

THE
WRECKED SERIES



*Reckless
Refuge*

CATHERINE
COWLES

RECKLESS REFUGE

CATHERINE COWLES

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RECKLESS REFUGE

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For Alessandra.

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fortunate to have had you with me along the way.*

PROLOGUE

SHAY

PAST

IT BURNED. Everywhere and nowhere. Slices in my skin that made it feel as if hot lava had been poured into my flesh. I couldn't count them, had lost track after the tenth. I tried to move, to somehow escape. Only my fingers twitched.

Sounds. Voices. Hovering above me. They were everywhere and yet nowhere. Pinpricks of light, like glimmering stars on the darkest night.

“Miss? Can you hear me?”

I managed a low moan. I only wanted the pain to stop. The agony tearing through my body. I craved a blanket of nothingness. An endless sea where I would cease to exist altogether.

“I'm an EMT. You're safe. We've got you.”

“Hurts.” It was the only message I cared about getting across. This woman might have the power to lessen the burn.

A hand slipped into mine, blood sliding down my arm to bind us together, the liquid already growing tacky with the passage of time.

“I know. Just hold on.”

I didn't want to hold on. I wanted to float away to a world where none of this was real. Where pain didn't exist—only light and peace and relief.

“Can you tell us who did this to you?”

My eyes fluttered. My cracked lips parted. I could only manage two words.

“My brother.”

SHAY

PRESENT

I STEPPED over a tree root and avoided the rock that was a recipe for a twisted ankle. After three years, my feet knew this path by heart. From the meadow, through the thick forest, to the sea encircling this piece of land. Some people would feel claustrophobic, knowing that they were surrounded by water. It made me feel nothing but safe.

The constant sound of the sea lapping against the shore, the hint of salt in the air. All of it was a balm that soothed the worst of my frayed edges. Assured me I was protected. When I jerked awake from a nightmare, I had only to lean towards my window to strain for the sound of water, inhale deeply for the scent to know I was okay. Only the comfort of my mother's arms would've been better.

I followed the path as it dipped down towards the water, the beach, and the dock. The majesty of the view never got old. The deep blue-green of the water. The other islands in the distance, popping up like forest green sea turtles. I could get lost in it. And if I were lucky, an orca might crest as the beauty held me captive.

I jogged down the steps built into the small cliffside, heading for the boat shed. I flipped the combination on the lock and pulled the doors open. Kayaks lined the walls, along with life jackets, floats, and toys. I grinned at the inflatable unicorn propped up against the corner. Lucy loved the thing.

Last summer, she'd spent half her time here, tooling around our little cove, lying on its back.

I was ready for the Dowds to return. It had been months since they'd visited the island. As the kids got more involved in extracurricular activities, it became harder and harder for them to steal away from Seattle for a weekend or week at their vacation home. And as the caretaker for the island, that meant I was alone.

I usually soaked up that peace. It meant I could relax. I didn't have to guard my words or make sure I wore long-sleeved shirts. I didn't have to worry about letting something slip that might give me away. I was free.

But as the days dragged into months, the loneliness sometimes caught hold. And the more years that passed with me on this thirty-acre plot of land in the middle of the sea, with only occasional visits from my employer, the loneliness grew fiercer. I gripped the door just a bit harder as I glanced at my exercise mat and weights in the corner of the shed. I usually reserved mornings for my workouts, but maybe today I needed town. The bustle of people, even if I never said a word to any of them.

I snatched up the keys to the boat and made a silent promise to myself that I'd pull the weights out this afternoon. Heading for the Boston Whaler, I checked the waters around our little island. Not too many vessels out and about on this Tuesday morning. I usually avoided the high-traffic times—my nautical prowess was still on the beginner side. But at least I'd become comfortable navigating the massive speedboat to Anchor Island.

Our small chain off the coast of Washington had a number of populated landmasses. Shelter had more shopping options, but I always opted for Anchor whenever possible. Shelter had too many tourists, even in the winter months. I always feared I would run into someone who recognized me. Someone from my old life, or a random stranger that would put two and two together because they'd watched some of the relentless news coverage of my life—the near end of it anyway.

The boat cut through the water with ease, saltwater dancing up in an artful array. The ten-minute trip from Harbor Island to Anchor was over in a blink as I pulled up next to one of the town docks. I tied off the boat and grabbed the bit of cash I always kept in the cabin.

Anchor was still a bit sleepy this morning, but fishermen and a couple of charter tour companies made the dock feel busier than the rest of town. I sidestepped a man hauling a cooler onto his boat. “Morning,” he called.

“Good morning,” I echoed. It had taken me some time to get used to the innate friendliness of the people here. Having grown up in a city, it had made me wary when everyone I passed greeted me. Even worse when someone helped to load my groceries onto my boat. Even now, it was a careful dance. If I protested too much, people became curious. If I let them in too often, they could become overly familiar.

I’d stuck to warm greetings but refused offers of help. I imagined the guys on the dock had decided that I was just a hell of an independent woman. And it was true. I’d worked incredibly hard to build this life for myself, thinking of every possible pitfall and danger. Disappearing without changing one’s name or ID was a challenge, to say the least. But when you had no other options, you got creative.

I headed down the dock and towards The General Store. The island had one of those big grocery stores away from the quaint downtown area, but I preferred the heart of the little brown-shingled market and used it whenever I could. It helped that half my paycheck each month was deposited into my account there. No one could track my spending that way.

I pulled open the door, the warmth of the air soothing the chill that had settled into my skin on the ride over. “Shay!” a voice called from the back.

A smile stretched across my face as I made my way to the small kitchen at the back of the store. “I wasn’t sure you’d be in today.”

Caelyn made a face as she rounded the counter. She looked as if she might hug me but settled for a shoulder squeeze. I

tried to let myself relax, but I still wasn't used to people touching me. It felt awkward and unpracticed.

"I'm still here in the mornings, Monday through Friday."

"Glad you're not disappearing on me altogether."

Caelyn had become my point of human contact—other than the Dowds. We'd formed a friendship of sorts over the past few years. I wasn't sure that she thought of me as a friend exactly, but casual acquaintanceship for her, was a lifeline to me.

She grinned. "Never. How about a breakfast sandwich? I've got your order in the back, too."

"A breakfast sandwich sounds great." I slid onto the closest stool.

Caelyn poured an egg mixture into a pan on the stove. "How are things on Harbor?"

"Good. Weather's taking a turn again, so my days are a little chillier."

"You're telling me. I had to force Mia into her coat this morning. The way she dresses, you'd think it was eighty degrees out there."

I grinned at the image of Caelyn's little sister refusing to cover one of her brightly colored ensembles with a jacket. "How are the rest of the tiny terrors?"

"They're good. We all are. It's taken some time, but things have finally settled down."

I studied Caelyn's face. Her expression held nothing but peace and happiness. You never would've known the hell she and the siblings she had custody of had been through just months ago. "You know, if you ever need to talk, I'm a good listener."

Caelyn paused in her chopping and looked up. "Thank you. That means a lot. But I promise, I talked this out until I was blue in the face. Griffin made sure of it."

"That's a good man you snagged there."

She winked at me. “Why do you think I put a ring on him?”

I choked on a laugh. “Because you’re not a stupid woman.”

“Dang straight.” She slid the egg and cheese goodness onto an English muffin and then proceeded to put all other sandwiches to shame by adding her secret blend of spices, some caramelized onions, and arugula. “Here you go.”

My stomach grumbled. “You know, I’ve tried to replicate this at home. I fail every time.”

Caelyn picked up her jar of the spice mixture. “This is the key. I’ll put some in a little jar for you to take home.”

“You’re a goddess.”

“Don’t I know it. But you’ll have to bring me some of your greenhouse tomatoes in exchange. I miss good tomatoes in the winter.”

I picked up my sandwich. “You’ve got yourself a deal. I’ve got a huge crop of them this year.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” The bell over the door jangled. “Let me make sure they don’t need any help. I’ll be right back.”

“Take your time.” I bit into the sandwich and had to hold back a moan. The concoctions Caelyn created were out of this world. She didn’t need the culinary classes she was currently enrolled in. Hell, she could be teaching them.

I forced myself to eat slowly, enjoying every bite. My culinary skills had vastly improved since I’d moved to Harbor, but I couldn’t compete with this. I’d learned how to use the ingredients I grew in the gardens and the greenhouse. I’d mastered creating sauces and stews to freeze for later. And I’d fallen in love with the process of it all. The slower pace of life that existed just a bit outside what the regular world demanded.

My work phone buzzed in my pocket. Pulling it out, I saw an email notification flashing across the screen. Opening the

message, I scanned the first few lines and froze.

Shay,

I hate doing this over email, but I know how spotty cell service is out there. We recently got an offer on Harbor that's too good to refuse. It breaks our hearts, but the kids want to be on the mainland this summer, and it just doesn't make sense to keep it if we'll be spending all our time in Seattle. The good news is the buyer is interested in keeping you on if you can agree on terms for responsibilities and salary. He's arriving next week. I'm including the number for his assistant below so you can arrange a phone call to discuss things further.

We'll miss you terribly. Please do keep in touch.

Lots of love,

Rebecca

My hand trembled as I set my phone on the counter. Selling. A new owner. One week. The Dowds had talked about selling before, but they'd never actually gone through with putting the island on the market. I'd thought for sure that if they *did* move, I'd have time to prepare. To consider all of my options. To plan.

My ribs seemed to tighten, making it just a bit harder to breathe. A million thoughts flew through my head, what-ifs and worst-case scenarios. I reached into my pocket, searching for the small, smooth stone that always grounded me, reminded me that I was safe.

Everything would be fine. The new owner still needed a caretaker. It was rare for someone to live on one of these small private islands full time.

I took a deep, steadying breath. I wouldn't lose my haven. The one place I'd felt safe since that night eleven years ago. I'd just have to prove how indispensable I could be.

BRODY

CARSON LET OUT a puff of smoke as he leaned back on the chaise lounge, the stream filtering up from my terrace and melting into the New York skyline. “Stop making that face.”

I took a pull from my beer. “What face?”

“The one that says you’re judging me for polluting the air around you.”

I grinned. “You said it, not me.”

“You used to have a pack-a-day habit.”

I grimaced at the reminder. “I was twenty-two and stupid.”

Carson stubbed out his cigarette on the bottom of his combat boot and then laid the butt on the table between us. “Maybe you are made for clean air and country living.”

I played with a frayed thread on my jeans, twisting it around my finger until the digit lost blood supply. “Let’s hope I am.”

“You couldn’t do what a normal person would and take a vacation. No, you had to go off and buy a fucking island.”

The string around my finger snapped. “You know me, go big or go home.”

Carson stayed silent, studying me. My friend of over a decade peeled back layer after layer as he stared. “How can you leave New York? It’s like another limb. It’s seared into our marrow at this point.”

He wasn't wrong. New York had become a part of me over the years. From the first time I escaped the suburbs of Connecticut and tore through the city with friends leaving our spray-painted tags in our wake, trying to become the next Banksy. Most had grown bored of the hobby the way most teenagers do. But I'd become obsessed. The burning desire to find a way to express everything inside me, the way I saw the world. It took over my life.

I'd left Connecticut for good the moment I could. Abandoning suburbia for the raw realism of the city. It had been everything I'd dreamed of for a long time. All-nighters with friends just as passionate about leaving their mark on the world through art as I was. Not art that was expected, either. Art that had no barriers and talked about real issues.

It was the highest high. Until it wasn't.

I let the string in my hand fall to the ground. "It's time for a change."

"Running across the country won't change what happened."

My jaw worked as I struggled to form words. "I know it won't. I just—I feel trapped. Claustrophobic."

"Probably because you haven't left your apartment in three months, other than to talk to the cops." Carson swung his legs around so he sat up, facing me. "Listen. And really hear me. None of what happened was your fault. I get that it messed with your head. It couldn't be any other way. But you're not giving yourself a chance to get over it by locking yourself away, completely alone, thousands of miles away from your friends."

"There's a caretaker."

"What?"

"I won't be alone. There's a caretaker on the island." We hadn't actually spoken, but my manager had communicated briefly with the woman. Said that everything was in order for my arrival. But, honestly, I wasn't sure I could handle having even a single soul in my business.

“Your island came with a person?”

I chuckled. “No, she worked for the previous owners. But she’s staying on with the house if we can come to terms.”

“Jesus. That’s some sort of *Downton Abbey* shit.”

“That makes you want to come with me, doesn’t it?”

Carson pointed his beer at me. “Don’t start. You know I’ll deck you if you insult *Downton*.”

I held up both hands. “I would never.”

“That’s better.” He sobered again. “It’s not enough. One random person. I’m worried you’re going to become one of those hoarder hermits. We’ll have to hire a team for an intervention.”

“I solemnly swear not to become a hoarder.”

Carson eyed the door to my apartment. “Not if Lara has anything to say about it. I’m pretty sure she’s planning to airdrop your entire studio onto that new little island of yours.”

I groaned, leaning back against the chaise. “I never should’ve let her handle packing it up.”

“You know she’s like a dog with a bone. Gets even a hint of a grip, and she’s not giving it up for anything.”

It was the perfect description for a woman who looked the opposite of what she was. Petite, delicate, and impeccably dressed, you never expected the colorful curses that escaped her mouth. Or the way she took anyone to task if it got her clients what they and she wanted.

We’d been friends since I arrived in New York at the age of eighteen. She’d run with my crazy crowd but had discovered that she had more talent for wheeling and dealing in the art world than putting paint to surface. Now, almost twenty years later, she handled practically everything for me.

“She’s hoping I’ll keep painting.”

“No shit, Sherlock. You’re the one who keeps her Chelsea penthouse full of Louboutins.”

I took another pull of my beer. “She’ll find another prize pony. It’ll be you if you’re not careful.”

Carson gave an exaggerated shiver. “Too worried she’ll stab me in my sleep.”

“Or maybe you guys will hate-fuck each other and finally stop making my life miserable whenever you’re in the same room together.”

Carson leaned back onto the lounge. “That idea has merit.”

I snorted. “You would solve every problem you could by sleeping with it, just as long as it was female.”

“I have wide and varied tastes in both women and art. So sue me.”

“I don’t know how discerning those tastes are...”

“I like the shit you make, so you’re really just insulting yourself.”

“Fair point.” I was quiet for a moment. “I’ll miss this.”

“You sound like you’re going off to war. No one’s making you leave. I’m sure you could get out of the purchase.”

“I need a change.” But it was more than that. I needed to figure out who I was again, what I truly wanted. And I had to do that away from the prying eyes of New York. I felt as if I couldn’t move here. Couldn’t breathe. And every step I took had the potential to detonate another bomb.

“Fine. Buy a spot upstate. One I can drive to in a couple of hours. You’ll be out of the fray of the city but not cut off from your entire life.”

But I needed that distance. A clean break was the only way to truly start over. “I’m going, Car.”

“Fucking hell. Fine. But when you’re bored as shit in two weeks, don’t come crying to me.”

“I promise, I won’t.”

“I’m gonna miss you too, you asshole.”

I grinned. “You’re going to come visit in a month when I’m settled. Hopefully, we’ll be well into building the studio by then.”

“I am jealous of the space you’ll have.”

Space in New York might as well be made of diamonds. And when you worked on large-scale art the way Carson and I did, it was a commodity you’d shed blood for. “I’m finalizing the designs with the architect now. It’s been a hell of a thing getting to choose every last placement.”

“Let’s hope the new space brings inspiration.”

Carson and I both started at the voice behind us. Carson muttered a curse. “Have you lost the ability to ring the bell?”

Lara held up a glinting piece of metal. “I don’t have to knock. I have a key.”

“Brody could’ve been banging a chick out here.”

Her face screwed up. “He’s not *you*. He has some decency.”

He gave her a wink. “Come on, Lara. You know you’d kill for a walk on this wild side.”

Her lip curled. “Not if it meant I’d have to be inoculated afterwards.”

I choked on my beer, and Carson speared me with a glare. “Don’t laugh at her jabs.”

Lara crossed to a chair, gracefully lowered herself onto it, and then set her handbag on the table. “He has good taste, what can I say?”

“More like you’ve trained him well,” Carson muttered.

I set my beer on the other side table. “All right, children. Can’t we all just get along?”

Carson gave me a mock pout. “She started it, Dad.”

“Gross,” Lara complained. “I will not be related to you. Not even in a make-believe scenario.”

I sighed, leaning my head against the chaise. “This, I will *not* miss.”

“I’ll put a hit out on Carson if you agree to stay in New York,” Lara offered.

“No hitman is going to take me out. I’ve got ninja skills.”

Lara rolled her eyes and then turned her focus back to me. “Seriously. We can call off the move.”

“I leave tomorrow.”

She made a *pssh* sound. “If I can put together a gallery show in forty-eight hours, I can reverse the sale of your condo and studio.”

This had been the refrain for the past month. The first time I’d floated the idea past Lara, she’d nearly lost her mind. She’d told me I would ruin my career. Burn all my bridges. But I didn’t have much of a career at the current juncture. It had all been blown to smithereens. Or the people who were interested in my art only wanted it for some perversely morbid reason.

I hadn’t drawn or painted or done anything in the art realm in months. And I missed it like a phantom limb. This part of me that had ceased to be in a violent tearing. But every time I tried to put even a pencil to paper, I seized up, images of how my art had been turned into something twisted filling my mind.

“Brody...”

Lara’s voice brought me out of my spiral. “Sorry. What?”

She shared a look with Carson. This was one area where they were on the same page. “Stay. You need your family right now.”

I gave my head a shake. “I’m going.” I left it at that. I’d tried explaining myself time and again. It never did any good. With either of them. I’d miss Lara and Car. I’d miss the noise and the scents of the city. The chaotic rhythms that came from the life that flowed through this place. My favorite deli on the corner. The local bar my crew and I invaded every Thursday.

New York was massive. But it was also a small town. *My* town. And it would never stop being a part of me—as much as the skin that stretched across my bones. I would carry it with me always. It was just everything else I needed freedom from. The darkness that had crept into my life when a man had taken my creations and turned them into walking death.

SHAY

I MADE my way down the stairs and towards the open living and dining space. One more walk-through. Just to make sure everything was perfect. The cleaning crew had come yesterday, and I'd hovered so much, they'd almost throttled me. I'd already boxed up and sent all of the Dowds' personal belongings to Seattle. But the new owner was keeping the furniture in the house.

Brody James. The enigma who would hopefully be my new boss. I wiped my hands on my jeans, but my palms simply dampened again. He would like me. No, he would think I was the best caretaker he'd ever encountered.

I'd hounded his assistant, Lara, for a list of his favorite foods. The household brands he preferred. Was there anything she thought he'd need from the mainland that I should order now? The woman probably thought I was a head case.

I wasn't crazy. I was determined. To stay. My fingers traced the raised scar on my stomach through the thin cotton of my t-shirt. Habit. A way of reminding myself that I could never be too careful. Too much was at stake.

With that in mind, my gaze traveled over the kitchen. I moved to the counter, adjusting the vase of flowers. I already had Mr. James' favorite beer chilling in the refrigerator. Along with an artfully arranged charcuterie board that only needed to be unwrapped and set out.

Plenty of belongings had been sent ahead. I'd moved all of the boxes marked *clothing* to the closet. I'd wanted to open

them to get a feel for the man by way of his garments but had thought better of it. I doubted he would be prepared for island weather coming from New York. I'd already begun a list of things he'd likely need me to order. A heavy-duty rain jacket, muck boots.

But maybe his lack of preparedness meant that he wouldn't be spending much time at the estate. I glanced out the wall of windows at the back of the house and knew I was wrong. Four large crates marked *studio* had arrived, along with the rest of Mr. James' belongings. No one brought that much stuff if they only planned on staying for the summers and an occasional long weekend or two.

My lips pressed into a firm line as I headed out of the main house and followed the path down the hill. I passed the vegetable garden and the greenhouse. The small chicken coop that provided more than enough fresh eggs. Finally, I arrived at the guest house. My home. My haven.

I pulled open the door, inhaling the soothing scent of lavender from the candle I'd burned earlier in the day. A touchstone. The therapist I'd seen after my attack had advised that I should build as many of them into my daily routine as possible. Things that reminded me I was safe. A scent. A sound. A feeling.

Years later, I'd kept up with the habit. Lavender. The sea. A smooth beach stone. Those things and my music always helped me fight the memories.

Over the past three years, I'd slowly made the small cottage my home. I'd come to it with virtually nothing. The quilt my mother and aunt had made me. My violin. The bare minimum clothing. Photos I couldn't bear to look at. But bit by bit, I'd infused myself into the space. A painting by a local artist. An antique tray from Second Chances. Stacks of sheet music. It was mine now, and I wouldn't leave it without a fight.

I crossed to the small desk in the living space and eased into the chair. I hit a few keys on my laptop and signed in. Thankfully, an internet connection was one thing the Dowds

had insisted upon when they moved in. Everything else on Harbor was self-sufficient. Solar panels and a generator. A filtration system to remove the salt from our water source. The greenhouse and the chickens. But Paul Dowd had insisted on satellite internet for the estate.

I opened a separate window on my laptop and signed into my virtual private network. My brother had always had a thing for computers, and this was an extra layer of precaution. Because with Michael's *good behavior*, he'd been granted more privileges. And one of those was computer access. I'd deleted all of the email addresses and social media accounts associated with my name after the first message I'd received from him. *I miss you, sissy. Come visit. We haven't finished our game.*

I shuddered and pulled my fleece tighter around me, zipping it up. As if the warmth of the fabric could chase away the chill of the memories. I logged onto my messaging site and pulled up the latest from my thread with Evergreen13.

Evergreen13: *Did you peek in the crates? I would have. What if they're hiding dead bodies?*

I snorted and typed out a reply.

Phoenix26: *Things would be smelling a lot worse if there were dead bodies.*

Evergreen13: *True. You holding up okay? What time does Mr. Enigma get there?*

The tension that had turned my shoulders to granite eased a bit. No matter how alone I felt at times, I always had E. I didn't know her real name or where she was located, but she'd been my lifeline since we met on a messaging thread about how to live under the radar.

I'd been a lurker on the forum for months before finally commenting on a post. Ever since I'd come to terms with the fact that Michael would get out one day. I'd abandoned thoughts of college and conservatory programs. I'd focused on how to stay alive.

And E had been a godsend in that arena. She was far more knowledgeable than I was. Over four years ago, she'd begun giving me advice over a messaging app. Soon, a friendship was born. We didn't know everything about each other, but with the things that did slip, I was sure we could've figured out each other's identities. But the silent promise between us was that we wouldn't try.

Phoenix26: *I'm fine. A.k.a. slowly going out of my mind trying to make sure everything's perfect for Enigma's arrival. And he gets here in...shit...fifteen minutes. I need to go. I want to meet him at the dock when he arrives.*

Evergreen13: *You're going to do great, and he's going to beg you to stay on.*

Phoenix26: *I hope you're right. I'll message you tonight and let you know how it went. Later, gator.*

Evergreen13: *After a while, crocodile.*

I pushed back from the desk and stood. Making a small detour to the closet, I surveyed my appearance. What the heck did you wear to meet your new boss when your job included pulling weeds and cleaning up chicken poop? I was currently going with my favorite pair of jeans—the kind worn so often they automatically molded to your body—a long-sleeved cotton tee, and a fleece jacket. My boots were worn but not falling apart. And my hair was currently swept back in a braid. Makeup had become a thing of the past long ago. Honestly, it would feel weird to put it on now.

I met my eyes in the mirror. The gold flecks in my hazel eyes seemed to stand out today, almost glowing against the green. “You can do this. Professional. Composed. Every detail handled.”

With one last silent promise to myself, I turned away from my reflection and headed out of my guest house and towards the dock. The scent of the salt in the air and the sound of the water did nothing to help calm my nerves. Anxiety took hold and refused to release.

An old mantra took root in my brain. *Feel the fear and do it anyway.* I'd seen it on one of those arty quote graphics. No idea who'd said it. But it had stayed with me throughout my recovery and after. I couldn't change whether or not I was scared or anxious, but I could keep moving forward.

I hopped over a root in the path and kept going. Within a few minutes, I was walking across the dock. I ignored the bench in the middle and opted to pace. The movement was at least an outlet for the energy that my anxiety created.

As I walked back and forth, I kept my eyes trained on the water. It wasn't long before a medium-sized speedboat peeled away from the main waterway and headed in my direction. I swallowed against the dryness in my throat.

The private water taxi pulled up to the dock, and I helped the driver quickly tie off and then took the single bag of luggage he hefted over the side of the boat. "That's it." He turned to the man who was currently pushing to his feet from where he'd been sitting in the co-pilot's seat. "Enjoy your new home."

"Thank you. I think I will."

The voice froze me in my tracks. It was deep and younger than I'd expected. I'd pictured a man in his fifties or sixties, someone entering retirement and looking for a brand-new adventure. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* I hadn't even taken the time to run an internet search on my new boss. I'd been too focused on getting the estate in shape and running impeccably before his arrival.

Now, I stood gaping at the man who climbed over the side of the boat. As he moved towards me, I took in his height and broad shoulders, the stubble covering his angular jaw. But it was his eyes that held me captive. Dark and haunting as if they had secrets I desperately wanted to uncover.

His mouth moved into a frown. "You're Shay?"

I gave myself a swift mental kick and straightened my spine. "Yes, sir. Welcome to Harbor Island."

"How old are you?"

I could barely hear the question over the boat roaring to life and heading away from the dock. “How old am I?”

His frown deepened. “Yeah. You look like you might not even be old enough to buy beer.”

My cheeks heated. “I’m twenty-three. And I have your favorite ale in the refrigerator, along with a sampling of local brews.”

His gaze traveled over my face as if he thought I might be lying. Not a great start. I cleared my throat. “I assure you, I’m a complete professional. I’ve worked for the Dowds for over three years, and I’m good at my job. If you’ll give me a chance, Mr. James, I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

The lines that bracketed his mouth softened the barest amount. “Fuck. I’m not going to fire you. It just took me by surprise, is all. I was expecting someone in her fifties or something.”

I nodded, my death grip on his bag loosening a fraction. I certainly hadn’t expected a man who looked to be in his mid-thirties. “Thank you. Because I really do love my job.”

Mr. James made a move to take the bag from my hand. “What does a caretaker of an island do anyway?”

“I’ve got this, sir.”

He scowled. “Call me Brody. And I can carry my own bag.”

I reluctantly handed it over. “All right. Well, I arrange for the cleaning staff to come whenever they’re needed. Coordinate maintenance of the buildings. I keep up the grounds—mow the lawn, tend the vegetable garden and greenhouse. I take care of the chickens. I purchase groceries and any necessities and retrieve them from Anchor. I watched the Dowds’ children when the couple needed. I’m pretty much a Jack of all trades. If you need something, I’ll figure out a way to make it happen.”

His lips twitched as he motioned for me to lead the way off the dock. “That could come in handy. Sounds like you’re pretty busy.”

“I am, sir—I mean, Brody.” I bit back a curse. I couldn’t help the desire to use a more formal title. To create some distance between us somehow and make sure things remained completely professional.

“You like living on this island all by yourself? You don’t get lonely? From what I understand, the Dowds weren’t out here all that much.”

The loneliness set in more than I wanted to admit. But no amount of loneliness could make me give up my safety. I couldn’t tell him any of that, though. “I love it here. The peace. The quiet. It’s my favorite place in the world.”

“I hope I feel the same way about it.”

I could feel Brody’s gaze on my back as I climbed, almost hear his mind asking a million silent questions. “I hope you do, too.” Maybe if he’d actually visited Harbor before dropping close to ten million dollars on it, he would’ve been more certain.

“This path runs the entire exterior of the island and has several offshoots that lead up to the main dwelling. If you have any large items delivered, we have a pulley system that we can set up to bring it up to the house.”

“That’s good. Do you know how the solar power system works? I’ve never used one before.”

I kept my gaze focused on the path ahead of me, afraid if I glanced at Brody, I’d trip over my feet. “I do. I can make small repairs on that and the generator. The maintenance teams have been good about teaching me every time they come out.”

Brody made a humming sound in the back of his throat. As we crested the hill and the buildings came into view, he sucked in an audible breath. “It’s gorgeous.”

More of the tension left my muscles. Maybe everything would be fine. Brody would be happy here. I’d make sure he was. He wouldn’t fire me. And when Michael was released, I would be safe. Surrounded by the thing that terrified him more than any other: water.

BRODY

THIS WAS A DISASTER. I watched as Shay moved seamlessly through the kitchen, pulling out a tray of what looked like expertly arranged snacks. Uncovering it, she placed it on the counter. “Would you like a beer? Or a soda? Water?”

I forced my gaze away from the curves of her body—the dip in her waist and the flare of her hips. Even clad in denim and fleece, I could trace the peaks and valleys with my eyes—the way I wanted to with my pencil against paper. “Water would be great. Thank you.”

Because I needed to maintain a clear head. Keep all of my faculties on high-alert. Why did she have to be heart-stoppingly gorgeous? *And young*, I reminded myself. More than a decade separated us, and yet I couldn’t stop staring. The way she moved, with a mixture of grace and efficiency, it captivated me. As if there were some music only she could hear, a muted rhythm that she followed.

Shay poured water into a glass and handed it to me. “I left some meals in the fridge and freezer for you. They’re marked with instructions on how to reheat. I asked your assistant what you usually preferred, but she didn’t have a lot of information.”

“Lara’s more of a manager, and she isn’t typically in charge of keeping me fed.”

“Really?”

I wanted to laugh but held back. “I lived in New York. All the takeout you could possibly want is at your fingertips.”

A wistful expression swept across Shay's features so quickly, I thought I might have imagined it. "That makes sense."

"Have you ever been?"

"Where?"

"New York."

Her lush mouth thinned. "Once, a long time ago. You'll have a much harder time with takeout here. You can always take the boat over to Anchor or Shelter if you want to eat out, though."

I traced a design in the condensation on my glass. Shay clearly wasn't one for openly sharing. Maybe it was a mechanism she'd put in place to create distance with her previous employer. It made sense. If you lived on the same thirty acres as your boss, a line had to be drawn in the sand somewhere. The problem was, the more she withheld, the more my curiosity was piqued.

"I guess I'll have to learn to cook. I think I've got grilled cheese mastered. That should hold me over."

Shay clasped her hands in front of her as if she were a butler waiting to be called to duty. "I'm happy to do some meal prep for you. Just let me know what you like and don't, and when you're running low on things in the fridge. I'm not a gourmet chef by any means, but you won't starve."

There was a lack of emotion to her tone that didn't seem authentic, a cool professionalism. A canvas began taking shape in my mind. Her lines and curves stretched across it. A smoky blue mist seeping out of her mouth. But hidden within the disguise of the mist: the truth. A blue heat so hot, it would leave burns forever etched onto the skin.

"Brody? Are you all right?"

The coolness had fled from Shay's tone, replaced by concern. I shook my head. "Sorry. Just tired from the trip. Some basic meals would be great. We'll make sure the additional responsibilities are reflected in your salary."

“I’m paid plenty. And I’m happy to do whatever you need.”

Whatever I needed. That was a dangerous proposition. “Well, we can revisit it at a later date. Once we’ve figured out what your role here looks like.”

She gave me a sharp nod. “I’ll leave you to rest and get settled. We can talk more tomorrow about what you’ll be needing around the property.”

Before I could even thank Shay, she slipped out the front door and headed down a path—one that would create that distance she seemed to like so much.

I REACHED out a hand to shake the contractor’s. “Thanks so much for being willing to start so quickly.”

Hunter gripped my hand firmly and then released it, an easy grin on his face. He’d come highly recommended by my architect and seemed to have his finger on the pulse of everything I’d need to build on this island. He looked a bit young, but his company’s website said that they’d been in business for over eight years, and they had the referrals to prove it. “No problem. Your call came at the perfect time. I just had a job fall through.”

“Their loss is my gain.” I motioned for him to follow me up the same trail Shay had led me down yesterday. It was a miracle that I didn’t trip and fall on my face. I’d slept like crap the night before. Everything was too...quiet. I’d need to get a sound machine. Something that made city noises.

“It’s going to be a bear getting supplies up this incline,” Hunter muttered.

“My caretaker mentioned there’s some sort of pulley system for heavier supplies.”

“Glad to hear it. Not all of these islands have them. A couple of years ago, my team built a house on a spot where we had to trek everything in a quarter of a mile...never again.”

I chuckled. “There’s not enough money in the world.”

“No kidding.”

I came to a stop at the spot where the trees thinned, and you could glimpse the rest of the buildings. “I believe the architect was thinking right over there.” I gestured.

Hunter pulled a tablet out of a small pack. “I’ve got the plans here.” With a few taps, we were looking at drawings that made little sense to me but seemed to be a language Hunter was fluent in. He strode forward, walking what would presumably be the foundation of the building. “The positioning is ideal. If we put in all the windows you want, you’ll have a perfect view of the water through the trees. But we’re low enough that it won’t impact the sightlines from any other buildings on the property. We’ll have to build into the incline, but I think it will be worth it.”

“How long do you think?” I was already itching to get to work. It was a foreign feeling after feeling blocked for so long. But all I could think about after last night was getting that image in my head down on canvas. Or maybe driftwood. I loved working on different mediums, but I hadn’t worked a lot on untouched natural surfaces. The idea had potential.

Hunter grinned. “One of the two questions I hate answering the most.”

“What’s the other?”

“How much is this going to cost?”

I shook my head. “I already know it’s going to be brutal.”

He shrugged. “Building on islands is never cheap. But I’ve got my full crew on this, so if we don’t run into any issues, I’m guessing four months.”

It wasn’t horrible, but it was still too long. I would have to set up a makeshift studio in one of the extra bedrooms. I had drop cloths to put on the floor. I’d have to hope I didn’t get paint on the walls. “Four months is doable.”

“Glad to hear it. We can get started in two days if that works for you.”

“It does...” I paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to say what I needed to without pissing the guy off. I went with brutal honesty. “Privacy is important. I went through some stuff back in New York. Got some press attention I didn’t like much. It’s mostly died down but—”

“I’ll have a word with my guys. We’ve worked for high-profile clients before. They know the drill. I have a one-strike policy, and I’ve enforced it before. You won’t have any problems.”

The set of my jaw eased. “I appreciate it. I’m not trying to be a prick. I just—this is a fresh start for me, and I don’t want that ruined before I even get started.” The fact that I felt the pull to create again told me that I was in the right place. And I really didn’t want to lose it.

Hunter’s gaze moved over my shoulder, and a grin stretched across his face. “Hey, Shay. Is this the island you’re in charge of?”

I turned to see her heading towards us, her hair swept back from her face, and her cheeks pink from the wind and the cool air. As my gaze traveled down her body, I swallowed. Hard. She’d clearly come from a workout. Her legs were encased in spandex, and her torso in a form-fitting top. I started reciting Mets stats in my head.

“Hi, Hunter. Yeah. This is the place.” Her expression took on a wary quality. “What are you doing here?”

Hunter shot her a smile that said he would be more than interested if she reciprocated at all. “I’m gonna be around for the next four months. We’re building your boss a studio.”

Her head snapped in my direction. “You’re building something?”

I felt as if I’d just been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. But this was my damn island. “Did I need your permission?”

Her face flamed, and I instantly felt like an asshole. “No. Of course not,” Shay hurried. “I’m just surprised, is all.”

“I need a place to work.”

I could see the thoughts flying through her head at a million miles an hour. Her gaze drifted to Hunter and then back to me. “So, I guess it’ll be pretty busy around here for a while.”

“My crew’s fairly small, and we’ll do our best to stay out of your way,” Hunter offered.

It made sense that Shay was annoyed. I was disrupting the thing she’d said she loved most about the island: peace and quiet. I took a step closer to her. “They won’t be working on the weekends, so you’ll get your dose of quiet then.”

She startled slightly as if shocked I’d remember something she’d told me. “Don’t worry about me. It’s your island. Just let me know if I need to prepare anything for the start of construction.”

“All we need is for you to show me the pulley system,” Hunter said. “My team can cover the rest.”

Shay pointed to one of the outbuildings barely visible from where we stood. “It’s in the storage shed. I can set it up if you’ll let me know when you’re starting.”

Hunter shook his head. “We’ve got it. Thanks, Shay.”

“Well, I’m about to head to Anchor to pick up the mail. Do you need anything, Brody?”

“No. I think I’m good. Thanks, though.”

“I’ve got my phone if you change your mind. You should be able to send a text if you’re connected to the Wi-Fi.” She waved and headed down the path before I could utter another word.

Hunter tried to hide his chuckle with a cough. “She’s something.”

“I still haven’t quite figured her out.”

“Buddy, no one has. Shay’s not unfriendly, but she doesn’t exactly welcome conversation either.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She just shuts it down or evades. As far as I can tell, she doesn’t have any friends. No boyfriend or husband, either. It’s gotta be lonely. She’s lived out here all by herself for years. But it seems that’s just how she wants it to be.”

Something about that knowledge burned in my chest. How isolated Shay was. The way she looked at me when she found out that people would be invading her island. It was almost as if I’d betrayed her. And why did I care so much that she’d looked at me with those wounded eyes?

I hoped it was merely because I was intrigued. People were always intricate, interesting puzzles to me. The kind of projects I created required that I study humans and all the things they hid beneath their carefully crafted exteriors. Shay was simply more compelling than most. But if I dug deep, I knew that was a lie.

SHAY

I FOCUSED on my breathing as I headed down the path and onto the dock. I matched my breaths to the gentle ebb and flow of the water as I readied the boat. I kept the count as I started the engine and headed for Anchor. I let the spray of the water around me soothe my frayed edges.

Everything was changing. My quiet haven had been invaded. And the handsome man now in my space had thrown me off-kilter. I eased back on the throttle, guiding the boat into one of the spots along the dock. Everything would be fine. So a construction crew would be around all winter. I could handle that. I simply had to continue being forgettable. That was easy enough.

But I couldn't deny the longing I felt pulling at my chest. For friendship. Community. I missed it. The simple ease of grabbing dinner or coffee with someone who knew you. Not even necessarily on a deep level. Just someone you could chat about your day with. The book you were reading, the movie you watched the night before. Someone who made you feel not quite so alone.

I considered taking a detour into The General Store to see if Caelyn was there. Talking with her always eased a bit of that ache for me. I forced myself to head for the main street through town instead.

The buildings that dotted the thoroughfare were a mix of Craftsmen, Victorian, and aged brick. They breathed character into the community and housed just about everything I might need. I passed The Catch bar and restaurant, The Mad Baker,

and a home furnishings store called Second Chances that always made me drool when I stepped inside.

I continued on until I reached my destination. The Exchange had mailboxes and a small shop for copies and shipping supplies, plus plenty of postcards for tourists. I kept two boxes here. One for Harbor, and one for myself. My personal box was at the end of a chain of similar mailboxes. I had my mail sent to St. Louis and then Charlotte before it ultimately landed on Anchor.

Everything about my life was a series of those types of protections. Layers I put into place to disguise where I truly was. I hoped that when the facility released Michael, he would never guess that I was mere hours away. If he searched the trail I'd left, he'd find a bank account and mailbox in Charlotte. But I'd stayed in Washington. A state that didn't require me to pay income tax. A state that helped me hide just a little better.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the Harbor box. The post office was forwarding the Dowds' mail to Seattle, but there were already a few pieces for Brody. I tucked them under my arm and moved to my personal box. An array of items was inside. As I pulled out a violin catalog and a flyer, the edge of an envelope caught my eye.

Everest Juvenile Treatment Facility. The tips of my fingers began to tingle as I stared at the envelope. The sensation grew, traveling into my hands as the words on the paper started to blur. *Breathe.* I sucked in a ragged breath. I needed a touchstone. I patted for the stone I usually kept in my pocket, but it wasn't there. I didn't have any lavender. And I couldn't hear the water.

Shakily, I closed the mailbox and made my way out of The Exchange. I focused on my steps, putting one foot in front of the other until I reached the beach. I sank to the rocky shore, barely registering the jolt to my spine. I stared out at the water as it rolled in and out. Listened to the sound of its power. A strength that would keep me safe.

I looked down at the envelope in my hands, the top of my stack of mail. I slipped a finger under the flap before I lost my nerve and tore away the paper. I unfolded the piece of cheap stationery.

Dear Ms. McCabe,

This letter is to inform you that Michael McCabe will be released from custody on January 21st. He will remain on parole until the entirety of his twenty-year sentence has passed. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the program director or the State of Washington Parole Board.

There was no signature at the bottom of the letter, simply the facility name. I ran my gaze over the letter again as if I might be able to change its message if I stared hard enough. I squeezed my eyes closed.

The familiar war took up root in my chest. Guilt and fear. Anger and longing. I wouldn't wish on anyone the need to fear, to the depths of your bones, the person you loved most. My mind couldn't help but travel back to the memories I cherished most about my little brother. Staying up past our bedtimes to watch our favorite movie. Decorating cookies with Mom for Christmas. Picking apples at an orchard an hour outside the city.

But almost every good memory was tinged with darkness. Michael breaking my favorite DVD because he wanted to watch his. Throwing my cookies in the trash after Dad had complimented my decorating. Pushing me off a ladder at the orchard for no discernable reason.

At three, my parents had realized that something was off about their son. But it took them far too long to come to terms with what that might be. By seven, he'd been hospitalized three times. By nine, we were all scared of the little blond boy who lived down the hall. And when he turned eleven, it was too late for any of us.

A conduct disorder with callous and unemotional traits. That was what the psychiatrists eventually diagnosed him with. Because no mental health professional wanted to use the term recognized by so many. Psychopath.

No one tells you how hard it is. How it will tear you apart from the inside out. Loving a psychopath. You can't turn off the soul-deep knowledge that the person is your family. It was in my DNA to care about Michael. And even after everything that had happened, I still couldn't turn it off. I often wished it was possible. That I could kill the part of me that loved him. But I'd never had much luck.

My heart both bled and broke for Michael. It was a death sentence for a child. Not because the diagnosis would kill them, but because there were so few treatment options out there. And often, the ones that did exist were found too late. They had been for my brother.

I tried not to let myself feel the anger about it all. To sink into the frustration at my parents for not doing more. To disappear into the rage I felt because of everything my brother had stolen from me. I refused to live there, scared that it would make me too much like him.

The treatment center he'd been transferred to not long after his conviction had promised rehabilitation for children and teens with Michael's diagnosis. For the first time in years, I'd had hope. Thought maybe I wouldn't lose the last person I had left. The center had a lot of wonderful success. But Michael wouldn't be a story of triumph.

The treatment center's staff was hopeful, clearly taken in by whatever show Michael put on. The district attorney or the parole board were ready to give him another chance. The only person who'd ever seemed to know I might be right was the aunt I'd lived with after my parents were gone. She'd wanted me to take every precaution I needed to.

Sometimes, I doubted myself. I'd sat across from Michael in the visitors' room at times and thought I saw a change in my brother. Healing. But then I'd get a glimpse of who I knew he would always be. Someone who got joy from pain. Someone whose currency was my tears. Someone whose thrill came from my breaking.

I returned my gaze to the water. Michael couldn't change. It was how his brain was wired. By some luck of DNA and

neurons, I could empathize, care...*feel*. My brother would never be able to do that. My only hope was that he'd violate parole, and quickly. And that the break wouldn't come at the expense of someone's life—or mine.

BRODY

I DROPPED the can of spray paint to the floor. It wasn't right. Somehow, I'd lost the ability to translate the things in my head to the canvas. Whether the loss was from doubt or fear, I didn't know. And it really didn't matter. The only thing that counted was whether I could get it back. So far, that endeavor didn't look promising.

My gaze traveled around the sunporch that I'd turned into a temporary studio. There were at least a dozen canvases at various beginning stages. Even a few pieces started on scrap metal or wood. Nothing that had any hope of turning into something worthwhile, though.

I pulled off my gloves and ran a hand through my hair. I had the sudden desire to throw everything into a pile in the yard and start a bonfire. At least then, I could roast marshmallows.

A notification trilled from my laptop, and I crossed to my makeshift desk. I sighed but hit accept on the video call. I'd ignored at least a dozen texts and calls. If I kept this up, she'd show up at my door. "Hey, Lara."

Her face appeared on the screen, makeup impeccably done, black hair in some sort of updo. "Brody, what the hell? I've been calling for days."

"Sorry. I've been busy. Getting unpacked and all of that."

She took in the space behind me, and her expression grew excited. "You're working. That's wonderful. I knew you'd get it back. Let me see."

I grimaced. “Not now.”

Her lips thinned. “You’re still blocked.”

It wasn’t a question, but I somehow felt put on the spot. Pressured to come up with something to say that would placate the friend before me, who’d turned into some sort of boss along the way. “I’m still settling in.”

Lara sighed. “I knew this was a mistake. I think you should come back to New York. I found a therapist who specializes in this kind of thing. He usually works with athletes under a tremendous amount of pressure, but I told him about your situation—”

“What the hell? You don’t spread my business around. That’s rule number one.” Over the past couple of years, I’d started to wonder whose back Lara truly had.

Her expression hardened. “I didn’t share anything that wasn’t public knowledge.”

“I don’t care. Look, you need to back off. I need a break. I’m not planning on showing anytime soon. Maybe ever. Focus on other clients. I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

Anger lit her features. “Brody—”

I hit end before she could say anything else. A moment later, my computer rang again. “What?” I barked.

Carson’s face filled the screen. “Geez, who pissed in your Cheerios?”

I blew out a long breath. “Who do you think?”

He made a clucking sound as he pulled a cigarette out of his pack. “I told you that you should’ve fired her years ago. You know she has to be the one who outed you to the media.”

I picked up a pencil from my desk and spun it between my fingers. I’d always thought Carson was being dramatic with his accusations, but I was beginning to wonder if they had merit. For years, I’d prided myself on keeping my anonymity. So many street artists did. When there was a chance you could get arrested for your art, it was better if no one knew your face or name. But somehow, a handful of years back, I’d been

exposed. It could've been any number of people, but Lara was certainly one of the suspects.

I leaned back in my chair. "She's one of my oldest friends. And, honestly, what would she have to gain?"

"She wanted you to go public. Magazine spreads. Interviews. Gallery openings."

I snorted. "Well, that didn't work out too well for her because I never do interviews, and I rarely go to openings. Even my own."

Carson blew out a stream of smoke. "Doesn't mean she ever stops trying."

I was quiet for a moment. "I told her I might not show again."

"I knew your head was in a bad place, but your work is your life."

It had been since that first fateful trip to New York when I was barely fourteen. But I'd lost myself somewhere along the way. "I have to find a way to make it mine again. It's not just what happened this past year. It was long before that. The minute my face was out there, things changed. I lost some of the...rawness. The bravery. I played it safe."

Carson studied me through the screen as if he were trying to find the right words. Ones that would help me out of this bizarre identity crisis. "Brody. I think you're being too hard on yourself. Your pieces have always been some of the most authentic I've ever seen. And the most terrifying. I don't know if it's possible for you to pull punches. But if you have recently, it's understandable. You'll get back there."

I let my focus drift to the canvases and various mediums scattered across the room. Darkness had always pulled at me. All the things that people hid beneath the surface. What they would look like if we could see those parts of them that they disguised because they were too ugly or scary to face.

But someone had taken that art and perverted it. Turned it into something it was never supposed to be. It had messed with my head. And not just that I was afraid to put it out in the

world anymore. A part of me worried what it said about me that my creative soul had called to a murderer.

“Brody.”

Carson drew my attention back to the screen. I blinked a few times, clearing my vision. “Sorry. Lost in the weeds for a minute.”

Carson rested his cigarette on an ashtray he’d welded from spare parts. “Do you want me to come out there? Maybe we can work on a project together.”

“Car, you’re a sculptor. I work with spray paint.”

“You could paint a sculpture that I make. We’ll come up with the vision together.”

“And how the hell are you going to get welding equipment and a bunch of metal to my place?” He was trying. And it meant something to me—his support and dedication to making sure I got my head in the game.

“I could figure out a way.”

I leaned back in my chair. “I’m sure you could. And I appreciate it, man. I really do. But I need to find my footing on my own. I’ll get there eventually. I just need to do it without Lara or anyone else in the art world breathing down my neck.”

“Fair enough. Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

Carson leaned towards the camera until his face was a close-up. “Don’t throw in the towel.”

A burn crept up my throat. Because I’d considered that very thing. More than once. The first time a detective had shown up at my door to question me. To show me the similarities between one of my pieces and the mangled body of a murder victim. Even after they’d caught the man who’d been doing it all, I’d continued dying a little more inside every day of the trial. Every time a reporter called. But I couldn’t let Josiah Mosely win. I couldn’t let the doubt that had sunk in with each headline questioning my motives for making such dark work take over my life. I had to keep pushing on.

“I’m not throwing in the towel.”

“Good. Now take a walk or something. Breathe that fresh air stuff you seemed so adamant about. And then get your ass back to work.”

I chuckled. “Are you my new Lara?”

He scowled at me. “That was uncalled for.”

“If the shoe fits...”

“I’m hanging up now.”

My finger hovered over end on the screen. “Thanks, Car.”

“Always happy to pull your head out of your ass.”

He disconnected before I had a chance to reply. But as I pushed to my feet and away from my desk, I had a bit of a grin stretching my face. Good friends always knew the buttons to push.

I headed for the front door, pausing to grab a jacket. The mid-January weather wasn’t quite as bad as New York could be, but it wasn’t balmy either. As I headed down the path, I heard the faint sounds of machinery in the distance—the crew digging out the foundation of what would be my studio. Hopefully, a building that would see more use than the sunporch had so far. But as I followed a trail leading in the opposite direction, another sound peeked out from under the machinery noise.

Music. Strings. A haunting melody. Far too raw to come from a stereo. I found myself moving towards the sound before I even thought twice. It seemed to hook me and pull me in, an invisible cord wrapping tighter around me as I walked.

I came to a stop outside the small cottage that belonged to Shay. I stood outside her front door, transfixed. I didn’t know much about music, the rules or whatever it was that made someone talented. But whatever she was doing had me spellbound. I couldn’t move forward to knock on the door or move away to leave her in peace. I could only stand and listen. Soak in every note. The way the melody dipped and soared.

When it eased off and when it attacked. The piece was a battle, and I only wanted more.

As the notes faded away, I shook myself out of the hypnosis she'd put me in and crossed the rest of the way to the door. I knocked. Silence greeted me. Then footsteps.

The door opened, and Shay appeared, wisps of hair falling free of her braid to frame her face. *She* was a work of art in that moment. Wildly disheveled and looking just a little annoyed. "Brody. What do you need?"

My gaze drifted over her shoulder to a violin case on the coffee table. "That was a hell of a performance."

A bit of the color in her cheeks fled. "Could you hear me from the house?"

"No. But I wish I could."

"Oh."

My mouth quirked. *Oh* was all she had to say. "Not one for praise, are you?"

Her lips thinned. "My music is for me. I don't need praise."

Her words hit me, each one a blow to the chest. That was exactly it. The thing I needed to get back. To create for no one but myself. Not Lara. Not fans and followers. Critics and collectors. Not Joe Schmoe on the street. For *me*. "Have dinner with me."

The words were out before I could stop them. Shay stiffened. "I, um—"

"We can discuss responsibilities. Salary. Expectations. Everything we've been putting off. We could take the boat and head to Shelter. Eat out." I hadn't explored much of the other islands yet. But being popular tourist destinations, there had to be decent food.

She shifted from one foot to the other. "Do you mind if we stay here? It's been a long day already. I can cook."

I waved her off. “I’ve still got a fridge full of things you made. Why don’t we heat up some of that veggie chili?”

Shay nodded slowly. “Sure. I baked some fresh rosemary bread this afternoon. I can bring that.”

“I wondered what smelled so good. That sounds perfect. How about six?”

She tugged on the sleeve of her t-shirt. “Six works.”

“See you then.” I turned and headed back up the hill, a new idea for a painting taking root in my mind.

SHAY

MY FINGERS FLEW across my keyboard, the tightness in my muscles releasing a fraction when I saw that E was online. I opened up a new chat.

Phoenix26: *What does one wear to dinner with their boss?*

I nibbled on my fingernail as I waited for E's reply.

Evergreen13: *The enigma hottie?*

I tipped my head back and groaned.

Pheonix26: *I never should've told you what he looked like.*

She would never drop the fact that Brody was handsome. Once she sank her claws into that juicy little morsel, it was hers forever.

Evergreen13: *But you did. And is it really so bad that you have to look at a gorgeous man? You refuse to go on any actual dates. At least having some eye candy will give you a thrill. I vote you wear something low-cut. I don't know a single man who doesn't like a boob shot.*

I snorted and then sobered as I looked down at my chest. As if I could see through the cotton of my shirt to the mottled skin beneath. No man would like a shot of my breasts. I'd learned that the hard way.

The scars were a part of me. I wasn't ashamed of them, but I didn't like to dwell on them either. And I certainly didn't flaunt them. I avoided mirrors when I was naked. Averted my gaze as I got dressed. The only time I couldn't avoid the knowledge of them was when I showered. As I rubbed

bodywash over my skin, there was no ignoring the raised and bumpy flesh. Sometimes, I mentally played a sonata as I went through my routine. Other times, I just showered as quickly as possible. But the feel of that skin, the knowledge of the pain it encompassed, always left me feeling raw and exposed.

I certainly didn't want to expose them to anyone else's eyes. There were generally only two reactions: pity or disgust. I had no use for either. So, I simply kept them to myself. The nice thing about living on an island in the Pacific Northwest was that even the summers were fairly temperate. I always wore long-sleeved t-shirts or rash guards when I swam. They covered my torso and the arm littered with scars.

My computer dinged, bringing me back to the present moment.

Evergreen13: *Earth to Phoenix. Are you pulling out a hot top?*

Phoenix26: *I'm Googling how to block you on this app.*

Evergreen13: *You wouldn't dare.*

She was right. I wouldn't. E had become a lifeline over the past few years. The small slice of normalcy I'd figured a way to hold onto. She didn't need me the way I needed her. E worked in a vet's office, had friends, went on dates. She wasn't hiding away from the world the way I was. She was just hiding from her family.

Phoenix26: *Thanks for always having my back. Even if, in your mind, it means encouraging me to expose myself to strangers.*

Evergreen13: *Like only a true friend would.*

I grinned at the screen as I typed out a goodbye and headed for my closet. As I surveyed my options, I grimaced. There wasn't much. My jeans were staying on. My fingers ghosted over my stack of sweaters and settled on a maroon cowlneck. As I tugged it from the shelf, my shoulder twinged, my hand losing its grip on the material. I muttered a curse as I rushed to grab it with my good hand before it hit the floor.

I set the top on my bed and massaged my angry muscles. I'd played for too long, anxious to lose myself in the music and forget about the fact that Michael was being released into the world today. I opened and closed my fist, trying to alleviate the nerve pain running from my shoulder to my fingertips.

It was the thing that no therapist ever understood. As hard as I worked to move on from that night, to forget, I never could. Because my body reminded me every day.

Instead, I had to shove the memories out of my mind. Forcibly remove them as soon as they tried to grab hold. Music was usually the vehicle for that escape, even when I had to create it in my mind. As I removed my fleece and donned the sweater, I moved through the scales of a piece I didn't even remember the name of. It didn't matter. The only important thing was that it filled my mind and kept dark memories at bay. By the time I'd swiped on some mascara and lip gloss, I felt more like myself. Not lost in the mire and the muck.

I grabbed the freshly baked bread, a notebook, and a pen, and was out the door with five minutes to spare. I shivered as I stepped into the evening air, but the dip in temperature helped to soothe further. To remind me that I was alive.

I paused for a moment as I reached the front door of the main house. I hadn't been inside much in the past week. A quick pop in to drop off mail or eggs from the chickens. But it was weird to knock at a house I usually simply walked into. I raised my hand anyway and gave three quick raps.

"Come on in," Brody called.

I took a deep breath as I moved inside, headed towards the kitchen. "It smells good in here."

Brody shot me a grin that had my steps stuttering. "That's all thanks to you. I'm just reheating."

I gave a small shrug as I crossed to the island counter, setting down the bread. "Reheating counts."

"Glad you think so because other than ordering out, that's about all I've got."

“Better than burning water. What can I do to help?”

Brody surveyed the kitchen around him. “Want to grab bowls and spoons? I’ll get drinks. Do you want wine, soda, beer?”

“A Coke would be great.” I needed to keep a level head this evening.

“Coming right up.”

I moved through the space, knowing exactly where everything was that I needed but also trying to give Brody a wide berth. He seemed to hum with some sort of energy, a forcefield surrounding him. A buzz that made my entire body acutely aware of where he was at all times.

I placed the bowls next to the stove to be filled and crossed to the kitchen table to set down the spoons. As I turned back to the kitchen, I caught sight of the open doors to the sunporch. Tarps covered the floor, and an easel peeked out from the space. “What are you doing in there?”

“Hmmm?” He turned to see where I was looking and chuckled. “More like what I’m *not* doing. Painting.”

I hadn’t asked any questions about my new boss, but the crates and new studio made a lot more sense now. “Is that what you do for work?”

His brows rose. “The Dowds or Lara didn’t tell you?”

“No. Your manager and I just talked about what you might need on the island. And your preferences for foods and household items.”

He rubbed a hand over his stubbled jaw. “That makes me feel like a real asshole. I’m sorry I didn’t make time to talk to you before I arrived. Things in New York were...hectic before I left.”

“It’s not a problem. And I never want to be nosy.”

Brody’s dark eyes seemed to spark with amusement. “I always want to be nosy.”

“You wouldn’t be a very good caretaker then.”

“I guess not.” He studied me for a moment before ladling the chili into the two bowls. “Ask whatever you want. If I don’t want to answer it, I won’t. But I promise not to be offended or fire you for asking something personal.”

There were endless things I wanted to know, but the problem with questions was that if you asked, people also assumed you’d answer. It was an intricate dance of scratching the surface but not going too deep. “What do you paint?”

He handed me a bowl. As I took it, our fingers brushed. His skin was rough, the texture seeming to match the man. No nonsense or pretense. “Mostly people,” he answered.

“Oil?” Having been so involved in the violin world at such a young age, I’d gone to a school for the arts. Many of my classmates were already masters with a canvas and brush.

His lips twitched. “Spray paint.”

I slowly sat my bowl on the table and turned back to face Brody. “You paint people...with spray paint?”

He burst out laughing. “You should see your face right now. I might as well have told you that I pilot missions to Mars on my twelve-speed.”

Heat flamed my cheeks. “I just—I can’t really imagine being able to get much detail with spray paint. I guess I don’t understand how it would work.” My words came out in a jumble. It had been a while since I’d felt so out of my depth on a subject.

“Your reaction is typical. Come on.” He motioned for me to follow him to the sunporch.

I trailed behind but left a safe distance between us. One where the buzz of his energy wasn’t quite as palpable. As I stepped into the space, I couldn’t help a sharp intake of breath. The room didn’t look like an art studio. It looked like a disaster zone. Canvases, wood, and scraps of metal were scattered across the floor. Some had bits of paint on them, but others were completely blank.

Dozens and dozens of cans of paint were arranged in the corner of the room, large pieces of cardboard next to them.

Tools I couldn't identify—and in no sort of organization—covered a table along the wall.

“Wow.” It was the only word I could seem to get out.

“It's controlled chaos. I know.”

But it was beautiful in its own way. “How does it work?”

Brody crossed to his desk, flipping a sketchpad closed before I could see what was inside. “It depends on the project. Usually, I sketch out a concept first. Then I move to stencils. I'll cut out the forms I need for each color from the cardboard. It allows me to layer the images easily and then go back in for the details. It's a throwback to when I did these on the sides of buildings and had to work quickly so I didn't end up in lockup.”

My eyes widened. “You were arrested for this?”

The smile that stretched across Brody's face was one I hadn't seen from him before. Full of life and mischief. And it was captivating. “More than once. But I stick to material I own these days. Canvas mostly. But I've been experimenting with other mediums, too.”

“Can I see a finished one?”

Brody shifted on his feet. “I haven't finished anything since I've been here. But, um...here.” He flipped open his laptop and hit a few keys. A website came to life on his screen. He clicked a few times and, suddenly, an image of a teenage boy filled the screen. He was well-kempt with perfectly styled hair and preppy clothing. It was shockingly realistic for what I now knew was spray paint.

But seeping out of the boy's arms was a dark, almost smoke-like substance. And within it were needles, vials, and other drug paraphernalia. Near his mouth were pills and booze. Above his head were words of anger and self-hatred. And in his chest cavity was a stylized broken heart.

“That's...” I didn't have the words I needed to describe the scene in front of me. Everything I could think of was far too lacking.

Brody shut the computer screen. “It’s a little too dark for some people.”

“No. It’s not. It’s real.”

He turned slowly to face me. Coming closer than we’d ever been since the day he’d taken his suitcase from my hands on the dock. “Real is the best compliment there is.”

BRODY

I STEPPED BACK from the canvas, the spray paint can faintly rattling as I lowered my hand. It had been so long since I'd worked freehand. And it showed in my technique—or lack thereof. It wasn't even close to what I wanted. Sure, the piece was a little different than what I usually went for. And that was good. But it wasn't the image in my head. It didn't even match the rough sketch on my pad.

I set the spray paint on the floor and peeled off my gloves and mask. The first few years I'd delved into my obsession, my fingers had been continuously stained with color. It wasn't until I fell in with a crew who was more serious about their work that I'd discovered the miracle of gloves. *"Comes in handy if the police stop you for questioning. No evidence."* One of the older guys in the crew had told me.

Now it just saved me from having to scrub my hands with a Brillo pad and losing a few layers of skin in the process. I picked up my sketchpad and studied the likeness looking back at me. Shay with her violin propped on her shoulder, eyes closed, lost in the music the way I could only imagine she looked. Wisps of hair escaping her braid and framing her face. Wild and untamed. Flying through the air and then transforming into something else entirely. Dark red smoke that, if you looked closer, was really a flock of birds. Her passion and freedom. The only way she seemed to experience them—through music.

The concept was sound. I simply wasn't executing it well enough. I let out a growl as I dropped the pad to the table. I

couldn't even look at the canvas.

Space. Maybe a little fresh air. Check on the progress of the studio. See what Shay was up to. I headed outside through one of the French doors, half blocked by all of my crap. I made a silent vow to actually organize my materials when I moved into my new space.

I followed the now-familiar path down the hill and towards the worksite. As it came into view, I marveled at the progress they'd made in just a few weeks. The land had been leveled, part of the hillside carved away, and the foundation poured. I knew next to nothing about construction, but it looked as if I might be getting some framing soon. Or maybe a floor.

Hunter waved me over when he caught sight of me approaching. "Hey, Brody."

"I can't believe all the progress you've made already."

He surveyed the work in front of him. "We're in the groove now. We'd be moving even faster if we didn't have to deal with that pain in the ass hill."

I grimaced as I took in the incline. The crew had been forced to get creative with how they'd gotten equipment through the trees. "Sorry about that."

"It'll be worth it for the view. Why don't you come meet my foreman and some of the crew? I don't think I've formally introduced you."

"Sounds good. I met Sam the other day, but no one else."

He started towards the group, who was currently organizing a pile of lumber. "Guys, this is the boss, Brody James."

"Already met the boss man. Hey, Brody. How's the new piece coming?" the burly man asked.

"Kiss-ass," another man, who I was pretty sure was named Manny, muttered.

Sam grinned at him. "Intimidated by actual conversation that requires more than two words?"

A third man crossed to me, shaking his head as he held out a hand. He had a warm smile, the white of his teeth gleaming against his darker skin. “Don’t mind those two. It’s like this all the time. I’m Cal, the foreman around here. If you need anything and Hunter’s not around, come find me.”

“Nice to meet you, Cal. Brody. Thanks for all your hard work on this place.”

“Happy to. And with a killer view, too.”

He wasn’t wrong. When this place was finished, it would be stunning. The main house had views from the second story, but they wouldn’t compare with this studio and its wall of windows facing the sea. “It’s going to be epic when it’s done.”

“You’re right about that,” Hunter chimed in. “Sorry about the back and forth. Those two are like oil and water.”

“No worries. I just wanted to stop by and check things out on my way to find Shay. Have you seen her around?” I asked.

Sam’s attention turned to us at the sound of Shay’s name. “Think she’s in the greenhouse. Hey, do you know if she’s single?”

I tensed at the question, but before I could answer, Hunter strode towards Sam and slapped him upside the head. “You’re here to work, not hit on women that want nothing to do with you.”

He shrugged before turning back to the pile of lumber. “Can’t blame a man for asking. A guy would walk through fire for a woman like that.”

My jaw tightened. I could do more than *blame him* for that. I had the sudden urge to fire him on the spot. Which was completely ridiculous and possibly a little insane. I gave myself a mental shake. “I’m headed out, but just come by the house if you need anything.”

“Will do.” Hunter waved before turning back to the work at hand.

I started towards the path that led to the greenhouse, gardens, and the chicken coop. There must not be a rooster

present because I'd yet to be woken at the crack of dawn by any crowing. Thank God for that. As I drew closer, I saw that the vegetable garden had been put to rest for the winter. Straw and some sort of cloth covered the rows of dirt.

The greenhouse seemed to be full of life, though. Even through the slightly foggy windows, I could make out plants taking over the space. The chickens clucked hello as I passed. As I opened the door to the building made almost entirely of glass, I called out. "Shay?"

"Back here," she answered.

I followed the sound of her voice to a far back corner and found her plucking a perfectly ripe tomato from a vine. "Tomatoes in January. I guess this greenhouse does serve a purpose."

Shay placed the tomato gently in a basket with a few other vegetables. "I try to plant on a rotation, so there's always something to harvest. It doesn't always work, but at least it gives us a hit of some of those things you usually miss during winter."

My gaze traveled over the space. I saw lettuce and kale, snap peas and asparagus, varied tomatoes and squash. The place was a gold mine. "Have you always been good at this?"

Shay laughed. It was the first time I'd heard the sound from her mouth. God, it was beautiful. A hint of her letting go for the briefest of moments before she refocused on the task at hand. "I was horrible when I first started. I think only about ten percent of the things I put in the soil survived that first year. But I got better at it with each season. I have a friend who knows all about it, and she gave me some advice—" Her words halted as if she'd realized that she was openly sharing things without checking herself. "But you don't need to hear about all of that."

I leaned a hip against one of the raised beds. "I asked, didn't I?"

Shay moved on to a squash plant of some sort, carefully surveying her options before plucking one. "Sure, but you

don't want me droning on about the topic.”

I wanted her to talk about anything. Just the sound of her voice was captivating. It had a musical quality to it, like the rest of her. But if I shared that little fact, I had a feeling she'd drop a two weeks' notice on my doorstep the next day. “I don't know. It's all interesting. How you've worked out such a self-sustaining system here.”

Shay glanced over her shoulder. She seemed to relax a bit at the focus being moved to the property as opposed to her. “It is pretty incredible. Most of it was in place before I got here. The solar panels and water filtration system. But having the coop and gardens has made a huge difference. The Dowds used to come for two weeks every Christmas, and they loved having fresh produce and eggs.”

“I'm sure. Did you always stay for the holidays? Didn't go visit family or anything?”

Her hands stilled in their weeding for the briefest moment before she picked up the motion again. “Nope. I'm happy here.”

I understood it on some level. My relationship with my parents was one more akin to awkward strangers than family. My insurance-broker father never understood my need to express myself through art. And I was pretty sure my mother thought that all the black I'd worn in high school and me moving to New York when I turned eighteen meant that I was worshipping the devil.

I'd paid off their mortgage with my second big commissioned piece. And tried to email or call every few weeks. But the conversations were always forced. My friends had become my family. Carson, my brother. And Lara, a sometimes-annoying big sister who always thought she knew best.

I shook myself out of the trail of thoughts I'd gotten lost down. “Well, this is a good place to be.”

“You're certainly right about that.” She tossed the weeds into a bucket on the ground. “So, why were you looking for

me? Did you need something?”

“I had a question for you.”

“And that would be?” she asked when I didn’t say anything else.

I wasn’t sure exactly how to phrase what I wanted—no... *needed* to ask. Shay was clearly private, but that guarded air only made her more mysterious. It was catnip for someone like me. I needed to know what she was hiding away from the rest of the world. “Will you sit for me?”

She straightened and turned to face me, her brows pulling together. “There’s not really a place to sit in here.”

I chuckled. “No. Sit for me. In my studio. I need a model for a project I’m working on, and I think you’d be perfect for it.” Better to let her think that she was a fill-in as opposed to my source of inspiration.

Her mouth opened, closed, then opened again. “Why?”

I wanted to laugh at the complete shock in her expression. But that humor quickly transformed into something that felt a lot like anger. Shay had lived on this island since the age of twenty. A time when she should’ve been sneaking into bars with friends. Dancing with strangers. Sharing sloppy, drunken kisses. Instead, she’d been here. Mostly alone. She might have no idea how breathtakingly gorgeous she was. Or that her hazel eyes had the ability to freeze a man to the spot. Couldn’t see that someone might want to paint her likeness, simply to try and capture that beauty.

She’d given up a lot to be here. A whole life in so many ways. And I couldn’t think of anything good that would send a young woman running that way. I cleared my throat. “You’ve got the look I need for this piece.”

Her hand slipped into her jeans’ pocket, seeming to find something there and squeeze. “I’m happy to help in other ways. I can organize your studio, clean up supplies, do any ordering you need. But I can’t sit for you.”

I saw something in her eyes—a mixture of fear and pain. And no piece of art on this planet was worth putting that there.

“Okay.”

Her gaze shot to mine. “Okay?”

“Shay. I’m not going to fire you, all right? Not because you won’t pose for me or any other stupid reason. Well, I might fire you if you try to burn down my house. But other than that, you’re safe.”

Her lips twitched. “Even though I look like I’m barely old enough to drink?”

I rolled my eyes heavenward. “You’re not going to let me live that one down, are you?”

“I think I’ll keep it in my back pocket for moments like these.”

I shook my head, taking in the smile that stretched across her face. When I first stepped off the boat, Shay had looked far too young for the responsibilities of her job. But the more time I spent around her, the more I saw the wisdom carved into her. Something I was sure came from pain and hardship. Some people simply wore it like a badge of honor. And Shay was one of them. But that pain had also birthed beauty. Something so deep it was infused into her very being. That went beyond skin and flesh and burrowed soul-deep.

I couldn’t help but want every glimpse of it I could muster.

SHAY

EVERGREEN13: *Sit for the man! That's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I checked out his website. He's a big deal.*

My stomach churned as I studied my laptop screen. I knew without words that Brody was struggling to make his art. The countless discarded canvases piled next to the trash told me that much. Maybe that was always his process. Twelve trashed paintings for one completed one. But a little voice inside me said that this was abnormal for him. I wanted to help, to ease his way, but sitting for him was one thing I simply couldn't do.

Phoenix26: *You know why I can't.*

Evergreen13: *You can't spend the rest of your life cooped up on an island. Eventually, you're going to have to live again.*

I wanted that. Not to escape Harbor—I'd grown to love my life here—but to live freely. Not to live as someone who needed to be invisible, but someone who left their mark. A person who had real friends, people who truly knew her, and would feel her loss if she simply disappeared. A musician who didn't hide her music where no one could hear, but let it touch the ears of the people around her.

When I'd hidden away in my little refuge, I'd slowly started erasing my life, bit by bit until there was nothing to see but a forgettable woman just passing through. Everything about me had seemed too risky. The thing I loved more than anything was the most dangerous of all.

My gaze drifted to the violin case in the corner. Growing up, I'd wanted nothing more than to play for audiences across

the globe. To attend Juilliard or Berklee. To join an orchestra in Dresden or Los Angeles or at the Met. But those dreams had slowly morphed into only wanting to play without fear. To share my music with people who would listen. To not have my bow snapped in two because Michael thought I was hogging our parents' attention.

By the time of the attack, I'd stepped back from performing. People wondered if the pressure had gotten to be too much for the young violin prodigy. I didn't share the truth with anyone. It was simply too much to endure the tantrums at home. The flashes of anger.

My parents had done their best to find a treatment center for Michael. They'd succeeded, promising that when he got the help he needed, all would go back to normal. But it was too late by then. That was the thing with Michael's disease. From the moment he was born, it was too late. All we could do was spend the rest of our lives, running in response—my parents just weren't fast enough.

Grief and anger warred whenever those memories snuck in. Grief at knowing how much my parents endured, trying to save their son. Anger that they didn't seem to see that I was dying bit by bit along the way.

Phoenix26: *He's out.*

Evergreen13: *What? Why didn't you say anything? Are you okay?*

Phoenix26: *I'm fine. No one knows where I am. I'm safe. But for things to stay that way, I need to keep a low profile. No letting famous artists paint my face.*

Evergreen13: *I promise I'll lay off. I have to head to work, but check in tonight? Let me know you're okay?*

Phoenix26: *Will do. Cuddle some animals for me.*

E sent a photo of a pile of puppies as a signoff. I stared at the image on the screen until my eyes went blurry. Maybe I needed a pet. A furry buddy to make me feel a little less alone. A companion who would make the distance I placed between

myself and every other person I came across, not feel so stark and alienating. It was something to think about.

I checked my watch. Time to tend to the feathered creatures already under my care. The chickens could get mean if they didn't get their breakfast on time. Mean chickens weren't something anyone wanted, especially those who had to enter the coop to gather the eggs.

I slipped into my muck boots by the door and pulled on a jacket. I stuffed a hat into one pocket and gloves into the other. I didn't think the weather warranted them yet, but that could always change. I made my way down the path towards the coop and the gardens. The birds let out a series of calls, and I heard Hunter and his crew in the distance, getting started for their day.

Pausing to pick up a bucket of scraps from the greenhouse, I headed towards the sound of irritated clucking. "I'm coming, ladies. Hold onto your feathers." I let them out of their nightly home and into the enclosed area where they could roam. There were too many hawks around to let them have truly free rein. But their yard was large, and they didn't seem to have a lot of interest in the world outside their wire.

I scooped out some feed, spreading it around the yard, and then scattered the scraps along with it for good measure. When they were happily chowing down, I went for the eggs. The smell of the coop was not pleasant, but it certainly helped me practice how long I could hold my breath.

I made quick work of gathering the eggs and cleaning up after the girls. With the eggs piled in a basket, I headed out. "Enjoy your freedom, ladies. I'll be back later." They squawked happily in response.

I closed and latched the coop. Just as I was about to turn around, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I let out a strangled squeak. "Sorry. I didn't hear you."

One of the men from Hunter's crew gave me a slow grin. "No worries. You were caught up with talking to the chickens."

My cheeks heated. I recognized him from around town. He'd offered to help me carry things to my boat once or twice, but we'd never officially met. "Comes with the job, I guess."

"It was pretty adorable."

I shifted on my feet. The man was handsome, but flirting wasn't something I'd had a whole lot of experience with. In high school, the boys had mostly given me a wide berth, knowing what had happened to me. People whispered, but they didn't engage. "Chickens are pretty cute. I have to get these up to the main house. Hope you have a good day."

"Sam," he said before I could leave. "That's my name."

I gave him a smile, but it wavered slightly. I was unused to such focused attention. "Nice to meet you, Sam. I really do—"

"What do you say to dinner on Shelter this Friday? I tried asking around about you but couldn't find out much. You don't have a boyfriend, do you?"

I froze. He'd asked around about me? Questions would only stoke any curiosities about the woman who stayed on this island alone nine months out of the year. That could lead to searching. Someone finding out who I was. No one on Anchor or Shelter even knew my last name. Well, no one but Caelyn. I hoped that would be enough to protect me. I met Sam's stare. "I'm sorry, but I don't have time."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but Hunter appeared. "Sam. There's more lumber to unload. We need your help."

Sam shot me a grin and headed back to the job site. "You got it, boss man."

Hunter focused his attention on me, his gaze scanning me from head to toe. Not in any sort of lascivious way, but as if he were checking for unease. "He bothering you?"

I adjusted the hold on my basket. "No, he was just making polite conversation." The guy didn't deserve to be chewed out by his boss for asking me out. I was sure my awkwardness would keep him from inquiring again.

“Glad to hear it. How are things with your new boss?”

Unnerving was the word that immediately popped into my mind. Not in a bad way, but in a dangerous one. Brody had me wanting to say all sorts of things that were far too risky for me. “Good. He’s kind and fair. Can’t ask for much more.”

Hunter glanced up at the main house. “Seems like a solid guy. Glad you landed a good one.”

The way he said it made Brody sound more like a boyfriend than a boss, and my cheeks heated. “Me, too.”

“You guys should come into town and hang out. You know Caelyn and the crew would always love to have you over for family dinner.”

I knew he was right. Caelyn had extended the invitation more than once, but I couldn’t say yes. For so many reasons—no matter how much I wanted to. “Thanks. I appreciate that. You should tell Brody, too.”

“I will. Have a good rest of your day.” He reached out as if to give my shoulder a quick squeeze and then stopped himself, turning it into some sort of wave.

It was the perfect metaphor for every pseudo-relationship I had at the moment. Awkward and unsure. If I couldn’t truly let anyone in, that would always be the case. And how sad and lonely was that?

BRODY

THE DOORBELL RANG, abruptly cutting through the quiet of my makeshift studio. I'd always preferred to work without music, the only soundtrack to my work the noises of the city around me. I'd swapped honking and loud voices for wind, sea, and birds. It showed in my work. The images were slightly softer somehow.

I took one last look at the painting in front of me before shucking my mask and gloves and heading for the front door. I pulled it open to find Hunter and someone I hadn't expected.

"Lara? What are you doing here?"

Hunter scowled at my petite art dealer. "She said she knew you, but I wasn't about to let someone I didn't know traipse all over the island."

I swallowed a chuckle at the indignant look on Lara's face. Not a lot of people told her *no*. "She's fine, but I appreciate you keeping an eye out." Everything on Harbor was unlocked for the most part. I hadn't considered how anyone with a boat could simply come ashore. I needed to think about a security system.

"Brody. Is this really how you greet your closest friend?"

My gaze snapped back to Lara, and I bent to give her a kiss on each cheek. "You know Carson's my closest friend."

She huffed as she pushed inside. "He's barely human, so he doesn't count."

I chuckled and gave Hunter a wave as I closed the door. “What the hell are you doing here, Lara? It’s not like this is a day trip from the City.”

Lara clasped her hands in front of her as she surveyed the downstairs of my house. “Did you really think you could tell me that you’re not sure you’ll ever show again and I *wouldn’t* have something to say on the matter?”

I let my eyes fall closed for a moment, hoping I might open them, and she would simply be gone. I knew it had been too easy. I hadn’t heard a word from Lara since our video call. I’d thought I was off the hook, but I should’ve known that she was simply getting her ducks in a row for an ambush. “There’s nothing to say. I need time. Space. And I need you to give it to me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I let you move across the country. That isn’t space enough?”

“Not when you show up at my door. Send emails asking when I’ll be sending pieces your way.” It stifled every creative flare. Made me feel as if I couldn’t breathe.

“I care about you, Brody. From the minute you started with our old crew, I knew you would be the one to go the distance. I’ve fought to make sure you were recognized. If you disappear off the face of the planet, you might not have an audience to come back to.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face, a hint of guilt squeezing in. “Then so be it. Better that than being miserable.” I had enough money to live comfortably for the rest of my life. I wouldn’t be buying private jets and houses around the world, but I could live here on my island without worry. And no matter what Lara said, I knew there would always be at least a handful of collectors still interested in my pieces. Whenever I was ready.

Lara stepped closer to me, gripping my arms. “You have too much talent to throw it away. They caught him. Mosely will rot in a cell for the rest of his life. His actions are on him, and him alone. You need to release that guilt.”

I shrugged out of her hold. The people in my life could tell me time and again, but it wasn't their creations that a madman had turned into his blueprint. "I don't blame myself." It was true, but I wasn't ready to put any piece I had created out into the world either.

Lara sighed. "Fine. At least show me what you're working on since I came all this way."

I couldn't resist the temptation. It was too much of a rush to talk art with Lara. We'd always had a dialogue that seemed to spur me forward in my process. I started towards the sunporch and inclined my head for her to follow. Despite the many false starts I'd had over the past few weeks, I thought I might be finding my way again. And that path meant exploring a lot of new expressions. Some of it was dark, but a lot more was peaceful. Serene. My new surroundings had made their way into my work.

A variety of canvases lined the wall, and Lara made a beeline for them. She didn't utter a word as she studied them, only issuing the occasional hum or another obscure sound. In all the years we'd worked together, I never could figure out what those sounds meant.

Lara paused in front of the third landscape. A scene of my beach where the surf had risen and looked about ready to swallow a figure whole. "This one. It's a mixture of the old and the new." She glanced up at me. "Maybe this place isn't so bad for you, after all."

"I told you."

She looked back to the landscape. "I can sell this."

"Not so fast."

"Brody. Let me keep your career alive. I'm not asking you to have a show or do interviews. Just give me a few pieces to slowly dole out over the next year. It will keep collectors' interests piqued. It might even work to our advantage. Limited supply. Then you can come back with a big splash when you're ready."

I was silent for a moment, taking in her offer. A year of freedom for a few paintings. And I owed Lara *something*. She'd been with me forever, and my career was largely thanks to how fiercely she'd fought to secure opportunities for me. "You can take the landscapes. I'm not ready for anything else. And if you take them, that means you can't ask for anything else for a year."

Lara's lips thinned but she nodded. "Fine. You have a deal."

I grinned at her. "Was that so hard?"

"You're my most difficult client."

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "But you love me."

She scoffed. "You'll be the reason I meet an early grave. All the stress you put on—" Her words cut off as she slipped out from under my arm and strode towards the piece I'd just finished. It was another of Shay. I'd probably painted half a dozen in the last week alone. Apparently, I was a man possessed. "This, Brody. This is magnificent. The landscapes are good. Interesting. Compelling. But *this* is transcendent."

I followed her to the canvas. This one was of Shay in the greenhouse, the way she'd frozen when I asked her to sit for me. Instead of growing from the soil, the plants in the space grew from her. The vines of her secrets and everything she kept hidden from the world. One branch exploded from her heart, winding around her neck and reaching into the air. Everything that she needed to let free but wouldn't. "I'm still working on it."

"Fine, but—" Lara looked over her shoulder. "Do you have more like this?"

"Nothing that's finished." I pulled the canvas from the easel and slipped it into the closet in the corner. The space that was full of paintings like that one. So many, I'd lost track. But they weren't something I would share with Lara. She'd latch on and refuse to let go.

Her gaze narrowed, assessing me, trying to determine how truthful I was being. “This is where you should focus. Maybe I should stay for a couple of weeks until you finish a few pieces. We can discuss—”

“Lara. It’s the landscapes or nothing.”

Her jaw worked back and forth before she spoke. “Fine. But you need to keep on in this direction. It’s going to be a sensation.”

My gaze drifted back to the closet and the paintings hidden inside. I wasn’t sure I wanted this work to be a sensation. Somehow, it seemed more personal than anything I’d ever worked on. I couldn’t put my finger on why exactly. My pieces had always been an expression of how I felt about a situation, how I saw a person or the world. Yet these dives into who Shay might be, felt like exposing a piece of *me*. Which made absolutely no sense.

I looked back to Lara, who studied me intently. “We’ll see where the muse leads me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Artists.”

I chuckled. “We’re fickle but endearing.”

“An early death, I tell you.”

“So dramatic.”

“What kind of manager would I be if I didn’t have a little flair for the dramatic?” She surveyed the room. “Have you unpacked your crating materials? I’ll get the landscapes packed up to ship back to New York.”

“There’s some over there.” I gestured to the far corner. “But there’s more in the garage.”

“Perfect. It shouldn’t take me long. Then I’ll be out of your hair so you can get back to work.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. As much as I was Lara’s friend, I was also her cash cow. I didn’t blame her for seeing me as a resource. It was the way of the world. But I couldn’t help but wonder if she’d sell me down the river if it got her what she wanted. “I’ll be right back.”

Lara hummed in response, but her focus was on the painting resting on my easel. I headed out of the sunporch and towards the garage, a room that held two four-wheelers and various equipment instead of cars. As I rounded the corner, I almost collided with Shay.

She let out a squeak and rocked back on her heels. I quickly gripped her arms to steady her. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to run you over.”

Her hand moved to her chest. “Just a few years off my life. No big deal.”

I grinned and forced myself to release my hold. “Maybe I should start giving you hazard pay.”

“It’s not a bad idea. I was just coming to tell you that I’m headed into town to pick up the mail and a few supplies. I wanted to know if you needed anything.”

“I’d actually like to come with you, but—”

“Brody,” Lara called as she rounded the corner. Her eyes widened as she took in Shay and me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I didn’t realize anyone else was here.”

“You weren’t interrupting,” Shay hurried to explain. “I was just checking to see if Brody needed anything from town.”

“Shay, this is my manager, Lara. Lara, this is Harbor’s caretaker, Shay.”

I could see the wheels turning in Lara’s head as she surveyed Shay. Trying to put the pieces together and likely filling in all the wrong things. I fought the urge to groan.

“It’s nice to meet you in person,” Shay said.

“You, as well,” Lara returned. “Brody, if there are things you need to do, go ahead. I can crate everything on my own. When I’m done, I’ll head back to Shelter, and we can meet up for dinner later. Shay, you’re welcome to join.”

Shay shook her head. “Thank you, but you two should have time to catch up.” She turned to me. “Do you want to come to town? Or I can just get whatever you need.”

“No, I’ll go with you.” The last thing I wanted was to expose myself to a couple of hours of interrogation by my manager. “Lara, the supplies are right in there. And I’m sure Hunter or one of his crew can help you bring them down to the dock when you’re done.”

She waved me off. “I’ll be fine. You know I always find a way.”

“So very true.” I turned to Shay. “You ready to go now?”

She shuffled her feet before answering. “Sure.”

I wanted to laugh. Shay didn’t seem sure about a couple of uninterrupted hours with me. But I couldn’t wait.

SHAY

“THIS IS INCREDIBLE,” Brody mumbled around a mouthful of sandwich.

“I told you.”

“Yeah, but I thought you were exaggerating. This is the best sandwich I’ve ever had.” He met my gaze, suddenly sober. “But if you tell the owner of my old corner deli back in New York, I’ll deny it until my dying breath.”

“I promise your secret is safe with me.”

“Thank God.”

I picked at the label on my bottle of soda as the sea air swirled around our picnic table outside The General Store. “Why did you want to leave New York?” The question had been on the tip of my tongue ever since Brody moved in, and especially after I’d learned that he was an artist. It didn’t make sense. It sounded like he had a good community back there and liked where he lived. People didn’t just pick up and move across the country for no reason.

Brody froze with his sandwich halfway to his mouth, and I wanted to curse. I hated when people nosed around in my life. Asked questions that I didn’t want to answer when they had no right to the information. And here I was, doing the exact same thing to Brody. “Sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“No. It’s not that. I just... I haven’t really had to explain it to anyone before. Well, no one who didn’t already know what was going on.”

I met Brody's gaze. There were shadows there. The same ones I saw flitting across his eyes every now and again, making them even darker than usual. Shadows that I often saw in mine. "You really don't have to talk about it."

"Shay. I'd like us to be friends. We're going to be sharing the same thirty acres for the foreseeable future. I'd rather do that with a friend than a stranger. What about you?"

Brody was so damn earnest in that moment. Hopeful. Like a puppy at an animal shelter just begging for you to take him home. And, God, I wanted that. Someone who knew me. Maybe not the trauma of my past but who I was today. Someone to play cards with on the nights when it got dark at four-thirty. To go kayaking with when the weather turned warm. Someone who might help me not feel so alone.

"I'd like that." My voice sounded rusty, a door that needed a little WD-40.

Brody smiled. And that action was a solid sucker punch to the gut. *Friends*, I reminded myself. But the butterflies that had taken flight in my stomach at the sight of that grin weren't the friendly kind.

"Good," he said. "Then you're allowed to ask me why I moved to what feels like another world." His gaze broke away from me and traveled around the south end of town. The store, our local bar and grill, a handful of other shops and buildings. Then it drifted out to the docks and the sea beyond. "I needed an escape. Somewhere people didn't know me."

My heart hammered a little faster. "Why?"

He looked back at me. "Did you hear about the serial killer who was active in the tri-state area?"

I searched my memory for anything of the sort. I read the news here and there, but I mostly stayed away from the darker stories. I had enough of that in my own memories. But something tickled the back of my brain. I'd seen a CNN headline about a series of murders that appeared to be replicated works of art. I sucked in a sharp breath, my eyes darting to Brody. "Your paintings?"

He nodded, the look on his face grim. “It took the cops a while to figure out the connection. It wasn’t until the FBI got involved that they realized what was happening.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what that must’ve been like for you.”

His jaw ticked. “It wasn’t a cake walk. It stayed under wraps for a while. But when the press got wind of it, I couldn’t escape. Even after they caught the guy, they didn’t let up. It was a sensational story. New York tabloids love that. And every week, I was reminded that my paintings had been weaponized. They’d been used to murder innocent people.”

“They were not,” I snapped. The ferocity of my tone took me by surprise, and I did my best to temper it. “Someone twisted your art. Turned it into something ugly. But that’s not what it is.”

Brody’s gaze locked with mine, an unidentifiable energy flowing between us. “What is it, then?”

“It’s truth. People through your eyes. Most of the world isn’t brave enough to expose that. But you are. And the truth can be painful to look at, but it’s also beautiful.”

Brody swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I’ve always said that my art is a glance into the darkness. I think you have to face it. In others. In yourself. It’s when you push it down, ignore it, that it swallows you whole.”

My eyes burned. How long had my parents pushed down and ignored the darkness in our home? The beast that was eating my brother alive, taking away a little more of the boy we all loved every day. It was that denial of the truth, the belief that everything would be okay, that Michael would heal, that’d meant our demise in the end. That’d made it too late to save Michael. Maybe if we would’ve looked into that darkness from the beginning, been honest about it, we wouldn’t be where we were now. Dead. Locked up. Hiding from the world.

“I’m glad you force people to look. It might be the wakeup call they need. But I’m sorry that some sick and twisted individual warped what you wanted to do.”

Brody picked up his soda and took a pull. “I am, too.”

“You can’t let him stop you.”

One of his brows rose in challenge. “I can’t?”

“No. You have to keep pushing. I’m not saying you need to do the exact same work. This experience has changed you, there’s no way around it. But you have to keep moving forward. Find your new voice.”

He set his soda on the table with a thunk. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to do. But it’s proving harder than expected. I’m all over the map, and Lara is about to throttle me.”

“Do you have to sell right now? Can you just take some time to figure out what you want to make? What you want to say?” I couldn’t imagine the pressure Brody must be under to not only create but also with knowing the world would judge whatever he put out there.

“It’s complicated. Art is a business. I’m just trying to find the happy medium between finding my truth again and having a career to come back to. But I think I bought myself a year by giving Lara the paintings she was boxing up today.”

I let out a low whistle. “A year is a good payday.”

“If she keeps to her end of the bargain. We’ll see if that happens.”

“Hold her to it,” I urged. “If she made a promise, she needs to stick to it.”

Brody grunted. “You don’t know Lara. The impression she gave today was polite and go-with-the-flow. She’s a bulldog when she wants something.”

“Then you’ll just have to be a bulldog right back.”

His lips twitched. “Maybe I’ll just sic you on her.”

“I am pretty ferocious.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Brody poured chips onto a napkin. “What about your music? You ever think about letting people hear it?”

My instinct was to clam up and change the subject. Instead, I took a deep breath before answering. This was a friendship. A back and forth. An opening up. “I used to. There was no greater high.”

“Why’d you stop?”

I rolled my lips together as I considered how to answer that without lying. “Life got...complicated. I lost the joy in playing. I stopped altogether for a while. And when I picked it back up again, I needed it to be for me. Someday, I’d like to play for other people again. But I’m not rushing it.”

Maybe that made me a wimp. Or perhaps it simply made me smart. Any time I played in front of another soul, it was a risk. The same as continuing to write letters to the aunt who had cared for me after my parents’ deaths. As calling Michael’s doctors to check on his progress for so many years, just to see how he was. But I couldn’t resist these small ties to my old life. Couldn’t give up the things that were as much a part of me as my own marrow.

“Maybe you could start by playing for me.”

I looked up from the napkin I’d begun to shred into little pieces. “Play for you?”

He broke the chip he was holding in half. “I’m not a crowd. You wouldn’t have to take a stage. But I’m someone to hear whatever you want to put out into the world. Whatever you need to say. It’s a place to start.”

It was. And another little risk to add to my pile. But I wasn’t sure I could turn away from Brody or his offer. The idea that he might be able to hear what I needed to say without words but through bow and strings and movement was too intriguing. “I’ll think about it.”

His lips tipped up. “I’ll keep asking.”

SHAY

BRODY BENT OVER, his hands on his knees, heaving. “You’re a masochist. You know that, right?”

I grinned as I caught my breath. “You’re the one who wanted to join my morning workout hour.”

He fell back onto the sand, pulling one of his knees up to his chest in a stretch. “I’m really questioning my sanity for that move.”

“It’s good for the body and the soul. Plus, it might turn you into a morning person.”

“Six a.m. is still night.”

I folded over in a stretch. “By the time you’re up and ready, the sun is rising.”

“Barely.”

I shook my head as I stared down at my sneakers. Sunrise was my favorite part of the day. Everything was so still and serene. It felt as if I were the only person in the world. I’d thought having Brody along for the ride would make me twitchy. Annoyed that another person was invading this sacred space I’d created for myself. Instead, I loved it.

Maybe it was because he always started out the workouts so quiet, still half asleep. But by the end, he was griping and giving me a hard time. It was the perfect balance. Still getting that hit of peace but not feeling so alone.

Brody and I had slipped into a routine of sorts over the past couple of weeks. Working out in the mornings and having

breakfast together before I headed off to take care of my tasks for the day, and he locked himself away in his makeshift studio. More than a few evenings a week, we'd meet to share dinner, sometimes a board game or a movie. Everything had remained light since that day at lunch where Brody had shared with me what had driven him from New York. I'd learned that he hated mushrooms and had a soft spot for old Westerns. He'd discovered my addiction to Skittles, how I always had to eat them sorted by color, and that I was a sore loser at Yahtzee.

None of the discoveries were Earth-shattering. Nothing left me feeling in danger or exposed. But as they piled up, they created this slow, steady pull towards the man who now lay sprawled out on the sand. His long-sleeved workout shirt rode up just a bit, revealing a V of muscle that had me swallowing and averting my gaze.

“What’s your plan for the day?” I asked.

“Besides crying because you were so mean to me?”

I laughed, but it turned into a grimace as my shoulder and ribs protested the action. I rubbed at the joint, trying to relieve the flash of nerve pain that often acted up after a hard workout or a long playing session.

Brody sat up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I might’ve pushed things a little too hard today.” I dug my fingers into the flesh at my shoulder, searching for the trigger point that might provide relief.

He pushed to his feet, crossing to me. “Looks like more than that.”

“Just an old injury.” It wasn’t a lie, but I was sure Brody would think a sports incident or a fall from the monkey bars, not a stab wound inflicted by my brother.

He reached out. “Here, let me. I’ll get a better angle.”

I moved in a flash, scrambling back. “N-no. Thank you. I’m fine.”

Brody’s eyes widened. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to cross a line.”

Everything in me seized at the hurt in his eyes. Pain that I'd put there. "No. It's not that. It's just a tricky issue, and if people don't know what they're doing, it can hurt." And if anyone massaged the tissue there, they'd feel the scars. Healed wounds that I didn't have an explanation for.

His stance relaxed. "Oh. That sucks. Are you seeing a doctor or a physical therapist?"

"No. I did for a long time, but there's nothing else they can do. It's not a big deal. It only bothers me sometimes." And every time it did, I was reminded of that night. How the pain I felt now was only a flicker of what it had been. The days I'd spent in the hospital. The weeks in the rehab facility. The months of physical therapy afterwards.

Brody's brow furrowed. "Maybe it's worth checking out what's available on Anchor or Shelter. There could be new treatments available that you don't know about."

"I keep pretty up-to-date," I lied. "There's nothing new." More like there was nothing but a life-threatening emergency that would get me into a doctor's office. I didn't have insurance, and I didn't need the paper trail.

The sound of an approaching boat had us both looking out at the water. Cal waved as they pulled up to the dock and tied off. Manny hopped out, followed by Sam and Hunter. "Morning," Hunter greeted. "You guys are up and at it early."

"She's a drill sergeant," Brody accused.

"One you chose to follow," I pointed out.

"I didn't know you were going to take pleasure in trying to kill me."

Hunter chuckled. "Shay, maybe you can come whip my crew into shape next."

"Please, God, no," Sam said, widening his eyes comically.

"Don't even think about it," Cal broke in. "Building houses is enough of a workout for me."

Hunter shook his head. "Then get up that hill and get to work so I don't have to employ this one." He hitched a thumb

at me.

They started down the dock and towards the path, but Sam slowed his steps as he approached me. “How are you doing this morning?”

“Just fine. And you?”

“Better now.” Apparently, Sam hadn’t been put off by our awkward encounter a couple of weeks ago.

I felt heat at my back. Brody. And I could feel the glare he was sending Sam’s way.

Hunter gave him a shove. “Get going, Casanova.” Sam jogged up the path without another word. Hunter turned back to us. “Framing’s almost done. Should move on to getting you some walls soon.”

“I never thought I’d be so excited about walls,” Brody muttered.

Hunter grinned. “Just wait until you’re over the moon about insulation. I’ll see you guys later.” With a wave, he was off.

I stepped back from Brody, away from the heat that tempted me, urged me to burrow closer to him. “I’m going to grab a shower and then head into town for a mail run.”

“I think I’ll come with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” It was a lie. I needed hours in the day separate from Brody, away from the pull he had over me. It was in those hours I could remind myself that while we were friends, he was also my boss. And with one action, he could rip my sanctuary right out from under me.

“WHAT?” Brody asked, humor filling his tone as he strolled down the main street of Anchor next to me.

“You’re going to go into a diabetic coma if you try and eat all of that.”

He raised a brow. “I’ll share some of it with Hunter and his crew.”

“You got two dozen pastries.”

“I’m a growing boy.”

“Growing so much that you could barely carry the boxes?” We’d had to make a stop back at the boat to unload before finishing our errands.

“What can I say? I can’t resist a cupcake. And they had some crazy stuff in there.”

The Mad Baker and its owner, Jules, were known for wildly decorated confections and coming up with flavors you wouldn’t always predict went together. Sea salt brownies. Chocolate blueberry muffins. A rainbow cake that exploded with sprinkles when you cut into it.

“You know, you live here now. You don’t have to try everything on your first visit.”

He shrugged. “Life’s uncertain. Eat dessert first.”

I could respect that approach to life. I smiled up at Brody as he opened the door to The Exchange for me. “Just as long as the blue velvet cupcake is mine.”

“I wouldn’t dare steal your precious. And not just because I’m a gentleman. The way you were eyeing that sucker tells me I might lose a hand if I tried to take a bite.”

A bark of laughter escaped me. “I do like my sweets...” I opened the Harbor mailbox first and handed the mail to Brody. Then I moved to my own box, pulling out a handful of items.

We headed back into the chilly winter morning. The air had a bite to it. One I loved. It reminded me that I was here and breathing. Brody and I were both quiet as we cut through the park, sorting through the assorted envelopes in our hands.

My steps faltered as I read the return address on a plain white letter. It wasn’t the address that stopped my heart. It was the name. Michael McCabe.

As my heart started again, it rattled against my ribs. I tore at the paper, trying to tug the folded pages inside free. My hands trembled as I finally unfolded the contents of the envelope.

Sissy,

It's been so long. I miss you. It hurt when you stopped coming to visit. I understand why, but I can't change that it hurt. Doc Abrams always says to be honest with our feelings. To let them out. So, I'm doing just that.

How are you? Have you missed me at all? Did they tell you I was getting out? I have a job at a local computer help desk company. It's not exactly mentally stimulating, but it brings in a check and makes my parole officer happy.

How about you come visit me? Or I could come to you. But I have a feeling you're not in Charlotte like the address and bank account I found. You're smart, but not smarter than me. Remember that. We have an unfinished game to play.

The words on the page blurred as the knowledge that I'd never be free of my brother and his torment sank in. Everything seemed to close in around me as I slipped from the here and now to that night so many years ago.

"Mom. Dad. I'm home."

Silence greeted me as I placed my violin down in my cubby in our mudroom. They hadn't been able to come to my recital tonight. They'd said they needed to talk with Michael, just the three of them.

Dad had later told me that they were sending Michael to a new treatment program they'd found in the Midwest. This one was specially designed for kids like Michael. They used that term a lot: kids like Michael. But I wasn't sure what it truly meant. Kids who enjoyed hurting others? Who refused to follow the rules?

"Guys? I'm home. Where are you?" Maybe they'd taken Michael out for ice cream to soften the blow. Ice cream always made news that Michael wouldn't like go down easier.

My stomach rumbled as I made my way to the kitchen. I could never eat before a performance, so I was always starving by the time it was over. I flicked on lights as I moved through the house. I searched for the switch on the kitchen wall, but I slipped on the floor as I moved to flip it up. My arms windmilled as the light flashed on. What the heck?

Everything came into focus at once. Blood. So much blood. Smears of it across the white-tiled floor. A handprint. A pool. I scrambled to a sitting position. As I did, I saw her.

“Mom?” I croaked. She was too still. Her eyes open and unblinking.

I tried to struggle to my feet, but before I could gain purchase, a hand gripped my neck and slammed my back into the wall. Stars exploded in front of my eyes. It took a second or two for my vision to clear, and when it did, my brother appeared, a knife tip hovering just over my heart. “We’re gonna play a game, sissy.”

“Shay. Look at me. What the hell is going on?”

Someone was shaking me. Brody, I realized in some part of my brain. Brody. Not Michael. I was on Anchor. Safe. Surrounded by water. He couldn’t get to me. “S-s-sorry.”

“Don’t you apologize. Tell me what’s going on.”

The worry etched in Brody’s face had me pulling myself together. “Nothing. Just a letter I wasn’t expecting. It was a bit of a shock. That’s all.”

“Bullshit.” Heat filled Brody’s gaze, and I fought the urge to take a step back. “That wasn’t shock. It was terror. You went white as a sheet. You’re trembling. You didn’t hear me the first five times I said your name.”

“I—I—” I scrambled to come up with an explanation.

“Shay. What are you running from?”

“Nothing. I’m not running from anything.” It was an automatic response. One borne of the time and energy I’d spent building this safe haven for myself.

A muscle in Brody's cheek ticked. "You never go to the mainland. You never use a credit card. I don't think a single person other than me knows your last name. You share things about yourself but never anything that might identify you. Are you really going to tell me you're not running?"

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. I attempted to clear the lump that'd settled there, trying to get out one word. Just one. But it wouldn't come.

Brody moved in closer, his hand taking mine, the one still holding the letter. His mail was now scattered across the grass. "Please. Let me help you. And if you don't want me to help, at least let me be a listening ear. I can see it. This burden you're carrying. Let me take some of the weight."

My eyes burned as I stared into Brody's. I wanted to lose myself in the dark depths. To dive in and never come up for air. The truth was, I was exhausted from holding this alone. The only other person besides my aunt who knew the truth was an anonymous screen name.

I'd felt totally and completely alone for three years. Longer if I were honest with myself. Because as much as my aunt had tried to be a comfort, she hadn't understood what I was going through. How could she? So, I was left to hold my love and hate, my hurt and patchwork healing, my hope and fear. When it came to Michael, it was always two sides of the same coin. I had to figure out how to hold onto both.

My breathing picked up speed, but I didn't look away from Brody. I let the dark depths of his gaze anchor me to the spot. To convince me I might not be so alone, after all. "My brother is sick. He hurts people. And I don't want him to know where I am."

Three simple truths. It wasn't the whole of it. But it was enough for now. More than I'd told a soul in over three years.

Brody's gaze dropped to the papers in my hand. "Does that letter mean he knows where you are?"

I shook my head. "No. My mail is forwarded from somewhere else." I fought the shudder that wanted to surface.

Michael knew I wasn't in Charlotte. Of course, he did. Because he was always one step ahead. But this time, he wasn't as far ahead as he thought. He didn't know where I truly was. Couldn't. I had to rest in that.

“What can I do?”

The simple kindness of Brody's question had the burn returning to my eyes. “You're doing it. Giving me a job and a place to live where he'll never find me.”

Brody pulled me into a hug, his large frame engulfing my smaller one. It felt as if he could block out all the bad, any threat that might come my way. I wanted to stay in that embrace forever.

“I'm such an asshole,” he muttered.

“Why would you say that?”

He rested his chin on the top of my head. “You were terrified that I was going to fire you. I thought you were just worried about losing a sweet gig. I wasn't exactly reassuring when I got here.”

The corners of my mouth turned up as I kept my cheek resting against his pec. “You came around pretty quickly.”

He grunted. “Not quick enough. I'm sorry. And you know you'll always have a place on Harbor. No matter what happens.”

The ferocity of his vow eased a bit of the fear still thrumming through my system. I was safe and I had a home. That was more than enough for now.

BRODY

I LEANED back in the chair at my desk. The paint hadn't come easily today. The evidence of that was a canvas in the corner that I'd broken in two. My brain had been caught in an endless loop. The blood draining from Shay's face. The panic in her eyes.

I shoved back from my desk and started pacing. She hadn't given me any more information, and I hadn't wanted to push. It had seemed hard enough for her to tell me what she had already. But I needed to know what she was dealing with if I was going to help her.

I turned to face my desk again, a war raging inside me. When I bought the island, and the Dowds had told me about their caretaker, they had offered to pass along the background check they'd run before hiring her. But they'd spoken so highly of the woman, I hadn't ever looked at the thing. I'd come to the island not knowing a damn thing about Shay McCabe. And now, I needed to.

I strode back and sank into the chair, tapping my laptop so it came to life. I pulled up a search engine and typed her name. There was a flurry of hits. But near the top of the page was a headline that stopped me cold. *Eleven-year-old boy arrested for the murder of parents and attempted murder of sister.*

I clicked on the link without thinking twice, my eyes scanning the text as quickly as possible. Phrases jumped off the page. *Parents stabbed to death. Thirteen-year-old Shay McCabe rushed to the hospital with life-threatening injuries.* I jumped to a follow-up article and read that, too. Michael

McCabe had been sentenced to twenty years in prison for the murder of his parents after they informed him that he was being sent to a residential treatment facility.

Wouldn't that mean that he was still locked up? At the end of the article, there was an update. *After new legal filings, and McCabe's admission into a new juvenile program at Everest Juvenile Treatment Facility, he will now be eligible for parole after his twenty-first birthday.*

I did some quick mental math. As of a month ago, he could be out. And only a couple of hours away. Why hadn't Shay gone farther than a ferry ride from Seattle? None of it added up.

My stomach churned at the school photo printed in one of the articles. A freckle-faced Shay stared back at me, a small gap between her two front teeth. Her smile was wide and unreserved as if nothing was wrong in her world. But there had been. The article spoke of Michael's long history with mental illness, even at the age of eleven. Trips to a local psychiatric hospital, and one brief stint at a juvenile detention facility. What would it have been like for a child to grow up in a home, struggling to deal with that? How terrifying.

My jaw worked as my back teeth ground together. I kept reading. Article after article. Everything I could find on Michael and the McCabes. Most of it was a regurgitation of the first two articles I read, but I kept hunting anyway. The truth of what I'd just learned swirled in the back of my mind. Shay had almost died. Because her *brother* had tried to kill her.

I almost jumped out of my skin when the video chat notification blared to life on my screen. I hit accept, and Carson's face filled the screen.

"Surfing the internet, slacker?"

I couldn't seem to force my mouth into a grin. "Just doing some research."

Carson sobered. "What's wrong? Press hounding you again?"

“No, nothing like that.” I scrubbed a hand over my face, trying to think of what I could share without betraying Shay’s trust.

“Is Lara giving you shit again? Need me to hire a hitman?”

That almost got a smile out of me. “You know she showed up here the other day?”

Carson’s jaw dropped open. “On your little island in the middle of nowhere?”

“It’s not in the middle of nowhere, but yeah. Flew in and had a boat bring her straight here.”

“No wonder you look like crap.”

I wished it was as simple as Lara showing up and driving me nuts. But she’d been surprisingly understanding when I’d canceled our dinner and promised that she’d heard me and would give me some space to figure out what the new direction in my career might be. I absentmindedly traced a design on my desk with my finger. “It’s not Lara.”

Carson let out a huff. “What then? You regretting your move already?”

“No. I love it here, actually.” The peace I’d found in my routine, the sounds and scents of nature...Shay, they’d all been good for me. I felt healthier and happier than I had in years, even if I hadn’t figured out what my new career path might be. “There’s someone here I care about...”

“Your hottie of a caretaker?” he asked with a mischievous grin.

I scowled at him. Shay had popped her head into my studio a couple of weeks ago when Carson and I had been chatting, and she had met him via video. I hadn’t heard the end of it from Car since. “I’m not saying who. But they’re in trouble. And I’m trying to figure out how I can help.”

“Trouble like avoiding the cops because they were part of a jewel heist, or trouble like they’re hooked on pills? Give me a little direction here.”

“Trouble like they’re lying low from someone who might want to hurt them.”

Carson’s jaw hardened. “If that someone is the slip of a girl living on your island, I’d tell you to keep her close. You want the number of my private investigator? You know he’s discreet, and he can get the lowdown on anything.”

A couple of years ago, Car’s sister had gotten mixed up with a bad dude and hadn’t been able to break free. This P.I. had found enough dirt for Carson to get his sister out and keep her ex away for good. Having more information on Michael, confirming his whereabouts, wouldn’t hurt. “Sure. Send it my way.”

“I’ll text it as soon as we hang up.”

“Thanks, man. How are things with you? Pieces for the show progressing?”

Carson grimaced. “They’re coming. But I’m not sold on any of them yet.”

This time, I did grin. “You hate every sculpture you make. It’s not until after collectors are clamoring all over themselves to outbid each other that you believe they’re halfway decent.”

He fumbled for his pack of cigarettes. “You might have a point.”

“Trust your process.”

His gaze met mine through the screen. “This is why I need you in New York. You remind me to keep my head on straight.”

“No one can keep your head on straight.”

His eye twinkled mischievously. “That little caretaker of yours might...”

“Carson,” I warned.

“Just wanted to see if you’d called dibs or not.”

“That’s the nice thing about living thousands of miles away. I don’t have to. I can just do...this.” I hit end on the call before he could utter another word and closed my laptop

screen. A few seconds later, my phone dinged with a message calling me an asshole and then another with the number for his private investigator. I'd place the call in a bit. First, I wanted to talk to Hunter.

I made my way out of the house and down the path towards the construction site. The crew was larger today, unfamiliar faces mixed with the ones I knew. Hunter waved, finishing up a conversation with a man I didn't recognize. "Hey, Brody."

"It's a full house today," I said, taking in everyone moving in and out of the building.

"It's time for the guts of it all, and that's a lot of moving pieces. Did you need something? Or were you just coming to check it all out?"

I turned away from the studio and back to Hunter. "I was wondering if you knew anyone who did security systems."

Hunter's brows rose. "Security?"

I heard the words he didn't say. Ones that would inquire why I needed a security system when I owned the whole island. "Yeah. With that trouble back in New York, it might be smart. As much as I think having this place to myself will be more than enough protection, I'd rather be extra cautious."

"I'm sorry you're getting that much grief. If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word."

In that moment, I realized Hunter was one hundred percent genuine. If I'd told him we needed twenty-four-hour patrols, he probably would've been the first to sign up for a shift. "Thanks, man. That means a lot. I really just need to know my options when it comes to a system for this place."

He nodded, his gaze drifting back to the studio and then to the surrounding forest. "You have perfect timing on the studio. We can pre-wire it, and then whatever service provider you use can simply hook it up. I don't know as much about how you can have an alert for someone unknown docking on the property, but I have a friend you can talk to. Griffin has a killer

system at his place on Anchor. He'll probably have some ideas for where to start."

"If he's willing, that would be great."

Hunter pulled out his phone. "Let me walk up towards the house so I can get some service and I'll call him."

"Thank you. I really appreciate you going above and beyond."

He grinned. "Welcome to small-town life. We look out for each other here."

It was a new experience, looking out for your neighbors. In my building in New York, I might have known two of my neighbors. And they certainly hadn't jumped in when I needed help. Then again, I'd never asked. But life on the islands was different. And I just might be a little different, too.

SHAY

I HIT CONFIRM on the final web page and let out a breath. It wasn't a fortress, but I'd put up a few additional walls between Michael and me. My mail was now being routed from Charlotte to Nashville to Maine and then finally to Anchor. If I just kept changing things around, he wouldn't find me. And even if he did, I couldn't imagine him enduring a ferry ride from Seattle, his fear of the water was too intense. Ever since he'd had a scare growing up.

It had been one of the many times my parents had tried to bring us together by going on a family vacation. We'd rented a house on a lake for a week. Fishing off the dock and making s'mores.

Michael had shoved me down when I was taking too long to put on my life jacket, and I'd gotten a nasty gash on my knee. My parents had been examining the injury, trying to decide if I needed stitches when we'd heard a splash. Michael had refused to wait for us any longer and had fallen into the lake while trying to climb onto the boat.

My dad had moved quickly, but Michael had needed CPR to begin breathing again. It had scared him spittleless. And he'd refused to go anywhere near water from that day forward. That one incident had given me the only true weapon I had.

I shut my laptop screen and headed for the door. I needed to double-check the generator because the weather report had called for a storm. I started up the path when a familiar voice called out. I turned to see Caelyn waving. Changing directions,

I made my way back down the hill. “What are you doing here?”

She motioned to her husband, Griffin, who was in what looked to be an intense discussion with Brody. “Hunter called Griffin because Brody had some questions about what kind of security system to put in. I thought I’d tag along for the ride, hoping I’d get to see you. And here you are.”

I smiled, but my gaze shifted to Brody, wondering if a security system had always been on his list of plans or if it was a new addition after I’d opened up a bit about my brother. “Does Griffin know a lot about that?” Caelyn’s husband had restored his old family farmhouse on Anchor pretty much on his own, so it wouldn’t have surprised me.

Caelyn rolled her eyes heavenward. “He’s obsessed. Could literally talk about it for hours on end. I might have to drag him back to the boat.”

I chuckled. “Then I guess it’ll be a while. Want to come with me to check the generator? Then we can take a walk down to the beach.”

“You’re a godsend. If I hear one more word about cameras or wiring, my eyes are going to cross.” She let out a whistle, and Griffin’s gaze shot to her. “Shay’s giving me a tour. I’ll be back later.”

Griffin paused for a moment and then nodded. “Be careful.”

“Pretty sure I’m not going to get eaten by a bear.”

Griffin shook his head, but his lips twitched as he turned back to the conversation. But Brody’s eyes remained on me, his gaze intense. I fought the urge to squirm under the weight of it. Instead, I issued a wave and turned away. “It’s sweet how Griffin is with you.”

Caelyn snorted. “Sweet but a little over the top. I swear he’d wrap me in bubble wrap if he could.”

My heart ached at her words. God, I wanted that. Someone who wanted to step between me and all the bad things in the world. Not because I couldn’t handle my own battles, but

simply because they loved me. “A little bubble wrap isn’t such a bad thing.”

Caelyn glanced over at me. “I guess not. So, how are things here? The new boss?”

“Different. But good. I think Brody and I are becoming friends. I mean he’s still my boss, of course. But since he’s actually on the island all the time, and there’s no one else here, we hang out.”

She wagged her eyebrows at me. “Hang out, huh?”

My cheeks flamed. “Not like that.” But I couldn’t deny that thoughts of what *that* might be like had been running around in my head for weeks now. It would be dumb, so incredibly stupid to go there with him. But thinking about it was a different story.

“He watches you. Not in a creepy way. In a sweet one. Like he’s looking out for you.”

My insides warmed at the thought. “He’s a good guy.”

Caelyn let out a humming noise of agreement. “He seems to be coming to town with you a lot. You’ve got some tongues wagging.”

I stopped on the trail and faced Caelyn. “Has someone been asking about me?” I tried to keep the panic from my voice, but I knew a little slipped in.

Worry lined the planes of Caelyn’s face. “Nothing bad. I promise. Just the local gossip mill. You know they’ll talk about anything.”

But they hadn’t talked about me before. I’d never given them the opportunity. But a handsome new resident and a woman who had no friends or family to speak of? That would get people talking. For the first time, I hated this new friendship with Brody. But the second the thought escaped my brain, my body seemed to revolt. I’d never give up stolen moments with Brody. Not my morning workouts or our movie nights. Not losing repeatedly at Yahtzee or those trips into town.

I glanced over at Caelyn. “But no one else is asking about me, right? Just longtime locals?”

She was silent for a moment before she answered as if trying to pick her words carefully. “No one I haven’t known for years. What’s this about?”

My lips pressed into a hard line, the lock to keep all of my secrets back. “Nothing, really.”

Caelyn reached out and squeezed my elbow. “You know you can trust me. My past isn’t an easy one, but letting people in, letting them help me instead of shouldering it all on my own has made all the difference. I’d love to help lighten your load if I can.”

My eyes burned at her genuine kindness. I’d known Caelyn since I first moved to Harbor. She’d been working at The General Store the first time I’d gone in for supplies. She’d been warm and welcoming when I’d been scared and homesick. But we’d never gone past that first layer of pseudo-friendship. Yet I’d grown to know her character over the years, and it was that of a person I could trust.

“I have a family member that I don’t want to know where I am. It’s a long, complicated story. But what matters is that I’ve been safe here. And I’ll stay that way just as long as I can remain as anonymous as possible.”

Caelyn tried to read between the lines of my statement, assembling guesses that I knew wouldn’t be correct. “I’ll do whatever I can to help. And I’m always here if you need to shine a light on the ghosts. Maybe exorcise them a bit.”

I grinned. “Are you going to burn some sage around me?”

“Don’t judge it till you try it.”

I held up both hands in surrender. “I wouldn’t dare. And, Caelyn?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much your kindness has meant to me over the past few years. I don’t think you realize the impact you have on people’s lives. They pass

through the store, and you light up their days. Give them a touchpoint when they might not get that anywhere else.”

Caelyn’s eyes glistened in the afternoon sun. “Why do you have to make me cry like that?”

“Because I’m evil.”

She bumped her shoulder with mine. “You really are.”

“But now you’re stuck with me,” I chirped back.

“I guess I’ll just have to struggle through it.”

This was friendship, I realized. One freely given. Not hampered by a brother who would rage and hurt if he thought I might have another playmate. One where I could simply *be* without worry or fear. And it was one of the greatest gifts I’d ever received.

BRODY

I GRINNED as I rolled the dice around in the Yahtzee cup. “You’re sure you want to play another game? It’s past your bedtime.” The last time I’d checked the kitchen clock, it was past midnight. Shay was usually in bed by ten at the latest since she got up at the crack of dawn every day.

“Shut up and roll the dice, James.”

I couldn’t hold in my chuckle. “What does that make the tally? Six games to one?”

She straightened in the booth of the breakfast nook. “Just you wait. I’m going to make a comeback, and it’s going to be epic.”

“Out of the dozens of times we’d played this game, how many times have you succeeded in a comeback?”

Her expression soured. “Once.”

I couldn’t help needling Shay. It was too damn fun, and she was such a sore loser. Not in any area of her life other than Yahtzee. Maybe it was because she was so bad at it, and the woman probably hadn’t been bad at anything else in her life. If Shay wanted to master something, she went after it with a vengeance. Gardening, raising chickens, fixing heavy machinery. If she didn’t know how to do it, she learned. If she was bad at it, she practiced. But no matter how many games of Yahtzee we played, she never got any better.

“You’re pretty adorable when you pout.”

Her head snapped up. “I’m not pouting.”

I swallowed my laugh. “Sure, you aren’t.”

She collapsed back against the cushioned seat. “All right. Maybe I’m pouting a little. I don’t understand if I have the world’s worst luck, or if I’m just horrible at mentally calculating odds.”

My brows rose. “Are you trying to dice count?”

“I’m pretty sure that only works with cards.”

“Remind me never to take you to Vegas.”

Her nose scrunched up in adorable disgust. “No, thank you.”

“Not a fan of Sin City?”

She shook her head. “I went once when I was a kid. Too many people. Too much cigarette smoke.”

“There’s pretty good food, though.”

“I can make good food from the privacy of my own home.”

Shay had managed to do just about everything from this island. But as I studied her in the dim light of the kitchen, wisps of hair falling free and framing her heart-shaped face, I couldn’t help but wonder about everything she was missing out on. To truly experience life, you had to live it in community. It was something I needed to remind myself. “We should go out this weekend.”

Her head snapped up. “Go out...”

“Yeah, you know. Get dinner, maybe hit up The Catch. Hunter told me they have live music on Saturdays and Sundays now.”

Shay’s mouth worked as if she were struggling to form the words she wanted. “I don’t know if it’s such a good idea.”

I reached out and squeezed her hand. “I’ll be with you. And I honestly think the more normally you live your life, the less people will ask questions. And you’re the master of vague answers if they do pry.”

Her lips curved, drawing my attention. My gut tightened. We were close. Just a few feet away. I could lean over and close that distance, sink into that gorgeous mouth, lose myself. Shay cleared her throat. “I’ll think about it. That good enough?”

I shook myself out of the stupor she had me in. “It’s a start.” And I wouldn’t stop asking.

WITH ONE LAST flick of the wrist, it was done. I stepped back from the canvas, surveying the image in front of me. Closer. Not quite there yet but closer to the image in my mind. It was another of Shay. This one was of her on the beach. The waves were crashing in around her, trying to take her out to sea, but her arms were outstretched, creating a sort of forcefield that kept the water from stealing her away. It was her power and strength and sheer force of will. But there was darkness, too. Swirling around her. Doubts. Fears. The ugly voices that I got a sense had a pretty powerful hold on the woman I’d become fascinated with.

I studied the curves and the sharp edges. The battle taking place in the image. It was the best thing I’d painted in months. Progress. I still ended up with a few destroyed canvases each week, but I was finishing more projects, too. And they seemed to be morphing into something a little different than my past work. I couldn’t put my finger on how exactly, but I liked the direction things were moving.

I peeled off my gloves and tossed them in the trash, then set my mask down. Just as I was about to head for the kitchen for a snack, an incoming call sounded from my laptop. I strode to my desk and hit accept. Carson’s face filled the screen. “You bastard.”

He’d said it smiling, but my brows still pulled together. “Right back at you.”

“You’ve been holding back on me.”

“What are you talking about?”

Carson moved around his studio space as we talked, large sculptures appearing and disappearing in the background as he went. “You said you were struggling. Barely finishing anything.”

“I was. I mean, things are a bit better now. I’m finally getting in a groove—”

“I saw that piece Lara’s putting up for auction this weekend. I’d say you’ve more than found your groove. You’re moving into a whole new era of work. It’s different from your other stuff. More alive somehow.”

“The landscape is more alive?” That series was decent, but it wasn’t anything to write home about. They were nice to look at, but they didn’t say enough. Didn’t grab you by the throat and force you to look at something you might have otherwise ignored.

“Not a landscape. The one of your caretaker. Where she’s growing vines. It’s epic, man. Truly epic. Hell, I might bid on it myself.”

I froze. “That’s not up for sale. I gave Lara landscapes.” I pushed back from the desk and stood, striding to the storage closet where I’d been keeping my paintings. I never looked at them again once I was finished. Why would I? I simply piled more pieces back there.

I searched through canvas after canvas. As I passed each one, flipping from one to the next, the set of my jaw got harder. None of my other landscapes were gone. Nothing where the subject was someone on the crew or an interesting face I’d seen in town. But I was missing at least four paintings of Shay. I let out a litany of curses and strode back to the laptop.

“What the hell is going on, Brody?”

I gripped the back of my desk chair, my knuckles bleaching white. “She took them. Paintings I told her she couldn’t have. I gave her landscapes in exchange for a year off my back. And she just went ahead and took whatever the hell she wanted.”

All amusement had fled Carson's expression. "I'm not trying to be an asshole here, but that's what she always does. She's never had your back. Only hers."

This was finally the last straw. All the times I'd excused Lara's actions because of our history. All the times I'd just thought she was especially ferocious. But Carson was right. Lara only looked out for herself. It was never truly for me. And it stopped now. I'd been approached by dozens of other dealers and managers over the years, asking to represent me. But I'd always felt a loyalty to Lara. That ended today. "I have to go. I need to deal with this."

"Heads-up, it's already all over the art blogs."

I ran a hand through my hair and tugged on the ends. That meant it might get some mainstream media play, as well. Ever since Josiah Mosely, people had become more intrigued with my art. And since there wasn't a lot of my personal information floating around, they'd become fascinated with me, as well.

"Thanks for the warning."

"Good luck. Let me know if I can do anything."

"Will do." I hit end and pulled my cell out of my desk drawer. I'd taken to just leaving it in the house because it only worked when it was connected to the internet anyway. I hit Lara's contact.

She answered on the third ring. "Brody, it's so good to hear from you."

"Cut the shit."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, cut the shit. You are going to do three things for me. First, you're canceling the auction and pulling all photos of that painting off any websites you have control of. Second, you're crating up every painting of mine in your possession and sending them back to me. And third, you're fucking fired."

There was silence for a brief moment before Lara began to speak. “You’re overreacting. I know your art is personal to you, but you needed a piece that would make a splash. And those landscapes weren’t going to cut it. I’ve already had numerous inquiries about it. I think it will go for at least upper six figures, possibly seven.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the money,” I roared. “You stole from me. And unless you do as I just instructed, I’m going to press charges. Then I’ll sue. I’ll take all of that precious money of yours, and I’ll ruin you in the art world.”

I couldn’t stop the words from tumbling out of my mouth because the only thing I could see in my mind was Shay’s face when she got that letter from her brother. How she would lose it when I told her that her face was out in the world, and it was tied to me. She’d given me her trust, told me things she hadn’t shared with anyone else. And without meaning to, I’d betrayed her.

“Brody,” Lara whispered, her voice full of hurt, “we’ve been friends for over a decade. A team. I built your career. We—we—you wouldn’t.”

“I am. You have two choices. Do as I say, and I won’t blackball you in this community. Or you can push, and I’ll destroy every shred of reputation you have. Do you think any artist will work with you once they know the truth? How you really operate?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re being a monster.”

“Maybe I am.” But I would be as much of a monster as needed if it meant keeping Shay safe. “Get to work.” I hit end before Lara had a chance to reply. I didn’t want to hear her bullshit excuses anyway. I had to go tell Shay that I’d exposed her to the world. And beg for her forgiveness.

SHAY

I HUMMED as I pulled weeds from the beds, a new arrangement in my head. It had been so long since I'd tried to compose anything original. But I'd begun to feel the pull of that outlet in the past couple of weeks. Maybe it was simply because enough time had passed, and I was finally ready to try again. Maybe it was because every stolen moment with Brody felt like a note in a song we were crafting together.

They built on one another, those notes. A steady crescendo. At some point, we'd reach the top of the peak. But I wasn't sure what might happen there. The most delicious spiral down? Or a complete collapse?

I pushed the thoughts from my mind. I couldn't worry about it now. I could only keep moving forward. Enjoying our friendship and reminding myself that platonic was where this relationship needed to stay.

"Shay? You in here?" Brody called as if I had just willed him into being with my thoughts alone.

"Back right corner."

He appeared in a flash, hair a little wind-blown, or perhaps simply ruffled from him running his fingers through it. "I need to talk to you."

His tone had me straightening from my crouch, and my heart giving an extra hard thud in my chest. "What's wrong?"

He started pacing back and forth in the small space. "I, uh...hell. I fucked up."

I reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping his movement. “Then we’ll fix it.”

His face held a war of emotions: hope, pain, fear. “I’ve been doing some paintings of you. It was wrong of me. I should’ve asked. You told me you wouldn’t sit for me, but the images kept playing in my head, and I just had to get them on a canvas—”

My fingers tightened on his arm. “It’s fine. Sure, you should’ve asked, but it’s fine. As long as you’re not planning to have some big art show with them. I know you’ve been struggling to find your footing with your work again, and if painting me helps, go ahead.”

Brody grimaced, and my hand fell away from his arm. I took in his expression again, the worry making itself at home. “Brody...tell me there’s no show.”

“There’s no show. But when Lara was here, she took some of my paintings of you. She wasn’t supposed to. I told her only landscapes, but she’s sneaky, and she loved the ones of you. She took them after you and I left. One of them was announced for auction today. A bunch of art sites have photos of it. I don’t think it has made it past that, but I can’t know for sure. I’m so sorry, Shay. You’ll never know how much. You gave me this gift, your friendship, your truth, and I...I betrayed that.”

I was silent, my body having gone numb. This was why I avoided people. Relationships. Every tether was a chance for exposure. Every string a greater risk of discovery. Yet as I stared at Brody, this man who was working his way deeper and deeper into my heart, I couldn’t wish him away. “You didn’t betray me. It’s not your fault.”

He moved in a flash, pulling me into his hold. “I’m sorry. So fucking sorry.”

My arms encircled his waist. The strength of his embrace felt like armor against the coming storm. If I could just stay like this, I’d be safe. “I have to know how far the image of the painting has gotten.”

Brody nodded. “Come up to the house with me, and we’ll dig. I’m doing everything I can to get the photos taken down.”

“I know you are. And these are art sites, so it might not be as big of a deal.” I wanted that knowledge to calm me. Michael had gone to the same school for the arts as I had. He’d opted for cello instead of violin, wanting to chart a different path than his sister. But the path had been more challenging for him. Lots of broken bows and a handful of smashed instruments. I had to hope with what had happened, and how much time had passed, that he was no longer plugged in with any art school pals. That no one would casually mention seeing a photo of a painting that looked remarkably like his sister.

Brody took my hand. “Come on. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

I left my gardening tools abandoned in the greenhouse, mentally promising to deal with them tomorrow. Brody tugged me along the path to the main house. Not forcefully, but with gentle encouragement. Without it, I would’ve probably sunk to the ground where I was. The memories crowded in, the bite of fear still thrumming through me, feeding each and every one.

I did my best to battle them. Expel them from my brain. It didn’t do any good. The memories were like that arcade game of Whac-A-Mole. The moment I’d beat one back, another would pop up. Michael slamming me into a wall, his hand at my throat. Him threatening a little girl who wanted to come over for a sleepover. Throwing his plate at the wall when my mom said he had to finish his green beans.

But there was good mixed in, too. The fort we’d made in our backyard. The one that only the two of us were allowed in. The time we’d made pancakes for Mother’s Day and had nearly destroyed the kitchen. The good and the bad swung back and forth in my brain in a crazy-making staccato rhythm.

Strong hands gripped my arms. “Shay. Focus on me.”

I gave my head a little shake, blinking rapidly. As if that might clear it all away. Erase a past that I’d never been able to

understand fully. “Sorry. I...” There was no way to finish that sentence, to explain what was going on in my mind.

Brody ushered me towards the couch. Deep and wide and the most comfortable piece of furniture I’d ever sunk into. But even that wasn’t a comfort, didn’t penetrate beyond a fleeting thought. He gripped my legs, his hands pinning them right above my knees as if he could secure me to this place. “Talk to me.”

That familiar burn crept up the back of my throat and into my eyes. “I don’t know how.”

“Tell me one thing. You always start with one true thing.”

I stared at the man in front of me. His eyes were so full of understanding and free of judgment. Begging for me to let him in. My hands fisted the sides of the couch cushion as I searched for the truest thing I could give him. “I love my brother.”

Brody’s hands flexed around my legs. “I’m going to be honest. I looked you up. I know the broad strokes of what happened. But those articles rarely give the full picture.”

“I know it seems insane. To love the person who murdered your parents. Who tried to kill you. And don’t get me wrong, I hate him, too. But it’s impossible to forget that he was my brother for eleven years before that happened. And I was his big sister. I was supposed to look out for him. I can’t erase that urge. Just like I can’t erase all of the good we had as a family.”

Brody traced absentminded circles on the inside of my thigh with his thumb. “But you ran from him.”

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. “I know that if given a chance, he’d kill me, too. And it’s not even his fault.”

Brody’s eyes flared. “It’s not his fault?”

“It’s not Michael’s choice. His brain betrayed him from the moment of his birth. I did a lot of reading, talked to a bunch of experts after he was arrested. Just trying to wrap my head around what happened. When Michael’s traits appear in someone so young, it means it’s hereditary. We had the same

parents, Brody. The exact same upbringing. Yet his brain had these invisible mines that would go off at the slightest provocation. How is that fair?"

One tear and then another escaped my eyes, sliding down my cheeks. "My brain is perfectly fine. I don't get joy from hurting people. I have empathy. But he just doesn't. Can't."

"Maybe too much empathy," Brody muttered.

It was impossible for others to understand. This tie to my brother that I refused to sever. "My aunt didn't understand it either. It used to make her mad for days when I'd go visit him."

"You visited Michael? After he tried to kill you..."

I had to look away, couldn't take the shock on Brody's face. I turned my focus to the window, the sea peeking through the wall of trees. "I didn't go very many times. I thought maybe if he saw me while I was still recovering, it might get through to him. The damage he created might seem real."

"But it didn't," Brody filled in.

"No, it didn't. Michael didn't care. He's not equipped to. Don't get me wrong. He's able to mimic what care and concern look like. He's even fooled the majority of the doctors at his facility. But it's not real." I glanced back at Brody. "I think that's why your art pulls at me. You don't shy away from reality. Even if it's ugly."

His hands tightened around my thighs, not painfully but with pressure, intensity. "But I'm starting to realize that the real isn't all ugly either."

"It's not. Even with Michael. There's good in him. There's life. It just got twisted somehow. And that makes me feel even more guilty when the anger slips in. When I remember how terrified I was growing up, how my parents barely had time for me, how much I lost...I hate him."

Brody released his hold on me. "Come here."

"I'm here."

In a flash, he'd lifted me so that I was cradled in his lap, my head pressed to his chest. The steady, strong beat of his heart reverberated against my cheek. His arms encircled me, holding on as if he'd never let go. "I can't imagine going through what you did. I can't imagine holding on to even a shred of that love."

"I'm not noble." Some days I felt like a complete coward. One who would've done anything to keep her brother locked up.

"You're pretty damn amazing in my eyes." His lips brushed the top of my head as he spoke, and I stopped breathing. Just the skim of them sent sparks of energy through me. I wanted to lean in to it. To feel more. Something told me that if I let myself fall, Brody James could make me feel more alive than I ever had before.

BRODY

I OPENED THE DOOR SLOWLY, guarding against any possible creak or groan. But there was none. I took in the form sprawled at a diagonal across the bed. Her brown hair was in wild disarray, lying across the three pillows she somehow managed to be using. Her face was relaxed, mouth slightly open.

I was already painting the scene in my mind. Planning the colors I'd need. The way I'd make the image come alive and jump off the canvas. I forced myself to push it from my brain. To step back from the guest room and shut the door.

I gave a mental thanks to whoever had invented blackout curtains, otherwise there was no way Shay would still be asleep. And she needed the rest, desperately. We'd sat on the couch for hours yesterday, talking about everything and nothing.

When I'd told her that I wanted her to stay in one of the guest rooms for the night, she'd put up minimal fight. More of a pause before agreeing. I didn't think she wanted to be alone. And I couldn't stand the thought of her even two hundred yards away for the night. Just in case she needed me.

I'd sent her back to her guest house to get a couple of things, and while she was gone, I'd placed a few calls. Requests to the large blogs to remove the painting from their sites with a promise of an interview at my next show. I'd never get it taken down everywhere, but the sites with the most traffic were a start.

I headed downstairs, grabbing my coat before making my way towards the chicken coop. I'd watched Shay feed the hens and gather their eggs before. And I knew she'd wake panicked if I didn't handle it. So, chicken whisperer for the day it was.

They squawked as I approached. "Sorry, ladies. I know it's later than usual, but please don't try and peck my eyes out in retaliation." I chose to spread their feed around before opening the hen house. It was a smart move because when I did, they ignored me altogether and went straight for the grub. I made quick work of gathering the eggs and headed back to the house.

The clock on the wall read 10:15 a.m., and I knew there was no way Shay would sleep much longer. I pulled open the fridge to see what options we had. My cooking skills were almost nil. But I did have a reserve of one or two recipes besides grilled cheese. I pulled out some cherry tomatoes and mozzarella. Heading over to the windowsill, I plucked a few basil leaves off the plant resting there. Before long, I had a frittata rising in the oven, and coffee brewing.

"What time is it? And what smells so good?"

Shay wandered sleepily into the kitchen. Her hair was still in wild tangles, and she was drowning in her oversized flannel pajamas. I fought the urge to laugh. "It's 10:45, and my culinary masterpiece is what smells so good."

Her eyes widened. "Crap. The chickens—"

"Already taken care of." I inclined my head to the basket of eggs on the counter.

"You fed the chickens and got their eggs? Did any of them try to peck you?"

I grinned. "They were far more interested in food. Here." I poured coffee into a mug, and a little of the half and half Shay preferred. "Drink this. You'll start to feel human again."

She sank onto a stool at the island and took a long sip of coffee. "I haven't slept that late since I was a teenager."

"You needed it." Shay had wrung herself dry yesterday. I didn't know how it hadn't happened sooner. Or maybe it had,

and she simply hadn't had anyone around to catch her when she fell. "Who in your life knows the truth?"

She blinked up at me. "About Michael?" I nodded. "My aunt. Caelyn knows something bad happened with someone in my family. And Evergreen."

"Evergreen?"

A hint of pink hit Shay's cheeks. "I don't know her real name. We just go by our screen names with each other. We met on a forum thread talking about how to unofficially disappear. We hit it off. For a long time, she was my only real friend."

"But you don't know who she really is..." It seemed a little reckless. Divulging so much to a complete stranger.

Shay's lips pressed into a firm line. "We both know enough about each other to find out the other's identity. But we haven't. It's a respect and trust thing. She's had her own hardships. I've never had anyone understand what I went through more than she does."

"I'm glad you have her, then." If this Evergreen made Shay feel less alone, then I was on board.

The buzzer on the oven dinged, and I pulled out the frittata. Shay let out a low whistle. "Why the hell have I been doing all the cooking around here if you can make that?"

I chuckled. "I have mastered this, grilled cheese, and steaks and baked potatoes."

"A well-balanced diet."

I pointed the potholder at her. "Hey, there are tomatoes in this. That's a vegetable."

Her mouth curved. "Technically, they're a fruit."

"Smartass," I mumbled. My phone buzzed from where it was plugged in on the kitchen counter. I swiped it up.

Carson: *Have you seen this? What the hell happened with her?*

My blood turned to ice as I read the headline of the article Carson had included in his text. *Inside scoop on 'The Artist' and how his reign of terror destroyed the art world's golden boy.* I opened the article, scanning the paragraphs. Lara had painted a picture, all right. One that questioned my mental state. She wove intimate truths and convenient lies into something that didn't even resemble reality. And she hadn't even bothered to do it off the record. Her name was there in black and white.

It shouldn't have felt like a betrayal. I should've expected this from her. She'd always had a vindictive streak. And she'd had to get one last payday out of her relationship with me. But she'd forgotten one convenient fact. After my identity had been exposed, and my anonymity destroyed in the art world, I'd had everyone who worked for me sign non-disclosure agreements. Lara had just royally fucked herself. And not in a good way.

I jotted out a text to my lawyer with a link to the article.

Me: *Shut this down. Then I want full legal action.*

I was done playing games with Lara. Done letting her screw me over while telling me it was for my own good. She thought that I would never take action against her because of some bond that, in all actuality, meant nothing. But she was about to find out how wrong she was.

Long, slender fingers wrapped around my arm. "What happened?"

I opened my mouth to answer but couldn't seem to find the words. Instead, I simply opened the article and handed Shay my phone. She scanned the screen in front of her. After a minute, her head snapped up. "That bitch."

"I can't think of a better word for her."

"Why? Because you told her she couldn't sell that painting? So what? She had others."

I ran a hand through my hair, taking out my frustration on the strands. "Probably because I fired her."

Shay's mouth dropped open. "Brody...you didn't do that because of me, did you?"

"No. I did it because I can't trust her." I let out a laugh devoid of any warmth. "I don't think I ever could. That's the most messed-up thing of all. I think she's been manipulating things, swinging them in her favor since day one."

Shay wrapped her arms around my waist. "I'm so sorry. That's not a truth that's easy to come to terms with. But sometimes, we need those wake-up calls. And it will make you appreciate the people in your life who *do* have your best interests at heart."

It was the first time she'd been the one to initiate this kind of contact. The first time an embrace had been her doing. My arms moved around her, one hand dipping under her fall of hair. As wild as it was at the moment, it was still so incredibly soft. Strands of silk. I rested my chin on top of her head and breathed her in. Hints of lavender that must've been in her lotion or shampoo. It soothed some of the torn edges of the morning. "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked against my chest.

"Just this." I held her a little tighter as if to show her.

"It's never a hardship to wrap my arms around you, Brody."

I grinned into her hair. "I'm glad to hear it."

"And I missed hugs."

My arms spasmed around Shay at the knowledge that she had missed this simple human contact. "I'll give you one anytime you ask."

SHAY

EVERGREEN13: *Then what happened?*

Phoenix26: *Nothing. We had breakfast. Then he had to get on a call with his lawyer.*

Evergreen13: *I almost never say this, but I'm disappointed in you, Phoenix.*

I scowled at the screen. I shouldn't have even started down this path. E was too nosy. Always trying to push me to broaden my horizons. I must've taken too long to answer because all of a sudden, the chat app was ringing. I froze. We'd never talked to each other face-to-face. But I couldn't resist hitting accept.

Evergreen's face filled my screen. She was both what I expected and not. Beautiful enough to grace the cover of any magazine but with a unique edge. A number of earrings lined her ears, and the delicate script of a tattoo peeked out from behind her left lobe. "I figured if I called without asking, you wouldn't have a chance to think of all the reasons not to pick up."

"You know me too well." I would've invented a million and one reasons for why it was a bad idea. But now here she was, in front of me, and I felt like I would've recognized her anywhere. Maybe because we'd shared some of our hardest things. Or simply because she'd been with me on this journey when I'd left everyone else I'd known behind.

"Now, are you gonna tell me why you haven't made a move on enigma hottie?"

I shook my head but chuckled. “He’s less of an enigma now. Kind of like you, I feel like I’ve known him forever.”

E’s expression gentled. “Must be good stock, then.”

“Must be.”

Her lips twitched. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice that fact.” I sighed when E stayed silent. “It’s too risky. For a million different reasons. Even if he weren’t my boss, I just can’t.” Because if Michael found me, the first thing he would do was hurt the people I cared about.

“You can’t stop living because of your brother. He doesn’t know where you are. And chances are, he’ll end up back in jail before the end of the month.”

I hoped she was right. As soon as the thought entered my mind, guilt flooded me. I should’ve had optimistic hope that Michael had been rehabilitated. But I would’ve been lying to myself. I saw it in his eyes during the last visit I’d made to the facility. The gleam when he’d brought up our parents, saw the pain on my face. He would always enjoy hurting me. Especially when I was the reason he’d been caught. Why he’d been locked away.

“Just promise me you’ll give it some thought,” E said, bringing my attention back to her.

“Give what some thought?”

“Making a move on that man.”

I groaned. “I’ll think about it.” Who was I kidding? I hadn’t been able to think of anything else.

I SHUT the door to the storage shed, taking a moment to lock it behind me. Not for fear of human thieves but critter ones. Raccoons and other creatures were crafty with their paws when the chicken feed inside called to them.

I turned to head to the greenhouse and caught sight of Sam heading towards me. “Coming to visit the chickens?”

“They do make good friends,” he said with a chuckle. “But I was actually coming to see if you wanted to meet up at The Catch this Friday.”

I struggled to find a kind way to say no. And figured honesty was the best I was going to get. “No, thank you.” Because as much as I was beginning to let people into my world, I had zero interest in going on a date with anyone. That was a kind of vulnerability I wouldn’t be ready for anytime soon.

“No, thank you?” He said the words as if he were confused.

“I appreciate the offer, though.”

A hard glint flashed in his eyes, and he moved closer. “You fuckin’ your boss?”

I stiffened. “Who I do or do not have sex with isn’t your concern. I don’t know you. You don’t know me. Now, please back up. I have work to do.”

Instead of stepping away, Sam moved in even closer, crowding me against the door of the shed. “Maybe you should get to know me before you say no to a date, then. It’s rude.”

My breaths came quicker, each one tripping over the next. I didn’t do well with feeling boxed in. Feeling like I had no way out. “Step back,” I gritted out.

“Or what?” he said with a sneer, leaning in even closer so his face was right next to mine.

I moved without thinking, a decade of self-defense classes springing to life in my muscle memory. I brought my knee up hard and fast. But Sam must’ve had some sixth sense because he moved at the last second, meaning I got more thigh than balls. He slammed me against the shed door. “What the hell, you crazy bitch?”

The combination of being trapped, the stars dancing in front of my eyes, the panic, it all sent me spiraling back. I

fought to stay in the here and now, but I couldn't quite hold on.

Hot tears tracked down my cheeks. "Michael, let me out. Please!"

His laughter sifted through the cracks of the trunk where it rested in the old attic. "I thought you wanted to play."

"It's not fun anymore. Let me out or I'll scream."

Michael had been in trouble so many times over these past few months, I knew our parents would ground him for sure if they found out that he'd locked me in here.

"Scream away. You know they won't hear."

My breaths came faster as my heart rattled against my ribs. I knew they wouldn't. Because Dad had spent an entire week last spring soundproofing the attic space so Michael and I had a place to practice our music without driving the rest of the house insane.

"Please," I whispered. "I don't want to be in here anymore."

"I know you don't." He gave the side of the trunk a swift kick. "Why? What does it feel like, sissy?"

"Like I can't breathe." Maybe if Michael got his answers, he'd let me out.

"Like you're going to die?"

"Maybe." My voice trembled as I tried to focus on slowing my inhaled and exhaled. I played my upcoming recital piece over and over in my mind. Maybe if I just focused on that, I'd be okay.

"You won't. You'll hurt, though. When you die, I want to watch."

His voice was so angelic when he said the words. One of the reasons he got away with so much, so often. It had taken our parents too long to see through that mask. To begin to worry what their son might be capable of. But they'd slowly caught on. Then, some of the kids at school. The teachers. I'd

overheard his third-grade teacher admitting to the librarian that she was scared of Michael. She should be.

My tears came quicker, but I didn't let the sobs out. It would only make Michael happier. Make him keep me in here longer. I did my best to keep my voice steady. "If you let me out, I'll give you my allowance next week."

Michael was quiet. Likely thinking. I should've started with this offer instead of a threat. I should've known by now that no punishment or loss seemed to change the way he acted. But sometimes a bribe did. He crouched in front of the trunk, his eyes level with one of the cracks between the slats so I could see him. "The whole month."

"O-o-okay." The tremble slipped through my voice again, and Michael grinned.

"I'll come let you out when you've learned your lesson." He started for the door to the downstairs.

"No!" I screamed. "You have to let me out now."

But Michael didn't listen. He never did. I searched my mind for any possible transgression that might've triggered this punishment. I hadn't given him my cookie at lunch. He'd stopped by my and Hannah's table and demanded it. I'd said no. I should've known. You never told Michael no.

I tried to fight through the memory to bring myself back. I didn't want to live through the next eight hours I'd been trapped in the trunk before my parents found me. How I'd wet my pants. The way my muscles cramped for days afterwards. How I was scared of the dark for years. But the memory was too strong. I couldn't fight my way out.

BRODY

THE SHOUTS COMING from down the hill stole my attention from my sketchpad and had me pushing to my feet. They weren't like the shouts I'd heard coming from the construction zone before. These were laced with anger and possibly fear. I was jogging towards the noise before I could think twice. I hadn't laid eyes on Shay since breakfast.

That knowledge and the rising voices had me turning my jog into a run. I hopped over a root in the path and then came to a skidding halt in front of the shed. Hunter and Sam were locked in a standoff. But I barely had time to register the move because my gaze was already zeroing in on Shay. Huddled on the ground, leaning against the shed, her knees pulled up to her chest as she trembled.

"Shay?" I sank to my knees in front of her. "Shay, talk to me." She didn't move a muscle. I glanced quickly at Hunter. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know," he gritted out. "I heard shouts and came running. Sam was cursing, and Shay was on the ground, trembling."

"I was talking to her, and out of the blue, she freaked out. Tried to knee me in the balls."

Hunter shoved Sam towards the construction site. "Quiet. We'll talk about this later. You're done for the day."

I blocked out Hunter and Sam. I couldn't focus on them right now. The only thing I cared about was Shay. I cupped her face in my hands, ignoring the small jerk her body gave at the

contact. “Shay, it’s Brody. You’re safe. I need you to come back. I’ve got you. No one’s going to hurt you.”

She kept trembling, and when Sam’s shouts rose, she gave a small jerk. “Get him out of here, Hunter,” I barked.

Another of Hunter’s crew hauled Sam away, but I didn’t bother to note who. I simply focused back on Shay, keeping my voice low. “He’s gone. You’re safe. You know I won’t let anything happen to you.” But I had. At the very least, Sam had cornered her. Maybe worse.

Her eyes moved. Not in the jumpy fluttering movements they had since I arrived, but as if she were trying to focus. I rubbed my thumbs across her cheeks. “That’s it. Look at me.”

Hazel orbs shifted in my direction. “Brody?”

“There you go. I’ve got you.”

“What?” She jerked, looking around.

“He’s gone,” I bit out. “What happened?”

“I—I’m sorry.” She looked from me to Hunter and back again.

“You don’t have a damn thing to be sorry for,” Hunter said, taking a step closer. “Did he touch you?”

She shook her head. “He backed me up against the shed when I told him I didn’t want to go out with him. He wouldn’t let me go. I tried to knee him in the balls, and he slammed my head against the door.”

Hot rage slid through my veins at the image Shay painted. But I forced my hands to remain gentle as I moved them to the back of her head, feeling for injuries. As my fingers glanced over a rising bump, she winced. “Sorry. I just need to make sure you’re not bleeding.”

She nodded slowly, and I pulled my fingers away. No blood. “How bad does it hurt?” I asked.

“I’m okay. Just need some Tylenol.”

“Should I call the sheriff? EMTs?” Hunter asked.

“No!” Shay cut in immediately. “No, I’m fine. Really.” She gripped my forearm. “Please. No cops.”

My jaw worked. The sheriff or the EMTs would mean paperwork. A public trail that someone could easily find in a basic internet search and follow. “Okay. No cops. But maybe we should take you to the doctor just to make sure you’re all right.” At least doctors were protected by confidentiality.

“If I don’t feel better tomorrow, I’ll go.”

I wanted to take her now, but I didn’t want to push, either. “Then you have to stay in the main house tonight. I’ll wake you up every couple of hours just in case you have a concussion.”

Shay pursed her lips but nodded. “Okay.”

Hunter intently watched the back and forth between us as if trying to figure out what the hell was going on. “I’m so sorry, Shay. This never should’ve happened. He’s a flirt, but we’ve never had an issue like this, I swear. He’s gone now, and he won’t be coming back.”

“Thank you,” she croaked. “But I don’t want you to lose someone you need.”

He scowled. “I don’t need anyone who acts like that.” Hunter’s expression softened a fraction. “You really should think about pressing charges.”

Shay’s hand tightened on my arm. “I really don’t want to go through that.”

“Okay...” Hunter agreed. “But if you change your mind, you send Sheriff Raines to me for a statement.” He turned his focus to me. “I need to get Sam out of here and deal with my crew. You need anything, just say the word.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll come talk to you a little later.” I needed the lowdown from Hunter on Sam. Had to know whether there was a chance he could cause more trouble. Hunter gave me a chin jerk and headed back towards the studio site.

I turned to Shay. “Do you think you can stand?”

“I want up. My butt’s freezing.”

I wanted to grin or laugh, but I simply didn't have it in me. Not while I was staring at a pale, still-trembling Shay. "I'm going to help you, okay?"

She took my hands. "I'm ready."

I pulled Shay to her feet, and while she stumbled slightly, she quickly righted herself. I slipped an arm around her waist. "We're going up to the house, but slowly."

"Slow and steady wins the race, right?"

"Damn straight." It might as well have been my life motto these days. With art. With this new life I was building. With Shay. "Does it hurt to walk?"

"I'm stiff, that's all. I need a long soak in an Epsom salt bath."

"We can arrange that." The guest room had a decent-sized tub, or she could use the soaking tub in the master. But what if she slipped or passed out? "Actually, maybe that's not such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"You had a pretty decent knock on the head there. You could pass out."

She groaned, leaning her weight against me a little more. "Pretty please? I'll talk to you through the door so you know I haven't started drowning."

I chuckled as I guided Shay up the front walk to the house. "The bath in the guest room has a curtain. You get in and pull the curtain. I'll sit by the tub, just in case."

She was silent for a moment before she answered. "No peeking."

"Scout's honor."

Shay snorted. "Like you were ever a Boy Scout."

I pulled open the door and ushered her inside, towards the stairs. "I'll have you know, I had two whole years of Boy Scouts before I dropped out, much to the dismay of my father. Easy on these stairs now."

She gingerly took each step, one hand on me, the other on the rail. “Do you know how to start a fire by rubbing two sticks together?”

“No, but I know how to start one using flint. And I’m an expert at roasting marshmallows.”

“We might have to put that to the test one of these days. There’s a fire pit on the far beach.”

An image of Shay and me wrapped in a blanket, roasting marshmallows filled my head. Her body curved against mine. I slammed that door shut. Not the place or the time. Especially since Shay was about to be naked, mere inches from me. Naked because she’d been hurt and needed to recover. That reminder sent any flicker of lust fleeing fast. “When you’re back to one hundred percent, I’ll get you some marshmallows.”

“I’ve got a few bumps and bruises. It’s not like I’ve been mortally wounded. I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“We’ll see.” I steered Shay towards the guest bed and helped her ease down to sit on the edge. “Stay here. I’ll run the bath. I think there are some Epsom salts in here.”

“They’re under the sink. And scalding hot, please.”

I grimaced as I ran the water at least ten degrees warmer than I would’ve liked, pouring in a healthy dose of the salts. I searched the medicine cabinet and came away with a bottle of Tylenol. Filling a glass with water, I headed back out into the guest room. “Take these.”

“Thank you. Sorry you’re stuck playing nursemaid.”

“If I would’ve known, I’d have picked up the sexy outfit.”

Shay grinned. “Now that would be a sight.”

She took the pills and then stood, already having toed off her boots and stripped out of her jacket and fleece. I took her elbow as we headed for the bathroom. “I’ll be right outside if you need me. Holler once you’ve pulled the curtain.”

“I’ll be fine. Promise. I’ve already got some of my sea legs back.”

“I’m still sitting with you.”

Shay huffed. “Pervert.”

“Troublemaker.”

She stuck out her tongue at me. “Takes one to know one.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Some of the tension that had overtaken my muscles since I’d first heard those raised voices eased as I headed out of the bathroom to give Shay some privacy. She was okay. Or she would be. But even as I thought that, I wondered if it was actually true. The image of her pale face and unfocused eyes filled my mind. She’d been lost in another world. And Sam had sent her there.

I cracked the knuckles of one hand and then the other. It was killing me that we couldn’t have him arrested. That I didn’t have a chance to put the fear of God into him, instead of him doing that to another woman.

“You can come in.”

Shay’s voice broke me out of my stupor and pulled me back to the here and now. I eased the door open and entered what felt like a steam room. I quickly shut the door behind me so I didn’t let any heat out. “How’s it feel?”

“Like heaven.”

I grinned as I eased onto the tile floor next to the bath. “Glad to hear it.”

“If you’re not careful, you’re going to have me breaking in to use this tub every evening. I only have a shower in the guest house.”

I leaned against the wall, crossing my legs. “You know you’re welcome anytime.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, the water sloshing against the ceramic.

“You scared the hell out of me today.” I didn’t think I’d ever forget the panic creeping up my throat when Shay wouldn’t answer me. Wouldn’t even look at me.

“I’m sorry.”

“Where were you? You were lost somewhere, and I couldn’t bring you back.” I was bolder with my questions than I had been before. Maybe because a curtain hung between us, or because I was desperate for answers. I didn’t know.

Shay was quiet for a moment, the only sound a trickle of water here and there. “I don’t do well with feeling boxed in. Sam triggered a memory, and I couldn’t stop it. They used to take over a lot more. But it’s been a while since I’ve had one that bad.”

“What was the memory?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, yet I couldn’t resist asking. I needed to know every sore spot and trigger so I didn’t accidentally send her spiraling like today.

“Michael locked me in a trunk. We’d been looking for hide and seek spots for when our friends came over to play. He told me he didn’t think I’d fit, but I said I would. When I climbed in, he locked the latch. I was in there for almost eight hours before my parents found me.”

My breathing picked up, going a little ragged around the edges. Eight hours in the dark with no way out. “How old were you?”

“I was nine. Michael was seven.”

It seemed impossible that a seven-year-old boy was capable of something so insensitive and cruel. That he could simply walk away in the face of his sister’s terror. “What did your parents do?”

What sounded like a washcloth plopped into the water. “That was the first time they sent him to a treatment program. He’d been hospitalized before, but he’d never been to a residential treatment program. Michael was gone for six months. It was the best six months of my childhood. I could finally breathe. I wasn’t constantly looking over my shoulder. I wasn’t worried that something I did or didn’t do might set him off. But then I felt guilty for being relieved.”

“It makes sense that you’d feel both.” But I wondered why Michael had only been at the facility for six months. Why not

a long-term placement somewhere that was equipped for his issues? “Why did he come back after six months?”

Shay sighed. “The issues my brother has, a conduct disorder with callous and unemotional traits, is complicated to treat. And even harder to measure rehabilitation. Michael has always been good at mimicking appropriate behavior, at biding his time before he gets his revenge. Every time my mom and dad went to visit him, he’d cry and beg to come home. That destroys a parent, Brody. Even as young as I was, I saw it eating them up inside.”

I couldn’t imagine the stress they had been under. But I also couldn’t understand putting the defenseless little girl they had at home at risk.

“You’re wondering why they let him come home,” Shay deduced.

“I’m trying to see all the angles. There’s no easy answer, that’s for sure.”

Water droplets fell into the bath as if Shay were wringing out her washcloth. “There wasn’t. For anyone. Not Michael, either.”

Shay blew me away. Her ability to hold onto empathy despite her terror and pain, amidst the betrayal she surely felt made me want to lean in to those relationships in my life that were imperfect but present. My parents sprang to mind most of all. They didn’t understand me. But they loved me. Maybe it was time I tried a little harder. Had them out to the island for a week this spring or summer.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“About how you make me want to be a better man.”

There was nothing for a long moment, then she spoke. “You’re already one of the best men I’ve ever known.”

I swallowed against the emotions crowding my throat. My hands itched to pull back the curtain. I wanted to see her face as Shay said the words. Needed a clue as to what she might be hiding below that calm and collected exterior. Was desire

clawing at her insides as much as mine? Was she battling this thing like I was? I could only hope.

SHAY

THE SOUND of wood cracking and a series of creative curses had me stopping in my tracks in the kitchen. They were coming from the sunporch. Hunter and his crew had made amazing progress on the art studio, but Brody was still at least a month—maybe two—away from using the space.

I set the full basket of my latest greenhouse haul on the counter and started towards the room that ran along the side of the house. I stopped just outside, listening to Brody's barely audible mutterings. I itched to cross the threshold, to try and soothe whatever ragged edges I could. It had become habit over the past couple of weeks. Brody and I both leaned on each other, maybe more than we should.

We ate breakfast and dinner together each day. Filled every evening with Yahtzee, cards, or a movie. We talked about everything and nothing. He'd shared that his relationship with his parents was awkward. And at times, painful. I'd watched as his mastery of two dishes in the kitchen had turned to four. I shared stories about my parents. Mostly the good memories that I hadn't shared with anyone. Brody had grown partial to feeding the chickens and even kept me company when I had to spend a couple of hours tweaking our generator.

Without me thinking much about it, we'd become a unit. We knew each other's moves before either of us made them. Evergreen had taken to calling us an old married couple. And I tried to ignore the warmth that took root in my chest each time she typed that tease.

I did my best to keep that one final boundary in place, though. The one that didn't allow for our lips to meet the way I wanted them to, or for Brody's body to curl around mine in sleep. But I'd let him inside in every other way. And I couldn't find it in me to scold or chastise myself for it. He'd become too important.

I took another step forward and knocked on the open door. Brody whirled, his eyes a touch wild. I kept moving into his space. Nothing about Brody scared me or gave me a second's pause. I eyed the broken canvas on the floor. "Testing out those new boots of yours?"

He scowled. "No."

I arched a brow. "Throwing a temper tantrum?"

"Maybe," he muttered.

"Talk to me."

Brody picked up the canvas and tossed it into a mounting pile in the corner. "Nothing feels right. Every time I start a new piece, something's...off. Like I'm pushing somehow." He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "I don't know. Maybe I need a break. Or a new career path."

"Or you need to paint with no set destination in mind."

"No free passes from you, huh?"

My mouth curved. "Not if it means you stop creating." I moved in closer, the smell of Brody's soap and a hint of cedar filling my senses. "Tell me what I can do to help."

He tipped his head down, his eyes searching my face. "Sit for me."

I stiffened for a moment and then forced myself to relax. No more managers were stopping by to possibly abscond with my likeness. Lara was back in New York and several hundred thousand dollars lighter after settling out of court with Brody's lawyer. She'd had to issue a public retraction of her statement, as well. "Okay."

"One more thing."

My lips pursed. “You’re very demanding today.”

Brody shrugged, the muscles in his shoulders flexing. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to play for me while you do.”

My fingers tugged at the cuffs of my sleeves, the movement sending a trickle of agony down my right arm. I instantly released my hold on the fabric, not wanting the pain to trigger a memory. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had an audience.”

“It’ll be good for you.”

I huffed. “And who are you? The expert on all things musical?”

Brody grinned, the movement socking me right in the gut. “I am an expert on getting out of your way. Art is meant to be shared, Shay. Trust me with yours.”

God, when he said it like that, how could I say no? “All right. Give me a minute to grab my violin.”

Brody nodded and immediately got to work setting up a new station. I cursed him and myself all the way to my guest house and back. I forced myself to keep a light hold on the instrument case or I surely would’ve snapped the handle in two. My mind wound through possible pieces to play. But nothing seemed right. Too predictable or too modern.

I set the case on a table and began the work of taking out and tuning the instrument. “I need you to tell me what to play.”

Brody’s brows rose. “That defeats half the purpose. The music you choose is part of the art, isn’t it?”

“It’s too much pressure.”

Brody came around from his easel and took my shoulders in his hands. “Breathe, Shay. Just breathe.” I followed his inhale and exhale. It wasn’t that my breathing was out of

control, it was my mind. “Close your eyes.” I did as he instructed. “Picture yourself in your happiest place.”

“Here. On the beach. Watching the tide roll in. Or the waves when the sea gets rough.”

“Hmmm.” Brody’s hand tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering there. “If you could picture yourself there, playing your violin, what would you be wearing?”

“A parka if it’s as cold as it is today.”

Brody squeezed the back of my neck. “It’s whatever temperature you want it to be. And this is your dream outfit. No parkas allowed.”

I grumbled something not-so-nice under my breath but kept my eyes closed. “A gown. One that’s sort of gauzy so it flows in the breeze. But I’d still want my boots.”

Brody chuckled. “Now, hold that picture. What would you be playing?”

“*Hallelujah*.” My answer was instant, just tumbled right out. My eyes opened, meeting Brody’s dark and swirling ones.

“Then play.”

I slowly raised my violin and bow and started to play. I was a bit self-conscious at first, watching Brody move out of the corner of my eye. He seemed to be sketching on the canvas. Not a lot of lines but some. Soon, he opened a window near me and pulled on latex gloves and a mask, reaching for a can of spray paint. The rattle of the little ball inside the can, the whoosh of the spray being released, added a sort of percussion to the music from my violin.

I let my eyes fall closed, getting lost in the music. It was my favorite high, when the world ceased to exist around me, and the only thing I could feel was my fingers on the strings and the pull of the bow. I played *Hallelujah* over and over, giving myself over to the peaks and valleys, hearing a whisper of the words along with the notes.

I had no idea how long I played, how many rounds from start to finish. The burn in my shoulder finally brought me out of my haze, a hot zing of pain that drove away my high. My playing faltered, and I had to lower the violin. I winced at the movement.

Brody was in front of me in a flash. “What’s wrong? Your shoulder?”

His hand reached out, gently caressing the skin through my long-sleeved t-shirt before I could stop him. I knew the second he felt that something was off. Noted the twisted and raised skin. He couldn’t have gone for the shoulder that was unmarred, he had to know it was this one that felt as if hot lava had been poured into the joint.

Slowly, as if giving me a chance to stop him, he tugged my shirt to the side. The V-neck collar allowed him to reveal my shoulder. He sucked in a sharp breath as he took in my skin. I couldn’t look at his face or my flesh. I knew what I’d see in both. Disgust and pity. Skin that would never be normal again.

Rough hands cupped my face, forcing my gaze to Brody’s. “I’m so sorry.”

I tried to shrug, but the pain was too strong. “It was a long time ago.”

His thumbs traced paths across my cheeks. “But you still carry it with you.”

My jaw clenched. “Wouldn’t you? Every time you felt the fire in your arm. Every time you had to see the ugly, ripped-up skin on your body?”

Brody’s hands gripped me a little bit harder. “Not one thing about you is ugly. The only thing those scars prove is that you can walk through fire and survive. I can’t think of anything more beautiful than that.”

My pulse thrummed in my neck, and blood roared in my ears as he held me captive within those dark depths. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t even look away. Brody leaned closer, moving millimeter by millimeter until he was just a breath away. He gave me all the time in the world to retreat, but I didn’t. I

wanted nothing more in that moment than to feel his lips on mine.

I closed the final distance. Demolished the last barrier I'd been so determined to keep intact. None of the reasons seemed to matter in the moment. Nothing mattered except Brody and me.

One of his hands slid down my neck, slipping under my fall of hair as our lips met. Everything about the contact was a jolt to the system. A beautiful juxtaposition of all that was Brody and me. Gentle yet strong. Hungry yet tender.

I lost myself in his kiss the same way I disappeared into my music—instantly and all-consumed. We found that same exploration, too. The slow builds and beautifully desperate spirals down. It was a composition I wanted to play forever.

Too soon, I was coming out of it, reality breaking in as Brody's foot knocked over a can of paint. I pulled back, breathless. "Wait." I placed a hand on his chest. "I need a minute. To get my head together and—hell. I told myself I wasn't going to do that."

Brody smirked. "I told myself the same. But sometimes, life makes other plans."

Dumb, dumb, dumb. It was all I could think as I stared into Brody's gorgeous face. The list of things that could go wrong if we moved into this shift in our relationship was endless. "I can't. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. Can we just pretend this never happened?"

Just saying the words aloud had pain sifting through my chest. I waited for Brody's anger. Instead, he simply smiled at me. "I'm afraid that's impossible. And if you're honest with yourself, you know that's true. There's something between us. It pulled at me from the second I got off that boat. A strand of something, weaving us together. And I'm not cutting that cord. And you could try, but I don't think it would work."

But I had to. For so many reasons. My safety. What Michael could do to Brody if he knew he was important to me. And because I was terrified. Of letting someone in. Of being

laid bare in every way to them. So, I did what any self-respecting wimp would do. I bolted.

SHAY

I WAS A PANSY. A total and complete wuss. A branch smacked me in the face as I moved through the woods. I deserved it. The price for doing everything humanly possible to avoid Brody for the past five days. Right now, I was trampling a new trail through the woods to avoid the well-worn path that could be seen from the main house. *Idiot*. Another branch poked at my side as if to agree.

But I needed that distance. Desperately. Because the more time I spent with Brody nearby, the harder it would be to resist that pull. I started getting up even earlier. Feeding the chickens and getting in a workout before Brody would ever consider leaving his bed. I came up with excuses to avoid having meals together, and I certainly didn't want him with me while I went into town.

I broke through the tree line and startled a curse out of Hunter. He whirled on me. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"Sorry. I was, uh, just trying a new way down to the water."

Hunter's lips twitched. "Still avoiding Brody, huh?"

I gripped the cuff of my sleeve, tugging it down. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you don't. You know, even a blind man could see the chemistry between you two. It clogs the air when you're around each other."

"It does not."

Hunter let out a bark of laughter. “Still in the denial phase.”

Yes, I was. And that was where I planned to stay. It was safe in denial land. Even if I did have brush and branch scratches all over my body. “There’s nothing going on between us.” Just chemistry that would probably burn me alive.

Hunter sobered. “You’ve done a real good job of keeping people out. I don’t know why, but I’m guessing it’s because you got hurt somewhere along the line. But the thing is, a life alone is a hell of a lot more painful than the hurt you’d get by letting people in.”

I stayed quiet. Hunter didn’t know that letting people in could literally get me killed. Get *them* killed.

“Don’t get me wrong. There’s pain in every relationship. But you’re going to get a lot more good mixed in. If you stay out there on your own little island all alone, you’re in for nothing but that hurt. Maybe it’s worth taking a risk.”

I took a deep breath and swallowed the urge to tell Hunter to mind his own business. “Are you a contractor or a therapist?”

He grinned. “You’d be surprised how often those two intersect. Building someone a home, restoring what’s been damaged, it can bring up a lot of feelings.”

“It’s made you pretty damn observant, too,” I muttered.

He held up both hands in mock surrender. “I just call ‘em like I see ‘em. You don’t have to listen to a word I say.”

I made a humming noise in the back of my throat. The problem was, I couldn’t *un*hear Hunter’s words. Forget his astute observations. I had been standing alone on my island for as long as I could remember. And for the first time, Brody had coaxed me off. But the second I got scared, I went running back. I didn’t know any other way.

I sighed and patted Hunter’s arm. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Anytime. And you know you’re always welcome to come to our Saturday night get-togethers at The Catch. Caelyn and Griffin always go. My brother and his fiancée. A couple of other friends. It might be good for you to get out and about. Be with people and listen to some live music.”

His offer tugged at my heart. The sheer kindness of it. “I’ll think about it. Thank you.”

Hunter gave me a chin jerk. “Open invitation.”

“I’m heading into town for mail and supplies. Do you need anything?”

“Nope. All good here.”

I moved before I could think twice, reaching up on my tiptoes to give Hunter a quick peck on the cheek. “You’ve got a kind heart. Make sure you keep it that way.”

Hunter flushed. “Don’t tell Brody you kissed me. I don’t want to get fired.”

I choked on a laugh and headed for the dock. The entire trek to Anchor, Hunter’s words played on an endless loop in my head. I saw the merit in them. And I sure as hell didn’t want to live the rest of my life never letting another soul truly see me. Was that what I had signed up for? I’d been so sure that Michael wouldn’t last a month out of detention before doing something to get sent back. But it was almost April and...nothing. I checked arrest reports weekly for his name and hadn’t seen or heard a peep.

Guilt gnawed at my stomach. What if he had been rehabilitated, and I was just determined to cast him as the villain forever? Then I remembered the note and I shivered. I wished I was wrong about Michael, but I didn’t think I was.

I made my way down the dock and caught sight of a small crowd by the waterfront park. A trickle of unease slid down my spine. An ambulance and a sheriff’s department SUV were also there. God, I hoped everyone was okay. I walked slower. I was about to force myself towards Main Street when I caught sight of Caelyn. She was white as a sheet.

I instantly changed direction and headed for my friend. As soon as I was at her side, Caelyn threw her arms around me. Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke. “Oh, God. Shay.”

My body was strung tight as I rubbed a hand up and down Caelyn’s back. “What is it? What happened?”

“Someone’s dead. They aren’t saying who. Brian found him on the bench.”

I followed Caelyn’s line of sight to a large man who looked more than a little pale and was talking to Sheriff Raines. I’d seen him before. A fisherman I often crossed paths with on the docks. We’d share a wave or a head nod, but I hadn’t known his name. This man, who would likely now be scarred for life by his discovery. “Do they know what happened? Heart attack or a stroke?”

Caelyn’s arm tightened around me. “People are saying they think he was murdered.”

“What?” My gaze snapped back to Caelyn. “Who’s saying that?”

“Just whispers. They put up those curtains before I got here.”

Walls of fabric that looked like the old-fashioned dividers you might see in a doctor’s office had been set up, but that didn’t stop people from trying to see around them, standing on tiptoes or bending to the side. Crime scene tape blocked them from any sort of success.

“What is happening on our island?” Caelyn whispered.

“I wish I knew.” There had been more than a small community’s share of violence and death lately. And now this? My safe place was feeling a little less secure.

An SUV pulled up next to the ambulance, and a man who looked to be in his mid-thirties climbed out. “That’s the new doctor,” Caelyn said in a hushed tone.

He shook hands with the sheriff, and after a few words, Sheriff Raines pulled back the wall to let him through. The

curtains weren't pulled back for long. Maybe a count of fifteen. But those seconds stretched into an eternity.

The image in front of me would be seared into my brain forever. A young man so pale he had to have been drained of blood. What looked like black paint covered his arms, but I could see the stab wounds, even through the paint. Small items had been strewn across the bench, and ugly words had been spray painted around him. And his chest...oh, God, his chest had been carved open.

I couldn't look away. Even though I wanted nothing more than to purge the image from my mind. Forget I'd ever even come into town today. But the tableau held me captive. Even as Sheriff Raines closed the wall of curtains, I stared at the blank white swath of material. I couldn't move a millimeter.

Something tickled the back of my brain—phantom pieces of realizations floating around in my mind until they came together with a violent snap. I couldn't help my sharp intake of air. Because the scene I'd just glimpsed was familiar. I'd seen it once before. On Brody's computer screen. His website. That gruesome murder scene had already been painted—by Brody's hand.

BRODY

I BALANCED my sketchpad on my knee as I leaned back on the dock bench. It wasn't a hardship to wait out Shay's return here. Winter's bitter cold was lessening just a bit, and I was glad to be able to enjoy my island a bit more without freezing my balls off.

I scanned the beach and Harbor's small point that jutted into the water. Another painting was taking shape in my mind. But this one would require some planning. And a canvas the right size to accommodate the epic piece I envisioned. I could see it coming to life. A woman out on that point. Gown billowing in the breeze. Strong and fearless as she prepared for what was to come. Her hair swirled around her, long strands taking flight as if they would fight to defend, too.

The woman's face was clear as day. What seemed like the only face I'd painted for the last month. The same woman who had bolted from my studio when I kissed her. The one who'd been avoiding me for days. But that all stopped this morning.

The sound of a boat's motor had me looking towards the water. I grinned when I saw it heading straight for my dock, Shay behind the wheel. She'd likely try to give me the brush-off, but we were going to talk if I had to chase her all over this island.

I took my time setting aside my sketchpad and getting up as Shay tied off the boat. I strolled down the dock, just in time for her to swing a leg over the side. But as she did so, my grin slipped. Her limbs seemed to tremble as she moved. I picked up my pace, taking her arm. "What's wrong?"

“I—I...” Her mouth opened and closed as if she were trying to get the words out but failing with each attempt.

“Is it Michael?” Hell, what if he’d shown up on Anchor, and she’d been alone? Maybe she’d gotten another letter.

Shay shook her head. “There was—someone was murdered. There was a body. At the park by the docks. He was dead. On the bench.”

Her explanation kept coming in that nonsensical pattern, in fits and starts. I guided her towards the bench at the base of the dock. “Sit down. Just breathe.”

Shay lowered herself to the seat and took a couple of steadying breaths. When she finally met my gaze, I saw so much pain there. And maybe a little fear. “Brody. The body. It looked like the painting on your website. The one of the boy with the broken heart and the drugs all around him. It looked just like that. But he was sitting, not standing.”

My blood turned to ice. “Are you—how can you be sure? Were you close enough to really see?”

Her fingers linked with mine. “I’ll never forget that image as long as I live. There were even words spray painted on the bench.”

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat, but the action felt like razor blades grating against my flesh. How was this happening? Again. My mind whirled, trying to put the pieces together. A million different possibilities circled each other. Had they caught the wrong person? Had a murderer followed me from New York? Was there some sort of sick copycat killer at work?

No one knew where I was. Not really. Not until Lara did her precious little interview. Sure, she hadn’t given my exact location, but she had given enough for someone even halfway proficient with a search engine to put the pieces together.

Shay’s arms slipped around me, her chin resting on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m so damn sorry. I wish I could take it all away. For you. For that man who lost his life. For this community.”

I pulled Shay closer to me, swinging her legs so they were draped across my lap. I needed every point of contact she'd give me. The pressure and weight. The warmth. The undeniable pull that was only Shay's.

We stayed like that for a while. I wasn't sure how long. Minutes? Hours? The only thing I was certain of was that Shay had stayed. She poured every bit of her strength into me.

I pressed my lips to the side of her head. "I guess we should go up to the house. I need to call the sheriff and—"

Shay squeezed my knee. "I don't think you need to call him."

She inclined her head towards the water, and I saw an approaching boat. I could just make out the sheriff's star on the side of it. *Hell*. I wasn't ready for this. The questions. To have this little haven I'd built for myself invaded.

Shay straightened and pushed to her feet. I felt the loss instantly and down to my very marrow. But she kept hold of my hand, her fingers still twined with mine. I stood and followed her towards the boat.

The man, who I assumed was the sheriff, disembarked. "Morning, Shay."

"Morning, Sheriff."

He gave her a small smile, but it was strained around the edges. "I've told you time and again, call me Parker."

I studied the man a little more intently with the voicing of that statement. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, tall and broad as if he might have been a linebacker in high school. Parker turned his attention to me and extended a hand. "Sheriff Parker Raines, but you can call me Parker. I've been meaning to stop by and introduce myself, but time got away from me. I'm sorry I'm doing it now under less than stellar circumstances."

Something about Parker's demeanor eased a bit of the tension thrumming through me. "Brody James. Why don't we head up to the house and talk there? I've got coffee."

Parker nodded. “Never turn down a cup. Lead the way.”

Shay had to let go of my hand as we made our way up the path, but she stayed close, lending me her silent support. I could feel the crew’s eyes as we made our way past the studio site, and I gave Hunter a small shake of my head when he raised his brows in question.

“Looks like an impressive project,” Parker said.

“Art studio. Hunter and his team have done an incredible job.” I just didn’t know if I’d ever be able to use it after this.

“They do some of the best work on the islands, that’s for sure.”

I pulled open the door to the main house and ushered Shay and Parker inside. Shay made a beeline for the kitchen, busying herself with preparing the coffee. “Do you guys want anything besides coffee? I could make you an early lunch. Sandwiches or a salad—”

I gave Shay’s arm a squeeze. “I think coffee is fine.”

“Sure is,” Parker echoed.

“Do you want me to leave?” Shay asked.

Parker glanced in my direction. “It’s up to you.”

“Stay.”

With that single word, she slid into the breakfast nook, leaving a spot just big enough for me. Parker eased into the opposite side. It took a moment for me to force myself down. Because I knew the moment I did, the questions would start. I kept my gaze on Shay as I finally sat, as though she could lessen what was to come.

Parker cleared his throat. “I take it Shay filled you in on what happened on Anchor.”

“She did. We were just about to head up to the house to give you a call when she saw your boat.”

Parker took a sip of his coffee. “I remembered reading about the case back in New York. Followed the news coverage here and there. And when I got to the scene today, something

scratched at the back of my mind. I didn't put it all together until I ran a search."

He paused for a moment before continuing. "There was a printout of a painting at the crime scene. When I did a reverse image search, your website popped up."

My jaw worked back and forth before I said anything. Not that Parker had asked a question, but his silence told me that he wanted me to offer something. "There were never copies of my art at the other crime scenes. Have you talked to the detectives in New York? The FBI? He crossed state lines back east, so they were involved."

"I've got a call in to the FBI and spoke briefly with a Detective Chen at the NYPD."

I nodded. "Chen is good people. He saw me through this whole nightmare before."

"Seems like it. He's gathering copies of their files and faxing them to me. But they seem pretty certain they've got their guy."

I traced my finger along the ridges and swirls of the table's grain. "I thought they had, too. He confessed."

Parker made a humming noise in the back of his throat. "Wouldn't be the first time someone messed-up in the head confessed to something they didn't do."

"I guess that's true enough."

He looked me in the eye. "I have to ask where you were last night, Brody."

I knew it was coming, but it stung nonetheless. I'd had to answer a million questions asked by the cops in New York until they were finally able to clear me. I understood the need for it, but that didn't mean it didn't piss me off.

"Seriously, Sheriff?" Shay barked. "Brody has been targeted. It's been proven. Someone is twisting the thing he loves most in the world. And now you show up asking him where he was?"

I squeezed her knee. “It’s okay.” Something about Shay jumping to my defense made it just that: okay. I turned back to Parker. “I was here all night. I don’t have anyone to really corroborate that—”

“Yes, you do,” Shay piped in. “I’ve had the keys to the boat for the last week. So, unless he swam to shore, Brody’s been here.”

Parker nodded. “That helps.”

“But I could’ve paid someone to pick me up.”

“Bullshit,” Shay said. “I sleep light. Always have. I would’ve heard a boat coming up to the dock and leaving.”

“Wait,” I cut in. “I have the security tapes.”

Parker’s brows rose. “Tapes?”

“Well, digital recordings. I had some cameras put in a few weeks ago. There’s one at the dock. Above my front door, the back of the main house, and on the rest of the buildings on the island, as well. I can give you my security company’s name. They can send the files to you. I think they keep the footage for at least thirty days. Or, I can log in from here if you’ll trust that.”

Parker let out a breath. “Thank God. Not to be a prick, but you’re new around here, and I know folks will want to point the finger at you before they’re willing to look at one of their own.”

“I get it. I really do. But I might’ve brought this trouble to your doorstep just the same.” Guilt gnawed at my belly, burrowing deep and making itself at home.

Parker’s expression hardened. “This isn’t on you. And someone using your work to create pain and suffering pisses me right the hell off. We don’t know each other, but I look out for the residents of this county. I’ll do everything I can to find this sonofabitch.”

His vow should’ve made me feel better. And maybe Parker *would* find whoever had done this. But I couldn’t help but

wonder if that only meant there'd be space for someone else to pick up the mantle.

SHAY

BRODY STARED off into space as he half-heartedly poked at his dinner. He'd been like this ever since Parker had taken off. I hated everything about it. This sedated version of a man who was usually so vibrant and full of life.

I'd done what I could to bring him out of it. To be a comfort. I hadn't shied away from his holding me, the brush of his hands, even though they were as dangerous to me as walking through a minefield without a map. Dangerous for my heart currently heading towards a cliff with a lethal drop-off. But when I knew Brody needed me, someone to tether him to the present, I couldn't resist.

"What do you think? Yahtzee or a movie?" I asked.

"Huh?" Brody said as if just realizing I was there.

"Yahtzee or a movie when we finish dinner?"

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "I'm not really in the mood for either."

I set down my fork and scooted around the breakfast nook's banquette so I was right next to him. I laced my fingers with Brody's under the table. His palms were rough, his fingers callused. But the coarse skin only made him seem more real. "I'm worried about you. I want to help, but I don't know if what I'm doing is making things worse—"

"Stay." Brody's gaze locked with mine. "Stay with me tonight." My muscles locked. "Just to sleep. I need to feel you next to me. To know you're safe. That I'm not alone in this. That I'm not going to drown in pain and death."

“I’ll stay.”

He leaned forward, his movements slow, and pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. It was the barest brush of touch, but it stoked a fire somewhere deep. And as he pulled away, my body made a move to follow, wanting more, wanting... everything. I blinked, trying to clear that pull. When I took in Brody again, he was grinning. I glared at him. “It’s not nice to be so cocky.”

He gave me another quick kiss, this time to my forehead. “I like knowing I affect you.”

“Maybe it’s just that it’s been a long time for me. Maybe anyone’s lips near mine would have the same effect.”

That grin slipped right off Brody’s face, replaced by a scowl. “Not cool.”

I chuckled and pressed a quick kiss to his jaw before scooting around and out of the nook. “Fine. Your lips are the eighth wonder of the world, and I’m powerless against them.”

“That’s better,” he said, pushing to his feet to help me clear the table.

It was a little too accurate for my peace of mind. Brody’s mouth made me reckless. The only thing I wanted to do was give myself over to it. To know what it would feel like places other than my lips. And that made me more than a little dumb.

We moved in tandem, following the silent rhythm we’d developed over the past couple of months. It was comforting, that quiet dance. It carried with it the recognition that someone knew me. My patterns and the way I moved through life. Even if that was only how I liked to load the dishwasher or where I kept my favorite paring knife. It wrapped around me like a warm embrace that I never wanted to leave.

Brody came up behind me, his hands going to my shoulders, massaging lightly. “I’m beat.”

I was, too. We’d eaten way too late after I’d had to move my morning chores to the afternoon, forcing Brody along for the ride simply because I didn’t want him out of my sight. “I could sleep.” At least, I hoped. I couldn’t imagine relaxing

enough to slip into unconsciousness, not with Brody right next to me.

He gave my hand a tug. “Let’s go.”

We headed for the stairs, and when we reached the top, I made my way to the guest room where I’d taken to keeping a few things. Mostly sweats so I could be comfortable on our game and movie nights. But my lone pair of flannel pajamas were still in the top drawer from when I’d slept in this room before.

I moved through my nightly routine, washing my face and brushing my teeth. I was more thorough than I’d ever been before, flossing twice and rubbing in my moisturizer for a full two minutes. The longer I took, the tighter the knot in my stomach grew. By the time I started towards the master bedroom, I thought I might throw up.

Brody looked up when I reached the door. He was already in bed, only the one bedside lamp on, casting the room in a warm glow. I took a deep breath, but it rattled in my lungs. *Just sleep.* I started towards the opposite side of the bed. Brody pulled the covers back for me. “I was starting to think you’d reconsidered.”

I gave my head a little shake. “No. Just getting ready for bed.”

I wasn’t sure if it was the slight tremble in my voice or the fact that I wouldn’t meet his eyes, but Brody instantly moved in close, cupping my cheeks and tipping my face up to his. “Hey, what’s going on?”

I was torn between so many emotions my body couldn’t keep them all straight. Anxiety and elation. Fear and excitement. Embarrassment and hope. “I’m fine.”

Brody’s mouth pressed into a hard line. “Don’t lie. Not with me. You know you can talk to me about anything.”

He’d proven that time and again. In how he listened without judgment. In how he encouraged without pushing. My hands fisted in the sheets. “I’ve never slept in the same bed with someone.” Not unless you counted my parents when I

was a child. I'd certainly never shared this tiny space with a man. Not that the California King we were on was small, but in my mind, it might as well have been us crammed onto a twin.

Brody was silent. Each second that ticked by wound the ball of worry inside me tighter. Soon, I couldn't take it anymore. "I'm just going to go."

"No." Brody tugged me back to the bed. "I'm trying to find the right words, but all I can think in my head is *why*. You're magnificent. This potent mixture of strength and kindness. With a beauty that would knock a man right on his ass."

Slowly, my gaze lifted to meet Brody's. I wanted to laugh at the look of pure bafflement on his face. But I was still wound too tightly. "I've had sex. But it wasn't an altogether pleasurable experience." I'd been young and so hungry for any kind of connection. I'd mistaken a boy's lust for love. But I'd never shown him or anyone else my scars, not until Brody.

"Any kind of intimacy makes you vulnerable. But for me, the stakes are so much higher in every way. It's not just the scars on my shoulder and arm. They're all over my torso, too. So many I can't keep track when I count. I'm not ashamed of them or embarrassed. But sharing them with another person means giving them a piece of me. I've never trusted anyone enough to be totally vulnerable with them. And that means there's never been a reason to share a bed with someone."

I watched as wave after wave of emotion passed over Brody's face, one morphing into another. But under it all was pain. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his hand trailing down my neck. "I hate how alone you've been. What you've gone without. I hate that even walking in here makes you tremble—"

"I'm not scared of you."

He stared intently at me as if checking for untruths. "Swear?"

“I promise.” I found his free hand and traced his fingers with mine. “Anything new is a little scary, and this just feels like one giant leap.”

Brody tilted my chin. “Then let’s leap together. I want you, Shay. In any way you’ll let me have you. As a friend. A companion. A lover. But we go at your pace. You just have to know one thing.”

My throat tightened but I managed to ask, “What’s that?”

“You’re never alone.”

My eyes burned as I took in this man and his solemn vow. “I’m a mess, Brody.”

His mouth curved. “Everything halfway interesting is. Look at my studio. What my paintings look like before they come together. A total disaster zone. But it’s all of those complex pieces in abstract arrangements that come together to create something uniquely beautiful. All of your pieces do the same.”

“If you make me cry, I’m going to be really mad at you.”

He grinned. “How about we try to sleep instead?” I nodded slowly. “You tell me if you need space. If you need to head to the guest room in the night, do it. But, Shay? I want you to stay in the main house until they catch whoever killed that man. I don’t like the idea of you being so far away.”

Ice slid through my veins. “I can stay. But I can sleep in the guest room if that’s why you asked me to stay.”

“I thought you were smarter than that.”

I scowled at Brody. “Don’t be rude.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” he chided and tugged me so that I lay on his chest. “I want you, Shay. And you’re going to have to learn to trust that.”

I made a humming noise but said nothing. I couldn’t give him my trust simply because he demanded it or even because I wanted to. It took time and careful tending. But Brody’s words tonight...they went a long way to planting those seeds.

BRODY

I PICKED up a rubber band from my pile on the counter. Leaning back on my stool, I aimed at the cup on the kitchen table and let it fly. I let out a series of curses when I missed the mark by half an inch.

“Am I interrupting?” Shay deadpanned as she entered the kitchen.

I snatched her wrist as she passed, tugging her onto my lap and kissing her neck. “You’re never interrupting.” I inhaled deeply as I nuzzled the spot behind Shay’s ear that always made her squirm. She no longer panicked or froze when I moved to touch her, no longer pushed me away after we’d lost ourselves in a kiss. But I was following her lead, and she hadn’t given me any signs that she was ready to take things further either. That was fine with me. I got my body wrapped around hers each night, and the taste of her on my tongue every day.

Shay twisted in my lap. “When was the last time you were in your studio?”

The happy buzz of having Shay close melted away. “It’s been a while.” I hadn’t set foot in the sunporch since the day Parker had been here. Now, almost a week had passed. There’d been no leads on the murderer, but no other deaths either. The islands were holding their collective breaths. And I was doing my part by not putting any other images out into the world.

“Brody...” She pressed a palm to my cheek, moving in close. “You can’t let someone this sick have control. You can’t let them steal the thing you love most in the world.”

I pushed to my feet, forcing Shay up as I went. I crossed to the kitchen table, picking up my array of rubber bands. “Don’t you do the same thing?” It was a cheap shot, and I knew it. But it was also the truth. Shay had been so concerned about staying safe, she’d all but erased herself from existence.

Shay was quiet for a moment. “It’s different.”

“How?” I asked, turning to face her. “You don’t let yourself have friends. You won’t play your violin for anyone but me. And you’re incredible. You’re hiding this talent away from the world. But why?”

Her jaw hardened. “You know why.”

“Shay...” I moved in close so I could see every fleck of gold in her gorgeous hazel eyes. “Michael doesn’t know where you are. Do you really think having a few friends or playing a local gig will expose you?”

“It’s not worth the risk.”

“Just like I’m not, right?” I could feel the battle within Shay every day. While she slept in my bed, surrendered her mouth to mine, she always had one foot out the door.

She stepped back, her gaze heating. “I thought you said we could go at my pace.”

Hell. I closed the distance, cupping her face in my hands. “That’s not how I meant it. I’m happy to hold you. But I feel you pulling away every time we get a little closer. Maybe it’s instinct. You’ve been pushing people away for a long time. But I don’t want you to push me away.”

Her eyes shone in the afternoon light. “I don’t want to, but I can’t help it. Every person I’ve ever gotten close to, Michael found a way to hurt.”

I wrapped my arms around Shay, pulling her tight against me. The scars that littered her body weren’t the only wounds she still carried. And the ones in her mind would be much

harder to recover from. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. I promise.”

She burrowed into the crook of my neck. “I’m not going to lie. Caring about someone scares the hell out of me. Every time I let you in a little more, my brain screams *danger*. I don’t know how to turn it off.”

“You don’t have to. You just have to keep stepping forward. Into that unknown. Even when it’s terrifying. That’s relationships. Hell, it’s life. Anything precious requires risk, carries the potential for hurt.”

Shay straightened, her mouth curving. “Are you going to lead by example?”

I fought the curse that wanted to surface. I was a fool of a hypocrite. “I need to paint.”

“Yes, you do. We’ve both let these ghosts haunt us for way too long. We can’t give the monsters space in our brains.”

“How about a trade?”

Shay’s brows rose. “I don’t trade for sexual favors.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Good to know. I was thinking more along the lines that I’d complete a painting if you played your violin for more than just me.”

She was quiet for a moment before answering. “Deal.”

“And you have to sit for me again.”

She rolled her eyes. “Now, he’s just getting greedy.”

I gave her hand a tug, pulling her towards the sunporch. “No time like the present.” I arranged her in a standing position. The same way I had envisioned the woman on Harbor’s point. “Raise your chin.” I guided it up with a finger. “There. Just like that.” I let my hand slide down the curve of her neck, the feel of her smooth skin such a contrast to the rough pads of my fingers.

Shay shivered. “I thought you were painting.”

My hand kept trailing down, tugging at the material of her shirt so her shoulder was bare. I bent, trailing kisses along

each visible scar. I wanted to touch every single one. To heal them. I wished I could make them disappear, but that would somehow take something away from Shay. Because these marks on her flesh were outward signs of how strong she was. Of everything she'd overcome. With one last brush of my lips, I straightened.

No words were needed. And Shay gave me everything in response when she didn't pull the fabric back into place. When she didn't hide from me but instead let me in a little more.

I rounded my easel and took in the blank canvas in front of me. The same white space that had been there for the past six days. I'd wandered into the room more than once. But every time, the empty space taunted me.

I flipped open my sketchpad to the drawing I'd been filling in as I waited for Shay to return from Anchor. The day my illusion of sanctuary had been shattered. There was only one way to fix it. And that was to rebuild. One stroke of paint against canvas at a time.

I looked from the rough sketch to Shay. She was so damn strong. She wasn't fearless. She was something more. Someone who had been terrified but fought to survive. Who'd experienced the greatest depths of that fear and kept on going. That was what I wanted to capture with this piece.

A woman looking out at the storm to come and not turning away. Facing it head-on. And I just had to harness a tiny fraction of that strength to put my first mark on the page.

SHAY

I LOOKED up from the grocery list I was compiling when Brody set my violin case down with a thud. I glared in his direction. “Watch it. That piece of wood in there is like my child.”

His lips twitched. “Well, what do you say you take your precious baby for a spin tonight?”

I froze, my grip on the pencil tightening as if it were my last lifeline. “Play for you?”

“Hunter and I were talking, and it turns out the band playing at The Catch tonight is bluegrass. They’d love to have a violinist with them for a few songs.”

The casual way Brody shared this news had me fighting the urge to throttle him. “You don’t have to look so pleased with yourself.”

His grin widened. “You want to kill me a little bit right now, don’t you?”

“The plants in the greenhouse do need a little fertilizer.”

“I’ll make sure to watch my back for the foreseeable future. But in the meantime, you should get ready. We’re leaving in twenty minutes.”

“Are you insane?” I barked. I was showered, but that was it. No makeup. Hair not done. And I was currently wearing a pair of sweats and one of Brody’s hoodies.

His brows pulled together. “What?”

“Men,” I grumbled as I stood. “No consideration for what women have to go through.”

“What did I do?”

I ignored Brody’s question as I headed for the stairs, cursing him the entire way. I did a bare-bones makeup job. Some concealer, blush, and mascara. A little flick of eyeliner to make the green in my eyes pop. I didn’t have time to curl or straighten my hair. Hell, I probably didn’t even remember how to style it, it had been so long. But I took some strands in the front and wove a slender braid across my crown, forming its own headband.

I took in my face in the mirror. It had been such a long time since I’d done anything other than sunscreen and lip balm. I had to admit, it felt nice. And focusing on my appearance meant I could ignore that I would be playing in front of more than one person for the first time in over a decade.

I tried not to let the ugly voices take root in my brain. The ones that said this was an unnecessary risk. The selfish ones. Taking a slow breath, I reminded myself how small the island was. That it was winter and mostly tourist-free. The chances of running into someone who would recognize me were slim.

I headed for the guest room’s closet to inventory what my options were. A few days ago, Brody had insisted that I just go ahead and bring all of my clothes up to the main house. I’d drawn the line at placing them in the master closet. While I spent every night in that bed, sharing a closet and dresser felt too much like moving in.

I nibbled at the corner of my lip as I surveyed the things in front of me. I didn’t exactly have a lot to consider. My fingers traced over sweaters and outdoor gear, things that were made for the labor I spent most of my days doing.

I came to a stop at the end of the row. The one nice dress my aunt Georgie had insisted on buying me. It was timeless, she’d said. Black with a fitted bodice that hugged my limited curves, making them look a bit more voluptuous than they actually were. It had long, gauzy bell-sleeves that fluttered

when I moved. I could only imagine what they'd look like as I played. The skirt had two layers: a shorter, form-fitting slip, and that same chiffon overlay that allowed you to see the limbs beneath it.

I took a deep breath and pulled it from the closet. I searched for one of my few pairs of *fancy* underwear. It just seemed wrong to have cotton beneath this dress. I hummed to myself as I pulled everything on, not allowing myself to look until I was completely put together. Slipping my feet into my favorite pair of booties, I turned to face the mirror.

For the first time in years, I felt beautiful. And Brody had given me a reason to remember. That I was real. That my body existed. And even though I often tried to hide it away out of fear of prompting questions, it was still there. And it *was* beautiful. No matter what scars marred my skin.

My hand went to my belly. The worst of the scars there. I traced the raised flesh with my thumb, but instead of letting it remind me that I should be hiding, I let it remind me that I was breathing. And because of that fact, I had a duty to truly live.

I let my hand fall to my side, and with one final look, moved towards the hallway. The heels of my boots clacked against the wood as I walked.

"I thought I was going to have to come throw you over my shoulder," Brody called from downstairs.

"You try and do that, and you'll get a nasty surprise." Brody had no idea that I'd studied martial arts for years after my attack. Once or twice a week, I found time to go through my moves, even if I didn't have an opponent to spar with.

"I might just have to give it a try to—" His words cut off as I came around the corner. "Holy hell. Never mind. I think we should just stay here. You can give me my own personal concert and—"

I stole the rest of his words with a kiss. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry, I'm a little dazed. Might've taken a hit to the head. What are you thanking me for exactly?"

“Reminding me that I’m real. That I’m breathing. That I’m beautiful.”

Brody pulled me tighter against him, a fire dancing in the dark depths of his eyes that I’d never seen before. “You’re all of those things. And so much more.”

I brushed my lips against his again. This time, I took the kiss a little bit deeper. Sank into the recklessness of it. The wildness. The bone-deep knowledge that I hadn’t died eleven years ago, and it was time for me to live.

When Brody pulled back, he was a little breathless. “You might kill me tonight.”

I patted his cheek. “Well then, just remember, this was your idea...”

MY FOOT TAPPED an incessant beat as I glanced around the table. All the faces were friendly, but their smiles and welcoming chatter did nothing to calm my nerves. Everything in me screamed to run fast and far.

Brody’s hand came to my knee and squeezed as he leaned in. “You’re going to be great.”

I scowled at him. “I’m probably going to throw up on stage.”

“I’m so excited that I’m finally going to get to hear you play,” Caelyn said from across the table where she was burrowed into her husband, Griffin’s, side. He was the least smiley and the quietest of the group, but he wasn’t rude. And the way he stared at his wife with adoration told me that he might have an ooey-gooey center under that gruff exterior.

“It’s been a really long time. I’m probably rusty—”

“Rusty, my ass,” Hunter said, picking up his beer. “I heard some music when I was heading up to the house to make a call. Thought it was a professional recording of some famous musician, but Brody told me it was you.”

I sent another dirty look in Brody's direction. "Stop spilling all my secrets."

He grinned. "I'm just here to give you a nudge in the right direction."

"You owe me a dozen paintings for this," I mumbled.

"So, Hunter. What's next for you after you finish the studio?" Griffin asked. It was the first effort at conversation he'd made all night.

Hunter set his beer down and picked up a French fry, twirling it between his fingers. "We've got a few more weeks on the studio, but I'm thinking about taking a look at the old resort on the north end of the island. I wanted someone else to buy it so I could just work on it, but so far, no one's biting."

Griffin's brows rose. "That would be a hell of an undertaking."

"You're not wrong there."

Caelyn straightened in her seat. "You want to buy a resort that's haunted?"

I almost spit out the sip of wine I'd taken. "Haunted?"

Hunter rolled his eyes. "It's just old island lore. Really, the place has just been ignored for almost a decade. Half the cabins look as if they're falling apart. Hopefully, it's not worse than that. I'll go check it out in a few weeks to see what's what."

A beautiful woman I recognized as the owner of Second Chances appeared at our table, resting a hand on Hunter's shoulder. "Not creating trouble, are you?"

Hunter gave her a wink. "I wouldn't dare."

She snorted and turned her attention to Brody and me. "I don't think we've ever officially met. I'm Bell. My fiancé, Ford, runs The Catch."

"Shay," I greeted.

"I'm Brody. Thanks for having us."

Bell smiled. "I'm just excited to hear you play, Shay. Hunter says you're amazing."

I turned my scowl at him, and he held up both hands. "Hey, what did I do?"

Brody chuckled as he ran a hand up and down my thigh. "Just get used to it. She's not a fan of praise."

"It's not the praise I'm worried about. It's the unrealistic expectations," I groused.

Bell motioned me towards her. "Well then, let's get it over with. The band said they're ready for you."

I started to stand, but before I was fully upright, Brody gave my hand a tug, pulling me forward so he could brush his lips against mine. "Break a leg."

"If I do, you're going to be the one carrying me home."

"I've got it covered."

Bell led me towards the side of a small stage where the musicians were gathered. I'd had a quick chat with them earlier, and we figured out a few songs we all knew. But it wasn't as if we'd ever practiced before. This whole thing could end in disaster.

"So," Bell began, "you and Brody look pretty cute."

I fought the grimace that wanted to surface. I was supremely rusty at girl talk. Maybe I'd never really learned. I could only talk so easily to E because computer screens separated us. I'd kept my distance from just about everyone except my aunt once I went to live with her. It was simply easier to avoid those kinds of ties than to risk painful conversations or prodding into my past. So, I wasn't even sure how to respond to a comment that Bell probably thought was innocuous. "He's nice."

She laughed. "Nice, huh? More like ruggedly handsome. If Ford didn't have me already locked down, I'd give you a run for your money there."

I should've laughed, but I couldn't quite muster it. Because the only thing it reminded me of was the knowledge that

Brody could have his pick of women. I swallowed against the burn in my throat. At some point, he would get tired of my bizarre idiosyncrasies and move on.

Luckily, I wasn't forced to drum up a response for Bell because we made it to the band. She wished me well and headed for the bar and a man who looked as if he were undressing her with his eyes. She gave him a long, hard kiss and then moved to pour drinks.

I turned my focus back to the band. And with a few last-minute checks, we took the stage. The lead singer and banjo player, Gareth, greeted the patrons. When he introduced me as their special guest, I caught sight of Sam in the crowd. I hadn't seen him since our altercation a few weeks ago, conveniently pushing him from my mind. His gaze swept over my body, and I fought a shiver. I turned my focus to a point about a foot over the crowd's heads. It was a trick I'd learned when I first started playing in recitals. If I didn't make eye contact, the nerves couldn't set in.

We started out slow, with a rendition of *I'll Fly Away*, and it didn't take long for me to get lost in the music. The bar, the building, the world...it all slipped away. The only thing that existed was my bow across the strings, the push and pull, the buildup, and the spiral down.

When we moved into *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, the crowd lost their minds as my fingers flew across the strings, and my bow went wild. They were loud enough that it pulled me from the trance I loved so much, and I found Brody across the room.

The smile on his face as he watched me fly twisted something deep inside me. His sheer joy at watching me do something I loved made its way into a place inside I hadn't let anyone into in over a decade.

As we transitioned into something slower, a song I couldn't name but which my fingers played on autopilot, I kept my gaze locked with Brody's. Neither of us looked away as one note slid into the next. Each sweep of my bow seemed to pull at something low in my belly. As if Brody's hand were

somehow on top of mine, and we were playing together. Each place his eyes focused on my body burned as if he were actually touching me. And by the time I finished the final note, I was aflame.

SHAY

THE BITE of the night air as our boat whipped along the water should've cooled my overheated skin. But it did nothing to calm the buzz of energy humming just below the surface. The wine, the high of playing for a crowd for the first time in years, the intensity of Brody's stare. It had started a fire in me that I wasn't sure I'd ever get under control.

I was silent as I tried to dial it back. As if I could douse it piece by piece. Forget how each part of tonight had made me feel alive.

As Brody pulled up to our dock, I moved to help him tie off. He climbed over the side of the boat and offered me a hand. I studiously ignored it. Instead, I hiked up my dress with one hand and placed the other on one of the dock posts for balance.

Brody eyed me carefully as I made my way down the dock and up the path. He was silent as we walked, likely taking stock of my mood and wondering what the hell had brought it on. I wanted to go to my guest house, to barricade myself in there and start rebuilding the walls that protected me from a world that could leave me exposed and at risk. Walls that would block out any temptation to lure me into an existence that would do just that. But the majority of my meager belongings had made their way to the main house. That was fine. I'd just sleep in the guest room.

Brody unlocked the door and punched in the alarm code as I made my way to the stairs. "You want to tell me what the hell is going on in your head right now?" he asked.

I froze with my foot on the bottom step. “I shouldn’t have played in public. It was foolish. A risk that didn’t need to be taken.”

“So, you hated it?”

I couldn’t answer him. Because I’d loved every second of playing with other people again. Of moving a crowd.

Brody moved in closer. “That’s what I thought. You came alive on that stage, Shay. I’ve never seen anything like it. You were flying. But you want to push it all away. You want to push me away.”

I whirled on him. “I have to! Because every time I get a taste of what life could be like if I just let myself free, I want it even more. I’m more and more likely to take a risk that could get me killed. And if I have to choose between music and breathing, I’m going to choose breathing every time. But I don’t need the reminder of what I can’t have. I don’t need *you* to remind me.”

My lungs heaved as Brody took step after careful step towards me. “Are you even breathing, though? What’s life if you don’t *live* it?”

Anger heated my blood. “That’s so easy for you to say. You don’t know what it’s like. To constantly look over your shoulder. To wonder if the person you love most in the world is going to show up and shove a knife between your ribs.”

Brody jerked at my words, but he kept moving forward until he came to a stop a breath away from me. “You’re right. I don’t know what it’s like to fear that way. But I do know that the answer isn’t to cease existing. Be safe, take precautions, but don’t sentence yourself to a slow death without human connection or the things you love most in the world.”

My eyes burned as if someone had filled them with acid. Tears spilled over, trying to soothe. “I don’t know how. This is what I’ve done for so long. I don’t know how else to keep myself safe. I’m scared to reach for something, only to have it stolen away.” Just like it had happened so many times before.

Everything I'd loved most, ripped right out from under me. Torn to shreds in front of my very eyes.

Brody reached out his fingers, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear before trailing his hand down my neck. "I'll help you figure it out along the way. You just have to take that first step."

My body hummed as I slowly and deliberately took a step towards Brody. Towards his strength and heat. Towards everything that was terrifying but oh so alive. "I don't want to hide."

His rough hands framed my face, his mouth the barest touch away from mine. "Been waiting for those words."

"Touch me," I whispered before I lost my nerve.

His eyes flared. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I want to know what it's like. With you." I wanted to feel what it would be to come alive under his touch. To lose myself in the rhythm of our bodies.

Brody didn't need any other words of encouragement. He lifted me in a flash, my legs naturally moving to encircle his waist. He climbed the stairs with a speed that made me dizzy. Each step he took created a delicious friction between my center and the hard planes of his body.

Striding into his bedroom, Brody came to a stop by the bed. Slowly, he lowered me, but his eyes stayed locked with mine as the movement sent little sparks through my nerve endings.

Part of me wanted to duck my head, to turn away from the intensity of the moment. But I wasn't going to do that anymore. I would be in the here and now. I would experience the moment fully. No more running and hiding. I would give myself a shot at this one wild and reckless life.

As my booted feet finally hit the floor, Brody's hands drifted up from my waist to the zipper at the back of my dress. He paused there, a silent question of permission. I brushed my lips against his. His fingers tugged at the clasp, and the sound of the zipper was like a cannon shot in the silent room.

I sucked in air as the movement came to a stop. This was the moment of truth. I took the smallest half-step back and let the fabric fall in a whoosh to the floor. I stood before him, this man who demanded my all, exposed but for my lacy underwear and boots. My nipples pebbled in the cool air and from the heat in Brody's eyes.

He drank me in, eating up every inch of skin with his gaze. "Never seen anything more beautiful. Not in a museum or on a gallery wall. Never and nowhere."

And as he closed the distance between us, his fingers skimming over my scarred skin, I felt that beauty blooming within me. A knowledge that I would always be that in Brody's eyes.

I stepped out of one boot and then the other. Brody tugged his Henley over his head, then the shirt beneath. I watched in fascination as his muscles bowed and flexed. Tanned skin seemed to glow under the moonlight streaming in through the window. I'd never gotten this. To watch and explore. I'd never wanted it.

He chucked one boot, then the other. His hands went to the button on his jeans, and I sucked in a sharp breath as he sprang free. No boxers or briefs, just him. The faintest thread of nerves traveled through me. It had been so long, and the one time I'd gotten up the nerve to have sex, it hadn't been enjoyable.

But I wanted this. To experience what had been described in books and shown on movies. I moved in closer, my fingers trailing up Brody's shaft, moving from base to tip. He hissed out a breath, and my gaze flew to his face.

There was reverence in his expression. A look I'd never seen before. "Been dreaming about your hands on me for months."

There was power in his words. Something that made me just a little fearless. My fingers grew bold, exploring. And I took note of each reaction in Brody's face, the set of his muscles.

His hands began an exploration. A thumb passing over my nipple through the thin lace of my bra. “Love you in this. How I can only see a hint of what’s beneath, but I can feel everything.”

I shuddered against his touch, pushing into his hand, searching for just a little bit more. Pressure. Friction. *Him*.

“What do you need, Shay?” His words had a slight growl to them.

“You.”

“You have me.”

In a flash, he lifted me, then tipped me back so I was flat on the bed. Brody’s jeans were gone, and all I could do was stare, drinking in every inch of his body. The man could’ve been a statue chiseled from stone, yet he had a fiery energy to him that would’ve exposed him as being alive the moment you got close.

Brody bent, reaching beneath me to unclasp my bra. He tugged it free, allowing his fingers to trail over my skin as he did. That barest touch sent sensation crackling across my skin, waking up every nerve ending with the promise of what was to come.

Brody’s thumbs hooked on the sides of my panties, dragging them down so slowly I thought I might scream. I lifted my legs as if to hurry him along, but I should’ve known that Brody wouldn’t bend to my silent demands.

“I’m taking my time. Looking my fill so I can commit this to memory. I’d paint your face just like this. Need coloring your cheeks. But I don’t want to share this view with anyone.” With one final flick of his wrist, he tossed the last bit of lace to the floor.

He pulled open the drawer in his nightstand and pulled out a small packet. I watched in fascination as he rolled the condom over himself, my stomach hollowing. Brody trailed his hands up my thighs, a finger dipping into my core. Teasing, testing. His eyes grew hotter, and my breath caught in my throat.

“I want to feel you.” The words didn’t even sound as if they belonged to me. They were from some stranger inhabiting my body. But I didn’t care one bit.

His tip bumped against my entrance. “You’re sure?”

“Please.”

He entered me in one slow stroke. My breath caught, my lungs stilling. The stretch, the fullness, the slightest bite of pain. Brody’s hand cupped my cheek. “Too much?”

“Perfect.” And it was. Everything about the feeling was what I needed to reinforce that I was alive.

As Brody slowly began moving, gliding in and out, every sensation melted, transforming into warmth and want. My legs hooked around his hips as my hands found his shoulders, his neck. Every movement I made begged for more, deeper. I wanted to feel him everywhere.

With one angle of Brody’s hips, he gave me just that. The hum that our bodies created together radiated to every muscle and synapse. I wasn’t sure I could take much more. I’d never felt this much all at once. And with a brush of his roughened thumb across my clit, I found I couldn’t.

All that sensation collapsed in on itself and then exploded out again, a shower of sparks from my very center cascading across the rest of me. Light danced across my darkened vision. And no part of me doubted that I was here. Breathing. Alive.

BRODY

MY FINGERS TRAILED up and down the bumps and ridges of Shay's spine. I wanted to commit every piece of this moment to memory. Burn it into my brain so I'd never forget. I'd never felt Shay so relaxed, so at peace. But each second that passed, a little more tension snuck back into her muscles. As if her body were trained to revolt against any kind of true closeness. Walls that had been in place for so long took time to break down fully.

I brushed her hair away from her back, trailing my fingers down her spine again. "Want to tell me what's going on in that head of yours?"

She didn't pull away when I asked, and that was a victory of sorts. Instead, she seemed to burrow deeper against my chest. "How do you always know when something's messing with my head?"

"Right now, I feel it. The slow tightening of your muscles. You were practically boneless thirty minutes ago."

She laughed. "And I think you know why that is."

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "So, tell me what's changed."

Shay let out a slow breath. "A million worries invading my brain."

I moved my hands to her head, massaging her scalp as if I could clear away those worries with my fingers. "Tell me about them. Sometimes, if you give them voice, they lose their power."

“I wish it was that easy.”

“Try.” I squeezed the back of her neck. “Tell me the biggest one right now. Go.”

“That he’ll hurt you.”

The words seemed to tumble out of Shay’s mouth before she could stop them. I froze. “That who will hurt me? Michael?”

She nodded slowly against my chest. “He’s done it before. Every time I got close to someone growing up, something bad would happen. A lot of times no one could prove it was him, but I always knew.”

“What do you mean something bad?”

Her fingers started tracing swirls on my pec. “When I was in fourth grade, and he was in third, a new girl moved to town. Jill. She and I really hit it off. We’d hang out at the playground every day after school. Michael would come with us most of the time. One day, I’d gone to get snacks from my mom, who always sat on one of the benches to read while we played. I heard a scream. We rushed back to the jungle gym, and Jill was lying beneath the monkey bars, screaming and crying. Her arm was so badly broken, the bone had pierced the skin.”

Shay swallowed hard as if she saw the scene right in front of her. “An ambulance came, and when they asked her what’d happened, she said that Michael had stepped on her fingers and she’d lost her grip. He insisted that it was an accident and started to cry. But when they loaded her into the ambulance, I looked at him, and he was smiling. On the way home, he said, ‘I guess she won’t be playing with us anymore.’”

I pulled Shay closer to me. I couldn’t imagine trying to wrap your head around that as a child. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s not the half of it. One friend I made, who was terrified of snakes, found one in her locker at school. Another had her bike smashed with a bat. At some point, I just stopped trying. It was easier that way.”

“But you were alone.” I wanted to erase it all. Every painful moment. I wanted to paint over her past so there was

no more hurt or loneliness. But I couldn't. And as much as I wanted to, those experiences made Shay who she was today. And that was a woman I was falling in love with. So, how could I wish her away?

"I was. But I got used to it. And once it becomes your normal, it's really hard to break." She tipped her head back so her gaze met mine. "It's not always that I even want to push people away. It's just habit. But with you...I'm scared. If anything happened to you. If Michael hurt you—"

"He won't." I pressed my lips to hers. "He doesn't know where you are. He has no clue who I am. We're safe here." Or as safe as we could be when there'd been a murder just ten minutes away. But I wasn't about to let my worries and fears fuel Shay's.

"I just want you to understand why it's hard for me. I've never been able to have this before. For a million different reasons. And it's hard for me to trust that I'll be able to have it now."

My fingers tangled in Shay's hair, tipping her head back. "You're going to have it all. Everything you want. A big, beautiful life full of friends and music."

"I hope you're right."

I knew I was right because I planned to make it so. I studied her face before I spoke. "Don't be mad..."

Shay grimaced. "Just the sentence every woman wants to hear."

I chuckled. "I hired a P.I. to do some digging into Michael."

Shay sat up, the sheets pooling around her waist. "You did what?"

I pushed myself into a sitting position. "I hired a private investigator. Someone who has done some incredibly sensitive work for Carson. I trust him implicitly. And I'm having him look into Michael. Keep an eye on things."

“You should’ve asked me first. This could lead him straight to you if he figures out someone’s watching him.”

I took Shay’s hand in mine, tracing circles on her palm with my finger. “I probably should’ve. But you were so locked up. I didn’t want to push, and I needed to know you were safe. That Michael was where he was supposed to be.”

“Is he? Where he’s supposed to be, I mean?”

“Dante ran surveillance last week. So far, everything adds up, but he had to leave for another job. I’m going to get him to do a deeper dive when he’s finished.”

“Brody,” Shay cut in.

I squeezed her hand. “I need it. I’ll have him check out Michael, and then I’m going to have him look into things on Anchor.”

Concern filled Shay’s expression. “You’re worried this person is going to kill again.”

My jaw worked back and forth. We hadn’t learned much about the murder that had taken place a few weeks ago, but the man that was killed didn’t have a shortage of enemies. Parker had filled us in that he was an avid gambler and a heavy drinker. He owed a fair number of people significant money. Parker’s working theory was that someone who wanted to kill the man had seen news coverage of my case back east and used it to cover up a revenge killing.

It was a fair theory, but something still had me on edge. Maybe it was simply because I’d been down this road before, and it had wrecked my life—and that of so many others. “I want to be sure. Having Dante look into things will give me peace of mind. And maybe it’ll give the same to you.”

Shay tugged her hand free of mine and framed my face. “How did this happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“What were the chances that you would decide to move here of all the places in the world? That you would buy the

island that I was working on? That I would find you. And that you would be just what I need?"

A burn started low in my gut. "Shay—"

She put a finger over my mouth and pressed her lips to my temple. "Thank you."

I SAT in one of the Adirondack chairs on the front deck and watched Shay move from the chicken coop to the greenhouse. It had been hard for me to let her go this morning. But she'd looked at me with a stern expression and told me that this shift in our relationship couldn't change her job. I understood that. She was holding onto a piece of normalcy she so desperately needed when the rest of her world was changing.

I'd give her that. So much of what she did was things she loved. The chickens, the gardening. I grinned as I thought about her cussing up a storm while trying to fix our generator. Maybe that wasn't her favorite. But I knew she took immense pride in mastering it. So, things would stay as they were in that arena. And I would just have to trust in the security system I'd had installed. And in the other measures I was taking.

I pulled out my phone and hit a contact from my recent calls. The phone rang twice before someone answered. "Dante."

"It's Brody."

"You've got good timing," he said, the growl of an engine turning over sounding in the background.

"Why's that?"

"I'm just leaving a meeting with the parole officer."

I sat up straighter. "You're in Seattle?" He was supposed to be booked up for at least another week.

"Finished up that job in Montana and something pulled at me to do another assessment of this guy."

“And?”

“Everything’s good on paper.”

My hand tightened around my phone. “Why doesn’t that sound like a good thing?”

Dante chuckled, but it wasn’t a particularly pleasant sound. “You’ve been in what amounts to prison for ten years. You just turned twenty-one and have your first taste of freedom. What would your first stop be?”

I had to think about it for a minute. “A good meal. A beer. Seeing the people I care about.”

“He hasn’t done any of that. I mean, he eats, but he doesn’t go to bars. Doesn’t get laid. Doesn’t see anyone from his old life. As far as I can tell, he goes to work at this computer help desk place and then comes home to his shitty studio apartment. He doesn’t see a soul. No calls to or from his cell, other than to order takeout. I don’t like it.”

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw. “This guy isn’t exactly normal. From what his sister has told me, he doesn’t have it in him to care about other people.”

“I know what you said. And I’ve been doing a little reading on the subject—the condition this guy has. Something tells me this is all a show he’s putting on for anyone who might be watching.”

And what the hell did I do with that information? Michael might be playing pretend, but the truth was that it didn’t matter. Not unless he knew where Shay was. “How do you feel about stepping things up?”

“In a way that might be slightly less than legal?” Dante asked, a grin in his tone.

“I need to know if he has any idea where Shay is.”

“I should be able to get to his computer while he’s at work. He doesn’t take it with him. Might be able to break into his phone search history as well if it’s linked to his laptop.”

It was exactly what I needed to breathe easier. “Am I gonna owe you hazard pay for this?”

Dante chuckled. “You’re paying me enough already. And something about this guy sets my teeth on edge. I want to make sure your girl’s safe.”

He’d called Shay *my girl* the first time we’d spoken, and I hadn’t corrected him. Because I’d wanted her to be. From the first moment I’d laid eyes on Shay’s gold-flecked ones, there’d been a pull. And it had only grown stronger. Now, I knew I had zero chance of breaking free. I was done for, and that was fine with me.

SHAY

PHOENIX26: *What does one wear to a BBQ?*

I drummed my fingers against the desk as I waited for E to answer. How had I gotten myself into this mess? A sexual haze, I realized. All Brody had to do was put his mouth on me, and I went stupid. And now, a bunch of virtual strangers were headed to Harbor for a barbeque.

Evergreen13: *Hold the phone. Are you going to be social?*

I scowled at the screen as if E could see me through it.

Phoenix26: *Don't be a smartass.*

Evergreen13: *But it's my native language.*

Phoenix26: *Are you going to help me or not?*

I didn't have long to get ready, and as usual, my options were limited. The weather had turned, spring starting to work its way through the islands. But when you lived on the water, that didn't exactly mean shorts and tank tops. I crossed to the dresser and pulled out my nicest pair of jeans. They'd have to do the trick. My computer dinged, and I looked back at the screen.

Evergreen13: *Jeans and a shirt that shows some boob. Give that man a peek at what he might get if he makes a move.*

I let out a snort of laughter and then grimaced at the chat box. I hadn't shared the latest update with E. With anyone. I felt like if I just kept it to myself, then I could keep him safe. If no one knew that I'd fallen in love with Brody, there was less chance harm would come to him.

Evergreen13: *You aren't responding...HOLY CRAP! Did you guys kiss? Tell me everything!*

I covered my face with my hands as if I could make her message disappear. When I peeked between my fingers, the entire screen was filled with ridiculous emojis.

Phoenix26: *There was a shift in the status of our relationship. But I really can't talk about it right now. I have to get ready in five minutes. Signing off.*

It was mean, leaving her hanging like that. And I would likely get an earful the next time we talked, but I wasn't ready to discuss Brody with anyone. At least not the intimate details.

I slipped on my jeans under my robe and moved to the closet in search of a top. I had a few button-down type shirts for when I had dinner with the Dowds when they were on the island. One of those would have to work. I settled on a pale pink one that I knew skimmed my curves. Putting that on, I gave my lips another quick swipe of gloss before checking my full reflection.

It seemed *normal*. But what did I know? Maybe all the women would come in sundresses, and I'd feel completely out of place. I pushed the thought away, chanting over and over in my head that everything would be fine. I checked my watch and knew that dragging-my-feet time was over.

I headed out of the guest room and down the stairs. Brody called out when he heard my footsteps on the hardwood floor. "I'm in the kitchen." I made my way towards the sound of his voice. He looked up from where he was popping the top on a beer. His dark eyes flared as he took me in. "Come here."

I arched a brow. "Ask nicely."

His lips quirked. "Come here, *please*."

"That's better."

I crossed to Brody, and he pulled me into his arms in one swift move. He brushed a strand of hair away from my face, his hand skimming down the side of my face to my neck, sending delicious shivers across my skin. His mouth brushed

mine. “You look amazing. I want to send everyone home so I can paint you.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.” I’d much rather have Brody on our island with me alone.

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “You’ll survive a dinner. I promise.”

“I might die of awkwardness.”

He chuckled. “You’re incredibly charming when you want to be.”

“You think I’m charming because we’re having sex.”

Brody’s fingers wrapped around a strand of my hair and gave a little tug. “I might be a little biased. But you did great at The Catch the other night. Had a whole evening of conversation.”

But that was different. There had been music and people slipping in and out of the discussions. I could’ve made an excuse to leave at any time. Here, I was trapped. Brody’s expression sobered. “You’re really nervous, aren’t you?”

“I’m not good with crowds.”

“I don’t know if this really qualifies as a crowd.”

“Eleven people is a crowd in my book.” I hadn’t been forced to talk to that many people since my recital days.

“Three of those people are kids, and one is a baby,” Brody said, his eyes dancing.

I widened my eyes comically. “Babies are the scariest of all. What if I drop her or she pukes all over me?”

“I promise to save you from all baby encounters.”

I brushed a hand over my forehead. “Phew.”

Brody pulled me closer. “I promise. I won’t leave you alone. Not until you’re ready.”

IT WAS HARD TO BELIEVE, but I was having fun. It hadn't been instant. The first hour the group of Caelyn's and Hunter's friends had been here, I'd been stiff as a board, and things had been awkward as hell. But Brody had kept his promise. He'd stayed by my side and helped ease me into conversations.

Caelyn's siblings that she and Griffin had custody of helped, too. The littlest one, Mia, had a million questions for me about my job and this island. It was mind-boggling to her that there was only one house on the whole place. She'd then taken it upon herself to teach me how to do a cartwheel. Once I'd mastered that, the spell had been broken, and I no longer felt out of place.

We'd balanced plates heaped with food on the arms of Adirondack chairs or the corners of a picnic table. I'd met Caelyn's friends, Kenna and Crosby, who'd brought with them their daughter, Harriet, who was just a few months old. I had to admit she was adorable. And she hadn't even puked on me.

They headed back to Anchor not long after dinner to put the baby down, but the rest of the crew stayed, pulling up chairs and blankets to a fire pit Brody and I had hauled out of storage earlier in the day. Caelyn passed out the makings for s'mores, stopping to help her two youngest siblings with their marshmallows and sticks.

Bell elbowed her fiancé, Ford, when he tried to force her marshmallow into the flame. "Stop it. I like mine golden brown, not charred to death like yours."

Ford chuckled as he pulled his out of the fire and blew the ignited marshmallow out. "You don't know what you're missing."

"Ashes," she retorted in a deadpan tone.

Hunter grinned. "How you two didn't murder each other before you got together, I'll never know."

Bell rolled her eyes. "Let's just say he's lucky to still be alive."

I burrowed deeper into Brody's side as I licked the last bit of chocolate from my fingers. The amount of love and

affection in the group was clear. Throughout the evening, I'd figured out that most of them had known each other their entire lives. They had a million inside jokes and fond memories.

I felt a pull in me as I watched them. A longing for something I'd never managed to have. True friendships. Ones where you knew everything about the other and could finish each other's sentences. But if I wanted that, I had to reach out. Let myself be known. Maybe tonight was the first step.

"So, when's the studio going to be finished?" Griffin asked as he pulled Caelyn into his lap.

Hunter set his beer on the arm of his chair. "Just a couple of weeks now. We're at the finish-work stage."

"Are you excited?" Caelyn asked Brody.

I could feel a flash of tension in his body before he answered. "It'll be nice to have a dedicated workspace again."

Ford glanced across the fire as if to check that the younger ones were occupied. Will, the oldest of the three, was shaking his head at his younger sister, Ava, as she tried to shove a marshmallow in his face. Ford looked back to the adults. "Did you hear that Parker brought Sam in for questioning for the murder?"

My body locked as I remembered the feel of Sam cornering me against the building. Not being able to move or breathe or get away. Brody pulled me tighter against him, pressing his lips to the side of my head. "You're okay," he whispered. "I've got you." I eased into his hold, letting his warmth clear away the coldness of the memories.

Hunter's hold on his beer tightened, his knuckles bleaching white in the firelight. "Everyone knows he and Billy have a history. I wouldn't have thought him capable of this." He glanced briefly at me. "But I was wrong about who I thought Sam was."

The murder scene flashed in my mind. The gruesome picture the murderer would've had to create. A memory of

Sam's sneer filled my brain, the dark glint in his eyes. He might very well be capable of it.

"Has Parker announced anything?" Brody asked, his hand rubbing up and down my arm.

Bell shook her head. "No. We've just heard gossip at the bar. It makes sense, though. Working here, Sam might've heard about what happened to you in New York, Brody."

Hunter winced. "He did. When we prewired the studio for security, Sam was asking a lot of questions. The next day, he came to work all jazzed to talk about what he'd found out about you and this serial killer. I told him to keep his trap shut, but that didn't exactly work out so well."

Brody laced his fingers through mine as if searching for comfort. And I would give him that anytime he needed it. I traced circles on the back of his hand with my thumb as he spoke. "It's not your fault. And what happened in New York isn't exactly a state secret. I just hope he didn't use it to get rid of someone he had a beef with and try to pin it on me."

"It seems like he has a vengeful streak," Caelyn muttered.

Bell nodded. "Remember what happened to his neighbor?"

"Shit, I forgot about that," Hunter answered.

"What are you talking about?" Ford asked.

Bell plucked up a graham cracker and proceeded to break it into tiny pieces. "It was before you moved back to Anchor. Someone called the sheriff's department on Sam when he had a loud party. Two days later, the neighbor's entire lawn had been bleached, and his truck windows smashed in. Not sure if anything else happened, but the guy moved."

It all sounded a little too familiar. The uncontrollable anger and rage. The belief that he should always get what he wanted for no other reason than he *deserved* it. The need for vengeance if anyone crossed him. It sounded like Michael. If Sam had those tendencies, Parker had his work cut out for him. I just hoped he could make a case before someone else got hurt.

BRODY

I SMOOTHED down the strip of tape, making sure the bottom of the box was secure before flipping it over. The last thing I needed was boxes of paint and supplies coming apart at the seams as I tried to bring things down to the new studio. My gaze swept the sunporch, and I groaned. It was going to take more than a day to pack all of this up. But the studio would be done and ready to move into tomorrow.

The sunporch had been good to me. Between its light and Shay's gentle pressure to continue painting, I'd finished a few more pieces in the last week alone. And the more people that had come into our lives, the more inspiration I'd gotten. But Shay was still my favorite subject. I didn't think I'd ever tire of exploring every part of her. Just when I figured out one facet of her, she'd reveal a whole new layer I never would've expected.

Like the fact that she had an advanced green belt in karate. One morning on the beach, I'd discovered her working through moves that had my jaw dropping, and she'd shared that little tidbit with me. I'd of course demanded that she perform some of the moves for me in the sunporch so I could paint her.

I was still perfecting the details of the piece, but it might have been my best work yet. Strong and powerful, yet full of delicate grace. I was finding a new truth in my art. A more realistic balance between the darkness that lurked below people's surface and the light. It led to work that was more vibrant than anything I'd done before. Richer.

For the first time in months, I had the itch to show it to other people. To see what they thought of the creations. It was a welcome relief that I hadn't lost the urge. But I knew I couldn't do it. Couldn't show the pieces Shay inspired, at least.

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw and thought about calling Dante for an update. Shay couldn't live like this forever. Locked away on a series of islands, never to set foot on the mainland again. She'd taken the first steps, but I knew if I pushed for more, she'd shut down.

My phone buzzed on my desk, and I crossed to it, seeing Griffin's name pop up on the screen. I hit accept, putting it to my ear. "Hey, Griffin."

"We've got a problem."

There was an edge to his voice that I'd never heard before. Griffin was gruff for sure, but this was something else, as if he were trying his best to hold back some rage burning through him. My hold on the phone tightened. "What's going on?"

"There was a body on the front porch steps of The General Store this morning. Caelyn found him when she went to open."

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Same M.O.?" I prayed that it wasn't. That, somehow, someone had simply had a heart attack at the store's door. It was a ridiculous hope. Juvenile and desperate, but I couldn't help it.

Griffin cleared his throat. "I don't know your work really, but I'd guess so. The body had snakes drawn all over it. A few real ones, too."

I instantly knew the piece he was referring to. It had been of a politician I'd met at an art show. Everything about the man had reminded me of a snake, even the way he moved. When I unveiled the painting, I'd gotten a lot of flak from his office, but it hadn't stopped me from putting it in a gallery show. Now, I wished I hadn't. If this piece weren't out there, maybe the murdered man would still be alive.

I gripped the edge of my desk chair so tightly, the plastic creaked and groaned. “I’m so sorry. Hell, I don’t know what I could even say to Caelyn to make this right—”

“Brody,” Griffin cut me off. “This isn’t your fault. Whoever did this is fucking with you, too. I’m calling to give you a heads-up, not because I blame you.”

The tension that had been thrumming through my body eased a fraction at his words. The community I was building here wasn’t one I wanted to lose. My friends in New York were great, and Carson would always be a brother, but everyone was so intricately woven into the art world. It was nice to have people in my life who were separate from that. It was more real somehow.

I cleared my throat. “Appreciate it, man. How’s Caelyn?”

He paused for a moment. “Freaked. Bell and Kenna are here calming her down before Parker talks to her. You might want to head over, get an update from him.”

I swallowed the bile that was crawling up my throat at the thought of being faced with yet another dead body. But I couldn’t ignore it or pretend it didn’t exist. This was happening no matter how much I wanted to will it away. “I’ll head over now.”

“Drive safe.”

“Will do.” I hit end on the screen and tossed my phone on the desk. Both hands went to the chair then. As if gripping it tightly enough would keep me from detonating. Memories flashed through my brain. The photos the NYPD detectives had shown me of the bodies they discovered. The twisted, gruesome scenes that had me losing my lunch in a garbage can in the interrogation room.

The detectives had been trying to get a read on me. Attempting to see if I could’ve been involved in the murders before my alibis had cleared me. They’d gotten their read, but the photos would live in my head forever. Taunting me. Turning to voices that asked if a dozen people would still be alive if I hadn’t started down this path to begin with.

It was a stupid question to let live in my brain, but I couldn't seem to stop it. Josiah Mosely would've found something to model his murders after. He didn't need my art. But the truth of that didn't seem to combat the lie that had made itself at home in my mind.

And now, it was all happening again. Whether it was Sam or someone else entirely, it didn't matter until they caught the bastard. Parker would save lives when he brought the bastard in, but I wasn't sure I'd ever recover.

The can of paint resting on my desk taunted me. The perfect shade of silver that I'd been using for the finishing touches on the painting of Shay moving through an arcing kick. I snatched it off the desk and threw it. It exploded in a cascade of shimmering color against the pale wall.

"Hey! What the hell is going on?" Shay asked, striding into the room, her face a mixture of disbelief and concern.

I couldn't find the words I needed, I simply pulled her into my arms with a rough tug and buried my face in her hair. The familiar scent of lavender and something uniquely Shay calmed my most feral edges. But it wasn't enough to numb the anger and pain.

She didn't pull away, just drew me closer, rubbing her hands up and down my back. "What's going on? Talk to me."

"Caelyn found a body at the store. It's not over."

Shay's body stiffened in my arms, but she didn't stop trailing her hands over my back. "Who?"

"I don't know." I hadn't even thought to ask. And what kind of bastard did that make me? I'd been so focused on how this affected me, but some family out there had lost someone.

I released Shay and stepped back, running a hand through my hair as I paced. "I don't know what to do. I'm not putting out any more art. I can't pull down every image from the internet, it would be impossible. I thought I'd moved to the edge of the world, but clearly it wasn't enough. Do I have to move to fucking Antarctica?" I gave the box I'd just put together a swift kick, sending it into the wall.

Shay caught my arm and halted my frenetic pacing. “Stop it.” There was a bite to her words I’d never heard before. “Don’t you dare let this bastard into your head. None of this is your fault. I refuse to let you spiral down a road that isn’t yours to walk. The only person who should be drowning right now is the person who killed those people. You’re a scapegoat, and you’re just letting him herd you into the role. Fight back, damn it.”

I watched in awed fascination as fury lit Shay’s face. The way it moved through her features and seemed to light up the golden flecks in those hazel eyes. *I love you*. The words almost tumbled out of my mouth before I pulled them back. Too soon. Too many other things going on. A million and one reasons kept me from giving those three little words the voice they deserved.

Instead, I pulled Shay into my arms and held her as tightly as I could against me. The feel of her breaths against my torso was soothing and calmed the things raging inside. “I’ll fight back.”

SHAY

I WATCHED as Brody guided the boat towards Anchor Island's dock. I could already see the assorted emergency vehicles and the crowd gathered near The General Store. But my gaze kept drifting back to Brody. As if I might be able to catch him before he spiraled into another cycle of self-loathing and blame.

I wanted to throttle whoever was doing this. For the loss of life, yes. But also because of what they were putting Brody through. They were eating away at the thing he loved most in this world. And I wasn't sure how long he could hold on.

We tied off the boat, neither of us saying anything, just moving in that quiet, tandem rhythm we'd developed over the past few months. We could predict each other's moves and speeds and knew just how to fill in where the other left an empty space.

Brody offered me a hand as I climbed over the side of the boat. As soon as our fingers linked, I didn't let go. I willed all the strength and reassurance I could muster through that single point of contact, pushing myself as close to his side as I could. We made our way towards the growing crowd. With each step that brought us closer, I felt more tension radiate from Brody's body.

Bell caught sight of us approaching and waved us over to where she, Griffin, and Caelyn were gathered, just outside what appeared to be a makeshift command station. Brody and I ducked under the crime scene tape and headed towards the group.

“I really thought this was over,” she muttered as we approached.

I took in Caelyn, who was wrapped protectively in Griffin’s hold, her face pale and eyes rimmed in red. “I’m so sorry, Caelyn.” The sentiment was completely lacking, but it was all I could think to say.

She tried her best to muster a smile. “I’m okay, really. It was just a shock. I’ll be fine.”

Griffin grunted something undecipherable, and I turned to Bell. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Kenna, Crosby, and Ford went to hang out with Will, Ava, and Mia. Caelyn didn’t want them to be alone.”

Understandable, given what was happening on this thirty-mile island. I wouldn’t want anyone I cared about alone either. Caelyn’s gaze drifted to Brody. “Are you doing okay?”

I wanted to throw my arms around my petite friend at the concern and kindness I heard in her tone. A little of the tension left Brody’s grip at her words. “I’m okay. I’m just so damn sorry you had to see that.”

The sheriff’s department had erected more of those sheet walls to prevent onlookers from viewing the scene on the store’s front porch, but I couldn’t help but imagine the sight. A mixture of what I’d seen a few weeks ago and the worst my brain could conjure. I shivered, and Brody wrapped an arm around me.

“Me, too,” Griffin gritted out.

Caelyn gave a little tug on the hem of his shirt. “I’m okay. No need for a grumpy giant.”

He scowled down at her but soothed the expression with a gentle kiss. “I’m not grumpy.”

“Just very scowly,” she said with a small smile.

The interaction had me taking my first deep breath since Brody had told me what’d happened. Caelyn would be okay. The next few weeks would be hard, but the images in her mind

would eventually soften and fade. She wouldn't be traumatized forever.

“What have you guys heard?” Brody asked.

Griffin looked away from Caelyn, even though it seemed to be a battle. “Not a whole hell of a lot. Sam was brought in for questioning yesterday, but they didn't make an arrest. No word on whether they're doing that now or not.”

“It seems like a pretty ballsy move to kill someone the same day you were brought in for questioning,” Bell said, looking towards the store. “Do you really think he'd do that?”

I doubted any of us knew for sure. The only thing I was certain of was that Sam had a darkness to him. One so similar to Michael's, I wanted to stay as far away from it as humanly possible.

Caelyn burrowed deeper into Griffin's hold. “I wouldn't have thought anyone on this island was capable of what I saw today.”

“Could be an outsider,” Griffin offered. “Tourists aren't out of the norm, even this early in the season. It wouldn't be hard for someone to slip in and out. And plenty of folks do long-term rentals for the spring and summer.”

God, I hoped Parker and his deputies caught whoever was doing this before months passed and who knew how many lives were lost. Just as the thought passed through my mind, Parker strode from behind the curtained wall and headed towards our group. He donned that impassive mask of professionalism, but Michael had taught me how to see what was just below the surface so I could try to predict when he might lash out. I could see hints of anger, frustration, and grief beneath Parker's blank expression. I wasn't a big hugger, but I had the sudden urge to wrap my arms around the man and tell him that everything would be okay.

He nodded to Brody and me as he approached. “Thanks for coming over. It saves me a trip.”

“Of course,” I answered.

“Is it the same?” Brody asked, not wasting a second.

Parker's jaw tightened. "We matched it to another painting of yours. This one isn't on your website, though."

"The politician?"

Parker nodded. "That's the one."

"I got a lot of grief from the subject's lawyers, and it wasn't worth keeping it up on my site. It was a part of a public gallery showing, though. I'm sure there are plenty of photos of it if you searched."

"I found it on the second search on my phone," Parker said.

Brody's hold on me tightened the barest degree. "Sometimes, I hate the internet."

Parker swiped a hand through his hair as he looked out at the crowd. "Don't disagree with you there. News of this is going to spread like wildfire."

I couldn't help the rush of panic that swept through me. Of course, this kind of thing would spread through a community quickly. But it would spread farther than that, too. Definitely state-wide coverage, possibly national. All it would take was me in the background of one photo for my hiding place to come crashing down.

I focused on the one touchstone I had at my disposal, the sound of the sea. I could just make it out over the din of conversation around us. The slow ebb and flow of the tide. Water lapping against the boats. I inhaled deeply, the scent of the salt air reminding me that I was safe.

Even if Michael did find out where I was, his fear of water would hopefully keep me safe. I held onto that knowledge with everything I had in me. My walls of water would protect me.

Brody's lips brushed the shell of my ear. "Are you okay?"

I tipped my face up to his, taking in his strong jaw and his dark eyes, the beauty of him and the reassurance of his presence. I didn't want to lose this. *Him*. And that meant I had to fight. But the enemy wasn't my brother, it was me. The fear

I'd let have free rein over my entire life, slowly eating away at my very existence. I'd already begun to battle it back. To reclaim pieces of who I had been so I could find out who I might want to be now. But I'd have to fight harder.

I pressed a kiss to the underside of Brody's jaw. "Just thinking."

He studied my face as if he could read every thought swirling in my head. "You're safe here."

"I know I am. I'm just trying to figure out a way to trust that."

Brody brushed the hair back from my face. "It's going to take time."

"I know." And in the interim, I'd simply have to live in the unknown and the uncomfortable. Know that the fear would try and battle me into submission, but that I would have to keep walking forward amidst it all.

My attention snapped back to the larger conversation at the letters, *FBI*. "What?" I asked.

Parker glanced in my direction. "I've got a consult with a profiler at the FBI. She's looking over the files I sent. If there's another serial murder, they may send a team. These cases are similar to the ones in New York, but there are differences, too. Printed copies of the paintings left behind to make sure we understood the connection. And the victims were both stabbed instead of strangled."

I swallowed down the bile at his last words, trying to shove away the memories attempting to take hold. I knew all too well what these victims had gone through. God, I hoped Parker would find some clue that would lead him straight to the killer's door and soon.

"Brody, she wants to talk to you," Parker added.

Brody pulled me tighter against him as if sensing my thoughts. "I'll do whatever I can to help. I'm going to have my tech people take down my website. I know it probably won't help, but at least it's something."

Parker shook his head. “Don’t. Agent Anders said not to change anything about your behavior, publicly or privately. It might provoke the unsub.”

Brody’s jaw worked back and forth. “I feel like I’m being held hostage by this psycho.”

“In a lot of ways, you are,” Parker said.

“The whole island is,” Griffin muttered.

Caelyn turned her gentle gaze to Brody. “But none of that is your fault. Don’t take this on. It’s not yours to carry.”

Brody’s gaze drifted to the porch of The General Store. “Easier said than done.”

BRODY

I SCOWLED DOWN at my phone as it rang on the counter. It was too early. I let it go right on ringing and took another sip of my coffee. I was in a foul mood, and I knew it. But waking up alone, the other side of the bed completely cold, did that to a man.

I'd gotten used to waking wrapped around Shay, starting my days by losing myself in her. And today I'd been robbed of that routine. She hadn't been in the kitchen when I came down either. I'd poked my head out the door and heard the chickens' happy squawks, which meant they'd been fed, but I didn't see any sign of the woman who'd turned my life upside down.

I took another pull of coffee when my phone started ringing again. I flipped it over to see Carson's name. I groaned and hit accept.

His face filled the screen. "What the hell, man? You ignoring my calls?"

"It's seven a.m., cut me some slack."

He grinned. "I know. Ask me how I know, Brody."

"Because you can do the simple math required to figure out a time difference?"

Carson gave an exaggerated pout. "Just because you're hung up on the caretaker and aren't getting any doesn't mean you have to be an asshole."

I hadn't talked to Carson in weeks, maybe a month, only trading texts here and there. He had no idea that things had

changed for me and Shay, and I wasn't about to let him in on that fact. But I should've known that he would ferret it out anyway. He'd known me for way too long.

"Wait a second. You don't have the hard-up scowl. It's something else... You tapped the caretaker!"

"Carson..." I warned in a low growl. "Don't talk about her like that."

A huge smile split his face. "Damn. It's serious. Pleased for you, man. But you're kinda stealing my thunder."

"And what thunder is that?"

"I'm in Seattle."

I straightened on my stool. "What?"

He spun around, giving me a view of the studio space he was in. "I got invited to do an installation piece here."

I caught a glimpse of more than a few sculpture elements Carson was already working on. "That's great. How long have you been in town? And why the hell didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"A few weeks, give or take. I wanted to get the work going before I made plans to come check out your new digs."

I winced. Now wouldn't exactly be the best time for Carson to come to Harbor. He'd want to hit up Anchor and Shelter, to check out every bar and restaurant. And with the increased press presence on the islands, I was trying to keep a low profile.

"What's wrong? You haven't given up island life and moved already, have you?"

"No, nothing like that." I spilled it all. Everything that had been happening over the past month. The murders, my call with the FBI, and Shay trying to stay under the radar through it all.

Carson let out a low whistle. "Man, you have some seriously bad luck. Are you holding up okay?"

I was starting to think that maybe I was cursed. “Things are calming down a bit now. Reporters are starting to leave. But the people who live here...we’re all waiting for the other shoe to drop. Might not be the best time to visit.”

Shay hadn’t left Harbor since the day of the murder. Reporters had begun arriving just as we were leaving, and we’d both known it was too risky. Griffin said that pretty much everyone had left now that a few days had passed and there were no new developments. But spending a bunch of time on Anchor or Shelter with Carson wasn’t a smart move.

“I get it. Maybe you can make a trip to the mainland. They set me up with a sick pad, and there’s a guest room just waiting for you. Bring your caretaker.”

I would’ve loved to take Shay to Seattle. Maybe take her to a nice restaurant or to a concert or gallery show. Have her meet Carson. But I doubted she was anywhere near ready to take that step. “I’ll try to figure something soon.”

“No rush. But, Brody?”

“Yeah?”

Carson’s expression had lost every bit of his typical cocky humor. “Watch your back, okay?”

“I will.”

I hit end on the call and dumped the rest of my coffee in the sink. Just talking about Shay had made me itch to lay eyes on her. I pulled on my boots and started down the path away from the main house. She wasn’t by the coop or in the greenhouse. I started towards the beach, thinking that she might be getting in a workout, but stopped when I heard music coming from the new studio.

Hunter and his team had finished the project and had helped me haul an endless number of boxes into the space. But I’d yet to unpack. No part of me burned to put the new space to work.

I moved towards the strains of an orchestral piece I didn’t recognize. Pulling open the door, I stepped into the space and

froze. It was completely unrecognizable from the disaster it had been the last time I'd stepped inside.

The wall of windows facing the sea let in a morning light that would've made every artist salivate. On either side of the windows were walls for storage. One had two long desks with built-in drawers. Bookcases and cabinets that had been empty three days ago lined the other. Now, my books and supplies filled them.

As I stepped forward to survey the shelves, I couldn't help but laugh. Shay had organized all of my books in alphabetical order by author name and arranged my spray paint in a perfect rainbow. I'd never had this kind of system in my life. My studio spaces had always been carefully controlled chaos.

I turned to the back of the space to see that the small kitchen was stocked, as well. Pulling open the fridge, I found all of my favorite beverages and a few snacks I liked. I turned to head up the stairs that led to a loft space I'd eventually use for an office but stopped when I saw Shay coming down them. Her hair was piled on the top of her head in some sort of crazy bun. And even though it was still chilly outside, she was stripped down to a tank top.

She let out a small squeak of surprise when she saw me standing in the kitchen. "Dammit. I wanted this to be a surprise."

My gaze traveled across the space that had been full of boxes just days ago. "It's safe to say I'm surprised."

She clasped her hands in front of her, not coming any closer. "I know I might have overstepped, but I just wanted you to have this space done. Not to have to worry about unpacking or dealing with a bunch of crap. I wanted you to be able to just walk in and create."

I crossed to Shay, pulling her into my arms. "You're pretty amazing, you know that?"

"I don't hate hearing it."

I swept my lips across hers. "I was grumpy this morning."

She ran her hands through my hair, her nails grazing my scalp in that way I loved. “Why?”

“I woke up alone.”

Her expression gentled. “I’ve had to sneak away whenever I could to get this done. I knew if I got up early this morning, I could finish.” She was quiet for a minute. “What do you think? We still need to decorate. This place needs some character. I was thinking we could go to Bell’s store, Second Chances, tomorrow and—”

I cut off her words with a kiss. This one was no gentle *good morning*. It was hungry and just a little bit desperate. Seeking and demanding at the same time. When I pulled back, Shay’s eyes were a bit dazed.

“Does that mean you like it?” she asked.

I chuckled. “Never had anyone care this much that I had the perfect space to create.” And just the knowledge of that had the itch to paint taking root in me for the first time in over a week.

Shay let her hands trail over my face as if she were trying to commit it to memory. “What you do is important. Not just for you, but for the people your work touches. I read a few posts from fans, and you make them feel understood, seen, not so alone. That’s art’s greatest gift. I don’t want you to stop giving it to the world.”

I stilled, each word hitting me like a blow to the chest. “I don’t want to stop trying to create those kinds of pieces.”

“Then don’t.”

My hand slipped under the hem of Shay’s tank top, trailing across her lower back. “There’s something I need to do first, though.”

Her breath caught. “What’s that?”

“Christen this kitchen.”

She squealed as I lifted her into the air, her legs wrapping around me. And christen it we did. I’d always smile when I looked at that kitchen counter.

SHAY

“SHAY...”

My name was part warning and part exasperated groan. I held up the antique anchor so that Brody could see it better. “It’s perfect. And I know just the spot for it.”

“You said that about the last ten things you picked up.”

My lips twitched as I tried to hold back my laugh. “The studio has a lot of empty space.”

Brody sighed. “And I like it that way. Leaves room for creativity.”

My shoulders slumped as I set down the anchor. “Fine. But I get to decorate the office space in the loft.”

“Deal. Now can we please get out of here? I’m starving.”

I stretched up on my tiptoes, pressing my lips to the corner of his mouth. “You’ve been a very good boy, and I promise I’ll reward you later.”

Brody’s dark eyes heated. “Never mind. I’ll stay as long as you want.”

I chuckled and lowered myself back to my heels, heading for the register. Bell looked up from where she was carefully packing our purchases into a few bags. “Find everything you needed?”

“More than we needed,” Brody grumbled.

Bell grinned. “You sound like Ford when I force him to go to an estate sale with me.”

Brody's gaze darted to me. "No estate sales. Please, no estate sales."

I held up both hands. "I promise, I'm done."

Bell handed two bags to Brody and one to me. "Maybe I'll get you to come with me next time."

"I'd like that." The words were out before I could reconsider the wisdom of them. And I found I *wanted* to go. Without realizing it, I had become a part of a community. And I was starting to have the friends I'd always wished I had. They might not know my deepest secrets, but they were starting to know me. The person that I was still discovering myself.

"Awesome. I'll text you whenever the next one comes around," she said.

I glanced at Brody and then back to Bell. "And you guys should come out for another barbeque. Maybe next weekend?"

"Only if there are s'mores."

"I'm doubling the supplies I got last time."

Bell laughed. "Like the smart woman you are. We're in."

We said our goodbyes and pulled on ballcaps and sunglasses before heading out to Main Street. The reporters seemed to have headed back to Seattle, but it was better to play it safe. Brody wrapped an arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer into his side. "I do believe you made social plans of your own free will."

"It's okay, right? That I invited them over?" I'd become so comfortable with Brody that I hadn't even considered I might need to ask for permission. But he was still my boss, and the island belonged to him, not me.

Brody scowled down at me. "Shay, it's your home, too. Invite whoever you want, whenever you want."

I relaxed a fraction in his hold. "I'm still not sure what the right balance is here. We're together, but you're still my boss."

He was quiet for a moment as if choosing his words carefully. “Do you like your job?”

“I love it.” I’d found a peaceful rhythm on the island that I’d never experienced before. A sense of purpose that was more healing than any of the therapy sessions I’d ever attended. Tending the land, the animals, the buildings...it gave me something I needed. Maybe it somehow proved that I could take care of myself, too.

“If you love it, then nothing needs to change. You know how to run Harbor better than I ever could, so it’s not like I’m actually your boss. I just sign your paychecks.”

I let out a soft snort. “Yeah, no big thing.”

Brody slowed to a stop on the sidewalk. “Does it bother you?”

I searched my mind, my heart, trying to be as honest with myself as possible. “At first, yes. But mostly because I was terrified that if something happened between us and it didn’t work out, I’d lose my perfect hiding spot. But now...I trust you.” It was as simple as that. I trusted the man of honor that Brody was. I trusted his heart. I knew he’d never be vindictive or cruel.

If things didn’t work out between us, I’d likely still have to leave. Not because Brody forced me to but because it would be too painful for me to be near him, knowing that he was no longer mine. But for once in my life, I was taking the risk anyway. I had no choice. The pull was too strong, and I wanted to reach for my happiness.

Brody’s free hand slipped beneath the fall of my hair, tipping my head back so he had better access to my mouth. His lips brushed against mine, then again. “Your trust is one of the best gifts I’ve ever been given.”

My throat clogged, and I swallowed the swirling emotions. Three little words were dying to escape, but I held them back. It was too soon. And it was a risk I wasn’t quite ready to take. “Don’t go making me emotional. It’s not very nice.”

Brody chuckled and guided me forward. “I’ll try to refrain.”

“Thank you.” I tugged him towards The Exchange. “I want to check the mail before we go.”

“Good idea. I’m supposed to be getting some papers from my lawyer.”

I pulled open the door to the shop. “Is everything with Lara okay?”

He held open the door for me to duck inside and then followed. “All’s calm on that front. She seems to have slunk away quietly.”

Brody’s brow furrowed as he spoke the words, and I had an urge to smooth the wrinkles that formed there. “You don’t trust that she’s gone away quietly.”

“It’s pretty unlike her. But then again, I’ve never struck back at her. Maybe she finally learned her lesson.”

I hoped that was the case. The last thing Brody needed was someone else turning his life upside down. Things around the island had been quiet for the past week, but everyone was still on alert. No killer had been found. People traveled in groups at night, and everyone locked their doors instead of leaving them open as they often did.

We pulled our mail from the boxes and headed back out to the street. As we walked towards The General Store, my steps faltered. I felt heat on my face, an invisible energy pouring into me. I glanced around and came to a halt as I caught sight of Sam across the street. His eyes locked on Brody and me, his gaze zeroed in on the place where Brody’s arm rested across my shoulders.

“Ignore him and keep moving,” Brody instructed.

I forced my feet to take one step and then another, but they were robotic, as if I’d never made the movements before. “Have you heard whether he had an alibi for the second murder?”

The quick movement of Brody's eyes told me that he had. I squeezed his side. "Don't hide things from me."

"Things have been good for the past few days. I didn't want to sour the mood."

He was right, things had been good. They'd felt lighter. As if the clouds had parted in the midst of a storm to give us a break. "I get it, but I deserve to know what's happening."

Brody pressed his lips to the top of my head as we rounded the store and headed for the dock. "You do. Griffin told me that Sam has an airtight alibi. And, unlike the first murder, he doesn't have much of a connection to the victim."

Disappointment flooded me, and on its heels, guilt. That I wanted Sam to be the one who had killed these men. Because it was somehow easier. Safer than some unknown person wreaking havoc on our little island. Bile crept up my throat, and I took slow, deep breaths to steady myself. By the time we reached the boat, my stomach had settled.

We set our haul of goods on the dock, and Brody climbed onto the Whaler so I could hand things over to him one at a time. As he stowed the bags below deck, I boarded. But my foot caught on a rope, and I stumbled, the mail in my hands sprawling across the deck. I muttered a series of curses that had Brody chuckling as he reappeared. "That's enough to make a sailor blush."

I scowled at the rope. "It was out to get me."

"They usually are." Brody picked up a few pieces of mail at his feet. "Here you—" He froze as his eyes zeroed in on a thick, padded envelope. "Hell."

My stomach that had calmed just moments ago was a riot of unease again. I knew without asking, but somehow I couldn't keep myself from giving voice to the question. "Michael?"

"I don't want you to open it. I know you have to, but it doesn't stop me from wanting to throw it into the water."

I crossed the boat, wrapping my arms around Brody's waist and pressing my face into his chest. The sound of his

heart, the feel of the beat against my cheek, it soothed. It didn't take away the anger and fear, but it did let me know that I didn't have to face those things alone. "I can handle it."

"I know you can. You're one of the strongest people I've ever known. But that doesn't mean I want you to have to handle it."

I pulled back, taking the envelope from his hand. "Better to get it over with." I tore at the seal before Brody could try and stop me. Pulling the paper free, I scanned the words.

Sissy,

You never wrote me back. You used to write me all the time. Visit, too. What changed? Did someone tell you lies about me? Aunt Georgie, maybe? Maybe I should pay her a visit and have a chat.

I hope you haven't forgotten me, replaced me with other friends. That would hurt my feelings, and I can't always control myself when I'm angry. See you soon, sissy.

Love,

Michael

My stomach twisted painfully. I'd have to call Aunt Georgie and warn her. She'd moved out of state once she knew that Michael would be released, but she needed a heads-up regardless. My gaze focused in on one sentence. "*I hope you haven't forgotten me, replaced me with other friends.*"

I tipped the envelope again, and a broken violin bow fell out. It could've been any bow, but I knew what it was meant to reference. He'd even etched my name into the side. Since I was eight, my parents had started getting me personalized bows. I could still hear the snap of wood when Michael broke one. The flash of anger. The sting of a blow when he saw me enjoying my music too much.

I battled the fear. Concentrated on the sound of the water. The smell of the salt air. Brody's arms around me. I didn't want to let my brother win. But he already had a foothold.

Brody cursed and pulled the paper out of my hand, shoving it into his back pocket. “You don’t need that shit in your head.”

But it was already there. Michael had made a home in my brain from the time he could speak. Maybe before. Sometimes, it felt as if he knew my mind better than I did. My hand fisted in Brody’s shirt. “It’s like he can sense when I’m happy. He has a radar for it. And if he wasn’t the one who made me that way, he’ll do anything to destroy it.”

If Michael knew about my new friends, playing violin at The Catch, the barbeques and shopping trips, he’d rip them all away. But if Michael knew about Brody...he wouldn’t stop until Brody was dead.

BRODY

I WATCHED as Shay shut down. Felt powerless as all the light in her eyes, those dancing golden flecks, simply drained away. I steered the boat towards Harbor. I wanted her home. Our home. Where I could hold her in my arms and tell her that everything would be okay.

But I wasn't so sure it would be. She'd have to be free of Michael first, and I wasn't sure how that was possible. It wasn't enough for him to have stolen her parents. To leave her with physical reminders of the loss that she had to look at every day. Reminders of the pain he'd carved into her flesh.

I gripped the wheel harder in one hand as I slowed our approach, easing the boat alongside the dock. Shay moved with a robotic air, helping me tie off the vessel and grab the bags and other supplies. She was completely silent as she walked up to the house. Not a sound passed her lips as we put the groceries away.

When we were done, she looked at me without actually meeting my gaze. "I'm going to work on prepping the garden beds."

"You're not going anywhere."

She bristled at my tone. Good. Frustrated and angry was better than this zombie who'd been staring back at me for the past hour. She glared in my direction. "Is that an order from my boss?"

"It's an order from the person who cares about you." But *care* wasn't the right word. I was so much more than that.

“The person who hates that every ounce of life slipped from you as you read that note. The person who wants you to *fight*.”

The annoyance fled from Shay’s face, replaced by what I could only describe as bone-deep sorrow. “I don’t know if I can. I want to. But I don’t know how to even start. And everything just seems so pointless. Hopeless.”

I crossed to Shay, framing her face in my hands. “You were already doing it. Reclaiming little pieces of your life. Your music. Friendships. Me. I see that fear taking hold in you, telling you to give all of those things up. Don’t listen.”

“How do you know?” she whispered, her mouth a breath away from mine. “It’s like you can see inside my brain.”

My mouth curved the barest amount. “Because I’ve felt the same. And every time I wanted to let my art go, you were right there, forcing me to keep going.”

Shay’s eyes glistened. “I sound like a bit of a bossy bitch.”

I chuckled and pressed my mouth to hers. “It just so happens that’s exactly what I needed.”

She ran her hands through my hair, her nails grazing my scalp. “Does that mean you’re going to be putting your studio to good use?”

“You wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“No. I wouldn’t. What you do is too important.”

A pleasant burn swept through my chest. If I never sold another painting, it wouldn’t matter. I’d paint for Shay alone. The way she saw my art, how she understood without words what I was trying to say, it was priceless. “I’ll get in there tomorrow.”

She smiled. “I’ll make sure you have a beautifully decorated office for whenever you need it.”

I groaned. “No more shopping.”

“I promise I’m done... For now.”

I let my hands trail down Shay’s neck to her shoulders and then her arms, tugging her closer to me. “Are you going to

fight?”

“I’m going to fight.” She pressed her lips together. “I just wish I could know for sure what Michael is up to. I think it would help.”

I was quiet for a moment, trying to decide the best way to confess what I needed to share. “I might be able to help with that.”

She blinked up at me. “How?”

“I talked to Dante.”

She tensed. “What did he say?”

I rubbed a hand up and down her back. “That Michael’s playing by every rule exactly.”

Her gaze traveled over my face, searching. “Why do I get the feeling you think there’s more to the story?”

“Both Dante and I feel it’s too perfect. Michael never takes one step out of line. Not that we’ve been able to see.”

Shay traced a finger in circles on my shoulder. “He’s incredibly good at mimicking whatever behavior he believes will get him what he wants. He always has been.”

“Dante’s been keeping a close eye, but he can’t watch him twenty-four-seven. And he has to leave Seattle for other jobs occasionally.”

“So, who knows what he’s been up to in the times Dante doesn’t have eyes on him.”

I hated that I couldn’t give her more reassurance. That I couldn’t take away every ounce of anxiety and fear that lived inside Shay, tearing her apart, piece by piece. “I can see about getting another guy on the job. Maybe between the two of them, they’ll catch something.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Why?”

“The more people you put on this, the more likely Michael is to notice. He’s always had a sixth sense about that stuff. He

knew when our parents had been in his room and went through his stuff. He knew when a guidance counselor was keeping an eye on him.”

She sighed. “And, honestly, Dante’s probably not going to give us anything that helps. Not unless he catches Michael in the act of something that would put him back in prison. One of two things is going to happen. Either something will trip Michael’s trigger, and he’ll explode. Or he’ll keep his dark side under wraps. Neither changes how I live my life right now. I have to hope that if I don’t engage with him, Michael will eventually get bored and give up. It makes me a horrible human being for even thinking it, but maybe he’ll find someone else to fixate on.”

“That does not make you a horrible human being. You’ve lived with his shadow for so long, it doesn’t make you a bad person to want a break away from it.” I pressed my lips to her forehead. “Proud of you.”

She gripped my shoulders tighter. “I have to figure out a way to keep stepping forward amidst all the unknowns. I’ve done everything I can to protect myself. But you’re right. None of those precautions are worth it if I stop living.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help you keep going. It might be into a giant unknown, but you won’t be alone.”

Shay pressed a palm to my chest. “I’ll be with you when you step into those scary places, too. I know it’s different. But I’ll support you every way I can.”

She already did. Sitting for me when she didn’t want her face publicized anywhere. Letting me into her world of music when she’d kept it locked away for so long. Never letting me give up on the thing that had been the most important in the world to me. Until Shay snuck in and stole that spot. She poked and prodded but never judged. She listened to the silence and understood me better than anyone ever had before.

I cupped her jaw as I stared at the golden flecks dancing in the sea of green of her eyes. “I love you. Your strength and empathy. Your determination and fire. The way you see things in me no one ever has. I know it’s soon, but hiding the truth

doesn't feel right either. I've been holding onto those words for weeks, and I need you to know they're yours."

I was stepping into the greatest unknown there was. Not knowing if I would send her running for the hills. Or if this could last. But I couldn't imagine my life without Shay, and I needed her to understand that.

Nothing but silence greeted me.

SHAY

HE LOVED ME. The words Brody said ricocheted around in my brain, snowballing from one emotion to another, gathering them all up in a mess I might never be able to untangle. “You can’t love me,” I whispered.

His brow quirked, but there was pain in his eyes. “Why not?”

It was a stupid thing to say. But some tiny part of my mind had decided that if we didn’t say the words aloud, I could keep Brody safe. That if those three tiny words were never uttered, he wouldn’t be at risk. My eyes burned and filled. “I want to keep you safe.”

“Hell,” he muttered, pulling me into his chest so his strength surrounded me. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. Or you, either.”

The tears came faster, my chest shuddering. “I love you, too. I didn’t want to say it because if we say it, then it’s real. And if it’s real, you become the person Michael would want to hurt most of all.”

Brody held me tighter against him. “Not letting those words free doesn’t change anything. The truth still exists. That love is still there. Nothing’s going to erase it.”

“I know.” For a normal woman, one who’d had a typical childhood, who’d dreamed of the perfect man, a white dress she’d walk down the aisle in, his words would’ve been a dream come true. But for me, someone whose past meant that she’d had to hide every single thing she even remotely cared

about, it brought ice-cold fear. The kind that froze everything inside of a person and made it impossible to move.

“Caring about someone doesn’t make you weak. It makes you stronger. Those feelings give breath and life.”

He spoke the words against my hair, his lips grazing the strands. I tried to take them in, grab hold and anchor myself to them. To the hope that our love could make me more powerful than I ever had been before. “I want to believe that. But everything I’ve ever loved has been ripped away and out from under me. Either destroyed or twisted beyond recognition.”

My parents, gone. My aunt, someone I couldn’t even see in person for fear it would lead Michael to either of us. I’d lost friends, my cat, any toys that I’d seemed to especially love. Everything just...gone. And if things like that happened enough, you stopped reaching for the stuff you wanted.

But, somehow, I’d reached for Brody. I hadn’t meant to, but the invisible pull had been too much. My fingers had itched to touch him from the moment I’d laid eyes on him climbing off that boat. My soul had called out for his the first moment I’d seen his paintings. The threads that tethered us to each other weren’t anything I could sever, even if I’d wanted to. I’d have to trust that they could withstand whatever life might throw at us. And that included Michael.

Brody slipped a hand under the hem of my t-shirt, the heat of his palm chasing away some of the ice-cold fear. His thumb swept back and forth across my skin. “You’re stronger now. There are people who have your back. We’ll fight with you.”

I tried my best not to let my body stiffen at his words, but I was only partially successful. “I don’t want anything to happen to any of you.”

“It won’t. And the more people who know what’s happening, the better. We’ll have more eyes. Only those you trust.”

When I searched my mind for who landed in that category, there were more than I would’ve thought possible a few years ago. Caelyn and Griffin. Bell and Ford. Hunter. And even

though I knew them less, Kenna and Crosby. They were in that circle simply because I knew they were in Caelyn's and Bell's trusted circle. Maybe it was time to let people into the life I'd left behind. Let them in to help me fight for the future I wanted. "Okay."

Brody pulled back slightly. "Okay?"

I nodded. "I think you're right. It's time to stop holding onto so many secrets. If I'm constantly worried about hiding, I'll never be free."

He tugged on a strand of my hair. "Wise."

I shook my head but smiled. "I might've heard it once or twice from this incredibly stubborn man I know."

"Stubborn, huh?" Brody released his hold on my hair, his hand going to my waist.

I moved in closer, my body pressing against the hard planes of muscle in his. "He's pushy, too."

"Demanding?" he asked, the hand at my waist slipping under my t-shirt.

My breath caught as his fingers traveled up to the lace of my bralette. His thumb swept across my nipple and everything in me tightened. "Definitely demanding."

His thumb circled the peak, teasing and toying. "Sounds like he'd be hell to live with."

"It certainly provides a fair number of challenges."

In a flash, my shirt was whipped over my head, and I grinned. "You gonna take me upstairs?"

Brody's lips twitched. "I don't know, I've become pretty partial to kitchen counters." My blood heated at the reminder of our christening of the studio. "You want our bed?"

Our bed. I loved that he thought of it that way. I nodded. "More room to move."

"I do like that." Brody lifted me, my legs going around his waist as he dropped my shirt to the floor. He took the stairs quickly, the door to the bedroom banging against the wall.

Slowly, he lowered me to the floor, his hands going to my face. Everything in his expression spoke of love, reverence.

I swallowed against the burn in my throat as my hands went to his stubbled cheeks. As if my fingers could memorize the planes of his face. They traveled down his neck to the collar of his shirt. I tugged, and Brody lifted his arms to aid me in my work. Golden skin greeted me, and I soaked up every edge and curve I discovered. It was hard to believe that this man was mine. Giving himself freely and wholly to me. And wanting me in return.

Brody unbuttoned his jeans, shucking them, having already kicked off his shoes. I started to go for the button of my jeans, but his hands stilled me. “Don’t. That’s my job.”

I arched a brow. “Oh, really?”

“You can’t rob me of the pleasure of peeling you out of your clothes. Like unwrapping a damn present.” His fingers deftly unfastened the clasp and slowly pulled down the zipper. Each millimeter, the unhooking of each tine, seemed to send an echo of sensation through me.

Brody took his time as he pulled my jeans and panties down my legs. The drag of his knuckles across my skin created a cascade of sparks across my thighs, burrowing in somewhere deep, stoking a fire that had lit the moment Brody’s lips swept across mine. He lifted one leg out of my jeans and then the other, tossing them to the side.

I was completely bare to him, wearing nothing but that little bralette. I fought the urge to cover myself. But I wasn’t hiding anymore. Certainly not from Brody. He’d proven time and again that I could trust him—with everything. My body. My heart. My soul.

He pushed my legs farther apart, and before I could think about what he was doing, his tongue flicked out, delivering the barest tease to my clit. I sucked in a sharp breath, and Brody grinned at me, his hooded eyes sparking. He circled that bundle of nerves, never giving me quite what I needed but continuing to drive me higher.

It wasn't long before I was ready to beg. "Please," I said on a hoarse whisper.

"What do you need? I'm enjoying myself right here."

And he seemed it. As if he'd be content with teasing me for hours while my fingers left nail marks in his shoulders. I let them dig in harder. "You. I need you."

Brody hissed as I released him. "You have me."

"Show me."

In a flash, he had me on the bed, my back against the mattress, and my face so close to his I shared his breath. I couldn't resist reaching up to touch, the pads of my fingertips skating across his rough stubble. He entered me on a slow glide, my eyes falling closed for a brief moment. I never wanted to lose this. If I could only hold onto this memory, remember what it felt like to be with him in every way, everything would be okay.

"I love you, Shay."

His words danced across my skin, digging deep and making a home in my flesh, my heart. My eyes fluttered open. "Love you." Those two syllables were stuttered with the strain of holding back, but when Brody's eyes flared, I let go. My hips rose up to meet his, urging him on.

Soon, we lost ourselves in the rhythm that was only ours. Bodies bowing and flexing. With each tilt of his hips, Brody hit that spot deep inside me that sent shudders through my system, my walls tightening around him. He muttered a curse and drove deeper. My heels dug into his ass, spurring him on.

I wanted him as deep as possible. Needed him to plant himself there so I never lost the memory of this moment. What it was to be loved and wanted with feral desperation. To go just a little bit crazy with the need for another.

"Don't close your eyes," Brody said, demand in his voice. "Need to see those golden flecks shatter."

I fought against the urge to let them shut again as my back arched. I locked on to Brody's dark, swirling orbs. How the

dark brown could glow, I had no idea. But they held me captive, and I had no choice but to stay right where I was. With him. The tether between us locked tight as the world shattered around us. My ears rang, and flashes of light danced across my vision. But I never lost sight of Brody as it happened. And I knew that no matter what came our way, I never would.

SHAY

I CURVED into Brody's side as we watched the flames dance in the fire pit. Griffin tossed another log onto the pile. "The kids wouldn't stop begging for one of these after the barbeque at your place."

Caelyn smiled as she tugged him down into the chair next to her. "More like you're a pushover, and the second any of them say they might want something, it magically appears."

Ford chuckled. "You've got it bad."

Bell arched a brow in her fiancé's direction. "Seriously?"

Hunter tried to hide his snort of laughter behind his beer. "And you don't?"

Ford leaned over and brushed his lips against Bell's. "I've got it the worst."

Brody and I had been invited over for what Caelyn had called *family dinner*. It had been a blast, with more food consumed than I would've thought possible, a raucous game of soccer, and then s'mores. Kenna and Crosby had just left to take their little girl home, and the kids had gone inside to watch a movie. Now, only the seven of us were left, enjoying the fire and the company.

It seemed that it had happened. I kept stepping forward into that terrifying unknown, and suddenly I had a group of friends. Ones that invited us over for family dinners and made me feel incredibly welcome.

Hunter tipped his beer towards Ford. “Don’t forget, Mom wants us at the house at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Ford groaned and sent a pointed stare at his fiancée. “I blame you for this decorating bug she has.”

Bell pressed her lips together to hide her smile. “All you have to do is paint a room. It’s not that bad.”

“For the fourth time in the past three months,” Ford groused.

Bell shrugged. “At least the room isn’t that big.”

“Then you paint it.”

“Sorry, Cupcake. I have to work tomorrow,” Bell said, taking another sip of her beer.

He looked to Brody and me for help. “Tell me, when does family obligation run out? On the fifth request for repainting? Or the tenth?”

My chest gave a painful squeeze at the question. It was a harmless comment, but I couldn’t seem to control the pain it left in its wake. The knowledge that my parents would never hound me into doing something that was the last thing on my list. I wouldn’t whine and complain about having to get up early on a Saturday to do it. Because they were gone.

Ford winced. “Oh shit, I stepped in it, didn’t I?”

He must’ve been able to read the grief on my face. The rest of the group clearly could too if their looks of sympathy were anything to go by. I gave my head a small shake. “No. It’s—” I was about to say that it was nothing, but that wasn’t how I was living anymore, from lie to half-truth. I didn’t need to hide from any of the people around this fire pit.

Brody’s hand found mine and gave an encouraging squeeze. I soaked in every ounce of strength I could from the palm-to-palm contact. “My parents were killed. It’s been a long time, but every now and then, something takes me by surprise.” I gave Ford the best smile I could. “It’s not your fault, really.”

“I’m still sorry,” he muttered.

Griffin cleared his throat. “I know how that is. It can be a sucker punch to the gut.” I nodded, remembering that he’d lost people close to him also. “But the good stuff can pop up, too. Can’t have one without the other.”

I gripped Brody’s hand harder. “You’re right.” I didn’t do enough remembering the good. It was too easy to push it all down for fear of something sending me into a spiral of fear and panic. “My mom would’ve been right with Ford and Hunter on the redecorating train. She always went all out for every holiday. I swear she even made a little display for Flag Day.”

Caelyn reached over and squeezed my knee. “I’m really sorry you lost them.”

I swallowed against the emotions trying to crawl up my throat. “Thank you. I am, too.” My heart hammered in my ears as if the organ lived there. “It was my brother. He killed them.” The group went completely silent. The only sounds were the crackles and pops of the fire. “He tried to kill me, too. It’s why...” I searched for the right words to explain without having to reopen every wound. “It’s why I try to keep a low profile.”

“He’s not in jail?” Griffin asked, his voice hard.

“He was only eleven when it happened. He got out a few months ago.”

Caelyn gasped. “Shay. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine.”

I took a sip of my soda. “He’s very sick. But good at pretending he’s not.”

Bell leaned forward, her blond hair glowing in the light of the fire. “What can we do?”

My eyes burned. I pretended it was from the smoke of the fire. But deep down, I knew the truth. They burned from the tenderness of the offer. And because I was the one who had kept myself from this kind of support for so many years. By keeping my distance from every single person who had offered friendship.

Brody seemed to sense the battle within me, the way he sensed everything and pulled me closer against him. “You’re not shutting people out now.”

I nodded and met Bell’s gaze. “He doesn’t know where I am. But if someone ever asks about me in town...” My blood chilled at the thought. “Let me know.”

“Of course,” she said.

Ford wrapped an arm around Bell’s shoulders. “We’ve got your back. Whatever you need, just let us know.”

Caelyn patted my knee. “Anything. Just say the word.”

Hunter nodded. “No one’s going to hurt you here. We look out for our own.”

And I was one of theirs. A member of this pieced-together family. One that wasn’t linked together by blood but by choice. And wasn’t that the greatest gift of all?

Brody steered the conversation away from serious topics and back towards the everyday. We talked about plans for the summer. Beaches to visit and hikes to take. Caelyn shared plans for the island’s Memorial Day parade. How the kids would all participate, and the fair that took place afterwards.

In the three years I’d been here, I’d never attended. Even when the Dowds had gone. But this year, I vowed to go. I’d watch the adorable little ones make their way down Main Street. And I’d stuff my face with funnel cake. I’d hold Brody’s hand for the whole town to see and kiss him under the starlight. I’d soak up every beautiful experience this place had to offer. And I’d do it, knowing I had friends who had my back.

BRODY

I CARRIED a stack of plates into the kitchen. Hunter, Griffin, and Ford all eyed the family room where the girls had gone to join in on movie night with the kids. I could hear an occasional giggle and squeal as something took place on the screen.

Hunter took the top plate from my stack, rinsing it and placing it in the dishwasher. “You want to give us the full rundown? Tell us how we can help?”

I should’ve known they wouldn’t let such a huge revelation pass without further discussion. I wouldn’t have either, not if the person affected was so close to Shay. I strained my neck to see into the family room. Little Mia was in Shay’s lap as they watched kids fight pirates on the screen. I didn’t think Shay would mind if I shared more. She’d shown tonight that she trusted these people. And, God, I was proud of her for taking that step.

I turned back to Ford and Griffin. “Her brother’s mentally ill. A conduct disorder with callous and unemotional traits. I’ve done a little digging on it, and that’s the politically correct term for a psychopath. They’re hesitant to dump that term on kids.”

Griffin grunted. “Understandable. He ever get treatment?”

“From what I’ve gathered, their parents tried over and over to get him help. Psychologists and psychiatrists. Medications and behavioral therapies. He was hospitalized repeatedly. And they had just found an in-patient treatment facility before their deaths.”

Ford leaned against the counter, shaking his head. “What happened?”

I knew more of the details from what Dante had found as opposed to what Shay had shared. I got it. I couldn’t imagine how painful it would be to relive those moments. What she’d seen and experienced. The swift punch of rage took me by surprise. I understood that Michael was ill, that he couldn’t control his actions. I even had some empathy for the boy and the man. But it didn’t drown out the rage.

I gripped the edge of the counter as I leaned against it, pouring all of that anger out into my hold, my fingertips screaming from the pressure. “Shay had been at a violin recital. Her parents had stayed home to talk to Michael. To tell him about the new program he’d be attending. Cops learned later that Michael had already known about their plans. Overheard his mom talking to the intake doc on the phone. He planned everything.”

It was hard for me to understand how an eleven-year-old boy could have that kind of capability, but Michael McCabe clearly did. “Their mom had a prescription for anti-anxiety meds. He crushed some up and put them in the parents’ drinks. As soon as they started to feel the effects, he began. The father tried to make a run for the phone, but Michael caught him in the hallway with a knife. They weren’t able to get a total tally on the stab wounds, there was so much rage.”

Griffin muttered a curse, his jaw flexing.

“Then Michael came back to the kitchen. His mother was trying to drag herself to the hallway, towards her husband’s screams. He killed her right there. That’s where Shay found her. She slipped in the blood on the tile floor.”

I could see it in my mind as if I were there. Even though I had no idea what the house looked like and hadn’t seen photos of her parents. I wanted to be able to stop Shay before she ever reached the front door. To whisk her away so she never had to experience what came next. “Michael caught her in the kitchen. They don’t know how long he had her, but she had over thirty stab wounds and cuts. The houses in their

neighborhood were set far apart, but a neighbor across the street had gone outside to take out his garbage cans. He heard a scream and called the cops. The sirens sent Michael running. He thought she was dead.”

“How’d they catch him?” Ford asked, his voice rough.

“He was just swinging in a nearby park. Covered in blood. Knife in his hands. He went with them willingly.”

“Holy hell,” Hunter muttered. “How do you ever get over that?”

“You don’t.” Shay would live with those memories forever, and there was nothing I could do to erase them. But even though I couldn’t take them away, I could fill her life with good things. So many happy memories that the bad ones would have less space to live.

Ford ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe they let someone like that out.”

“Me either.” If it were up to me, Michael would be locked up for the rest of his life.

Griffin straightened. “Be honest. Do you think he’s going to come after her?”

“I truly don’t know.” If there was ever one answer I wished I had, it would be that. But there were too many unknowns. “I put a P.I. on it. So far, Michael’s staying on the straight and narrow. All a little too tidy in Dante’s opinion.”

“But he doesn’t know where she is, right?” Ford asked.

I nodded. “He’s good with computers. He tracked her to a PO Box she set up back east but hasn’t made it past there. She gets mail from that box forwarded here. He’s sent her a few letters.”

Hunter’s eyes narrowed. “Threats?”

“Nothing outright, but they’re definitely weird. And Shay says they’re his version of threats.” I would never understand the language the two of them shared, but I trusted that Shay knew what she was talking about.

Ford shifted on his feet. “That’s why she took the job on Harbor, isn’t it? She can live with no trail.”

“Yup. And, apparently, her brother’s afraid of the water. Refuses to get on a boat or anything.” And as messed up as it was, I’d be forever grateful that Shay had been forced to take that job. Because it had brought her to me.

Hunter let out a low whistle. “So, she’s safe. As long as she stays here.”

I hoped she was. “I’m not taking any risks. Now that you know, we can all keep our eyes open.”

“You can count on it,” Ford said.

Griffin grunted in agreement. “I never would’ve thought we’d be keeping an eye out for a psycho brother and a murderer on our tiny island.”

“The world is going to hell,” Hunter muttered. “Even our little corner of it isn’t untouched.”

“Any updates from Parker?” Ford asked.

Everyone shook their heads, and I echoed the movement. “We saw Sam in town the other day. If his glare was anything to go by, Shay and I should both be dead.”

“He might not be the person who killed those folks, but he’s not exactly a good dude, either,” Griffin said.

Hunter’s jaw clenched. “Well, we all know now. That’s twice I haven’t seen the truth about someone so close.”

Ford slapped him on the back. “It’s not your fault.”

Hunter shrugged off his hand. “I gotta get going, early morning tomorrow.”

I watched as he headed for the front door without saying goodbye to anyone else. I looked back at Ford. “What was that about?”

He slumped back against the counter. “We had some trouble a ways back. Someone stalking me and Bell, trying to hurt us both.” Ford paused for a moment as if struggling to get

the words out. “It turned out to be one of Hunter’s best friends. He kidnapped Bell, and we almost lost her.”

“Shit, man. I’m sorry.” My words seemed more than lacking, but what did you say to something like that?

“It all worked out in the end, but Hunter still carries that weight. And what’s happened with Sam just stirs up all that guilt.”

“None of that is his fault,” I argued.

“No shit,” Griffin added.

Ford turned back to the sink and the pile of dishes. “I just wished he saw that.”

Movement flashed from the corner of my eye. Soon, arms wrapped around me, the scent of lavender filling my senses. Shay burrowed into my side. “You ready to head back? I was starting to fall asleep in there.”

I pressed my lips to the top of her head. “Sure.”

Griffin grabbed a set of keys from a little rack. “I’ll give you guys a ride.”

We said our thank yous and goodbyes and headed for the marina. The drive was mostly silent, which seemed to be Griffin’s preferred state. But thoughts of all the scars that everyone in this group of friends seemed to carry swirled in my head. It just went to show that no one made it out of this life unscathed.

Shay and I waved to Griffin as we headed to the boat. The skies were pitch-black, but the docks were well-lit. It didn’t stop me from being on high alert, my gaze swiveling back and forth.

Shay slipped her hand into mine as we approached the Whaler. “You okay?”

I nodded, placing a quick kiss on her temple. “Fine. I had a good time tonight. You?”

She climbed over the side of the boat, moving immediately to one of the ropes. “Me, too.” She paused for a moment,

looking up at me. “It’s nice to have friends. I’ve never really had them before. Not people I truly felt like I could be open with anyway.”

I crossed to Shay, wrapping her in my arms. “You took a big step tonight.”

She tipped her head back so she could meet my eyes. “It felt right.”

“I’m glad.”

She traced a finger over my lips. “You feel right, too. Like it was always meant to be you and me.”

My chest constricted. “I feel it, too.”

Her hand fisted in my shirt. “Thanks for sticking with me.”

“Always.” The single word was a vow. She just didn’t know it yet.

SHAY

EVERGREEN13: *Well, it's about time! I thought that man of yours might've kidnapped you and locked you in a dungeon. I guess that might not be a bad thing, though...*

I almost choked on the sip of coffee I'd taken. I carefully set the mug on the island counter before I typed out a response.

Phoenix26: *Sorry I've been MIA. Things have just been busy.*

I hadn't said a word to E about the murders that had taken place over the past couple of months. Not because I didn't trust her, but because I didn't want her to worry. E could be like a mama bear if things were going poorly in my life.

Evergreen13: *You never have to apologize. I'm glad life is so full that you haven't had time to be online as much lately.*

She had a point. It wasn't just the bad that had kept me away from our chats. It was how much *good* had been taking up my time. I'd gone to an estate sale with Bell, did some cooking with Caelyn, and Brody and I spent every moment we could manage together. His studio storage was filling up with new paintings, and I sat for him at least a couple of times a week. Those sessions always seemed to end with some surface of the studio being explored in a whole new way.

Phoenix26: *Things are good. I'm making friends. Even told some of them about Michael.*

There was no response for a moment.

Evergreen13: *Are you sure that's wise? Do you know them well enough?*

I took a moment to fight back the anxiety that wanted to grab hold of my insides. I was moving forward, and that meant I had to take a few leaps. Bell's and Caelyn's kind understanding told me that I'd made the right choice. They had both checked in after the night at Caelyn and Griffin's farmhouse. But neither had pushed. They had simply given me gentle reassurance that they were available if I ever wanted or needed to talk.

Phoenix26: *If you met them, you'd understand. They're pretty amazing.*

Evergreen13: *Sorry, my paranoia can get the best of me sometimes. It's good that you're letting people in. I'm proud of you.*

I was proud of myself. Stepping into that great unknown had brought nothing but change for the better. I was even considering playing at The Catch again this weekend. The bluegrass band wanted me to consider playing with them regularly.

Phoenix26: *Thanks, E. How are things with you?*

Evergreen13: *Same ol' same ol' here.*

Somehow, even through a computer screen, I could sense that E was holding something back.

Phoenix26: *What aren't you saying?*

E sent a picture of someone sighing.

Evergreen13: *Always have that sixth sense, don't you? I'm just wondering if it's time for me to face some stuff that I've been avoiding.*

I didn't know E's full story, only bits and pieces. But I knew that staying away from her family had been priority number one for a long time.

Phoenix26: *Family stuff?*

Evergreen13: *Isn't it always?*

Sometimes it felt impossible to make peace with that kind of hurt. How could you, when the one who'd caused you pain was someone you'd loved all your life? I certainly hadn't mastered how to hold both sides of those emotions when it came to Michael. Instead, I always seemed to seesaw back and forth between love and hate, fear and longing.

The longing was the worst. Because I wasn't nostalgic for some moment in my past. It was a vicious yearning for something that had never existed. A family where I didn't live every moment on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and the monster to appear.

The more time I spent with Caelyn and her family, the more I saw what I'd missed. The casual ease with which they experienced everyday life. Sure, there were fights. I'd seen a knock-down-drag-out one between Mia and Ava when Mia had gotten some glitter paint on Ava's drawing. But underneath it all was a love you could feel, and a shared empathy. Michael simply wasn't capable of that.

I gave my head a little shake, bringing myself out of my musings and back to the conversation with E. She'd been there for me through so much, and I wanted to give her the same.

Phoenix26: *Is there anything I can do? Want to talk it out? We can video chat.*

Evergreen13: *I appreciate it, I really do, but I need to wrap my head around some stuff before I talk about anything.*

Phoenix26: *I'm here whenever you're ready.*

Evergreen13: *I know you are. Let's talk soon.*

We said our goodbyes, and I logged out of the chat. My fingers drummed against the counter as I took another sip of coffee. Days like today, I wished E was just a boat ride away so that we could have these conversations in person. Maybe then she'd be more likely to open up. I'd have to talk to her about considering a visit to Harbor. I was sure Brody would be fine with having a guest. Even if it meant our studio sessions would be restricted to just painting.

I smiled down into my mug. My skin hummed just thinking about it. Brody hadn't even stirred when I'd left him in bed this morning. A late night leaving him dead to the world. But I couldn't shake my early-bird routine. And the chickens would be making a fuss soon if I didn't get going.

I took the final swig of my coffee and headed for the coop. I fed the girls and collected their eggs, leaving the basket just outside their enclosure to grab when I finished my morning chores. I made my rounds in the greenhouse, paying special attention to the seedlings I'd started that would soon be ready for planting in the larger outdoor garden. Our growing season wasn't long, so I made the most of it, fitting as many things as possible in the rows of soil.

I headed out of the slightly stuffy greenhouse and towards the water. I hoped I could convince Brody to take the first kayak trip of the season. If we were lucky, we might spot a few orcas and some other creatures. He'd seemed a bit skeptical about taking out the skinny watercraft, but I had a feeling I could bring him around, even if it took a little bribery.

I walked down the worn path, hopping over the familiar roots and rocks. Just as I was about to turn to head down to the beach and the boat shed, my steps faltered. Something was on the dock. I started towards it without thinking, jogging down the steps. When my feet hit the planks of the dock, I froze. The form was familiar, *too* familiar.

I screamed. My feet tripped over each other in a battle to get away from the sight that seemed to draw closer. But I couldn't right them. I couldn't do anything but scream.

BRODY

A SCREAM PIERCED THE AIR. One that spoke of sheer terror. My steps faltered for the briefest of moments as if they were still headed towards the studio as planned, but the rest of my body was already moving towards the sound that had sent birds soaring into the air.

A million and one thoughts flew through my mind as I ran down the path. Not a single one taking hold as my gaze jumped from the ground in front of me to the water and back. I had to keep myself from tripping over one of the exposed tree roots or logs. But I had to get to Shay. As fast as my legs could carry me.

I tore out of the woods and down the steps to the dock. She was scrambling up the steps and wound up to level a punch to my gut before recognizing it was me and stopping herself.

“What is it? What happened?”

She jolted as I wrapped my arms around her, my eyes and hands searching for injuries. Her arm shook as she pointed towards the end of the dock. I froze. Another crumpled form lay on the wood. I slowly pushed to my feet, trying to get a better view.

I knew the image in front of me too well. Except it belonged on a canvas, not in real life. At first glance, the woman looked like she could pass for Shay. Dark brown hair, petite frame. But her eyes were too clouded over with death to tell if they had been hazel. Some sort of vine wrapped around her body, the same way I had painted Shay in the greenhouse.

But the vine around this woman's neck wasn't a sign of vitality. It was how she'd been killed.

Her neck was mottled with deep bruises that stood out in contrast to her pale skin. I had no idea if the woman had been fair in life as Shay was, or if death had taken her natural hue. But beneath her pallor were a number of stab wounds. I fought the bile that crept up my throat and turned back to Shay.

She was staring towards the end of the dock, but her focus seemed hazy as if she were looking but not really seeing. I stepped between her and the body, crouching low. "Come on. We need to get out of here."

Shay nodded woodenly as I guided her away from the body. She trembled as she moved, and anger flooded my bloodstream. Shay was one of the strongest people I knew. A normal person would've collapsed under the weight of what she'd been through. But Shay had always stood strong amidst whatever storm came her way. To see her shaking now broke something in me, releasing a potent mixture of rage and concern.

As quickly as possible, I guided Shay up the steps and towards the studio. Once we were inside, I locked the door and set the alarm, then guided her towards the couch that had been delivered just days ago. I wrapped a blanket around her shoulders as if that could ward off all the memories I knew were likely flashing through her mind.

She sat frozen on the leather cushion, her gaze still with that hazy quality to it. I pulled out my cell phone and hit Parker's contact. It rang twice before he answered. "Raines."

"Parker, it's Brody. I've got a dead body on the end of my dock."

Parker let out a litany of curses. "I'm on my way. A team will be just behind me. Are you safe?"

"We're in the studio, locked up tight. But I didn't see anyone."

"Okay. You stay right there until I come get you."

“Understood.” For the first time in my life, I wished I’d had training with a firearm. Maybe it was time to look into that. I was sure there must be a range on Shelter where I could learn the basics.

I crossed back to the couch, slipping my phone into my pocket. I eased down next to Shay. “Parker’s on his way.”

She let her grip on the blanket loosen, the material falling from around her shoulders. “Did you see the stab wounds?”

“I did...”

“They’re just like mine, Brody. On her torso and right arm. Nowhere else.”

Everything in me froze. I couldn’t manage to get a single word out.

Shay looked towards me, but her eyes were as empty as I’d ever seen. “What if it’s him? What if it’s Michael?”

“There’s no way...” But what were the chances that this victim who looked so much like Shay would have the same wounds? “We have to tell Parker.”

“I know.” She was silent for a moment before speaking again. “I’m sorry I lost it. I just—”

I framed her face with my hands. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I’m not weak.”

“Nothing in me thinks you are.”

Her hands gripped my forearms. “I studied self-defense for years, completed firearms training, did so much therapy I lost track, all so I’d be ready if something bad happened again. Instead, I lost it. I could barely focus.”

I swiped my thumbs back and forth across her cheeks. “You looked like you were about to level me with an uppercut before you realized it was me. You handled yourself better than you think.” I struggled to get the words out, thinking about what might’ve happened if the killer had still been there.

I swallowed in an attempt to clear the tightening in my throat. “What you saw...it was horrific. Give yourself a little grace.”

Shay let her head fall forward so that our foreheads rested against each other. “What’s happening?”

“I wish I knew.” But all I could think about were the stab wounds. The ones so similar to Shay’s. The woman who looked as if she could’ve been her sister. I wrapped my arms around her, needing to know that she was safe and breathing.

I wasn’t sure how long we stayed like that before a knock sounded on the door. “It’s Parker,” a voice called from outside.

I reluctantly released Shay and pushed to my feet. She followed. My gaze swept over her face. “You okay?”

“No. But I’ve made it through worse not being okay.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “We’ll get through this, too.”

“We will.”

I crossed to the door, disarming the alarm and flipping the deadbolt. When I pulled it open, I was greeted by a pissed-as-hell Parker. He was usually good at hiding his emotions, but the set of his jaw alone gave him away today. “Thanks for coming.”

He gave a jerky nod. “You guys okay?”

“We’re fine, really,” Shay answered.

Parker glanced back towards the dock. “I’m having my team dock by the beach. I don’t want anything contaminating the crime scene.”

“Do you need anything from us?” I asked, wrapping an arm around Shay’s shoulders.

“I’m going to need you to walk me through everything.”

“Come inside,” Shay offered. “I’ll make us some coffee.”

She moved to the small kitchen, seeming to do a little better now that she had a task. Before long, she was pouring three cups and handing them out. We settled in the small

sitting area, Shay and I on the couch, and Parker in the overstuffed chair.

He took a sip of his drink. “Thanks for this, Shay.”

“Of course.”

He turned his focus back to me. “You discovered the body?”

Shay’s hand went to my thigh, an unconscious search for comfort. “No, I did.”

We walked through the events of the past few hours with Parker jotting down notes in his phone as we talked. “And neither of you saw any signs of someone still lurking around? No boat, no nothing?”

“Nothing—” My words cut off as I stood immediately. “The cameras. I have one set up at the dock, and it’s equipped with night vision.” I led them up the stairs to my office. Logging into my computer, I opened the security software Griffin had helped me install. Before long, I was rewinding through the dock camera’s footage.

The video was black and white, which limited things, but any information was better than nothing. Soon, the static image of the dock changed. The body appeared. Then another figure dressed all in black.

“Damn it,” Parker muttered. “He must know you have cameras.”

Whoever this was, knew a whole lot of things they shouldn’t. The figure, wearing a ski mask, crouched over the body, arranging the woman in his perverse art form. My muscles locked as I watched him move, invading my space and darkening the sanctuary I’d built for myself, the one Shay had held onto for years. “That gives us a clue, doesn’t it? Not many people know I put security in here.”

Parker met my gaze. “I know you’re new to a small community, but you’d be surprised how quickly word gets around. From the order for the cameras you put in at the hardware store, to whoever did the install, probably half of Anchor knows what you’ve got cooking over here.”

I muttered a curse under my breath. “Small-town gossip.”

Shay laid a hand on my shoulder. “There’re good and bad things about living here, just like everywhere. But I think the good heavily outweighs the bad.”

I glanced up at her, my gaze full of everything I didn’t want to say with Parker present. She was right, and I needed that reminder. This asshole wasn’t going to steal the beauty we’d built here. The life that was so much richer than anything I’d had before.

Parker cleared his throat. “This, at least, lets us know that the suspect is male. A rough gauge of height and weight. I’ll have my techs come in here and make a copy of the footage.”

“Sam fits the build. You’re sure he had an alibi?” I asked, keeping a close eye on Parker for his reaction.

“He did. He was drinking at Maverick’s all night. One of my deputies saw him, and at least a dozen other folks. You have any more trouble with him?”

Shay’s grip on my shoulder tightened. “We saw him on Anchor a week or two ago. He wasn’t happy to see us.”

“That’s the understatement of the year.”

Parker’s jaw worked. “I’m sorry he’s still giving you trouble.”

Shay looked in my direction and then back at Parker. “There’s something else I need to ask you.”

“And that is?”

“Were the stab wounds on all of the victims on their right arm and torso?”

Parker’s expression went blank. “How’d you know that?”

Shay slowly slipped off the long-sleeved flannel she had on over her tank top. As she let the shirt drop to the sofa, Parker sucked in an audible breath. Even from a few feet away, he could see the long scars crisscrossing her arm. Shay did her best not to look away. “They’re on my torso, too.”

“How?” Anger lit Parker’s features as if he would take down whoever’d done it.

“My brother, Michael. He killed my parents and tried to kill me. He got out of a prison treatment program a few months ago. He’s in Seattle.”

Parker straightened in his chair. “He contacted you?”

“He’s sent some letters, but I have my mail forwarded through several post office boxes. I didn’t think he knew where I was but...”

I heard every word she wouldn’t say. Every doubt rising to the surface. Every fear.

“Does anyone else on the islands know about this?” Parker asked.

Shay shook her head. “Only Brody and our friends. I guess someone could’ve seen something that I didn’t realize. But I doubt it.”

Parker looked at me. “What about these paintings?” He pointed to a half-finished piece that clearly portrayed Shay’s scars.

“No one’s seen—” I had to stop myself mid-sentence because people *had* seen them. The construction crew had been in the main house more than a few times for lunch or to use the internet. Any of them could’ve mentioned something in casual conversation.

“Someone could’ve seen them,” Parker surmised.

“It’s possible, but they had to have gone out of their way.”

“I’ll do some casual questioning and get a feel for if they’ve seen something they shouldn’t have.”

I pulled Shay closer against me, needing every point of contact possible. “I’ve had a P.I. on Michael. So far, everything’s been on the up and up. But this might change things. I can put you in touch with him.”

Parker pulled out his phone and began tapping out notes. “That would be great. And I’m going to have to question

Michael—”

“No!” Shay cut in. “If it’s not him, if this is someone else, he’ll know where I am.”

I rubbed my hand up and down her arm. “She’s right. You can’t expose her.”

Parker stared down at his phone. “I’ve got a friend in Seattle PD. I’ll call in a favor. Have him do the questioning, and I’ll go along in plain clothes. We’ll start with getting an alibi. If he has one, we can drop it there. If he doesn’t, then we may have to bring him in. It’ll be tougher to keep him in the dark then.”

“Please try.” Shay’s voice shook as she spoke, and I had the sudden urge to deck Parker.

“I’ll do everything I can to help keep you safe.”

I just hoped it was enough.

SHAY

I COLLAPSED onto the couch in the living room, Brody following close behind me. I didn't think I'd ever been so tired in my life. Drained in every way imaginable. The sheriff's department had been here all day. But Parker had left immediately after our conversation, returning hours later with the news that my brother had an alibi for all three of the murders. He'd been playing a video game where you were on camera for two of them and was on his employer's security camera for the other.

The entire day had been trying, to say the least. And the conversations with Parker had stirred up memories that I wanted to keep buried deep. I kept waiting for relief to set in at the knowledge that my brother wasn't involved in this, but it never came. I was just as on edge as I had been this morning. Maybe simply because I knew my hiding spot might not stay hidden for much longer.

Parker was a good man, an empathetic one. Someone who'd moved into his career because he truly wanted to help people and keep them safe. He'd said that he would do everything he could to keep my name out of the reports, leaving me anonymous for now. But when and if this case went to court, my days of anonymity would be over. There was no way around it.

All of a sudden, I felt as if there were an invisible countdown clock hanging over my head. I wanted nothing more than for this killer to be caught and brought to justice. But what would I do when that happened? Would I have to

leave? Find somewhere else to tuck myself away? It was the last thing I wanted.

Brody tugged at me, taking us down so that we were flat on the couch, my body on top of his. “You doing okay?”

“This has been a no good, very bad day.”

He brushed the hair away from my face. “I want you to think about something for me.”

I searched his face, looking for any hint about what might be to come. “I can think.”

His mouth curved the barest amount, but it didn’t stay put. “Think about leaving with me. We can go anywhere you want. Italy, Australia, the UK. Let’s get out of here until the dust settles.”

I stiffened against him. “You want to leave?”

His roughened fingertips skated along my skin. “I want to keep you safe. I want you to be able to live freely, not looking over your shoulder every second.”

“I don’t want to run away.” I didn’t want to leave these islands. As much as I’d used Harbor and Anchor for a hideout, they’d also become my home. I’d built a life here. One I’d be giving up if I took off for somewhere halfway around the globe. “This is my home.”

Warring expressions flashed across Brody’s face. Ones that spoke of pride, frustration, and a hint of fear. “You’re ready to fight.”

“I’m not going to give this place up.” It had given me too much. It was where I had truly healed, where I had begun to live again for the first time in decades. Something in the sound of the water, the scent of the air, brought me immeasurable peace. And now that I thought about it, I couldn’t imagine making my home anywhere else.

Brody pressed his lips to my temple. “Then we stay. But we stick together. And that includes all the chores you’ve got going on every day. I don’t want you alone.”

I arched a brow. “That means you, too. No sneaking off to the studio alone if you can’t sleep.” More than once over the past couple of months, I’d woken to an empty bed when I turned over. The next morning, there was always a new canvas in the works.

Brody’s lips brushed the side of my face, moving closer to my ear. “It’s no hardship staying in bed with you.”

His tone had all my nerve endings waking up, as if he were calling to each and every one. My hand slipped under the hem of his t-shirt, exploring the ridges of muscle. I wanted to commit each dip and curve to memory, how it felt to be pressed against him.

Brody’s hand curled around my neck, tilting my head back to give him better access to my mouth. His tongue tangled with mine, deep and searching and just a little bit desperate. And when he pulled back, he was breathless. “Need you, Shay.”

“You have me.” And he did. Mind, body, and soul. I’d never thought I would be able to give myself fully to someone. To show them all of me—the scars and dark corners. But Brody had come along, and from the moment I’d laid eyes on him, the pull had begun. This invisible tether that seemed to unravel all the walls and barriers I’d erected over the years.

It was a slow and steady tug, one that I hadn’t recognized right away. And when I *had* noticed it and had one of my freak-outs, that unwavering pull just continued. It kept right on going until Brody had it all, every last piece of me.

My thumb swept across his lips. I couldn’t imagine a greater gift. To have someone see all the things that you were terrified to show the world and still love you. And not just in spite of them, but because they were a part of you. “Love you,” I whispered.

With a growl, I was suddenly flipped over, Brody hovering over me. “You know what it does to me when you say that.”

A giggle escaped me. “It’s a hell of a reaction.”

Brody's mouth was on mine again, desperate and feral. He only broke away as we tugged clothes free, both of us needing to be skin to skin. I'd lost any inhibition with regards to Brody seeing my scars. They were simply a part of the canvas of my skin.

One hand cupped my breast as Brody pushed inside me. A small mewl slipped from my lips, and my eyes fluttered closed. Nothing could compare to this feeling. So full. Not complete. But as if I were me yet...more.

My eyes opened to find Brody staring down at me, his gaze full of reverence. "You're so damn beautiful. The way your eyes flutter and your cheeks turn pink when I'm inside you. The way your back arches to bring you closer to me." He began to thrust deeper. "Never want to forget it."

I knew it was only a matter of time before some erotic painting showed up on one of Brody's canvases. My mouth curved at the thought. Just as long as it didn't end up on an auction block. I sucked in a sharp breath as Brody hit that spot deep inside me, the one that sent shudders echoing through every muscle.

"There it is," Brody rumbled, driving deeper.

My fingers dug into his broad shoulders. The frenzied need in me to have him fully would surely leave marks on his skin, but I couldn't find it in me to care. The only thing that existed in that moment was Brody and me and the frenetic energy between us. My legs hooked around his hips, heels digging into his ass. My back arched. Everything in me searched for release.

"Come with me." It was both an order and a plea. And I obeyed. Brody let out a muffled curse as he thrust one more time. But I was already gone, spinning out into spirals of light and explosions of color.

Brody collapsed, turning us so that I was lying on top of him again. We slowly came back to ourselves, Brody trailing his fingers down the ridges of my spine. My breaths began to even out, my lungs no longer desperate for oxygen. "I'm pretty sure I passed out for a second there."

Brody chuckled, and the sensation sent little shocks through me. When my walls tightened around him, he groaned. “Don’t do that. You might actually kill me.”

I grinned down at him. “Wouldn’t want to do that. I kind of like having you around.”

His lips ghosted across my temple. “You should know by now, you’re stuck with me forever.”

A warm hum of energy spread through me. Because nothing in this world sounded better than that.

BRODY

A CLUMP of weeds and dirt hit me in the chest. “Hey, what was that for?” I barked.

Shay picked up another ball of detritus from her bucket and chucked it at me. “That’s what you get for making fun of me.”

I side-stepped her weed missile. “Come on, you have to admit that playing music for plants is a little ridiculous.”

Shay huffed. “It’s scientifically proven to help them grow. There’s also been research that if you say nice things to them, they’ll do better.”

“That’s what you were doing when I came back from the shed, wasn’t it?”

She blushed. “It doesn’t hurt to tell them what a good job they’re doing.”

I wanted to scoop Shay up and steal away back to the house for an hour or two. She was just too adorable. I needed to lose myself in that for a while. But when I looked around at the mess that was the garden, I knew I’d be shot down. We’d moved into what Shay had deemed her gardening months, and everything else came second.

I kneeled and began searching for weeds. “Where’d you hear this stuff about music and sweet nothings for plants, anyway?”

Shay smiled. “Evergreen. She knows a ton about that stuff. And when I was drowning, not sure if I could handle this job,

she walked me through a lot of things.”

“Has she agreed to come and visit?” I was more than a little curious to meet the woman who had helped Shay so much over the years.

“She said things are too busy at work right now, but maybe in a couple of weeks.” Shay rested back on her heels. “You know you can go paint, right?”

My fingers were itching to get something down on paper or canvas. I hadn’t done nearly enough of it over the past few weeks. And whenever that happened, I got twitchy. “I’m fine.”

She gave me a pointed stare. “Whoever it was is long gone. You know we’re safe.”

It had been three weeks since Shay had discovered the body on the dock. We’d been on high alert for days afterwards. But then another victim killed in a similar fashion to one of my older paintings had been found on the mainland. And just yesterday, a body had been discovered over the border in Oregon.

It should’ve eased something in me to know that he or she was moving farther and farther away. But it hadn’t. Everyone was still on edge. Constantly looking around for an unfamiliar face.

Shay sighed and moved closer to me. “Brody. I need you to go paint. At some point, we have to get back to normal. You can’t stay with me every moment of every day.”

She was right, of course. But when I thought about having Shay out of sight, something in my chest squeezed painfully. “You’ll just be in the garden?”

She leaned over and brushed her mouth against mine. “I’ll be right here. If I see anything even remotely out of the ordinary, I’ll scream my head off.”

“We need a dog,” I muttered. “A big, scary dog.” An almost wistful expression flashed across Shay’s face. “You want a dog?”

“I only had a pet once growing up.” Everything in her posture closed down. “It didn’t work out well.”

God, I wanted to hurt her brother. Even though I knew it wasn’t entirely his fault, I couldn’t help the rage that pounded through me. “But now you’d like one?”

“I’ve always wanted a dog. I kept saying ‘maybe one day.’ But I’m not really hiding anymore, am I?”

“No, you’re not.” Hair had fallen loose from her braid, and I tucked a strand behind her ear. “I bet there’s an animal rescue or something on one of these islands.”

The golden flecks in Shay’s eyes seemed to sparkle in the late-morning light. “There’s one on Shelter.”

My lips twitched. “You’ve already done your research, huh?”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s go this weekend. But no purse dogs.” We needed something that could actually be an early warning system.

Shay laughed. “Even you have limits?”

“Damn straight.” And a yapping fluff ball was one of them.

She kissed me long and slow. “Love you. Even if you don’t want me to get a purse dog.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She gave me a little shove. “Now go paint me something beautiful. I’ll meet you at the house at noon for lunch.”

I pushed to my feet, trying to ignore the twinge in my chest as I walked away. “Yell if you hear or see anything. Even if you think it’s just a critter.”

“Even if I think it’s a baby bunny,” she promised.

I didn’t let myself look back as I made my way to the studio. I was afraid if I did, I wouldn’t leave. But Shay was right. We had to get back to normal eventually. And the longer

I was on high alert, the harder it would be to let those instincts go.

So, I forced myself to the blank canvas in the center of my studio. It didn't take long for me to lose myself in the creation of something new. In Shay in her garden, singing to her plants. I was so consumed with the new piece that I jumped when my cell phone rang.

I snapped off my gloves and crossed to the table where my phone rested. I hit accept, and Carson's face filled the screen. "You're in the studio. Does that mean you're painting again?"

"I've got pieces piling up."

"You ready to show me?"

"Not quite yet." After everything that had happened these past few months, I wasn't ready to show anyone besides Shay a damn thing.

"That artist's temperament is back," Carson chided.

I scowled at Carson through the screen. "I don't have an artist's temperament." I'd seen some artists pull some ridiculous stunts over the years—pitching fits, going to extremes for privacy, the list went on and on. I was pretty damn normal on that scale.

"All right, all right. You're very well-adjusted. Feel better?"

"I do, thank you. Now, what's up?" I glanced at the clock on the wall. "I've got to meet Shay for lunch in fifteen minutes."

Carson waggled his eyebrows. "Shay, huh? How's my little caretaker doing, anyway?"

I let out a noise that sounded a whole lot like a growl. "She's not *your* caretaker."

A huge grin spread across his face. "Holy shit. You're in love. I never thought I'd see the day."

"We aren't talking about this."

“Fine. But get your caretaker and come to Seattle this weekend. It’s the unveiling of my installation. It would mean a lot to have you here.”

“Of course.” I’d been a crappy friend over the past year. It was a hell of a way to repay a person who’d always been there for me. “I can’t wait to see what you’ve been working on.”

Carson’s mouth twisted into some sort of grimace. “It’s nothing compared to what you can create, but I’m starting to find my way.”

“Don’t be dumb. Your work is amazing.”

Carson was always the toughest grader on his creations. The art world could go crazy for something, but he would still find parts that weren’t up to his standards.

“We’ll see,” he muttered. “Go have lunch with your girl. And text me when you know you’re getting into town.”

“Will do.” I hit end and headed for the main house. A trip to Seattle might be just what Shay and I needed. A true getting back to life and moving on. Eventually, the FBI would catch the copycat killer. And at some point, Michael would likely go back to jail or to a psychiatric hospital. We needed to move forward in spite of it all.

I pulled open the front door and headed for the kitchen. “Something smells good.”

Shay looked up from the frying pan on the stove. “Fancy grilled cheese.”

“What’s fancy grilled cheese?” I asked, moving in close so I could breathe her in, the scents of lavender and that hint of salt air soothing everything inside me.

“Aged white cheddar, turkey, and caramelized onions. With an arugula salad on the side.”

My mouth watered. “You spoil me.”

“Damn straight. And I expect to be rewarded.”

I trailed my lips up the side of her neck. “Oh, I’ll reward you.”

Shay shivered. “Not now, Romeo. Tonight.”

I chuckled, releasing her. “Fair enough. What can I do to help?”

“Grab us drinks from the fridge. I’ll take an iced tea.”

“On it.” I moved around the kitchen, grabbing what we needed and helping Shay bring plates to the table. When I took my first bite of the sandwich, I moaned. “I don’t think I’ve ever had something so good.”

Shay beamed. “Caelyn and I came up with the concoction the other day. I think she’s going to add it to the menu at The General Store.”

“I think it’s going to be a fan favorite.”

“Me, too.”

I took a sip of my Coke. “So, what do you think about going to Seattle this weekend? Carson has the opening for his new installation. I’d love for you to meet him. We can explore downtown, restaurant-hop, the works.”

Shay froze, her sandwich halfway to her mouth. “You want me to go to Seattle with you?”

I could suddenly see that the path in front of me was full of barely visible mines. “Yeah. I know it’ll be tough at first, but Michael lives outside the city. Dante didn’t see any evidence that he ever leaves the neighborhood he lives and works in. You’ll be totally safe.” Dante had found so little that he’d finally said it was time to throw in the towel. He was taking a case in Colorado and then would do another check-in on Michael when he was done.

Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession as she laid her sandwich back on the plate. “I can’t.”

I reached across the table to lay a hand over Shay’s. “You can. I know it’s scary, but you’ll be with me the whole time. And we’re getting back to normal life, right?”

She tugged her hand free, searching for something in her pocket. She pulled out a small stone, rubbing her fingers over

it in circles. “My normal is here. On Harbor and Anchor. I don’t want to go to the mainland.”

“Don’t want to or are scared to? Be honest with yourself.” I had to push a little. Shay couldn’t live the rest of her life on these islands, just hoping that her brother would get sent back to jail.

Her motions on the stone sped up. “I’m not ready.”

“Will you ever be ready?”

Shay’s fingers stilled. “That’s not fair.”

I bristled at the accusation in her tone. “It’s an honest question.” Because I couldn’t live the rest of my life on this thirty-acre island. While I saw it as my home, I still wanted to travel and experience the rest of the world now and then.

“You’re pushing, and you promised I could do this at my pace.”

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw. She had a point. I had promised her that very thing. But I selfishly wanted her with me. And I sure as hell didn’t want to leave her alone. “I have to go. I haven’t been the best friend to Carson lately, and he needs my support.”

Shay’s expression softened, some of the tension leaving her shoulders. “Then you should go. I’m not saying you shouldn’t.”

Just that she wouldn’t be with me. I swallowed back my frustration, trying to remember everything that she had been through over the years. To her, nothing was worth the risk of running into her brother. “I’m not leaving you here alone. Not with everything that’s been going on.”

She opened her mouth as if to argue and then closed it again. “I’ll call Caelyn and see if I can stay with them this weekend.”

I nodded, but it was stiff. “You’ll have fun with the kids.”

Shay’s mouth curved, but it didn’t seem completely authentic. “Mia’s been asking to have a slumber party for weeks.”

“It’s perfect, then.” But it didn’t feel that way. It felt as if a giant wall had just been erected between us, and I wasn’t sure if either of us could scale it to reach the other side.

SHAY

“THANKS again for picking me up at the docks and letting me stay—”

“Oh, stop it,” Caelyn said as we walked up to her and Griffin’s farmhouse. “You’ve thanked me enough already, and the girls are so excited about our party.”

“Sleepover!” little Mia shouted as Caelyn pushed open the door.

Caelyn turned to me. “See?”

I chuckled. It was the first time in days that I’d made the sound. Things had been painfully awkward with Brody. As if for the first time, we both knew this thing between us might not work out as we’d planned. I shook my head. I wouldn’t entertain those thoughts. This weekend was all about fun. Griffin was taking Caelyn’s brother, Will, camping, so it was just us girls.

Mia flew at me, wrapping her arms around my legs. “Are you ready for our party?”

I grinned down at the little girl. “I hope so. I brought nail polish. Think we should do manicures?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “That’s my favorite. I have extra sparkles we can use.”

“Perfect.”

“Hey, Shay,” Ava greeted from the hallway.

“Hi, Ava. Thanks for letting me sleep over.”

She ducked her head but smiled. “It’s going to be fun.”

Griffin and Will hurried into the entryway. Griffin gave Caelyn a long, slow kiss that had me averting my gaze. “You sure you guys will be okay?”

“As I’ve said time and again, we’ll be just fine. The security system is on, pizza has been ordered. We’re going to be living the dream while you two are out freezing your butts off.”

Griffin’s lips twitched. “Good thing I have you to warm me up when I get back.”

Will made a gagging noise. “Can we *please* get going so I don’t have to listen to this anymore?”

Caelyn gave her brother a hug and ruffled his hair even though he was almost a foot taller than she was. “Be safe.”

“Yes, *Mom*,” Will chided.

We watched as the boys took off, waving from the entryway. When Caelyn shut the door, she spun around. “Finally, all those icky boys are gone.”

“Let’s party!” Mia cried.

Caelyn wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “I agreed to ice cream sundaes. She’s going to be high on sugar for days.”

I grinned. “It’ll be worth it.”

I LEANED back in my Adirondack chair and took a sip of wine as I watched the flames in the fire pit dance. We’d done every sleepover activity I could imagine. Manicures, face masks, and hair braiding. Pizza, ice cream, and a movie. Now, the girls were in bed, and Caelyn and I had sunk into chairs around the fire, each with a nice glass of wine.

I twisted the stem of my glass between my fingers. “Thank you for tonight.”

“I should be thanking you for helping me wrangle those two hooligans.”

I stared down at my wine, the glow of the fire making the swirling liquid almost amber. “I never really had that. The whole slumber-party experience.”

Caelyn’s expression grew serious. “Why not?”

“Having Michael for a brother wasn’t exactly conducive to friendships. After a while, everyone just stopped inviting me anywhere.”

“I’m so sorry, Shay. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been.”

I shook my head. “That’s not why I said it; for you to feel bad. It’s just—this, tonight, it was really nice to have a taste of normal.”

Caelyn smiled. “You’re welcome here anytime. The girls love you.”

“The feeling’s mutual.” I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d soon be making a home on Anchor instead of Harbor. If things didn’t work out with Brody, I couldn’t stay. He’d offer, of course, but I couldn’t watch as he moved on while I stayed frozen in place.

“Your eyes are really sad right now. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

Caelyn’s tone was just like her—gentle and comforting all at once. Just the sound of it had me fighting tears. “I’m not sure Brody and I are going to make it.”

Caelyn twisted in her chair so she was facing me fully. “Why not? You guys seemed so happy the last time I saw you.”

Tears burned the backs of my eyes. “He’s used to this big, full life. Art openings and travel. Fancy restaurants and concerts. I just want to stay here. I need to.”

“He wanted you to go with him to Seattle,” she guessed.

I nodded. “But I can’t. I thought about changing my mind, forcing myself to go. But the second I thought about it, everything in me froze. I just...” I wasn’t even sure how to finish the thought.

“You’re not ready yet.”

I looked up at Caelyn. “I’m not sure I ever *will* be.”

She reached out and squeezed my arm. “You will. One day. I have complete faith in that. But Brody shouldn’t be pushing you to do something you’re not comfortable with. I saw how hard it was for you to take all the steps you have over the past few months. Letting new friends into your world, playing at The Catch, spending more time on Anchor. Those are all huge strides. You need to give yourself some credit.”

I traced a circular design on the arm of my chair. “But I don’t know if it’s enough. I don’t want to hold Brody back—”

“You aren’t. You didn’t tell him he couldn’t go to Seattle, did you?”

“Of course not.”

Caelyn set her wine down on the side of her chair. “Then he is free to do what fills up his bucket, just like you can.”

“I’m not sure it’s that simple.” Of course, Brody would want someone who could go with him to all those events. It was only natural, and I couldn’t blame him for it.

“Do you love him?” she asked.

I met Caelyn’s gaze dead on. “More than I thought possible.”

“Does he love you?”

I thought about all the ways Brody had shown me just that. Not only with his words but also with his body, his actions, his every move. “He does.”

Caelyn gave me a gentle smile. “Then you two will figure it out. I promise. Love always finds a way.”

It was a beautiful thought. I just wished I could be as sure as Caelyn was.

BRODY

I STARED at the massive sculpture piece that took up the entire center of the gallery courtyard. Carson was moving in a different direction with his art. Instead of a piece that had an almost whimsical quality, this one was darker. As if he'd been incredibly angry when he set his flame to metal.

I moved around the angular sculpture freely now that most of the crowd had made their way inside to see the rest of the show. As I circled it, I couldn't help but wish that Shay were with me. What would she have to say about this piece and the others? What would she think of Carson? The patrons of the gallery? Everything.

I just missed *her*. I'd spent every day and night with her for months. And now, she was gone. God, I was a mope. It wasn't like I wouldn't see her in twenty-four hours. This was pathetic.

"I hope you're not scowling at my work."

I turned at the sound of Carson's voice. "That look was entirely directed at me. This piece is great. You're working in a whole new way."

His mouth pressed into a firm line as he surveyed the sculpture. "It was time for something different. My work was getting tired."

I took in my friend. He'd always been hard on himself, but this seemed like something else entirely. "What's going on?"

He ran a hand through his hair, tugging on the ends. There was an almost...frenetic energy to him. As if he couldn't be

still. “This doesn’t come as easily to me as it does to you. I’m always searching for something that will inspire a piece or series. Trying to do something that’s new and original.”

“It’s not a walk in the park for me either.”

Frustration flashed across Carson’s expression before he schooled it. “You always have a million and one ideas. You have a hard time narrowing them down.”

That was true. But I’d struggled this past year. More than struggled. Things hadn’t seemed to fall into place until I met Shay. Followed that pull between us that had led me down an entirely new path in my art. Instead of being so focused on the darkness that people hid away, my work had become more balanced. I was still exploring all the things people concealed, the good and the bad, but my world was less black and white. Instead, it was full of colors in every shade. Shay had given that to me.

I turned my focus back to Carson. “I think you’re being too hard on yourself. Everyone loved the installation. I hung back from the crowd and overheard two art critics raving about it.”

“Really?” I saw a flicker of hope in Carson’s gaze.

“I wouldn’t lie about that. But who cares what they think? Do you like it?”

He took some time to take in the entirety of the work. Then he grinned. “I fucking hate it.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “I think it’s time for you to make some art for yourself. No one else. I can’t tell you the kind of freedom I’ve felt doing that.”

Carson sighed. “You might be right. I’m just not sure what I want to do or where I want to be—”

“You’re thinking of leaving New York?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know what I’m thinking. And I don’t have a little caretaker to light my way.”

My chest tightened at his words. “It definitely helps.”

Carson's eyes narrowed. "What was that look?"

"What look?" It was hopeless to try and deny the pain I was sure had flashed across my expression. Carson and I had too many years of shared friendship between us.

"Don't bullshit me. You've been in a foul mood since you got into town. I thought it was because you knew reporters would be at the opening, but it's something else."

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw. "I fucked up."

"With your caretaker?"

"She has a name."

"Sorry, with *Shay*?" he asked, drawing her name out.

"Yeah," I grumbled.

"She dump your sorry ass?"

"No." But I wouldn't have blamed her if she did. I'd pushed after promising her that we could move on her schedule. Thinking I knew what was best for her when she'd been dealing with decades of terror and looking over her shoulder.

Carson made an out-with-it gesture. "Are you going to tell me what happened, or do I have to get you drunk first?"

I wouldn't put it past him. On more than one evening, Carson and I had shared a bottle of whiskey and more than a few of our most closely guarded secrets. "I pushed her to come with me, and she wasn't ready. It was a crappy move, especially when I'd promised her that we could go at her pace."

Carson let out a low whistle. "Definitely a dick move. But she'll forgive you if she hasn't already."

It was more than that, though. "I'm worried she thinks I'm not happy with the way things are. But I am. Even amidst the hell of the past few months, it's the happiest I've ever been. I just want to make sure she's not living some half-life because she's scared."

“But that’s not your choice to make. It’s her life, Brody. Not yours. You have this protective streak that can mow down anything in its path. But you have to let Shay make her own way. All you can do is stand beside her and support her.”

Everything Carson said was true, but at the same time, it went against every instinct I had. But in trying to help, I’d ended up controlling the situation. “Hell,” I muttered. “When did you get so wise?”

Carson smirked. “Always have been. It’s about time you started listening to me.”

“I need to call Shay. Then what do you say you and I skip out and find a beer and some real food?” I’d always despised the hors d’oeuvres they served at these things. You needed to eat thirty of them to make a meal.

“Sounds like a plan.” He inclined his head down a pathway. “That leads to a back alley. Should have some privacy there. I’ll run and grab my stuff from the back room and meet you back here.”

I nodded and headed down the path as Carson disappeared inside. The alley was dark, only the glow of the light over the door to the gallery casting a muted glow. I paced back and forth in front of a dumpster, searching for the right words. Everything I came up with felt incredibly pathetic. I could always just throw myself on her mercy and grovel, beg. Whatever it took.

My finger hovered over Shay’s contact in my phone. “Stop being a pansy and call her,” I muttered.

The sound of the back door opening had me looking up from the phone number taunting me. But before I could turn around, something stung the back of my neck. I felt a bite of pain before every muscle in my body spasmed. As the world around me went blurry, I heard a shout. But it was too late. I was falling. I saw a flash of light, felt pain, and then nothing at all.

SHAY

AS I HANDED Caelyn the last dish from our sundae extravaganza, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was past eleven. My heart gave a casual flip in my chest as I pulled the phone out. *Brody* flashed across my screen.

Everything in me eased at just the sight of his name on my phone. That he was thinking about me. That instead of partying it up with his best friend, he was calling me. That silent knowledge gave me hope that everything might be okay.

I hit accept and put the phone to my ear. “Hey, Brody.”

A vaguely familiar voice filled the line, but it wasn’t the one I’d been expecting to hear. “Shay, it’s Carson. Something happened. Brody was attacked...”

The world around me went fuzzy as my grip on the phone loosened. It clattered to the floor, but even the sound of the device slamming into the tile wasn’t enough to break through the fog. I was slightly aware of Caelyn moving around me, picking up the phone. The muffled conversation.

“Shay, look at me.”

I blinked rapidly, Caelyn coming into focus. “Oh, God.”

“He’s going to be okay,” she assured.

“What happened?” Every image that popped into my mind was worse than the one before it. My stomach roiled as I considered the possibility of the killer returning to Washington and setting his sights on Brody.

Caelyn kept her tone even and calm. “They think it was a botched mugging. He’s got a concussion and needs stitches. They’re just waiting on a CT scan to make sure there’s no bleeding in his brain.”

I let out a muffled noise that sounded like an injured animal. “Bleeding in his brain?” This couldn’t be happening. After everything and everyone I’d lost in my life, I would’ve thought I’d be stronger in the face of someone else being torn from me. But I wasn’t. Not in the slightest. Brody had opened my world and shown me what it was like to live again. He understood me in ways no one else ever had. And his heart... God, it was everything good. A heart like that couldn’t leave this world.

“Doctors are treating him now. If he needs surgery, he’s in the best possible place. Seattle Memorial has wonderful doctors.”

I nodded woodenly. “I have to go. How do I get to Seattle in the middle of the night? Can I take the Whaler?”

“You want to go to Seattle? Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

Just hours ago, I’d watched Brody climb aboard the ferry, so sure that I wasn’t anywhere near ready to venture onto the mainland. But now, nothing in the world could keep me away. Not even the knowledge that I’d be in range of my brother. “I need to go now.”

Caelyn wrapped me in a hard hug. “We’re gonna get you there. Griffin has a boat that can make the trip. Ford can drive it, and Bell will go with you.”

“I can’t ask—”

Caelyn held my shoulders as she pulled back from her embrace. “Don’t say another word. This is what friends do.”

And for the first time in my life, I had those kinds of relationships. I’d be forever grateful.

I TREMBLED in the back of the cab as we rode to the hospital. The trip had taken far too long. I stared at my phone, willing it to ring. Carson had texted to tell me that the CT scan was done and they were waiting for results.

My finger rubbed circles on the smooth stone, the one I'd used to ground myself for years. But now it wasn't doing a damn thing to help. Space seemed to be closing in around me as I struggled to keep my breaths even.

Bell patted my knee. "He's going to be okay."

I nodded, refusing to voice the fears running rampant in my mind.

"Would you mind going a little faster?" Ford asked. "We've got a friend who was in an accident."

But it wasn't an accident. Someone had deliberately tried to hurt Brody. For what? A few dollars and a cell phone? But I knew better than most that some people didn't need a reason to inflict pain. Sometimes, they simply liked it. I shuddered as an image of Michael sneering over me filled my mind.

I was okay. Safe. I had Bell and Ford. This hospital was on the opposite side of the city from where Michael lived. Everything was fine. I whispered the reassurances over and over to myself until we pulled up to the emergency room.

I was out of the cab in a flash, Bell hot on my heels as Ford tossed some bills at the driver with a muttered "thanks." I charged into the ER, scanning for anyone who might be able to tell me where Brody was. A middle-aged woman behind a desk gave me a kind smile. "Can I help you? Are you hurt?"

"N-no. I'm looking for Brody James. He was brought in after a mugging. I'm his girlfriend." It was the first time I'd used the word. Brody and I had never had to define our relationship, we simply were. Lovers, partners, friends. Everything that lay between us was far more than the term *girlfriend* could ever encapsulate.

"Just a moment." The woman checked her screen. "I can bring you back to him, but your friends will have to stay here. There's already one guest with him."

“That’s fine.” I turned to Bell and Ford. “I’ll come out as soon as I know anything. Or I’ll send Carson.”

Bell grabbed my hand and squeezed. “You sure you’ll be all right by yourself?”

I nodded. “I’m fine.” It was a total and complete lie, but I would will it into truth.

“Okay. We’ll be right out here,” she said, releasing my hand.

I followed the woman whose name tag read *Rosa Cruz* through a maze of hallways. “Thank you for taking me, Ms. Cruz.” My voice shook as I spoke, but I refused to let the tears burning the backs of my eyes fall.

“Call me Rosa. And, of course. I’m sorry you guys are dealing with this tonight. But we have wonderful doctors here. They’ll get your young man fixed up, don’t you worry.” Rosa’s kindness only made the burn behind my eyes intensify. “Here you go. He’s in number eleven.”

I paused for a moment outside the curtained area. I took a long, slow breath as I gripped the fabric. My hand trembled, but I gave the fabric a tug. I barely registered the hulking man sitting in the chair beside the gurney. I only had eyes for Brody. He was pale, and even though the overhead light had been turned off, he seemed to squint in pain. A bandage covered the right side of his head from his temple to part of his scalp. I couldn’t help the small noise that escaped my mouth.

“Shay?”

Brody’s voice was rough as if he’d smoked a pack of cigarettes in the past hour. The tone sliced through me, leaving nothing but shards of glass in its wake. “Hi,” I whispered.

Carson stood, patting Brody’s arm. “Told you she’d come.” His gaze shot to me. “Nice to meet you, Shay. I wish it were under slightly less dramatic circumstances.”

“You, too,” I said absently, only taking my eyes off Brody for a second. I crossed to the bed and took his hand in mine. It was too cold. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, promise. The doc just came in and said no brain bleed.”

All the air left my lungs on a whoosh. And with the air came the tears. Once they started, I had no hope of stopping them.

“Shay, no.”

Brody gave my hand a tug to bring me closer. But instead, I collapsed onto the bed. My body shook as I sobbed. “I was so scared I was going to lose you, too.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” His fingers ran through my hair and down my back in a soothing caress. “Car, can you give us a minute?”

Carson must’ve agreed because Brody kept stroking my hair and back. “I’m fine. And so are you.”

I sniffled into the hospital blanket, trying my best to pull it together. I focused on my breathing, the feel of Brody’s hand in my hair. Finally, I was able to sit up. “I’m so sorry.”

His brows drew together. “For what?”

“That I didn’t come with you. That—”

Brody started to shake his head and then winced. “No. I shouldn’t have pushed. I promised you I wouldn’t, and then that’s exactly what I did. I’m the one who’s sorry. I was just about to call you to apologize when that mugger surprised the hell out of me.”

My fingers fisted the blanket on his gurney. “Did the police get him?”

“No. Someone down the street saw the attack and yelled. The guy took off. But I was already hitting the pavement. Got my head pretty good.”

I reached, ever so slowly, to cup Brody’s face in my hands. His stubbled cheeks had never felt so good, the prickle of his scruff assuring me that he was here and not going anywhere. “How do you feel right now?”

His lips quirked. “They gave me a dose of pain meds before you arrived so I’m feeling better than I was. They still want me to stay overnight for observation.”

Brody seemed annoyed with the prospect, but I was relieved. The journey back to Harbor wasn’t an easy one, and I’d feel a lot better if the doctors kept an eye on him for a while longer. “I’ll stay with you.”

“You don’t have—”

“I’m staying,” I said firmly.

“I don’t want you doing something you’re not comfortable with.”

I swept my thumbs across his cheeks the same way he had with me so many times before. “I love you. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.” The simple truth hit like a freight train. Brody was my person. The first one I wanted to share both my triumphs and failures with. He was my comfort and my encourager. He’d given me everything, and I just hoped I could give him a fraction of that.

Brody tilted his head so his lips met mine in a soft caress. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I thank my lucky stars every day.”

I smiled against his mouth. “You’re stuck with me now.”

“I think I can live with that.”

It was a good thing he could because I was never letting go.

BRODY

“WHAT DO you think you’re doing?”

I froze halfway in rising from the bed. The bed that I’d practically been living in for two weeks. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“You are not,” Shay said as she hustled to my side. “And you’re supposed to call me if you need to get out of bed.”

Shay had taken the overprotective nurse routine to the extreme. It was mostly adorable, but I was beginning to go stir-crazy. “I’m taking a shower, getting dressed, and going downstairs. I might even take a walk.” I needed some of that fresh island air and would maybe venture to my studio. My fingers had been itching to paint.

“That’s too much. You need to rest—”

I cut Shay off by framing her face and laying a hungry kiss on her lips. “I’m fine. A few headaches. A little dizziness here and there. But I’m healing. And if I don’t start moving around, I’ll never make a full recovery.”

She laid her hands on my forearms, squeezing. “I just want to make sure you’re being careful.”

“I am. It would be impossible for me not to be with this crazy nurse I have at my bedside.”

She arched a brow. “And who would that be? Should I be jealous?”

I kissed her temple. “She’s smart, gorgeous, and cooks like a dream. The only thing I’m waiting for is her to wear that

naughty nurse outfit I suggested.”

Shay chuckled but softened into my hold. “You know I harp because I love you.”

“I know. But it’s time for phase two of my recovery. The doc said I could start getting up and around more.”

Bell’s father was a semi-retired physician and had made the trip out to Harbor twice to give me follow-up exams. Shay had hovered then, too, asking a million and one questions. I think Dr. Kipton had been tempted to suggest she look into nursing school.

Shay sighed. “Okay. Shower, but be careful. When you get downstairs, I’ll have lunch ready.”

I knew it took a lot for her to walk out of the bedroom and descend the steps. Shay had lost too many people in her life, and the idea of something happening to me was almost paralyzing. I’d have to go slow getting back into our normal routine. Not just for my recovery but also for hers.

The spray of the shower was a little piece of heaven on Earth. Shay had forced me to take baths for the past two weeks. They would’ve been amazing if she had joined me. But instead, she’d hovered around, waiting for me to pass out. I grinned into the stream of water. She loved me. And her worry showed me just how much.

I bent to grab my shampoo, and a wave of dizziness passed over me. I cursed and grabbed the side of the shower. Dr. Kipton had warned me that it would take weeks, possibly months for the concussion side effects to subside completely. But I was done with this shit. I wanted my life to go back to normal.

I forced myself to move through my shower routine more slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements that could send my equilibrium off-kilter. I took my time getting dressed, and when I headed downstairs, I felt like a new man.

Shay glanced up from the stove. “You look better. How do you feel?”

I rounded the island and wrapped my arms around her, relishing the feel of her body against mine. “Good enough for some rigorous activity.”

She grinned and flipped the sandwich in the pan. “You’ve still got a few weeks before the doctor clears you for that, buddy.”

I groaned. It felt like forever since I’d lost myself in Shay’s body, in the frenetic energy that only she and I shared. “I’m not convinced that the doctor knows what he’s talking about.”

“I think almost ten years of training says he *does* know what he’s talking about.”

I released her and leaned a hip against the counter. “Fine.”

Shay chuckled, looking up at me through her lashes. “Are you pouting?”

“Maybe.” I was. But I’d earned it.

A console on the counter dinged just as the phone in my pocket did the same. I crossed to the video monitor and intercom Griffin and I had installed after the incident with the body on the dock. We now got alerted to any movement on the structure. Occasionally, there was a false alarm—like when a seal had decided to take a nap there—but it mostly came in pretty handy.

“Who is it?” Shay asked.

“Looks like Parker.”

The sheriff climbed out of the boat and waved at the camera. I pressed the intercom button. “Come on up.”

He nodded and stepped out of the frame.

“I’m going to make him a sandwich, too. I bet he hasn’t eaten.”

I pressed a quick kiss to Shay’s temple. “You make him one of those fancy grilled cheeses, and he’ll never leave.”

She smiled, tipping a sandwich onto a plate and handing it to me. “Then we’ll have the safest house on any of the islands.”

I paused for a moment, taking in her face. “You feel safe here, right?”

Shay hadn’t talked much about finding the body. She’d had a couple of nightmares but hadn’t wanted to discuss them. She brushed her mouth against mine. “I feel safe with you.”

A burn lit deep in my chest. “I’m glad.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” I called.

Within a few seconds, Parker appeared, striding towards the kitchen. “Something smells amazing.”

“I hope you’re hungry,” Shay said. “Because I’m making you a sandwich, too.”

“Wouldn’t turn one down. Haven’t had time to stop for lunch.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like always.”

We’d developed a friendship of sorts with the sheriff. And Shay had taken that as permission to mother him. I gave Parker a small chin lift. “Hey, man. Everything okay?”

He slid onto a stool at the island. “Busy but fine. I just wanted to come and check on you and see how you were doing. But it looks like you’re fully up and about.”

I rounded the counter to take another stool. “Barely. This one has been stricter than a prison warden.”

Shay flipped a sandwich with a huff. “You try to keep someone from passing out and getting another concussion and all you get is grief.”

Parker chuckled. “He’s not the best patient, is he?”

“The *worst*.”

“Hey,” I complained.

Shay arched a brow in my direction. “Are you really going to argue that fact?”

I leaned back on the stool. “I might be a little impatient.”

She snorted as she plated the second sandwich and handed it to Parker. “Understatement of the century.”

Parker took a bite of the grilled cheese, and his eyes widened. “This is amazing.”

“Glad you like it.” She took her own sandwich and scooted onto the stool next to mine.

Parker took a sip of the Coke I’d brought him. “I asked Seattle PD to keep me up to date on your case, but they don’t have much hope of finding the guy.”

“I figured as much.” No one had seen the mugger’s face. And he hadn’t succeeded at stealing anything, so it wasn’t like my belongings would show up at a pawn shop. “I’m recovering, and no one else was hurt. That’s what matters.”

“Have you heard anything else about the murders?” Shay asked quietly.

Parker shook his head. “Nothing. It’s like he just disappeared.”

“Maybe he’s done,” she suggested.

Parker’s jaw went hard. “People like that, with that kind of darkness in them, they don’t stop killing. They can’t.”

The sandwich soured in my gut. As much as I knew Parker was right, I wanted to believe that the whole nightmare was over.

SHAY

“ALL RIGHT, LADIES, ENJOY YOUR FEAST.”

I swore the chickens clucked in response as if to say thank you. The further we got into the spring season, the more goodies I had for them from the gardens. And it gave me a weird sense of satisfaction to win over their normally cranky selves.

I picked up the basket of eggs and started back towards the house. I looked up to the bedroom window. No light shone, and I smiled. Brody didn't want to admit it, but he was still recovering. He needed significantly more sleep than usual, and his appetite was greater, too.

I was doing all I could to make sure he got everything he needed. That morning, I'd looked like a cartoon character, creeping out of the bedroom. It made Brody grumpy every time he woke without me, but it couldn't be helped. The chickens needed their breakfast, and Brody needed his rest.

I opened and closed the front door as quietly as possible. Making my way into the kitchen, I set the eggs on the counter and moved directly for the coffee maker. I needed an extra hit of caffeine today. Between taking care of Brody and making sure everything on the island ran smoothly, I was running myself ragged.

But it was only for a few more weeks. Brody was more himself each and every day. I poured a cup of coffee, added some half and half and sugar, and then slid onto a stool at the counter. I opened my laptop screen and scanned through the

secret email account I kept for Google alerts on my brother and aunt. Nothing.

With a sigh of relief, I was about to close the computer when a ding sounded. I clicked open the chat app E and I used. There was a new message from her.

Evergreen13: *Are you home?*

It was the most bizarre question coming from her. Of course, I was home. Other than my quick trips to the other islands, I was always home. And I never checked the chat app on my phone, the connection wasn't secure.

Phoenix26: *I'm here.*

Evergreen13: *I hope you were serious about wanting me to come visit...*

Phoenix26: *You know I was. When can you come?*

I instantly began planning all the things I wanted to do with her. Take the kayaks out, go whale watching. I wanted us to eat sandwiches at The General Store and go to Bell's workshop at Second Chances. We'd have to do a huge barbeque so she could meet all of my friends.

Evergreen13: *I'm already here.*

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It wasn't even eight a.m. The first ferry didn't arrive for another couple of hours, at least.

Phoenix26: *Did you get here yesterday? Why didn't you message?*

Something was wrong. This wasn't like E at all. She planned everything down to the smallest detail.

Evergreen13: *It was late. I just stayed at a little motel on Anchor. That's the island closest to you, right?*

Shelter was actually a bit closer, and it would've been easier for her to stay there instead of having to stay on the ferry even longer, but none of that mattered. E was here. Without warning. And that meant something was wrong.

Phoenix26: *E, what's going on? Where are you? I'll come get you right now.*

Evergreen13: *I can walk to the docks. That's where you come into town, right?*

Phoenix26: *I'll be there in twenty minutes.*

I pushed to my feet, dumping my coffee in the sink. I needed to grab my phone and keys. Hell, it was something bad. E and I had become each other's port in the storm years ago, sharing all the things we didn't let anyone else in on. But I had started to let others in. Brody, my friends. I had a whole host of support now. I wasn't sure that was the case for E. I might be the only one she trusted.

Evergreen13: *Thank you for always being there for me.*

Phoenix26: *Always.*

I hurried to find a piece of paper and pen. I scrawled a quick note to Brody, telling him I'd gone to pick up E at the docks on Anchor and would be back soon. He'd be pissed I hadn't woken him, but I knew Brody wouldn't be crazy about me going into town alone. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission. I needed some time with E alone before I had her meeting a total stranger when she was obviously going through something.

I stuck the note next to the coffee maker where he'd surely see it and headed for the front door. I moved as quickly as possible down the trail, trying not to trip over any roots or rocks. As soon as I reached the dock, I realized my error. There was no way for me to get to the boat without signaling the alert linked to Brody's phone.

I muttered a curse but hurried to the boat anyway. I'd just have to move quickly. I untied the ropes and jumped aboard. I started up the engine and pushed away from the dock. Hopefully, Brody wouldn't be too mad.

I guided the Whaler away from Harbor and towards open water and Anchor. Picking up speed, I maneuvered the boat through familiar channels. Wind whipped my hair around my face and roared in my ears. The smell of the sea didn't calm

me like it usually did. I was too worried about E and nervous about how pissed Brody would be.

I didn't hear a thing. Not until cool metal pushed against my lower back.

“Keep driving. Look straight ahead. Don't move a muscle.”

Everything in me froze. My muscles stringing so tight they should've snapped. “W-w-what?”

“Keep driving.”

The voice was so familiar. I reached deep into my mind, trying to place it. But before I could, something sharp pricked my neck. I tried to bat it away, losing my hold on the steering wheel. I should've gone for the radio instead, tried to get off a distress call. But strong arms wrapped around me, halting my movements.

In seconds, I felt sluggish as if each of my limbs weighed one hundred pounds. “No...Brody...”

His name was the final word on my lips before I slipped under, and nothing but a sea of blackness surrounded me.

BRODY

THE BEEPING COMING from my phone pulled me out of my deep sleep. I groaned as I rolled over, patting the nightstand for the device. My fingers closed around the cool rectangle, and I brought it to my face to see who the hell was interrupting the amazing dream I had been having.

The alert was from our dock cameras. I pulled up the feed, expecting to see our little seal friend using the dock as his own personal sunbathing spot again. Instead, I saw Shay pulling away in the Whaler.

I sat up straight, instantly awake and alert. *What the hell?* I swung my legs over the side of the bed, hurrying to pull on my jeans and a tee. I tried her cell phone, knowing it was likely a hopeless endeavor. There wasn't service out on the water.

I jogged downstairs to find Shay's laptop still open, a cup of coffee in the sink, and a basket of eggs on the kitchen table. Shay never left a space in any sort of disarray. Everything went back to its place immediately after use.

I scanned the kitchen, looking for anything else out of place. My gaze caught on a note by the coffee maker. I crossed to it in four long strides. Plucking it up, I read it quickly and cursed. Why hadn't she woken me up? I would've gone with her.

It had to have been urgent for Shay to have left like she had. But something in my gut wasn't sitting right. I pulled up my message app and typed out a text.

Me: *Hey, Caelyn. Are you opening the store today?*

Within seconds, I had a reply.

Caelyn: *That I am. We'll be open at nine. You need something?*

Shay would be pissed as hell at me, but I didn't much care at the moment.

Me: *Shay left to pick up a friend at the docks before I woke up. Can you keep an eye out and let me know if you see her?*

Caelyn: *I'm at the docks now, waiting on our seafood haul for the day. Don't see her yet. When did she leave?*

I glanced at the time on my phone. It had only been ten minutes since she'd left, and it took fifteen to twenty to get to the docks.

Me: *She should be there in five to ten.*

Caelyn: *I'll be on the lookout. And I'll be sure to tell her what a worrywart she has for a boyfriend and to go easy on you.*

I wanted to smile down at my phone, but something felt wrong, and I couldn't shake it. Maybe it was simply because this was the first time in weeks that we'd been apart. Or because of Parker's warning yesterday that the killer wasn't done. The combination was likely messing with my head.

Me: *I really appreciate it.*

I forced myself to spend the next few minutes in normality. I rinsed Shay's cup and put it in the dishwasher, brewed a cup of coffee for myself, and set the eggs in their proper resting spot. But when I finished, I was still waiting for my phone to ding.

I slid onto a stool in front of Shay's laptop, knowing that what I was about to do was a violation of her privacy. I'd apologize later. I tapped a key, and the screen blinked to life. I breathed a sigh of relief when it didn't require a password.

A chat window was up. A conversation between her and someone named Evergreen13, her friend, E. As I read the messages, my gut tightened. Maybe her friend truly was in

trouble, but it sounded a hell of a lot like someone was trying to get Shay away from the island and me.

Me: *Any sign?*

Caelyn: *Not yet. Is everything okay?*

I was an asshole for worrying Caelyn after all she'd been through, but I couldn't help the deep and unsettling feeling that something was wrong. Before I could type a response, my phone rang. Seeing Caelyn's name on the screen, I accepted the call.

"Do you see her?"

"No sign of her, and now you have me totally and completely freaked out."

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw. "I'm sorry. Something just feels wrong. Like this friend was trying to lure Shay away from the island for some reason."

I scanned the screen again and froze. In a small column to the left of the messaging app was a history of conversations. At least half a dozen chats visible in the history window. They were all with the same person...until her most recent chat. At first glance, it looked the same, but when all the screen names were lined up, you could see the slight difference. Most of the conversations were with Evergreen13 but the one this morning was with Evergreen13. Someone had created a new name and replaced the number one with a letter *l*.

My chest seized. "Caelyn, I have to go. I need to call Parker. Call me if you see the boat or any sign of Shay. If you see her, don't let her out of your sight. I'll explain later."

"Wait, Brody—"

I hung up before she had a chance to continue and dialed Parker immediately. Someone was after Shay.

I PACED BACK and forth in front of the island. "We have to do something."

Parker's jaw worked. "We're doing everything we can. I've got every officer on our payroll looking for Shay and the boat. We'll find her."

But would it be soon enough? My gut twisted as images of dead bodies filled my mind. The ones that had been carved up and displayed to look just like my paintings. I couldn't help imagining Shay the same way. Bile crept up the back of my throat, and I forced it down.

A hand came down hard on my shoulder. "You have to hold it together. Losing it won't help you or Shay."

I gave a jerky nod in Griffin's direction. "I'm trying."

"I know that kind of fear. It eats you up, but you have to keep a clear head."

I was doing everything I could to hold onto my last strand of sanity. Not to tear this kitchen apart. But it had been two hours. Parker and his deputies had descended on Harbor in a wave, looking for any clue they could find. A tech was combing through Shay's laptop, trying to trace the new screen name. But so far, no luck.

Parker checked his phone for the hundredth time. "You have your laptop up here?"

I nodded. "It's in the den."

"Grab it for me. I want to look through your security footage. See if we can spot anyone lurking."

I jogged to grab the computer but couldn't imagine it would be much help. It would be difficult to keep eyes on Shay or me. The forests that surrounded the buildings on Harbor would make it nearly impossible for someone to see through.

I set the computer on the counter and pulled up the camera app. "What views do you want?"

Parker came up next to me. "Let's start with the dock camera that faces the water."

There were three views from our dock cameras. One facing the water, one facing the trail that led to and from the

dock, and one of the dock itself that was linked to an alert. I pulled up the view of the water.

“Here are rewind, fast forward, and stop,” I said, showing Parker all the buttons he would need.

He slid onto the stool and began a speedy rewind of the recording. I scrubbed a hand back and forth across my jaw where an ache had started to form. After a minute, Parker slammed his finger down on the stop key.

I leaned in closer. “What is it? What did you see?”

“I’m not sure.” He started the recording again, this time at a normal speed. Griffin moved in closer to see what we were looking at. “Holy hell,” Parker muttered.

I watched as a figure poked up out of the water and hauled himself into the boat. The man slipped off a wetsuit and opened a waterproof sack to don clothes. He threw the rest of his gear overboard and then slipped into the large storage bin at the back of the boat.

Vomit crept up the back of my throat. Someone had been in the Whaler, just waiting for Shay. And now, he had her.

“Do you recognize him?” Parker asked.

I shook my head. “It’s dark, and the view is from too far away.” It could’ve been any number of people.

“Sheriff,” a deputy called. “We found the boat. And there’s blood.”

SHAY

I GROANED as I rolled over. My mouth was dry as a desert, my tongue like bitter sandpaper. I blinked a few times, trying to clear the blurriness from my vision. The tiny movement made my head pound. I felt like a scene out of one of those movies when someone has their first hangover, but I didn't remember drinking. I'd never had one of those nights of overindulgence. I was always too careful and cautious.

I tried blinking again. This time, it wasn't quite as painful. As things came into focus around me, my heart rate sped up. I wasn't in Brody's room or the guest house. My surroundings were completely unfamiliar.

I tried to push up from the bed to get a better view, but zip ties on my wrists and ankles caught me. Plastic cording cut into my wrists and held my jeans-clad legs together. My stomach cramped. With worry or lack of food and water, I wasn't sure.

I used an elbow to lever myself into a sitting position, but the movement was awkward. My head swam and throbbed, and I feared I might lose what little I had in my belly. I closed my eyes and took several slow deep breaths. In through my nose, and out through my mouth.

When my stomach stilled, I opened my eyes. Rough wood walls that'd seen better days greeted me. Cobwebs filled the corners, and dust covered the surfaces. Curtains hung at a haphazard angle as if someone had tried to pull them down and failed.

I wracked my brain for anything even remotely familiar about the space, but there was nothing. I tested the bindings around my ankles, trying to break them apart, but had no luck. I knew I could get out of the ones around my wrists, but it would hurt like a bitch.

Just as I was about to make an attempt, I froze. I needed to remember first. What was the last thing in my mind? It stung my brain to try and sift through my memories. Gathering the eggs. Going back to the main house. My chat with Evergreen.

I stilled. She had asked me to come to Anchor to get her. No. She couldn't be involved in this. My stomach pitched. What if someone had hurt her? Stolen her computer. My brain flew through the possibilities, each one worse than the one before.

I dug my nails into the backs of my clasped hands. I had to stop. None of the what-ifs would help me now. The who and the how didn't matter if I couldn't get out of here. I was quiet for a moment, listening for any hint of sound. There was nothing, only the sound of the wind against loose shutters.

I slowly stood, trying my best to keep my balance with my feet bound together. Once I'd gotten there, I held out my arms in front of me, praying that everything I'd learned in that self-defense class would work just as the instructor had promised. I studied the pawl head on the zip ties. It looked tiny and insignificant, but I knew it was much stronger than it appeared.

I closed my eyes and steeled myself. The movement needed to be strong and quick enough that I succeeded on the first try. I took a deep breath and brought my arms down with as much force as I could muster.

It was enough to send me collapsing to my knees in a coughing fit. But my hands were free. I braced myself against the floor, willing my heaving under control. I swallowed back the second round of coughs that wanted to surface. Quiet and surprise were the only tools currently in my arsenal.

I carefully pushed to my feet and hopped over to the cabin's small kitchenette. I pulled open drawer after drawer.

All I needed was a knife or some scissors or—I stopped. I saw a single set of cutlery. The knife wasn't sharp, but it did have a slightly serrated edge.

I grabbed it and the fork and hobbled back to the musty bed. Sitting down, I hoisted up my feet and got to work. I sawed and sawed until sweat dotted my brow and I was sure I'd throw up. I'd only made it halfway through the width of the plastic tie.

I lay back on the bed, trying to catch my breath. "Come on, Shay. You can do this. Don't let this asshole win." As I started to sit up, my gaze caught on the wooden frame of the bed. The post at the end looked surprisingly sturdy.

I hooked my legs around the post and tested its strength. It didn't appear to be going anywhere. I tried a couple of different positions with gentle tugs, trying to see what my best angle would be. Down and back seemed like my best bet. I closed my eyes, steeling myself yet again, and pulled with all my strength.

I muffled my cry of pain with my hands. It felt as if I'd almost amputated my feet, and I still wasn't free. Leaning forward to check the cord, I saw that my pain hadn't been completely in vain. I was almost there.

I lay back on the bed again as waves of nausea swept over me. "One more. You can do this." I moved before I could give my brain a second to back out. One sharp tug, and my legs broke free.

A few stray tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. I quickly wiped them away. If I let my emotions loose right now, I'd never get myself under control. I swung my legs around so I was sitting up on the bed. Just a minute to breathe, to steady myself. Then I would run.

I listened carefully again. Still nothing but the wind. I stood and slowly made my way to the door, my fork in hand. It wasn't a knife, but it could still take someone's eye out.

When I was mere steps from the door, it swung open, banging against the wall. A figure filled the frame, the sun

shining from behind. But I couldn't make out an identity, only that it was male. "You know, you've been a real bitch to get ahold of."

The man took two strides forward, and his face came into focus. My stomach twisted. "Sam?" The single word came out on a croak. "W-what are you doing here?"

"What do you think? It's time to have a little fun, don't you think?"

My head swam as the nausea intensified. The darkness in Sam was no longer carefully disguised. Instead, it poured off him in waves. My hand tightened around the fork, the metal biting into my skin. There was only one way he'd let me go, and that was if it were in his best interest. "This isn't smart, Sam. Think. You're the first person they'll come looking for when Brody can't find me. Let me go now, and you'll have a head start—"

His dark chuckle cut me off. "Do you really think that it's just me? That I didn't have help?"

Another figure stepped into the doorway and held up a phone. "It's so fun to watch you struggle. To think you were making progress when, really, I hold your life in my hands. I'd forgotten how much I liked to watch you hurt yourself trying to get free. It's just like the trunk, only better. Don't you think?"

The air shuddered in my lungs, disappearing as if I hadn't breathed at all. How? This couldn't be real. "M-M-Michael?"

He stepped into the cabin, a gun pointed at my head. "Hello, big sister. Did you miss me?"

BRODY

WHEN THE DEPUTY SAID BLOOD, everything in me shut down. Nothing existed except the raging fear coursing through me. Shay was hurt. Or worse. Those ugly, twisted imaginings instantly filled my mind.

I did everything I could to lock it all down. To turn off all feelings and simply go numb. Parker had wanted me to stay on Harbor, but that wasn't happening. I'd jumped in Griffin's boat with him and we made our way to where deputies had found the Whaler.

The boat was parked at a small public dock near one of the lesser-known beaches. We weren't allowed to pull up to the dock itself, so Griffin slid the vessel as far up to the sandy shore as possible. Without a word, we both took off our shoes and rolled up our jeans, making a jump as close to shore as possible.

As soon as I landed, I made my way towards the gathering of sheriff's department officers. Parker held up a hand when I reached the dock. "This is a crime scene. I can't let you out there."

"I need to know what you found." My voice sounded remarkably calm, the numbness seeping into my tone. But in reality, a fire raged below the muscle and sinew, an inferno that would burn me alive if Shay wasn't okay.

Parker's jaw worked. "There were only a few drops and smears of blood on the boat. Not enough to suggest serious injury."

All the air in my lungs left on a single whoosh. She was okay. “What does that mean? If this monster’s idea was to kill her, he would’ve done it already, right?”

“I’m honestly not sure. But this is a good sign. He’s keeping her alive for a reason. And whatever the reason is, it’s giving us time.”

But how much time did we have? I turned, scanning the beach and the surrounding areas. There were a couple of places he may be holding her, but not many.

Parker leveled me with a stare. “I have officers searching the area. I need you to go with Griffin. Get some food and wait for my call. We’ll find her.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Griffin’s hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed hard. “I’ve got him, Parker.”

“Thank you. We’ll update you as soon as we know anything.”

Griffin steered me towards a road that led away from the beach. I shrugged out of his hold. “What the hell? I need to know what’s going on.”

Griffin stepped into the path. “Look around. Whoever did this isn’t keeping her here. He probably loaded her into a car in the parking lot and drove somewhere else.”

My rib cage constricted at the images flooding my mind, cutting off my ability to take a deep breath. Shay, shoved into the trunk of some car, hurting, scared, and alone. Griffin gripped my shoulders again. “Keep it together. Ford is on his way. We’re gonna find her.”

I met Griffin’s gaze. “You’re not trying to get me to stay put?”

He grunted. “Hell, no. I would never do that, and I don’t expect you to be any different.”

A luxury SUV pulled to the side of the road, and a window rolled down. “Hop in.”

I climbed into the passenger side of the SUV and turned to Ford. “Thank you.”

“Of course. The girls are calling everyone we know to help with the search or to tell them to keep an eye out for any suspicious activity. Crosby’s getting some flyers made up with Shay’s photo.”

I didn’t even know how they had a photo of Shay. I didn’t have one. Not a single picture of her or of the two of us together, marking the memories we’d made. All I had were dozens of paintings. But those weren’t realistic enough. Then again, neither was a photo. Nothing came close to the real thing. The curves of her body, the feel of her skin, that lavender scent that always clung to her.

“Where’s Hunter?” Griffin asked as he fastened his seat belt.

Ford pulled out onto the road. “He hasn’t called me back yet. He was going to check out the resort he’s thinking about buying, and you know how the service is up there.”

“Shitty on a good day,” Griffin muttered.

My gaze jumped all around as we drove. As if I might catch sight of Shay walking down the street, and this would all be a terrible mistake. “Where are we going first?”

Ford turned on a road that led out of town. “A few areas are known for having a lot of rentals. That seems like the most likely place to keep someone. But he’d need to have privacy. So, we’re going to focus on the places with some acreage.”

He’d already thought this out. While my mind had been reeling, Ford had been thinking logically. “Thank you. I’ll never be able to repay—”

“We care about her, too,” Ford cut in. “You guys are part of the family now. We’d do anything for you.”

My throat burned, but I managed to nod.

Griffin leaned forward in his seat. “You got your Glock?”

Ford nodded. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Good. We should stop by the farmhouse so I can get something, too.”

Ford made another turn, taking us down a road surrounded by rolling fields. “Your place is between house one and two, we can stop then.”

I looked back and forth between the two of them. I’d never handled a gun in my life, but I wasn’t about to complain about them being armed. Who knew what we’d face when we found Shay?

A phone’s ring sounded through the car’s speakers. Ford hit a button on his steering wheel. “Hunter, where are you?”

The line seemed to crackle, but we could just make out Hunter’s words. “I’m at the old resort. Someone’s been up here.”

My body locked. “What do you see?”

“I’m far away, but there’s an SUV. Two guys pacing and talking. One of them looks like he’s watching something on his phone.”

“Can you get a better look?” Griffin asked.

“Maybe.”

“Be careful,” Ford warned. “If you get yourself killed, Bell is going to be really pissed.”

I pulled out my cell phone. “I’m texting Parker just in case this is something.” My fingers flew across the screen.

Within seconds, my phone rang. I hit accept. “Are you sending someone?”

“I’m on my way with a deputy. Where the hell are you?” Parker barked.

“We’re on our way, too. Hunter’s already there. He’s trying to get a view inside the cabin.”

Parker let a slew of curses fly. “Tell him to fall back. He’s unarmed. We’re ten minutes out.”

But anything could happen in ten minutes. Including losing the person who meant the world to me. “We’ll see you soon.” I hit end. “Parker’s on his way.”

Breathing sounded over the phone line, but nothing else could be heard other than the wind. “I’m coming in from the back, there’s a little tree coverage here,” Hunter whispered. “I’m not sure if I’ll be able to get a line of sight—” His words cut off for the briefest of moments. “Hell, it’s Sam. He has Shay. And there’s another guy with a gun.”

SHAY

EVERYTHING IN ME LOCKED. Muscles and mind, frozen in shock. This couldn't be real. Had to be some sort of horrible nightmare. I just needed to wake up. As soon as consciousness rose, I'd be safe in Brody's arms instead of staring down the barrel of a gun.

"Cat got your tongue, sissy?" Michael asked, tilting his head and the gun to one side.

"How?" It was the only word I could seem to get out. But I did my best to keep my voice from shaking, not to show my brother the fear he got so high on as my gaze jumped back and forth between the two men.

Michael pulled a fake pout. "No hug? No, *'I've missed you?'*"

Part of me *had* missed him. Wanted to throw my arms around him and weep for the brother I'd only had glimpses of growing up. The one who played with me, and helped me convince Mom and Dad to let us stay up late to watch a movie and eat ice cream. But those flickers of a true brother had died right along with my parents. The man in front of me was a stranger.

Sam leaned against the counter, smirking. "She doesn't look like she missed you."

"No, she fucking doesn't." Michael lowered the gun so it was resting by his side. "But I know the truth. Deep down, she did. She doesn't know how to live without me."

I met his gaze dead-on, unwavering, not letting the blow his words delivered show. “How did you two find each other?”

Sam pushed off the counter and moved closer to me. “That hell hole of a treatment facility takes all kinds. And most of us are released when we turn eighteen.”

“But Parker brought you in for questioning. Ran you.”

He shrugged. “Juvenile record. It’s handy to have parents who can pay a high-priced lawyer to keep things sealed.”

I studied Sam, trying to put the pieces together. He looked closer to my age than Michael’s. Sam leered in my direction, his eyes roaming over my body. “I should look familiar, Shay. I’ve had eyes on you for years. I knew you were thinking of moving here before you even told good ol’ Aunt Georgie.”

Bile crept up my throat. The idea of Sam watching me for so many years made me sick. The fact that I never once remembered seeing him. I wanted to scour my skin clean. “Why would you do that?” The *for him* was silent but understood.

“Your brother saved me. Had my back when some gangbanger tried to shank me. Let’s just say we became a team after that.”

Michael stepped forward. “Did you really think I’d leave you alone? Wouldn’t care what happened to you?”

I fought the shiver at his words. If he didn’t have a gun in his hand right now, he’d almost sound like a concerned brother. But I could hear the truth. The only person I belonged to was him. And what he wanted more than anything was my pain.

“I overcame my fear of water just for you. Aren’t you proud of me, sissy? I told the doctors it would be good for my development if they helped me face that fear.” He let out a bark of laughter. “Those idiots took me to a pool.” He smiled at me, tapping the gun against the counter. “I’ll give them credit, though. They helped me work through it.”

I should have known that Michael’s need to see me suffer would outweigh any of his fears, any hurdle in his path. But

I'd wanted to believe that I'd built a safe haven on Harbor—with Brody. That none of the ugliness and pain of my past could reach me there. I'd been wrong.

Michael shook his head. “Did you really think you could hide from me on this godforsaken island? I'll give you points for trying, but honestly, the attempt was pretty pathetic.”

I did everything I could to keep my face a blank mask. Not to give him any reaction.

“Sam's been keeping me updated the whole time. It was dumb luck that he landed on the crew that built the studio for your boyfriend.” His expression darkened as he glanced at Sam. “But he got a little overeager.”

Sam's face reddened. “How was I supposed to know she'd have a meltdown when I so much as talked to her?”

Sam clearly hadn't told Michael the whole story. But before I opened my mouth to share what had truly happened, I needed a better feel for their relationship. They were brothers in arms, but there was tension, too. I needed that to work to my advantage.

“I told you, she's delicate, my big sister.”

Not anymore. Everything that Michael had put me through had hardened me. He just didn't know it yet.

“It really was reckless for you to play at that bar. Sam sent me a video of that one. Your playing isn't quite as good as it used to be.”

Memories battered at my brain. All the times Michael had cut me down. Pointed out every shortcoming and failure. I stared straight ahead. “I play for myself. No one else.”

He scoffed. “That's what the mediocre use as an excuse. You used to be talented. Had so much promise. Why did you give it all up? Hmmm? Was the violin ruined for you after that night?”

I let my eyes fall closed for a moment, trying to push back the onslaught of images battling to get through.

“You gave up so much after. It’s only fitting. You were never supposed to live. And you did a pretty good job of playing dead for years.”

Each word hit me like a physical blow. Not because they were cruel, but because they were true. I held back for so long, thinking that making myself invisible was the only solution. “I’m not doing that anymore.”

Michael scowled in my direction. “You shouldn’t have been so careless. All of those people made you weak. Left you wide-open. How do you think I got you off that island? Pretending to be one of your little *friends*.”

I stayed silent, keeping my gaze on him but also trying to scan the room. All I had was the fork gripped tightly in my hand. A piece of silverware was no match for a bullet and two men much larger than me.

“You know that’s why I had to punish you. But you never listen to my warnings.”

“Why *we* had to punish her,” Sam corrected him.

Michael’s jaw worked but he nodded at Sam. “Of course. *We’ve* been keeping all of these local yokels chasing their tails, trying to find a killer who was right under their noses.”

My stomach pitched, acid surging up my throat. “Y-you had an alibi for every crime. How?”

Michael beamed. “Bingo! She finally gets it. Someone give this girl a prize. It really is fascinating that you fell in love with someone whose past is almost as dark as yours. And the man they sentenced in New York? He really was helpful to ensure we got the details right.”

“You really think your brother couldn’t fake some video footage? I thought you knew him better than that.”

I should’ve known better. But even with as much energy as I’d put into protecting myself, I’d let my guard down.

Sam shot Michael a grin. “We tag-teamed everything we needed to. Once each of us had at least one alibi, the rest was easy.”

“Why?” I croaked. So many people. And for no reason.

Michael pulled a knife from a sheath at his side, his eyes narrowing. “Why? Because you’re a heartless bitch who abandoned me when I needed you the most. You knew they were planning to send me away. But did you warn me? No. You were just going to let them do it.”

My gaze stayed focused on the knife, the glint of metal in the sun. I swallowed hard. “Because you needed help. They were trying to get you well.”

“They were trying to get rid of me!” he screamed. “And you were going to let them. I never had any of you on my side. I had to fight for every little kernel of attention. Do you know what that’s like?”

I did know. Because as wonderful as my parents were, they focused on Michael. They had been terrified of and for their son, of what he was turning into. And somewhere along the way, I fell by the wayside. They hadn’t meant to, and I knew they loved me. But I wasn’t the one screaming out. I was simply trying to keep from drowning. “I know.”

Michael lunged forward, stopping just a few feet in front of me. “You do not! I know! You were loved. I was hated.”

“Stop,” Sam ordered. “I want to have my fun first.” He cut around Michael and grabbed me by the throat. “This bitch has been teasing me for years.”

My eyes watered as I scratched at Sam’s arm, my makeshift weapon clattering to the floor. I let instinct take over. My hands moved up to break his hold, and then my knee rose in a striking motion as I pulled his head down. I heard a loud crack and felt Sam’s nose break.

“You cunt! I’m going to kill you.”

Just as Sam reached for me, another crack pierced the air. This one louder. Sam was simply there one moment, and then he wasn’t. My eyes tried to compute the body on the floor. The gurgling sound as he bled out, clutching his throat.

“Dammit, Shay. He was supposed to be my fall guy. I’m going to have to come up with another plan now.”

“L-l-let me go. Please.”

He gave me a smile that was a bit feral. “Now, why would I do that? The fun’s just beginning.”

A figure crashed through the door, taking Michael down in a tackle. It was a blur of limbs and cursing and it took me a moment to realize that the figure was Hunter. “Run, Shay!” he called. But I couldn’t. Wouldn’t leave him with my brother.

The knife clattered to the floor, and I dashed to pick it up, my head pounding with the movement. I tried to reach for my brother to pull him away from Hunter, but I was too late. A loud pop cut through the air, and Hunter crumpled, rolling to his back, blood blooming on his chest.

No. No. No. I fell to my knees. “Hunter. Talk to me.” I quickly pulled off my flannel shirt, keeping the knife tucked between Hunter’s body and mine.

His eyes fluttered. “Run.”

I pressed one hand against his wound and took hold of the knife with the other. I pointed the knife at Michael. “Get out of here. The police will be on their way.”

He leveled the gun at me. “No, big sister. It’s time for our game.”

SHAY

HE'D LOST all semblance of reason. I knew Hunter wouldn't have come charging in here without calling the sheriff's department first. They had to be on their way. *But they might not be fast enough*, a little voice in my head whispered. Because if Parker was only minutes away, Hunter wouldn't have come charging in here the way he had.

"Get up," Michael ordered.

I shook my head frantically. "He'll die if I don't keep pressure on his wound." I wouldn't be the reason Hunter slipped from this Earth. Not even if my brother shot me, too.

He pointed the gun at Hunter's head. "Get up, or I'll put a bullet in his brain. Then no doctor will be able to save him. At least this way, he has a chance."

I closed my eyes as my arms trembled. There were no good choices in this scenario. And nothing in the dozen or so self-defense classes I'd taken could help me now. I said a silent prayer that Hunter would keep breathing until help arrived. Then I slowly released the pressure on his wound. Blood soaked the shirt, and my palm was covered in the dark red substance.

Michael's eyes seemed to glitter as he took in the sight. "Not sure that blood will ever come off your hands. Just like all the blood before it."

Anger, swift and hot, flowed through me. Was everything he'd already taken from me not enough? My parents. My life as I'd known it. Any hope for a normal future. No, it wasn't.

Nothing would be enough for Michael. Not until I was completely destroyed. But what then? He would be totally and completely alone. Maybe that was what he'd wanted all along.

I stared at the man who was both monster and brother and let my anger show in my eyes and expression. I let it flow free and unchecked. "What now?"

Michael straightened. "Yes, tap into that rage. It feels good, doesn't it? I never understood why you didn't let yourself go there as a child. It's so much more fun not to be encumbered by what the world sees as right and wrong."

His words might as well have been made of ice as they poured over me. "I'm nothing like you."

"That's where you're wrong, sister dearest. We're made up of the same DNA. You just haven't activated that part of you that will change everything. Maybe this will be what does it."

My stomach cramped. That was Michael's plan? To turn me into him? I'd wondered time and time again how two people from the same parents, raised in the same household, could turn out so differently. It had often seemed incredibly unfair that Michael's mind had turned against him in the way it had. Almost as if we'd both had bombs in our brains, but Michael's was the one that had been rigged to explode.

I searched his face. "And what happens if I turn into you? Then what?"

He beamed. "We'll have so much fun. Think of the list of people we can take revenge on. The people who locked me up. That bitch of an aunt, who turned you against me. The possibilities are endless."

This was Michael's existence. A constant tally of those who had wronged him and plans for how he could take revenge.

"I don't want to do that." There wasn't a single person on this Earth that I hated enough to take their life. Not even my brother. Because as much as I hated him, I loved him, too. No matter what I'd done, I hadn't been able to burn that love out of me. It was a part of who I was.

Michael's expression hardened. "We'll see about that. People will do a lot of things to survive. Haven't you ever considered what it would be like to get even with me? To stab me the way I stabbed you? I enjoyed each and every cut. Did you know that? Your screams of pain. The way your blood pooled in the open wounds."

His words had memories struggling to surface. So much pain, fighting to get free. My vision swam, and my hands trembled.

Michael laughed, but it was twisted and ugly. "Looks like you have quite a few scars. Tell me, big sister, do you think of me every time you look in the mirror?"

I wouldn't let him take me there, back to that place. I couldn't. I glanced down at Hunter. Still breathing. But those breaths were shallow, and I wasn't sure how much time he had. I looked up at my brother. I had one opportunity, and one tool. That tool was surprise.

If I rushed him, there was a chance I could incapacitate him before Michael knew what was happening. He had to know that I'd taken karate, but he'd never seen me in action. He didn't know how I moved or the skills I'd learned. It would be impossible unless he'd trained with me.

I studied the paths and angles while trying to appear simply concerned about Hunter. And I was. Concerned enough that I was about to hurl myself at a man with a gun, who wanted me dead or destroyed.

I didn't give myself a chance to reconsider or overthink which plan of attack would serve me best. I didn't take a moment to wish there was food in my stomach or water in my system. I simply moved.

In a flash, I was in front of Michael. There was only a brief widening of his eyes before he tried to block my attack. But I was quicker. Just this once, I was faster than the little brother who'd always seemed to outpace me. My knee came up to make contact with his groin, and he crumpled.

I'd hoped the gun would clatter to the floor, but it didn't. And I still only had my knife. Michael kept his grip firmly on the weapon as he cursed. So, I did the next best thing. I ran. Into the bright sunlight, blinking and trying to get my bearings. But what I saw didn't help. Other dilapidated cabins and outbuildings were scattered throughout.

I ran as fast as I could towards a copse of trees. They weren't dense, but at least they might provide me some cover until help arrived. Michael shouted from behind me, but I just kept running. A bullet zinged past me, splintering the bark on a tree to my right.

I tried running a zigzag pattern to avoid one of those bullets catching me instead of a pine. But I had no idea where I was going, and my lungs burned as though I were running through a forest fire. I kept pushing forward, but I could hear Michael gaining on me.

I came to a skidding halt at a curved cliff. The waves crashed against the rocks down below. My gaze flew up to find Michael coming to a stop just feet away, the gun still in his hand. He grinned. "Out of options. I've got to admit, I didn't expect you to pack quite that much of a punch. You'll pay for that."

I cringed but didn't look away. I wouldn't give him the pleasure of my fear. "Just do it already."

"I'll tell you what. I'll give you a choice."

I eyed him carefully. Michael's *deals* always came with a steep price. I'd learned that the hard way too many times to count. "What?"

"Try to stab me, and I won't kill you."

I blinked back at him. "W-w-what?"

He held his arm with the gun out to the side. "Don't get me wrong, I'm going to hurt you. Just to remind you I can. But I won't kill you. All you have to do is shed a little of my blood. A few drops, and you'll be free."

I opened my mouth to speak and then closed it again. None of this made any sense...Until suddenly, it did. And it broke a

little something inside me. My brother wanted, more than anything, to turn me into the monster that he was. Maybe it was so he wouldn't be alone any longer. Perhaps it was because he knew that would hurt me the most, and pain had always been his drug of choice.

I looked into Michael's eyes. I could still see a glimmer of the little boy who'd loved Matchbox cars and ice cream sundaes. The little boy my parents would've given anything to save. "No."

"I'm sorry. Did you just say 'no?' That you'd rather have death?" He was completely incredulous.

"I'd rather choose life. Even if that life is shorter than I hoped." Without another word, I jumped. I pushed off the cliff as hard as I could. Hoping and praying I would clear the rocks and land in the water. But even if I didn't, I would die as my own woman. The one who played violin and sat for paintings. The one who fed chickens and learned how to grow a garden. The one with friends and a man who loved her with his whole heart.

And as I fell, I could've sworn I heard Brody yell my name.

BRODY

MY MUSCLES SEIZED, but I kept running as I yelled Shay's name. I was too late. Just a few minutes earlier, and I would've made it. Would've been able to save her.

I barely noticed Griffin taking Shay's attacker to the ground. I only had eyes for the cliff. I skidded to a stop at the edge, searching the water below. I couldn't see a damn thing. The only thing I knew was that she wasn't on the jagged rocks. She had to have made it to the water. There was only one thing to do now.

I jogged away from the cliff just as Griffin called, "I got him." I think I gave a nod and then started running, hoping I would clear those same rocks Shay had. Griffin yelled for me to stop but I didn't. I hurled myself over the side, arms windmilling as I kept my gaze on the water below.

The force with which I hit pushed all the air from my lungs. Ice-cold seawater surrounded me as I struggled to break the surface. I clawed at the water as I reached for sunlight. My head broke through, and I sucked in air with a desperation I'd never experienced before.

The moment my lungs filled, I began scanning the waters around me, searching for any sign of Shay. Nothing. I was just about to dive under the waves when I caught a glimpse of brown hair against the rocks.

No. I swam as fast as I could, fighting the waves as I went. I sent up a silent prayer as I reached her. "Shay, can you hear me?" I lifted her unconscious head above the water, using my

other hand to press two fingers to her neck. There was a faint pulse. But I didn't feel any breath against my neck where I'd rested her head.

We needed to get to shore. Anywhere I could give her mouth-to-mouth. I locked my arm around her body and begun swimming parallel to the shore so I could round the rocks. With each stroke, I willed Shay to stay with me. I needed her. More than she would ever know.

I reached a break in the jagged rocks and pulled Shay ashore. I quickly tipped her head to the side, letting any water drain out of her nose and mouth. My brain whirled. I'd been a lifeguard one summer in high school, but that was forever ago. I could only hope that the CPR lessons had stayed with me.

I tilted Shay's head back, opening her airway. I placed my cheek over her mouth, hoping for signs of breath. Nothing. I didn't hesitate to begin breathing for her.

I repeated the rescue breaths as I heard voices yelling from above. Someone shouted that help was coming. I barely heard it. But I stayed focused. The only thing that mattered was getting oxygen into her system.

Just as I was about to breathe into Shay's mouth for the fifth time, she started to cough. I turned her on her side just in case more water needed to come out. Only the smallest bit fell from her lips.

I kept a firm grip on her shoulders as she heaved. "You're okay. You're safe." I said it more for myself than her. The sight of her chest rising and falling on its own had tears burning my eyes.

"Brody?" she croaked, blinking against the sun.

"I've got you." I hauled her into my arms. She weakly nuzzled into me. "I've got you." I couldn't help repeating the words.

And I was never letting go.

SHAY SHIVERED, and I pulled the blankets tighter around her. I'd sent the nurse off for another one, but he hadn't returned yet. "Are you okay?"

She gave me a gentle smile. "I'm fine. Like the last ten times you asked. I just wish we had an update on Hunter."

I slipped my hand in Shay's and held tight. Hunter had been airlifted from Anchor to Seattle Memorial, and then the sheriff's helicopter had come to pick up Shay. We weren't taking any chances with either of them. Hunter had gone directly into surgery, while Shay had been sent for a battery of tests. Ford was in the surgical waiting room and had promised to update us as soon as he got any word from the doctors.

I pressed my lips to Shay's temple. "He's going to be fine. Hunter's one of the strongest people I know." I hoped I wasn't lying.

"He looked so bad, Brody." Shay's voice shook as she spoke.

I slid onto the side of the bed, careful to avoid her IV line, and wrapped my arms around her. "None of this is your fault."

She leaned into me. "I know that in my head, but my heart's a different story."

A knock sounded at the door. "Come in," I called.

Parker poked his head in with Caelyn and Griffin in tow. He gave Shay a kind smile. "Glad to see you looking better."

Caelyn rushed to the other side of Shay's bed, tears filling her eyes. "I'm so glad you're okay. You are, right? I was so scared—"

Griffin cut off her words by pulling Caelyn against him. "She's going to be just fine."

"I am," Shay promised. "Any word on Hunter?"

Caelyn nodded. "The surgeon was briefing Ford when we got here. It was touch and go for a little bit, but they say he'll make a full recovery."

Tears spilled down Shay's cheeks. "Oh, thank God. I don't think I could've handled it if he wasn't okay." I pulled her closer against me and kissed the top of her head. Shay turned her gaze to Parker. "My brother?"

"He's in county lockup, awaiting transport to prison."

Shay swallowed hard. "That's good. He won't be able to hurt anyone else."

The pain in her voice was raw and deep. I rubbed a hand up and down her arm. "You're allowed to be sad, too." I knew that Shay's feelings for her brother would never be simple, and she needed to be free to express whatever complicated emotions swept through her.

"He's so sick," she whispered, a tear slipping from the corner of her eye. "And he'll never be better. My heart breaks for him. But I'm also relieved that there's no chance of him getting out now."

Caelyn stepped forward, taking Shay's hand. "It's understandable. Your relief comes from being safe. And knowing he can't hurt anyone or himself."

Shay nodded slowly. "Thank you for everything. All of you."

Caelyn gave Shay's hand a squeeze and then released it. "Griffin and I are going to go get everyone food. How does a burger and milkshake sound?"

Shay's stomach grumbled audibly. "Cheeseburger? Vanilla shake?"

"You got it."

Caelyn, Griffin, and Parker said their goodbyes, Parker promising that the official statements could wait. Suddenly, we were alone again. I brushed the hair back from Shay's face. "Feel a little better?"

She let out a long breath. "I do."

I gazed into her eyes. "You're free now. You can go anywhere you want." I hadn't realized until this very moment how terrified I was of that. Shay could decide she wanted to

play in an orchestra on the other side of the world. Or that these islands held too many painful memories. But if she left, I would follow.

Shay brushed her lips against mine. “The only place I want to go is home. With you.”

I’d never heard sweeter words.

EPILOGUE

SHAY

ONE MONTH LATER

“HAVE YOU SEEN THE TOMATOES, EVERLY?” I asked as I sliced the mozzarella.

“They’re over here. Do you want me to wash them?”

“That would be great. Thank you.” I smiled up at my friend, who I’d only known from the confines of my computer, but who had now been to Harbor twice since my kidnapping. As soon as she’d heard what had happened, she’d taken the first ferry she could get. The combination introduction and reunion had been bittersweet since I was a mess of guilt, fear, relief, and gratitude.

But I was doing better these days. Breathing easier and feeling free for the first time in my life. That freedom meant I could enjoy everything this sweet life had to offer. And a big part of that was my amazing friends.

Caelyn bustled into the kitchen with Bell and Kenna in tow. “I’ve got the pasta salad makings, and Hunter’s starting up the grill.”

“Do the kids have everything they need?” I asked.

“Happy as clams,” Bell answered. “Ford and Crosby talked them into a game of soccer.”

“And how’s this little one?” I set down my knife to round the counter and let little Harriet grab hold of my finger.

Kenna smiled. “Growing like a weed.”

I nodded. “I swear she gets bigger every time I see her.”

Everly glanced at the clock on the wall. “How long until you think Brody is back?”

“He should’ve been here by now, but Carson’s ferry might be running late,” I said, heading back to my cutting board. I did my best not to let any worry take root. But it was easier said than done when we’d been on edge for so many months. Any time Brody was late, just a flicker of dread slipped through.

Caelyn came up next to me and gave my arm a squeeze. “Don’t worry. He’s got Griffin with him, and he’s only going to Shelter.”

Griffin and Brody’s friendship was adorably sweet. I had no idea how they spent their time together since Griffin barely said two words in my presence, but it seemed to work for them. “Knowing the two of them, they might’ve stopped at a hardware store.”

Caelyn chuckled. “So true.”

Shrieks sounded from outside and Mia’s high-pitched cry of, “Oh my gosh!”

I wiped my hands on a towel and headed for the front door. “What in the world?”

As I headed outside, I caught sight of Griffin and Carson lugging bags and a box up the hill. My gaze shifted to two creatures straining against a leash that Brody held. Mia jumped up and down and raced towards the dogs.

I couldn’t contain my laughter at the doggy odd couple. One was a tiny, fluffy Pomeranian, and the other looked to be some sort of massive Mastiff mix. I looked at Carson. “You didn’t tell us you were bringing your dogs.”

“Hey, little caretaker.” Carson gave me a wink. “Those aren’t mine.”

I turned towards Brody just as the dogs reached me. I sank to the ground to soak up all the licks and cuddles. “Whose are

they?”

Brody smiled down at me. “They’re yours.”

I blinked rapidly, my gaze jumping from him to the dogs and back again. “What?” I whispered.

“You said you’ve always wanted a dog. I figured now was a good time.”

The Pomeranian jumped onto my lap as the Mastiff mix licked the side of my face. “You got me a big dog *and* a purse dog?”

Griffin chuckled from behind Brody. “He’s a goner for you, Shay.”

Brody rubbed the back of his neck that was growing a bit red. “The shelter said they were a bonded pair, and no one wanted to take both of them. I knew we could.”

I launched off the ground, tucking the little dog under one arm and throwing my other around Brody. “Thank you. They’re perfect.” The Mastiff gave a deep bark of agreement as he danced around us.

Brody brushed the hair away from my face. “Love you, Shay.”

I pressed my lips to his, not caring who was watching. “So much it almost hurts sometimes.”

HUNTER and I brought up the rear of the group as we headed down to the dock. I looked up at the man who’d tried so hard to save me. His sling was a reminder that he’d almost lost his life in the process. “Are you feeling okay?”

He scowled at the path ahead, but his tone remained gentle. “I’m fine.”

I wanted to ask a million more questions, give voice to an endless stream of thoughts. Instead, I simply said, “Thank—”

“If you try to thank me one more time, I’m going to tell your boyfriend you’re running away with me to a Greek island.”

My mouth fell open. “You wouldn’t.”

He arched a brow. “You’ve baked me endless amounts of cookies and brownies. Brought me a case of my favorite beer. Offered to drive me to physical therapy. I think you’ve said thank you enough.” He looked out at the water as our friends climbed on Griffin’s boat. “I didn’t even help you. I failed.”

I gripped his good arm. “You almost gave your life for mine. That’s not failure. That’s noble.”

“Didn’t see what was right in front of my face until it was too late.”

I was about to argue when Ford let out a whistle. “Hurry up, Hunt.”

Hunter glanced down at me. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I’m glad you’re okay, too.” Except I wasn’t so sure he was.

I wound my way down the dock to Brody, who wrapped an arm around me. We waved as the boat drove away, Mia blowing kisses from the back. I leaned into his side, watching our friends leave. “Do you think Hunter is going to be okay?”

“Physical therapy takes time. And so does getting your mind right. He’ll get there.”

“I hope you’re right.” I smiled as the two dogs danced around us. We were still deciding on names, but Mia really wanted us to go with Princess and Giant. Brody was partial to Yahtzee as the name for the little one. “We’re going to have to make sure they know how to swim. Maybe we can get them life jackets.”

Brody’s face scrunched as if he smelled something bad. “I am not putting our dogs in life jackets.”

I grinned up at him. “Our dogs. I like the sound of that.”

“Me, too.” He swept his lips across mine. “How about a few more things being ours?”

“Like what?” I asked, burrowing deeper into Brody’s hold.

He turned so we were facing one another but still close. “Like the house, the gardens, the island. This life.” I sucked in a sharp breath as Brody’s hand slipped into his pocket and retrieved a ring. “There’s no one else I’d want to create a life with. It’s okay if you want to wait—”

“I don’t want to wait.” My words came out in a whoosh. “I’d marry you tomorrow.”

“How about next month?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “There’s nothing I want more than to live this life with you.”

Brody slipped the shining diamond onto my finger. The rose gold band had intricate leaves carved into it. I couldn’t help but stare. “It’s beautiful.”

“I drew the design and had a jeweler in New York make it.”

Tears pooled in my eyes. “I love that I’ll have one of your creations with me always.”

Brody’s roughened palms cupped my face. “Just like I’ll be.”

Want to find out what happens when Hunter meets his match? Find out in *Beneath the Wreckage*. [Available for purchase by tapping HERE](#). And keep reading for a special preview.

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THE WRECKAGE

PROLOGUE

Piper

PAST

“What do you think?” Jenn spun in front of the skinny mirror on the inside of the closet.

“It’s perfect.” I flicked one of the small little rhinestone buttons in the shape of a flower. It was sophisticated, and the pale pink was beautiful against Jenn’s summer-tanned skin. “I didn’t think there was any way you’d need a sweater while we were here but I should’ve known better.”

“Doesn’t matter that it’s summer; it’s always freezing at night.”

I should’ve remembered. Our families had been making our yearly trip to Anchor Island for as long as I could remember.

“Okay, finishing touches.” Jenn motioned me forward so I stood in front of her. “Look down.”

My gaze caught on the half of a heart around her neck that read: *Friends*. My fingers sought out my half, rubbing circles on it as Jenn swept something across my eyelids.

“Okay, finished. You can look.” Jenn stepped behind me, her hands on my shoulders. “My bestie is a stunner. Those high school boys won’t know what hit them.”

Facing the mirror, I rolled my eyes. “I just hope no one shoves me into a locker on the first day of class.” The high school we were attending in the fall was so much larger than the middle school we’d gone to, and I wasn’t exactly looking forward to the new experience.

She hooked an arm through mine, so we were looking at each other through the mirror. We were polar opposites. Jenn with her blond hair and long, sinewy form. Me with my dark hair and petite stature. But fourteen years of being hitched to each other’s sides had made us more like sisters than friends, even if we looked nothing alike.

“We’ll handle it like we do everything—”

“Together,” I finished.

She grinned into the mirror. “I have a surprise...”

The mischievous glint in Jenn’s blue eyes had my stomach dropping. “What?”

She stuck out her tongue at me in the mirror. “Don’t be like that. It’s a good one.”

Jenn’s *good* surprises could be anything from: I scored us some double fudge brownie ice cream, to we’re going to toilet paper our pre-algebra teacher’s house. “All right, spill.”

“I ran into Ethan earlier, and he and his friends invited us to a party. They’re having a bonfire up on the cliffs.” She did a little running-man dance and let out a squeal.

That dropping sensation in my stomach turned to cramps. I should’ve known when Jenn had said she wanted to give us both a makeover that something was up. “I don’t know.” I wandered out into the main room of the cabin, Jenn on my heels.

“Come on, Piper. Pleeeeeease? It’ll be fun, I promise.”

I slid into a chair at the table, studying the drawing we’d been working on every night since we’d arrived at Whispering Falls a week ago. “You know my uncles wouldn’t like it. Neither would your parents.”

She leaned a hip against the table, looking down at me with that same mischievous smile. “What they don’t know won’t hurt them. And don’t you want to start high school having gone to one party?”

I didn’t. If I could avoid parties for the foreseeable future, that would be just fine with me. But that was something changing between Jenn and me. I was happy with how we usually spent our yearly vacation here—excursions with our families during the day, whale watching, hiking, shopping in town. And our nights working on our plans for when we’d buy the Falls one day, while our favorite movies played in the background.

“Come on,” Jenn pleaded. “I really want to see Ethan again. And don’t you want to hang out with Nick? You’ll like it. He said they tell ghost stories at the bonfire. You’re super into all of that.”

No number of ghost stories could get me out of this cabin tonight. I had never lied to Nathan and Vic. Okay, I had never lied to them *after* I’d told them that a fox had kicked the soccer ball and broken the window when I was nine. I was pretty sure there were no foxes in Seattle, and the guilty look on my face had given me away. My uncles trusted me, and I didn’t want to ruin that. “It’s a stupid idea. I bet those guys don’t even know you’re fourteen. They wouldn’t have invited you if they did.” They must be at least sixteen—too old to be interested in an incoming freshman.

Jenn stiffened. “I told them I was in high school.”

“But not a freshman,” I challenged.

“It doesn’t matter. What’s going on with you? Are you scared or something?”

“I’m not scared. I just think that party’s going to be lame, and as soon as they figure out how old you are, they’re going to kick you out anyway. Why waste time?”

Jenn straightened from her perch against the table. “Well, I don’t want to watch another lame old movie and doodle on those stupid plans. I want to have some fun. Live a little.”

“Fine. Go without me, then.” The words were out before I could stop them.

“I will.” With that, she took off, slamming the door against the wall as she went.

Tears stung my eyes as I stared down at the map we’d been working on all week. The sketches of the buildings and the swimming pool blurred.

“What’s going on? Jenn tore out of here like the cabin was on fire,” Nathan asked as he entered, Vic in tow.

Concern laced Vic’s features as he crossed to me. “What are these tears, Munchkin?”

I let him fold me into a hug, the familiar scents of cedar and something just a bit floral wrapping me in comfort. “It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing to me,” Nathan said, a bit of extra gruffness to his tone as he sat across from Vic and me.

I gave my head a little shake. “Just a fight. I think high school is going to be different...” I let my words trail off. I didn’t know how to explain it. Everything felt as if it were changing, and all I wanted was for things to stay the same.

Nathan and Vic shared a look, and then Vic turned to face me. “Friends aren’t always forever. Sometimes, they’re just for a season. Others might fall away, only to come back when you least expect it. I have a feeling you and Jenn will find your way.”

“Maybe.” I couldn’t imagine my life without her. We’d been friends for so long, she felt more like another limb. I took a shuddering breath. I could take it back, apologize tomorrow. Or maybe she’d have a horrible time at the party and realize that a movie night was better.

Nathan stood from the table. “Why don’t I make sundaes, and we can pile onto the couch and watch that awful movie for the millionth time?”

Vic pressed his lips together to hide his chuckle, but he wasn’t very successful. “You love *Troop Beverly Hills*. It’s

why you decided to lead Piper's Girl Scout troop."

Nathan leveled Vic with a glare. "Don't remind me of those dark days."

"The moms loved you, though," I offered.

"I thought I knew what being competitive meant, but I had no idea until we had to sell those damned cookies. I swear those moms would've sold a kidney to win one of those cookie prizes."

"Language," Vic chided.

I rolled my eyes. "I think I've heard the word *damn* before."

Vic pulled me into a tight hug and then covered my ears. "Let me keep you young and innocent forever."

I immediately went for his sides, where I knew he was ticklish. "What was that?"

Vic's hands flew off my ears with a shriek. "Uncalled for, young lady!"

Nathan just shook his head at the two of us.

Eventually, we settled onto the couch with bowls of ice cream in hand—extra whipped cream on mine, no peanuts, just the way I liked it. I burrowed into the couch cushions between the men who always had my back, no matter what life threw my way. But the ice cream sat heavily in my stomach, and I couldn't help but imagine where Jenn was. Wondered if she was having so much fun, she hadn't thought about me.

By the time the movie had ended, I was a walking zombie, brushing my teeth on autopilot and falling into bed. I pulled back the curtain to peek out the window. I saw no light on in Jenn's room at her cabin. My stomach twisted. Clearly, she was having way more fun than I'd thought she would. I lay back on my pillow and stared at the ceiling. It was a while before sleep finally came, and when it did, it was fitful. Dreams of being stuffed into a high school locker, kids laughing and pointing.

When an arm shook me awake, I thought it was because I'd screamed in my sleep. Nathan's face filled my vision. "Did you hear from Jenn last night?"

I blinked the sleep out of my eyes. "No." Cell phones barely worked on this end of the island. You had to stand in one of three spots to get service.

Nathan's jaw tightened. "Do you know where she was going? The truth, Piper."

My heartbeat fluttered, wings beating against my rib cage. "Sh-she wanted to go to a bonfire. With some high school kids. What's going on?"

He eased down onto the bed. "The Brantons can't find her. She wasn't in her bed this morning."

"What?" I croaked. Jenn might stay out late, but all night? Never.

Nathan took my hand. "No one's seen her. She's missing."

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Writer of words. Drinker of Diet Cokes. Lover of all things cute and furry, especially her dog. Catherine has had her nose in a book since the time she could read and finally decided to write down some of her own stories. When she's not writing, she can be found exploring her home state of Oregon, listening to true crime podcasts, or searching for her next book boyfriend.