’s side door, stopping short to hang his forearm over the top. “Let me give you a ride back.”

“No thanks.” Recalling my excuse, I take another step back. “I’ve got a dress to find, remember?”

A shadow seemingly darkens his features, but he recovers quickly. “Why did you block that photographer’s shot?”

“I already told you why.”

I’ve got to have the best story *Luster* has ever produced, and that can’t happen if Marcus is running around town, letting these guys get the jump on me.

“But you hate me. Why would you cover for me?”

The question throws me for a loop. And not because I can’t tell him why, but more so the glaring vulnerability in my response.

“I don’t know...”

His eyes slide across my face, peeling my exposed layers apart before I can stitch them back together.

Situating himself in the driver’s seat, Marcus closes the door and then rolls the window down. “I’m not letting you quit.”

I gape at the audacity. “I’ll do whatever I damn well please.”

But that flirty smirk says we both know I won’t be giving up. Article aside, it’s just not in my nature.

With the window rolled down, he backs out slowly, and I can’t help the dreadful sense that he’s privy to something I’m not.

Marcus leaves me with a wink. “See you back at the ranch, slayer.”

CHAPTER NINE



Marcus

The delicate metal sliding between my fingers feels as though it weighs one hundred pounds. As the sun crowns the mountainside in a wash of vivid orange against the purple-blue sky, I trace the intricate words in the center of the connecting chains.

Footsteps across the wooden deck alert me to someone's presence well before Jango even blinks an eye open.

"Not much of a guard dog," my cousin says with amusement.

I glance at the grayed snout resting between my feet to find the hound blissfully snoozing. But I can't bring myself to smile.

"I wonder what Leah'd say if she could see us now," I muse.

Penelope takes a long sip from a steaming mug with the words 'bad bitch club' scrolled along the side. "She'd probably tell you to get your head out of your ass and quit being a slave to your parents."

With a sigh, I curl my fingers around the bracelet and stuff it back into my pocket. "Undoubtedly."

Almost everything about this place reminds me of Leah. It's not just the barn, but Augustine itself. I can't see a sunrise without remembering how much joy they brought her or listen

to music in the work truck because I can still hear her complaining about the rock songs I would force her to endure.

From across the pasture, our guest gingerly exits Aunt Lucy's house before rounding the porch to shake out her yoga mat. She's too far away to make out much more than her killer figure and her hair sloppily piled atop her head, but that doesn't stop me from staring.

She faces the rising sun as she rolls through a few simple stretches, completely unaware of my perusal. And like muscle memory, my tongue glides across my lower lip, searching for Heather's unique taste.

"Guess who I bumped into at Pearl Beach yesterday?"

Pen leans both elbows on the porch railing, pursing her lips at the woman in question. "No way. She said she was sick. I've got the texts to prove it."

Heather reaches her arms up toward the sky before slowly bending into downward dog.

"Interesting." Something I've found myself saying a lot when it comes to this cryptic woman.

"Did she tell you what she was doing there?" Pen asks.

Dragging my gaze from Heather's perky ass, I turn to my cousin. "She said she was getting a dress for a date with Ernesto."

"What? No." Pen's mouth gapes. "She can't date that stupid asshole."

"Apparently, she'll do whatever she wants."

She tightens the collar of her obnoxious fur-lined robe. "I suppose he is the hottest bachelor in Augustine."

My lips thin as I snag her mug and take a much needed swig. "Ernesto isn't that good-looking. And he's a player who'll sleep with her once and never think about her again."

Pen snatches the cup from my hand. "You're not wrong there, but give the girl a break. You've seen how uptight she is. Maybe she needs a good roll in the sheets to loosen up."

The very idea of Heather sleeping with Ernesto makes my blood boil.

When she dragged my mouth to her lush lips, my brain pumped the brakes so hard, I couldn't make up from down. I was so thrown by the taste of her that I admitted I've secretly wanted it before knowing how much I truly did.

She claims it was a cover to distract the paparazzi. But I've experienced scripted, lifeless kisses before, and the passionate frenzy of the one she planted on me yesterday was far from it.

Pen nudges my shoulder. "What do you care about Heather anyway, Mr. Bad Boy?"

Surprisingly, I care a fucking lot.

Call it a hunch, or that viperous personality, but Heather doesn't strike me as the type to go on dates with random men. And there's still the question of why she'd followed me to Pearl Beach to start with.

I push off the railing. "Think I'm going to take a trip into town. You need anything before I go?"

Penelope's dark-red lips twist. "Don't go meddling in Heather's business, Marcus."

"I'm not *meddling*." I toss the word back at her, earning a glare. "I'm keeping us safe."

"Safe from what? Heather wouldn't hurt a fly."

"You trust people too easily." At her snort, I flick my gaze toward Heather's porch. "There's more to her story than she's letting on, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."



"Marcus!" two of my favorite girls squeal with crinkling brown eyes and light brown dimpled cheeks. They assail my

sides with an enormous double hug as I stretch my arms above my head for the orange flowers tangled in a mass of vines.

“Trouble One,” I say to the younger sister, Sariah, who bounces excitedly when I place the flower behind her ear. “And Trouble Two.” Her older sister, Theresa, gifts me with a big toothy grin.

“We’re so happy to see you!” Sariah beams. “Did you bring us any presents?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” I remove two wooden figurines, no bigger than the center of their palms, from my pocket. “A unicorn for Theresa, and a dolphin for Sariah.”

Their piercing shrieks turn the heads of the locals.

“What do you say, girls?” their mother, Catalonia, chides.

“Thank you!” They giggle profusely as she gruffly speaks to them in Spanish, then shoos them away from her stand.

The pair have grown exponentially since I’ve been gone. They’re eleven and nine, but if I didn’t know better, I’d think they were twins.

“Theresa is fully convinced you’re going to marry her someday.” My friend swipes her paint-crusting hands over a worn smock. Then, arching a thin, dark brow, she teases, “I’m not sure I like her crushing on men with questionable reputations.”

With a grunt, I flip through various sketches Catalonia has displayed on her table outside of Ernesto’s café. “And I’m not sure I like her crushing, period.”

The girls skip their way across the cobblestone street to a small play yard. Theresa jumps in the middle of a soccer game, sticking her tongue out at the boys as she takes off with the ball. But her sister loses interest almost immediately, opting for the bookstore instead.

“At least Sariah has her priorities straight.”

We share a laugh as I move on to a giant canvas. I trace the raised gold and yellow hues of a bold setting sun before

moving to a field so green, Sparrow's stomach would be growling.

"Glad to see you're still creating," she says about my wood carving hobby.

"You as well," I say, perusing several more paintings before tipping my gaze to hers. "These are gorgeous, Cat."

"Your uncle always buys the biggest ones." A soft smile graces her round, tan cheeks. "I have no idea what he does with them all."

So many of her paintings are plastered on the walls of his and Aunt Lucy's home. The woman's too humble to charge what they're really worth, but that's never stopped Uncle Pat from paying double—or leaving large tips under her painting supplies.

Curving my hand over her shoulder, I lower my voice. "Have you thought about my offer?"

Catalonia pulls her long black braid over her shoulder before glancing at our feet. "You know I'd never agree to that, Marcus. Not with your situation."

Fuck my situation, I want to argue. When we met inside Ernesto's last week, I didn't see my childhood best friend who never knew a sad day in her life. I saw a mother who's barely scraping by, and years later, is still grieving the loss of her husband.

Offering to build her dream studio and a little money to keep food on the table until she gets established was a no-brainer. No matter the circumstances, I don't want to watch them suffer.

"It's not contractual, Cat. You wouldn't owe me a damn thing."

Fingers that are coated in red, white, and yellow paint settle over my sternum.

"I love your heart, Marcus. But if Daniel's death has taught me anything, it's the importance of being able to rely on

myself.” Her sharp green eyes travel to the two most precious beings on this island to her.

Moving those same fingers to her neck, she rolls a gold wedding band around the chain hanging there. “By the time they’re my age, our struggles will be nothing more than a blink in time, but they’ll have learned the value of working toward their dreams and the sacrifices it takes to achieve them.”

Every cell in my body vibrates with the urge to fix. To find a way to convince her to move out of her mother-in-law’s house so she and the girls can live comfortably.

With a dismissive pat on my shoulder, she smiles at an approaching couple, leaving me with an ache in my gut, but I know better than to push. Catalonia may be kind and gentle on the outside, but much like my new neighbor, she can bite.

I wave goodbye before making my way through the entrance of the corner café. If I want to find out what Heather’s up to, who better to ask than the man planning on taking her out?

Inside, rare plants climb the walls with their vein-like vines spreading over the low-hanging ceiling. The aroma of fresh soil and coffee beans steep my senses as I hunt for the man in charge.

Part of the reason why I love Augustine lies in the familiarity. Not just the land, people, or magic—but times like this, when I can go into an establishment and be completely ignored, except for a head nod here or a smile there from the locals who have known me since I was Sariah’s age.

“Marcus,” Ernesto greets me heartily. “How are you, my friend?”

I used to think Leah hung around here for her love of coffee and the fresh beans Ernesto and his father grow themselves. But one look at that obnoxiously charming smile reminds me it was he who drew my sister here.

His curly black hair is tied at the base of his neck in a low bun, and his eyes hold an annoyingly lively spark as he yanks

me in for a hug.

Through three hard claps on my back, I answer, “Can’t complain, I guess.”

“Come, come. I have a special brew for you to try.” He guides me to a small table in the back, signaling a man behind the counter with a snap. “Finest beans in Topica Bay.”

“Don’t go through the trouble of making anything. I won’t be here long.”

“Nonsense,” he says with an accent that’s both thick and smooth. Leaning in as if sharing a secret, he wiggles his brows.

Clapping at the man now, he shouts for him to hurry. They bicker back and forth, but, against my protests, I’m presented with a flight of small espresso mugs.

Ernesto describes the taste and aroma of each coffee his buddy pours, and I bide my time, waiting for them to stop bickering over which one would be best with dessert so I can figure out what exactly he has planned with Heather.

Unfortunately for me, Ernesto’s father, Santiago, and my uncle are best friends. And if it weren’t for Santiago, he would have never obtained his land in Augustine to begin with.

As for his son, even years after hooking up with my sister, and then breaking her heart when he got caught fucking the elementary school principal, it takes maximum effort not to outright strangle him.

“Gentlemen.” I raise a hand between them, shutting them up instantly.

Nodding at Ernesto, I sweep my hand toward the seat across from me. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

After waving the other man off, he slowly lowers himself into the chair.

“Some would consider it rude to deny such a gift.” His accent softly accentuates each word.

I glare as he doodles on the table with the tip of his finger, pouting like a child, and I can't help wondering what it is Heather or Leah find so appealing about him.

"I'm here for information."

Brows pinching, he pauses the half circle he'd been tracing. "Ha!" He relaxes back with a cocky half-grin. "If it is information pretty boy wants, it is information pretty boy gets."

Ignoring the nickname, I scoot the coffee closer to the edge of the table. "There's an American woman here in Augustine. Her name is Heather." At the mention of her, mischief pulls the corner of his grin higher. "Have you two met?"

"The woman whose hair is that of silken honey, with eyes a man would happily drown in?"

Christ. He's going to milk this for everything it's worth. "I'll take that as a yes."

"I'm familiar with the beauty you speak of," he says, interest tugging the edges of his eyes as he gauges my reaction.

"She said the two of you were going on a date?"

"Ah, yes. She came by late yesterday afternoon." He spreads his legs, casually hanging his arm over the back of his chair. "The woman can be quite persuasive, can't she?"

Yesterday afternoon... I knew she was lying, and now I have to know why.

"Cut your shit, Nesto." My chair creaks when I lean forward. "She's not your type."

"And how would you know that?" he scoffs.

"She's not married, for starters."

Finally, that arrogant grin stutters. "What matter is this to you?"

I dig in my wallet for the Topican equivalent of one hundred American dollars and slide it across the table. "I don't

want you touching, looking at, or breathing in her direction for the remainder of her stay. Understood?”

Ernesto’s foot taps in time with his bouncing knee beneath the table. He’s too easy to read. Nostrils flaring, as if I’m pissing him off, but he’s too shifty, like he’s got more information and he just can’t bear to hold it in.

I already know it’ll cost me more before he utters another word.

An extra twenty slips his way, and with a twitchy smirk, he says, “*Perdón, compadre*. Your lady offered me double to show her a good time.”

Now my curiosity is beyond piqued. “Why would Heather pay you to take her on a date?”

With a heavy dose of smugness, he says, “Perhaps she wants a real man to introduce her to the beauty of Augustine.”

A real man? Not only does that make zero fucking sense, but if it weren’t for the respect I have for his father, I’d drag this dickhead outside and beat his pretentious ass for taking her money.

“When are you supposed to pick her up?”

He laughs, disbelieving. “Don’t tell me you want to fight for her affections?”

But when I answer with a menacing scowl, he crosses his arms like a petulant child. “Sunday. Five o’clock.”

Two nights from now.

Pushing to stand, I press my fingers to the bills still lying on the table. “Great. I’ll be sure to give her your apologies for canceling on such short notice.”

“No, no, no,” he sputters like a fish out of water. “I already made arrangements.”

Maybe I’m being too hard on him. After all, Heather has a right to date Ernesto if that’s what she really wants. But I can’t shake the memory of Penelope holding Leah, curled up

together on the couch as she hiccupped through tears she should have never cried for him.

“Unless you want the school, and your father, to find out about your affair with the principal, then I suggest you *unarrange* them.”

“You have no proof,” he says with wavering confidence.

But the blood splotching his neck is all the confirmation I need.

Leah begged me not to track him down when she caught him. Clung to my arm, saying she loved him and didn't want to embarrass him.

Now, however, I'd love nothing more than to finally make him pay.

I cock an eyebrow in challenge. “Are you willing to find out?”

Ernesto's eyes narrow, but he doesn't argue further. He does, however, hit me below the belt before I make my exit.

“Since you're taking the liberty of speaking for me, why don't you tell Morton I said *holá?*”

Icy pinpricks skitter from the top of my head to the base of my spine. My pulse ticks loud enough to deafen my ears, but I don't dare give him the satisfaction of shocking me.

Tapping the table, I offer him a wide smile. “Pleasure doing business with you, *amigo.*”

CHAPTER TEN



Heather

Ernesto will be here in ten minutes to pick me up, and I still can't decide which outfit I should wear. Up in the loft, I re-check my freshly straightened hair and minimal makeup in the full-length mirror beside my bed.

I adjust the straps of my red lace bra and smooth my hands down a new pair of leggings before holding up the two different dresses I bought from the boutiques at Pearl Beach.

"Which of these says, *I'm using you, but I need this to look legit?*"

Alice squints from where she's propped up on the nightstand, attempting to get a better view through our video call. "You sure you should be going out with this guy? I believe your direct orders were to stay incognito."

"Trust me. Augustine is like Topica Bay's best-kept secret, and Ernesto is harmless."

"Honey, no man is harmless," she retorts. "Speaking of, what have you uncovered since we talked last?"

Priding myself as a journalist who's thorough to a fault, I've decided not to let Alice in on Leah's death, or the Matthews's financial situation, until I compile as much crucial evidence as possible.

No sense in working her up, only to be mistaken.

"Not much," I fib, "but that's precisely why I paid this guy to go on a date with me to begin with. If I really want to

uncover their secrets, I need to defer to the people who know them best.”

Sure, the idea came to me after panic-poofing said date out of thin air while arguing with Marcus, but hey, I wasn’t lying when I said I was resourceful.

After I get this over with, I’ll be one step closer to going home and far away from that festering thorn in my side.

“Mm-hmm. And when were you planning on telling me about this?” Alice asks, casually exposing a photo of me and Marcus at Pearl Beach. “You think I don’t know that ass when I see it?”

The flowy blue number I’d been holding flops to my side as I hinge toward the screen. Sure enough, I was able to block his face almost entirely.

Ha! He should be thanking me. It’s almost too bad I can’t rub it in.

“That wasn’t a real kiss.” Immediately defensive, I toss the dress beside the other one on the bed with a soft *thud*. “There was no way I was letting one of those paps get a better shot than me.”

“Incognito, Sinclair. And you’re damn lucky no one from the team recognized you.” Alice’s tone is chock-full of grit. “Get the story. Don’t blow your cover. Fly your ass back home.”

I roll the cotton edge of the peach-hued gown between my fingers as guilt hammers at my fragile ego. The last thing I want is to let Alice down or jeopardize my position with the magazine. “Understood.”

Backing off, she sighs. “I just want you to stay sharp, okay? Don’t do anything with this Ernesto guy that I wouldn’t do.”

The barest hint of a smile reaches my face. “You mean, don’t sleep with him in exchange for photos of celebrities?”

“Okay, on second thought, do *exactly* as I would do.”

The heavy knocks coming from the front door have me frantically scrambling for my phone to end the call. But halfway there, my feet get tangled in a pile of discarded clothes.

“Shit!” I narrowly avoid busting out a front tooth before crashing into the nightstand.

Rolling to my back, I quickly pat myself down. No injuries, but I’ll probably have to replace the stained-glass lamp that now has a crack through the middle of its base.

In a huff, I crawl to the side of the bed and resort to a classic round of *eenie-meanie-miny-mo* until my finger lands on the dress I’ll be stuffing myself into tonight.

Snatching the blue dress off the hanger, I puff my wild hair out of my face, and call downstairs, “Just a minute!”

“Don’t keep me waiting, slayer.”

My fingertips cut into the chiffon material as that smooth request slithers up my spine before kissing my ears. Spinning on my heel, I nearly vault myself over the barrier to glare at Marcus. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He embodies sex appeal with his hands resting in the pockets of worn work jeans, tipping a crooked smile up at me.

The nerve.

“Aw. Did you get all dressed up for me?”

Glancing down the line of his darkening gaze, I find my breasts damn near spilling out of my racy red bra.

I slap a hand across them with an exaggerated gasp.

“Don’t cover up on my account,” he drawls, but I’m already backpedaling for the dresser.

That cocky bastard.

Cramming the heel of my hand against my forehead, I heave several calming breaths and pretend Marcus wasn’t just staring at me as if he could devour me in one bite.

His resounding chuckle heats my cheeks as I grab a loose T-shirt and yank it over my head. Once I'm able to compose myself, I stomp down the stairs, rounding the last step, only to bump into a wall of obnoxious male energy.

“Pity.” He clucks his tongue. “I liked the first outfit better.”

The carnality shadowing his face has a vise grip on my stomach.

“They're just tits.”

Marcus's words turn deep and gravelly. “Should I deny having looked at them, then?”

The warmth of his body wafts that intoxicating aroma off his skin. It glides through my nose before settling deep inside my lungs, coaxing a disturbing impulse to curl my fingers into his hunter-green tee and rub myself against him.

“If you had an ounce of decency, yes.”

“Would you look at that?” He watches me swallow around a building knot. “Guess I'm fresh out.”

Just how easy would it be for him to throw me over one muscled shoulder, toss me onto the bed, and strip me bare?

Clearing my throat, I press my pointer finger to his sternum and focus on his boots as I push him backward.

I fight it with everything in me, but the two of us naked and entwined is more clear to me now than any story I've ever written.

Marcus, tearing my shirt clean through the middle before reaching inside each cup of my bra, in search of my hardening nipples. That skilled tongue licking and sucking each one to the point that one swipe of my clit would detonate me.

I force myself to breathe. Alice's seduction comment must be messing with my head because I would *never* entertain the idea of sleeping with Marcus Matthews.

Except for that one time when we made an imaginary porno—and I suppose right this very second.

Dammit.

He wraps his hand around my wrist, giving an authoritative squeeze above my pulse, and that increasingly familiar static-charged shift swells between us. His thumb strokes my skin in wide, lazy circles, and this time, I don't have to guess if he can feel my heart pounding, because his body leaning into mine whispers *yes*.

Softly, sensually, he asks, "What's going on in that pretty head of yours, hmm?"

There sure seems to be a lot of naughtiness flitting around in those eyes of his, and my libido is definitely picking up what he's putting down.

Pulling my wrist from his grasp, I rub the area as if to rid myself of his temptation. "I'm wondering if you make a habit of barging in on strangers."

His forearms flex as he tucks them across his chest. "I heard a crash and wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Ah, so just a good Samaritan, then."

He snarls at my attitude, and now I know I've lost it because part of me enjoys evoking the reaction.

"If you'll excuse me." Backtracking to the stairs, I place one hand on the railing to head up and finish getting ready.

"Where do you think you're going?" Marcus's palm flies to my arm.

It's the kind of grip that's tight enough to stop me, but loose enough that I know I could move if I really wanted to.

"My date should be here any minute." I sweep my free hand over my casual attire. "And I can hardly go out with Ernesto looking like *this*."

Glowering, he climbs the first step, standing tall and straight while staring down at me. "The lingerie you're wearing... Is that for Ernesto as well?"

A hint of jealousy shadows his face as he stalks me up another step. For the life of me, I can't figure out what game he's playing here.

When I open my mouth to lash out, I'm silenced by a hand curling around my jaw.

"Don't answer that," he growls.

A blistering hot thrill pounds through my middle, confusing and arousing me at the same time. With his long fingers squeezing my flesh, and the webbing of his palm strapped across the tip of my chin, I couldn't speak even if I tried.

My gaze narrows lethally, but my traitorous clit aches with arousal steadily pumping to it.

We glare at one another, unmoving and unwilling to break the tension, all while our ragged breaths become forbidden, chaotic chords to a song we never intended to play.

Marcus doesn't know that I never planned on sleeping with Ernesto, but it bothers him, and for more than one reason, I want to know why.

"Yes," I defiantly murmur, and when his hold loosens, an inferno blazes in his pupils.

Not a single other human's touch has affected me the way Marcus's does now— dominating and commanding.

As quickly as his anger flared, it's now contained, tucked neatly behind a tight-lipped smirk. "Ernesto won't be escorting you out this evening."

The heat between us evaporates in a snap. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Batting his eyes in mock innocence, he says, "Why, I out-bought you, of course."

My vision blurs red at his overinflated ego as he backs down the stairs, one step at a time.

"I didn't pay him." Chasing him to the center of the living room, I sputter, "T-that's ridiculous."

"Oh, but you did." Marcus taps the tip of my nose, angering me further. "And I'm not leaving until you tell me your motive."

He stares through me as if he wasn't ready to eat me alive mere moments ago.

“Why would a beautiful woman like you need to pay a man for his company?”

Excuses jam in my throat. More shocking than his spot-on suspicion is the fact that he thinks I'm beautiful.

“Silence won't do you any favors here,” he says snidely. “Were you hoping he would share something with you? Information, perhaps?”

My fevered skin tingles when he reaches for a curled lock, twisting it around his finger thoughtfully. “Maybe you hoped to record him. Share whatever secrets you think he may hold with your blog or the media.”

He can't know how close he is to the truth.

“I don't know what you are talking about. He was just taking me to dinner, Marcus.” At his skeptical glare, I whisper, “You're scaring me.”

His hand freezes beside my ear, that kissable mouth forming a deepening frown.

Guilt rots my gut at the innocent girl act, but I'm seconds from losing everything I've worked so hard for, and I'll do anything to keep that from happening.

As soon as his arm drops, we hear a loud *thud*, followed by cracking, splintering wood.

Despite his irritation, Marcus shoves me behind his back with a sweep of his forearm before swiveling for the door.

“Stay here, Heather,” he warns. “I mean it.”

The only reason I don't pursue him is to give myself a moment to recoup.

“Fuck,” I breathe, holding my hand over my racing heart.

I'm getting sloppy, that has to be it. Tailing him to Pearl Beach and paying off Ernesto has made Marcus distrustful of me, and rightfully so.

As I'm mulling over ways to fix this sticky situation, he clomps back up the front porch steps. "Get your shoes on. We gotta go."

It must be the worry lines tugging at his eyes and mouth, but I grab my dirty boots from beside the door and slip them on without argument.

"We're not finished," he says from beside me.

In my line of work, intimidation tactics like these are a dime a dozen. Child's play, really. And if Marcus thinks I'll respond to empty threats, then he has certainly underestimated me.

"What happened?" I ask as he leads me around the east side of the house.

Pointing to a thicket that's been trampled through by something large enough to break the surrounding fence, he says, "Sparrow."

"She did this?" I turn in shock, but he's already walking toward the hole she's made.

"When my uncle first brought Sparrow to the ranch, she was a loner. None of the other horses took to her, and she was constantly breaking through the fence in the pasture to get to the river."

My mouth twitches to picture her causing so much trouble.

"Has she always been so stubborn?"

"Probably. She's only been here for a year, but the other day when I was in her stall, I noticed Bertha being overly aggressive." He half-heartedly gestures to the barn. "I'm starting to think that has something to do with what's made her so agitated lately. So, I figured I'd give her a place of her own where she can be comfortable."

"That's uncharacteristically sweet of you." I poke at him.

Once he steps aside to give me space, Marcus wipes his hands on his jeans and says, "You say that as if you know me."

I duck my chin, pleading the fifth.

The wind picks up, blowing my hair around my face as I try to maneuver over the thick, splintered pieces, and my stomach flips at what lies on the other side.

Miles of forest stretch ahead of us, with species of trees I've never seen before climbing high enough to block the late evening sun. It's not so dark that we can't see, but it won't be much longer before it is.

For the next twenty minutes, I fall into step with Marcus, tracking Sparrow's hoof prints down a worn path covered in foliage and pebbles. The air carries a faint musk of aged bark and wet leaves, and the farther we tread into the forest, the more alive it becomes.

Just when I think he might have let it go, he asks, "Why did you offer Ernesto money, Heather?"

He's no longer stabbing accusations at me, but I can't find relief when he sounds so wounded.

The trickling of running water grows nearer, making my palms sweat. I'll give him a half-truth to pacify us both, but where do I begin? What could I possibly say that won't become an issue later?

"Not that it's any of your business, but maybe I was lonely."

His shoulders bunch, and I watch his reaction curiously. "You could have chosen anyone else."

"Maybe I find him attractive, is that so hard to believe?" With less spunk, I quietly wrap a secret truth inside a lie, "I don't exactly do this dating thing a lot. I figured if I offered him an incentive, he wouldn't say no."

Marcus comes to a grinding halt before turning over his shoulder. "The guys in Augustine would be fucking lucky to share the same air as you, let alone take you on a date."

He stares at me with collected clarity, as if every word he's about to speak is the truth. "Keep your money next time, slayer. I promise you, a man who knows your worth won't want it."

Offering nothing else, Marcus ducks through a group of hanging branches.

Well then... I kick at a cluster of rocks in our path while that statement posts up outside my frozen fortress like a neon-lit sign.

“What’s your deal with Ernesto, anyway?”

After a moment, he shrugs. “I don’t get the hype. A guy puts his hair in a man-bun and suddenly, panties go flying.”

I snort a laugh loud enough to startle a rodent from the dirt hole it was hiding in. Awarded a suspicious side eye, I nudge Marcus’s flank. “He’s hard-working, for starters.”

“I work hard,” he fires back.

“Memorizing lines and boinking hot women doesn’t exactly scream intensive labor, vamp.”

He huffs at that while helping me step over a blanket of sticks and clumps of mud.

“For your information, I’m not great at the dating thing, either.”

At that, we collectively find the dirt mixture under our feet superbly interesting.

“And I’ve sort of always loved working with my hands. I’m a self-taught carpenter,” he finishes.

I picture Marcus as he was days ago, taking my hand and inviting me into his natural habitat outside the glitz and glamor of his usually hectic life.

He trusted me with a part of himself that most people don’t get to see, and I don’t know how I’m supposed to process that.

“It’s not much farther,” he assures me as we break through a thicket to face a deep, crystalline riverbed spanning bank to bank from where we stand.

“There you are,” Marcus says before pressing his fingers to his mouth and whistling.

Sparrow rears her head back with a screeching neigh and trots our way with the giddiness of a young foal.

“Shit,” Marcus mutters, surveying the woods left and right before shoving a hand through his hair. “I didn’t realize the route she’d taken until now, but there’s not a dry crossing point for at least half a mile, and it’ll be dark by the time we make it.”

Watching the haunting waves, I utter a terrified, “What are you saying?”

“Looks like we’ll have to ride her across.”

My feet creep back two cautious steps. “Not only no, but *hell* no.”

Ignorant of my fear, Marcus blocks my retreat and tilts his head.

“Remember when I said I can’t swim?” I gulp. “What I meant to say was, I *don’t* swim. At all. Ever.”

“You’re joking?”

“Nope. I hate water, and water hates me.”

Sparrow crams her warm snout into my armpit, nudging me gently. She’s proud as can be having soaked herself from the base of her neck to the tip of her long black tail.

Marcus claps his hand over my shoulder with mock sympathy. “I hate to break it to you, slayer, but the only way home is through this river.”

Sparrow snuffles, shoving me with more force, but my heels are glued to the earth.

“Once we cross, there’s a gate on the other side that opens to the pasture. It’s not that far from here.” He pats the mare’s rump twice before reaching for me. “Giddy up.”

“Absolutely not. I’ll drag both your happy asses back up that trail before I cross this death trap.”

“Get on this fucking horse, or so help me, I’ll put you up there myself.”

My body warns me of the ensuing panic attack by numbing my hands. I search for another escape route, but I don't know these woods like Marcus does. Getting lost in them is inevitable, though I'm tempted to give it the ol' Girl Scout try.

"You're really that scared of a little water?" he prods, sorely underestimating my terror.

"How irrational of me to not want to fall off this deranged animal, have my dead carcass drift out into the ocean, and become shark food."

"You're being ridiculous," he quips, stalking toward me.

"Marcus," I warn, backing up until my heels smack into a foot-tall tree stump. "I swear to god, if you so much as touch —"

"All right, up we go." In one fell swoop, he squats and drapes me across his back as if I weigh nothing.

His shoulder jams into my rib cage as I rage, "Put me down right this second!"

Sparrow chuffs as he approaches, and I brace my palms against her wet fur, grasping it rougher than I had intended, but I'm steadily losing my vision to the terror hot wiring my central nervous system.

My body moves, but the second my eyes shut, I'm not attached to it anymore. Instead, I'm somewhere frightening, by myself in a pitch-black space where I scream at the top of my lungs for someone to help me, but no one ever answers.

The hair on my forearms pricks to the point of pain, and I clench my jaw hard.

You're okay, Heather. Everything is okay.

Useless words.

Still, I chant them over and over, just like when I was drowning.

Just like when I was sent away from the only family who ever loved me.

Just like every night I've tucked myself into a cold bed,
alone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Marcus

Shh,” I murmur into the sweat-dampened crook of Heather’s neck. There’s a ceaseless protective urge to place a kiss beneath her ear as I continue to coax her from whatever dark ledge she’s found herself on. “I’ve got you, okay? I’m right here.”

Body flush with her spine and hips, I cocoon her on top of Sparrow while carefully stroking her bleach-white knuckles.

“Listen to my voice, Heather.”

She gives an almost imperceptible nod, and a sense of victory battles the remorse coating my insides black. I hate to see her like this, terrified and shaking.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you. You’re safe.”

I won’t listen to the thoughts which remind me that I’d told my sister the exact same thing, only to have failed her in the end.

Instead, I draw my legs tighter, molding them against hers to help keep us steady, but her trembling lips threaten to cleave my heart in two.

“I’m sorry,” Heather whispers, gradually unfurling her fingers from Sparrow’s coarse mane. She releases several shallow, unsteady breaths before she’s able to regulate again.

“Don’t apologize. I shouldn’t have pushed you like that.”

When I sit back, her hand snaps around my wrist conveying a silent request for me to stay.

Untapped masculine pride unravels inside me to be the one she needs. It's omnipresent and consuming as it scoffs, *Yeah, you'll be going fucking nowhere, bud.*

Her leggings are warm beneath my hand when I settle it on top of her thigh, which rises gently with Sparrow's expanding lungs. The horse dances to be cut loose in the river, but I give her a stern command to wait.

She catches her breath for a few more minutes, staring at the river as if it may jump up and snatch her from my grasp. Eventually, she murmurs, "I have panic attacks when I'm around large bodies of water."

I admire her vulnerability nearly as much as I admire her allowing me to protect her.

Turning my face into her neck, I draw a greedy breath, filling my lungs with her unique brand, only to hesitate when she tips her head to the side invitingly.

My lips burn to kiss the spot, my tongue eager to taste the salt on her soft skin.

I chuckle lightly, feeling the heat of my breath reflecting across my mouth. "Maybe you should lead with that next time."

Sparrow's hooves make a *squelching* noise in the mud as she steps sideways, impatient.

"Was 'don't you dare touch me' not clear enough?" Heather murmurs.

My shoulders relax with more humming laughter. "Guess I'm not good at following directions."

"Throwing my words at me," she says, turning those soft brown eyes on mine, and I'm relieved at the life sparking in them again. "Cute."

"Do you trust me?" I ask, knowing I'm keeping secrets from her, but seeking validation, anyway.

“I don’t trust anyone.”

“I figured as much,” I tease.

“It’s nothing personal,” she’s quick to say. “But most people have agendas, you know?”

“Finally, something we can agree on.”

Her brows pinch when I point straight ahead at the opposite side of the river. “The sun’s setting, and as much as I wish we could take another route, this is the fastest way home.”

She faces forward, readjusting her grip. “How do you know we won’t fall in?”

I could tell her that the rocks and mud lining the bottom of the river make for good traction or that it doesn’t flow fast enough here to drag us under. But I say neither of those things as I offer a kind of strength that words sometimes fail to give by scooting her ass closer with one hand secured on her hip bone.

“Sparrow knows this water. She’ll keep us steady while we cross.”

With no other option, Heather rolls her shoulders back and grabs a fistful of Sparrow’s mane between her fingers. “Okay.”

I click my tongue and give the mare’s belly a gentle tap with my heels.

Shudders wrack Heather’s body with the first gradual steps, but as we lurch forward, Sparrow quickly finds her footing.

“Easy,” I coax them both, winding my forearm across Heather’s middle.

The water swiftly rises to Sparrow’s knees, licking the bottoms of my boots, but I keep tracing light circles over the back of Heather’s hand so she knows she’s not alone.

“Talk to me. It’ll help if you distract yourself.”

For several heartbeats, the only sounds come from the splashing, clear water, and Sparrow slurping lazy gulps of it as

we move.

Eventually, she says, “My fear of the water started when I was a kid. Being in foster care meant bouncing around to different families, and, to be honest, it made for a pretty lonely childhood.”

The water rises to the middle of my work boots, soaking my socks, but Sparrow doesn’t even twitch when Heather jerks her feet up and digs her heels into her shoulders.

“The Owens took me in when I was ten, and like most children in the system, I had some trouble-making tendencies.” She pauses, rubbing a fat freckle at the base of Sparrow’s neck with the tip of her finger. “But despite my spotted record, Mrs. Owens took a chance on me.”

“Why do I get the sense this story isn’t going to give me any warm fuzzies?”

“Maybe because everyone wants to believe the system looks out for all those precious, unspoken-for babies, but the reality for most of them is much uglier than you can imagine.” She laughs without joy, hauntingly hollow. “Those heartfelt hopes of kids growing up in happy homes with families who love and protect them may not fall short for all, but they do for far too many.”

I ache for her as she relaxes enough to move her hands along with her story. “Anyway, Arizona has some of the hottest summers I’ve ever experienced. The kind that could melt the skin right off your bones, but the Owens had a pool.”

With a bit of effort, she shifts to look at me. “It was *giant*, and had one of those fancy waterfall attachments. My foster mom would laugh at how excited I was each morning while she rubbed sunscreen on me. She called me her little mermaid, and naturally, I was obsessed with the movie.”

“Naturally.” I smirk at her subtle wiggling. As if she’s reliving that excitement through her memory.

“I’d only been with them for six months, but their son, Jeremy, hated me. He was two years older, and he made it his life mission to bully me and hoard their attention any chance

he got. But I guess having two parents who genuinely cared for me made the torture he put me through more bearable.”

“Sounds like a real shithead to me.”

Sparrow bobs her head, chortling, as if she agrees.

“For the first time since the start of that summer, Jeremy decided he wanted to play in the pool with me. As an adult, I can see every single red flag before that afternoon, but as a kid, I was just so desperate for him to finally accept me.”

I don’t point out that we’re now halfway to the other side. I barely breathe as I wait for her to finish, knowing full well by the end, I’ll be wanting to hunt down the man this Jeremy grew into.

Turning away from me, she stutters, “H-he jumped on me while I was diving for a pool ring and pinned my shoulders down. I’ll never forget how scary and cold those eyes were, glaring through the water. He made sure I knew he would *never* willingly share his family with me.”

As predicted, fury courses through my veins, and instinctively, I tighten my hold on her.

“I fought back with everything I had, twisting and kicking until I succeeded in wrapping my hands around his throat. And at that point, we could either both drown, or I could release him and somehow convince our parents that their son attempted to kill me.”

Dusk has blanketed the forest by the time Sparrow finally hauls the three of us out of the water, and a wave of flickering fireflies welcomes our presence on the other side.

“That didn’t go well,” I assume.

“Oh, Mr. Owens was furious with me. Jeremy was sobbing, pointing fingers and claiming I tried to drown him. But how was I supposed to defend myself when the evidence was bright red across his neck?”

“No.” Shaking with anger for her, I argue with her past. “That’s bullshit. They had to have believed you.”

“Don’t you get it?” A spike of emotion thickens her throat. “The only mother I ever wanted—the only mother I ever *loved*—stared at me as if I was a monster. There’s no coming back from that.” Her loss is a mirror that reflects mine. A stable family, career, and my long lost sanity.

All at once, I’m arguing with myself. “She would have listened to you. You could have told them the truth.”

But I’m a hypocrite, sitting here as though I don’t understand her struggle.

If I told my parents I was done, if I quit this whole other life I’ve been living just to keep us afloat, would they not see me as a monster, too?

Like a steel weight in the pit of my stomach, my own childhood mocks me through her story. My parents were loving, sure. They did the best they could and despite every mishap, they still do. But there were times I felt outranked and under-prioritized, which bred an unhealthy competitive culture that made for an unhappy home the older I got.

When I wasn’t on the island, I often found myself withdrawing from reality and throwing my time and passion into creating a new one. There, the pressures of being the perfect son or brother couldn’t quite reach me.

“I was unwanted, an outcast. A black stain to be bleached from their lives.” Heather’s spine straightens. “And less than a week later, when they filed for me to be returned to the agency, that’s exactly what they did.”

When we approach the gate to the pasture, Heather abruptly swings her leg over Sparrow’s neck and drops, unsteadily, to her feet.

“Where are you going?” I call after her before sliding to the ground.

With a determined grunt, she hooks her hands firmly on the metal fencing, then hoists herself overtop, crouching once she hits the grass.

From the opposite side, I watch her rise to standing with a willful, and uncompromising, shadow surrounding her.

“Heather.” Her name becomes a brittle plea, and I’m forced to swallow my warring emotions when she wraps her shaking arms around her middle.

“Leave me alone, Marcus.”

And then, she’s gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Heather

From inside the bookstore in Augustine, locals scurry down the street with boxes of supplies for the *T'slasta* celebration. According to the woman at the counter, the bonfire starts in the next hour, which gives me just enough time to find a good book to curl up with at the house while everyone else enjoys the festivities.

My fingers graze the cracked spines of various books on the 'world discovery' shelf. Lucy Vance has pretty decent taste in literature, but given my most recent interactions with Marcus, I'm on the hunt for something that won't be stimulating the ol' nether regions.

I flip open a book written by a local Topican on the unearthing of 'magic and other oddities' surrounding Tiger Falls, but a raucous round of giggling keeps tugging my attention toward the rear of the store.

Rising on my toes to search for the source of laughter, I spot an enormous pink and purple sign with the word 'romance' written in a bold typeface.

"Don't you dare." But the section is teeming with lively colors, fonts, and images that are begging to be touched.

Snapping the book shut with a heavy sigh, I replace it on the shelf and then creep around the corner of the bookcase.

"This is ridiculous. You don't even like romance books." My chastising mutters have unfamiliar eyes watching me.

I offer the elderly woman who's glaring at me a polite smile and pick up my pace, slipping around another rack until I'm face to face with an entire wall of romance novels.

Bracing one hand on the edge of the middle shelf, the spot along my hairline blushes where he whispered comforting words that helped ebb the panic. It's been two days since I all but opened my closet of skeletons, and said, "Here, take your pick!"

For the first time since leaving the Owens's home, I revisited a moment when I was both loved immensely and then forgotten in a blink. I'm as tattered and raw as I was that night, but did his touches have to be so damn tender that they've left a lasting mark?

Not even scrubbing the knuckles he rubbed thoughtfully or the hip he fit his hand around as if the curve was made just for him could remove them.

The harder I fight this undeniable magnetism to him, the more the attraction grows, and it's as frustrating now as it was when we first met in Augustine.

In a matter of two weeks, he's battered his way through a defense system that took years of detachment to construct. But at this point, the options for relief are risky at best and perilous at worst.

Alice has been sending daily emails for updates, and I'm running out of excuses. I have a camera full of images I could send her, but I've been stalling because every time I start typing, I erase more words than I write.

I remove a Harlequin romance from the shelf, studying the gaudily dressed woman on the cover, who is wrapped in a man's broad, bare-chested embrace.

"Poor thing," I tsk. "He's going to break your heart, and you won't even see it coming."

"Oh, he loves her. He just doesn't know it until chapter fourteen."

A melodic voice startles me into nearly dropping the damn thing between us.

“Oops!” The woman I saw Marcus with at Ernesto’s coffee shop smiles apologetically when I recover. “*The Captain’s Bride* is one of my favorites. He’s a pirate, and she’s the daughter of the king whose port he’s trying to seize. Fated enemies and all that.”

Her thick ebony hair is braided over her shoulder, complimenting her deeply bronzed complexion. Most Topica Bay natives share similar features, but this woman’s eyes are an oceanic green instead of a rich brown.

“Uh, you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m not really into romance,” I say before sliding the suspicious book back into place.

“Shame,” Penelope says, popping up from my other side. Her arm whips around as she imitates a sword fight. “The swashbuckling, roguish, well-endowed men... You’re seriously missing out.”

When her dark brows wiggle, I bark a laugh. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“We’re grabbing Cat’s kids from their hiding spot,” she says, pointing at a tent strung with fairy lights where two young girls are snuggled up with stacks of books surrounding them.

“Ah, that would explain all the giggling,” I say to her friend.

“Yes, the laughter is never ending.” She smiles in that motherly way—partially annoyed, partially adoring the shit out of them—then says, “I’m Catalonia by the way. But most people call me Cat.”

Penelope interjects before I can give my name, holding one hand up in the shape of an ‘O’ and jabs her opposite finger in and out of the center. “If you’re looking for a *good time*, Cat has the hottest recommendations.”

I snort. “I’m good on the panty pirates, thanks.”

Cat’s promiscuous smile culls a pool of jealousy in the pit of my stomach.

It's not her beauty that has my skin itching with envy, but the possibility of who she may be to Marcus and whether they've been doing all the dirty things hidden between these pages.

"Mommy!" the two young girls shout before rushing down the aisle. They're spitting images of their mother, and close enough in age to be twins if the oldest didn't have a few inches on her sister.

"Here come my monsters." Cat rolls her eyes, but the minute they reach her, she turns to tickle them.

Their scrunching faces share many similarities, but up close, they couldn't be more opposite. One wears her hair up, and the other wears it down. One has on a vivid pink dress, and the other wears a modest pair of khaki pants and a plain white shirt with ruffled sleeves.

"I'm Theresa, and this is my sister, Sariah," the one in the dress says before shaking my hand.

"Heather." A slither of warmth dances around my soul at their sweet innocence. "It's very nice to meet you guys."

Sariah tugs on the bottom of Cat's shirt with a big goofy grin. "Mom, is your friend coming with us to the bonfire?"

Cat and Penelope glance at me expectantly.

"Me? Oh, no, I'm going home." I point to the romance I was holding. "And much like your pirate friend here, I'll be drowning myself in rum."

Theresa's head cocks. "What's rum?"

"You have to go," Penelope demands. "I won't take no for an answer."

"I've got blogging to do, remember?"

"Right, right. Your woefully-boring-and-not-at-all-romantic travel blog."

Cat hikes a brow. "How do you two know each other again?"

“Oh, Heather’s staying in Mom’s house while she’s working on a big piece about the island,” Penelope says as if me living next to her and her famous cousin is the most natural thing in the world.

“It’s nothing ‘big,’” I clarify. “And unless you consider my love for food romantic, it’s pretty tame.”

“Okay, regardless, you’ve been downright cranky lately. And you can’t miss *T’slasta*. It’s the biggest celebration in Augustine.”

“It *is* pretty special,” Cat pipes up. “We burn wood harvested from the sacred forest that’s been blessed by Elder Mateo. Then we eat until our bellies pop, dance, and give thanks for our land.”

Sacred forest? Elder?

“Now doesn’t that sound more fun than sitting all alone at the house?” Penelope asks.

I suppose she has a point. And who knows what sort of information I may run into with Marcus’s closest friends all gathered in one place.

“Please,” the girls clasp their hands together and beg in unison.

“Okay, okay. I’ll go.”

It’s a challenge not to smile with the four of them clapping excitedly before they drag me out of the bookstore, and onto the cobbled walkway.

“We’ll see you guys there, Pen. Nice meeting you, Heather!” Cat and the girls wave us off.

In the center of the square, rows of pink and white paper-flower garland sweeps from lamppost to lamppost, blanketing the streets in spurts of intermittent shade. The scent of cooked meats and grilled corn being prepared drags my attention down the sidewalk.

She hooks a thumb in the opposite direction of where everyone else is headed. “I have to pick up some flowers before we go. Wanna come?”

Mesmerized by the sights and sounds around us, I step off the curb and into the busy street.

“Whoa. You’ll be public enemy number one if you ruin Momma G’s homemade wine.” Penelope grabs my shoulder, hauling me backward before I stumble into a cart full of thick oak barrels. “Come on, the flower shop is this way.”

By the way she handcuffs her fingers around my wrist before guiding us around the cart, ‘no’ wasn’t ever an option.

There’s an unusual ease in my laugh as we make our way up the road toward the florist. I’m slowly finding an appreciation for her spunkiness and the way she cons me out of my comfort zone.

“Is Marcus going to be there tonight?”

A windstorm of jitters brushes my ribcage when she absently remarks, “Oh, he wouldn’t miss it.”

Every plaguing thought regarding Marcus that I’ve had this last week threatens to spill over, but I bite my tongue.

There’s a portion of my soul longing for what’s calling me here.

Friendship, peace, and adventure. But then, it’s all an illusion, isn’t it?

None of these things could ever truly be mine, because I’m not some normal girl vacationing on a ranch in rural Topica Bay like I’ve led them to believe. And eventually, Alice will either force me to procure this article or I’ll push through what’s blocking me and write it on my own.

But whichever comes first, one thing is certain—I won’t be on this island for much longer, and the fewer attachments I have, the better.

“Everything okay?” Penelope asks.

“Yeah,” I say, lowering my façade back into place with a simple shrug. “Just nervous, I suppose.”

“Everyone will love you, Heather,” she says, threading her fingers through mine in that no-boundaries way of hers. “Be

yourself, relax, and let *T'slasta* work her magic.”



An enormous fire blazes toward the night sky on a stretch of land between the Vance’s ranch and the road leading into town. Rows of tents line the perimeter of the field as children of all ages flit around, shouting and chasing each other in circles.

We sit on two padded quilts away from commotion while Sariah methodically braids my hair. Theresa has wrapped Penelope’s braids in a thick crown on top of her head and stuffed them full of colorful Topican flowers, but Cat opted for a classic, modest braid and a simple crest of twisted vines which run across her forehead.

“What are all those tents for?” I ask, twitching my nose when a stray lock tickles it. “People don’t actually sleep out here, do they?”

A man sitting by the fire plucks fast, upbeat chords on his guitar while singing and cheering with the group that’s gathered around him. I spot Tobias and Yennifer racing across the field before colliding in an excited heap at his feet.

“Not sure there’ll be much sleeping going on.” The suggestive swirl of Penelope’s hips has humor dancing with the firelight across Cat’s face.

“You better join the fun this year, Pen. I’ve seen a few eyes on you already.”

Twisting for another peek at the area, I count at least twenty tents. “What fun?”

“You’ll see,” Cat singsongs.

“How annoyingly cryptic,” I mutter, earning a sassy wink from Penelope.

Sariah abruptly angles my head forward, and my mouth clamps shut as her fingers work quickly, folding the strands into French braids down both sides of my head, then wrapping what's left into two low buns.

After inspecting the final product, she turns my head toward the girls. "What do you think?"

"It's missing something." Cat reaches for two fat, snow-white flowers from the pile Penelope and I brought with us. She sucks the tip of her thumb where one of the thorns stuck her. "Friella can be prickly, but they're one of Topica Bay's rarest treasures because they only bloom for the week before and after *T'slasta*."

Once she skillfully breaks the stems, Cat wiggles the friella above each bun.

Penelope hides an obvious smile behind her hand.

"Care to share what's so funny?"

She stands before pulling me up with her. "You, my friend, are going to be the most sought-after woman tonight, and I can't wait to watch these fellas fall all over you."

Confused, I glance at my dirt-streaked boots, jeans, and loose white blouse. "Okay, tell me what the hell is going on."

She chuffs as if I've ruined her fun.

"Toward the end of the night, all the singles join a dance called *Hallevah*," she says, gesturing for me to follow her to one of the nearby wine barrels.

After handing me a mug from the display on top, she takes one for herself, drinks a hearty gulp, and shrugs. "Never know who you'll end up with, but regardless, it's always good fun."

I take a generous sip of the rich, warm liquid, hissing as it burns my throat. "Surely you're not suggesting what I think you are?"

"That you make sweet, sweet love to a sexy Topican bachelor in one of those tents over there." She points for emphasis, and the next sip I take sputters around a frantic laugh.

“No, no, no. I assure you, I won’t be hooking up with anyone tonight.”

Penelope’s rainbow-stitched dress flutters in the balmy night air, giving her an appearance too docile for that impish smirk. “We’ll let *T’slasta* be the judge of that.”

I gawk at her back when she spins away from me toward the heart of the celebration. “I’m serious. Keep whatever freaky, festival witchery you’re throwing my way to yourself.”

Her head tips back as she laughs, and the sound is as bright and beautiful as the woman herself. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to Elder Mateo.”

Everywhere I turn, men, women, and children alike wear some variation of fuchsia, blue, green, and gold. The sky is a yawning, endless midnight against the orange glow of the fire and the white lights strung through the forest trees.

It’s difficult to express just how *alive* everything is, but I feel a presence subtly brushing the surface of my skin, like a wave of goosebumps that never comes.

We bank the stone barrier surrounding the burning wood to find an elderly man sitting in a carved wooden chair. His legs, torso, and arms are covered in vibrant slashes of dried paint, but as my gaze travels up, I’m startled by a pair of milk-white eyes which are trained on me.

The entire world pitches forward, and I lose my breath at the slow-growing smile touching his lips.

Penelope places a closed fist over her heart and bows. “Elder Mateo, this is my friend, Heather.”

Beneath a set of gray brows, his irises are completely void of color. It must be impossible for him to see me, yet I’m completely exposed by his stare.

“*K’ippi ah-weh,*” he murmurs.

I cast an uneasy glance at Penelope, unsure what he’s said, but she only nudges me closer.

“I-it’s an honor to meet you.” Blood pounds in my ears as I repeat a bow similar to hers. “I’m thankful to your people for

allowing me to participate.”

His smile is a soft and welcoming contrast to the streaked black lines trailing down his cheeks, ending in thick bands that parallel his neck.

“What you seek will leave you brokenhearted,” he says with enough confidence that I’m certain he can read my thoughts.

Swallowing nervously, I stammer, “I-I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean.”

The lie dies in my throat when he raises a wrinkled, boney hand and hovers it barely an inch above my chest. I lose touch with reality as a phantom pressure around my heart increases. Like a fist, it grips the organ tight enough to elicit a gasp.

“The friella are peculiar.” Elder Mateo smiles again, but this time, the sensation eases to a soft caress. “Their thorns are sharp and thick, protecting the flower which took much energy to make from harm.”

My palms slick with sweat when he inches forward in his seat. I hold entirely still as he gazes at me in blind wonder.

“It is no coincidence they’ve chosen you this night. But remember, you are not as lonely as your thorns have led you to believe.”

I shiver, breathing too quickly as I take one step backward, followed by another until I’m engulfed by a crowd of people dashing for the other side of the field.

“All right, very funny,” I say, convinced Penelope is pulling a prank on me. “You had your laugh.”

I’m startled by two hands clamping over my shoulders from behind, making my muscles bunch defensively.

I puff my cheeks with a relieved sigh. “I’ll admit, you got me.”

When those hands turn me toward Marcus instead of Penelope, I come face to face with a pair of cutting brows and a troubled scowl.

His fingertips dig into my skin and color leaches from his cheeks as if he's seen a ghost. Wild eyes scour my face before finally landing on the flowers in my hair.

“Um, hi to you, too.”

Blinking, Marcus's arms go slack as he falls out of whatever trance had a hold on him. “Sorry. I-I guess I thought you were someone else.”

His hair is sloppily tousled, and he looks effortlessly sexy with the first few buttons of his shirt undone. Flicking my stare to the top of his smooth, exposed chest, my mind automatically finds each imprint of his strong fingers gripping my biceps.

All at once, we're back on the stairs in his aunt's house, entirely too close for comfort.

“If you're looking for the sex tents, they're over there,” I mutter.

He opens his mouth, closes it, then cocks his head. “What did you just say?”

“Penelope told me there's some dance party or something later that may lead to some *activities*.” My arms fold around my middle. “Figured you may have lost who you were looking for over there.”

“I see.” Despite the way I left him after our ride through the river, a sensual smile dimples the corners of his mouth. “Did Penelope specify what *kind* of activities?”

A coil of heat unwinds low in my belly. He knows exactly what kind. And does he really have to rumble it like that?

“Don't worry, I'll be long gone by the time you and what's-her-name start bumping uglies.”

He laughs, and the corners of his eyes wrinkle in an adorable way that both spikes my heart rate and embarrasses me. “Why the sudden interest in my sex life, slayer?”

A burning reminder of Marcus in the barn and the obvious bulge in his jeans makes an appearance at the forefront of my

thoughts, followed by Cat and every other woman here pawing at his naked body, straddling, and grinding against him.

Marcus being intimate with another woman shouldn't bother me in the slightest, but the sickness in my gut only intensifies with each flashing image.

"There's no interest here, vamp. You're free to screw whoever you please." I clench my fists and push past him, ignoring a brush of disappointment.

He hops in front of me before I take another step.

"What?" I growl.

With soft amusement, he brushes a thumb over the friella petals tickling my ear, studying me by touch. "I'd like to propose a deal."

We're left to the sounds of crackling embers as the crowd wanes, and I'm pretty sure this is the part where I tell him to fuck right off, snoop for whatever information I can gather, and then be on my merry way.

But I was always too curious for my own good.

"I'm listening."

"What if, just for tonight, you pretended you don't hate me?" My head falls back with an exaggerated sigh, but he charges on, tapping my sternum with the tip of his finger. "In fact, maybe you even enjoy my company a little."

I snort. "That's a pretty big ask."

A kaleidoscope of mischief flits through his gaze. "When was the last time you just let go? Threw a middle finger in the air, laughed with your whole chest, or did something totally unexpected?"

The years following my time with the Owens are a complete blur. The faces of new families, how many kids they kept at a time, the different schools I went to. It's like my brain has a hard lock on those memories and I can't reach them, even if I wanted to.

So, in short, probably never. But after our horseback confessional, I don't need any more reasons for him to think I'm pathetic.

"All right. Let's say I'm actually considering it," I muse. "What's in this for you?"

"Honestly?" His touch grows bolder, sliding the pad of his thumb along the slope of my cheek, then across my lower lip.

I pant a feeble, "Yes."

My lips burn beneath his stare as he watches my tongue instinctively flick over the bottom seam. "I suppose I want you to know the real me."

"Why?"

A rich chuckle fans across my mouth. "Because for the last two days, all I could think about was how I should've kissed this smart mouth when I had the chance, and what it was that stopped me."

What began as a tiny coil of heat turns molten, slipping between my legs as I remember Marcus dominating our battle of wills with one hand around my jaw on the staircase in the guest house.

"Then I realized it's not me that you don't like, but your perception of me."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

He brings his lips close enough for me to inhale his every word. "You're going to deny this attraction between us until your very last breath, aren't you?"

How can I when he's stealing each one for himself?

When those visions switch to me straddling, clawing, and licking my way up his body, I ask, "What exactly are you proposing?"

"That you simply loosen the reins and have a little fun with me."

Reflecting on my earlier thoughts, what Marcus is offering is too tempting. Everything I know I can't have could be mine

for tonight.

Stubborn to a fault, I clarify, “Only one night?”

“One night.” Marcus wears the satisfied smirk of a man who’s just gotten his way. “Then you can go back to hating my guts.”

Half of my brain may be shouting for me to run, but for the first time in my life, I don’t want to question what happens next.

“Deal.” I jut my hand toward his to shake, but he threads our fingers together instead.

“Come on. The fun’s about to start.” He pulls me toward the sound of a steadily beating drum, followed by raucous chanting that vibrates through the air.

Penelope stands with Cat and the girls under a tree as tall as its canopy is wide. Their faces glow in the orange firelight as she waves us over to the outer edge of a crowd.

Mateo sits serene, cross-legged in the grass with a drum nestled in his lap. Beside him are three men, shirtless and barefoot, yipping and hollering as everyone moves closer.

Marcus places me in front of him so I can get a better view of a tan man with braided raven hair and red markings splashed over his upper body.

“That’s César, the leader of Augustine, and beside him are his brothers, Angél and Santiago,” he informs me.

Penelope leans over to add, “Santiago is Ernesto’s father.” I study the male covered in dull green paint. He and his son share the same proud nose, brows, and curly hair. “He brought Dad before Mateo twenty years ago when he came here to purchase land.”

It’s hard for me to imagine these proud Topicans giving up their land to a man of power like Patrick Vance. He would have been an outsider; someone whose money held no value like that of the land he was surely after.

“How did a foreigner convince them to consider his proposal?”

Penelope shifts her attention back to the proud leaders of Augustine. Adoration glints with the dancing fire in her eyes when she says, “He became one of them.”

Mateo hits the cured hide of the drum one last time, and a hush falls over us all.

He speaks in Spanish, riling the crowd who clap and pound their chests with their fists before he switches to English. “Tonight, we come together as one in celebration and to honor our ancestors.”

Two young boys carrying a roasted pig stop behind the purple-painted brother, César, to place it on a table with the rest of the food.

The man raises his arms toward the sky. “*T’slasta* is a time for cherishing those we have loved and lost, but also a time for new beginnings. A time for change, forgiveness, and starting over.” He looks at each of us, placing his fist over his chest. “My friends, do not waste this evening being angry, do not waste it on regret.”

Mateo hums low as he beats his drum. When his voice starts to rise, chanting a song, everyone around me joins him, including Marcus.

The red man starts again, “Let us rejoice in all that *T’slasta* brings us this night.”

I’m jolted forward as the crowd erupts in a flurry of chanting and clapping.

When a string of people race toward the fire, I turn to Marcus, who reaches out a hand. “Let’s have some fun tonight, what do you say?”

I scoffed at the idea of magic surrounding this place, but it gusts around the field in heavy, balmy waves, and the fire seems to dance, flickering toward the sky as salt from the sea blends with the smoke.

Marcus raises my knuckles to his lips, placing a heated kiss on them before tipping his head back and howling at the full moon above.

Genuine, full-bodied laughter consumes me as I allow him to guide me straight into the melee. We join Tobias, Yennifer, and the other kids from the shelter, as well as the people of Augustine, in dancing around the fire.

Penelope, Cat, and her daughters hold hands as they round the pit, howling just like Marcus, and I jog with them in a dizzying circle, laughing so hard tears prick the corners of my eyes.

Like a seagull gliding over the coast, my heart soars freely.

Then I tilt my head toward the inky night sky and throw my arms up as I howl right along with them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Heather

A curvy Topican woman by the name of Momma G brings me another clay mug filled to the brim. I haven't had the courage to question how she concocts her special brew, but it's making my pulse thumpy and my toes tingly, like they're being kissed by a hundred bees.

"How is your wine?" she asks with a thick accent like Ernesto's.

"I'm not sure," I say, peering at the suspiciously dark liquid. "It kind of tastes like berries mixed with dirt."

Helping herself to the spot on the fallen log beside me, she pats my knee. "Don't drink too much. Puts hair on the chest."

When I glance at my boobs warily, the older woman chuckles.

Theresa and Sariah snore softly from their sleeping bags where I helped tuck them in, and for the last half hour, Momma G has kept me company while Marcus, Penelope, and Cat dance with their friends. Thanks to her homemade creation, the jagged bark digging into my ass barely registers, but the niggling reminder that I should be out there with them remains.

Momma G's cousins play traditional *T'slasta* music with their guitars, maracas, and drums. They sing a sensual song in low, enchanting tones, and as the lyrics swirl around an alluring melody, confidence rolls through the sturdy shoulders of the men who eagerly wait for their turn to dance.

Now I understand why Cat and Penelope were so secretive.

Hallevah isn't some silly dance party as I had assumed. It's a sacred coming together of both body and soul.

A shout draws my attention to the fire that cracks and spits flames just as intensely as it had at the beginning of the night. I watch Marcus, relaxed and smiling, as he spins a blindfolded Penelope in a circle, and her gleeful cry pierces the air before he guides her into the arms of the man beside him.

Over the edge of my mug, our stares snag, and an undeniable, spellbinding need smolders through my center.

I quickly finish my sip and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand before turning back to Momma G. "Why do the women wear blindfolds?"

Her gaze fills with ardent, nostalgic emotion. "Many years ago, five different clans separated the borders surrounding Augustine. They would gather here on neutral ground for *T'slasta* to secure bonds and keep the peace, and the sons and daughters of each clan would join *Hallevah* in hopes of finding their life partner."

"So, it's like a mating ritual?"

"Yes and no. In this, the women hold control. The men offer a dance, waiting to be chosen to spend the night with them. If the woman woke in the morning fully satisfied, the chief of each clan would offer the couple their blessing."

"Damn," I mutter, taking another swig. "That's a lot of commitment for a one-night stand."

She *clinks* her mug to mine with a dash of humor tipping her lips. "That is the beauty of this celebration." A sky littered with thousands of stars meets the tip of her pointing finger. "Our joys, fears, and hopes attract the magic of the island here. You cannot know what's to come, but you must trust it."

I'd claim the woman was batshit crazy if I hadn't felt exactly what she described when I spoke to Elder Mateo.

A group of women wait their turn for a partner, clapping and giggling as Penelope is twirled into the arms of a heavily muscled man who's at least an entire foot taller than her. He wastes no time tucking her into his body and nuzzling a naughty smirk against the crook of her neck.

They dance toward the outer edge, and there's an unmistakable adoration in his gaze when she chooses to remove her blindfold. Her gasp of surprise when he picks her up and throws her over his shoulder tells me all I need to know about the rest of her evening.

I quirk a smile, raising my cup to her. "Hope he's a good lay, friend."

Momma G examines me with pursed lips.

"What?"

Nodding toward the circle, she takes another casual sip from her mug. "You should join them."

Her meddling, paired with an arched brow, makes me laugh. "Oh, no. I don't belong out there."

"I think Marcus may disagree..."

We watch him step aside, shoving a couple of his friends into the circle while encouraging them to grab one of the blindfolded females from the other side. His eyes search for mine one last time before Catalonia sidles up beside him.

She holds a clay mug just like mine and Momma G's, but oddly, Marcus doesn't. As far as I know, he hasn't had a single sip tonight, or any other time I've been around him, and I find that strange for someone known for having his vices.

I'm distracted from my thoughts by Catalonia elbowing him. She spouts off something that has him grabbing her with an arm around her neck, sloshing liquid from her cup as she hinges forward in his grasp, laughing uncontrollably.

As they wrestle, that same inkling of jealousy from earlier festers. The way he smirks at her once she breaks free of his hold slaps a tiny green monster on my shoulder, who shouts at him, "*Look at me, look at me!*"

At first, I used putting the girls to sleep as my excuse to be a bystander. I decided our deal was still good, even if I didn't participate in the dance. But that's only because Marcus was right. I was afraid—no, I've *been* afraid—of this pull we have toward each other ever since that first deadly drop of temptation.

“Know what?” I chug a final, chest-hair-producing gulp of Momma G's elixir before standing. Amusement radiates off her as I thrust the cup into her open palm. “I think I will join them.”

If I didn't know better, I'd say the woman was testing me, but I don't waste another moment before marching toward the next group of young women hurriedly tying strips of cloth over each other's eyes.

The song switches the second I reach the wicker chair where a wooden box sits, filled with a jumble of torn white ribbons.

With a shaky hand, I slide the cloth through my fingers, readying to tie it behind my head, but pause as three rapid, monophonic strums from the guitar ascend into a romantic, Spanish-style harmony.

My breath hitches when a prickling gust of wind surges, flapping the material in my palm.

When the second guitar, maracas, and drum join the sophisticated tempo, what feels like a delicate set of ethereal fingers gently raise my chin until my gaze crashes into Marcus's through a throng of twirling bodies.

Quivers trickle down my ribs, kissing the tops of my thighs with tiny pinpricks of electricity. His arms slowly unfold, falling limply when he catches sight of what I'm holding.

If Momma G was right about this ritual, then that sweltering awareness means he knows exactly what I'm doing here.

This is what you wanted. I convey with my head held high, unyielding. *So come and get me.*

I fasten the cloth over my eyes and step in line beside a woman whose panting excitement sends my heart into a gallop.

I'm fidgeting like crazy, unable to control the loose energy bouncing throughout my body.

"What now?" I ask her, rubbing my palms down the front of my blouse. "Will they come to us?"

Anticipation pulses between us as she blindly makes contact with my forearm and yanks my hand out in front of me. "Hold your palms up! It won't be long before one grabs you."

Not a second later, she squeals in delight. The sounds of her retreating steps and trailing laughter have my breaths quickening to the point that I grow lightheaded.

Oh, god. This was a bad idea. A terrible, awful idea.

But two small, warm hands clasp my palms before I can make a break for it.

"Oof!" I fumble forward. "So sorry, I'm new to this."

A strangled sound travels up my throat. It's supposed to be a laugh, but it probably translates more like terror to the man who easily sways with the music, as if every complex vibrant chord lives inside his veins.

"What a surprise to see you, *bonita*," a familiar voice croons.

"Ernesto?"

My movements are jerky at first as I allow him to guide me. He places one hand in mine and locks the other across my lower back, keeping me secure as our steps move forward and backward.

"Sorry," I say again when I accidentally step on his foot.

His chuckle is smooth like rich, dripping molasses. "Relax. Follow my lead."

Each of my senses heightens beneath the thin material. The warm, espresso scent of coffee integrating with his cologne,

the ebb and flow of the music, and each of our footsteps scuffling through the grass.

Ernesto's lips tickle my ear when he molds our bodies closer together. "Your boyfriend does not look very happy right now."

I turn my head, forgetting I'm temporarily blind. "Marcus is not my boyfriend."

Though, the thought of him being my anything weakens my knees.

"Funny you assume it's him I was referring to," he muses with an edge that serves an underlying meaning.

Ernesto's movements are flawless enough to hide the fact that I can barely keep up. When he slows our pace, and I'm finally able to catch my breath, an incessant prickle skitters across the back of my neck.

Whatever animosity stands between the two, I need him to know that I won't be caught in the middle of it.

"Ernesto," I start with true sincerity, "it was wrong of me to offer you money in exchange for a date. But honestly, I'm not looking for anything while I'm here."

His posture grows rigid, and with every step, he gradually puts more distance between us. "Yet you join *Hallevah*? The cruelty of such a heart."

I stumble twice before he brings us to a dizzying stop, and I wonder if he can sense my eyes narrowing as I'm forced to grasp his shoulders to avoid tumbling into him.

He whistles low, sweeping my skin with a quick burst of air. "Let me tell you something about Marcus Matthews, *bonita*."

My eyes widen frantically behind the blindfold, and my gut sends microscopic jolts to my brain like warning bells.

This is what I've been waiting for. The reason I agreed to come to T'slasta to begin with.

Only now, it feels wrong. Ernesto and Marcus have history, and regardless of how badly I need his secrets, I don't want to hear them here and now. Especially from someone Marcus doesn't trust.

Shoving away from him, I dust my sweating hands over my jeans. "I appreciate you trying to look out for me, but I can take care of myself."

"That man is not who you think he is, Heather," he warns thickly, but then cool air fills the space in front of me as another set of hands spirits me away.

"Hi, there," a man with a lyrically sweet voice greets me.

Time blurs as I'm spun to another. "What's your name?"

"Dance with me, beautiful."

More hands grab me, spinning me like a top between them.

"Where are you from?"

"*Chiquita*, if you choose me, I'll show you the time of your life."

My stomach lurches as my old friend panic rises from the recesses of my mind. I gasp for air with each set of hands that touch me.

"Help," I whisper. That niggling sensation that's trailing from neck to gut blooms until my ears fill with static. "I can't breathe."

Nausea makes my mouth water while I fight to keep the alcohol in my stomach.

Seconds from yanking off the blindfold, warm, calloused hands brace my shoulders, and I hear an unfaltering, "I've got you."

"Marcus," I exhale, hooking my fingers around his forearms.

Instantaneous relief becomes a balm for my frayed nerves.

The melodic voices of men singing drunkenly mingles with the music as he protectively cups a hand over the back of

my neck and guides me into him. His chin brushes my temple, teasing my skin with the subtle roughness of beard stubble. “Say the word, and we’ll get out of here.”

Like a glutton, I inhale the cinnamon and clove scent I’ve come to associate with him until I’m finally able to speak.

“N-no, I want to stay.” Still sightless, I turn my cheek into the soft material of his shirt while listening to the pounding cadence of his heart. “With you.”

He swipes his thumb down my spine in long, soothing strokes, eliciting waves of desire that peak my nipples against my thin undershirt. “Careful. You say things like that and I might start to think you like me.”

I’ve unintentionally become addicted to these simple pleasures. The temptation of his sensuous mouth, the way he smirks when I take a stab at him, and the tips of those long fingers always testing the limits of my boundaries.

He reaches up to untie the blindfold and when I blink the world back into view, those eyes, dark blue in the night, hold promise after promise of what’s to come.

If only I take the leap.

“Tolerate,” I say as he stuffs the material into his pocket. “The word you were looking for is *tolerate*.”

God, he’s beautiful when he laughs like that, his shoulders relaxed and teeth flashing.

“Why don’t you *tolerate* one more dance with me, then?”

I flick a wary glance at the men and women still twirling and shifting in the center of the circle.

“Not here.” Marcus pinches the tip of my chin between his thumb and forefinger, returning my attention to him. “There’s something I’d like to show you.”

I pause only a moment to look back at Momma G, who wears a knowing smile. The woman raises her cup to me, exactly as I had to Penelope, and then the world blurs as we move.

Couples scurry past us to their tents for the night, and I blush, thinking of Penelope and the man who carted her off.

“What about your cousin?” I ask.

The night air shifts, cooling my cheeks the closer we step to the forest’s edge.

“I think you’ll be waiting on her for a while,” he says suggestively, making my belly flutter. “Unless, of course, you’re into voyeurism.”

“Voyeurism?” I repeat the word curiously.

The carnal twist of his lips spreads a blush to my ears. “It means you like to watch.”

The idea of giving in to that type of kink electrifies my sex drive, but his purposeful goading has my eyes rolling. “You’re impossible.”

He gives me a naughty wink. “So I’ve been told.”

I carefully dodge tree branches and rocks jutting from the forest floor as we step inside the tree line. The forest blooms with life as beams of full moonlight cascade through the canopy. Ribbiting frogs and the noise of a bubbling brook blend with the ongoing celebration.

“I’m sorry if I ruined your evening,” I say, reaching my hand toward a swarm of blinking fireflies.

He walks beside me, quietly watching the creatures zip around my hand. “You didn’t ruin anything.”

I peer up at him, trying to level my tone. “I’m sure there was someone you were waiting for.”

“You’re right,” he says. “There was.”

Of course there was.

He bumps my shoulder before stopping us in front of a giant tree cradling a small house in its branches. One of the thicker limbs extends over a pond below, with an old rope swing dangling from it.

“This was my hideout when I was younger.” He walks to the base of the massive trunk and gives it a thoughtful pat.

Stairs made from thick blocks of wood are hammered into the thick bark. And when Marcus grips the first few, testing each with a rough tug, I rise on my tiptoes to get a better view of the structure suspended above our heads. “You want me to climb up *there*?”

Two sections of the tree protrude through the base of the house, which has been carefully shaped around them. The unit is no bigger than three hundred or so square feet, and although the wood is timeworn, it has a sturdy, well-executed build, unlike a flimsy neighborhood treehouse.

Already on the fifth step, Marcus twists back and extends a hand. “Come now, Heather. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Heather

I glare at the palm he holds out to me expectantly.

Challenge accepted, vamp.

My hand fits snugly into his as he helps me up the first couple of steps, and one at a time, I follow him to the top.

At twenty feet above the ground, the sky-scraping trees encircle us in a fortress of solitude, and fireflies flit in and out of the shadows dancing on the ground. I gingerly step across the creaky deck to brace my palms on the handcrafted railing. The wood has been sanded smooth, and even left to the elements as it has been, the sealant has held surprisingly well.

I trail a finger over each individual notch, wondering why I'm not more terrified to be out in the wild, where no one can hear us. Marcus's boots clip across the floor as he enters the room behind us, and I realize it's because I'm with him. And when I'm with Marcus, there are plenty of things I feel, but afraid isn't one of them.

The molding which frames the door to the main cabin is littered with a series of hand-carved doodles, ranging from tiny hearts, scrolls, and flowers, big and small.

And then there's Marcus, leaning against the doorframe, bathed in a soft yellow glow that illuminates the night through the small windows on either side of him.

"You built this, didn't you?"

He nods, watching me with that ever-present curiosity and an unusual pinch of sorrow.

“It’s stunning.” I glance at the underside of the extended roof, brushing my fingers through one of many wind chimes made from sea glass. “Who knew you were more than just a pretty face?”

My hand stills when I turn a playful smile on him, only to find that enigmatic stare swallowing me whole. Choosing not to counter, he gestures for me with a crooking finger instead. “I believe I owe you a dance.”

The wildlife pulls us into their song, steadily chirping and humming beyond the trees as I place my hand in his. My heart pitter-patters when he strokes the friella in my hair, and at the same time, I spot a flower strikingly similar carved into the wall behind his head.

Beneath the array of Topican flowers are a group of carved initials—MM, LM, PV, and CV. Off to the side, more jagged than the others, his initials appear again.

“Earlier tonight, I could have sworn I saw my sister, Leah,” Marcus whispers, rustling the petals with a forlorn expression. “These were her favorite, and as crazy as it sounds, I think she was speaking to me or something. Guiding me to exactly where I was supposed to be.”

He shakes his head, seemingly fighting to keep his cool or give in to a wave of grief, and all at once, the reference to Leah doesn’t provoke the same sense of interest it had that day in the barn.

The answers I’m after, the reason I’ve been studying him to begin with pale in comparison to the sudden and unremitting need to comfort him.

“The treehouse started as a silly fantasy she concocted one summer,” he says fondly, leading me by the hand into the dimly lit room.

Stale wood and an earthy aroma like that of fresh soil crowd the inside of the treehouse as instantaneous warmth shrouds me. In the front corner sits a small recliner and a tea

table stacked with dusty books. Battery-operated lights swoop along the railing of a top bunk and down the side of a wooden ladder. The full bed making up the bottom bunk has the same matching buffalo-plaid blanket as the one laying across the top.

“My uncle helps keep up with repairs it needs from time to time.” Marcus shrugs as my eyes explore. “But I let Pen have ‘creative freedom’ with the décor.”

His displeasure at her feminine touch makes me laugh. “You have to admit, the woman’s got great taste.”

An answering smirk deepens my smile as he mutters, “She’d never let me hear the end of it if I did.”

Absently, he rubs the underside of my wrist before raising it and smoothing my hand over the firm arch of his shoulder. Then, just as tenderly, he guides the other to the sinewy dip of his hip, wordlessly offering me a dance.

Unlike with Ernesto, my feet don’t fumble, but I can’t say the same for my somersaulting heart as I gaze up at the shadows flickering across his face and neck.

Without a doubt, if I’d told the me from two weeks ago that I’d be dancing chest to chest with Marcus Matthews in a treehouse nestled in a sacred forest, she’d ask me what the fuck I was smoking and happily refuel my weakening hatred for the man.

“Leah always had these ridiculously grand dreams,” he says.

My toes curl when his strong hands settle just under my ribcage, his fingertips teasing the outer edges of my spine. “And you were the one conned into making them come true?”

Marcus’s lashes flutter with a gentle laugh. “‘No’ wasn’t exactly part of my vocabulary when it came to my sister.”

I boldly drift my hand up to his neck. He closes his eyes while my finger twirls a short, silky lock at the base of his skull.

“What happened to her?” I ask, not as a journalist, but as one wounded human to another.

His pulse thuds against the tender side of my forearm, and when he opens his eyes, he hesitates long enough to have me squirming. “She died a while ago.”

There’s no elaboration, but the anguish coating those words runs through me like a blistering hot knife. “I’m so sorry.”

I’m forced to swallow the ick forming in my throat. I feel like a fraud, standing here as he bears his pain to me. A liar, who, despite it all, craves this connection more than the will to walk away before someone gets hurt.

“Thank you.” His smile is grim. “Since I’ve been back in Augustine, I see her everywhere. My uncle wants to tear down the barn where some of our best memories were made as kids, and Penelope isn’t fighting him on it.”

He stares out the open door toward the chattering forest, and I take my time appreciating his strong jaw and sharp cheekbones. Recalling the initials carved into the side of the treehouse, and how tirelessly he’s worked on rebuilding the barn, I imagine how hurt he must have been with the idea of losing something so special to him.

“Penelope agreeing to get rid of the barn doesn’t mean she didn’t love Leah. You know that, right?”

His gaze slowly returns to mine. “It feels like betrayal.”

“I know. Grief’s a fickle bitch. But it’s okay for her to not hold on to material objects the same way it’s okay that you do.”

He considers that a moment. “You’re just saying that because she’s managed to woo you with her obnoxious, clingy friendship.”

Genuine laughter tips my head back. “Yeah, I guess she did, didn’t she?”

Marcus’s stare shifts in a way that unsettles me. As if the sound of my laughter is something to marvel at, and it shakes

me to my very core.

“The woman you were waiting for...” I begin, asking the question that’s been burning in my gut ever since the start of *Hallevah*. “Was she Cat?”

He gawks. “What? No. Cat and I have been friends since we were kids.”

“Friends can be lovers, you know.”

My interest must entertain him, because when he braces me for a lazy spin, and then dips me low, he’s grinning from ear to ear. “I happen to find your jealousy quite attractive, slayer.”

“I’m *not* jealous,” I grit.

“Sure you are,” he says, righting us. “I can see it here,” he taps the corner of my eye and then my fevered cheek below, “and here.”

I attempt to wiggle free, but his arms clamp around me, bear-hug-style.

“Let me go, you insufferable ass.”

He only holds me tighter, that relentless merriment softening his features enough for me to forget who he really is or that we come from two separate worlds.

“Her husband passed around the same time Leah did, so I try to support her however I can.”

I go lax in his arms. Will he ever stop surprising me?

“She’s my friend and I care about her and the girls dearly, but it’s not that kind of love.”

“That kind?” I prod nosily, wondering what his idea of true love could possibly be.

“You know,” Marcus says as if it should be obvious, “all-consuming and shatterproof. Where you can’t stop touching each other, no matter where you’re at or who’s watching, and there’s a clear distinction of who plays the big and little spoon when you finally lay down for the night.”

I break away from him, absently staring at the built-in bookcase beside us.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t know what that’s like. The only person I remotely care about is my editor. How pathetic is that?”

When I return my gaze to his, whatever defense may have been protecting him has crumbled almost entirely. “Not pathetic.”

“And the fact that I’ve never really had a boyfriend?”

“Preferable,” he says throatily, without hesitation.

Those hooded eyes stare at me with all the intensity of a summer storm—full of lightning and the surety of gentle rain—and more than anything, I wish I understood how he could both degrade me as he once had and utterly captivate me as he does now.

Whether I want to admit it or not, seeing what a huge part of Marcus’s life his sister had been shines a different light on that interview. Maybe he hadn’t quite moved past losing her? Maybe he’d been lashing out? It would explain his reckless behavior, and while it’s not an excuse for treating people poorly, it does soften my anger toward him.

Marcus’s lips draw dangerously near to mine, dredging up memories of that day at Pearl Beach. His thick lashes flutter as our breaths mingle, causing five different alarms to blare in my mind. We’re too close to jumping over a line we can’t uncross. The kind of line that breaks each one of my steadfast rules.

Dipping my chin, I twist toward the built-in bookcase and rectangular desk beside it.

I already know which books belong to Penelope by the racy titles on the spines, but it’s the gold picture frame beneath them that demands my attention.

Our hands brush when we reach for it at the same time.

“Oh.” I jerk mine back.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, but his essence, paired with a tantalizing wave of body heat, makes me dizzy.

“Is that you?” I point at a young boy who has the same dimples and dark blue eyes, but hasn’t grown into the strong, sharp features he now has as a man.

“Yeah. That’s Penelope’s younger sister, Carrie, sitting beside me.”

“And who are they?”

“That’s Pen.” The tip of his finger glides across the picnic table in the photo. “And that’s Leah and Ernesto.”

His shoulders stiffen when I touch Ernesto’s boyish face, and a sudden chill reminds me of his warning. “What happened between you two?”

After placing the frame back on the shelf, Marcus turns to face me. The charge in the air changes swiftly. It zaps with anger, suspicion, and something possessive that has my belly rolling with anticipation.

“I feel the need to warn you,” he says, freezing me in place as, one at a time, he plucks the friella from my hair and places them on the middle shelf, “Ernesto isn’t the innocent man he’s painted himself to be.”

I swallow, but my voice is merely a rasp when I say, “Interestingly enough, he said the same about you.”

His rage is a tangible, living thing when he speaks again. “Did he care to mention that he took Leah’s virginity just days before she caught him in a parking lot, fucking a married woman?”

A sinking sensation deflates my shoulders. “Why didn’t you tell me that a week ago when I mentioned our date, instead of shoving your way into my business?”

Reaching for my hair again, he studiously unwinds the elastic holding each bun, and my scalp tingles at his delicate touch. Desperate enough for his response, I allow him to unwind the braids Sariah gave me.

“Answer me,” I prod him sternly now that my hair is loose and draping down the front of my blouse.

“Because I didn’t think you were telling the truth,” he says gruffly, rolling his broad shoulders as he crowds me. I shudder when his scorching gaze flashes to my lips. “But worse than finding out that the asshole accepted your money was acknowledging the lengths I would go to keep you away from him.”

One hand feathers through my hair until his palm cups the base of my head. He uses the strands as an anchor to tilt my face up and my mouth parts unbidden.

“What are you saying?” I breathe, pinned in his grasp while my body arches into him.

His pupils dilate, thinning the deep blue irises around them, and with certain clarity, I realize that Marcus didn’t bring me here with the intent of airing out his past. He brought me here because he’s *starving*—and ready or not, I’m about to satisfy that hunger.

“I’m done with our games, Heather.”

A whimper lies behind my trembling lips as his stinging hold on my scalp lights my clit up like Times Square on New Year’s Eve.

“Everything you think you know about me is a lie.”

“Then tell me the truth,” I beg with a throat-tightening whisper.

His dark brows draw tight with a frown, and just as I think he’ll confess, he shakes his head.

“I can’t... I won’t.” Marcus knocks my legs apart with his knee, and I’ll be damned if I don’t immediately roll against it. “Which means you decide, here and now, if that’s an acceptable condition for what I’m about to do to you.”

It may not be the truth I wanted, but it’s not the empty promise I once expected, either.

“Time’s ticking.” Marcus’s nostrils flare lightly as he waits. “What’ll it be, slayer?”

Alice is going to kill me for this, is my last coherent thought before I murmur, “Just fucking kiss me already.”

The room spins in a blur of colors when Marcus picks me up and drops my ass on top of the desk next to the bookcase. It creaks with my weight, jostling against the wall as our mouths clash in a heated flurry.

Frantic, wanton, and greedy. We claw at each other as if this kiss is the very sustenance we crave. We pant for air between kisses, while our roaming hands grasp and grope. My nails score his abdomen in a rush to remove his shirt and he hisses, grabbing it by the collar and slipping it overhead before descending on me once more.

My calves hook around his sturdy, flexing thighs, holding on for life as he takes my bottom lip between his teeth and sucks hard enough to deliver a delectable, pinching wave of pain.

This man is ecstasy incarnate, and when he presses his pelvis into mine, he siphons a half-feral moan from my lips. Gazing at my mouth in wonder, he says, “Make that sound again.”

I do as I’m told, throwing my head back with another needy moan while giving that deprived mouth another spot to devour.

“I can smell him on you, Heather,” Marcus growls into the crook of my neck. “And if I wasn’t confident that, after this, he’ll never touch you again—I would drag you down to that pond and scrub every trace of his scent from your skin until it’s raw.”

A secret thrill skitters up my spine with his roaming hands. If any other man spoke to me this way, I’d happily tell him to kiss my ass. But Marcus’s claim doesn’t dissuade me. It cranks the dial of my libido past the absolute maximum.

“We’re going to burn these clothes when I’m finished with you.” Wrath ripples off him like an electrified current, slamming into me one hard surge at a time. “And while we’re at it, I forbid you from drinking coffee ever again.”

I can't help but laugh while playfully pouting at the ceiling. "But I love coffee."

"You'll learn to love something else." He bites the hollowed slope above my shoulder as if to mark me, own me, and dammit, I crave so much more of this carnal possession. Lapping the sting from my skin, he rumbles, "I hear tea is a great substitution."

Lust stokes the inferno in his gaze when he pulls back to check in with me, reading and assessing, as if he wouldn't dare press on without knowing I'm on board, and I wish that simple gesture didn't soften me to him as much as it does.

"We're just scratching an itch," I breathe, reminding us both what's really going on here, festival voodoo be damned.

"Mm-hmm." His lips hum as he smiles across my skin.

"Tomorrow, we'll pretend this never happened. You'll go back to being a frustrating, exasperating—"

"Handsome, irresistible..." He exhales against the underside of my chin, granting me several more pecks and despite myself, I laugh again.

"I can't decide if I'd rather punch you or kiss you."

Each word is drenched in sex when he says, "I'm open to both."

Then our mouths are melding, even easier this time, as if somehow our bodies have already learned what the other expects, needs, and desires. If I was the sentimental type, I might think this was the purpose of *Hallevah*. To find a partner whose mind, body, and soul are a perfect match beyond the intricacies of a dance.

"This changes nothing," I warn the man who's dangerously close to changing my view of him.

His lips are so warm and satiny soft, I'd almost be content kissing him all night long.

Almost.

Marcus nibbles my bottom lip. "Right."

With my last surviving braincell, I press my knee into the hard plane of his abdomen, but he hardly budes. “I’m serious, dammit. The last thing either of us needs is a complication. And this,” I say, gesturing between our hips, “is screaming complication.”

“We can worry about tomorrow, tomorrow,” Marcus mumbles, grabbing my knee and deliberately flexing my hip outward to make space for him. “I’m going to take my time with you, Heather. Not because I want something in return, and not because I’m scratching an itch.” His blue eyes darken when he straightens, drinking me in. “But simply because I *want* to.”

Well, there’s no way in hell I’m saying no to that, so I concede with a murmured, “Okay.”

I watch him unbutton my blouse and then delicately slide the material off my shoulders. It pools around my waist in a quick *wisp* before, inch by inch, he removes the blindfold I wore during *Hallevah* from his pocket.

Holding it out for me, he gestures for my wrists with a crooked brow. “In case you get any ideas about staking me again.”

“I happen to be stake-free, vamp.” But I surprise myself by offering my wrists to him willingly.

Marcus kisses the thumping pulse on the inside of each wrist before efficiently tying them together in a knot. A wolfish grin becomes him. “Unbelievable, Heather.”

“What?” I ask, glancing at the material winding around my arms and questioning if I’ve done something wrong.

“How goddamn sexy you are, restrained and at my mercy.”

My inner ice fortress quakes, threatening to crumble altogether.

The electrified air peaks my nipples, and his lower half bucks on instinct when I stretch to stroke his impressive length behind his zipper. Saliva fills my mouth as I writhe to bust the damn thing open. But when I grip him hard, Marcus hisses a

breathy, *ahh* before snatching my hands and pinning them between our bodies.

“When you’re bound, you will not touch me unless I give you permission, do you understand?”

“I-I’m sorry.” But my fingers clawing at his chest and my rolling, needy hips say I’m anything but.

“Don’t be sorry. Be obedient,” he grumbles, testing the weight of my breasts with rough, calloused hands. “Now, tell me you understand like a good fucking girl so I can finally taste you, slayer.”

“I understand.” I cry out the moment his tongue lashes one aching nipple. “*Yes!*”

“Heather.” He sucks and pulls at the hard bud, and then the other, while I wiggle with my hands trapped between our bodies. “This can’t be real. I have to be dreaming.”

If I didn’t have a front-row seat to every sinful, depraved swipe of his tongue, I wouldn’t believe it, either.

Nuzzling and nipping the soft swells, he says, “Fuck it. If this is a dream, I hope I never wake up.”

“Let me touch you, *please.*”

“When I’m just learning all the little things which give me those sounds?” His hand finds the top of my pants, undoing the button with a simple flick, and then gradually dipping inside. I gasp-groan, and he utters a seductive, “I don’t think so.”

If it’s possible, I widen further to give those wicked fingers space to cup my swollen center hiding beneath my panties.

“Not when I can make you beg, cry, and scream for me in ways I’ve only heard in my fantasies.”

“Y-you’ve thought about doing this with me?” I gulp, trying to decide if I like the idea of Marcus thinking of me like that.

He presses a kiss to my lips, still tingling from our fervor. “This is, by far, the tamest thing I’ve thought of doing to you.”

And that's a big fucking yup.

“Relax,” he coaxes, carefully guiding me so my shoulders and head rest against the wall.

“Kinda difficult when my arms are bound,” I growl my frustration, delighting him further when my breasts jiggle as I squirm.

Pausing only long enough to remove my shoes, followed by my jeans, that lust-drunk stare scorches every spot in which my lacy red thong stretches.

“Look at you, soaking for me,” he whispers, shifting the scrap of lace to the side and deftly parting my center with two thumbs. His chuckle clenches my center with a cool rush of air. “So wet and eager for a man you supposedly despise.”

One finger glides inside to the very last knuckle as he all but purrs, “Tell me, do you hate me now, slayer?”

Blood throbs between my legs when a second joins, and my core grips him mercilessly when he curls his fingertips against my g-spot. “It’ll take more than a measly orgasm to change my mind—”

My mouth hangs open as he twists his wrist while sliding in and out.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus drawls, eliciting a round of wet, sucking noises which accompany my mewling, “Were you saying something?”

That pistoning motion he’s doing has my back bowing tighter than a harp string. I grasp for purchase, finding nothing and no one but the man before me as I splinter around him.

“Marcus!” I shout until my voice is hoarse, and I swear to god, I hear every color in this room and visualize every sound as he continues gently fucking me with his hand until my body goes entirely limp.

Removing his fingers with a quick *pop*, he moans as he licks them clean. “How rude of me to interrupt.”

That’s it, I’m going to fuck this man within an inch of his life.

Completely naked, I scramble for him, ass peeling off the table, only to come face to face with a savage grin.

“On your back,” he says, forming a collar around my neck with his hand. “I’m far from finished with you.”

“Marcus, please,” I whine as, with that same hand, he lays me flat and squeezes in warning for me to stay put.

Scooting my lower half off the desk, he falls to his knees before draping my legs over his rippling shoulders.

“Tomorrow, you’ll wake up with the phantom pleasure of my mouth between these beautiful thighs.” He bites into each one deeply, coaxing a garbled moan. “I will consume your thoughts as you have consumed mine, and your silly proposal for things to go back the way they were will be forgotten.”

“No,” I argue weakly, wrapped in the sensation of free falling as the light scruff along his jaw lazily scratches my sensitive flesh. I don’t know where I’ll land when I eventually hit, but Marcus’s nuzzling mouth getting closer to my center takes control of my wild thoughts.

“We’re long past going back, Heather. You know it, I know it.” He pauses, sending blistering hot tingles coiling through my clit when he swirls the tip of his tongue against it. “She knows it, too,” he finishes, referring to the tender flesh he’s ravishing.

That tongue of his whips, lashes, and plunges, stoking the embers of my earlier orgasm until I feel another rising. Heels grinding into his shoulders, I thrash my head with my arms still tied, but my fingers remain free to grip his hair.

“Marcus,” I chant, plunging them through his silken locks while frustration and ecstasy clash like Titans.

“My name on your lips is the sweetest satisfaction.” A grin spreads me wider as he fucks me with his tongue before gliding up and down my slit. “Almost sweeter than the way you taste, the way you smell... I could do this for hours, slayer.” He pauses after another torturous lick. “Is that what you’d have me do? Devour this delicious heat of yours until you can’t walk tomorrow?”

Fuck. Yes. Eyes rolling, I arch into his filthy, greedy mouth. “I’m so close. Oh shit, I’m almost there.”

“I know,” he growls in approval, encouraging me. “Now let me have you, Heather. Every drop. Come right here on my tongue or don’t come at all.” Hands gripping my ass cheeks, he continues flicking and sucking me until the desk is shaking with the rest of me. “You can do it. I’m ready for you.”

Those last four muffled words are what send—no, *vault*—me straight over the edge.

This is the orgasm to end all orgasms. A release that explodes and refracts into tiny diamond shards, only to leave me in a puddle of loose limbs with my chest heaving.

Our gazes collide as I softly float back into my physical form, and what lies in his stare frightens me.

“If only you could see yourself the way I see you right now,” Marcus murmurs.

“Sweaty and disheveled?” I tease woozily, if only to distract myself from the adoring way he’s watching me.

Marcus steadies my wobbly legs by helping place my feet on the ground and propping my ass against the edge of the desk. Trailing kisses up the insides of my thighs, he rights my panties first, then my jeans, and when he’s finished, he unties me and readjusts my top—peppering kisses across my shoulders and collarbones as he goes.

I swallow a knot that refuses to budge as finally, he cups my cheeks and says, “Like you’re mine.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Heather

T rue to Marcus's arrogant word, the incurable throb in my core is all I can think about. Not even helping myself to two more orgasms this morning—thank you, Mr. Shower Head—could alleviate what's become a dull, painful ache.

I know exactly where I can find relief. Marcus would be more than willing to slake this unquenchable thirst he's cursed me with, and without a doubt, it would be as mind-blowing as our night in the treehouse. But I've weighed every option, and giving in to him entirely always yields the same result.

Disaster.

A shaky breath parts my lips as I stare at the same river we crossed just one week ago. Unlike our first crossing, we've followed the path farther south to an area that flows more gradually. Marcus's arm tightens around me as Sparrow's steps grow quicker with excitement.

"Whoa," he orders with low authority, and my cheeks flush.

Need I constantly be reminded of how commanding he is? *Never mind how much I enjoyed it.*

She halts several feet from the water's edge, clomping and snorting as I lean to give her an affectionate pat on her shoulder.

Marcus coughs, shifting his groin at my back, and I might arch the tiniest bit, giving him a view of my jean shorts

straining against my ass.

“Fucking hell, woman,” he mutters.

The bushes rustle behind us as Jango, with agility an old mutt like him shouldn't possess, races by in a tawny blur. He doesn't hesitate before tucking his arms in, lengthening his body, and diving straight into the clear water.

Sparrow flings her head around, glaring at us both for not allowing her a turn, then aims a hot burst of air at us.

I toss Marcus a mock pout over my shoulder. “Aw, let her go have some fun.”

He rolls his eyes as he adjusts the backpack he's carrying, then slides off her back.

“The both of you are proving to be more trouble than you're worth.” Grabbing my waist, he hoists me from the mare and sets my bare feet on the ground.

“I resent that.”

Sparrow's lips pop as she rapidly nods her head, and Marcus can't suppress his smile any longer. “So does your friend, it would seem.”

She reaches toward him with her floppy lips as if to nip him, and he gives her big body a playful shove before removing the harness. “Yeah, yeah. You're welcome.”

I smush the pads of my feet into a sea of bushy, clover-like greenery that blankets the area, smirking when Sparrow snags a mouthful of them on her way into the water with a gleeful whinny.

“Are you sure about this, slayer?” he asks while I help remove our towels and a quilt from his bag, then fluff each one out not far from the shore. “You don't have anything to prove. To me, or anyone else for that matter.”

The nickname that once irked me now tickles my insides. But it's nothing compared to the fleet of shivers rocking my core when he reaches one arm behind his neck and tugs his shirt clean off.

Christ on a cracker. My silly heart thuds the same way it had this morning when I walked into the barn with all the confidence of an Olympic swimmer.

I expected him to talk me out of it, maybe flat-out object to my plan to finally face my fear of the water. But what I hadn't anticipated was him setting down the wood carving he'd been in the middle of working on to harness Sparrow, and then giving me that *what are we waiting for* grin.

"I'm sure," I say, hoping he doesn't notice me ogling the dips, ridges, and slopes of his beautiful body, or how the afternoon sun highlights his tapered waist and broad shoulders.

Marcus's muscles bunch, flexing beneath my stare.

Yeah, he definitely notices.

"Quit showing off, vamp."

He arches an arrogant brow. "I much prefer my name coming from those lips."

The last inflected word becomes a naughty, needy reminder of every moan he'd coaxed from my throat.

"And I would prefer to get this over with, if you don't mind." My hand circles toward the water, but already, my skin is twitching, my insides bubbly and unsettled.

T'slasta may have left unanswered questions between us, but my final report on our night together comes to this—we kissed, he gave me a couple of soul-shattering orgasms, end of story.

Yet, here he is, stalking toward me with those sultry bedroom eyes full of devil-may-care promises.

"Arms up," he instructs in the same tone he used with Sparrow.

Unlike my previous will to obey, I cross them instead, which only makes his cheek dimple with humor. Marcus sighs, prying my forearms apart and forcing them into the air to remove my shirt.

“Have you always been so...” Words fail him as he rakes his burning blue gaze from the top of my head to the apex of my thighs. The man’s seen me naked, but somehow, he loses his nerve at the sight of me in a thin black bikini. Go figure.

Tossing my shirt on the ground, he finishes with, “Perfect.”

A stream of sunlight peeking through the trees hits me square across the chest, warming me from the outside-in as he carefully hooks his fingers in the sides of my shorts and slides them down my legs.

“I believe you meant *stubborn*.”

His smiles come a little easier now, and this one is annoyingly attractive from where he kneels in front of me. His gaze flits from where his mouth previously marked me to my heating face. “Ah, yes, lest I forget your most endearing quality.”

I yank him to standing before I do something stupid—like popping the tie loose on my bikini bottoms and giving him a second course.

“I’m not doing this because I have anything to prove, you know.” Bringing us back to his earlier question, I say, “It’s just that maybe I don’t want to wake up one day, years from now, to find that I’m the same person I’ve always been. A woman who lived the same year over and over until she died. Lonely, cold, and bitter.”

“I suppose that is depressing,” he teases. “If not a touch dramatic.”

I put a hefty amount of space between us before scoffing, “Says the actor.”

Jango pads out of the water, shaking his fur after dropping a long stick at our feet. His paws do a tippy-tap when we turn our attention to him.

“Are you suggesting *I’m* the dramatic one?” Marcus bends to pick up Jango’s prize.

“It wasn’t a suggestion.”

After chucking the stick toward the trees, he gives me a smirk that's way too flirty for my liking. "Now is that any way to speak to your friends?"

My eyes go wide. "I would hardly say you and I are friends."

"We totally are." He walks me backward with each progressive step. "I was just thinking we should make up a best friend handshake."

"You've lost your damn mind." I trip through a pile of twigs. "And will you stop looking at me like that?"

Eyes sparking with determination, he scoops me up under my shoulders and knees, bride-and-groom style, then whistles for Sparrow to get out of the river.

Water sloshes around his ankles as I screech, "What the hell are you doing?"

"We're going for a swim." There's a whole lot of *duh* in his tone that I don't appreciate one bit. "One dip," he follows up sternly. "If you get the slightest bit panicked, I promise to get you out."

"I think this goes without saying, *bestie*, but you're entirely too bossy."

His delight is nearly as palpable as that sexy grin. "You should see me in the bedroom."

I smack his pec, biting the inside of my lip.

I've already gotten a taste of his bedroom authority, haven't I?

Marcus made it clear he wouldn't be refuting any misconceptions I may have of him. But what remains unclear is where exactly that leaves us.

If we were friends, I would feel guilty for writing a tell-all article about Marcus and his family, and I, for sure—without a trace of doubt—do not.

Big, fat liar.

But even if I somehow didn't write the story, with our feuding careers, friendship is off the table. And there's no chance he'd willingly jump in the sack with me when he uncovers my dirty little secret.

Cool water laps at my bottoms, forcing a lid on my errant thoughts.

My nails score his shoulders, but with a wink, he assures me, "Don't worry. I won't drop you if you pass out."

"My hero," I say dryly, earning a sexy, throaty laugh.

Waking up nightmareless for the first time since staying in Augustine has made facing my greatest fear seem reasonable. But now that it's happening, all the confidence I mustered this morning shrivels in my veins.

"Maybe his wasn't a good idea," I whisper, fighting memories of Jeremy attempting to drown me. His angry face flashes across my mind like a strobe light, and I begin to hyperventilate. "I-I don't think I can do this."

My teeth chatter as Marcus pivots in the direction of the shore, but my relief is short-lived the moment he opens his mouth. "I'm not letting you give up your mission."

"I'm scared."

"I know," he says, rubbing his thumb between my shoulder blades in tiny, comforting circles. "Why don't you try standing so you're more in control?"

Sweat beads across my brow, and my brain fogs with dizziness when he sets me down. I cling to his biceps while securing my footing over the smooth, oval rocks and watch as the clear water laps up my calves.

Already, my vision starts to tunnel.

"Focus on my voice. Don't let your mind wander." Marcus gently spreads my fingers over his sternum. "Stay with me, Heather."

His heart steadily pounds against my palm.

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

I close my eyes and count the beats until I'm able to look up from the rainbow rocks beneath our feet.

Keeping his voice firm but quiet, he says, "Good. Now take a step."

My belly leaps and rolls as I follow his lead. He walks backward, guiding me by the hand, but never once taking his eyes off me. When the water hits the middle of my trembling thighs, and I don't vomit, I beam up at him.

The corners of Marcus's eyes crinkle with a mixture of mirth and pride. "See if you can go a little farther."

My lower back and shoulders twinge with the effort it's taken to get to this point, and I'm afraid if I go much deeper, I'll slip.

"I... I'm sorry. I can't."

Marcus takes a sloshing step forward. With both hands clasping my cheeks, he tips what I know is a fear-filled gaze up to his.

Unbending, unshakeable, he says, "Allow me to show you just how capable you are."

I gasp when he reaches for my legs and easily wraps them around his hips. Water sluices between our bodies, glinting sunlight off his barbell piercings, and I'm breathing too fast again.

Clinging to him as he walks us deeper, a few steps at a time, I do my damndest to draw air into my aching lungs.

"Open your eyes for me," he whispers.

When I do, we've sunk low enough that only an inch of my shoulders remain dry. "I did it?"

"You did." He smiles. "How does it feel?"

I bravely sink my hand below the surface and swish it around. Cold water flows between my fingers and tickles the hair on my arms when I murmur, "Surprisingly... safe."

I'd have never known the effect that frail confession had on him if it weren't for his hands tightening around my sides

and his shoulders drawing back proudly.

Once I'm sure he isn't going to release me, I drop my other arm and swirl it through the sun-refracting ripples. Up above, tropical birds sing in the tops of massive trees, which blanket us in broken bouts of shade. Their leaves are impossibly green, and the striking contrast to the aquamarine river is remarkable.

“When Pen and I were kids, this spot was one of our secret hideouts.” His mouth twitches. “Leah never cared for swimming or getting dirty, unlike Penelope. She's a tomboy, through and through.”

He recalls stories of the two of them cannonballing off the rocky ledge, where the water steadily flows in a small waterfall, and digging through mud in the forest, collecting bugs so they could scare their sisters.

I laugh lightly at the images of the pair, carefree and wild. “How is it possible that you spent so much time here? The people of Augustine treat you as if you're one of them.”

“I suppose because, in a lot of ways, I am.” His hand lazily floats around mine, riding the current I'm creating. “As you know, my uncle came to Topica Bay many years ago, but what brought him here initially was a rare breed of Topican horses that Ernesto's father, Santiago, was selling.”

Marcus's fingers absently tickle mine, coaxing currents of energy wherever he touches. “But when Uncle Pat arrived to examine the horses, he found one of the mares in labor with a stillborn.”

Our hands continue their dance beneath the rippling surface. “What did he do?”

“He rolled up his sleeves, had Santiago contact the veterinarian, and together, they were able to save the mare.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, sad for the life lost, but glad for the one which was spared. “So, the Vance's ranch actually belonged to Ernesto's father?”

The picture of all of them as children in the treehouse makes more sense. As does the wound where Ernesto is

concerned. Leah may have grown fonder feelings for him, but to Marcus, he must have been like family.

With a nod, he continues, “Afterward, Santiago demanded my uncle stay in Augustine for a few more days to allow him to rest, and in that time, they formed a bromance to rival all bromances.”

The idea of two men living out here, enjoying the simple pleasures of island life makes me smile, and the more I learn about the business mogul, the more respect I have for him.

“A few days turned into weeks. Then Patrick was visiting Santiago for months on end, learning about the people, their culture, and helping tend to the ranch while Santiago pursued his dream of farming coffee beans.” He pauses to crook a brow. “And it only took one *T’slasta* for my uncle to go before Mateo and the other elders for permission to purchase the unwanted land from his friend.”

If Patrick’s experience at the bonfire was anything like mine, then I get it. That night will have a hold on me as long as I live.

“My dad wasn’t really around when I was younger, and I think flying us out here between my acting gigs and auditions was my uncle’s way of stepping into a fatherly role where he could.”

I mean to ask him more about his father and maybe even, I don’t know, do my job and delve into the suspicious affiliations he’s allegedly been tied to in the past.

But instead, I go completely rogue.

“I would love to meet him sometime.” My body goes taut as I snap my mouth shut, and when I glance up, Marcus’s lips are doing that twitchy thing again.

“Don’t read into that,” I warn. “Your uncle sounds like a nice guy is all I meant.”

That twitch becomes a full faced grin. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re smitten with me.”

“You’re delusional.”

I mean, I *did* just admit I want to meet one of the most important people in his life. But not in a creepy, stage-five-clinger kind of way. More like a totally casual, get to know him better way.

Oh, god.

My pulse comes to a heart-starving halt. Am I smitten with Marcus fucking Matthews?

“What finally wore you down, the chiseled jaw or the effortless charm?” he asks, playfully crushing me against him while posing with his face lifted toward the sun.

What’s behind door number three? Oh goody. A lifetime supply of denial.

“How about neither,” I mumble with my cheek and mouth smashed into his chest. Sucking in a breath when he gives me a couple of inches of space, I seethe. “And you’re not nearly as charming as you’d like to think.”

With obvious amusement, he returns his attention to me and brings his lips intentionally too close to my ear. “Must have been my *insatiable* appetite, then.”

A slow burn builds along my arms, creeping toward my neck and grinding jaw. How does he always manage to make me feel like a prude?

“Admit it. You like Augustine, you like my annoying cousin, and most importantly, you like me.”

“I’d rather choke.”

His eyes are impossibly blue against the river’s shimmering reflection. Dropping them to my lips, he rumbles, “That can be arranged.”

“I think we’re finished here.” More wiggling to no avail, and then I’m given another one of his belly-fluttering smirks.

“We’re not though, are we?”

A seductive caress glides between each word, matching the tenderness of his touch, and with certain clarity, I know

whatever happens next will end one of two ways—naked or *naked*.

He tucks a lock of stringy, damp hair behind my ear. “For the record, I think you would have made an adorable mermaid.”

“I sincerely regret telling you about that.”

Marcus starts humming a song from *The Little Mermaid* that I haven’t heard in ages. “How does it go, again? The one where they’re in the boat.”

“How should I know? It’s been years since I’ve seen it.” But who am I kidding? I’d recognize ‘Kiss the Girl’ anywhere.

He pushes off the rocky bottom, drifting us through the water, and like an unused muscle, my feet awkwardly swish and kick as we move.

“Maybe I’ll sing it so badly, you’ll be forced to remember the words.”

“I seriously doubt that,” I deadpan as he grabs my hand and leisurely twirls us around.

Adrenaline heightens my senses to the cool liquid whirling around my skin, and in this moment, I wonder if Marcus is intentionally helping me make peace with my past. Like some form of immersion therapy, he blends both my childhood fantasy of being a redheaded mermaid while submerging me in waters similar to those Jeremy had harmed me in.

“Okay, it’s something like—” He closes his eyes, and sure as shit, starts belting the lyrics. They’re the wrong lyrics, but that’s clearly not stopping him. “She don’t got a lot to say, mm-hm-mm-mm, something about that girl.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying like hell not to laugh.

“I mean this with the utmost sincerity, Marcus. But please, don’t ever quit your day job.”

“And you don’t know why,” he croons, ignoring my protests and tugging me by both hands. We spin in a dizzying circle, and when he waggles his eyebrows as if he’s doing such an impressive job, I nearly lose it.

“But you’re dying to try,” I grumble the next line, but decide that whatever happens, it was more than worth it for the ridiculous amount of mirth transforming his handsome face.

A hiss severs my answering smile the moment my back smacks a frigid, unyielding surface. I peer up at the ledge we’ve run into on the opposite side of the bank. The abrupt stop shocks air from my lungs, but not nearly as much as the man towering before me.

An electrified thrill slithers its way to the pit of my stomach, amplified by adrenaline, the cool stone wall at my back, and the narrow waterfall gently cascading beside us.

Our breaths mingle across my upper lip as Marcus watches me, waiting for me to argue.

His chest brushes mine with one, two, three inhaleds, but before he utters the rest of the verse, I whisper, “Kiss me.”

His velvety mouth captures mine swiftly, unapologetically, and I quake at the heartrending tenderness in which he restrains himself—pecking, roving, and toying with my lips until they’re plump and swollen.

Our first kiss was an accident. The second, ravenous and lustful. But this? Marcus must have kissed dozens of women in his career and otherwise, yet he makes me feel as though I’m the first.

“Need more.” Using his thigh to boost me higher, he pants, “So much more.”

My hands skate up his back, hanging on to his shoulders as his body pins me in place.

His tongue flicks the tip of mine with silken care while, in contrast, his eager fingers reach for my neck and snap the bow neatly tied behind it. My breasts spill free, nipples hardening with a chilled breeze and Marcus smiles against my lips. “That’s better.”

Then a shuddering breath collapses over my nipple, and I thrash, aching with need as he exhales a harsh, frantic groan around the bud.

“You were right. We don’t need complicated,” he confesses. “But I can’t keep my fucking hands off you, Heather, and I’m this close to begging you not to make me.”

The waves striking my heated core are driving me nearly as insane as his hard length rubbing the same spot.

“If you need a body to use, then use mine. If all you crave is release, then let me be the one who gives it to you. Not Ernesto, or any other man on this island.” Marcus pauses our fervor, eyes full of intense yearning. “Me.”

Is this what he meant by letting go? Not just releasing any and every inhibition, but finding a space between friends and lovers where I can experience a true, sensory drunk dance with desire.

“Ground rules,” I croak, somehow forcing words from my throat. “We should establish some.”

“Mm, not much of a rule follower,” he says with the sexiest damn smirk I’ve ever seen.

I shiver when his breath skitters across my bare flesh. “As true as that may be, vamp, those are my terms.”

With a disapproving growl, he slowly, deliberately lowers his skillful mouth beneath the sensitive bud he’d been lapping at. He nips at the underside of my breast, and I arch into him, responding instantly.

“We’ll compromise. You get one rule.” He moves to give the other breast the same rapt attention. “You better make it count.”

I bite my lip when his fingers trail down the clenching muscles of my abdomen.

One rule? There are too many to choose from, but if we’re really doing this, then we’re going to keep it casual. No risk of attachments, and especially no risk of intimacy.

“Fine. I’ll give you my body anytime, anywhere that you want.” He halts, breathing unevenly as he gradually raises his gaze. “But no beds.”

His knee lowers, sinking my body back into the water. “Your only rule is that we can’t have sex in a bed?”

“Yes,” I say, roaming my hands across the ridges of his abdomen.

Rolling around in sheets and cuddling for hours afterward is too personal. And getting too personal with this man isn’t something I can afford, smitten or not.

Marcus tips his head curiously, placing his hands over mine so they’re flush with his skin.

“All right. I accept your terms, but I’m not always going to be gentle with you.” My eyes flick upward, my stomach tightening with anticipation at the intoxicating seduction stamped across his face. “I’ll give you more pleasure than any man who’s touched you before me, that’s a promise. You’ll come, and then you’ll come again, but not before I torture you a little.”

This is bad. It’s so, so bad. But fuck me, it feels *so* good.

Excitement pounds through my middle, and when I nod the okay, Marcus doesn’t hesitate.

His hand sails down the front of my bottoms, seeking my heat, and once he finds it, his mouth goes slack, parting in awe. “Dear god, woman, you’re so fucking tight.”

I throb around his fingers delving inside me, the cold water like an ice cube to my searing core, but it’s my greedy clit that demands his attention.

“What is it?” he asks when a frustrated groan parts my lips. “Am I hurting you?”

Is it okay for me to tell him where to go or what I want? I don’t exactly know the proper etiquette, but I want to be present with him, allowing us both satisfaction without questions spinning in my head.

His hand stills. “We aren’t a couple of teenagers, Heather. There’s no reason to play guessing games.” Sliding the side of one finger through my seam, he rumbles, “Tell me exactly what you need, when you need it, and I will give it to you.”

My hand grips his wrist as I guide him up to my clit. “Here, please.”

A shudder wracks his upper body, jolting straight through the bundle of nerves he pinches and rolls. “This is what you wanted?”

Head falling back, I grip his forearms and moan his name.

I’m awarded a deep, proud chuckle as he splits his fingers and runs them along either side, spreading my entrance before diving in and back up again, repeatedly. “Now I know you can be louder than that.”

“Marcus!” His name echoes through the trees. “Just like that, *yes*.”

“Would you look at that,” he utters huskily, “she does listen.”

Arrogant ass.

But I don’t pause to mince words. I’m too busy swiping around for him beneath the surface.

He bats my hand away, continuing to stroke me to the edge. His powerful body supports me as he snatches both my wrists and roughly pins them to the muddy stone above my head. “You can touch my cock once you’ve given me what I’m after.”

Dear god, where did he learn to talk like that?

My eyes slam shut with the sensations he’s culling from me, and with every retreat, I grip him harder.

“Come,” he says frankly, stroking me to climax like his life depends on it.

Thighs slamming together, I hold his hand in place, and with an explosion of blistering, prickly vibrations, I do exactly that.

“Heather.” A cold blast replaces his fingers as he removes them from my bottoms, and after lowering my wrists, he places a kiss on my sweat-damp brow. “It’s painful how fucking beautiful you are.”

“Please,” I murmur, unable to meet his stare. “Please don’t say things you don’t mean. We have an understanding now. There’s no need to sway me.”

“Look at me.” Marcus pulls back to notch my chin up, and I scour his gaze for all the lies I wish were there, only to come up empty. “What reason would I have to deceive you? You’re stunning, inspiring, and if you don’t believe me, I’ll gladly take my time proving it to you.”

My heart pitches, nearly slipping right out my chest to happily bounce into his palm.

A slow-building grin graces his lips. “Now, where were we?”

Half-swimming, half-stepping, he cradles me as he carries me through the river. Searching for our four-legged friends, I spot Sparrow grazing through the trees while Jango chases birds ahead of her. And thank god for that, because the last thing I need is the pair getting nosy about what’s about to go down.

I expect Marcus to stop and release me, but he’s on a mission as he heads for the blanket we spread out on the shoreline. The quilt is refreshingly sun-warmed when he gently lies me on my back, but when he stands to remove his swim trunks, he pauses with a note of caution.

“I can’t afford any accidents.”

His intent is clear. He can’t further damage his reputation by knocking up the stranger next door, and I ignore all the tinglies that follow such an outrageous idea.

“We’re covered,” I promise him. “I’m on the pill.”

His thumbs hook inside the front of his shorts, and the bulging outline of his erection makes my toes curl. I grip the blanket once he tugs them down, watching it bob free.

“Marcus,” I whisper because fuck me, how can it look *that* good?

My legs tremble as he eclipses me. Droplets of water splash from the tips of his hair onto my naked breasts, and he

thoroughly sucks each drop from my skin before shirking the tangled top off completely, leaving me covered by nothing but my bikini bottoms.

“You once gave me a list of reasons why you hated me,” he breathes, “but I’ve made one for you.”

Once he stretches my arms overhead, he feathers kisses along my torso, and I writhe, preparing myself for whatever it is that he hates about me.

“I hate how distracting you are, working on our property while you wear those ridiculously thin clothes.” I fight for air as he nips the ridges of my ribcage. “I hate how easily you befriended that impossible horse,” he murmurs, dragging more searing kisses all the way down my abdomen to the slope of my hip.

“That stubborn chin, your laughter, and every sexy sound you make at my touch.” His tickling breaths have my pelvis jerking toward his smiling mouth. “I am undeniably addicted to you.” He releases each tie at my waist with his teeth, and then painstakingly peels the front of my bottoms down, bearing me entirely. “But slayer... I don’t hate it.”

With that, we collide like thunder and lightning. A blindingly bright force of passionate kisses and grasping fingers. A storm joined by two elements which can’t exist without the other. It’s as horrifying as it is exhilarating, and I know in the deepest, cobweb-ridden parts of my soul that I’ll never tire of this high I get from him.

“You must have had a lot of time to think about that list,” I pant, popping his bottom lip with a bite that further ignites his smoldering gaze.

“I’m one hundred percent certain you’re all I think about,” he says with guttural admiration.

Okay, I’m the one who’s supposed to have a way with words here.

But they fail me when he moves to stretch my calf across his upper body and kisses the inside arch of my foot. When he

swirls a hot lick around my ankle bone, my body grows dangerously close to the melting point.

“I need to feel you, please,” I beg, but it’s little more than a rasp, and the pinching grip I receive to my outer thigh has my eyes rolling.

“What did I say? No guessing games.” I’m blinded by lust as Marcus draws my other leg up his side and slicks the underside of his impossibly hard length through my parting lips. “Tell me exactly what you want. Where do you need me?”

A flush burns my chest. “Inside.”

“My fingers?” With the longest two, he pumps up and down, spreading my arousal along the outer seam before bringing them to my lips.

When I open to tell him that’s not what I meant, he pops them into my mouth, swiping in a ‘V’ formation around the sides of my tongue.

A foreign tartness glides over my tastebuds before slipping down my throat.

“That’s a good girl, sucking your come off my fingers.” His pupils flare, darkening his gaze as he watches me clamp my teeth down on his knuckles.

“Heather,” he utters my name as if it’s a sacred, precious thing. “You’ll finish me if you don’t stop that.”

The way he watches me is so erotic and filthy.

I lick my lips when he brings his pointer finger to his mouth, cleaning anything I may have left behind with a low hum. “Devine.”

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I say, awed by his constant ability to be both unbelievably sexy and thoughtful at once. A sensuous lick of heat from his cock has me spreading for him. “But what I truly want is for you to stop being an unbearable tease and fuck me already.”

With twitching amusement, I’m awarded a single, hard inch before Marcus gives in and glides all the way to the hilt.

He releases a groan paired with a spine-wracking shiver. “It’s too good. *You’re* too good.”

A sudden urge flickers through my mind, and I act before I can second guess it, nipping his shoulder and reveling in his moaned pleasure.

Cupping his palm behind my head, he holds my mouth to the spot, and purrs, “If you’re going to bite me, then *bite me.*”

I hesitate half a second before sinking my teeth back into his hard, rippling muscle, leaving two rows of marks when I pull away.

An animalistic noise rumbles from his throat, and I take his response as permission to play, licking and kissing, just as I’ve watched him do to me.

“I like these,” I admit, quickly flicking my tongue over the bar through his right nipple. “Very much.”

“God, you filthy woman.” His hand never leaves my hair as he pistons in and out of me. “I’ll keep them forever, then.”

Forever.

The word whispers across my mind as I wrap my lips around the piercing. It’s warm with a hint of metallic flavor as I suck it into my mouth.

“Ah!” Marcus slams into me, settling there while I nibble, lick, and swirl.

Unable to stand it any longer, he shudders. “That’s enough.”

With one hand, he presses me into the quilt, putting just the right amount of pressure at the base of my neck to pair a tendril of discomfort with every slamming wave of euphoria.

“You wear my hand around your throat so well.” He pinches one of my nipples, rolling it before doing the same to the other, and my center swells around him considerably. “Let’s see what that ass looks like wearing my handprint.”

I’m given one more blistering hot kiss before he pulls out and flips me onto my stomach.

“Christ, Heather,” he murmurs. My skin heats with agonizing ferocity when he gradually slides back home, placing an iron grip on both cheeks. “Are you ready?”

I’ve never been spanked before, but Marcus takes a moment to rub his palm over the curve.

“Yes,” I say with my heart beating against the ground.

He delivers one quick smack, rippling my ass cheek with the force of the blow, and then gives two more to follow. My entire lower half visibly shudders.

“Oh!” I shout loud enough to rattle the earth. My moans are warbled and smashed into the soft material beneath my cheekbone, and I grow frantic with my need for release, meeting him thrust for thrust. “*More.*”

“So needy after you’ve already come.” Popping the other cheek, harder this time, he grunts, “But you’re already right there, aren’t you? Taking my cock so well. You’re tightening around me, and—*ah*, it’s perfection.”

His balls tap against my clit in a cadence quick enough to blur my vision. He doesn’t relent as he works me over, slipping through the fresh liquid the spankings have procured.

“Squeeze harder, Heather. I refuse to fall without you.”

A broken whine tumbles out of me as I clench around him, and finally, *thankfully*, thousands of electrified nerves flare with an orgasm that damn near rips my soul from my body.

Marcus curves over my back with one hand secured around my waist, moaning as he fills me with hot, twitching jerks. “No. Yes. *Fuck*, I don’t want it to end.”

Utterly spent, I collapse beneath him, little-spoon style as a breeze flutters through my hair, kissing every curve of my spent body. “Marcus, that was incredible.”

A chuckle reverberates against my neck before he presses a tender kiss to the top of my shoulder.

“I have a confession.” My sensitive skin jumps under his touch, spiking my pulse substantially. “I don’t want to be

Marcus Matthews when I'm with you. The actor, the player, or whatever else the world says I am."

Brows tight, I shift to glance back at him. "Who do you want to be, then?"

Marcus's eyes burn with a longing.

There's something he isn't telling me. I can feel it in the pit of my gut, even though I know he's being sincere.

"Who I want to be doesn't pair well with *casual*."

When he moves for my lips, the kiss is the gentle, languid kind that heats my body from the inside-out all over again.

A conflicted combination of elation and pain clash when he pulls me closer, but I shut my eyes, savoring his exploring fingers, and allow myself a moment to enjoy the afterglow.

For now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Heather

If casual sex means twice a day for the next two days, then Marcus and I deserve a gold medal. He encourages me to communicate what my body craves with filthy words and pinches of pain, followed by intense bouts of pleasure that I can't get enough of.

It's pathetic how a simple brush of our arms or a smoldering stare over his shoulder has me constantly sneaking off with him. Anywhere we can manage, Marcus has his hands on me—the stables, the riverside, where he continues to help me navigate swimming, and the bed of his uncle's old truck.

I rub my achy kneecaps through my jeans with a wince. Still have the bruises from that one, and this morning's quickie only made them worse.

But even though I'm more than satisfied, he hasn't used a form of restriction on me, like the blindfold around my wrists, since our night in the treehouse, and it's something I'm eager to experience again.

I find Penelope and Marcus at the far end of the stables with Sparrow and a speckled gray-and-white horse, who are tied up in the side-by-side washing stalls. The kids from the shelter excitedly help them fill two plastic buckets with soapy water, but my eyes are drawn to Marcus and the sight of him in his worn work clothes.

His piercings strain against the front of his T-shirt when he lazily hangs a towel over his shoulder, and I nibble my lip.

That is one good-looking man.

“About time you showed up,” Penelope teases, bumping my hip when I reach her side.

Startled, I flub for an excuse. “Sorry, I accidentally overslept.”

Actually, I was riding your cousin on the kitchen floor of your mom’s house.

But she doesn’t need to know that.

It’s just Tobias, Yennifer, and Rhydan with her today, but their smiling faces have me spreading my arms wide enough to fit all of them as they attack me with hugs. I squeeze them fiercely, listening to them jabber about their early morning full of chores.

“Now we get to wash the horsies!” Little Yennifer beams.

“Oh my gosh. That’s *so* fun,” I say, matching her excitement and laughing when they scatter to grab some old brushes and a few sponges.

Marcus swaggers toward me with an obnoxiously flirtatious grin that says he’s up to no good.

Penelope’s rubber boots squeak through a slop of spilled water as she hauls one of the buckets off the ground. She plunks a soft-bristled brush into a mound of suds inside the other one. “Why don’t you two take that one and help Yennifer with that beast? I think the boys will do better with Churro.”

“Anything compared to your spoiled rotten gelding would be considered a beast,” Marcus says defensively. “He’s scared of his own shadow.”

She cocks her hip, ready to scold him, but I smile sweet enough for the both of us. “What he meant to say was, we’d *love* to.”

Reaching around me to grab our bucket, Marcus gives me a wink.

“Whatever you’re thinking about doing, *don’t*,” I mutter.

“I’m simply following the boss’s orders.” But the moment Penelope turns for the wash stall, he pinches my ass.

I swat his hand, hissing, “Will you stop?”

He swats it back. “Nope.”

“You’re acting like a child,” I grumble, but when I move to follow her, he kicks out a foot and trips me.

I whirl on him, and he’s grinning from ear to ear, making it almost impossible to keep a straight face.

“Do you want her to find out what we’re doing, or should I go ahead and make an official announcement?”

Marcus snatches my wrist with his free hand and places a kiss over my knuckles. “Careful, slayer.”

I tug my hand from his grip. “Or what?”

“I’ll yank those jeans down your thighs and bend you over my knee.”

Swiveling to make sure no one heard him, I whisper, “You wouldn’t dare.”

But desire blooms in his eyes as I read the cockiness stamped across his face.

He spins me around to face the stalls, but not before nuzzling my ear and uttering a depraved, “Try me.”

Penelope casts a raised brow at us over her shoulder, and I offer an innocent wave, desperately willing my heart to slow. Marcus may be blasé about us hooking up, but she’s my friend, and I’d be horrified if she caught us.

“You two missed the school play yesterday,” Penelope says as she and the boys step into the open stall with Churro.

We enter Sparrow’s wash space, separated by a wall beside them, and when her horse stretches his harnessed face toward me, I place a chaste kiss on his soft, whiskered snout.

“Oh, well, you know. I had some work I had to do,” I say, turning to fiddle with the perfectly secure straps attached to Sparrow’s harness.

She stomps happily, bending to sniff the hand Marcus helps Yennifer hold out to her. When her lips gently nibble her palm, Yennifer screeches with glee and the smile Marcus gives them hits me smack dab in the uterus.

“Oh, baby Jesus.” I jump when I look over the half-wall to find Penelope’s eyes narrowed.

She clucks her tongue. “Work, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. Lots of intense writing.”

Marcus flicks her an annoyed glare from where he’s sopping the sponge in water.

“And what’s your excuse?” she asks him.

“None of your business, for starters.”

“Miss Penelope, what’s this dangly thingy on Churro’s belly?” Tobias’s voice sounds from behind her.

Her eyes bulge before she whips around. “Oh my god, no. Don’t touch it!”

The three of us snicker as Marcus grabs the hose attachment and turns the knob to a comfortable pressure for Sparrow. When he offers it to Yennifer, she gives me a goofy grin. “Sariah was almost too nervous to sing her solo, but luckily, Jingles kept her company on stage, and she loosened up.”

“Damn good mayor, that goat,” I joke, leaning an elbow on top of the stone wall.

“I hate him,” Penelope grumbles, resting her forearms beside me. “At one point, I literally had to cuff him to my wrist to keep him from wandering off. Thank *god* I didn’t lose the keys.”

“Been there,” Marcus mumbles before squatting to help Yennifer guide the hose up and down Sparrow’s legs.

Penelope blanches while I quirk a brow. “Speaking from experience, are we?”

“Yes,” she adds. “Do enlighten us on how you handcuffed yourself to a goat, cousin.”

“Not a goat. I meant losing the keys.” He shakes his head with a breathy chuckle. “All I’m saying is, handcuffs can be tricky.” To me, he gives another playful wink. “If not versatile.”

I squint as if studying him, then lift my hands as if to frame his face before offering Penelope a view. “Do you think Marcus’s head has always been this big or has sucking the necks of all his pretty victims made it double in size?”

Penelope snorts when he bares his teeth, as if he actually has fangs, and tosses a wet sponge at him. “You missed a spot, fat head.”



Later in the afternoon, just as I’m finishing laying out feed for the demon chickens, Marcus heads for the barn with Sparrow in tow. He catches my eye with a sexy tilt to his lips, and that come-hither grin sends bubbles of excitement through my bloodstream, beckoning me like a bee to sweet, precious nectar.

We pack a backpack with some snacks and towels, and with Jango hot on our heels, we ride Sparrow down to our spot on the river for a dip.

After a naked swim, we end up lying on our backs with our furry friends, staring up at the brilliant blue sky. The late afternoon sun and warm, balmy breeze dry the droplets from our naked skin as I listen to him recount a time when he and Penelope caught a cat in these woods.

“You named the cat Orange?” I ask around a bite of one of the protein bars he had packed for us.

“It was my favorite color at the time,” he says, taking the other half when I offer it and smiles up at a cloud floating by. “And I love orange juice.”

According to the *How Well Do You Know Marcus Matthews* online quiz, he hates orange juice, but I wouldn't dare let him know I've ever taken it. He'd never let me live it down.

When his head lolls my way, he says, "Don't laugh, but I once made up an entire backstory for an imaginary band called The Juicers."

I curl my lips under my teeth, because how the hell am I supposed to not find that funny?

"Can you *peel* the love tonight? I'm not the man I *juiced* to be. Better late than *navel*." Marcus's eyes crinkle as he turns back to the sky. "Our greatest hits—beloved by our fans, the 'Juice Heads' of course."

Jango's sun-kissed fur warms my side as I gently stroke his fur. "I think you're more likely to have oranges thrown at you than have any adoring fans."

Stretching his arms up, he laces both hands behind his head and crosses his ankles. He's smug in all his exposed glory with a towel lazily draped over his pelvis, and I admire the way this position lengthens his beautiful body.

"Would you come to my shows?" he asks.

"You can't be serious." I laugh, turning on my side and adjusting my towel over my backside.

Sparrow lies beside Marcus, nibbling on a patch of clovers, but even she raises her head to grunt in disbelief.

"Dead serious," he says, rolling to mirror the way I'm facing him. "Go on, tell me you'd be a die-hard Juice Head."

"Hardly."

When he cocks a brow, I huff, playfully exasperated, "Yes, Marcus. I'd be front and center, shaking my tits for your obnoxious fruit band. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I knew it." His smile turns positively radiant as his gaze travels over my skin like a tangible caress. There's a good foot of space between us, but my thighs rub together as my body reacts to him.

“Okay, your turn. Tell me something I don’t know about you,” he says expectantly.

Jango settles his jaw on the curve of my waist, nudging my elbow, and I absently rub his ears. “So, the thing is, I’ve always loved the color green. And limes are my favorite fruit —”

Marcus brings the tip of my finger to his mouth and gives it a naughty bite. “You said you wouldn’t laugh.”

After kissing the sting away, he languidly threads our fingers together, and I stare at our connected hands resting on the quilt.

That barrier of ice around my heart reminds me of its presence. It’s there for protection. To keep me from experiencing the devastation of being let down or hurt ever again. But when I’m with Marcus, in our hideaway spot, basking in the sunlight and enjoying simple touches... It’s the closest to shattering as it’s ever been.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You’re deflecting,” he teases, “but I’m hard-pressed to deny you anything, slayer.”

My stomach twists as if someone’s wringing it dry. “There are so many rumors about you out there, yet none of them seem to be true.”

The corner of his mouth hints at a smile. If my sudden interest in his A-list life surprises him, he hides it well. “Funny thing about rumors is, they’re *rumors*.”

“I suppose, but I’m still curious. Does Mr. Matthews really have connections to the mafia?”

There’s no way he’s going to give me that answer, especially not if it’s true. But as usual, Marcus surprises me.

“No. My father is not tied to the mafia,” he confirms. “I mean, he does have some questionable acquaintances, but who doesn’t in Hollywood?”

“Fair enough.”

The amusement in his smirk reaches his eyes. “Go on, I know there are more questions burning away in that pretty head of yours.”

“I once read that your mom ran off to Barbados with her yoga instructor boyfriend.”

A flash of humor crosses his face before he shakes his head. “Are you serious?”

I can’t help but smile back.

“Allegedly, she and said boyfriend were being investigated for money laundering and counterfeiting art.” His brows shoot toward his hairline. “But the reports were spotty on whether they were tried in court.”

Marcus shifts on the quilt, averting his gaze. “They were extremely careful to keep it all underground.”

I cease breathing, waiting for him to give me the rest. *Can it really be true?*

But I know he’s fucking with me the second his stoic expression breaks. “Come on, you can’t really believe those shitty tabloid and magazine stories, do you?”

My lips thin as I raise to sitting and tuck the towel in my lap. His mocking amusement at what I do for a living stings. Maybe celebrity gossip wasn’t what I always wanted to do, but most people don’t realize how much goes into writing and developing stories. All the tiring interviews, calls, emails, and insane amounts of research hours. It’s hard work.

“What about Leah?” I blurt, letting my irritation get the best of me. “There’s so much speculation about her but no one knows the truth.”

Marcus slowly moves to sit, keeping steady eyes on mine.

I wish I could take the question back, but it’s just there. Breathing between us like it’s come to life, taking up enough space to make me uncomfortable, and the irony of Alice’s suggestion to seduce him for information isn’t lost on me.

“I’ll answer that question after you’ve answered mine,” he says coolly.

My phone buzzes from the pocket of our backpack. At first, I ignore the two consecutive vibrations, but when I hear a third, I reach for the bag with a huff.

ALICE 'THE WORLD'S BEST EDITOR'

Publisher's breathing down my neck.

They want something soon.

Sinclair?

“What is it?” Marcus asks, surely noting I’m burning red.

After I’ve wrapped myself in the towel, I step over Jango to search for my discarded clothes, and all at once, I feel like an idiot for ever agreeing to this.

“Heather.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, but damn him.

Why does he have to sound so concerned? Why does he have to be so *different*?

My head swims dizzily as I recall Alice’s messages and the story that still isn’t written, but also just *not* there.

Marcus isn’t a player or a bad-boy, and he isn’t rude, hateful, or demeaning. From what I’ve gathered, his family isn’t even all that bad, and if I’m really searching for the facts here, then this is the scoop—Marcus Matthews is the complete opposite of everything I once thought was true, and I’ve been hopelessly charmed by him.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” I force the words from my throat, breaking a sweat.

If I cut this off, here and now, I can still come up with a decent enough article to satisfy my boss, leave the island, and forget any of this ever happened.

“Doing what? Enjoying each other’s company?”

He’s standing now, still naked, save for the rolled towel around his waist.

“You know exactly what I mean, Marcus.” Once I find my clothes, I click at Sparrow, who rises onto wobbly knees before standing. “Let’s get back before Penelope gets suspicious.”

“Actually, I don’t.” There’s an edge in his voice that wasn’t there before. “And let her get suspicious. I don’t care, and neither should you.”

I blink in disbelief. What does he mean he doesn’t care?

His shoulders flex with his clenching fists. “What’s gotten into you? I’m just making conversation.”

“Well, I didn’t agree to *conversation*.”

“So I’m just supposed to fuck you and walk away, then? Is that what we agreed to?”

“I said casual, Marcus, as in, a good orgasm for both of us here and there.” My hand visibly shakes when I point at the quilt we were laying on. “Not this.”

Stepping around Sparrow, I sling my clothes across her back before getting dressed.

I only manage to pull on my swim bottoms before he’s rounding her hindquarters. “Knock it off.”

My hand freezes beneath his when I reach for my top.

He holds it to Sparrow’s twitching coat, lowering his voice. “All I wanted was to get to know you. Is that really such a crime?”

“Yes.” *One that’s going to get me fired.* “Now let me get dressed, please.”

He squares off with me, crowding my space like always. “You’re not the only one who’s been disappointed by someone you loved. I get it, Heather. Foster care is rough, there’s no denying that. You don’t trust people because the first time you ever did, they abandoned you.”

The hair on the back of my neck bristles and my throat tightens. “Don’t do that. Don’t dissect me with what you think you know.”

“I see you. I understand you. That’s what I’m saying.”

Icy spikes protrude from my heart as swiftly as a switchblade. “What would someone like you understand about abandonment? You have *everything*, Marcus. What more could you possibly ask for?”

His jaw clenches as he swallows. “For starters, not having every one of my fuck-ups aired out for the public to tear apart, or maybe some honest friends other than the cousin who only tolerates me because we’re related. A family. Love and affection from a person who cares about the real me.”

Marcus consumes every particle of oxygen with each step he takes toward me.

I don’t understand. He’s said it before, but who is he really, if not the man devouring the heat from my skin with every brushing inhale.

Pulling my top and shirt free from his grasp, I spin to get away from him.

“Oh no you don’t. We’re going to work this out, one way or another.” He quickly moves around me to block my path. “So, if you’ve got anything else to say, slayer, then say it with your chest.”

“*Fine*. You want to know me that badly?” I swipe my arm down the length of my body to the mark on my right hip. “I hate this birthmark because it reminds me of the woman who birthed me but never wanted me. Oh, and here’s a scar from when I broke my leg while riding my bike, but my foster family didn’t want to cancel their summer vacation, so they left me with a designated caregiver just one week after I was released from the hospital.

“I hate being by myself, and I hate being cold. Yet, I live in one of the coldest cities in America, with no pets or roommates. I have no friends, no kids, no family to speak of, and I’m miserable.” I bark a vicious laugh, losing the strength in my voice. “I’m so fucking miserable inside this bubble I’ve created, Marcus, but it’s *safe*. So yes, getting close to people threatens that safety. Can you understand that?”

Sparrow side-steps nervously, and guilt beats at me to have upset her with our argument.

“It’s okay, Sparrow,” I say as steadily as I can. But at the sound of twigs snapping, Marcus flicks his gaze toward the trees.

“Get behind me, now,” he instructs, blocking me with his body when Sparrow rears her front legs up.

More branches and leaves rattle, but when Jango barks, wagging his tail happily, I know who’s found us before she utters a word.

“What the hell are you two—” Saddled on top of Churro, Penelope throws a hand over her eyes to block her view of us and shrieks, “Oh, my god, *titties!*”

My arms fold across my chest on instinct as I shout back at her, “It’s not what it looks like!”

Peeking through two fingers, she sees that I’m still mostly naked, and groans, “Heather, you’re topless. I think it’s exactly what it looks like.”

“Pen,” Marcus interrupts. “What the hell are you doing down here?”

He snatches the shirt from my hand and quickly yanks it over my head to cover me. Gripping the bottom tight, his wounded gaze clings to mine long enough to make me shudder. And for everything I listed that I hate, I hate myself for hurting him the most.

Sparrow bumps my hip with her face as I step around her, and by the time I reach the quilt, I’m choking back bitter tears.

“Dude, if it’s privacy you want, then send me a text or something next time,” Penelope remarks.

Embarrassment clogs my throat uncomfortably. I can’t bring myself to look at her when I say, “Oh, no, privacy won’t be necessary.”

I fluff the blanket more times than needed before cramming it and our towels into Marcus’s bag.

“Cat’s invited us all to dinner at her mother-in-law’s tonight. So once you’re done *canoodling*,” she inflects with a good dose of I’m-totally-judging-you-guys, “meet me at the ranch.”

Clicking at Churro, she guides him back into the forest, leaving no room for argument.

The backpack hangs limply in my arm when I eventually turn to Marcus. He dresses quickly, not meeting my stare, and then walks Sparrow to me without uttering a single word.

“Marcus, wait.” I half-heartedly reach for him, unsure where we stand or where the hell we’re supposed to go from here.

But he dodges my touch, heading for the forest with Jango by his side.



Marcus gives me the silent treatment the entire way to Cat and Vera’s, and he continues to ignore me even after we arrive. I challenge him with equally pensive silence, but the longer I’ve had to calm down, the more I regret blowing up on him.

The rich scent of homemade bone broth encompasses me, Penelope, and Cat as we work in the kitchen, helping Vera prepare dinner. I listen to Marcus and Sariah laugh as they kick a soccer ball back and forth out on the patio. They’ve set up two laundry baskets as goals, and every time he’s about to score, he finds a way to deliberately fumble so she can have the ball.

I shouldn’t be watching them as closely as I am, but after all the things he confessed to wanting in his life, I can’t help it. I’m also immensely grateful that Penelope hasn’t mentioned finding us together, and I pray she never does.

Cat’s oldest storms through the living room from the back hall with a pouty huff and plops down on the couch.

“Hey, Theresa.” I turn to wave at her, expecting one of her bubbly smiles to greet me, but she only offers a half-wave in return.

I don’t get a chance to ask her what’s going on before Vera points at me with a grunt.

Glancing at Cat for translation, she nods toward the cutting board with a smile a touch too chipper for someone with their hand up a dead chicken’s rear. “She wants you to chop the veggies.”

As someone who keeps the frozen TV dinner section at the grocery store in business, I don’t know the first thing about chopping vegetables, but despite myself, I give an enthusiastic, “You got it.”

Craning to peek at the couch, she calls for Theresa to come help.

“*Mom.*”

“Now,” Cat says with enough authority that even I straighten up.

After a bit of grumbling, Theresa drags her feet to the kitchen and makes her way beside me. She grabs a knife as long as her forearm and then hands me one of equal size.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she asks.

“Oh, no reason.” I source through my Girl Scout catalog for veggie chopping instructions and come up empty-handed.

After grabbing a basket full of potatoes, I remove one of the largest ones and prepare to chop. My tongue snakes out in concentration as I use the very tip of the knife to slice through the spud.

When I’ve made a decent-sized cut, I smile at my handiwork.

Not too shabby, Sinclair.

“Um, Heather,” Theresa says, already having chopped three times what I’ve managed. “What are you doing?”

I glance at the dirt coating the cutting board and the irregularly shaped piece of potato. “Is this wrong?”

Her little lips quirk. “You’re supposed to wash them first. And you cut them like this, not like that.” She takes a minute to teach me how to hold the knife properly, and what cuts to make to which vegetables.

“Thanks,” I say, glad to see her face brightening. Then I lean closer and lower my voice. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

She gifts me a full-blown smile and whispers back, “Yeah, that’s totally obvious.”

We share a laugh as we dump the veggies into the pot of deliciously aromatic broth.

“What’s so funny over here?” Penelope asks, snagging a stray carrot from my board. She breaks it into multiple pieces, then steps back before tossing one into the air and catching it in her mouth with a smug smile.

“Bet you five bucks you can’t do that,” she smarts to Theresa.

“Oh, yeah? Bet I can do it higher!” She grabs another carrot, lobbing it up and catching it with ease.

When it’s my turn, I toss it twice as high, and... completely whiff the bite.

“*Boo*,” Cat jeers, deciding to join our fun.

I wrinkle my nose at her, and when she sticks her tongue out at me as if we’ve been friends for years, I’m struck with such a heavy sense of belonging with these women that I have to brace myself against the counter.

“Here, throw it to me, Pen.” She trots to the other end of the kitchen and claps, readying for the throw.

I bump Penelope the minute she rears back, sending the carrot off course.

“Cheater!” they both shout at me, but somehow, Cat manages to scramble and catch it.

The room quiets when Vera shuffles toward me. There's a determined set to her jaw that has me shifty-eyed, glancing at the girls for assistance that doesn't come.

I'm shocked to my core when she stops in front of me before taking a piece of carrot from the board. A woman of a few words, Vera grabs my hand and slaps the chunk in the middle of my palm.

"Uh..." *Immediately no.* I refuse to be the person who hits this old woman in the face with a vegetable.

Theresa giggles, shaking her head when I secretly try to hand it to her, and to my absolute horror, Vera is now standing farther than Cat was, squatting in a sumo position with her mouth wide open.

She slaps her thighs with a grunt as if to say, *'Let 'er rip.'*

I glare at the carrot in my palm, slowly closing my fingers around it.

Please, for the love of all that is holy, do not miss.

I take a deep breath and ungracefully pitch the vegetable across the room. My trajectory is off by at least a foot, the carrot is spinning out of control, and yet—despite her age and four-foot-ten stature—she hustles to catch it.

It lands on her tongue and when Vera gives an approving grunt, I drag Theresa into my chest. We hug, jumping up and down as Cat and Penelope cheer. "I did it! Holy shit. I can't believe I did it."

When I spin toward the living area, I freeze, feet glued to the ground the minute Theresa wriggles out of my embrace.

Marcus stands with his hands in his pockets, watching me with unbridled amusement, and despite our earlier argument, a current snaps between us.

While everyone else moves to finish preparing dinner, I reach for the last piece of carrot.

It's no olive branch, but it might do the trick.

He rounds the couch, pulling me to him like a magnet and meeting me halfway.

“Want a turn?” I ask.

Translation: I’m sorry for being an asshole.

He studies my face quietly, starting with my brows, eyes, nose, and eventually, my lips.

After a torturous pause, he bends forward and wraps his lips around the piece I’m holding out for him. His tongue glides against the pads of my pointer finger and thumb—hot and reminiscent—before sucking it into his mouth with a playful wink.

Translation: You’re forgiven, slayer.

After dinner, everyone gathers on the patio to watch the fireworks being set off in town. Sariah stares up at a star-sprinkled sky, informing me that the fireworks signify the official end of *T’slasta*. But when I search for her sister, all I find are Marcus and Penelope, deep in conversation on the opposite side of the patio.

“Have you seen Theresa?” I ask Cat as she helps settle Vera into an old rocking chair.

“She’s probably hiding in her and Sariah’s room. I’ll grab her in a sec.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll check on her,” I offer, receiving a grateful smile.

“Thanks, Heather.”

I follow the path from the patio, through the living room, to the back hallway, stopping when I find a princess-pink room with two twin beds separated by a tent like the one at the bookstore. Inside are a variety of fluffy pillows and a handmade garland, full of tiny paper heart cut-outs.

On top of a mass of unicorn-colored blankets, Theresa lies on her back, staring up at the top of the tent.

I crouch next to her little feet and pretend to knock on an invisible door. “May I come in?”

Without moving, she flicks her brown eyes to mine and nods.

Shuffling inside, I lie down beside her, making sure I'm not crowding her space before grabbing the squishy taco pillow next to my face. Once I'm settled, I offer it to her. "Wanna *taco* bout it?"

"Are you gonna do that adult thing where you make me, even if I don't want to?"

"Absolutely not," I assure her. "You don't have to tell me anything you aren't comfortable with. But if you do want to talk, then I promise, your secrets are safe with me."

I offer her a pinky, and Theresa cracks half a smile, glancing down as she stuffs the pillow under her arm. "Okay, so there's this boy."

I roll onto my side, propping my head on my hand. "Give me the tea, sis."

When she turns to match my pose, I'm given an adorable, big-toothed grin. "His name is Thomas, and he's a grade older than me and super quiet. Like, I was totally sure he didn't like me, but then yesterday, after lunch, he kissed me." She rushes to add, "Only on the cheek."

"I see." My smile softens, wondering if he could be the source of her upset before dinner. "And did you like that he kissed you?"

"Mm-hmm. Except, he won't text me back now." Her chin dips as she plays with the tag on the taco. "Do you think there's something wrong with me?"

Oh, sweet girl.

I was not prepared for the slew of emotions this conversation would dredge up. The crushes, the boys, the feelings. When I was her age, I kept my head down and tried not to draw attention to myself. But honestly, I wish I'd given a few of those boys a real chance instead of locking my heart behind a steel door.

“There’s nothing wrong with you. Boys just have different ways of expressing themselves,” I say.

“They do?”

“I guarantee, Thomas is avoiding you because he really does like you.”

Her head tips in confusion. “Then why won’t he talk to me anymore?”

The same reason, I suspect, that fighting with Marcus is easier than giving in and accepting that he may genuinely care for me.

“Because finding the courage to kiss someone can make you vulnerable. And sometimes, when a person doesn’t like or understand those feelings, they avoid them.”

Her eyes widen as she says, “Ohh.”

I peer over at the door to see the very man taking up my thoughts, leaning against the doorframe. His arms and ankles are crossed, watching and listening with his lips quirking.

“Ladies,” he drawls, and I swear the two of us sigh, “I know I didn’t hear you in there talking about boys, right?”

I chuck the dragon pillow I’d been laying on at his head. “Get lost!”

Sitting up, Theresa pokes her head out of the tent and sticks her tongue out at him.

“Why you little...” Marcus unfolds his arms, and we fall into a fit of giggles, scrambling backward as he charges across the room.

“Heather!” Theresa gasp-laughs as he drags her out by the feet. “Help me!”

Sariah comes running through the door the moment he tosses her sister onto the bed.

“I’m gonna pee my pants,” Theresa cries as he tickles her relentlessly.

“No mercy!” Marcus snarls like a monster.

“Quick, the closet,” Sariah says, pointing to two foam swords.

I grab the purple handle while she reaches for the pink, and we descend on him with a fierce battle cry.

“Let go of my sister, beast.” Sariah whacks him across the shoulders while I stab his flank.

He whirls around, scooping her up with one arm and dumping her onto the bed beside her sister.

“Save us!” they shout through a fit of laughter.

“Your move, slayer,” Marcus goads, raising a brow at my weapon.

I toss the sword onto the ground, readying myself before rushing him. “Game over, buddy.”

Tucking my shoulder, I barrel into his side with all the force I can muster. He grunts, making the girls screech with joy when he cants to the side. But soon after, one strong arm whips out, wrapping me in an unrelenting hold.

“Got ya.” He smirks, and we all shriek when he pins us beneath his weight, tickling the three of us until our voices give out.

A loud *bang*, followed by four more in succession, has our laughter dying in our throats and leaving us frozen where we lie.

The girls glance at each other before wiggling free from the Marcus monster.

“Fireworks!”

Their feet slap the floor as they race for the door, vanishing around the corner.

The room goes silent except for the occasional *pop* outside and the blood whirring in my ears. Marcus lies between my legs, staring down at me with the kind of adoration reserved for a lover.

“You’re a natural,” he murmurs. “I appreciate you talking to her.”

“Of course,” I say, running my finger over the tip of his nose. “Boys can be stubborn jerks sometimes, but then again, so can I.”

“Don’t sweat it.” His lips pucker, pressing kisses to any spot on my palm he can reach. “I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

When he rests his cheek flat on my chest, my entire body sags. Those icicles protruding from my heart gradually retract as his warmth melts my insides.

“My favorite color is blue.” My throat tightens. “I never sleep naked in case there’s a fire and I’m forced to run out to the street, and I sing in the shower—often and terribly. I want to foster as many kids as I can someday, because I know I can protect them.”

“Well,” he murmurs, “now I can’t stop picturing you in the shower.”

“You truly are the worst.” A soft laugh bubbles up as I sniffle. “I’m sorry I lost it on you earlier.”

“It’s okay. Really.”

“No, it’s not. What you said to me, about not trusting people is true. I have been, and probably always will be, a bitter ice queen who doesn’t let anyone get too close because I’m a big fat coward.”

He lifts his head, bringing his hands to my face before tenderly sweeping his thumbs over my eyelashes. “Slayer, you know that isn’t true.”

“How so?”

“Because, if you were as cold-hearted as you claim, then this house wouldn’t be full of people who care about you.” His eyes trace the planes of my face, making my stomach flip. “I think it’s you who needs convincing that you’re so much more than everything that’s holding you back.”

My chest squeezes around a sob, forcing it back down, but I’m losing the battle.

Marcus climbs further up, shushing me softly as he kisses my tear-stained cheeks. “I can’t stand to see these. Tell me

how to make them stop.”

“I-I’m sorry. I can’t,” I whisper choppily.

“Let me make it better.”

He feathers his lips along my jaw, and more than anything, I want to believe he can. Marcus makes me feel empowered, needed, and cherished effortlessly, and it rattles my core, peeling back each of my layers until I’m fully exposed.

“I didn’t think we’d ever be here, like this,” he murmurs into the crook of my neck, “but I like it.”

I shiver when he squeezes me tight. “I like it, too.”

We let that declaration set up camp around us as we listen to the fireworks outside, signaling the end to one of the most magical weeks of my life.

The lies I’m keeping from him scrape their claws along my subconscious, making it increasingly harder to keep them silent. Because that’s the thing about secrets, the more energy spent concealing them, the more determined they become to expose themselves.

“I won’t be here much longer, Marcus.”

“Tomorrow,” he says by way of avoidance. “We’ll deal with whatever comes next then.”

Will we, though? It’s becoming our mantra at this point. One more tomorrow. One more night. As if we can truly put off the inevitable forever.

“Okay,” I say, meeting him halfway for a soft, sensitive kiss. “Tomorrow.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Marcus

A tingling sensation, followed by a vise grip around my cock, wakes me from the sweetest fantasy. I check the time on my phone with squinted eyes before stuffing it back under the pillow. It's four o'clock in the morning, and here I am, half-awake and pumping away with a fresh vision of Heather on her knees in front of me.

I try to resist the urge to continue, but it only makes my balls ache twice as much.

I wish it were her touching me, and I wish like hell she hadn't made that rule about not fucking in my bed. Because right now, I would be worshipping her.

I groan, knowing this torture was brought on by the longest, dick-teasing, make-out session in history after we made it home from Vera's. As tempted as I was to take what Heather was offering, she was emotionally spent, and instead of a quickie on the couch, I ordered her to relax in a nice hot shower.

And to think of me while she was at it.

Fucking hell. For all my supposed addictions, I'm a fiend for her. I crave the smallest tastes of Heather I can get. Especially the soft, sensual kisses paired with her constant challenging.

"Fuck it." Might as well finish.

Slicking my palm with spit, I wrap it around the tip of my throbbing dick. Still submerged in what I'd been about to do to dream Heather, I squeeze, pretending it's her hand choking my shaft instead of mine.

"Just like that," I whisper into the cool darkness of my room.

From my side, something weighs the edge of the bed down, and then I hear a pathetic chuffing sound.

Jango rubs his snout on top of the covers, wagging his tail happily.

"Jerking off in front of a dog." I glare at him in the dark. "That's a new low, even for me."

My phone startles me when it buzzes beneath my pillow.

"Shit," I say when I get a glimpse of who's calling. "Couldn't have picked a worse time."

Yanking my boxer briefs up with one hand, I stare at my phone, hesitating to answer. I'm not ready to have this conversation, but I guess it's about time.

With my stomach in knots, I slide the green bar to accept the video call.

"Hello, brother," an identical reflection of me says, instantly dowsing my veins with anguish, grief, and anger.

"Morton," I greet my twin.

It's been well over a month since the wreck that could have easily taken his life and thankfully, no one else's. I knew he would check-in once he was sober enough to start a new bender, but I didn't expect him to look so lifeless.

"Can't bother showing me that ugly mug?" he goads, searching the dark screen for my face.

"I'm sure you get enough of it plastered all over the internet." I click the lamp on the nightstand. "Especially after your most recent escapade."

Being a twin isn't as exciting as most would like to believe. We don't have telepathy or share any other inhuman

communication skills aside from a bond forged at birth. And before losing one-third of our triplet triangle, that bond was damn near unbreakable.

But now, all that's left between me and Mortie is a whole lot of baggage.

He sits in my recliner by the bay window of my Seattle home with an IV pole, a bag of fluids, and a line running into his arm beside him. "Where are Mom and Dad?"

"Out," he says without further explanation, and I grind my teeth. They're not supposed to be leaving him unsupervised.

Other than when Mom initially called for help with this whole mess, the only contact I've received from my parents was to tell me Mortie's agent set up an anonymous exchange for a photo of me—posing as him—at Pearl Beach.

This whole thing should have been another classic twin swap. Something we've done plenty of times in our lives. Only, it's not funny like it was when we used to prank our friends, cousins, and teachers.

"I didn't ask for this, you know," he says somberly.

It's strange seeing him this way. Haunted, instead of full of life like he used to be. But then again, we don't usually speak unless we have to. Like the last time he pulled this shit and I had to work on set for him or the time before that, when he drank himself into a four day depression and I had to attend the SAG awards on his behalf.

"Are you saying getting shit-faced drunk and high on coke, then crashing your Lambo was an accident?"

"Look, I understand you've disowned me, Marcus. But I want you to know that Mom asking you to get involved wasn't my call." He shifts in the chair. "I was going to go for real this time."

Was being the keyword.

I still remember the day we picked him up from the hospital. I hid in the back of the limousine, nauseated at the

sight of my brother beaten and bruised from the crash, while photographers swarmed him.

Even after all of that, it took one week for him to relapse, and that's how I ended up taking his place. But Dad was supposed to call once Mortie recovered. The deal was, one way or another, he would get him out of the court-ordered rehab agreement, and get me back home as soon as possible.

"It doesn't matter if you asked for this or not; this is what I do, right? I step in as you when *you* can't be."

I take a good, hard look at his hallowed cheeks and the circles under his eyes. He looks just like Leah did when she was sick, and the sight makes bile rise in my throat. "What's going on with you? You look like hell."

"Withdrawals," he admits, and for a moment, all I can do is stare in disbelief. "Fucking feels like I'm dying. Hell, I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy."

I hold my breath for three counts before slowly releasing it. "Why did you call, Mort?"

"We have a problem." He pans the camera to the computer in his lap with a still shot of a man who looks an awful lot like me—well, him. "Look familiar?"

My heart jolts at the sight of Heather flexing up on her tippy-toes to kiss me. Her hat perfectly covers my face through the next few images, just as she hoped.

That woman's too smart for her own good, but I guess whoever snapped that picture decided to sell it anyway.

"Can't keep your dick dry for more than a week before you pull this," Mortie says.

I clench a fist to keep from lashing out at him. He doesn't deserve my anger. He doesn't deserve the name I've allowed him to use. He doesn't even deserve my help after what he's put our family through.

"Mom said the debt collectors have resorted to making threats for payments, and that photographer was going to split his earnings with us after selling it to a tabloid. I was just

trying to help.” I scoot up to rest against the headboard. “That picture is weeks’ old anyway, so what does it matter? Let the tabloids speculate. There’s no actual proof that it’s you.”

He scoffs. “Somehow, the studio is just catching wind of it, and they’ve contacted my manager, wanting to know if I violated the rehab orders.”

Mortie pulls away from the screen, falling into a wrenching fit that has him clutching his side, and I lean forward to... what, offer him a shoulder to lean on? A hug or loving pat on the back, perhaps? It’s been too long since we had a relationship like that, and given he can’t put his family first when their lives depend on it, I’ve long since given up hope he’d ever make an effort to get it back.

I shift on the bed uncomfortably. “What did they say?”

“Gregorio made his stance on my sobriety explicitly clear. He’s keeping me on the show with strict conditions that I attend rehab for the ordered six weeks, or I’m done. Starting Monday, he wants weekly reports of my progress at the facility. Proof that I’m really sticking to it this time.”

Six weeks.

We’ve known the verdict since the day he received it. But Dad always pulls through with his connections to get him off the hook. I didn’t think this time would be any different.

“No one bothered to tell me your career was on the line.” My frown deepens at my parents keeping me in the dark.

“We didn’t know the studio was going to hold me to it until today. Dad’s still trying to find a loophole, but if I leave rehab early this time, it’s over.” His face is grim when the camera flips back around. “They’ll kill me off the show and cut me from the movie deal.”

I scrub a hand down my face. *Goddammit.* That movie contract is our one chance at finally getting on the other side of all this.

Then I can have my life back.

“I’m also calling to let you know I’m too sick to travel right now.” My brother stares for what feels like an eternity, all but begging me to stay here for him. “But I promise I’m done with this shit, Marcus. The last time was the last time. I mean it.”

It’s a lie. It’s always a lie.

“Dad’s going to fix this, or I’ll heal up enough to take your place. Don’t worry,” he finishes.

I twist off the bed, lowering my feet to the floor as a blanket of dread smothers me. We both know what he’s really saying. Either he weasels out of this, or I stay the rest of the six weeks.

He thinks I’ve disowned him, and I guess, maybe in spite, I allow him to think I have. Mortie’s addiction, and general apathy for seeking help, is a burden my parents and I have carried since we lost Leah, but the truth is I love my brother.

My gaze shifts to the photo of the three of us still sitting in the hidden compartment of the nightstand. I may not like the situation, but he’s all I have left, and I would crawl to the ends of the earth to keep from burying him beside our sister.

“What do you need from me?” I ask, equally grim.

“I want you to stay put until you hear from one of us again.” Then after a beat, he utters a frail, “Thank you, Marcus.”

When he disconnects our call, I glare at the screen until it fades to black. Every ounce of joy I’ve collected in my time here dissipates, leaving me hollow.

I open the nightstand drawer and carefully remove the bracelet I haven’t worn since Mortie left the hospital. I grab the folded-up picture of the three of us, arms slung around each other with three separate smiles boasting several missing teeth.

Almost all my life, I’ve been third-best. The triplet who would rather sculpt than practice the piano or take acting lessons. The one who sat in the very back of every recital and

rehearsal with a pencil in my hand and my nose in a sketchbook.

I may have cheered them on from a distance, but I never turned down an opportunity to help my brother with his lines or practice dancing with my sister. And when they both settled into their careers, I was proud of their accomplishments even though I hate the crowds, cameras, and flashy Hollywood lifestyle. It didn't matter because I knew it made *them* happy.

Somewhere along the way, my role morphed into consoling Mom whenever she missed Leah and Mortie, because she'd cry, and I hated her tears more than anything in the world. I helped Dad around the house, teaching myself how to fix drywall and busted pipes because he was, and still is, shit with any kind of tool.

The guilt of saying no to any of them became unbearable. All it took was a single twinge of disappointment, and I'd crumble.

Mortie and Leah had the kind of talent that put stars in our parents' eyes, and I became the one they depended on to come through. The voice of reason. The one who would take care of things that needed taking care of.

The thin gold chain slides through my fingers as the diamonds sparkle in the light. Heather has no idea of the truth, and the minute I tell her, the fragile amount of trust she's given me will wither and die.

She'll never forgive me for deceiving her.

"Is this what you wanted?" I ask my sister as if she could possibly hear me. "To give me signs, show me what it could be like to be happy, only to have it blow up in my face?"

I've felt isolation and I've felt despair, but this level of lost when it comes to what to do about her, is unsettling. I could be the asshole she once thought I was and push her away. I've been pretending to be the famous Marcus Matthews for so long, it wouldn't be that hard to pretend I don't truly care for her.

I utter a pathetic laugh because of course I care about Heather. And the thought of hurting her nearly brings me to my knees because I'm miserably, desperately in fucking love with her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Marcus

We lowered Leah into the earth on the coldest day in Los Angeles' history.

Mom held on to me and Mortie with everything she had—one arm around each of our backs, and we held her just as tight. Uncaring that we were grown men or that bending to accommodate her small stature put a crick in our necks and shoulders.

It was as if she knew if she let go, even for a second, we might disappear, just as her only daughter had.

Mortie sobbed with her, while Dad was quiet and still as stone. But me? I was suffocating in a way that didn't stop at robbing my lungs of air but left my body boneless.

Leah lay there in a pretty pink casket, arms crossed with her hair and makeup done, while a sea of paparazzi and media surrounded the fenced-off portion of the cemetery.

I could almost see my sister pouting beside me as she scoffed, "They got my lashes wrong."

I would have laughed if I hadn't been wilting from blood loss. Because losing her felt exactly like that—like I'd slit both wrists and waited for my turn to join her.

It felt like a cruel joke that after years of auditions and sacrifices, years of growing up half in, half out of my life, Mortie had finally landed his biggest role, only for Leah to fall sick.

“One of the rarest blood cancers known to man,” the doc had said after sitting us all down with her results in an office that smelled like rubbing alcohol and greed.

The chances of survival were practically zero.

Dad simply nodded as if the doctor had told him there was a slight chance of rain. Then, with Leah bawling her eyes out and Mom’s face the color of ash, he asked us to gather our things and proceeded to do what he did best—figure out our next step, no matter the cost.

Mom says when the three of us were born, we were never content unless we were together. No matter how hard she tried to get us to sleep in our own beds once we got older, she always found us in Leah’s, tucked into either side of her while we slept.

We protected her then and always. So how can I blame my father for stooping as low as he had? Reaching in to the darkest corners of Hollywood for help, desperately seeking a cure for a near-incurable illness.

Two men dressed in all black with nothing more than a single briefcase came to speak with us. They painted the experiments as ‘new age’ and ‘infallible.’ Just a signature on the dotted line and Dad’s princess, Mom’s pride and joy, and our best friend would go through a series of trials before she was as good as new and walking the runway once more.

I tried to talk her out of it, but Leah was the kind of person who was either all in or all out, leaving no gray area. And that doubtless surety was what made her such a star. She was never afraid of a challenge, and she’d already made up her mind.

Over the months following that meeting, her treatments were showing surprisingly positive results. After Leah’s accounts were drained, our parents sold some of our most valuable assets to keep on top of the looming debt and to maintain the Matthews’ public persona.

I took on more freelance projects, building furniture and creating sculptures for clients while working toward my dream of having my own woodworking business in Seattle. Mortie

showed up to set, bright-eyed and inspired, climbing his way to the top of the A-list, and together, we were making a difference. Best of all, our sister was going to survive.

Except, no one survives a cancer so new that it hasn't even been exposed to the general public, and within six months, Leah's health started to plummet.

We did everything, and exhausted every avenue, to try to save her.

But in the end, none of it mattered.

"Take this," she said to me when she was admitted to the hospital for the last time.

I took her most prized possession and cradled it in my hand. "Leah..."

Tears brimmed my eyes, but I held strong. I wouldn't let her see me break down, no matter how badly I wanted to.

"Don't think of it as a goodbye, Marcus. Just keep it safe for me."

And after carefully tucking it inside my pocket, that's exactly what I did.

Two weeks later, in that same hospital, I held her frail hand and recalled some of my favorite memories with her.

Like the time she wanted to give herself bangs but decided to practice on me first.

"You cut my hair so short it didn't touch my eyebrows." I smirked at her sleeping form. "Mom was so mad at us."

Or how she'd roll her eyes anytime I snuck myself a popsicle late at night, saying she still loved me, even though I was dumb for only eating the orange ones. Or the way she would hug someone tight enough to crack their ribs.

There wasn't anything about her that didn't add to how special she was, but it was her death and Mort's way of coping which ultimately shoved a wedge between us.

Leah was like a string of lyrics I could never get out of my head. The kind of song a person could sing on repeat and come

back to over and over again without getting tired or bored. She was brighter than every color in the rainbow, individually beautiful, and altogether unforgettable.

But Mortie was the one who was there any time we needed him. He would hype me up before I took a girl out because he knew I was always a sweating, nervous mess beforehand. He would stay up with me until the wee hours of the morning, playing video games, knowing I was shit at them but letting me win, anyway.

He could read me like a book and knew me better than I knew myself. Being friends with people came effortlessly for him, as did his talent for acting, and though I know that wasn't the path I was destined for, I've always wished I had his charisma.

I didn't cry at Leah's funeral, but I did that night in the hospital, knowing it would be the last time I saw her. I couldn't stand how disturbingly thin she was or that she couldn't hear me say how much I loved her.

And as I thanked her for being the best sister I could ever ask for, I cried until my chest cracked in half and my lungs gave out.

I cried for my mom and dad, and for our cousins and aunt and uncle, who were like second parents to us. And I cried for my brother, who would take this loss harder than any of us combined.

Unknowingly, I cried for the worst that was yet to come.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Marcus

A shifting breeze skates through the newly added barn windows and across my bare back as I sculpt the corner of the wood block I'm working on. After talking with Mortie this morning, I needed something to do to block out the chaos in my mind.

I replay our conversation for what has to be the tenth time, continuously coming back to him relapsing. These stints of his are getting too close together, but if he's experiencing withdrawals as he says, can moving forward truly be an option for him?

I sand the piece some more, reflecting on the love lost between us. How Mortie only visited Augustine a handful of times during our lives, and how he wasn't afforded the same adventures Leah, Pen, Carrie, and I were because he was too busy chasing an acting career.

Chunks of our childhoods which should have been spent together are gone, and there's nothing I can do for the kids we once were. But seeing what he's become has shaken me into wondering what I can do for the men we are now.

Sparrow stomps in her new stall behind me, whinnying and snorting for attention.

"Let it go, mare. You've already had your snack. Anything else and you'll end up overweight and unbreedable, like Bertha."

“Don’t listen to him, Sparrow. You’re nothing like that mean old bitch.”

I turn toward the woman plaguing my every thought, and shove the piece I was working on out of sight.

“I see you found some proper work attire,” I say, strangled by how beautiful she is in a pair of brown boots and a yellow sundress. The thin material falls loosely around her waist but accentuates her breasts with a subtle U-shape and capped sleeves before stopping just above her knees.

She places a glass of water on top of Sparrow’s stall before feeding her half an apple and murmuring how pretty she is. My heart pinches when Sparrow shoves her head toward her and peels her lips back, demanding more affection.

“No work for me today.” Heather beams at her furry friend before turning to me. “Perks of getting on the boss’s good side, I guess.”

That frisky smile stutters when her eyes fall to my bare chest. I watch her nibble her lip, and despite my bitter disposition, the secret I’m keeping, and the fact that I’m too far gone to detach from her, I desire the woman with untamable ferocity.

“I brought you something to drink.” she says, then boops Sparrow’s nose when she sniffs at the glass. “Figured you were working hard with all that clanging going on around here.”

Her timidness is a charming contrast to her generally feisty nature, and I’m guilt-ridden to receive this trust from her when she thinks I’m another man entirely.

Tell her. Just come clean.

“Thank you,” I say tightly before snagging a clean towel from the stack on my workbench and scrubbing it over my face and neck. I walk toward Sparrow’s stall and drape the towel over it before lifting the glass and taking three hefty swallows.

“So,” she drawls, walking her fingers across the wood timidly. “I was wondering if you wanted to go into town for

dinner later, um, with me?”

I'm not sure if her hands are shaking with nerves or excitement, but the elation I felt when I first saw her now forms a hollow pit in the bottom of my stomach.

“You're asking me on a date?” I stare at her swooping lashes, accenting her soft brown eyes.

“Yeah, well, I found a little spot next to the bookshop that has this giant dessert shaped like a swan. The whole thing's made of chocolate. It's seriously amazing.” She pauses when I glance between our feet. “Is everything okay?”

“Far from it,” I manage, confusing her into frowning.

My confession is on the tip of my tongue, but she's wearing dresses, flirting and smiling, and asking me on dates... I think about the way she's been slowly opening up, the tears she cried in front of me, and the admission freezes in my throat.

“Tell me what's wrong,” she demands in that no-bullshit way of hers.

“It's nothing,” I say too sternly.

“You're lying.”

We glare at each other as I struggle to remain cool and controlled, but after this morning, I'm wired too tight.

Stubborn as usual, she prods, “If you want me to leave, then just say so. But if I'm not allowed to shut down on you, then you can't shut down on me, either.”

This is the Heather I envisioned while in bed this morning. The version of her that's in tune with everything and ready to roll with whatever's thrown her way.

I admire that about her. Fuck, I *crave* it about her—our back and forth, and the way she's never afraid to go toe-to-toe with me.

“Should I see myself out, then?”

Capturing her chin, I give a slow shake of my head.

Had I really tried to convince myself I could live without her?

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that, vamp.”

The corner of my mouth tips up. “No.”

“Then ask me to stay.” Determination bleeds into her gaze, making my blood pump wildly. Somehow, more arrogantly, she says, “Go on.”

God, this woman.

“I would like you to stay.” I slip my hand around the back of her neck. “Please.”

Her citrus scent wafts around me as her breaths tickle and tease my lips. I’m terrified of how strongly I care for her, but the thought of losing her—of losing *this*—terrifies me more.

“Now, was that so hard?” she chides with a winning smile.

My lips part at the precise moment she kisses me. Her nails dig into my chest, delivering a sting that has my dick jumping for fucking joy. Dark, honey-blond tresses curl around my fingers as our mouths fight for dominance.

I capture every guttural whimper on my tongue, savoring each one like they may be the last.

“Tell me what you need,” she demands between kisses, using my words against me. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

Dopamine floods my pores at those words. No hesitation, no question. She bears her soul before me, and it’s the most beautiful goddamn thing I’ve ever seen.

“This might get messy,” I whisper, though I’m unsure if I’m referring to our future or what I want to do to her right now.

“I don’t care.” Heather flicks those beautiful, burning eyes up at me. “I trust you.”

Our chests heave as we stare at each other in heated silence.

Scorching-hot need splices through every brain cell shouting at me that this isn't going to end well, but I'm not listening. How can I when she's scrambling for my belt as if she can't stand another second without my cock buried inside her.

I swat at her greedy hands, smirking when I'm given a piercing glare as I pick her up. Our bodies do what they do best, molding together effortlessly, and I dive for those beautifully exposed breasts, rubbing my nose and chin against them before sucking the soft mounds hard enough to leave my mark.

"Ah!" Heather throws her head back as she clings to me.

Her dress crumples in my hold, rising up over her hips while I adjust my palms, grasping at the round curve of her ass.

In her stall, an agitated Sparrow stomps and grunts, undoubtedly scenting the arousal thickening the air.

"I had this dream, and *fuck*, you just couldn't keep your hands off me." I pause to devour half a nipple peeking out from the lacy U-shaped outline of her dress, loving how the scraping material paired with my mouth are driving her wild. "So I tied your wrists behind your back."

Heather's lips are blistering hot when she grabs my cheeks and forces my mouth on hers again. "Did I like it?"

I hold her tight, grinding against the tantalizing heat between her thighs with a growl. "Loved it."

The impression of her smile on my lips makes me shudder. "Then do your worst, vamp."

I blindly swipe for the latch on the stall to release our friend, and Sparrow clomps around us with her tail and ears flicking cautiously.

Heather pauses long enough to reach for the mare, giving her a firm smack on the hindquarters, and she releases a high-pitched neigh before taking off for the pasture.

I set her on her feet to close the doors, then stalk my way back to her. A shiver trembles her body, spurring a predatory side of me that she doesn't shy away from.

"You said to tell you what I need," I whisper against the shell of her ear as I peel the sunflower-yellow dress from her body, agonizingly slowly. A pair of rose-pink nipples harden beneath my stare, and I swallow the saliva pooling on the tip of my tongue. "I need release, and not just an orgasm. What I need is to be in control for a little while."

To be selfish for the first time in my life.

Holding my stare, her hand travels to the pathetic scrap of lace barely covering her center. Anticipation twitches my fingers when she rolls hers over her swollen lips. "My body is yours, Marcus. Take from me if that's what you want, but I'm offering myself freely."

"Heather." I flick my gaze up to her beautiful face. She can't know what those words do to me.

She tugs her panties aside, giving me a peek at her, glistening and ready. "I don't know what's going on in that head of yours, but you've taken care of me countless times. Now, I want to take care of you."

With permission granted, I move her hand before tucking my face into her neck. When I slip my palms under the thin sides of her panties to palm her supple cheeks, I ask, "Did I just see you touching yourself, Heather?"

"Y-yes," she says eagerly.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed it," I say before biting her flesh, "because it'll be the last time your hands are free to do so."

Her breath hitches as I haul her into my chest.

I tease my fingers beneath the length of her thong, pulling it to the side before slipping them inside her tight warmth from behind.

"Marcus." My name on her lips is a caress of sun-soaked silk, followed by hisses and moans of pleasure that have my

dick hard enough that I'm seeing stars. "I want to touch you—*ah*—make you feel good."

"And you will," I whisper, kneading my way over her hips toward her front. Traveling down to her scorching hot clit to swirl the liquid surrounding it before re-entering. "But I want you to come for me first. Can you do that?"

She pants into my chest, eyes slammed shut and face flushing beautifully.

"Will you come for me?" Her head bobs, and I laugh softly. "Of course you will."

It takes three more swift pumps, two passes of my thumb over that sensitive bundle of nerves, and one bite to her shoulder before an instantaneous orgasm forces her walls to clamp, trapping my fingers inside.

"Fuck yes, that's it." I gently corkscrew in and out, massaging the rest of her orgasm from her. "We're going to do that again, but this time, I want you to stay very still, and push as hard as you can when you hit that peak, understand?"

Strands of her hair puff with each breath as she bobs her head.

"Spread your legs wider for me," I coax. "There you go. Good girl."

I steadily increase the speed and pressure between her legs, relishing the slickness I've created and the sweet, tormenting scent of her previous orgasm. When her thighs shudder, she leans more of her weight against me, and I gladly support her.

Eyes rolling back on a moan, she digs her nails into my arms, staying perfectly still as I've asked. "That's too good, Marcus."

"Then maybe I should stop." Though she's out of luck because I'm not stopping until my hand is drenched and she's too weak to argue.

"Don't. You. Dare." She grits her teeth, and then shouts, "Ohh!"

Her mouth goes slack as I curl my fingers inside her, and Heather bears down, clenching hard enough that a rush of hot liquid soaks my palm and drips down my wrist.

“Yes, look at you. Such a good, good girl coming so much for me.”

I shake with the forceful need to claim her. My dick throbs excruciatingly, but I endure the pain which fuels my darkest pleasures. Edging myself in a way that drives me to the brink, and now, it's her turn.

Her hazy eyes fall to my erection straining against my jeans.

“Go ahead,” I command. “Take them off.”

Determination greets me when our gazes clash once more. Ready to please, she fervently removes my boots and the rest of my clothing, and when she steps back, she homes in on the middle of my pelvis with starving impatience.

An intrusive wave of possession hums through me. *Mine. All mine.*

“Do you want to know why I enjoy binding you?” I ask, reaching for the corded rope hanging from the hook inside Sparrow's stall, as well as a thick saddle pad.

“Yes.” Heather's eager tongue wets the seam of her lips, and the orgasms I gave her darken her cheeks pink.

One loose loop at a time, I wrap the rope around my palm, taking pleasure in the way she watches my flexing arms.

“Because bondage gives me that sense of control I told you I needed. And given how little I seem to possess when it comes to you, well...” Cock twitching under her rapt attention, I step behind her. Moving her hair to one shoulder, I whisper against the sensitive spot just under her ear. “I'll take it where I can get it.”

She moans as I brush my hands down her biceps to her wrists, rolling her ass backward in search of me.

“Communication is key. If at any point you want to be freed, you tell me.” I tug her wrists behind her and begin a

double-column tie. Once the rope is knotted through the middle, I double-check she's heard me with a firm smack against that pretty little ass. "Do you understand?"

She jolts with a sharp inhale that makes my dick seep with precum. Her fingers twitch, testing the binding before she finally utters, "Yes."

"All right, then." I position myself at her front, reveling in her shuddering breaths as I grin. "On your knees, slayer."

Heather's breasts bounce when she drops to the pad. Goosebumps litter her chest, budding her nipples as she catches her balance.

"This is exactly how I saw you." I swipe a bead of liquid off the tip and brush it across her lower lip, "eyes wide, lips parted."

Sucking on her bottom lip, she whispers a needy, "I'm ready. Please."

My hands splay over her cheeks as I step closer.

"You'll let me know if you want to stop." It's not a question, but a demand.

Instead of answering, she smirks, then lunges forward, taking me all the way inside the silky heat of her mouth.

"Ah, fuck!" My balls seize, and my dick jerks against her teeth.

Ecstasy like nothing I've ever known bristles up and down my thighs.

"Easy." I stroke the front of her throat, feeling her muscles flex as she works me. When she scrunches her eyes tight, I murmur, "Breathe through your nose."

Her answering hum vibrates through my shaft and up my spine. My head tips back with a sigh. *Pure fucking heaven.* That's what Heather's wicked tongue feels like as she sucks me deep with hallowing cheeks.

"Add some pressure with your teeth."

Curious, she flicks her gaze up, and I chuckle softly. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

My fucking toes curl when her lips peel back, flashing ivory as she does as she’s told.

I tenderly wipe the corners of her mouth as I take control, gliding in and out. “You’re doing such a good job. I love how well you take me, Heather.”

Not once does this wild woman falter as her teeth rake over the tight skin of my cock.

“Harder,” I whisper, craving the pinching pain. I moan when she immediately complies. “I think you like obeying me, don’t you?”

That familiar fire, full of spite, burns in her eyes, earning her another low laugh when she attempts to retreat. Palming the back of her head, I hold her still a second longer. “I’ll admit, I do love our little games.”

By the time my hand finds her chin to pry her jaw open, she’s shuddering with need. I nearly bust when I spot a rivulet of arousal trickling down her inner thigh.

“Come here.” My voice is hoarse as I pull her to her feet and quickly yank the knot loose.

Once I’ve positioned her in front of the empty stall across from Sparrow’s, I nudge her feet apart, coating the tip of my cock as I glide deep into her heat.

“You have no idea how badly I needed this. How badly I needed you.”

But then, she did, didn’t she? And she’s given me something no other woman has or ever will again.

My heart thunders in my chest, singing her praises as I slide all the way home, and growl. “I would hold on to something if I were you.”

Heather’s hands slap around the top of the door as she cries out for me, “Oh, yes.”

“This... amazing...” It’s all I can manage as that perky ass grinds into my pelvis as I spear my cock in and out of her decadence. The tang of sex fills my nose and lungs, driving the most primal parts of me absolutely mad.

Huffing a breathy laugh, she finally smarts off, “So eloquent.”

I smirk, nearing the edge, but unwilling to jump if she’s not right there with me. My hands roam as she uses the door as an anchor.

“It’ll never be enough.” I split two fingers around her clit, gliding along the forked nerves surrounding it. “I’ll never get enough of us, Heather.”

“Don’t stop. I’m so close,” she urges.

She frantically swipes around until her hand latches onto my wrist, the same way she had on our ride with Sparrow, silently asking me to stay.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I comfort her. Those thighs quake as I protectively curl my body around her back, thrusting deep and long. “Feel me right here, and let go with me, please. It’s the last thing I need from you.”

Loud, shuddering moans are music to my ears when she finally does, spasming fiercely enough to milk my release along with hers.

“Marcus,” she pants my name, her body going slack as she comes back to me.

I stay put a moment longer, holding her, feeling every pounding beat of our hearts as they sync together.

“Wait here,” I murmur at her temple, pressing a kiss over the dampened spot.

Snagging a clean cloth from the edge of my workbench, I wet it at the sink before grabbing Heather’s dress off the ground and shaking it out.

When I return to clean her up, a fresh rosy-red colors her arms, shoulders, and cheeks, highlighted by a thin sheen of sweat.

I capture her pink lips sweetly. “Are you aware you’re blushing, slayer?”

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t blush.”

I kiss the tip, pulling her into me so her ear rests against the center of my chest. “You do when you’re with me.”

Sunlight peeks through the cracks above, refracting through the barn that meant so much to me as a child but means more to me now that it’s whole again and serving a purpose.

“Thank you,” I say thickly, desperately trying to get a hold of my emotions, all while refusing for this to be the last time we’re together this way. I’ll burn the whole goddamn world to keep her if I have to.

“You’re welcome.” She kisses my chest before resting the tip of her chin on my sternum, gazing up at me affectionately.

I swipe my thumb over her cheek and decide that I’m going to talk to Pen about my conversation with Mortie and my feelings for Heather. She’ll know exactly what to do—she always does.

“I’m never letting you go,” I say, hugging her to my body as tight as I can. Then I press my lips to her forehead. “How’s that for eloquence?”

CHAPTER TWENTY



Heather

Sinclair,” Alice barks when I answer her call.

“Mm-hmm?” I squint sleepily at my brightly lit phone screen.

She sits at her desk, prim and proper as ever, in a light-pink suit and only the finest quality makeup accenting her beautiful dark complexion.

“Wake up. I have something important to tell you,” she says while shifting her gaze around her office.

Stretching in bed is nearly as orgasmic as Marcus tying me up in the barn yesterday. My forearms and shoulders are minimally sore, but the pulsing reminder of him between my legs will need to be taken care of soon.

“I don’t believe it.”

I absently wonder what time it is, as I yawn. “Don’t believe what?”

“You’ve been dick-matized.”

The remark startles me enough that I drop the phone on my face.

“Shit,” I groan, swiping around for the device before sitting up.

I rub my forehead, but when I catch sight of her judgey eyebrow, I scoff, “Me, sleeping with the enemy? Absolutely not.”

“Tell that to your sex-drunk eyes,” she counters.

I inspect my face in the tiny window of our video call.

I suppose I do have a certain glow.

“Oh, and the hickeys on your tits are a dead giveaway.”

Three splotchy purple marks are scattered over my cleavage. And I’ll be damned, I do blush.

“All right, well you’ve got me there,” I grumble, but my heart is steadily filtering adrenaline, waiting for whatever bomb she’s called to drop.

More pushy than usual, she cuts to the chase. “Just tell me you got the answer we were searching for?”

I may have learned that Leah is indeed, dead, but who was wearing her bracelet in the picture Alice sent me remains unsolved. But uncovering half the truth won’t be enough. She’ll want to know who was in that photo, and she’ll expect me to have the answer.

“I did,” I say, not willing to elaborate before I’m able to make a solid plan.

Relieved, Alice raps her knuckles on her desk. “Good, because I just got out of a meeting with the publisher, and he wants your story now.”

“What do you mean *now*?” I shake my head, grasping for a lifeline. “I’m still gathering some finer details.”

“You’ve been on the island for almost a month.”

After tossing the phone on the bed, I stand to put on my robe.

It hasn’t been that long, has it?

My brows pinch as I recount the date, only to find she’s telling the truth.

Alice heaves a sigh. “I know you’re living as if you’re on vacation, but you do realize you can’t stay there forever, right?”

“Of course I do.” My tone is uncharacteristically defensive. “I just thought I had more time.”

“Look, you’re my best girl. I know you’ve been working hard, but *Luster’s* reputation is riding on this, and it’s not just you who will have to answer to the big guy if you don’t deliver what was promised.”

I want to remind her that she basically conned me into taking this assignment when she flew me here, only to drop the Leah bomb on me after the fact. But then, I understand why she did it.

I’m dependable, quick on my feet, and I would never say no to an opportunity to prove my skills. And because, at one point, I was the girl who had nothing to lose.

Only now I feel as though I’m about to lose everything.

Ashamed by how easily I’ve lost sight of my purpose here, I swipe my phone off the covers and carry it with me downstairs.

“I need you to follow through, Sinclair.”

The pressure I’m under weighs every step like my feet are coated in cement, and guilt strikes my temples with the beginnings of an unforgiving headache.

“When am I supposed to return?”

“I convinced the team to give you three days to wrap up any loose ends,” she says simply. “It’s more than the bosses wanted to give you, but I know you’re a perfectionist. I’ve got your back.”

I give a curt nod, though my insides are being shredded to bits. Three days to figure out the biggest piece of the puzzle, then I’ll disappear without a trace and hope a good, long stint in therapy will be enough to get me through the heartache.

“I’ll email you the return flight information shortly,” she says with her stern, I-mean-business, voice.

“Understood.” My hands tremble when I disconnect our call. The clock in the top corner of the screen reads 5:08 a.m.

I slam the device face-down on the kitchen counter as my stomach pitches. I grip the edge of the sink as a sick, dizzying sensation dries out my mouth.

“How could I have let this happen?”

I retch repeatedly, clinging to the edge as the room spins. Tears prick my eyes, but nothing comes up, leaving my queasy stomach roiling.

My arms shake with anger at myself, at the unfairness of it all, but mostly, that I’ve broken every one of my rules where Marcus is concerned when I should have known better.

He said he was going to keep me. He said he was never going to let me go. And as he held me in the barn where precious memories with Penelope and his sister were made—where he’s given a mare he refuses to admit he adores a new place to rest, commanded a pretend pirate ship, and eventually commanded *me*—I ripped my frozen heart open and allowed the warmth of those words to thaw it like the affection-starved girl I’ve always been.

My lips tremble, stomach clenching again as the anxiety and instability of my time in the foster system batter me into a corner.

I rub my palm over the twinge in the center of my chest. If Marcus discovers I’m a journalist, the last thing I’ll have to worry about is a stupid NDA.

Ping.

I swipe the corner of my mouth with my wrist, casting a quick glance at my phone. Snatching the stupid thing off the counter, I unlock it to find Alice’s email, along with several others left unanswered in my inbox.

By the time I scroll through the fifteenth email, my thumb freezes on the screen. “What the hell?”

I hover over a message from none other than Ellis Turner, time-stamped twenty-three hours ago.

Acid rises in my throat as I scour every single word, punctuation mark, and syllable for the punchline to what has to

be a joke.

I've got information on the Matthews you're not going to want to pass up. How about a trade?

"No." I scrub my hands over my face and into my hair, yanking on the roots. "There's no way he's serious."

I don't know what he's still doing on the island, but I do know I can't trust Ellis as far as I can throw his cocky British ass.

That niggling sensation in the back of my mind refuses to quiet. Alice's call was a reality check; a hard slap in the face to wake me up from the fantasy I've been living in Augustine.

Because that's exactly what's been going on here.

Stripping away what brought me to Topica Bay to begin with, how the hell would Marcus and I ever make 'us' work? As far as the entertainment industry is concerned, we're fated enemies.

I scan Ellis's message two more times, thinking maybe this was the push I needed to remind me we're better off that way.

I respond with a heart-pounding:

I'm listening.

With a day between responses, I don't expect to hear from him for while, but it takes less than five minutes of pacing the floor for him to reply.

Meet me at the volleyball courts in Butterfly Cove. Ten o'clock. If you're late, no deal.

I exhale sharply, reaching for my phone to call Alice, only to pause. I already know what she's going to say. *He's a snake. A liar. Don't be an idiot, Sinclair.*

But isn't exhausting every resource exactly what she wants from me?

"Sorry, Alice. Desperate times call for desperate measures."



“Bloody hell. What on earth are you wearing?” Ellis scoffs, his eyes widening as I approach the picnic table where he sits beneath a giant umbrella.

I flip the tail of the crocheted scarf I borrowed from Lucy’s closet over my shoulder, not bothering to sit. “It’s called fashion. Look it up.”

I’ll admit, I’m already breaking a sweat beneath the thick, itchy material. But after four failed attempts to cover Marcus’s hickeys with makeup, and the discovery of two more marks on the side of my neck, it’s doing the job.

He scoffs, “Faux pas, more like.”

“I didn’t come here to mince words, Turner.”

Running the tip of his thumb across his bottom lip, he steeples his hands on the table. “Regardless of what you may think, I like you, Sinclair.”

“Bullshit.”

Ellis is the handsome type, sure. Any woman with eyes could see that. And he carries himself with such confidence, it’s difficult not to appreciate his good looks. But unlike Alice, I’m not so easily swayed.

“That right there, love.” His smirk dimples the sprinkling of gray scruff along his defined cheeks and jaw. “The balls you have to call a man out and do whatever it takes to get your story is what makes you great at what you do.”

I huff a mirthless laugh. “No amount of flattery is going to make me trust you. I know you’re up to something, so just spit it out already.”

Raising his palms in submission, he says, “I know the Matthews have become one of many interests for *Luster* over the years, which explains why I found you hiding in a bush

several weeks ago.” He sits unnaturally still, putting me more on edge. “I also know that you’re the journalist who leads the gossip column which garners such incredible ratings for them.”

“Unsurprising, considering you got the last columnist fired.” A statement meant to throw him, though he remains unwavering.

“Yes, a low point for a starving photographer, and one I’ve come to regret.” Sitting back, his mouth drops into a frown. “Surely you can relate to climbing the proverbial ladder and the sacrifices it takes.”

All too familiar with these games, I almost laugh, but I pin a finger on the table instead. If I want information out of this cocky son of a bitch, I’ll have to squeeze it out of that overinflated ego of his.

Rule number four: When it comes to gaining intel, apply as much pressure as necessary to get your answer.

“Actually, I can’t relate. Because, at the end of the day, you’ll always be chasing a dollar sign while I’m chasing the truth.”

I can see the hard set of his jaw and the slight flare of his nostrils, and I know I’ve rattled him. For a dash of added flair, I smirk. “And since you respect my balls so much, why don’t you give them a nice little smooch before I go?”

His gaze narrows dangerously, but he’s got that look in his eye that says he’s seconds from cracking.

“See ya ‘round, Turner.”

It’s as I turn that he croons, “Sinclair.”

Got him.

I slowly twist over my shoulder to find a manilla folder clasped in one greedy paw. “About that trade.” Flicking it open, he flashes the first page of a document with a generic depiction of a human body and a red stamp of authentication across the bottom right corner.

“Is that what I think it is?”

He snaps it shut with a flick of his hand. “The elusive autopsy for one Leah Nicole Matthews.”

“W-where did you find it?” I stammer.

I must have majorly pissed off the universe for it to place my golden ticket in the hands of this asshole.

“My sources matter not. I’ve shown you proof of its authenticity. Now, here is what I want.” Taking his time stuffing the folder into his bag, he rises from the table and takes two generous steps toward me. “You give me a full-face image of Marcus Matthews galavanting outside of rehab, and in exchange, I will give you this report.”

My stomach pinches with dread. “Why would I have any idea if Marcus was released from rehab?”

Ellis smiles, cruel and crooked as he reaches for my scarf. I jolt away from his touch, but not before he exposes the marks trailing up my neck. “Because you’re the woman who blocked my shot, of course.”

He has me right where he wants me, and we both know it.

“I was contacted by an anonymous agent for the Matthews, who proposed a deal. They offered to tip me off to Marcus’s location in Pearl Beach for a sixty-forty split if I provided them the image to submit.”

The photographer that day was Ellis?

Shock splinters my system, and my journalist instincts are vibrating like Spidey senses.

“Of course, I had no intention of following through, but imagine my surprise when a woman of the same build, wearing this very hat, *smooched* my target.”

“Why would the Matthews pay a paparazzi to split the earnings?”

He pauses, reveling in the sheer joy of throwing me off my game. “Celebrities pay us for these things all the time, love. Helps keep them relevant and such.”

That would make sense if I hadn't overheard Marcus's conversation with Penelope that day in the barn, but who the Matthews owe money to, and why, have yet to be revealed.

"Why offer this to me and not just sell it?"

"A three-year-old autopsy report isn't nearly as valuable to me as the photo I'm after." He shrugs. "You may have ruined that shot, but there are a number of magazines with calls out for images of Marcus Matthews worth *thousands*, and I want a piece of the pie."

I glare at his bag, and noting my obvious struggle, he pats it as if it's a prized object. "Just think how you'll be praised for writing such a scandal. I've heard rankings have been less than enthusiastic lately, even with talent such as yours."

I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he's right. When I was hired, *Luster* was in the top ten most-resourced magazines, both virtually and in print.

Now we're lucky to be in the top thirty.

My head spins with what feels like an impossible decision. After everything we've been through... After everything I know... Could I honestly sell Marcus out to Turner in exchange for the answers I desperately need?

I don't want to make a rash decision, I've made plenty of those as it is, but the clock is ticking.

"Give me time to work some things out."

Ellis's eyes roll as he shifts his weight, but I cross my arms in challenge. I need time to clear the mud. One last-ditch effort to get to the bottom of everything Marcus is hiding. Then, and only then, can I make a conscious decision.

"You've got until sundown tomorrow, or I'll release it to the highest bidder." He sneers as he steps around me. "Don't disappoint me, Sinclair."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Heather

“Hey!” Pen beams from the entrance of the stables, sweaty-faced in a pair of dirty jean overalls and an old gray shirt. “I’ve been looking for you.”

As if the word *traitor* is stamped in red ink across my forehead, I duck my face and finish walking one of their chestnut mares into her stall. “Hey, sorry. I just got back from riding Biscuit.”

My hands nervously fumble with the straps of her saddle as I undo it.

“Don’t apologize, silly. I just wanted to thank you for your help around here today.” She wipes her brow with a rag before stuffing it in her back pocket. “I really needed to fix the tear in the chicken coop, and Marcus is still helping corral a herd of sheep on the loose in town.”

“No problem,” I say, picking up the pace.

Once the heightened anxiety of meeting with Turner subsided, I considered calling Alice and coming clean.

She said she had my back, but with the pressure we’re both under, she’ll be forced to keep the publisher’s best interests in mind. And the thought of failing her procures a sense of guilt that’s going round for round with the guilt of betraying Penelope and Marcus.

“I need to ask you something,” Penelope says from behind me, sending my heart rate through the roof.

Clutching the leather cinch, I utter too tightly, “Sure.”

She steps into the stall, and leans an elbow up on Biscuit’s rump, watching me resume unbuckling and unwinding the rest of the straps. “How serious is this thing between you and Marcus?”

I swallow the dread thickening my throat.

Not even two days ago, I was on my knees for the man, tied up and vulnerable, with an undeniable desire to ease whatever had him so pent-up. In the barn, Marcus’s burdens became mine to bear, and I did so willingly, savoring how good it felt to relinquish all control to him.

But today I need answers.

“Why do you ask?”

“Look, I like you, Heather, I really do. But surely you understand how much Marcus means to me.” She slides the saddle pad off Biscuit’s sweat-drenched back while I grab a brush for her matted fur. “I know as well as you what the media says about him, but the truth is our family has been through a lot, and I don’t want to see him hurt.”

Lying awake all night, I ran through every scenario I could think of to gain the intel I need without giving Turner what he wants. I can’t trust him. I know it in my gut, but still, I kept coming back to reality.

I care about Marcus, and I *don’t* want to hurt him. But what I want no longer matters. I knew what I came to this island to do, and there’s too much at stake to forfeit it for a fantasy with a man who was never mine to have in the first place.

I fall silent, unable to offer the reassurance she’s searching for, and eventually, she asks, “When are you leaving?”

“Soon.”

Penelope considers this for a moment. “Have you told him?”

I smooth the brush down Biscuit’s fur, focusing on the soft *snick* of each stroke, but I’m close to the breaking point, and I

need to get away from her before I let my emotions derail me completely.

“I genuinely appreciate you playing matchmaker here, Pen, but I think it’s best we just leave well enough alone.”

She watches her fingers glide through a few strands of Biscuit’s tail, twirling them idly. “Actually, I was going to say that I think it would be best if you ended your relationship once you leave Topica Bay.”

The brush freezes as I slowly digest what she’s said.

I close my eyes, begging myself not to fold. To stay strong in my mission to find the answers I need. But hearing the woman I’ve come to consider a friend say she doesn’t want us to be together stings.

Why? I don’t fucking know. Probably because even though I know it’s what needs to happen, I didn’t expect her to give me a realistic answer. Somehow, through all this mess, I needed her to give me an insane solution. One that would somehow give us all a happy ending.

Placing a hand on my shoulder, she says, “Save yourselves the heartache, Heather.”

That’s impossible when my heart’s aching already.

“And what about us? Should we just pretend we were never friends?”

I shrug out of her hold, and Biscuit shifts, sensing the hostility bubbling up inside me.

Don’t you see? my inner-child hollers. This is how you get hurt.

“We’re still friends, Heather.” She turns to me, and the hurt pinching her face guts me. “Why do you think I’m saying this to you? I’ve been through this hell. I’ve desired something I couldn’t have, and I don’t want either of you to suffer.”

I just want her to stop. *Stop* pouring salt into the wound. *Stop* making sense. *Stop* thickening the layers of everything I’m questioning like, what’s motivating her encourage me to forget about him.

Sweat breaks across my forehead by the time I drop the brush into an empty stall bucket, and then collect the saddle.

“Maybe you can answer a question for me,” I say, meeting her worried gaze. “At the bonfire, Ernesto told me Marcus wasn’t who I believed him to be. What does that mean?”

Penelope slowly shakes her head. “I can’t answer that.”

My nails dig into the worn leather saddle. I’ve never felt more hopeless than I do right now. I don’t want to take Turner up on his offer, but with Penelope pushing me out, how the hell am I supposed to get the answers I need?

I exit Biscuit’s stall, but Penelope quickly follows to block me. She takes the saddle out of my arms with a frown marring her pretty face. “I’m sorry, Heather.”

“Don’t be.”

Chest pounding, I turn to slide the stall door shut, only to cry out in pain when the meaty part of my palm gets slammed between it and the latch.

Penelope drops the saddle before rushing to grab my wrist and assessing the damage. A steady flow of blood drips to the floor from a flap of skin that’s been torn from my palm.

Without hesitation, she removes the rag from her pocket and winds it around my hand.

“It doesn’t look like it needs stitches, but we can clean and wrap it properly with the first aid kit that’s inside the house.” She tugs me to follow, but I pull out of her grasp.

Adrenaline zips through my bloodstream in the form of tiny spikes, sending *ah-ha* signals to my brain.

“I know where it’s at,” I say sharply, letting her speculate what I’m implying.

I’ve just been given a free pass to snoop through their home, and I don’t have a second to spare for morality.

Without argument, her hand falls limply to her side, and I finally find the courage to turn my back on her.

Hurt becomes my driving force. The thing that gives me the strength to push open the front door once I've made it up the drive to do what I have to do next.

The living space is enormous, with two separate halls flanking it, but from memory, I follow the one that leads me to the master bedroom where Marcus cleaned me up the first time.

I tamp down the sensations of his essence flooding the room and threading its way through my body as I enter the bathroom. I crouch in front of the sink, opening the cabinet to search for the first aid kit.

Blood slowly tinges the white gauze once my palm has been thoroughly cleaned and rewrapped, but the pain barely registers over my desire to uncover the truth.

Left to my own devices, I pad across the room to the window and look to see if Penelope has wandered up to check on me. When I make out her silhouette still inside the stables, I peek down the hall and listen for any movement inside the house.

Then I get to work.

I open Marcus's closet and carefully snoop through boxes and pants pockets for notes or any sort of clue. When I come up empty-handed, I move on to a six-drawer dresser, but the more I search, the more clarity I find in the suspicions I've been distracted from.

I pace, recalling each one, starting with Marcus never recognizing me, followed by his confusion when I mentioned his breakup with Bianca—both of which I initially dismissed given his arrogance and celebrity entitlement. Which brings me to number three on the list, reminding me that neither of those things fit the man I've come to know.

Fourth is that Marcus was admitted to rehab for alcohol and drug abuse, but not once have I witnessed him reaching for a drink or seen a tell-tale shudder of withdrawal.

All of my questions come into focus now.

The way he takes his coffee, how he respects the women in his life, including the mare that grates his every nerve. Those rough, calloused hands that are so different from the smooth, soft one I shook the first time we met. The messy way he styles his hair, and Penelope refusing to elaborate on Ernesto's warning.

Lastly, and most importantly, is Alice's photo. The one with Marcus's face turned toward the camera as he enters a limousine and another person hidden by shadows, wearing Leah's bracelet.

Suddenly, finding the why behind it all becomes less about my job, and more about who the hell I've been spending the last month with.

On the left side of the bed, I find some of his uncle's belongings inside a side table, but when I move to search the one on the right, I pause.

"Give me something here," I mutter.

The top and bottom drawers are empty, except for a pearlescent Bible with his aunt's name stamped on the bottom.

"Dammit." After closing them, I slump back on the bed in defeat.

I rub my throbbing temples, but something about the way I had to force the top drawer closed brings my gaze back to it.

Sitting up, I hover my knuckles over the top of the table and give it two hard knocks. There's a reverberating echo that has my fingers wandering along the edge of the drawer.

I pull it open, slower this time, eyes widening when I find the lip of a secret compartment beneath the tabletop.

Slipping one finger on the underside, I give it a quick tug.

I tremble, blood pounding in my ears so fiercely, I can hardly catch a breath.

Leah's bracelet lies in the center of the hidden felt drawer beside a picture that's been folded into quarters. If her bracelet is here with Marcus, then who the hell was wearing it in the limo?

With shaking hands, I reach for the timeworn image.

“Oh my god.” I gasp at the three children smiling back at me.

There’s a young girl standing between a set of identical twin boys, who hug her sides.

Twins. No, it can’t be possible. The tip of my thumb brushes one of their faces, then the girl’s in the middle. They don’t appear to be older than seven, maybe eight, but their identities are unmistakable.

“Care to explain what you’re doing in here?”

I bolt up from the bed in a rush. “Marcus! I-I thought you were in town.”

He immediately notices my injured hand, and the flare in his eyes to see me hurt is nearly missed by the unfiltered shock at the photo I’m holding in the other.

I raise it slowly, attempting to steady my breaths. “What is this?”

Crossing the room one agonizingly slow step at a time, he stares with clouded disbelief and grave acceptance over what I’ve discovered.

My arm shakes with the force of adrenaline pumping through my body.

“Don’t come any closer,” I whisper, leaning against the table to keep me upright.

He stops, pointing at the image, before offering an explanation. “That’s me, Leah, and my identical brother, Morton. We’re—”

“Triplets,” I finish breathily, and he confirms with a solitary nod.

“I was going to tell you,” he starts, “but I wanted to speak with Penelope first.”

In the stables... She must have been trying to keep me from getting too close. From discovering their secret. But was her advice for me to forget about Marcus his idea, or hers?

“Who are you?” I ask as though he’s a stranger. “Is Marcus even your real name?”

“Yes.” Resigned, he slides his hands into his front pockets, lips thinning bleakly. “When my brother auditioned for *Fang for Hire*, he used my name as a pseudonym. He was overlooked for numerous auditions before that one and had convinced himself he would never have a serious acting career with a name like Morton. So, I gave him permission to use mine.”

I gape, dumbfounded as he adds, “I live alone in Seattle, far away from the Hollywood lifestyle, where virtually no one knows I exist outside of a few trusted family friends. As far as I was concerned, it’s just a name.”

I filter through everything I know about his family to find that he’s right. For as long as I’ve followed the Matthews, I’ve never heard of him and Leah having another sibling. But then again, I wasn’t looking for someone who didn’t want to be found.

“All this time, you’ve been pretending to be him.” A sense of paralysis takes over and dread fuels every beat of my heart.

“Slayer,” he pleads.

“No.” I hardly recognize my ragged, raw voice. “You don’t get to call me that anymore.”

Marcus stares with a glazed look of despair, as if he’s memorizing me. As if part of him has already made peace with the consequences of confessing.

“Mortie relapsed shortly after the wreck, and I came to the island to fill in for him until he was stable enough to come on his own. Penelope pulled some strings and brought me here to lie low, but you’d already rented the house without my knowledge, and by the time I met you, you were inescapable, compelling me at every turn.”

Against my wishes, he steps closer, pausing a foot away from where I stand. “I never intended to deceive you.”

Anguish throbs through my middle, coated in the irony that I’ve been deceiving him, too, but my lack of faith in

others won't allow it to hurt any less.

"But I didn't have much of a choice. Mortie's job is at stake, and my family cannot afford for him to lose his career."

My thoughts swirl so fast I can hardly grasp them. "The Matthews are one of the wealthiest families in LA. Why would you rely on his income for anything?"

His shoulders tense and I know I've struck a nerve.

"Right. Let me guess, you can't tell me?" And here we are, just like in the treehouse when he told me everything I knew about him was a lie, but refused to elaborate.

I should have listened then. Should have turned around and gone back to the celebration with my heart in my hand, not his.

"I may have projected my brother's persona at first, but nothing about how I feel for you is a lie." His voice holds a tremor, and I do my damndest to keep my feet firmly planted instead of closing the rest of the gap. "I swear to God, sometimes I think all I'm good for is fixing his screw-ups, but that's not who I am when I'm with you. I don't have to be the fall guy, the one looking out for everyone else but himself or the fixer."

"Marcus..." I watch him with wide eyes as he closes another few inches between us, and my traitorous fingers twitch to touch him.

"I understand that I lied to you, and you have every right to be upset about that. But I was protecting the ones I love, and they come first, always. Is that not at least a little bit forgivable?"

Of course it is, I want to shout at him, but he doesn't get it. To him, I'm finding out that he has an estranged twin, but to me, it's so much worse than that. Because now I know Marcus was never the asshole I thought him to be, but a truly good, kind, genuine person—and he's just given me the biggest scandal I could have ever hoped for.

He lifts a hand as if to touch me, but lets it fall when I flinch away.

“Oh, I see.” He backs up one step, then another, with eyes narrowed suspiciously and miles of distance filling the void. “You’re disappointed that I’m not actually famous, is that it? That I’m just some nobody, running my woodworking business out of my house with no fortune or fame to offer you.”

My jaw pops open as I sputter, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

He has it all wrong. But what more can I say without making matters worse for either of us?

Marcus looks me up and down skeptically. “Tell me what you were doing in here, snooping through my things.”

“I needed a bandage,” I say, raising my hand.

His eyes fall to the blood-stained wrap covering it. “The kit’s in the bathroom, and clearly, you’ve already used it. Try again.”

Air. I need it. And I need to get away from him before I start my own confession. Like how I’m being paid to stalk him, or that I’m not a travel blogger but a gossip journalist. And worse, the same journalist who, regrettably, glamorized his sister’s funeral for a boost in ratings.

“I’m not doing this with you.” I step around him and head for the door, but my feet can’t carry me fast enough.

Marcus crosses the room in quick strides, throwing an arm out in front of the doorway to block my exit. “Heather, stop.”

The certitude of our fate dredges up panic, thickening my throat and shrinking the edges of my vision. “Penelope said I should forget about you once I leave Augustine. That I should save us both the misery of trying to make the impossible possible.”

I gaze up at wild eyes, more blue in distress than I’ve ever seen them.

“Don’t listen to Penelope. Listen to *me*.” Marcus’s body dwarfs mine in the middle of the door frame. His hands fidget like he wants to grab me, and his tone lowers to the softest,

most desperate decibel. “I’m fucking crazy about you, woman. Please. I’m asking you not to go.”

This is what we needed. A nice clean break that will allow both me and Marcus to resume our lives exactly as they once were.

All I have to do now is walk away.

Salvaging the last of my resolve, I hike my chin up. “Let me make the decision for us.”

Without another word, I duck beneath his arm and don’t look back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Heather

I shakily climb the steps up to the loft and start packing my things as quickly as possible. My flight doesn't leave until tomorrow, but after hours of pacing, attempting to procure an unprocurable story, and damn near pulling my hair out, I'm frantic for any type of distraction.

Rain patters on the tin roof as I sloppily stuff clothes into my suitcase. I grab my things off the dresser in no particular order, but when my fingers brush the delicate red thong I wore that night with Marcus in the treehouse, my eyes squeeze shut and my lips quiver.

"You will not cry," I say, gripping it tightly before clearing my throat. "You will go downstairs, write until your fingers bleed, and do what has to be done or you'll be living on the streets."

Once I head home, and I'm in the safety of my protective bubble, then, and only then, will I allow myself to feel my heart break.

The thin material flutters on top of the clothes I've crammed inside my bag, and I slam the thing shut before zipping the memories away.

The quicker I get this all behind me, the better.

I drag the suitcase down to the front door, trying my damndest to think of anything other than Marcus crowding me while asking me to stay or his forlorn gaze when he told me he was crazy about me.

Halfway through rolling my luggage toward the door, I pause to glance at my laptop sitting innocently on the coffee table where I left it. “On second thought, I’m gonna need a drink.”

Mateo’s warning the night of *T’slasta* whispers across my mind as I search Lucy’s fridge for a bottle of—hell, I don’t know, but at this point, anything will do.

I suppose the old man was wrong about one thing. These thorns I’ve grown are as sharp as the day I arrived on the island. Only now, they’ve grown so thick, I fear I’ll never get rid of them.

Settling for some chilled chardonnay, I pop the cork and take a hefty swig right from the bottle, listening to a low rumble of thunder outside.

“Shit,” I hiss, scrunching my nose at the bitter flavor. I raise the bottle, inspecting the swirling liquid with a frown. “Disgusting, but it’ll have to do.”

I carry my new companion over to the couch, drinking three more burning gulps before sitting down in front of my computer. The windows are drawn and the door is double locked, but just like when I attempted this hours ago, I seize up.

I’m sobbing behind the steel fortress of my mind. Clawing and pinching my skin as I scream at the top of my lungs until my throat is blistered raw, but on the outside, I’m staring at a blank document, mocking me with its blinking cursor.

Hanging my head in my hands, I rub my tired eyes and try to force the words from my body. I leave for Chicago tomorrow evening, and I’ve got nothing prepared. Zilch, zero, nada.

“Maybe I need another swig for good measure,” I say, swallowing a mouthful before setting the bottle on the table and scooting onto the floor.

I close my eyes, trying again, to reach deep within for my best words, but my creative space is utterly empty. Like the

synapses in my brain packed everything up overnight with no more than a *'that's all, folks.'*

Blinking the room back into focus, I reach for my camera and pull my knees to my chest. I balance it on my kneecaps as I flip through the images on the memory card, each image deepening my frown.

Scrolling through the ones of Penelope and Marcus sneaking out of rehab, then Marcus at Pearl Beach, I find myself slowing down to absorb all the tiny details.

There are rows of photos of just Sparrow that I've taken in the pasture, her gray-black coat changing in every picture, and more that follow of her grazing in vibrant green grass.

The images shift to the hills surrounding the ranch as well as some of Augustine, with the locals hard at work in their shops and flowers cascading from every stone balcony.

I flip back through them all one last time, suddenly sad that I have no representation of the friendships I've made here. And it dawns on me how much I wish I could call Penelope, Cat, and her girls to come build a pillow fort that we would lay in while we talked through this mess the same way I talked with Theresa about her boy problems.

Each one of those girls crept through my barriers, smearing vibrant colors all over the walls, and hollowed longing forms in the space to know I'll be going back to my colorless life, never to see them again.

I gently place the camera back on the table and turn it off.

The sun set a while ago, meaning the window for getting Leah's autopsy has closed. But even if it hadn't, giving Ellis Turner anything on Marcus wasn't going to happen, no matter how beneficial it may be.

A rumble of thunder grows louder the closer the lightning gets, but it's not the ticking of rain falling on the roof that I'm listening to. It's the reason behind the abrupt silence inside that chamber in my head.

The force of what I feel for Marcus rattles me in a way that no single word could describe. I think of the man he was

pretending to be, of all the things I swore I couldn't stand, and how despite it all, I came so close to sacrificing everything for him.

"I can't do this," I say, folding into myself.

I can't give Alice what she wants because somewhere between my hatred for who I thought Marcus was and giving him access to parts of me no one else has ever seen, he helped me heal the kind of scars that last a lifetime.

An idea hits me with the strength of the lightning bolts breaking the sky.

I may not be willing to give her a tell-all... but I can give her something else.

A loud clap of thunder startles me, and when I crawl over the couch to peek through the window, I hear the distinct sound of someone walking up the front steps. My diaphragm freezes, refusing to pump my lungs full of oxygen necessary to keep me upright.

I turn, waiting for a knock, a word, anything as thunder rumbles low again.

With a knot in my throat, I tread toward the door and hover my fingers over the top lock. Then in a dizzying, frantic rush, I unlatch and twist each lock before yanking the door open.

A burst of lightning strikes, bringing with it a gust of static-charged air, which raises the hairs on my arms.

Marcus stands on the porch, water dripping from his dark hair in rivulets that trail over the planes of his brows, nose, lips, and chin. His stormy gaze journeys up my bare legs to my pajama shorts and thin white tank top, before eventually landing on my face.

I watch his shoulders rise and fall steadily. He's soaked to the bone with his shirt and jeans plastered to every contour of his body.

"What are you doing here?" I ask weakly.

His posture is rigid, like that of a marble statue when he says, "I wasn't completely honest with you earlier."

My spine straightens as I wind my arms around my middle. “You don’t owe me an explanation, Marcus. You don’t owe me anything.”

“No. I refuse to be added to the list of people who have done this to you, Heather.” Reaching for my crossed arms, he gives a gentle tug before taking my palm and flattening it over his rapidly beating heart. “You can close yourself off from the world if you want, but please, don’t close yourself off from me.”

My breaths turn shallow as more lightning skitters across the sky, electric and ominous. Water droplets slip through his hair, sporadically hitting my wrist, and I give in to my need to hear the rest with a gentle nod.

“Leah didn’t die from a drug overdose. She had an incredibly rare blood cancer that completely deteriorated the woman she was, all while the rest of the world decided how it actually happened.”

The brittle defenses I’d thrown up sway before shattering completely.

As if losing her wasn’t enough, I can’t begin to imagine the pain he must have experienced while watching her suffer.

“The experimental testing my dad opted her into was more than dangerous, but my parents had spent a fortune to get it started and the doctors gave us so much hope that it would actually work.”

The tips of my fingers tighten over his shirt as I brace myself for the rest.

“My parents signed their lives away to a debt they could never repay for a daughter they would never see again.” His voice hitches. “Mortie started using and drinking while Leah was dying in the hospital, and I was livid. I didn’t understand it, sometimes I still don’t, but I’m no better for abandoning them after she died.”

“But you didn’t. Look at everything you’ve done for them and your brother,” I whisper, but he shakes his head.

“For the last three years, I’ve isolated myself, keeping far away from them, only to be drug back to LA anytime he needed me to cover for him. But I wish I would have seen it sooner, you know? Because while Mortie suffers from his affliction, it’s me who’s lived the same unchanging year on repeat. Resentful, angry, and alone like you said. I just couldn’t tell you that before now.”

He lowers my hand, and the laugh he gives is soft, pathetic. “Then I come back to Topica Bay, and I see you filled with so much contempt for a man I didn’t even want to be. And you drove me mad with that smart mouth, mad with the simplest touch, absolutely fucking *mad*, Heather, but you always felt right.”

I hold on to the doorframe to keep my legs from giving out.

“I finally have a purpose, and it’s here, in Augustine. I feel it in every fiber of my being, and I can’t help but think that’s what Leah was trying to show me all along. To stop hiding, to help Mortie instead of enabling him, and to embrace the life and happiness I desire.”

My mouth trembles when he reaches into his pocket and then carefully holds out his hand. “I made this for you.”

Grabbing the thin strip of leather, I bring it into the light and study the small wooden charm dangling from its center. The tiny horse’s mane, hooves, and tail are all delicately carved into soft blond wood, stained where each area dips to give it lifelike definition.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper, clutching the necklace in a closed fist.

“This ache for you,” he mutters so close that his wet boots touch the ledge under my bare toes. “I’ll get over it if that’s what you want. Maybe I’ll get lucky, and it won’t last forever. I can shove it down far enough that the torment of my obsession can only reach me when I miss you enough to allow it.”

He swallows and takes a steadying breath. Then, with unfiltered certainty, he says, “But I’ll always allow it, and I won’t get lucky, and there will be no getting over you, because I love you.”

If I’m a thorn-ridden flower, then his words pop them off, one by one, until the very stem keeping me alive is bare.

I shake my head, shocked to my very core.

“I do. I fucking love you, and I don’t care if you don’t love me yet. I’ll just love you hard enough until you do, because we deserve this.”

When he tips my chin up, misery like I’ve never known pours tears down my cheeks. He’s offering me everything I’ve ever wanted, and still, it’s out of reach.

“Marcus.” A body-trembling sob beats at the back of my throat as I offer him a sad, tear-filled smile. “Even if I wanted to stay, we’re fresh out of tomorrows.”

His voice is gentle, almost fearful, when he asks, “What do you mean?”

“I’m leaving.”

He studies me pensively before cupping a palm over my cheek. I flutter my eyes shut, leaning into his touch while absorbing the strength it offers.

“Do you want to stay?” he asks.

Some logical part of my brain understands that this is where I’m supposed to close the door. That this is where I remind myself of everything that’s at stake, and that the second I give in, I’ll doom us both.

But fuck that. The man made me a necklace. And damn every feministic, strong-willed cell in my body if that one gesture doesn’t have me taking an inviting step backward.

“Yes,” I say, because what I feel for Marcus is so much more than a passing infatuation. It’s bone-deep, beautiful and meaningful, and I want this more than anything I’ve ever wanted in my life. I want *him*, and I vow to myself in this moment that I’m going to make this work somehow.

Watching my feet connect with the wood flooring just inside the door, he rumbles, “Say it again.”

“Yes, Marcus, I want to stay.”

And that’s all the encouragement he needs.

His strong arms scoop me up, holding me to his soaking-wet form as he crosses the threshold completely. He kicks the door shut, shoving my suitcase out of the way with a masculine growl that has me burying a smile into the curve of his neck.

“You’re not going anywhere, slayer,” he declares. “As far as the rest of the world is concerned, you’ve disappeared.”

My hands thread through his hair, and my thighs grip him tightly as he heads for the couch.

“Wait,” I say, shuddering from the water seeping through my clothes, chilling and exciting me all at once. His confusion forms a frown, which I kiss from his brow. “Take me upstairs.”

Reverence sparks his gaze as he understands what I’m offering him, and he takes the stairs up to the loft in record time, making me laugh before he lays me down on top of the covers.

When I was a child, the only thing I ever wanted was stability and a warm bed, in a home where I was loved unconditionally. I once thought Marcus couldn’t give me those things, but I see now that I was wrong.

Desire rakes over my body, and I bloom beneath his rapt attention as he gradually peels off his shirt. “I meant what I said about never letting you go.”

I bow off the bed when his mouth clamps over my nipple through the dampened material of my tank.

“Maybe I’ll chain you up this time.” Gripping the opposite breast, he kneads it before switching and giving that nipple the same treatment as the other. “Make you my prisoner.”

I offer a low, needy moan, which tips his lips. “I’d like to see you try.”

He sits back and grips the front of my tank top before tearing it in half with two gruff tugs. My shorts are next, and he makes quick work of yanking them off before tossing them to the floor.

“I want this,” he murmurs, echoing my thoughts so close to my core that the heat of my thighs quiver. He laps straight up the center, then flips the tip of his tongue over my clit.

I nod in quick succession. “You can have it. Just don’t stop doing that.”

A chuckle tickles my center, adding a heavy amount of pleasure to each intentional lick. In and out that tongue works, culling the beginnings of a delicious orgasm from deep in my pelvis.

“What I mean is, I want you.” He rises with careful precision, his muscles flexing as he removes the rest of his soaked clothing, and when the bed dips, I eagerly wriggle toward him.

He teases my entrance, looking at me sternly. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Our chests brush as my heart swells to the point of overflowing.

“You’re safe with me, and you always will be.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

With that, Marcus slides forward. His arms, strong and corded, tremble when he’s fitted completely inside me, and I thrash my head, overwhelmed by the deliberate way he curls and thrusts, hitting all the right spots.

“It’s us against the world, slayer.” Marcus kisses me tenderly, matching his pace to the way he’s making love to my mouth, and then whispers against my lips, “No matter what.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Marcus

In the middle of the night, I wake up to Heather curled into my side, snoring lightly.

I smile in the darkness, thoroughly enjoying all the sounds she makes. The sighs and quick inhales when my fingers roam, flick, or rub. Her body responds to it all, clueing me in on what she likes in a way she was once too shy to do. Especially now when we're naked, and my hands and mouth are exploring.

"Again?" she whispers a half-hearted, sleepy complaint, but she's already arching, seeking, needing.

"Again," I say, slipping between her legs and delving inside with one smooth stroke.

My palms knead and caress the softest parts of her, and there she goes, giving me those little moans I love so much while rolling her ass back into my groin. I bury my face into the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent and kissing her skin.

I rock into her, wondering what she'll look like barefoot on the beach, tanned and smiling at me, or wearing that sexy black bikini while she rides Sparrow down to our spot on the river.

I smile at my thoughts running away from me, but how can I resist picturing my life here with this woman? I spent so long resigned to my familial role that I didn't realize how much of myself I'd lost.

Heather was the key to the shackles I've been ignoring for years because more than anything, she gives me hope. Hope that my brother and I will find peace, hope for a future I've only ever dreamed of, and I'm going to shower her with so much affection, she'll be sick of me.

She'll insist I'm ridiculous with every gift I give. But then I'll get that feisty smile just before she's shoving me, and shoving will turn into kissing, and kissing will lead us right back here, in a tangle of limbs and sweat-dampened bodies. And if I'm lucky, we'll repeat the process every day of our happy lives.

"Marcus," she mutters in that way that tells me she's about to crest the edge of an orgasm any minute, spiraling out of control with me, and I'm the man who gets to catch her when she comes back down.

"And I'll keep catching you," I whisper my thoughts to her. "Over and over again, Heather. I won't stop."

When she rolls to snuggle into my chest, I kiss her temple, her nose, her lips, gently and reverently, until she feels comforted enough to fall back asleep.



It's still early when I return from the market. The sun is creeping over the mountains by the time I climb the steps to my aunt's house and set a vase full of blue hydrangeas on the front porch table.

"Hey, buddy." I scratch Jango's ears when he plods toward me from the other end of the porch.

I don't want to wake Heather just yet. Figure the least I can do is let the woman rest after I kept her up most of the night.

Pulling Leah's bracelet from my pocket, I roll it through my fingers thoughtfully.

For so long it's been my anchor, something I thought connected the two of us through the afterlife, but now I realize the importance of her wanting me to keep it safe, and why it's time to finally let it go.

I relax in the chair before scrolling through my phone for my uncle's contact, and Jango settles at my feet, offering a sense of support without even knowing it.

"Marcus?" he answers on the second ring.

"Hey, Uncle Pat. I hope I'm not bothering you."

"No, of course not," he assures me, but it sounds like he might be rolling over in bed. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, all good." Restless, I lean forward to prop my elbows on the table, staring at the old red barn. "But there are some things I'm going to need your help with."

With no hesitation, he says, "Tell me what's going on."

I start with Sparrow and the mare who's been picking on her, and then I follow that with all the reasons why I can't let him tear the barn down. Not now, or ever.

I recount the last month I've spent in his home with Penelope and the sleeping woman upstairs, the adventures we've had, and the Augustine family I've missed so much.

I reveal my ideas and plans for what comes next, but there's one glaring issue to work out before then, and I need his help if it's going to work.

"Are you sure about this?" he asks before I disconnect our call.

I touch one of the hydrangea petals in the bouquet I picked for Heather. "I've never been more sure of something in my life."

When we hang up, I feel an enormous weight lift from my shoulders. There's no way to know if my plan will work, but for the first time since Leah passed away, my mind is clear.

I move to go wake Heather, only to sit back in the chair when my phone vibrates with a surprising round of text

messages from Mortie.

Brows furrowed, I flip to our mostly barren message thread to find a series of frantic texts and links.

“What?”

The first screenshot shows messages between Mortie’s agent and the paparazzi they made the photo deal with. They go back and forth about securing the deal before there’s a significant time jump to a message received at five o’clock this morning.

I thought Mr. Matthews would want to see this.

The picture of Heather and I kissing on the beach sits below the screenshot, and what follows is a series of articles written about my brother and our family.

Confused, I click through each article, not understanding what he’s trying to show me. Each one is from the same magazine with dates varying over the last three years.

My thumb hovers over a featured article in *Luster Magazine*, which covered Leah’s funeral.

Acid coats my throat when I click on it. Instead of mentioning any of the things that made my sister great or memorable, the author wrote a gossip piece full of speculation and recounted photos of Leah partying with friends, painting her as a reckless young woman who could never turn down a good time.

I begin to sweat, remembering how devastating each of these stories were for the four of us. The lies and slander that surrounded her death, all because we wanted to keep her autopsy private.

Blind anger has me scouring the rest of the story for a name.

H. Sinclair

The world blots in and out around me as I receive text after text of images paired with files.

“No,” I say, hand shaking enough to blur a picture of Heather, smiling back at me out of focus.

Jango sits up with a uneasy whine while I skim a copy of her degree in journalism, then a screenshot of her name boasted proudly on *Luster's* website as their lead journalist before I finally understand what he was trying to show me.

Mortie calls me two minutes after the last message is received, but I stare at my phone with numb disbelief, forwarding his call and the one after while I struggle for air.

Heather's a travel blogger, not a writer for a gossip magazine, and she wouldn't do this to me, Penelope, or my family.

Standing on unsteady legs, I round the table.

Someone's setting her up, that's the only explanation I can come up with.

It can't be true. When I reach the front door, I hesitate, holding the knob in one hand and the damning evidence that Mortie's given me in the other. *Please, don't let this be true.*

I enter the house, and as quietly as possible, close the door behind me.

Halting in the entryway, I listen for signs that Heather's still asleep, and after a moment of silence, I carefully scan the room for her things.

My first thought is to rummage through her suitcase, but then I spot a laptop sitting in the center of the coffee table. I pry it open, waking it from sleep mode with a tap on the spacebar, only to find that it's password protected.

Mortie calls again, but I ignore it, lowering the screen with a shaky hand, and once it's closed, my gaze flicks to the camera sitting beside her computer.

Trepidation makes me pause. If what I find is anything other than scenery for her blog, I don't know what I'll do.

Sitting back, I turn it on and start looking through the images.

A sunrise behind the barn pops up first, but then I'm clicking through the rest of the images so quickly, my thumb keeps slipping from the button. Cold dread pricks my neck when I reach the beginning of the photo run, where Pen and I are standing in the shipyard.

"Good morning, handsome," Heather says, and her yawn sounds sex-drunk and sleepy. I listen to her feet descend one step at a time before they're softly snicking over the tile toward the kitchen.

I blink my eyes open to a picture of me on Pearl Beach, talking with some of Mortie's fans, and suddenly, it all makes sense. Why she was there that day, her eagerness to volunteer on the ranch, and her snooping in my room yesterday.

Unsuspecting, she reaches up on her tippy-toes for the tin can full of coffee grounds in the cabinet, humming to herself as she makes a full pot. But I'm paralyzed, watching her work as a pain almost worse than grief batters my insides.

Heather's sweet smile drops the minute she turns to see what I'm holding.

My skin crawls when she mutters a quiet, "I can explain."

She doesn't try to deny anything. But why would she? She knows exactly what I've found.

Heather pads from the kitchen to the edge of the living room, arms wrapped around her middle. More than anything, I wish we were still in bed, tangled up in each other in blissful ignorance, instead of facing the reality that the woman I love could betray me like this.

After setting her camera on the couch, I stand and reach for my phone. I find the article about my sister's funeral and turn the screen so she can see.

"Party Girl Leah Matthews Dead at Twenty-Five," I read aloud.

A shiver wracks her body at the raw disdain constricting my voice, and she has the audacity to close her eyes, as if she can't bear to look at what she's written.

“I know you’re a journalist, but what I don’t know is how you managed to find me. Were you sent here to spy on us?”

Her eyelids flutter open, full of unshed tears.

“Give me the truth or nothing at all,” I grit, and with a dejected frown, she submits instantly.

“We got a tip that your brother was coming to Tauntuma for rehab after his wreck, and it was my job to report on it.” Carefully, she reaches for her phone, handing it to me once she finds what she was searching for. “But then, my editor sent me this.”

I study a photo of Mortie leaving the hospital from top to bottom, spotting Leah’s bracelet glinting around my wrist. Sometimes, on days like that, when my anxiety is spiraling out of control, I’ll wear it to ground me.

It’s always been a source of comfort, like having a part of her with me wherever I go. But in light of what Heather shows me, it feels like a crutch.

“She believed Leah may still be alive and reassigned me to investigate,” she says. “But we thought you were still in Tauntuma. Ending up in Augustine with you was purely a coincidence.”

Unrelenting anguish carves through my insides, spreading its inky tendrils like a sickness until I’m forcing bile down by the swallow. I refuse to believe fate is responsible for this.

Everything I’ve confessed to her—Leah’s death, faking as my twin while he’s detoxing, the safe haven of Augustine, and everything in between. It’s all going to end up on the front cover of a bullshit magazine as breaking news, and when Mortie’s director catches wind of it, he’ll be finished.

I’ve always been the fixer in our family, but for the first time, I don’t know if this is something I can fix.

Fear gurgles in my stomach. A magazine like *Luster* is going to find every loophole imaginable in the NDA she signed.

“Congratulations, Miss Sinclair. Looks like you’ve got everything you need for a best-selling story.”

“I... I can’t write it,” she says.

I force myself to look at her. “But will you?”

“I made a decision last night before you ever came to my door to find a way to make this right.” Her hands fidget at her sides, face contorting as if she’s trying like hell not to cry. “But I have to give them something, Marcus, or I’m going to lose my job.”

It’s then that I realize how unbelievably fucked I am. Because I can’t beg Heather to quit her job any more than I can beg Mortie to sober up.

Intense pressure pounds behind my eyes, and if I were able, I’d tear my heart out, right here and now. Because it’s weak for her. *I’m* weak for her, and as much as this should make me hate her, I don’t.

“I can’t even look at you,” I mutter, stepping around her trembling form.

A pained whimper shudders from Heather’s lips as her hand strikes out, grabbing my bicep to stop me. “You said it was us against the world, no matter what.”

I stare at the fingers gripping my arm. “That was before I knew you were using me.”

“It might have started out that way,” she says when I pull away from her, “but I didn’t know the truth about Leah or your brother. I-I didn’t know about *you*.”

“So, because you don’t truly know the people you write about, that makes it okay to spread lies about them?”

“When I wrote that story on Leah, I was brand-new to the team and was trying to make something of myself.” The less she denies, the more it stings. Each unveiled truth is more damning than the last. “That doesn’t make it okay, and I own that. But whether I liked it—whether I *believed* it—or not, I was just doing my job.”

“Is that all I am to you? A job?” I’m struggling to keep my composure after all but crawling on my hands and knees, confessing my love for her.

“No,” she rushes to say. “Of course not.”

“Then help me understand what went through your mind last night when you accepted my gift, my body, my *trust* while pretending you weren’t about to ruin my life.”

Fucking hell. I can barely breathe as I reach for the door, but in a blur, she ducks around me and plasters her back against it.

I’m already grieving her as I watch her soft brown eyes well with tears. The pain of losing her is so real, it feels like my muscles are detaching from every bone in my body. “Exactly how did you think this was going to work out for you, Heather?”

“I’m so sorry, Marcus.” The hitch in her chest forces her to pause, but then her voice wobbles through a sob. “I-I’ve told you everything. Let me talk to my editor. L-let me find a way to fix this, please.”

With our faces just inches apart, I give her nothing but silence, furious for craving the press of her velvet lips on mine regardless of what she’s done.

We glare at each other, and I nearly cave at the tear spilling from her bottom lash and whispering down the edge of her mouth.

“A lie for a lie,” I say, gently swiping the trail it leaves behind. She tilts her face into my palm with a stuttering exhale, and for a heartbeat longer, I hold her there before finally twisting the knob at her back. “Consider us even.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Heather

I wish I could say I'm surprised Turner outed me, but I feel nothing but the familiarity of bitter solitude as I load my belongings into the car.

Marcus was right. What the hell was I thinking?

But the truth is, I wasn't... not enough about the consequences, anyway. I was too busy absorbing every word and touch. Absorbing an unbelievable kind of love that he'd curated just for me.

I took advantage of him the way I've always feared being taken advantage of, and I wish it hadn't taken hurting him to see how wrong and selfish that was. How loving someone is a two-way street, and it can't survive when only one person gives and the other takes.

The wind carries a hint of mixed spices that has my fingers gripping the lip of the trunk.

It's been hours since he left, but that doesn't stop me from hoping he's there when I turn.

Like a shadow, a dark nose appears next to my elbow. "Sparrow?"

I follow the length of her face up to a set of feisty eyes.

She bobs her head, whinnying sharply before clamping her teeth on the bottom of my shirt and yanking me backward.

“Quit that, you stubborn ass,” I say as I wrestle with her, but she keeps tugging until I’m dragged several feet from the car.

When I finally manage to pop my shirt free, I hold up the shredded edge, now covered in stains, while her lips peel back with an obnoxious neigh.

“I’m sorry, okay?” I say once she’s had her fit. “But his mind is made up.”

“And what about yours?” Penelope asks, rounding Sparrow’s flank with an arched brow.

Jango pants furiously as he trudges his old body toward me to sit at my feet. I busy my hands with rubbing the top of his head.

“If you’re here to talk me out of writing the story on Marcus, let me save you the trouble.” Turning away from them, I slam the trunk. “I didn’t write it, and I don’t plan to.”

“I figured.”

My hands still as I slowly turn toward her. “How?”

“Because you care about him, dummy,” she says, pointing to the small wooden charm hanging around my neck. “If you didn’t, you damn sure wouldn’t be wearing that.”

Tracing the outline of the necklace, I glance at Sparrow. I haven’t taken it off since he placed it there last night.

“I thought you’d be furious with me.”

Penelope sighs heavily, tucking her hair behind one ear. “Oh, I am. But, come on, I’m not going to pretend I don’t understand how things got muddy between the two of you. And unfortunately, no matter the situation, caring for someone isn’t something you can just turn off.”

I didn’t expect her sympathy, but then again, I’m not sure why I’m surprised. Penelope is the kind of friend who doesn’t leave her person’s corner just because they lost a few rounds, and considering how utterly alone I am, I’m immensely grateful to have her in mine.

My voice isn't much more than a rasp when I say, "I hurt him, Pen."

She steps beside me to lean her butt against the trunk. "We're humans, babe. No matter how hard you try not to, you'll hurt someone you care about at some point in your life. It's like, part of our genetic makeup or some shit. To be both the thing that heals and cuts. But then we recognize what we've done, and we do the most human thing possible."

"What's that?"

"Forgive," she says, bringing tears to my eyes.

I don't remember a time I wasn't closed off from the world, because at some point in my life, I killed all the qualities that I thought made me weak. If I was too open, I would get taken advantage of. If I was too warm, I'd be used until I was cold. If I cared too much, I got hurt.

But what's left of that woman—who I was before Marcus and before Augustine—is nothing more than shattered glass. I'm free of her, which is why I can stand beside my friend, butt planted against the car right next to hers with Jango squirming between our legs, and easily take her hand in mine.

"I'm sorry I lied to you, Penelope," I say tightly, regretting that I couldn't articulate the apology Marcus deserved this morning.

Regretting even more that I may never get the chance.

Her smile is kind and accepting. "I know."

"Is he gone?"

I appreciate the sympathetic squeeze she gives when she nods. "My dad had him flown back to Seattle about two hours ago on a private jet."

"Wait, what about rehab? He can't just leave... can he?"

Penelope stares at her boots, lightly tapping her toes together. "He didn't give me any details other than to wait for him to call once he landed. But Dad and Marcus are up to something. I just don't know what."

My head tips toward the brilliant blue sky. That's it, then. The passion, the laughter, the ease in which we fell into each other. It's over, just like that.

Before Marcus, my goal in life was to be the best journalist I could be. Cranking out stories that, in hindsight, only gave me temporary purpose and fulfillment. But there's nothing fulfilling about hurting people. And for as badly as I once thought I wanted to expose the Matthews and all their secrets, in the end, I've only managed to expose myself.

I release Penelope to open the back passenger door, and then fish my laptop out of my backpack.

"What are you doing?"

"I told you I didn't write the story on Marcus, and that's true. But I want to show you what I ended up writing instead." After opening my laptop, I click on the file that I emailed to Alice an hour ago.

Penelope takes it from my hands, cradling it in hers like it may explode any minute, and I laugh lightly. "Just read it."

She carefully scans the pages, brows raising and lowering with surprise through each paragraph while I wait anxiously.

"Heather, this is brilliant." Clusters of goosebumps raise her skin when she eventually reaches the end. "You do love him."

She says it almost giddily, and finally, I admit it to us both. "I do."

Penelope's face glows, renewed with excitement, and as if he knows what's going on, Jango barks. But I lean back on my elbows, searching the sky for the hope I've lost with a fading smile.

"You didn't see the way he looked at me." I wince at his chilling parting words. "I don't want to let him go, Pen. More than anything, I don't. But you talk about forgiveness, and I'm not sure if I'm redeemable."

"Aside from the glaringly obvious fact that he loves you, this right here makes you more than redeemable." She sets my

computer on top of the car and nibbles her lower lip in thought. “But it won’t be enough to just tell him. The kind of groveling you’re going for will need some *hutzpah* behind it.”

My lips twitch. “I’m all ears.”

She straightens as if she’s readying for battle with me, and I groan. “I’m afraid to ask what that brain of yours just came up with.”

With a sly smile, she says, “This is what you’re gonna do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Marcus

A reporter, Marcus?” my mother gasps dramatically. “How could you be so careless?”

“A journalist,” I correct her, wondering why I even bother.

It’s not like I’ve thought about the woman every passing minute since leaving Topica Bay.

She stares with pinched lips. “The point is, you’ve put your brother’s job and this family in jeopardy.”

Her disappointment stings, and up until now, I would’ve sacrificed everything to avoid it.

Mortie sits between her and our father on the couch in my living room with his elbows on his knees, uncharacteristically quiet and avoiding my gaze.

Dad sits back and removes his glasses to scrub a hand down his weary face. “I’ll have to call in another favor. It won’t be easy, but we’ll do what we have to do to keep her from submitting that story.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I’m quick to say. “Besides, it’s likely already been submitted.”

Heather may have done me dirty, but I’ll be damned if she’s ever on the tail end of one of my father’s ‘favours.’ In fact, if it weren’t for finding out what she’d been hiding, I wouldn’t have had the courage to stand before them today with two separate, life-altering proposals.

“Great, we’re screwed,” Mortie says.

I study my family with a fresh set of eyes.

They’ve been living at my place in Seattle ever since we left the hospital in LA to keep him away from temptation and the media. But where I’m tanned from exposure to the sun, and toned from the labor of working in the barn, the three of them look no different than they did a month ago. Drained, exhausted, and hollow.

“We can’t keep doing this,” I say.

Mom places her hand between Mortie’s shoulder blades. “There’s no other choice. You know what the loan sharks will do the minute we stop paying them.”

I hate the lingering fear in her eyes, but if my time in Topica Bay has taught me anything, it’s that everyone has a choice. Some choices are just harder to make than others.

Leah’s bracelet shines in the overhead lights of my living room when I hold it out to them. “Uncle Patrick helped me find a buyer for this. They’re coming to pick it up tomorrow.”

I fight a fresh onslaught of grief. It’s not that I want to sell the only piece of my sister that we have left, because honestly, if I could keep it, I would. And while difficult, I’m hoping the outcome is worth it.

Dad re-situates his glasses on the bridge of his nose as if gearing up to say something, but it’s Mom who leans forward.

“Marcus, no. We can figure something else out,” she says. “We’ll sell the house if we have to.”

My beaten heart aches for our broken family. For the sacrifices we’ve made, the struggles, and the appearances we’ve tried to maintain as the perfect family. But mostly, for the pain we’ve endured while desperately clinging to Leah’s ghost.

“You all know Leah’s last wish was for me to hold onto this. But I’ve come to realize something I don’t think I would have had I never gone back to Augustine.”

Mortie gradually lifts his head, and though he still looks miserable, I'm glad for the small amount of progress he's made.

"She was everywhere, Mort. In the trees, the music, the people. And I spent nearly a month rebuilding that old barn, hoping to finally lay this guilt I've been carrying around to rest. I was the happiest I've been in too long, and I missed our sister, I did. But I was also missing you."

He shifts uncomfortably. "Why are you saying all this?"

"Because you may be my twin, but I don't recognize you anymore. And maybe if I had been here to fight your demons with you, instead of detaching myself from the situation, things would be different than they are now." I pause, nervous to give them the rest. "You'll never know how sorry I am for that, but while I can't change the past, I can offer you a better, more stable future."

"Marcus, what is this all about?" Mom asks, but when Mortie slowly moves to stand, a hush falls over the room.

"He's done covering for me," he translates, reading me as easily as he had when we were kids.

I give a single nod, and our parents frantically glance between us.

"Now, wait a minute," Dad warns.

I look to our parents, who have been through hell and back since losing Leah, and sympathize with what they thought was right for us, even if it didn't end well. But even they have to own up to their part in all of this.

"He's right. All we're doing is hurting him in the long run when what we should be doing is finding a solution."

I feel as though I'm staring at my reflection, and not because we're identical but because my brother's appearance projects how I've felt inside for so long.

Miserable. Lost. Unhappy.

"I've started the process of getting dual citizenship so I can move to Augustine, and until it's approved, I want you to

come back with me and go to rehab for real,” I say to Mortie.

This house serves its purpose, but my true home is on the island with my second family, and my mind has been made up since my flight back to Seattle.

I want a chance for us to rebuild our relationship. I want to bring him back to the peace of the island, and then maybe, hopefully, he’ll come out on the other side a changed man.

“Selling the bracelet will get Mom and Dad out of debt, but coming to Topica Bay will ensure you stay clean. You’ll be happier, healthier, and when the time comes, you’ll be ready to take on your movie role without the constant fear of relapsing.”

Mortie’s silent for so long, I’m sure he’s going to fight me on it.

“I’ve always looked up to you, you know. The rock, the levelheaded one, the *favorite*,” he digs lightly.

“Bullshit,” I mutter, earning a glare from Mom.

“But Leah and I were cut from the same cloth—her modeling, my acting. We knew what kind of life we signed up for. That the possibility of having a real family or falling in love may never be in the cards for us, but it always would be for you.”

With a weak shake of his head, he glances out the window. “So yeah, losing her was traumatic for all of us, but I never got the break I needed to grieve her death. I had an image to uphold, a career that was finally taking off, and one day, I woke up to find that I’d become a monster. One who never tires of the fix and has a limitless appetite for chaos. One who envies your perfectly normal life, and the genuine connections you get to have with people.”

I think of every conversation I had with Heather as the famous Marcus Matthews, and all the times I’d told her something similar. How I felt alone. How I missed true intimacy and human connection so badly. And though I’d been speaking for myself, it turns out, most of it was true for Mortie, too.

“I never wanted you to cover for me, but I also know I wouldn’t have stayed in rehab to begin with.” The resentment and anger I’ve kept on tap for him for the last few years dissipates the moment he turns back to me. “I may never make up for all the times you’ve had to step up for me, but I’m thankful you did.”

Mom holds a hand over her mouth with watery eyes, and Dad wraps his arm around her. “We all have something to answer for here, son. I’ve clearly pushed you both too hard, demanded too much.”

“We can go around the room taking blame and saying we’re sorry all we want, but apologies aren’t what’s going to fix this.” Mortie pulls his shoulders back before holding out a hand between us. “So I’ll go with you, Marcus. Because I love you, and this family, and because I want to prove to you guys that I mean it when I say I’m done. I want to try and put this shit behind me, behind us, and move on.”

I clasp his palm and pull him into me. My free hand grips the back of his shirt, holding him as I struggle to control my emotions, and he embraces me just as tightly.

“I’ll set up a meeting and come clean about everything to Gregorio,” he says when we finally break apart. “But we should probably prepare ourselves for him to shitcan me the second that story goes live.”

I feel the start of a smirk. “And if he does, I guess you get to look for your next big break after spending some time with your brother and our annoying cousin in paradise.”

The barest hint of humor finds his gaze.

“Dad?” I ask, needing the final stamp of approval to get our plan into motion.

“We’ll have to discuss the details, of course, but it’s not a half-bad idea.” He stands to place one hand on each of our shoulders, but to me, lips thinning to conceal his own warring emotions, he says, “Thank you, son.”

Mom finds her way between us, and for the first time in too long, the four of us bring it in, and I relish this sense of

peace and love I've been longing for. The healing we're going to achieve together.

Finally, my soul shudders. Only, it's not my voice I hear but Leah's.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Heather

Well.” Alice peers up from a stack of papers on her desk through our video call. Her mouth sets in a grim line that puts me on edge almost more than the turbulence of the red-eye flight I’m on. “It’s not what they wanted.”

In the privacy of the first-class cabin, I adjust my *Futuro* airlines-issued blanket over my lap as I wait for the bad news.

I knew this story wouldn’t be what the publisher expected, but I also know what people want when they click on one of our articles or pick one of our magazines up from the corner store—and I damn well delivered.

“But it’s being sent for print tomorrow,” she says, shocking the hell out of me.

“For real?” I bring the phone closer to my face. “Like, for real, for real?”

Three days ago, I left paradise for my home in Chicago, and I spent the entire plane ride home preparing for a meeting with Alice. I carefully weighed my options about whether I should come clean to her or not, but I kept coming back to Penelope, Cat, and even Sparrow, and their unwavering friendships.

Alice took me under her wing at twenty-one years old. She showed me the ropes, taught me everything I know, and stuck her neck out for me multiple times while I was on the island. Most importantly, she believed in me when I had no one else.

So, while I didn't reveal Marcus's deepest secrets to her during our meeting that day, I did dish out every scandalous detail of our time together—down to the very last orgasm. I may have even cried a bit when she yanked me into the kind of hug only a true friend can give before I told her my plan to win him over.

“I mean, I still think a tell-all would have been amazing, but the ‘Nothing to fear but fear itself’ Roosevelt line was a nice touch.” She inspects the story one last time before spreading the papers out on her desk. “People like raw, emotional, and gritty. You’ve given them that, no doubt. Though, I could have lived my whole life without knowing your affinity for bondage.”

I smirk, blushing hard while fiddling with the corner of my printed copy. Alice isn't just my editor—she's my friend. Which is why the decision I made was incredibly difficult, no matter how necessary.

“Alice, there's something I need to tell you.”

That gets her attention, but Christ on a cracker, I'm already sweating.

“I—”

“No,” she interrupts.

Blinking at her, I pull my earbud out, check that there's nothing clogging it, and then place it back in my ear. “Excuse me?”

“There's no way in hell you're quitting on me.” She leans in and lowers her voice. “I swore I wouldn't out your secret love affair, but that doesn't give you permission to leave. It's you and me, baby. We're the A-Team, and we always will be.”

“Alice, come on. We both know that, regardless of what happens with Marcus, I'm done with celebrity news. I just don't have it in me anymore.”

Her pencil *taps, taps, taps*. “You're really putting in your notice?”

I nod, having already scheduled interviews with two separate travel magazines this week.

“Well, that’s too bad. Because my request to have you take over the *Living and Travel* section is being approved as we speak.”

My jaw damn near drops. “You didn’t.”

“I did.” It’s her turn to smirk. “And the position is remote. You can work anywhere you want on the condition you return for each quarterly meeting.”

“Thank you, Alice,” I breathe, stunned and grateful beyond belief.

“You’re welcome.” She blows me a kiss before leaving me with, “Don’t screw this up, Sinclair.”

We hang up and I slump back in my seat, clutching the papers to my chest.

“No way.” A beautiful brunette flight attendant stops abruptly at my seat. She pokes her head inside my space, getting a better look at me. “*Heather?*”

It takes a second, but then I remember her. She’s the chick who almost body-slammed me in the lobby of the Double Palm before I found out where Marcus was going for rehab. Except, she wasn’t near as happy then as she appears to be now.

“Kate. You work for *Futuro*?”

“Yes! I can’t believe this.” A thousand-watt smile beams at me, and then she gasps, “Oh, my gosh. Did you ever nail your story on the vampire hunter?”

When my head hits the seat with a sigh, her arms drop. “Oh, brother. What happened?”

“For starters, I slept with him. Like, a lot.”

Kate winces. “Definitely nailed it, then.”

I huff a laugh. “Exactly.”

“Hang on, I’ve got just the thing for this story.” She stands to open the curtain to the main cabin and flags down another flight attendant using her thumb and pinky finger in an unmistakable code for, *Bring me a drink*.

The blonde Kate introduces as Coraline pops her head through the curtain a few minutes later and removes two mini bottles of vodka from her skirt pocket. “Who needs the goods?”

“That’d be me,” I mutter before taking them from her tattooed hands and guzzling them down.

I give them the Cliff Notes version of *Heather and Marcus had No Business Falling in Love, Yet Here We Are*, complete with a freshly concocted plan to convince him to forgive me.

Kate turns to her friend. “There’s something seriously freaky about that island.”

“Honestly, I’m convinced there’s voodoo involved,” Coraline says with a shiver.

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Let me guess. At some point, you started feeling this weird pull toward Marcus, right?” Kate asks. “Almost like, no matter how hard you tried, you couldn’t keep away from him.”

I nod, thinking of *T’slasta* and how dizzying that whole experience was. How even though I fought it, there was no resisting him.

“How the hell do you know that?”

They glance at each other, then back to me. “The same thing happened to us.”

I’m on the edge of my seat now as they share smiles brimming with secrets.

“Did it work out, you know, for you both?”

“It did. Granted, for me, it took three weeks, a little soul-searching, and a lot of faith that what I’d experienced on the island wasn’t just some lust-drenched fantasy.” Kate laughs. “I

mean, just last week I chased Damon through LAX to tell him I loved him before he left the country.”

My eyes widen. “Wow.”

“It was very dramatic,” Coraline teases.

“Okay, well, not everyone has an easy love story like you.” She hooks a thumb at her friend. “Hot pilot she’s been in love with forever... Both of them got trapped on the island during Christmas... I’ll let you connect the rest of the dots.”

Coraline shoves her, and I laugh when they stick their tongues out at each other.

“If I’m being honest, I’m terrified it’s too late,” I admit quietly.

Kate’s manicured hand falls to my shoulder. “If Marcus doesn’t forgive you after everything you’ve done to make it right, then he’s an idiot, but so be it. At least you’ll know you leaned into your truth and put yourself out there. No more doubts.”

The seatbelt sign *pings* above our heads, and Coraline gives her the signal to wrap it up. “Good luck, Heather.”

“Thank you,” I say, waving at her as she disappears behind the curtain.

Kate starts to follow, but then stops to look back at me. “Hey, do you remember what you said to me that day we ran into each other?” I’m grinning before she even finishes, “Take it all in stride. One minute. One hour. One day at a time.”



“You can do this,” I whisper to myself from the front drive of Marcus’s Seattle home.

The modern house lies in the middle of the woods, surrounded by rows and rows of massive trees. Cedar is heavy in the air, making my nose twitch, but with a view as stunning

and peaceful as this, I have to wonder how Marcus ever manages to leave.

It's a cool sixty degrees and looking suspicious for rain, but my palms are sweating, and the papers I'm holding tremble with each step I take up the door.

Seventy-two hours of practically no sleep, an unfathomable amount of coffee, and an endless surge of adrenaline bring my feet to halt at the front stoop.

I raise an unsteady hand to the lit doorbell and press it once, releasing a humming melody from the other side of the stained oak door. My pulse is out of control, making me nauseous and dizzy to the point that I'm questioning every move I've made to get here.

"No doubts," I whisper, just as Kate said, but my heart full-stops when Marcus answers the door in nothing but a pair of low-hanging sweatpants.

He leans against the frame with his elbow, stretching his obliques and abs—and everything I'd been about to say, every word I've practiced, becomes one big lump at the base of my throat while his gaze utterly devours me.

"My, my, aren't you a pretty thing?"

I slow-blink. Then I blink again. "Excuse me?"

"Wait a minute." He carefully lowers his arm. "I know you."

Now that the initial shock of seeing him has waned, I notice all the things that aren't quite right about my Marcus. Things no one else would notice unless they were as intimate as the two of us had been.

"*Morton*," I grit.

Marcus's twin's nose is a bit crooked, his lips aren't as full, and his ears are slightly bigger. He has a leanness to him that makes a stark difference from not only his brother, but the actor I've seen on the show. As if he never quite healed from his accident and is just now on the upside of recovering.

Unfortunately, none of these things make the jerk any less attractive.

He takes a couple of curious steps forward, and I loathe the way he leers at me.

“You’re that—”

“Media roach?” I finish for him, recalling our interview.

Unlike when I first saw Marcus in Augustine, there’s a heavy amount of recognition in Mortie’s hardening gaze. “Close, but more like the journalist who’s trying to ruin my career while fucking my brother over to do it.”

He’s livid, it’s clear in the hard set of his jaw and foreboding stare—and that’s great. I’m *glad* he’s angry, because knowing what he’s put Marcus through, that makes two of us.

My shoulders are bunched so tight that the tension zipping up my neck induces the start of a pounding headache. God, how good it would feel to scream at this man. To spit at his feet for his carelessness and for using Marcus the way he has with no remorse.

But the longer I look at this broken man, the less substance my anger has. I’ve lived through the motions of despising him, had come to terms with them in a sense, and I’m exhausted from hating him for both me and the way he’s used Marcus. I’m exhausted from my disdain for his recklessness when all I truly want is to be happy with the man I came here for.

And Mortie’s opinion of me means nothing compared to that.

“Are you just going to stand there, or would you like a police escort back to wherever you came from?” he asks arrogantly.

Trying to keep my cool, I level my gaze with his. “I’m here to talk to Marcus.”

He crosses his arms. “You’re out of your fucking mind, woman.”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re doing here, and frankly, I don’t care. I’ve slept a total of ten hours in the last three days. I haven’t eaten more than a single bagel this morning and a piece of gum my cab driver offered me on the way over here. The last thing I’m going to do is sit here and listen to *you*, of all people, tell me that I can’t see him.”

Mortie’s head tilts and I’m thrown by how similar the action is to Marcus.

It starts to sprinkle, each drop on my shoulders colder than the last.

“Here.” I thrust my hand out to him in a moment of desperation.

He cautiously takes the damp pages, flipping through them with a healthy amount of confusion. “What is this?”

“The story I wrote.” It’s starting to rain more steadily, but I stand on the edge of the stoop, enduring every freezing drop. “Just a version that left you both out of it.”

His troubled eyes find mine. “Why?”

I laugh, and it probably makes me look legitimately crazy, and at this point, I think I might be. “Because your brother is an incredible man, not a gossip piece. Marcus deserves the sappiest, happiest fucking ending in Hollywood, and I’m here to deliver it.”

A shadow passes behind Mortie, and holy shit, seeing the two of them in the flesh like this is freaky with a capital F.

Marcus stares directly at me, and I can’t decide if he’s glad, shocked, or mad as hell to see me standing out here. His hair is messy, like he’s been running his fingers through it all day, and guilt gnaws at my insides over the circles under his tired eyes.

When he reaches for the papers in his brother’s hand, I shiver with a mixture of hope and fear.

“A Month Without Marcus Matthews,” he reads aloud.

“I had this plan to read it to you.” I wave my hands nervously. “Actually, it was Penelope’s idea, but...”

The rest of that thought dies on my lips when he starts scanning the article silently.

Mortie exudes apathy, leaning against the house with one foot propped on the wall behind him, and I grow more agitated by the minute with nothing but the sound of rain accompanying us.

When he finally glances up, a dam breaks inside me, and with it, comes a slew of fumbling words that really should be more eloquent for as much as I've practiced.

"I was told to uncover your biggest, baddest secrets. But as you can see, to my surprise, Marcus Matthews is a changed man. One who's committed to getting sober and never once left rehab."

Mortie watches my wringing hands, but Marcus's attention is focused on my moving lips.

"I-I know how much Augustine and the locals mean to you, so I renamed you Francesco and put us on a different part of the island. I wrote about you and your well-mannered horse, Arrow, and how you both helped me overcome my fears of the water, and the lantern festival, where I drank wine that was delicious—and absolutely did not taste like dirt. I mean, that part about me loving the way you 'unleashed my wild side' was for a bit of shock value, but—okay, actually, that part isn't a lie."

I pause my ramble to slick my wet hair away from my face, and the irony of standing before him, soaked to the bone, isn't lost on me.

My voice breaks when I manage to find it again. "It's all right there between the lines, Marcus. What I should have said to you before you left is written boldly, loudly for anyone in the world to see, and I'm not embarrassed or ashamed to let them. I'm fucking honored."

Marcus releases the papers in a fluttering mess to the concrete, and for a soul-shattering second, I think he might turn his back on me.

But then he's stalking forward, one step at a time, and I hold my ground, unmoving. "You wanna know why I never told you I loved you?"

His eyes flit around my face as he rumbles a quiet, "Yes."

"Because what I feel for you makes love sound like an insult." My hands shake from the force of trying to keep them off him. "You once said you didn't have a fortune to offer me, but what use is wealth when I'd rather sleep peacefully knowing you're right there beside me. When I'd rather have your touch whenever I need it, knowing it's the only thing that soothes me—*really* soothes me—all the way down to my bones."

He inches closer now, touching me without touching me, and that shouldn't make sense but to me, it does. That's the kind of connection we have. And it's been a lingering, commanding presence since the moment he drank my coffee in Ernesto's café.

"Keep talking," he says, making me swallow even though my throat's gone dry.

"I'm sorry for lying to you. If I could go back to that morning, knowing what I know now, I would've never let you walk away."

"More," he murmurs so softly, I feel the word as a candlelit caress in the darkest depths of my soul.

"Your ass is a major distraction in those Levi's."

His lips quirk. "I suppose that could be problematic."

The rain finally lets up, but our cheeks and lashes are dotted with drops when I stare up at him.

"Marcus, the idea of losing you terrifies me, but if you've changed your mind, I need to hear you say it. Say that you don't love me. Tell me that I've made it all up in my head, and that when you look at me, you feel absolutely nothing. Scream it at me if you have to, but at least then I'll know."

His fingers tangle with mine as he shakes his head. "I can't."

I'm tucked into his body, thankful it's strong enough to absorb every wracking shudder I release.

"You forgot kissing," he says. "Give me more of your words to describe that."

I nibble on the edge of what wants to be a smile, not quite letting it touch my lips. "Kissing you is actually, pretty ordinary."

A wicked grin lowers close enough for me to press my mouth to it. "What a beautiful lie that is."

I sigh against his lips when they finally brush mine, and my fingers curl into his shirt, locking him in place as fresh rainwater mixes with every swipe of our tongues.

"Forgive me," I half-moan, half-mutter. "Please, Marcus. If you want me to say it, I'll say it again. I'll say it with everything I have left to give." I steal another burning kiss. "*I love you.*"

"I forgive you, slayer."

I peer up at him, finding an endless amount of love gazing back at me. The kind of love I always dreamed of, but never dared hope for.

"In fact... I've got a proposition for you."

EPILOGUE

Heather

Three Years Later

Sparrow's whiskered snout sniffs at the baby kicking inside my belly.

"What is it?" I ask when she snorts, eyeing me suspiciously.

Cupping my hand under her jaw, I gently guide her to the moving lump my daughter, Rose, creates whenever she stretches.

Sparrow sniffs and nudges the spot, but I laugh when she feels a gentle tap and rears her head back in shock.

"Won't be long before you get to meet her." I kiss her speckled face when she nudges me, and my heart pinches, wishing Jango were here to meet her too. "I know you two will be nothing but trouble together."

"Heather!" Penelope calls from what was once her mother's hideaway. "Dinner's almost ready."

After giving Sparrow a quick kiss, I pick up the bottom of my dress and make my way across the field.

"This was a lot easier before I was enormous," I grumble once I reach her.

Our newly installed fence wraps around the perimeter of the house, and Pen has one arm propped on top of the entrance

post. Her eyes glitter with humor at the sight of me, huffing and puffing. “What was?”

Flattening my hands on my lower back, I arch my spine to catch a breath. “Walking. Breathing. *Peeing.*”

She lovingly places a hand over my belly, giving me and Rose some reassurance. “You’re almost there. Just a couple of more weeks.”

We walk up the front porch steps, and just like every evening, once we’ve finished up work for the day, I marvel at all the renovations and expansions Marcus made to the house.

Three years ago, when he made the initial proposal for me to start a life with him here in Augustine, I didn’t even hesitate. The answer was *yes, without a doubt, when can we leave?* Because what reason did I have to say no? Aside from Alice, there was nothing left for me in Chicago, and up until I met Marcus, I was accepting the bare minimum from life when I no longer had to.

There wasn’t time for thinking about it or taking it slow. I’d flown to Seattle to give Marcus my heart, and I wasn’t looking back for a single second. Our future was as bright as every star in the sky. We knew what we wanted more than anything in this big, spinning world, and we were going to make it happen.

Patrick insisted that we move to the ranch, and Lucy was the one who offered her house to us—no matter how much I fussed that we could find somewhere else to live—and so began our fresh start.

I enter our home to find Catalonia and her two girls flitting around the expanded kitchen, hurriedly grabbing utensils and plates for our guests gathered around the yard on the backside of the house.

We’ve set up picnic tables, lights, and music for everyone in celebration of our new addition. I didn’t want any sort of shower for her because I knew it’d be hard on people to travel or take off work. But when it comes to my new family, I wasn’t given much choice—and I secretly love them for it.

“Hey, woman.” Cat smiles so brightly, it lights the entire room. “Shouldn’t you be taking it easy?”

“Does she ever?” Pen answers for me, stepping in to help while I’m attacked with big hugs from the girls.

“Heather!” Theresa and Sariah gasp in unison, and as usual, their excitement to see me softens my insides like butter.

“I missed you guys,” I say, smiling at Sariah’s ear pressed to my stomach.

She’s made a habit of talking to baby Rose—as if I’m not bodily attached—any chance she gets.

Theresa smirks. “We saw you two days ago, silly.”

She’s fourteen now, blossoming into a beautiful young woman, and I just can’t believe how much the two of them have grown.

I poke her nose, smirking back. “My limit for missing you doesn’t exist.”

Cat calls the girls to follow her outside just as I hear a screeching, “*Mom!*”

Yennifer leans over the loft above. “Tobias put worms on top of my pillow!”

I turn in time to catch him sneak around the corner of the stairs for the back door.

“Tobias,” I warn, using my well-practiced mom voice.

He gives me a mischievous grin. “What? They’re not *real* worms.”

I arch a brow, and he sighs. “Fine, I’ll go apologize.”

But before he heads up, he walks over with a timid smile and gives me a quick hug.

The thing with being pregnant is, everything makes me cry. The sunset, someone going out of their way to hold the door open for me, my kids doing literally nothing but existing.

It doesn't matter. If it's the tiniest bit heart-warming, there are tears.

Marcus knew adoption and foster care were heavy on my soul, and something I couldn't wait to do once we were married. So, two years ago, when we discussed our options with the ladies at the shelter, and Yennifer and Tobias came up, there was no question. They were coming home with us.

"Don't cry, Mom," he says, but dammit, now I can't stop.

"I'm fine, I promise," I assure him, squishing his handsome face between my hands.

Being forced to call my foster parents 'Mom' and 'Dad' was one of many things that made me uncomfortable when I was in the system. I've never asked that of these two, but even at the ages of nine and eleven, the way they've adopted us as much as we have them... *tears*.

The front door swings open behind me, and Tobias smiles over my shoulder.

"Hey, Uncle Mortie."

"What's up, kiddo?"

I step aside for them to hug, fiddling with the horse charm necklace Marcus made for me while swiping at my cheeks.

"You okay?" Mortie asks when Tobias makes his way up to the loft.

I sniffle, then choke on a sob, because seriously, that was so sweet, I feel like my heart is going to explode. "Yeah, totally fine. All I do is cry nowadays."

My brother-in-law—the man I once thought was incapable of redemption—grabs a tissue off the coffee table and offers it to me with a smile.

Mortie's been sober for three years, but that haunted look in his eyes never truly left. Marcus, their parents, and I have done everything we can to support him, and I know he's happier, but I often wonder if his addiction remained a quiet voice in his mind. Always there, always tempting.

He tilts his head as he studies my abdomen, protruding from my flowing dress. “You look beautiful.”

I curl my lips under my teeth, swallowing the ache in my throat until I can’t stand it any longer.

“Oh,” Mortie says, wide-eyed as he scrambles for more tissues. “You weren’t kidding.”

“Thank you,” I hiccup, making his lips twitch when I stuff the used tissues inside my dress pocket. “How was your flight?”

The kids scurry downstairs, worm-mishap forgiven, and with little more than a wave, they meet the rest of our family and friends outside.

“Not nearly as miserable as the one from California to Bosnia.” He rubs the back of his neck. “It’s been months, but I still have this crick in my neck.”

“Aw, poor vampire, having to travel to amazing places to film his what... second movie now?”

His hand stills as a cheeky grin dimples his handsome face. “Third, but who’s counting?”

Through the kitchen windows, we watch the kids play soccer with their grandparents, Patrick, and Lucy. Their laughter and the sound of Marcus cheering them on from where he’s placing food on the grill amplifies the sudden silence in the house.

Mortie reaches inside his front pocket and produces a thin, white handkerchief.

“I found it,” he says quietly.

Surprise rushes through me hard enough to jolt Rose into kicking. I place a shaky hand to my side, blinking up at Marcus’s brother when he places Leah’s bracelet in the other one.

“Mortie...”

I’m at a loss for words.

“The investigator we hired finally tracked it down.” His hand falls from mine as he smiles fondly. “I bought it for a quarter more than what Marcus sold it for.”

I shake my head, unable to tear my gaze from the jewelry. I was sure we would never see it again. “No, this was all you.”

His hand folds around mine, curling the bracelet under my fingers. “It was your idea, and you’re the one who found the person for the job. All I did was supply the funds to make it happen.”

I grab his wrist with my free hand and yank him into me with enough force to knock a breath out of him.

“*Jesus Christ,*” he exhales in a rush.

“Thank you,” I say, for more than just this gift, but for what this will mean to my husband and their parents. “Thank you so much.”

He gingerly pats my back before giving in to the hug altogether, and as well as I can with Rose in the way, I squeeze him hard.

Resting his hands on my shoulders, he gently separates us. “I’ll let you be the one who gives it to him.”

I frown, certain he’d want to be the one to share that moment with his brother. “Wait, are you sure?”

I’m given a soft smile. “I’m sure.”

I fumble with the tissue box, yanking several more tissues free when he leaves to get Marcus.

I watch everyone drop what they were doing to greet and hug him, and never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be here in this house we’ve made our own, writing and traveling freely. All while being embraced by a family who has accepted me as their own, with kids who call me Mom, and a new life thriving inside me.

Mortie claps his brother’s shoulder, and before he can finish what he was saying, Marcus is trotting across the yard for the door.

He cranks the handle and opens the door in one swift motion, scouring me from head to belly to toe with his worried gaze. “Hey. Everything okay?”

My pulse thumps wildly when he crosses the room, fussing his hands all over my body when he reaches me. They graze my neck and shoulders before splaying on either side of where our sweet girl is settled.

“You’re scaring me, Heather,” he says. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry. I-I’m not trying to.” I look up at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath so I can make this moment special for him, but it’s damn near impossible.

“Shh,” he says, bringing his hands to my face and kissing my forehead. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out. Just like we always do.”

I inhale one last deep breath before taking one of his hands in mine and shakily placing Leah’s bracelet in the center of it.

Marcus goes completely still. “Where... where did you get this?”

His throat works, turning as red as his face as he stares at the only piece of his sister he has left—a piece he sacrificed for the ones he loved and believed was gone forever.

“Mortie and I worked together to find it.” I place a tender kiss on each of his trembling fingers before he closes them in a fist. “I’m sorry it took so long, but it’s yours, Marcus. She came back to you.”

Marcus covers his mouth, brows scrunched tightly as he tries, and fails, to force back a sob. I’m a goner when he collapses into me, holding his head to my shoulder while he releases years of pent-up anguish.

“I know,” I murmur. “It’s okay.”

We stay like that, in the comfort and security we’ve only ever found in each other, and I whisper my fingers along his spine until he’s finally calm enough to face me.

His tear-filled gaze breaks with an adoring smile. “I swear to god, if we weren’t already married, I’d marry you all over

again.”

I laugh against the lips he brings to mine—devouring, seeking, loving—and I meet him with as much force as I always have and always will.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever thank him for this...” he says between tentative kisses.

“He loves you,” I whisper. “It’s not something he expects to be repaid for.”

Marcus absorbs those words, knowing they’re true. Knowing that Mortie may not be perfect but he’s trying, and that’s all Marcus ever wanted.

“I guess you were right all those years ago.” He nuzzles a path down my neck, lighting a need through my middle that only he has the power to relieve. “To say I love you isn’t good enough. It won’t ever be good enough. But I love you, regardless.”

My heart sings for him, for everything he’s given us, and everything we’re yet to be.

“The windows are open...” I warn playfully when he palms my ass, bringing me impossibly close while nipping along my skin.

“You’re my wife and my whole world, slayer,” Marcus murmurs the nickname he refused to part with over my lips. “Let them see that.”



Thank you for reading!

I love interacting with my readers <3 Join my reader group on Facebook for access to exclusive book goodies, advanced reader copies, updates and more!

[Loren’s Hype Hive](#)

Get a FREE Topica Bay Novella featuring Coraline and Josh
when you sign up for my [newsletter](#) !

LOREN BEESON BOOKS

Contemporary Stand-alone

[The Art of Loving Ellie](#)

Betting On Love Series

[Betting Blind](#)

[Dealing Dirty.](#)

[Waging War](#)

Topica Bay Series

[One More Wish \(TB #.5\)](#),

[One More Kiss](#)

[One More Night](#)

One More Try (Coming Soon)

PLAYLIST AND PINTEREST INSPO

[Click here to listen to the OMN playlist!](#)

[Click here to see the OMN inspiration!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Loren Beeson is a dreamer, artist, radiologic technologist, and author who loves all things romance. Always writing short stories as a young child and young adult, she knew she wanted to become an author someday. Horses are her muse while drawing, and writing is her escape from the real world. She's a lover of flaming hot Cheetos and smutty romance novels, and occasionally has a glass of wine or two... or four.

Loren can be found in her cozy home in Texas with her nose in a book, her corgi and mini-Aussie on her lap, and her son trailing along with her and her husband through their many adventures.

